Hump!, the online porn fest that wouldn’t have happened without quarantine

Enlarge / Columnist and author Dan Savage spoke with Ars Technica about the first year that Hump!, his offline amateur-porn festival, has had an online component.

reader comments

9 with 9 posters participating

Share this story

However cooped up you may feel after months of bingeing films and TV series in quarantine, it’s not entirely likely that you’d look at this article’s headline and say, “Yes, I need to kick my viewing habits up a notch with a curated selection of homemade porn.” The people behind Hump!, the United States’ best-known amateur-pornography festival, certainly didn’t want things this way, either.

“One thing about Hump! is, if you couldn’t get to a theater, you weren’t going to see it,” series curator and sex columnist Dan Savage tells me over the phone from his Seattle home. “Ever since the first Hump!, people have asked, ‘Are you going to sell DVDs?’ Which turned into, ‘Can you watch it online?’ But you can’t. There are no DVDs, and you can’t see it online.”

Hump! was always supposed to be offline. But just like pretty much everything else this year, Savage’s creation had to concede to the realities of coronavirus. And after launching a test run earlier in 2020, Hump! Greatest Hits, Volume 1 is

following as a streamed-video exclusive (not VOD) over the next three weekends. And while the festival was never designed for online distribution, the silver lining is a very weird, and surprisingly eye-opening, perspective on what porn on the Internet can look like in 2020.

“An eternity on the Internet”

The festival began life as a Seattle-only experiment, produced by The Stranger, a weekly newspaper where Savage once served as editor in chief. (He continues writing for the paper’s print and online editions, primarily in the form of his nationally syndicated Savage Love column, which also has a popular podcast.) The Stranger had already begun promoting local arts and music events, and Savage thought an old-school, all-local porn fest, screened only in theaters, would be a gas.

It had a slogan: “Be a porn star for a weekend in a movie theater, without becoming a porn star for an eternity on the Internet.” This was 2005, after all, by which time free, easily downloadable porn had already become ubiquitous—and content like webcam portals was mostly aping the basest content from mainstream porn productions. Savage wondered what would happen if the “amateur” aspect of the industry was channeled into something old-school. His boss, former Stranger publisher Tim Keck, wasn’t so sure.

“He didn’t think anyone would make and submit films,” Savage says. “That the event would fall on its face and we’d have to cancel it. But even if not, would people come and sit in a movie theater, in the dark, next to strangers [laughs], to watch porn the way their grandparents used to?”

After two years of campaigning, Savage got the go-ahead to organize an event in 2005. As it turns out, local Stranger readers submitted films—over 30 individual clips, which floored everyone involved—while curious patrons snatched up

tickets. The first year's theater booking "sold out within hours," Savage says. That year, and every year that followed, saw organizers solicit films from the public with optional content requirements that would prove the film was made specifically for the event. (The first year's theme was a Beavis & Butt-Head-worthy chuckle: use of food and wrappers from local hamburger chain Dick's. Future popular themes revolved around Republican politicians that Savage had mocked in his sex-positive and LGBTQ-friendly column over the years, including Mike Huckabee and Sarah Palin.)

"Part of the permanent record"

After starting as a Seattle-only theater event, Hump! began touring to other cities, including Portland, Vancouver, and San Francisco. In spite of this, the original version's careful intent remained: all of the films in The Stranger's possession were destroyed upon the conclusion of each fest, and theater management forbade attendees from having phones or recording devices out in the slightest. Also, as the series' reach grew, so did its prize pool, as all participating films were eligible for cash prizes based on audience votes for categories like "funniest" and "best kink."

For the most part, Savage says The Stranger staff's early concerns about bashful participants were misplaced. "For the Seattle-only shows, if you made a film and gave it to us, the odds that a roommate, coworker, or [laughs] parent might be sitting in the theater and watch your porn might be high," he says. "People at the paper thought, '*I* wouldn't make porn under those circumstances, so nobody else would.' And they were wrong!" Later in our chat, he concedes that some participants have contacted the fest's organizers with second thoughts and worries, though that has become much less frequent in more recent years.

"Now in a world of sites like OnlyFans, and the creeping,

dawning awareness over the last 15 years that all of us have dirty sex—and maybe even dirty little video clips we share with friends and lovers in circulation out there, as part of the permanent record—the stigma is less if someone were to be outed," Savage says.

- The trailer for Hump! Greatest Hits Vol. One is technically safe-for-work… but it's also very in-your-face about its sexuality. This gallery is the tamest gallery I could make from that trailer. Hi, cardboard R2.
- We're pretty sure cardboard R2D2 gets down with low-rent Chewbacca.
- Homemade cartoons count as "amateur" adult content for Hump!, like this one starring ET.
- Looks like ET is about to phone home.

That leads to this year's evolution to an online-only format, which Savage is adamantly clear about: all involved parties, particularly in this year's return of older, fan-favorite submissions from the past 15 years, have given Hump! the go-ahead to stream online, knowing full well that someone could tap a "screenshot" button or record a snippet for Twitter sharing. Each screening includes Savage's own direct, heartfelt appeal to viewers to suppress their possible sharing urges, instead directing them to an official trailer (warning: NSFW). Savage says a few filmmakers declined to be part of an online-only format due to their own concerns, and this is on top of prior festivals' submissions that had been approved to only screen in certain cities.

"Audiences all over the country have been lovely and wonderful about protecting Hump!," Savage says. "They want to keep it a safe space for people who may have an exhibitionist streak or share whatever their thing is, about their lover, their kink, their gender expression, whatever it is. But they don't want it on the Internet forever."

Rocky Horny Picture Show?

Having attended a Seattle Hump! festival event in the past, I can attest to its unique weirdness. The events I've attended have drawn a diverse audience of ages and proclivities arguably comparable to a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* midnight screening, and it's a crowded house full of audience participation, laughs, and cheers, as opposed to the creepy silence you might expect from a '70s adult film theater.

"The magic of Hump! requires a packed theater, and we can't give people that right now," Savage says when recalling prior years' success. "That makes me sad."

But he also admits that he's fond of this year's upside. Fans from around the world (and the USA's more conservative enclaves) have finally gotten their wish for an accessible version of the festival, and they'll be in for a series that's designed primarily to entertain and enlighten (though, yes, it also titillates). As in, this isn't your typical porn, meant for quick-and-dirty viewing. The man responsible for Savage Love's column and podcast, unsurprisingly, says it better than I possibly could:

"The audiences [whose votes drive Hump!'s prize pool] edited the festival. Some [submissions] aped the conventions of mainstream porn, but audiences mostly voted for films that were personal, idiosyncratic, and… you want to say 'niche,' but it wasn't niche. Audiences responded to what was deeply personal about other people's stuff. That's what people vibed on. I'm credited as a curator, but audiences really curated it over the years."

"'How is that porn?' For that person, that's their porn."

Savage goes on to describe at length a few films that resonated with viewers, and, yes, Savage's descriptions—uncannily clear, even for old clips not in this

year’s “best-of” collection—have to be edited for publication here. One was a single-camera shot of a heterosexual couple very simply having sex, without gimmicks or kinks; “What I remember is the intensity of their connection that they shared, their passion for each other,” Savage says. Another saw a woman stare down the camera while jumping on a trampoline and repeating a kinky phrase before doing something… strange. “Some people asked, ‘How is that porn?’ But for that person, that’s their porn.”

Savage rattles off other film descriptions. One involves a clothed lesbian couple simply chatting about why one partner won’t kiss the other, while another follows a BDSM scene playing out against a chain-link fence, and he’s wise to stitch these stories together with a rise and fall of intensity. Some of his descriptions are simple, tame, and sweet. Others are full of production value and bombast. And still others are, to be frank, messed up.

He is also savvy about presenting Hump!’s history to champion its mission. That mission is to ask viewers to watch a carefully sequenced series of different types of erotic videos and deliver something you just won’t find on the Internet’s most popular adult alleyways.

