Cyberpunk 2077 will come to Stadia after console, PC launch



reader comments

95 with 54 posters participating

Share this story

- We opted to only share images from the game’s gussied-up trailer that actually resemble what we saw in the hands-off demo.
- The protagonist V lives in this sprawling apartment complex, which resembles modern-day LA buildings, though with grimy, tech-loaded tweaks like broken biometric scanners on people’s front doors.
- The game’s opening mission sees you rescue an apparently high-ranking civilian from a kidnapping ring. Insurance in *Cyberpunk 2077* seems to revolve around private companies showing up with military squads and medical

personnel to help LA's elites.

- In the demo, V finds and makes an offer to this rich, powerful "corpo" character. A dangerous mission follows in which everyone seems to stab everyone else in the back.
- Frankie is V's accomplice during the demo and offers a *lot* of chatter and dialogue-tree options for V to pick through.
- We saw a taste of open-world driving, but it was the least impressive part of the demo.

Developer CD Projekt Red has quietly confirmed that *Cyberpunk 2077* will not launch on Google Stadia on September 17, the date it's due to hit PC, Xbox One, and PS4. Instead, the game will be available on Google's streaming gaming service "by the end of the year," the developer says.

The confirmation, which appeared at the bottom of a largely unrelated press release, doesn't come as a complete surprise. When the Stadia version of *Cyberpunk* was first announced back in April 2019, CD Projekt Red merely said the game would hit Stadia "the same year" as other platforms. But that was before *Cyberpunk 2077* got pushed back from a planned April release to its current September target date.

Meanwhile, the official *Cyberpunk 2077* website lists Stadia alongside other platforms under a large banner and button reading "Coming September 17th, 2020. Pre-order Now." Clicking through on that offer, though, doesn't offer a Stadia preorder option, likely because Stadia doesn't offer preorders on a platform level.

Day-and-wait

CD Projekt Red representatives weren't immediately available to comment on the gap between *Cyberpunk*'s Stadia release and that on other platforms. But creating a Stadia version requires porting the game to Google's Linux-based streaming

servers. That’s a process that might not be a high priority during the final sprint of a major game’s development.

Id Software said last year that a test port of the 2016 *Doom* remake to Stadia took only three weeks of full-time work by two people. But the company said that process was made faster because *Doom* already used the Linux-compatible Vulkan graphics API, rather than Windows’ DirectX standard. Other high-profile developers, meanwhile, have dealt with some apparent graphical issues in the process of porting to Stadia. Regardless, *Cyberpunk*‘s Stadia “delay” highlights the service’s continuing problems attracting software launches on or near the day those games are first available on competing platforms. Since the service’s November launch (which included a fair number of titles originally released before 2019) just 11 of the 31 “new” Stadia releases have been games launching that same day on other platforms (or exclusives). Of those, April’s *Doom Eternal* is by far Stadia’s highest-profile day-and-date synchronized release with other platforms. Having a library of older games on Stadia is nice, but there’s at least some evidence that Stadia users have little interest in these older titles, even when they’re offered as freebies. And data shows that a large proportion of a game’s total sales often come in its first weeks of availability, meaning even a slight delay for a Stadia release could reduce sales among players with access to other platforms.

Croteam’s *Serious Sam 4* is planned for a timed-exclusive release on Stadia this August. Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla* and Activision’s *Marvel’s Avengers* game have announced plans for Stadia releases at or near their launch later this year.

Listing image by CD Projekt Red

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681926

Review: Elisabeth Moss gives a brilliantly subversive performance in Shirley



reader comments

0 with 0 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]

Elisabeth Moss stars as a fictionalized version of author Shirley Jackson in the new film, *Shirley*.

Author Shirley Jackson might not quite be a household name, but her work has been haunting American psyches for decades. Both Stephen King and Neil Gaiman cite her as an influence, and novelist Susan Scarf Merrell was so captivated by this literary figure that she penned an entire novel about her, *Shirley*, in 2014. It’s now been adapted by director Josephine

Decker into a darkly meditative psychological thriller filled with the kind of slow-building existential dread that is a hallmark of Jackson's work.

(Mild spoilers below.)

The protagonist of Merrell's dark psychological thriller is the newly married (and pregnant) Rose Nemser, who moves to Vermont with her husband, Fred, a graduate student at Bennington College. They end up staying with Fred's mentor, Stanley Hyman, a famed literary critic, and his equally famous wife, Shirley Jackson. Fred becomes increasingly caught up with his academic life, while Rose forms a tenuous connection with Shirley, who is struggling with anxiety and agoraphobia, and self-medicating with prescription drugs and alcohol. But Rose is increasingly troubled by strange late-night phone calls, and tales of a female student who went missing long ago.

While the novel is set in 1964, later in Jackson's life, *Shirley* takes place in 1948, right after *The New Yorker* has published Jackson's most famous short story, "The Lottery." Otherwise it seems to hew pretty close to the source material. Eilsabeth Moss plays Jackson, with Michael Stuhlberg as Stanley Hyman, Logan Lerman as Fred Nemser, and Odessa Young as the increasingly fragile Rose Nemser.