“[When each Hump! event begins], people are knocked back in their seats by the porn that isn’t for them.” [Savage proceeds to describe different reactions to different kinds of content, veering well into NSFW territory.] “But then there’s this shift. At first, all they can see is what’s not theirs. Not my preferred kind of partner, not my gender, not my kinks. But in a moment, they go from not seeing what’s theirs to recognizing what’s the same. Gender differences, kinks—they’re all a thin veneer laid upon everything we have in common: desire, passion, vulnerability, a sense of humor, and a desire for connection and intimacy. All of that is the same. After the five-to-six film mark, you see that shift. No matter how off-the-wall the next film is, everyone’s cheering for each film.

It becomes this celebratory, affirming vibe. You're shielding your eyes at first, then you're watching and cheering at the same content."

Find the streaming schedule for Hump! Greatest Hits, Volume 1 at HumpFilmFest.com, with screenings happening tonight, June 26, and two evenings in early July. Tickets start at $25 before fees; the content is only available as a livestreamed feed, not video on demand (VOD).

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1687484

In trailer for Brave New World, everyone but John the Savage knows their place

reader comments

65 with 41 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
An adaptation of Aldous Huxley's classic novel *Brave New World* tops the offerings on NBC's Peacock streaming service, launching next month.
NBC's Peacock streaming service launches next month, and the jewel in the crown of its initial offerings is undoubtedly *Brave New World*, an ambitious adaptation of Aldous

Huxley's classic 1932 dystopian novel. The full trailer for this Peacock original series is finally here, starring Alden Ehrenreich as Huxley's antihero, John the Savage, who finds himself struggling to adapt when he is thrust into a utopian society.

(Some spoilers for the book below.)

As we reported in April, *Brave New World* is set in the year 2540, in the World State city of London, where people are born in artificial wombs and indoctrinated through "sleep-learning" to fit into their assigned predetermined caste. Citizens regularly consume a drug called soma (part anti-depressant, part hallucinogen) to keep them docile and help them conform to strict social laws. Promiscuity is encouraged, but pregnancy (for women) is a cause for shame. Needless to say, both art and science (albeit to a lesser extent) are viewed with suspicion.

"Every discovery in pure science is potentially subversive," Resident World Controller of Western Europe Mustapha Mond tells the novel's antihero protagonist, John the Savage. "Science is dangerous; we have to keep it most carefully chained and muzzled."

John is the illegitimate son of a high-level government official, born and raised on the Savage Reservation, where people still give birth, age naturally, and generally represent the opposite of the World State's carefully controlled ideals. His only education has been the complete works of Shakespeare. (The novel's title references a line by Miranda in *The Tempest*.) When John and his mother, Linda, find their way back to the World State, he initially becomes a cause célèbre but struggles to adapt to the new social mores. Specifically, he falls in love with a young woman named Lenina Crowne but can't deal with her promiscuity and sexual forwardness. He ultimately isolates himself from society in hopes of purging himself of "sin." Things don't end well for

anyone.

In the April teaser, we met Beta-Plus Lenina (Jessica Brown Findlay), dropping a tab of soma and partying with various potential sexual partners, as occasional paramour Bernard Marx (Henry Lloyd) looked on with jealousy. And we got a glimpse of Savageland, as Linda (Demi Moore) urged her son John (Ehrenreich) to return with her to New London. We also saw gender-swapped authoritarian Mustapha Mond (Nina Sosanya) lecturing a group of acolytes about the danger of asking questions or welcoming new ideas: “A virus enters a cell. That’s how it begins.” Also gender-swapped: Bernard’s friend Helmholtz Watson, a professor at the College of Emotional Engineering, is now Wilhelmina “Helm” Watson, played by Hannah John-Kamen.

- Welcome to New London, a utopian society where everybody knows their place.
- Everyone is happy because they self-medicate.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Beta-Plus Lenina (Jessica Brown Findlay) knows that regular doses of soma keep unhappy thoughts away.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Party time!
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Alpha-Plus Bernard Marx (Harry Lloyd) enjoys a position of highest privilege.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- A disturbingly violent intrusion into New London’s blissful existence.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- A gender-swapped Mustapha Mond (Nina Sosanya) senses trouble in paradise.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- John the Savage (Alden Ehrenreich) is trouble with a capital “T.”
  YouTube/NBC Peacock

- The Director (Ed Stoppard) might be harboring a secret.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- The way to really connect
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- John observes the training of young children.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Not really getting into the promiscuity thing.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Across a crowded orgy….
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- Cracks can spoil perfection.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock
- John might be an agent of chaos.
  YouTube/NBC Peacock

The new trailer gives us a few more details and hints of things to come. It opens with Lenina dropping a bit of soma, while Bernard's voice introduces us to the supposed utopia that is New London. Everyone is happy, everyone knows their place, there's no hunger or violence or pain—you get the idea. "I've always wanted that for you," John's mother Linda tells him. Much of the remaining trailer is devoted to John's reaction as he struggles to adapt to New London. "All you have to do is connect," he is told, which seems to involve a special kind of contact lens that wires into your eyeball.

Everyone is connected, all the time, which means no one is ever truly alone, which doesn't seem to suit John at all. He's present but apart, observing but not engaging, and he doesn't seem to like what he sees. "You know I've been watching you people," he says at one point. "If this place is so perfect, why is everything upside down?" We see Bernard leaning over a dead body in this otherwise ideal city, so John has a point. The only bright spot is Lenina, who finds herself drawn to the savage, and he to her. John is clearly having a disruptive influence on New London, something that does not go unnoticed by those in power. "We need to stop this before it goes too

far," Mond says.

Back in April, I wrote that "while Peacock is relatively late to the streaming scene, the series looks like it could be a winner for the fledgling service." I stand by that impression. The series is visually striking and has a stellar cast, and showrunner David Wiener looks like he has imaginatively updated the technological details of Huxley's novel for the 21st century. *Brave New World* debuts on July 15, 2020 as part of the launch of the Peacock streaming service.

Listing image by YouTube/NBC Peacock

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1687354

You should play Namco's lost arcade-action classic, Mr. Driller DrillLand

Enlarge / Right about now sounds good for a blast of 2002's best arcade-puzzle gaming.
Bandai Namco

reader comments

2 with 2 posters participating

Share this story

In recent years, Japanese game makers have tried to revive the 16- and 32-bit era's beloved niche of arcade-puzzle series,

but these nostalgia cash-ins have mostly failed. Capcom's *Puzzle Fighter* came back to life on smartphones as a free-to-play gacha mess. Sega's *Chu Chu Rocket* returned with too many complications as an Apple Arcade exclusive (and, crucially, zero multiplayer). And Hudson's *Super Bomberman* sputtered onto the Switch's 2017 launch lineup as a mess, though it eventually received some face-saving patches.

As a result, I shudder whenever I see a cult-classic, puzzle-arcade series return on modern, download-only storefronts. The genre that used to thrive on cartridges and CD-ROMs has become ripe for microtransactions and slot-machine mechanics. Which is why I'm taking the unusual step of reviewing such a launch going *right*.

Mr. Driller DrillLand, out today on Windows PCs and Nintendo Switch, is one of the rarest games from Namco's early-'00s period, which was otherwise marked by the blistering 3D likes of *Ridge Racer* and *Tekken*. The cartoony, 2D game, which launched exclusively in Japan in 2002 for the GameCube, was arguably a swan song for the studio's legacy as an '80s arcade juggernaut. Thankfully, today's updated, translated version leaves well enough alone: its pure gameplay experience returns with 1080p-friendly touches.

$30 may be a bit steep for this classic game, but it's the best *Mr. Driller* game ever made, and it's a remarkable love letter to the Namco of old.

Clearing a path to a flow state

- The "basic" mode mostly resembles the classic gameplay of the 1999 original. Every mode in this game has an amusement park theme, and this one is clearly the "It's A Small World" segment.
- Dig further, and you'll find other countries. Here, Puchi makes his way through France.

- Different characters have different strengths and weaknesses. This robot character is a bit slower, but he gets double the health.
- That's the star of *Dig-Dug*, if you're wondering.
- This Indiana Jones-like mode is the most interesting, thanks to its treasure-routing challenge.
- This mode, an homage to Namco's *Tower of Druaga*, has some cool adventure-mode tweaks.
- Collect potions, then use their powers to trap and capture ghosts.
- The least interesting mode in the package merely makes you contend with randomized bonuses.