To fully appreciate Decker's film, it helps to have at least a passing familiarity with Jackson's 1951 gothic novel *Hangsaman*, since it plays such a central role in the film. The title is a reference to an old folk ballad, and a little extra sleuthing turned up "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," recorded in 1939 as "The Gallis Pole" by the folk singer Lead Belly—the same Lead Belly tune Hyman plays to his classes at the start of each semester in the film.

While Jackson has always defied traditional genre boundaries to some extent, *Hangsaman* is technically a *bildungsroman*,

centering on a young woman, keen to escape her oppressive home environment, who enrolls in a liberal arts college and gradually descends into madness. Jackson was partially inspired by the real-life disappearance of a young Bennington College student named Paula Jean Welden in 1946, who went hiking one afternoon on Vermont's Long Trail and never returned.

Sticklers for accuracy might not care for the handful of liberties taken with Jackson's life. Most notably, her struggles with anxiety and depression, and corresponding abuse of prescription drugs (barbiturates, amphetamines) and alcohol, occurred much later in life than depicted in the film. In the 1940s, she and Hyman were known as gracious, lively hosts who counted Ralph Ellison in their social circles. They also had four children together, and by all accounts Jackson enjoyed motherhood, even though she felt alienated by the ladies of Bennington. There are no children in the house in the film at all.

Downward spiral

- A house nearly consumed by overgrown ivy sets the reclusive tone.
  YouTube/NEON
- Elisabeth Moss gives a stunning performance as a dark, fictionalized version of Shirley Jackson.
- Shirley and her college professor husband, Stanley Hyman (Michael Stuhlbarg) have an equally darkly twisted marriage.
  YouTube/NEON
- Stanley welcomes Fred Nemser (Logan Lerman) and his new wife Rose (Odessa Young) to Bennington, Vermont.
  YouTube/NEON
- Fred and Rose head to the Jackson house.
- Shirley is displeased to learn the couple will be

staying with them for several weeks.
YouTube/NEON

- The writer at work.
  YouTube/NEON
- A toast from across a crowded room.
  YouTube/NEON
- Not in a party mood.
  YouTube/NEON
- Shirley doesn’t so much warm to Rose, as see her as a source of writerly insight.
- A tarot reading with three Hanged Man cards? Not possible, but thematically fits.
  YouTube/NEON
- Rose slowly begins to unravel.
  YouTube/NEON
- Taking a few notes in the bathroom.
  YouTube/NEON
- What does Rose’s future hold?
  YouTube/NEON

That said, the couple did meet at Syracuse University’s campus literary magazine, and he did vow to marry her after reading one of her stories. And yes, Hyman *was* notoriously unfaithful, often seducing his students and insisting upon an open marriage, to Jackson’s dismay. He was also very controlling, right down to their finances, even though Jackson earned significantly more money than he did after “The Lottery” appeared. But he was a genuine admirer of his wife’s work and regularly read her manuscripts. (He was purportedly too scared to read *The Haunting of Hill House.)* He frequently decried the relative lack of recognition Jackson received while she was alive, correctly predicting that her work would stand the test of time.

Fudging a few biographical details is to be expected, even encouraged, but Moss’s Jackson is a deeply unhappy, frequently unlikable character by design, and this, more than anything,

is likely to annoy hardcore fans. For instance, she is clearly resentful at having a pregnant young woman in the house, rolling her eyes and sighing deeply when Rose express admiration for “The Lottery.” At dinner, she asks when the baby is due in front of Fred (who doesn’t yet know), telling him, “I hope it’s yours.” Even though she becomes kinder to Rose, it’s mostly because she’s trying to get inside the head of her own female protagonist, and Rose is a useful, easily manipulated stand-in.

Hyman doesn’t come off much better. He makes inappropriate advances to Rose and, when he thinks Fred is becoming too confident, sets him up to fail with a guest lecture. Then he twists the knife by pretending to celebrate Fred’s “victory” before ripping him to shreds in front of Rose and Shirley, denouncing the “derivative mediocrity” of Fred’s research—much to Shirley’s amusement.

> *Moss’s portrayal is brilliantly subversive, even if sometimes hard to watch.*

The biggest mystery might be why this young couple would even consent to stay with such awful people for so long. The film’s answer is that Rose is increasingly obsessed with Shirley, even undertaking some amateur sleuthing to find out what happened to the missing Paula Jean Welden. There are increasingly erotic overtones to their interactions. But it’s difficult to tell how much of this is real, part of Shirley’s manipulation, and how much is happening in Rose’s head as she starts to lose her grip on reality.

Moss’s portrayal is brilliantly subversive, even if sometimes hard to watch. This is a fictionalized version of Shirley Jackson, after all—seen through the eyes of an increasingly unreliable narrator, Rose—and it’s a character that Jackson herself might have written, had she ever set out to portray herself in a novel. It’s to Moss’s credit that she still manages to evoke our sympathy at times. It’s hard not to root

for Shirley when Hyman's current mistress, Caroline (the dean's wife), tries to give her shade at a departmental party. Shirley gives a wicked smile, leans forward, and menacingly intones, "You'd bore him to death in a week."

Ultimately, that is the secret to the marriage. For all the caustic sniping and passive-aggressive behavior, these two are twisted soul mates. While Hyman might engage in a fair share of "negging" during his wife's writing process, when Shirley final completes *Hangsaman*, he declares it a triumph and gives a hearty toast to his "horrifically talented bride."

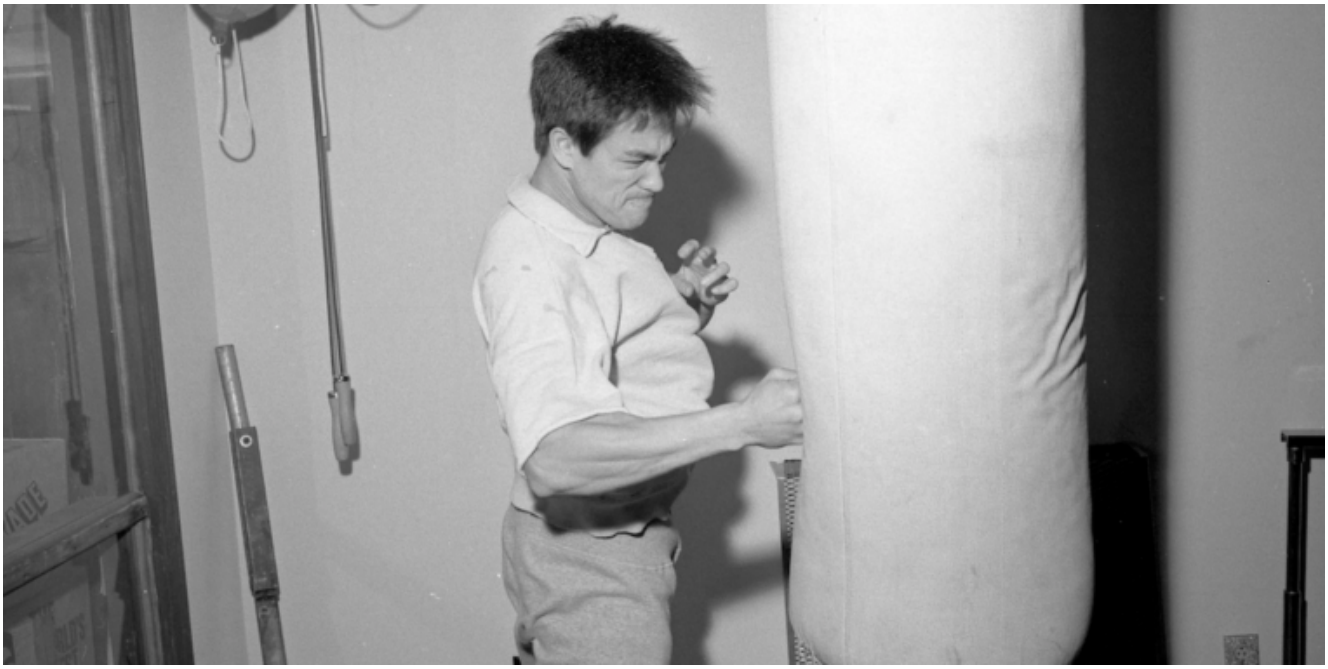
Shirley isn't likely to suit everyone's taste, given how fundamentally interior it is in nature, and its deliberately ambiguous ending. But it's very much a fitting homage to the author's work, and I suspect that Jackson herself would have been quite pleased with the result.

***Shirley** is currently streaming on Hulu and is also available on Amazon, iTunes, and other digital platforms, including VOD.*

Listing image by NEON

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681503

After ESPN's Bruce Lee doc, you'll see Enter the Dragon through a whole new lens



reader comments

65 with 37 posters participating

Share this story

- As you might suspect, Bruce Lee trained hard.
- Young Bruce lived in Seattle, attending the University of Washington and meeting his future wife when he was training her in martial arts.
  Bruce Lee Family Archive / ESPN
- Like the young Michael Jordan shown in *The Last Dance*, young Bruce is… pretty dang stylish.
  Bruce Lee Family Archive / ESPN
- You did *not* want to be on the other end of this, we'd presume.
  Bruce Lee Family Archive / ESPN
- The image of Bruce Lee many of us likely retain (give or take some facial hair).
  Bruce Lee Family Archive / ESPN

ESPN may not be thriving these days due to a severe lack of live sports, but the company's documentary arm is arguably having its biggest moment since the introduction of the *30 for*

30 franchise. *The Last Dance*, the network's 10-part docuseries on Michael Jordan's 1998 Chicago Bulls, became ESPN's most-watched documentary ever in the midst of our still-in-progress, gameless pandemic. So naturally, the company had two more personality-centric projects waiting in the wings to hopefully continue the momentum and establish Sunday Night Sports Docs as a thing.

But last week's endeavor—*Lance*, a two-part series on the disgraced cyclist—tanked, kinda hard in fact. Audiences may simply be sick of a guy who repeatedly lies to the public no matter how much money for cancer research he's raised. But this week, ESPN debuts *Be Water*, a feature-length look at the life of martial arts icon Bruce Lee. And if you think Lee kicked ass on-screen (which, *duh*), you may leave this 95-minute exploration even more impressed

[embedded content]
Just as a reminder of who we're talking about here—the final fight of *Enter the Dragon*.