Plus, quite frankly, I'm happy to have this enormously cheery and weird game right now.

Like other puzzle games from its era, *DrillLand* comes with a silly and largely unnecessary plot, and it includes the same Japanese voice acting found in the 2002 version. Mr. Driller and his friends have been invited to visit a fictional amusement park, and its every attraction twists or modifies the core *Mr. Driller* gameplay formula with some thematic gimmick. (His friends, if you're wondering, include his dad—as in, the guy who starred in *Dig Dug*—and a cheery, talking dog named Puchi.)

One of these attractions is essentially a port of other *Mr. Driller* games, because it simply asks players to dig, dig, dig. Your primary object is to dig through colorful blocks from the top of the screen as deeply as possible. That may seem simple, but if you dig carelessly, you may leave hanging fragments that fall and crush you, and your digging path is complicated by "solid" blocks and a requirement to pick up oxygen tank refills. This is a high-score chase mode, since you'll get more points for clearing various depth amounts quickly and efficiently.

Since the first *Mr. Driller* game launched in 1999, no other

puzzle game has copied its formula. Unlike color-matching and piece-fitting classics, *Mr. Driller* emphasizes the flow state of constant, efficient movement and digging, which benefits from spatial awareness of shapes and colors all around you. Matching other colored blocks factors into your success, and your downward digging can put color-matching combos into motion, so there's a two-headed thrust to your *Mr. Driller DrillLand* progress. That this gameplay still feels special and unique makes this 2002 re-release a worthy puzzling option for anyone who may have missed the series before.

But even if you find that puzzle system a bit wanting, the four other modes add clever twists to its formula. The best mode removes the oxygen-filling requirement and converts the whole game to an Indiana Jones spoof, where you're forced to create digging paths that lead to treasure pickups while avoiding traps and—oh, I love these—giant rolling stones that will smash through your digging path and threaten you, like the chase scene from *Raiders*. Another mode pays homage to Namco's classic *Tower of Druaga* series, as it forces Mr. Driller to take specific paths through a dungeon, collect treasure and keys, and fight bosses. And a haunted-house mode turns you into a ghostbuster of sorts, as it makes you freeze and capture ghosts within the blocks that you'd otherwise dig through.

That's the Puchi attitude

- Need a cheery, silly game? *DrillLand* has you covered.
- You'll switch from mode to mode by wandering across this map interface.
- As far as a silly, family-friendly script is concerned, *DrillLand* delivers. Expect plenty of groaners and cheese.
- Boy, I'll say.
- The points you accrue in every level can be spent on

things like cards.
- These appear to exist primarily to dole out trivia.
- Want to buy some utterly worthless collectibles? Go ahead.

Between each of these challenges, a fully voiced cut scene will play out with the Driller crew's personalities clashing in giddy, Saturday morning fashion, and while you can mash buttons to skip these, I'd suggest not. The whole package radiates with DayGlo-bright designs—all handsomely scaled to modern screen resolutions and a 16:9 ratio—and part of the inflated $30 cost is that you're sometimes expected to sit back and marvel at how weird and *elaborate* the game's story gets.

This should particularly delight anyone who still fondly recalls *Katamari Damacy*, which debuted on PlayStation 2 two years after *DrillLand*'s launch. You can see the seeds of *Katamari*'s wacky plot and King Of All Cosmos character planted by the Driller family's saccharine-sweet trials. Meanwhile, *DrillLand*'s perky J-Pop soundtrack, presented here at full fidelity, isn't identical to *Katamari*'s classic tunes by any stretch, but the up-tempo charm and vocal-melody components are almost identical.

The weirdness doesn't end there. At any time, you can load a lengthy, music-driven parade sequence, where various *Driller*-series characters stomp across your screen, almost-but-not-quite in time with the music. There's no way to fail this mode; it's not technically "gameplay," and you can only modify it by pressing a joystick to change the marchers' tempo. Why is this in the game? I have no idea. But now I kinda wish every video game had an optional parade sequence as an amusing distraction. (Just think of how *TLOU2*'s post-apocalyptic Seattle might look with its mutated monsters stomping to the music while holding batons.)

- Big-screen treatment for two-player modes.
- Smaller screens for three- and four-player modes.
- On PC, it’s easy to set up everyone’s preferred controllers.

To finish the package, the game includes a pair of four-player battle modes. One is a parallel race through standard *Mr. Driller* gameplay, where each player races to dig through identical content, and the other is a ho-hum battle mode where players dig through the same, shared screen in search of a randomly placed treasure. The latter feels unfair as a versus game, while the former is pretty meager with its battling and “garbage” mechanics. Still, as family-friendly four-player modes, they’re better than nothing (but, sadly, don’t work online).

Nitpicks, not dealbreakers

The biggest drawback to the whole package is a $30 pricetag, which is high for a 2002 re-release. As far as “new” content, you’re getting a newly translated script (no new English voice acting), an admittedly smooth upscaling of the original 2D assets to 1080p resolution, and a new “casual” difficulty level—which, I should be blunt, is far from casual. *Mr. Driller DrillLand* can be pretty unforgiving to new players due to how quickly its falling block fragments fall and harm your character, and entire runs will get wiped out due to a severely limited pool of lives. (Casual mode only adds a single extra life to each mode, which, I have to say, doesn’t suddenly make the package newbie-friendly.)

Worse, the game’s digital download doesn’t include any form of instruction manual, so you’ll go through trial-and-error to answer serious questions about the game. Which levels should I play first? Do shiny blocks, which disappear after a certain amount of time, mean anything in a level? Why don’t each individual mode’s “level 2” and “level 3” sections unlock? Is

there a point to spending in-game coins on a shelf of collectibles? And how do all of the items in the item shop work? The last question is crucial, because beginners will rely on that item shop, not the "casual" mode toggle, to survive their earliest sessions. Some in-game guidance to that effect would have been appreciated.

Thus, it's not a perfect collection. Still, I'll take a re-release that's doggedly old-school over the microtransaction alternative. *DrillLand* is exactly the kind of unique, satisfying, and cutesy puzzle-action game I want right now, and its brand-new appearance on the portable Nintendo Switch is particularly welcome. (And since the series' iOS $1 version from 2009 is dead, thanks to a lack of 64-bit update, we'll have to settle on this week's solid port.)

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1687029

Wishful thinking: George R. R. Martin offers a new Winds of Winter estimate

Enlarge / Artist's interpretation of today's wishful thinking.

reader comments

139 with 97 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Everyone in search of a pandemic-based silver lining can head to author and producer George R.R. Martin's blog, where the creator of the *Song of Ice & Fire* book series offers new hope for its next installment. Progress continues on *The Winds of Winter*, Martin insisted on Tuesday, and he's dared to offer a hopeful estimate (though, obviously, not a release date).

"The enforced isolation has helped me write," Martin wrote on his amusingly named "Not A Blog." He confirms a flurry of progress in the past week, adding up to five chapters for *Winds of Winter*, and he points to "long hours every day" and "steady progress" in putting the book together.

Martin then mentions the cancellation of a New Zealand fan convention this year, which he admitted was, in some ways, a perfect development.

"The last thing I need right now is a long interruption that might cost me all the momentum I have built up," he wrote. "I can always visit Wellington next year [2021], when I hope that both Covid-19 and *The Winds of Winter* will be done."

"Dropping back into Braavos"

This estimate, of course, comes from an author who has left *SoI&F* enthusiasts waiting since 2011 for a follow-up to *A Dance With Dragons*. Martin had previously told fans that he would get the unfinished book done before HBO moved ahead with a sixth season of *Game of Thrones*. In 2015, he told Entertainment Weekly what steps he'd take to make that assertion a reality:

> *Maybe I'm being overly optimistic about how quickly I can finish. But I canceled two convention appearances, I'm turning down a lot more interviews—anything I can do to clear my decks and get this done.*

That means Martin's assurances about skipping a convention for the sake of "momentum" may ring hollow for the remaining devoted fans of the book series. Those assurances may also ring hollow for anyone left unmoved by the finale of the HBO series based on *A Song of Ice and Fire.* And the announcement comes with a reminder that Martin still has a ways to go: "This does not mean that the book will be finished tomorrow or published next week."