Kinetic genius

If all you know of Bruce Lee is *Enter the Dragon* or more recent pop-culture shoutouts in board games and Tarantino flicks, *Be Water* sets out to show how much of a badass the actor was without even considering his fists. This film may air on a sports network, but it's less interested in Lee's undeniable martial arts abilities and accomplishments and more intrigued by his societal ones. Leveraging Lee's own personal writings, interviews with friends and loved ones, plus loads of family archival footage, viewers will get to see Lee the dogged creator, Lee the vulnerable philosopher, Lee the family man, Lee the Chinese American man at times still working through his own identity.

Director Bao Nguyen spent the last five years putting together this film, which is well-crafted enough to have earned a

premiere at SXSW 2020 before that event met its COVID-19 fate. In his director's statement on the film, Nguyen describes Lee as the first onscreen image of a strong Asian man he came across as a child (in a very modern flourish, Lee's break was through a superhero franchise, playing sidekick Kato in a *Green Hornet* TV series). Learning about Lee's off-camera life later only made the martial arts idol more inspiring to this director.

"I saw someone who looked like me for the first time, with an unapologetic confidence and magnetism that resonated on every inch of the silver screen," Nguyen writes. "Bruce Lee is the epitome of the American story. Like him and so many other Americans before, my family, as Vietnamese war refugees, left their familiar homeland looking for a better future for themselves. It's a side of Bruce's story that isn't always emphasized. I hope by the end of the film, audiences have learned something new. Not just about Bruce Lee but also how America has treated the 'other' in the past."

SXScreeners 2020

View more stories

Lee's life turns out to be a particularly apt tale for our present moment, where COVID-19 fears bred anti-Asian sentiment and thousands continue to take to the streets in support of black Americans. The actor rose to prominence in the United States during the 1960s civil rights era, and *Be Water* again and again shows him as a man of his time pushing for equality across many aspects of his life. As a martial arts trainer, Lee didn't discriminate students by race at a time when many others would only provide lessons to people like them (individuals as famous as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar trained with Lee, and the basketball star and activist later agreed to be in one of Lee's films, *Game of Death*). When Lee continued to meet resistance in Hollywood due to fears about making an

Asian American a leading man, he simply created his own opportunities, pivoting to writing and production after moving to Hong Kong. As a man who called that country home for many years, he'd write anti-colonial messages and images into his films. And as an actor, he wouldn't settle for roles that resorted to stereotypes and also refused to use them for the villains he created (it's why Chuck Norris in *Way of the Dragon* isn't downright cartoonish). It reminded me a bit of folks like Louis Armstrong or Dave Brubeck, artistic legends who decades later may only be known for select works but quietly pushed for social justice at the prime of their powers.

"He once told me, 'I can educate people faster with one film than I ever could by writing a book or by opening 100 karate schools in America,'" as one *Be Water* interviewee puts it.

Lee's physical gifts remain obvious whenever *Be Water* showcases training footage or shares clips from a classic film sequence. "He made fighting on-screen dialogue—there was subtext," one interviewee says. One former girlfriend calls him a "kinetic genius," and that ability evidently translated to dance halls. But everyone already knows that; Lee's films have become iconic over the years primarily because of how gripping the actor is during any on-camera action (which, by the way, he'd often choreograph—Lee worked as a stunt coordinator early on in Hollywood when he couldn't get roles). If you want to watch the "stick to sports" version of a Lee profile, his fight sequences are all over YouTube and his movies are on various streaming services (HBO Max newly has *Enter the Dragon; Fist of Fury* is on Amazon Prime). Instead, *Be Water* shows a fuller picture of the action star, which will likely endear him to an entirely new generation more familiar with the Asian action stars Lee blazed a trail for. It certainly made me eager to rewatch a few films I haven't seen since I was a kid, now armed with whole new perspective on the hero.

“Right now, in the midst of the COVID19 pandemic, the fear of an uncertain future and the need to blame the ‘other’ has sparked anti-Asian racism and harassment throughout the world. And as a victim of some of this anti-Asian racism, I know the importance of sharing positive images and stories of Asian Americans like Bruce’s to a broad audience,” Nguyen concludes in his director’s letter. “As Bruce once said, ‘Under the sky, under the heavens there is but one family.’ Asian Americans are Americans too and it’s unfortunate that we have to remind people of this. Bruce really was about building bridges—bridges between cultures and bridges between people, no matter what you looked like or where you came from. Let’s always remember that.”

ESPN’s Be Water *airs Sunday, June 7, at 9p ET. Look for it in the ESPN+ / WatchESPN app soon after.*

Listing image by Bruce Lee Family Archive / ESPN

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681698

Command & Conquer Remastered Collection review: Loving the smell of Tiberium

reader comments

120 with 79 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

- Welcome back to Westwood's classic RTS series in this week's new *Remastered Collection*.
  EA / Petroglyph
- Let's start this article with a dive into the game's full-motion video selection. Some of the original footage is pretty darned grainy, in spite of AI upscaling techniques.
  EA / Petroglyph
- Mission briefings before *every* mission. *C&C* didn't mess around back in the day.
  EA / Petroglyph
- Remember the weird opening-cinema sequence, complete with unnecessary channel flipping? Ah, the '90s.
  EA / Petroglyph
- I'm still creeped out by this fake kid's channel.
  EA / Petroglyph
- CGI combat, engage.
  EA / Petroglyph
- After completing each mission in the game, you'll unlock behind-the-scenes clips from the original video team. (This screen hides most of the goodies you can expect to find.)
  EA / Petroglyph
- In fantastic news, when you first boot either game in this new package, you'll be greeted with a familiar video sequence.
  EA / Petroglyph
- Check your graphics.
  EA / Petroglyph
- Check your sound card.
  EA / Petroglyph

The strategy, the explosions, the FMV sequences, the ripping guitars, and the Kane-fueled cheese—they're all back. The original 1995 game *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Dawn* and its 1996 prequel *Red Alert* have returned in today's launch of the *C&C: Remastered Collection* on Windows 8/10

(Amazon, Steam, Origin). In good news, the package is right for the price: $20 gets you both original games, all of their expansion packs (one for *C&C:TD*, two for *Red Alert*), and each game's console-exclusive content. The complete package has been aesthetically touched up for the sake of working on modern PCs.

I've spent the past week tinkering with *Command & Conquer: Remastered Collection* to break down exactly what to expect and how you should temper your real-time strategy expectations. Despite a few quality-of-life tweaks, the package is otherwise faithful to the originals—almost to a fault—while its compatibility with modern PCs is *mostly* good enough.

From 400p to 2160p, but not without issues

The package's biggest selling point is a new coat of high-res paint. Every single asset and map element has been redrawn, and like other recent classic-game remaster projects, this one includes a handy "graphic-swap" button. By default, tap the space bar at any time during single-player modes to switch from the original 400p assets to a new, 2160p-optimized suite of units, buildings, and terrain. Here, enjoy an after-and-before gallery of both zoomed-in units and full battleground scenes.

- The game's default, zoomed-out perspective, with updated graphics. (Most of the other images are of super-zoomed units.)
- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics.
- A tighter zoom on those buildings, new graphics.
- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics.
- A peek at Red Alert's first Alliance mission. Thanks to the higher resolution, you might recognize the historical figure we're rescuing there.

- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics. We swear that one fuzzy sprite is Albert Einstein.
- A tighter zoom on some Soviet vehicles from *Red Alert*. This includes a submerged submarine on the right.
- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics. Now the submarine looks like someone tossed a padded microphone in the sea.
- Some Nod vehicles from *C&C:TD*, with updated graphics.
- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics.
- Some Nod buildings, remastered.
- The same scene, with original lower-res graphics.

Should you wish to admire the higher-res, 2D art in this new package, especially if you run at resolutions lower than 3140×2160, the combined development forces at Petroglyph Games (made up mostly of Westwood veterans) and Lemon Sky Studios have added a mouse-wheel zooming option. This also lets you tighten the view to match the game's original, cramped perspective, as opposed to the much wider default view (apparently the same as the "*C&C Gold*" version from 1997).

Returning to the source material with a jump in resolution seems like the obvious move for an RTS remaster, especially for those seeking better unit visibility during manic eight-player skirmishes. But as polished as this new package looks, the visual overhaul comes with three issues, which range from nitpicks to legitimate concerns.

The first is an apparent reduction in color-specific visibility. Both flavors of the *C&C:TD* campaign (GDI, NOD) open with your enemies having largely similar unit colors to your own, and worse, their health bars aren't different colors for each faction. Instead, they're all colored based on how healthy each unit is (green for healthy, red for wounded), and the health bars' coloration is very loud and obvious compared to the "gritty" color of the campaign's desert, forest, and snow backdrops.

As it turns out, the original games' blurrier, lower-res units pop better in terms of their specific coloration; it's easier to tell which squad each mush of old-school pixels belongs to even when zoomed out, since it averages out to match the squad's color, whereas you'll need to zoom in to get a clear view of the newer, finer-painted units' allegiances. Your opinion may vary on this, but if you see things the same way I do, you don't get much recourse at launch. *C&C:RC* doesn't include toggles to change those health bars' colors to match the squads, which would severely help. Additionally, online multiplayer doesn't support the series' old-school, low-res graphics. You can only play online in high-res mode.

Sidebar gripes and a matter of taste

My second issue is with the newly designed sidebar. Just like in the original games, it sits flush on the right side of the screen, but this new interface splits all building options into tabs: buildings, troops, vehicles, and super weapons. Back in the day, all of those were split into two columns, so you could point your mouse over the menu and go back and forth between triggering new buildings and queueing new soldiers or vehicles.

- In good news, you'll no longer have to tap a "scroll" button to see all of these options at once. In bad news, you'll have to tap a whole new button to switch between these buildings and your troop options.
- Original interface, for comparison. Notice that you can more easily queue troop and building creation simultaneously with this side-by-side scroll.

Now, players face a new trade-off: you don't have to click the "scroll down" buttons to expose more units, which is good, but you *do* have to tap a button to switch between each tab, which

is bad. At today's modern higher resolutions, the original interface could very well have been extended to show more units at once, which would have arguably been the best of both worlds. But Petroglyph and Lemon Sky have removed the old sidebar as an option altogether, as if destroyed by a GDI ion cannon. The only consolation at launch is a series of brand-new keyboard shortcuts to switch between these tabs. The community's response to this announced change was mostly positive, so you may also appreciate it—especially since it resembles the interface of later *C&C* games—but I don't personally think this is an improvement.