Martin's Tuesday post reminds fans of the other plates he's currently spinning. He mentions progress by the team responsible for HBO's upcoming prequel series *The House of the Dragon*, then rattles off various productions he is trying to get onto screens big and small: a TV series based on a Nnedi Okorafor novel (which HBO optioned in 2017), feature films based on his own short stories, and a "relaunch" of the *Wild Cards* TV project (which was previously linked to Hulu before going quiet).

Interestingly, Martin's very large list of years-old projects does *not* include a mention of a *Captain Cosmos* TV series, which HBO optioned all the way back in 2015. He concludes his list of projects by adding, "there are the secret shorts we're doing that… well, no, if I spilled that, it wouldn't be secret."

And if you think all of that sounds busy enough, you can click backwards in Martin's blog for updates about his New Mexico bookstore, his annual endowment given to a promising sci-fi writer, and his early-June call for justice (which came in the form of a Frederick Douglass quote).

As far as Tuesday's post, fans would be forgiven for focusing on Tuesday's *Winds of Winter*-specific commentary, which includes this anecdote about where his focus has been: "Of late I have been visiting with Cersei, Asha, Tyrion, Ser Barristan, and Areo Hotah. I will be dropping back into Braavos next week."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1686761

Oculus will start selling Quest software regardless of quality

reader comments

33 with 26 posters participating

Share this story

- Behold: the Oculus Quest, as photographed in my messy home.
- A gray fabric lining around most of the unit is a nice touch.
- Just like on the original Oculus Rift, the Quest's side straps include elastic slack so you can pull them off your face when you have them set to your ideal tightness.
  Sam Machkovech
- USB Type-C port and one of the headset's two 3.5mm headphone jacks.
  Sam Machkovech
- The other headphone jack and the power button.
  Sam Machkovech
- On the bottom, you can see the volume buttons and the physical IPD (inter-pupillary distance) slider.

Sam Machkovech

- A closer zoom on one of the headset's four sensors. Each is angled enough to enable something apparently wider than a 180-degree tracking zone.
  Sam Machkovech
- Bad news: Oculus Quest will *not* work without syncing it up to your smartphone at least once. (The same is true of last year's Oculus Go.) Good news: once you sync it, you can uninstall the Oculus smartphone app and never use it again.
  Sam Machkovech
- The usual lens warnings before diving in.
  Sam Machkovech
- Oculus Quest (left), HTC Vive Pro (right). Vive Pro gets some added bulk thanks to its "pro"-grade strap and physical earbuds, as opposed to Oculus Quest's use of recessed built-in speakers.
  Sam Machkovech

Since its launch last year, Oculus has kept tight control over the library of software on the wireless Quest headset, applying what the company called a "quality-first approach" to app approval. Today, Oculus pledged to loosen that control with a new app-distribution path to be rolled out early next year.

In a blog post today, Oculus says its console-like curation approach for Quest has been a success, highlighting over $100 million in Quest content sales in its first year. That same tight curation will still apply for the main Quest store going forward.

But Oculus now says it will also be adding "a new way for developers to distribute Quest apps" in early 2021. This new channel "will enable developers to share their apps to anyone with a Quest, without having to be accepted into the Oculus Store, and without the need for sideloading," the company writes.

Currently, adding unapproved apps to a Quest headset requires setting the device to a less secure “Developer” mode and using a PC-based tool like SideQuest to transfer the necessary files. Oculus isn’t sharing many details about its new app distribution method, but the process sounds like it will be more streamlined for end users looking for a wider array of VR software.

While Quest apps in this new channel will still have to conform to Oculus’ general content policies (e.g., no pornography, no hate speech, no real-money gambling, etc.) Oculus writes that “apps distributed through this new channel won’t be held to the same technical standards as official Oculus Store apps.” That makes it ideal for developers who “want to share their apps as broadly as possible [or] test early-stage applications and distribute to specific users.”

Oculus’ move comes as Apple faces its own controversy and potential antitrust probes surrounding overly tight control of its iOS App Store.

“Go” bye-bye

- Go, frontal view.
  Sam Machkovech
- Go with its power indicator on. The volume buttons are easy to access and press in the middle of any action.
- The back of Go’s box.
- Lift the top off to expose this nicely arranged set of parts.
- The thin, black box opens up to expose these accessories, including a “glasses spacer.”
- What is Oculus Go? Let the instruction manual tell you.
- Instructions for how to replace controller batteries, how to add the glasses spacer, and other general setup suggestions. Worth noting: I never needed to install the glasses spacer while wearing my own bulky glasses.

- Zoom on the controller's face, which includes a serviceable, clickable trackpad.
  Sam Machkovech
- A single trigger.
- The single controller explodes to expose a single AA-battery slot.
- How it fits in the author's hand.
- The strap looks and feels a little flimsy, but it does the job. (See below for how it looks on my head.)
- The retail version of Go comes with warning stickers attached to the lens. Pretty good way to make sure users notice them.
- The foam lining is a little firmer than I'd like, but it's serviceable for a discount device. We'll be curious to see aftermarket improvements appear down the line.
- Micro-USB for charging.

Alongside the expansion for Quest software, Oculus also today announced the end of support for its older Oculus Go hardware. The company now lists the Go headset as "no longer available" on its official website, and developers will no longer be able to submit new Go apps or updates to Oculus after December 4.

The self-contained Go headset—itself built as a replacement for the mobile phone-based Gear VR line—was the last Oculus product that didn't feature support for hand-tracking controllers or head-tracking six-degree-of-freedom movement. Deprecating that hardware makes some sense for a company trying to make a clean break from the more limited, less capable hardware of the past.

At the same time, the budget-priced Go (only $149 for a 32GB version) was a great entry-level headset for users who wanted a VR experience that was still a step up from something like Google Cardboard. Cost-focused use cases like education, training, and museums will likely be forced to invest in the $400 Oculus Quest instead, even if they don't need its expanded feature set.

Listing image by Sam Machkovech

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1686737

One tricky racing sim: Assetto Corsa Competizione is now on consoles

reader comments

26 with 18 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

- Day or night, rain or shine, we race on.
- The cars and tracks are all modeled from the real world—specifically the 2018 and 2019 GT World Challenge series.
- That display on the steering wheel features live information.
- The interiors of the cars are highly detailed, but the game only runs at 30 fps.
- If you want more particle effects, you need to spring for a PS4 Pro or Xbox One X.
- This is not the easiest sim to get to grips with, and once cars start to slide, you better be fast if you want to catch it.

On Tuesday, sim-racing options for the Xbox One and Playstation 4 just got a little more diverse with the release of *Assetto Corsa Competizione*. The game is a companion of

sorts to the well-established PC racing sim *Assetto Corsa*, developed by Italian studio Kunos Simulazioni. First released on the PC in 2019, *ACC* is a much more narrowly targeted game than its older sibling—this game is focused on a single category of racing, called GT3, which uses modified versions of exotica you might see on the road (or reviewed here at Ars) like Lamborghini Huracáns and Acura NSXs.

ACC is also the official game of GT World Challenge, a collection of race series held around the world by an organization called SRO. That kind of hyperspecific demographic makes sense in the PC world, where most hardcore sim racers live, but the people at Kunos have ported their game to both the PS4 (which we tested) and Xbox One—consoles that have traditionally been better served by more accessible driving games.

I've heard good things about the fidelity of *Assetto Corsa* over the years, so I was eager to try out the franchise's console debut to see how it stacks up.

Tricky tires

In a briefing last week, Kunos said that it's done a lot of work with both the aerodynamic and tire modeling of *ACC*, which (unlike its earlier game) is built using the Unreal Engine. For the tire model—arguably the most important part of any racing sim—the studio worked closely with Italian tire company Pirelli, which is the official tire supplier for SRO's various GT3 championships. (Turn 10 did something similar with Pirelli for *Forza Motorsport 4* back in the day but then abandoned that in favor of doing its own tire testing for subsequent games.)

I haven't had a chance to drive a car on Pirelli's GT3 racing tires, but if you catch an actual race car driver in an unguarded moment, they'll often have plenty of complaints about the Italian rubber brand. That may well be why the cars in *ACC* feel so sensitive to drive: once you start to slide,

you have to be extremely fast to correct it without losing control completely. That means this is a game where you need to be precise all the time. If your approach to driving games is to mash controller buttons, you will not enjoy *ACC* much.

In fact, if your preferred (or only) way of playing driving games on consoles is with a controller, *ACC* isn't the game for you, either. Kunos said it spent a lot of time making sure the game works with a gamepad, and the game technically works in this mode. But unless your name is Jacques Villeneueve and you won the 1997 Formula 1 World Championship, you really, really shouldn't play this without a steering wheel. (Also, if you switch between a gamepad and a wheel, you may need to reset your wheel settings in the game to avoid some weird handling problems.)

The cars and tracks are pretty accurate

There's a good deal of attention to detail in the simulation of the racing cars and tracks in *ACC*. Each of the real-world tracks (there are 11, plus another four available in a DLC pack today for Xbox players and in a couple of weeks for PS4 players) has been built up from accurate lidar scans, along with dynamic lighting and different weather conditions. The 24 different race cars are also accurately rendered, inside and out, including multiple real-world liveries for each of the teams that have contested the SRO's GT3 series in 2018 and 2019. Even the multifunction display on each car's steering wheel accurately reflects the data that a real racing driver would be presented with (complete with multiple pages of data to scroll through).

On a PS4 or PS4 Pro, the game runs at 1080p, but the Pro version has improved draw distances, anti-aliasing, and better particle effects, as well as an option to run it at 3200×1800. For the Xbox One, *ACC* runs at 900p, with the Xbox One X

running at 4k along with the other features just listed for the PS4 Pro. However, the game's frame rate has been capped at 30 fps on all variants of both consoles. Kunos said this was done to maximize processing power for the game's audio and physics simulation, but when the PC version can reach higher frame rates with more powerful graphics cards, that may well leave console players feeling like they're missing out.

Driver rankings

If you spend any time listening to professional drivers who race GT3 cars, you will quickly hear complaint after complaint about driver ratings. Because *ACC* is heavily focused on online multiplayer racing, it too judges your driving (both in online multiplayer and single-player races) in order to rank you into competitive online matchups. The game does this by tracking six different attributes, which it begins calculating during your first hour or two of gameplay. (Either as you start in career mode, or in my case, if you spend a couple of hours lapping a track you know in order to get a handle on how the tire model behaves.)

These are as follows:

- Track Competence, or how well you know your way around each circuit. Set more clean laps and this number increases.
- Car control—pretty self-explanatory: it goes up if you drive clean and don't spin out.
- Consistency, which again is self-explanatory.
- Pace, which measures how close you are to the fastest lap times for each circuit's leaderboards, as well as how you rank in the special events.
- Safety is determined by how well (or poorly) you avoid colliding with other cars. You won't be able to participate in some of the game's multiplayer sessions unless your safety ranking is high enough.

- Racecraft, which is determined by how well you can overtake or defend against other cars on track.

Enlarge / This is what your driver-rating screen looks like.
Some of these scores will take a long time to build up. For example, after a few hours of play for this review, my track competence, car control, and consistency scores are all in the 60-70 range (on a 100-point scale). But pace and safety are only in single digits, and race craft has yet to get a numerical score.

Race on your own or with other

humans

As usual, Ars got access to the game a few days before its launch. That means most of my gameplay has been single player because the servers aren’t heavily populated. Single player has a few different options. There’s the championship mode, which lets you cycle through either the 2018 or 2019 seasons, presented in the same order of tracks as they were in the real world. There’s career mode, where you start off with a series of 10-minute test sessions (during the day, then in the rain, then at night) before running through a championship interspersed with other test sessions. And there are some special events which change every so often—these are challenges like hot lapping a particular circuit or completing part of a race.

ACC also provides some online multiplayer options. You can weight preferences for servers to Quickjoin based on tracks you like, weather conditions you do or don’t want to experience, and so on. You can scroll through a list of active servers and pick a particular one. And if your driver ranking is high enough, you can also enter some of the competition servers. (Private lobbies are on the list of things to be implemented in time.)

Enlarge / An example of the Special Events menu.

Gameplay

As a hardcore sim, *ACC* replicates many of the things you'd experience as an actual GT3 racing driver. Each race begins with a rolling start, so you have to drive in double-file order before the lights go green and you can begin overtaking (or getting passed). You'll want to take part in practice and qualifying sessions before each race to determine which position you start from. And races feature pit stops, which have to be performed within a specific window during each race.

To help you out, you have a race engineer who gives you

information and acts as a spotter, telling you if there are cars in close proximity that you can't see. There's also a useful radar-like display that appears on the screen when you're in close proximity to other cars. And the game has a bunch of different driver assists like automatic windshield wipers, headlights, and pit-lane speed limiters to help manage what can be a hectic workload while also trying to race at over 100mph. In my experience, some of these are buggy—the automatic pit-lane speed limiter didn't engage in at least half my races, which means I could either accept a 30-second penalty for speeding in the pit lane, or I could restart the race from the beginning. Also, either the UI is broken or I'm too dumb to work out how to give my pit crew instructions using a on-screen menu that appears frozen during those pit stops.

Don't be afraid to use driver aids like traction control and ABS—these are present on real GT3 race cars, which are designed to be accessible to amateurs. Like other racing sims—and even more "simcade" games like *Gran Turismo Sport*—you can and may have to tweak these on the fly, so memorizing which buttons or dials on your steering wheel do what is probably a good idea. Kunos could also have done a better job informing players about some of these—for example, each car has different engine settings or maps, which you'll switch between if you need to save fuel or it rains. Thankfully, because *ACC* came out on the PC, other people have done the hard work to figure out some of that stuff.

It's not perfect

Although *ACC* is now available on three different platforms (PC, PS4, Xbox), there is no cross-platform gameplay. Console players hoping to join friends who are already playing the game on PC are out of luck. There are bound to be technical reasons for that, but it means your pool of competition is going to be restricted. And for a game as narrowly focused as

this one, with as much emphasis on esports and online multiplayer, that seems like a problem.

In fact, I'm at a loss to understand why Kunos spent the time and effort to port *Assetto Corsa Competizione* to consoles rather than the broader *Assetto Corsa*. That series at least offers a wider range of cars to drive, which would appeal to a wider audience. As a console racing sim, *ACC* is satisfying to master but less so than *Project Cars 2*, which in my opinion has a better tire model and definitely has a much bigger array of tracks and cars to choose from, as well as robust online communities for each platform. And most players looking for a hardcore sim will go straight to the PC anyway, where you have your pick of *Project Cars 2*, *Assetto Corsa*, *ACC*, *iRacing*, and more.

The Good

- Highly accurate real-world race tracks and GT3 race cars
- Faithful simulation of the 2018 and 2019 GT3 racing season
- Some helpful driver assists and aids

The Bad

- Only 30 fps
- No cross-platform multiplayer
- Very limited appeal to casual gamers
- Don't bother without a steering wheel
- Once the tires start to slide, you're probably not going to catch them

The Ugly

- Trying to play this game with a controller
- Bugs that need fixing
- No private lobbies yet

Verdict: Try it if you want a hardcore console race sim and really love GT3 racing. Most other players should probably pass.

Listing image by 505 Games

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1686626

Apple gives us our first glimpse of Foundation, adapted from Asimov series

reader comments

118 with 81 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
Jared Harris and Lee Pace star in *Foundation*, coming to Apple TV Plus in 2021.
At today's 2020 Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC), Apple dropped the first teaser trailer for *Foundation*, a new TV series for Apple TV adapted from Isaac Asimov's seminal *Foundation* series of novels. The new show, which stars Jared Harris and Lee Pace, had already begun filming when the global pandemic shut down production in March. The teaser offers our first glimpse of what this highly anticipated series will look like, as well as a few peeks behind the curtain on set.