And my final nitpick about the new graphics is one of taste: the original games' units never lent themselves to remarkable articulation or expansion. The before-and-after results from 2017's *StarCraft Remastered* are more enticing because their original designs were already full of sci-fi and fantasy flourishes, including bold unit designs, ridiculous sizes, and colorful landscapes. The *C&C* series sticks mostly to boilerplate jets, tanks, bikes, and Humvees, all drawn against "realistic" backgrounds. Remaining faithful to this aesthetic was certainly the best call, but it didn't leave *C&C*'s remastering team much room to blow non-fans away with this update; *Red Alert 2* remains a prettier 2D option, even with its 768p-maximum resolution and serious issues running in Windows 10.

In spite of these nitpicks, I prefer playing with *C&C:RC*'s tasteful new graphics over the original pixel art—especially when everyone in an online skirmish picks bolder primary colors for their units, which helps quite a bit. And the C&C:RC package is careful to update its new units' animation frames in appropriate fashion. They all include more frames of animation, but not significantly more, and interpolation is wisely applied to make sure the small soldiers and vehicles animate in a way that looks like badass GI Joe characters waging war, not silly little puppets.

Ladders, private matches, and cross-platform hoops

- Let’s do the options-and-menus song and dance. Start by picking which of the two EXEs you’d like to load (or jump into the map editor).
- Pick any, all, or none of these QoL toggles for controls.
- The tooltip mentions a welcome return for a classic series actor. You can also revert all audio to the same tinnier sound effects found in the original, if you want.
- You can map the dickens out of this game’s shortcut bindings.
- Hopping from mission to mission is a breeze thanks to a new menu. You’ll have to unlock progress in the primary campaigns, but all other maps are unlocked from the jump.
- Notice the wealth of options for private skirmishes.
- In *Red Alert*, faction choice matters, as it adds certain perks on top of the Soviet/Alliance distinction.

Returning to the “faithful, even to a fault” sales pitch: if either Petroglyph or Lemon Sky applied a significant unit-balancing update to this RTS classic, it’s not saying, and my testing thus far hasn’t revealed any reason to assume that debates over GDI versus Nod or Allies versus Soviets will be settled any time soon. To clarify, the collection puts *C&C:TD* and *Red Alert* into separate EXE silos, so you can’t pit factions from the first game against those of its prequel.

You’ll likely want to focus your online battling on the *Red Alert* side of the equation, since that game was built with superior unit balancing than its predecessor and includes more built-in Westwood-designed skirmish maps that range from 1v1 to eight-player free-for-all skirmishes. Both games include

the similar-yet-asymmetric balance of two opposing factions, and each includes its own Elo-rated 1v1 ladder for matchmaking against strangers. (We could not test this sufficiently during the pre-launch period.)

Setting up skirmishes with friends, meanwhile, was a hit-or-miss proposition ahead of launch. Inviting friends through either Steam or Origin worked most of the time, though roughly one-third of the friend-only matches I tried loading resulted in some glitch, ranging from a mouse cursor disappearing to a match never starting to even a wild crash of visuals on both ends. For the majority of my private matches that loaded, they worked just fine—although in each of these cases, *C&C:RC* drops the ball on two crucial quality-of-life features: keeping lobbies together after a match ends and letting players cleanly surrender. Your only option is to rage-quit, which *C&C:RC* responds to by filling empty seats with AI players—which is admittedly welcome for matches containing up to eight players.

If you own the collection on Origin and want to play against Steam friends, or vice versa, you can't send them direct session invites. Your only option is to host a publicly visible game, then tell your cross-platform friend to refresh the public "join" list as quickly as possible to take up any of your session's open slots. *C&C:RC* does not support closed, password-protected lobbies at this time, which is a bummer. I'm happy a workaround is available at launch, at least, for cross-platform friends willing to jump through hoops, but it feels a little silly for 2020.

To round out the usual online questions: no, LAN support is not available at launch; Petroglyph says this is a casualty of quarantine issues changing the development team's priorities, and the company has pledged to straighten this issue out at some point (but haven't offered an estimate just yet). Yes, the single-player content works offline, so long as your client completes an every-30-days online check via either

Steam or Origin. No, the game doesn't include any DRM beyond what's built in to both storefronts.

Custom-made content and mods work on both platforms, at least, and each ships with a nifty built-in map editor. Sharing such mod content is easier to do via Steam Workshop, since Origin doesn't have an equivalent, so users of EA's storefront will hilariously have to browse through the game's Steam interface to access and download that content. (**Update**: For those asking how mods work, this goes beyond the traditional practice of editing a "rules.ini" file. Fans' access this time around begins with EA officially opening up the source to TiberianDawn.dll and RedAlert.dll, which may lead to some serious game-changing possibilities, as the dev team pointed out on Reddit in May.)

Nicely updated audio, acceptable FMVs



Enlarge / Customize the in-game audio at any time with this handy jukebox interface.
EA / Petroglyph

Original music and sound producer Frank Klepacki's name has

been broadcast frequently in the run-up to this launch, and for good reason: he went to the trouble of recovering the games' original audio assets, which were downsampled because there wasn't enough CD-ROM space. If you'd like to play these new versions with the original 22kHz monaural music and sound effects, you can still toggle those, but the higher fidelity applied to all sounds across the board is appreciated.