(Mild spoilers for the first book in the *Foundation* series below.)

The series started out as eight short stories by Asimov that appeared in Astounding Magazine between 1942 and early 1950, inspired in part by Edward Gibbons' *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first four of those stories were collected, along with a new introductory story, and published as *Foundation* in 1951. The next pair of stories became *Foundation and Empire* (1952), with the final two stories appearing in 1953's *Second Foundation*. Asimov's publishers eventually convinced him to continue the series, starting with two sequels: *Foundation's Edge* (1982) and *Foundation and Earth* (1986). Next came a pair of prequels: *Prelude to Foundation* (1988) and *Forward the Foundation* (1993), the latter published posthumously. (Asimov died in 1992.)

The original trilogy centered on a mathematician named Hari Seldon, who has developed a mathematical approach to sociology he calls "psychohistory" that enables him to predict the future of large populations—like the Galactic Empire, which incorporates all inhabitants of the Milky Way. Unfortunately, Seldon's theory predicts an imminent collapse of the empire—well, in 500 years, which is certainly imminent on galactic time scales. This will usher in a Dark Age lasting 30,000 years, after which a second empire will arise. The news is not well received by the members of the Committee on Public Safety, who essentially rule the empire, and Seldon is forced to stand trial for treason, along with a brilliant young mathematical protege named Gaal.

In his defense, Seldon argues that he cannot stop the collapse, but there is a way to limit those Dark Ages to just 1,000 years. He proposes creating a Foundation, a group of the most intelligent minds in the empire, charged with preserving all human knowledge in the Encyclopedia Galactica. Rather than executing Seldon, the committee decides to exile him to a remote world called Terminus, along with the members of the

new Foundation, where they can begin compiling the encyclopedia. Much of the first book in the trilogy follows the establishment of the colony on Terminus and the various political machinations that shape its early history, along with a startling revelation: unbeknownst to the committee, Seldon has established a second Foundation at the other end of the galaxy.

- Jared Harris stars as Hari Seldon.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Lee Pace plays Brother Day, current Emperor of the Galaxy.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- An intense discussion.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- This could be Trantor, capitol of the 12,000-year-old Galactic Empire.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Spacecraft of the Galactic Empire.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- A stately procession.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Laura Birn plays Eto Demerzel, aide to the Emperor of the Galaxy.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Weary travelers by water.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Lou Llobell stars as mathematical genius Gaal.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Leah Harvey plays Salvor, warden of Terminus.
- Catch those *Star Wars* vibes.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Queen of her remote domain.
- Seldon seeks to preserve human knowledge in the face of the imminent collapse of the empire.
- Burning books is not the way to preserve knowledge.

YouTube/Apple TV Plus

- Looks like a decent rendering of a black hole.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- This shot has movie poster potential.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus

New Line Cinema tried to develop a film version of the *Foundation* trilogy back in 1998, spending a cool $1.5 million on the project before throwing in the towel and signing on to produce *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy instead. Columbia Pictures tried to do the same in 2009, with Roland Emmerich attached to direct, but that project never happened either. HBO acquired the rights in 2014, with Jonathan Nolan aboard to adapt it into a TV series, which also failed to materialize. Finally, Apple commissioned a 10-episode straight-to-series order, with David Goyer serving as showrunner.

The official premise is short and sweet: *Foundation* "chronicles a band of exiles on their monumental journey to save humanity and rebuild civilization amid the fall of the Galactic Empire." We don't have many details beyond that and no sense of how closely the series will hew to its source material—but it's a good sign that Robyn Asimov, the novelist's daughter, serves as one of the executive producers.

Harris plays Seldon, with Pace co-starring as Brother Day, current Emperor of the Galaxy. Lou Llobell plays Gaal, Leah Harvey plays a gender-swapped Salvor, warden of Terminus, and Laura Birn plays Eto Demerzel, aide to Brother Day. Other listed characters include Brother Dusk (Terrence Mann), the ruling family's oldest living member, and Brother Dawn (Cassian Bilton), the youngest member and heir apparent to Brother Day.

Sprawling

The teaser trailer opens with some brief commentary from Goyer, noting all the past efforts to adapt *Foundation* over

the last 50 years, as well as the enormous influence the series had on *Star Wars*. “The story is sprawling, the scope is sprawling, it unfolds over the course of a thousand years,” Goyer says. This being an Apple event, naturally there’s also a bit of corporate promotion: “If ever there were a company that was hoping to better people’s lives through technology, through connectivity, it’s Apple, and that’s something very much that Asimov was hoping to do.”

Then the official teaser begins, and we see Seldon telling Gaal that they will both be arrested the following day and tried for treason. The crime: applying psychohistory to predict the future—specifically, to predict a very bad future for the Galactic Empire. “They’re worried people believe I can [predict the future], and they don’t like the future I predict,” Seldon says. “The empire will fall. Order will vanish. This rash of events is rushing to meet us.” And we hear Gaal say, “Maybe we can shorten the darkness.”

In short, the teaser lays out the basic premise, along with some visually stunning shots of the scenes that had been completed before the shutdown. It looks gorgeous, Harris and Pace are inspired choices for the leading roles, and this might just be the kind of must-see content Apple TV Plus really needs to become a truly major player in the streaming wars.

Foundation will debut on Apple TV Plus in 2021.

Behind the scenes

- A view of the set from above.
- Building a palatial room.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Putting the finishing touches on a model.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Putting Brother Day through his paces.

YouTube/Apple TV Plus

- YouTube/Apple TV Plus
- Capturing a tender moment on camera.
  YouTube/Apple TV Plus

Listing image by Apple TV

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1686341

Microsoft is killing its game-streaming service, folding it into Facebook's

reader comments

96 with 70 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Mixer, the game-streaming platform acquired by Microsoft in 2016, is done. Xbox team lead Phil Spencer confirmed the news on Monday, announcing a 30-day end-of-life period before Microsoft formally pulls the plug on July 22.

What's more, Microsoft used the opportunity to offer all of its users, particularly its moneymaking "partner" members, a transition path to another streaming service: Facebook Gaming.

"Beginning today, Facebook Gaming will make it easy for anyone in the Mixer community to join, if they choose to do so,"

Spencer writes at Xbox Wire. He guides affected users to check out a Mixer FAQ on the transition, but unsurprisingly, the guidance about jumping from Mixer to Facebook Gaming is full of caveats about “eligibility” and having financial agreements matched by Facebook “as closely as possible.”

Resources spent on Xbox One OS, exclusive streamers

Mixer’s death is a staggering development for three major reasons. First, Microsoft has emphasized the service as a built-in, one-button streaming option on all Xbox One consoles for the past few years. This was arguably the whole point of Xbox acquiring the service (formerly known as Beam) in 2016: to keep Xbox users in a Microsoft ecosystem with a nifty, OS-level way to broadcast users’ gameplay.

Users can still go into menus and set up other rivals’ services, particularly Twitch. But as of press time, only Mixer works as a top-level, stay-in-your-game streaming option on Xbox One consoles. Comparatively, the Windows-level nags about using Microsoft Edge as a default browser are a cakewalk compared to this aggressive enforcement of what streaming app you might use on Xbox.

And all of that work to build a system-level streaming interface may be for nought. Mixer’s help site about the transition instructs users to download and install the Twitch app, should they wish to continue natively streaming from their Xbox One consoles, instead of indicating that the built-in streaming service will redirect to anyone else’s API.

This is pretty wild, considering the rest of the FAQ talks about the platform’s formal transition to Facebook Gaming, which doesn’t have a direct-from-console streaming solution as of press time. Instead of acknowledging the Xbox One OS’ existing streaming options, Spencer instead hints to such

services working on the cloud level in the future: “We’re always testing new features and learning, and we’re excited to explore further as we look to debut click-to-play scenarios within the Facebook Gaming and Instagram communities.”

The second peculiar thing about Mixer’s shutdown is that Microsoft had begun a bullish investment strategy to secure exclusive streaming partners in August 2019. This began with a massive, multi-year deal with popular Fortnite streamer Tyler “Ninja” Blevins signed only 10 months ago, and that deal was reportedly worth over $20 million. Microsoft followed its Blevins deal with others.

Microsoft has since confirmed that everyone signed to those Mixer exclusivity deals is now contractually free to stream wherever they see fit, though further terms—including any suspension of payment due to Mixer’s impending shutdown—have not been confirmed.

As of press time, Blevins has yet to announce where he’ll take his livestreamed gameplay sessions, either to Facebook, Twitch, or elsewhere.

“She CANNOT be racist… because she hired a black person”

The third peculiar thing about today’s announcement is that it comes from Spencer, who less than 24 hours earlier acknowledged a glaring and embarrassing allegation about racist management practices at Mixer.

Milan Lee, a former business-development manager for Mixer, posted his allegations about his time with the company on Sunday as part of a rising tide of stories about racism and sexism in the tech industry. He described a troubling incident in which a female manager (not yet identified) called herself a “slave master” and all of Mixer’s partner streamers her

“slaves.” Lee then described his attempt to formally complain about this incident—including an email he’d sent to Spencer himself—which was full of resistance from the reported manager, departments not communicating with each other, and time dragging on.

The internal investigation eventually concluded, Lee says, with the following determination from Microsoft’s legal team:

> *The reason my manager was not penalized and the reason she still has her job today is because she CANNOT be racist. The reason she CANNOT be racist is because she hired a black person.*

Hours before confirming that Mixer was on end-of-life status, Spencer used Twitter to request a meeting with Lee.

This event followed months of reports about budget cuts, shrinking morale, and departing founders within Microsoft’s Mixer division. In February of this year, employees began leaking their frustrations to the press alongside a recorded video from a Mixer “town hall” meeting, in which newly hired general manager Shilpa Yadla began openly and loudly dismissing the negative feedback she’d received from employees she’d spoken to during one-on-one meetings. OnMSFT published this video, which includes Yadla describing this feedback as “blah blah blah” and telling staffers she was not responsible for “sympathiz[ing] with anybody.”

If you’re wondering whether Mixer management turned the boat around in terms of employee management and communication, a post from an Xbox program manager on Monday suggests it had not. “We didn’t know this [Mixer’s termination] was coming,” Tara Wake wrote on Twitter shortly after Spencer’s announcement went live. “We found out right before you.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1686300

Rasputin features in all his mad mystic glory in The King’s Man final trailer

reader comments

18 with 13 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
Ralph Fiennes stars in *The King’s Man*, a prequel to the successful *Kingsman* franchise.
Any trailer that features Rhys Ifans chewing up the scenery as the mad mystic Rasputin is going to be a winner, and that’s just what we get in the final trailer for *The King’s Man*, Director Matthew Vaughn’s prequel film to his successful *Kingsman* franchise. It was originally meant to be released on November 15, 2019, then rescheduled for February 14, 2020, before 20th Century Studios moved the film to its current release date: September 18, 2020.

(Spoilers for first two Kingsman films below.)

As I wrote when the first trailer dropped last fall, the Kingsman franchise is based on the Marvel comic series *The Secret Service* by Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons, which spawned two very successful action/comedy spy films. In the first film, Eggsy (Taron Egerton), the young son of a deceased Kingsman agent, is recruited to follow in his father’s

footsteps by Harry Hart (Colin Firth), aka Galahad. (All the Kingsman agents take on the monikers of the Knights of the Round Table.)

The agency is looking for a new Lancelot, and Eggsy narrowly loses the job to Roxy (Sophie Cookson). But he gets another chance when a second agent is lost in the line of duty, and he joins up with Roxy and Merlin (Mark Strong) to foil a nefarious plot by tech entrepreneur Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson).

Kingsman: The Secret Service grossed more than $400 million worldwide when it debuted in 2014, earning praise for its deft comic touches and hyper-stylized action sequences. Eggsy was back for *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017), this time teaming up with the agency's American counterparts, Statesman, to overthrow a drug cartel. It didn't have quite the same magic as the original, garnering mixed reviews, but it still grossed $410 million worldwide, pretty much guaranteeing more installments. Vaughn purportedly shot the third film in the franchise (a sequel to *The Golden Circle*) at the same time as the prequel, with Firth and Egerton reprising their roles.

The prequel will explore the "bloody origins" of the very first independent intelligence agency. Per the official premise: "As a collection of history's worst tyrants and criminal masterminds gather to plot a war to wipe out millions, one man must race against time to stop them." Among those tyrants is Grigori Rasputin (Rhys Ifans). Historically, Rasputin was a mystic who gained considerable influence in the court of Tsar Nicholas II, only to be assassinated by a conspiring group of nobles in 1916. Legend has it that it took several attempts to finally kill him, so he should make for an excellent villain.

- Grigori Rasputin is plotting to start a war. It's a very prestigious line of work.

YouTube/20th Century Studios

- Ralph Fiennes plays the Duke of Oxford.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- The war room.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Manufacturing instruments of destruction.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- The spoils of war.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Meanwhile, Conrad (Harris Dickinson) demands the Duke do something with regard to the war.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Welcome to the first independent intelligence agency, Conrad.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Polly (Gemma Atherton) brings a bit of refinement into the mix. But don’t underestimate her.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Djimon Hounsou plays Shola, another member of the team.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Brandishing their swords.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Now that’s a look of resoluteness.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Rasputin consolidates his power.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- This might be the court of Tsar Nicholas II.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Rasputin in full-on beast mode.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Shola in fine fighting form.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- A bit of hand to hand combat.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- Polly isn’t one to languish on the sidelines in battle.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- A dicey mid-air situation.

YouTube/20th Century Studios

- Third knife’s not quite the charm.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios
- And now he’s all out of knives.
  YouTube/20th Century Studios

The all-star cast also includes Ralph Fiennes as the Duke of Oxford, Charles Dance (aka Tywin Lannister from *Game of Thrones*) as Field Marshal Haig, Gemma Atherton as Polly, Matthew Goode as Tristan, Djimon Hounsou as Shola, Aaron Taylor-Johnson as Unwin, Stanley Tucci, and Harris Dickinson as Conrad. Tom Hollander gets to play three roles: George V, Wilhelm II, and Nicholas II.

Last fall, I notes that the first trailer “was conspicuously lacking in the dark humor that made its predecessors so broadly appealing,” although it certainly had plenty of Vaughn’s trademark hyper-stylized action sequences. This latest trailer has a bit more of a subdued humorous spark, opening with Rasputin calling a meeting of his secret cabal. His nefarious plan is to start a world war in which “Nations will slaughter each other while we get rich.” That’s the mad mystic’s idea of a corking good time.

We get a few scenes of escalating mayhem, as Rasputin blows up a ship, and a bystander lobs a grenade into a motorcade—the car just behind the Duke of Oxford. War breaks out, much to the chagrin of young Conrad, who complains to the Duke, “You cannot keep me locked away as the world burns.” That’s when the Duke introduces Conrad to his secret society. “We are the first independent intelligence agency,” he intones. “Refined, but brutal. Civilized, but merciless.” They’ll need to train hard to take on Rasputin, who is remarkably spry and in fine fighting fettle.

The King’s Man is currently slated to hit theaters September 18, 2020 (as always, coronavirus willing).

Listing image by YouTube/20th Century Studios

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1685439

TV writers, like all of us, are developing a love-hate relationship with Zoom

Enlarge / ATX TV’s panel on writers’ room Zooms: From L to R, top row: IndieWire’s Ben Travers (moderator), Sera Gamble (Netflix’s *You*), Dan Goor (*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*). Bottom row: Melinda Hsu Taylor (*Nancy Drew*) and Beth Schwartz (*Sweet Tooth*).

reader comments

18 with 16 posters participating

Share this story

Every week now seems to bring news of another Hollywood project being delayed. Sometimes this is because you can’t make money in an empty theater, but it’s just as often due to production halts in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. While most of that industry hits pause for now, one crucial segment has not—the writers. Like many of us, they’ve instead become intimately familiar with the inner workings of on-the-job Zoom calls.