In terrific news, Klepacki appears to have paid particular attention to how the games sounded back in the day and has aimed to retain the original games' intense, in-your-face tuning of frequencies, both for music and for the glut of newly recorded sound effects. Everything here sounds punchy and old-school, as opposed to a pleasant, sounds-swimming-together mix you might expect from modern game productions. (If you disagree, every single audio element's volume can be individually tweaked.) As a fun bonus, a handful of classic songs has been newly recorded by Klepacki and an accompanying live band, complete with original samples and '90s-style arrangements, and they absolutely shred. You can go into an in-game "jukebox" and pick exactly which songs you want to hear, which is a blast for picky music lovers.

C&C:RC also comes packed with *every* FMV sequence attached to both original games, along with video sequences that had previously been exclusive to the series' console ports. Sadly, EA and Petroglyph were unable to recover any higher-res video beyond what shipped on the original games' discs, although I appreciate that each video has been touched up with AI reconstruction techniques. Some of the segments look like garbage with this filter applied, but many look dramatically smoothed out. What's more, beating every mission unlocks a ton of behind-the-scenes footage and green-screen video tests, which range from boring to remarkable. If you can't get enough of Westwood's original cinematics Director Joe Kucan as Kane, this part of the package will likely be worth the asking price alone.

The mainstream-friendly thrust of the C&C games' campaigns remains intact, particularly with missions that emphasize don't-think-just-rush sequences. Each campaign opens with players simply pointing and clicking a massive cast of units toward a few "kill all the things" goals, while later missions slowly reveal the series' RTS heart of resource management and multi-pronged assaults. The series' classic FMV sequences fit nicely with this approach, especially once iconic characters like Kane and Tanya show up to serve your 100-percent USRDA of cheese.

Let's be honest: We like this side of EA

On the quality-of-life front, *C&C:RC* includes a slew of new control tweaks, including mouse button assignments and the option to queue vehicle and troop production. (Most of these, unlike the updated production sidebar, *are* wholly optional.) Private online skirmishes include their own QoL toggles, including customizable team assignments (yes, you can host a 1v7 match if you want), gameplay speed, an option to spawn discoverable, boost-filled crates, and choosing whether or not fog of war returns to zones once troops leave them. And now, *C&C:TD* includes the same number indicators on units that *Red Alert* added to indicate which keyboard-shortcut group they belong to (which you can set by holding Control and tapping a number).

But the devs' teases about under-the-hood bug fixes aren't necessarily clear, and they leave some dated issues intact, particularly unit pathfinding. Should you order your units to walk from a barracks to a bridge, you had better carefully guide their steps, or those dummies are going to walk through hazardous, Tiberium-soaked fields and emerge with a ton of health missing.

If you're a fan of the core dated gameplay within *C&C:TD* or

Red Alert, the QoL content spread across *C&C:RC* is for you: the vocal, 25-years-later contingent of Westwood's RTS roots, who arguably favor the military stylings and '90s-rock bombast of the series' first two games over the insane balance and actions-per-minute madness of *StarCraft* or *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*. (Speaking of, credit where it's due: EA has absolutely, unquestionably improved these two games with this new collection. Blizzard can't say the same about *W3*, whose botched "Reforged" version is still missing major features that its community has been begging for.)

On the other hand, if you're unsure whether you still have the stomach for the series' roots, I wouldn't blame you for dipping your toes into a freeware version of *Red Alert*, currently available as either a full install of the original game or a multiplayer-only fork, before shelling out for this one. But this is one of those occasions where EA has done the right thing and offered the community a full open source path to the games' original code, should that compel you to pay for the package due to principle, as opposed to your RTS preferences. Really, so much of this package bucks Ars' assumptions about EA as a modern game publisher: a return to a beloved franchise, built in part by its original staff, that has prioritized fan feedback and its hardest-core fans at whatever cost. That makes the collection's launch-week issues a little easier to swallow.

To misquote Kane: today, the sun rises on something old, not new. But, hey, it's a welcome sight.

Listing image by EA / Petroglyph

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681147

Investors argue against excessive pay package for Activision CEO



reader comments

111 with 70 posters participating

Share this story

A major investment group with substantial holdings in Activision stock is speaking out this week against the high compensation for Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick. The move comes ahead of a shareholder vote on executive pay scheduled for June 11.

“Over the past four years, Activision Blizzard CEO Robert Kotick has received over $20 million in combined stock/option equity per year,” the CtW investment group writes in a letter filed with the SEC this week. “These equity grants have consistently been larger than the total pay (the sum of base salary, annual bonus, and equity pay) of CEO peers at similar companies.”

CtW—which works with union-sponsored pension funds to speak out against “irresponsible and unethical corporate behavior and excessive executive pay”—said Kotick’s excessive compensation is especially concerning in light of the wave of nearly 800 layoffs the company rolled out in 2019. Those layoffs were implemented amid the announcement of “record results in 2018” for Activision and reportedly focused on “non-development teams” that were no longer needed thanks to a lighter slate of releases from the company going forward.

In a statement provided to GameSpot, Activision defended Kotick’s high pay, noting that over 90 percent of that compensation is based on the performance of the company’s stock. Activision’s market capitalization has “increased from less than $10 million to over $53 billion dollars” since Kotick started as CEO in 1991, the company said.