“I kind of feel for every aspiring TV writer at home right now

due to the pandemic," said Sera Gamble, showrunner of Netflix's *You* (formerly of *Supernatural* and *The Magicians*), during this year's online-only edition of the ATX TV Festival. "They're trying to write while doing a bunch of other stuff; well, congrats, you're now in showrunner training. I've frequently had to sit down in the past and rewrite a script in a moment that felt like a severe crisis, and sometimes it was a severe crisis. But it feels like that times 10. I have to reset expectations every morning: I wake up, wait a minute before checking my phone, check in with loved ones, and then take the problems of the day as they come… [I tell my writers] 'You can't solve what you can't solve, so what can we get done in the next hour?'"

For this late-addition panel to this year's ATX TV Festival, Gamble (virtually) joined Dan Goor *(Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Parks and Rec*), Melinda Hsu Taylor *(Nancy Drew*, *Lost*), and Beth Schwartz (*Sweet Tooth, Arrow*) to take streamers "Inside the Writers' (Zoom) Room." For some, the change came abruptly. Hsu Taylor and her staff had nearly completed both writing and production on the latest season of *Nancy Drew* when suddenly they had to convert everything to be remote-friendly (she credits doing a Zoom birthday for her son around that time for helping her grasp the basic logistics and experience). Other writers started wholesale in a digital world, like the staff of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. They were five weeks into story-breaking at the time of this panel and hadn't been together in person at all while working on the upcoming season eight.

No one had a choice, of course. As COVID-19 continues to surge in the United States—the country passed the 2-million-case mark within the last two weeks—all walks of life must adjust. And when any in-person interactions come with potentially life-threatening risk for the foreseeable future, suddenly Zoom calls sound downright preferable.

"Right when we went home, there was a little bit of a relief," Gamble said. "We were social distancing in two separate rooms

for weeks before we went home just so people could have six to 10 feet between them. At one point, I asked a writer's assistant to track how often 'coronavirus' was said—it was every two minutes. So at least if we went home, we'd be able to work."

The work

Logistically, certain things have been trickier for TV writers in this shared Zoom existence. Larger writers' rooms pushing 10 people or more may have difficulty translating into a single Zoom chat, where not talking over each other and reading the room become harder. So, *You* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* now opt to have multiple, smaller Zoom calls focused on more narrowly defined tasks, and only the showrunner will hop between conversations. That magic writers often like to refer to—the creative spark, the inner-staff interactions where a lunch convo might solve a plot problem later that afternoon—has also proven harder to recreate in these digital work spaces.

ATX TV Festival

View more stories

"It's more efficient, but it is weird and less fun," Goor said. "There's less joking around. We did every possible Zoom joke we could do that first week—changed all the backgrounds, mine was my mom's water colors. We did background videos of each other… so I guess we found new ways to waste time, now that I think about it… But it's nice to feel a reaction to a pitch, and it's much harder to do that over Zoom. I find myself talking myself out of story ideas."

Early on at least, Zoom has also surprised writers with a few positive benefits. In writers' rooms where some staffers have

been with a show much longer than others, Zoom may take away some unspoken hierarchical barriers and put everyone on equal footing. “There’s something democratizing about these squares that are always present and equally sized,” Goor said. “For new people, it might be easier to speak up now. ‘Oh, and April, what do you have to say about this?'” Zoom also inherently leads to less workday interruption: fewer bathroom breaks, less losing the room to endless joke-offs, and skipping longer lunch routines like the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* staff’s elaborate *Wheel of Fortune*-style approach to selecting takeout.

But perhaps the biggest change? The pandemic has given everyone in the writers’ room a more holistic perspective on life—episode four of season whatever no longer gets to be anyone’s most important thing. Add it all up, and many writers now have a much more traditional work day.

“Comedy hours are usually bad, and they’ve become so much better,” Goor said, noting how he now typically works 10am to 12:30pm, takes lunch, and resumes from 1:30p to 5:30p. “Routinely for the first few seasons, we’d eat dinner [in the writers’ room] and be there till 8pm or 10pm or 11pm for a table read. We’ve adjusted. It’s partly because it’s impossible to look at Zoom for that long, but it’s partly so people can be with their families, be healthy, and experience life.”

Focusing at home versus when you’re physically in a space for a specific task can be a new challenge, but these TV writers continue to find approaches that work for individual groups. Hsu Taylor and the *Nancy Drew* staff start each session with a three-minute meditation to intentionally tell their minds that work time has begun. “I know some people are checking their email because I hear clicking,” she said. “But I think most like this. ‘OK, I’m doing this now.’ I’m telling my mind and body to be here for the next few hours.” And some former tasks that would force writers to split their attention now don’t

exist, like having to be on set for script tweaks during an episode you may have written.

“With production being down,” Schwartz said, “you can really focus on the scripts instead of being all over the place.”

- Welcome to the nerdiest, most-inside-baseball TV event this side of network upfronts. (Held in downtown Austin most years, like in 2017 when FX’s Fargo headlined.)
  Nathan Mattise
- Years later, this ATX TV installation still represents the best use case we’ve seen for those ol’ B&W and tiny TVs.
  Nathan Mattise

The end product

Whether good or bad, our new reality has absolutely already impacted what we’ll eventually see on screen. *You,* for instance, centers on a bookstore manager creepily obsessed with an aspiring young writer. To put it succinctly, the show frequently has characters *at least* kissing. But for the upcoming season three, that may be one aspect needing to change, no questions asked.

“We can’t put people in danger—TV shows aren’t worth that,” said Gamble. “So we’ll change what we can and keep an eye on the lines we don’t want to cross. We won’t do the show and have it be shitty because there was a pandemic. We’ll be measured and try to maintain the spirit of the show. But it’s a conversation, scene by scene by scene.”

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitates shifts in logistics, too. Where you can film and who can you film obviously feeds into what scenes a writing staff can write. The writers noted productions in Canada and New Zealand, like *Nancy Drew* and *Sweet Tooth*, will happen first since those countries have

navigated COVID-19 better than the US. And with mandated quarantine for travelers to those places, local actors could have a leg up for roles, too.

For Goor and the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* team, new logistical concerns start with babies. No explicit spoilers, but two characters had one last season, and the team suddenly has to look at animatronics and maybe less overall on-screen infant time ("There's going to be a run on those bespoke fake babies," Gamble joked).

"It's hard, because we're doing stories on the work-life balance for these people. This goes in so many different directions and we still don't know where [the pandemic] is going, so it's hard to write for it," Goor said. "Is it safe to shoot outside? Originally, we wanted everything to be a bottle episode, so we can shoot on the stages, [and] it'll be controlled. But now, is it better to do all exteriors? Because it seems like it's healthier and safer for people. How many extras can you have? Can you use kids? And since there will be waves of productions, with movies and pilots starting, too, availability for guest cast will be a lot harder. Five-episode guest-star arcs are now harder."

All these decisions ultimately bleed into the business of TV, too. For writers, maybe the option of participating in a writers' room remotely suddenly becomes more commonplace, democratizing the career for people outside of NYC and LA (and those cities' sky-high rents). And not having to commute regularly or be in one physical space would mean writers' rooms could welcome writers with physical disabilities more easily, thus bringing wider perspectives to a host of shows.

"I think there's a reason we do [in-person writers' rooms], and it's not just to spend studio money on all that rent—it's good for creativity and production," says Gamble. "But it will be easier to say, 'We should just meet on Zoom on some days.' And for the disabled community, if an agent were to call and

pitch me somebody and explain why someone could rarely or never be on set, well, I know that works now. If this all leads to a crop of great writers breaking into the business, that excites me."

ATX TV Festival 2020 continues to post its panels on YouTube throughout June (including a panel with the staff of The Mandalorian *available this weekend). The entire discussion "Inside the Writers (Zoom) Room" is available below.*

[embedded content]
You can watch all of ATX TV's "Inside the Writers (Zoom) Room" panel on-demand now.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1684924