“In the last five years, Activision Blizzard’s share price has outperformed the S&P 500 by more than 120% and over the past 20 years, under Mr. Kotick’s leadership, Activision Blizzard’s share price has outperformed the S&P 500 by over 11,000%,” the company told GameSpot.

What is “excessive pay,” anyway?

Kotick’s high pay isn’t a new issue for investment groups. Proxy voting advisory group Institutional Shareholder Services (ISS) has recommended similar votes against Activision’s executive pay schemes since 2012, when Kotick’s $64.9 million in compensation made him the second-best-paid CEO in the country. Advisory firm Glass Lewis also recommended against approving Kotick’s pay package from 2012 through 2018, before flipping to support the vote in more recent years.



Enlarge / Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick.

In an April SEC filing, Activision said the ISS recommendation against its executive pay package (which CtW cites heavily in its letter) was based on a “faulty analysis” with a number of technical errors. “We also believe the ISS analysis fails to give adequate credit to the Company’s historically strong financial and operational results which continue to this day, even in these historically difficult times,” the company wrote.

In 2019, shareholder advocacy group As You Sow put Kotick at No. 45 on its “most overpaid CEOs” list, arguing that almost

$13 million of his $28.7 million in pay that year was excessive, based on total shareholder returns. Electronic Arts CEO Andrew Wilson appeared on that list at No. 98.

A full 92 percent of Activision shareholders voted to approve Kotick's pay in June 2018. According to public disclosures for 2018, Kotick's pay is 319 times the median salary of an Activision employee, compared to a 142x average multiplier for the S&P 500 as a whole.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681552

From Zelda to Civ to Frostpunk—can climate change be fun?

reader comments

9 with 9 posters participating

Share this story

- In case you thought climate catastrophe was a new thing for video games, remember *Wind Waker* kicks off due to the Great Flood, right?
- In 2011's *Fate of the World*—which leveraged genuine scientific research to build its story—players lead the international organization in charge of managing social, technological and environmental policies.
- Last year's *Beyond Blue* took gamers deep underwater in the name of conservation.

For decades now, video games have concerned themselves with the end of things. From the bombed-out nuclear wasteland of Washington, DC in *Fallout 3* to the flooded Hyrule of *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker,* popular games have explored the concept of the apocalypse with both goofy humor and stark seriousness, often revealing unpleasant truths in the process. So perhaps it's no surprise that as the all-too-real climate change crisis continues to creep towards a breaking point—even as the ongoing public health disaster known as COVID-19 eclipses it in the public imagination—video game developers are taking steps to systematize the ways that rising sea levels or other ecological catastrophes might overwhelm us in the coming years.

While many of these climate changed-focused games focus on depicting the dire future that experts predict if we refuse to radically alter our behavior patterns, others are a bit more traditional in their approach. And some notable game-makers like Firaxis Games (*Civilization*) and 11-Bit Studios (*This War of Mine*) are drawing inspiration from climate-change to craft ludic dilemmas that force players to make radical decisions in the face of overwhelming odds. In other words: if these studios can't necessarily make living through the apocalypse as fun as it sounds, they can at least make it interesting.



The picturesque environments of *Civ6* were about to experience some hardships.

A game that can do both

To be fair, climate scientists have understood for years now that video games have a unique ability to communicate the stakes and severity of this global crisis to a mass audience. Historically, many of these games fit well-within the strategy genre, and developers have tried different approaches to lure players in. For example, the commercial game *Fate of the World* often overwhelms new players with the heft of its interlocking systems: make a few bad decisions early on, and you'll quickly find yourself hurtling towards a bad ending. All you can do then is apply the lessons learned to a future playthrough. On the other hand, educational fare like the underwater exploration sim *Beyond Blue* lean more towards accessibility. By focusing on the specific effects of climate change—in this case, the destruction of the Earth's oceans—the game can communicate the costs of a warming climate to a wider audience.

While these so-called "global warming games" do succeed in

changing minds, as an established subgenre of the arguably-outdated label “serious games,” they can’t quite penetrate the psyche of everyday gamers in the same manner as their ultra-successful commercial brethren like *Minecraft.* For many, that’s not their aim. However, a game like *Civilization 6* can do both. When developer Firaxis Games announced that the Gathering Storm DLC for their latest entry in the classic strategy franchise would add climate and disaster mechanics, fans responded with major enthusiasm.

According to Ed Beach, the game’s lead designer, the team felt that these ecological features would help further flesh-out Civ 6’s core philosophy, which he describes as “playing the map.” Unlike previous *Civilization* games, if a player wants to build powerful settlements, they must invest resources in exploiting the particular terrain around a potential city, such as building a water-wheel next to a river or digging a mine beneath a mountain. According to Beach, letting that river overflow or that mountain erupt with magma every-now-and-then struck them as an obvious avenue for improvement.

“Climate change was a natural extension of that idea, especially since our game runs until 2050,” Beach says. “The next 30 years are quite critical ones for our planet where we may see just such dramatic changes to our planet’s landscape.”

In the early to mid-game of a *Civ 6* match, flashy disasters like storms and floods are governed by the same systems as their more mundane examples, like famines and droughts. They’re all keyed to random dice rolls in the background, though players have the option of adjusting their frequency and severity. It’s not all doom-and-gloom—as with their real-life equivalents, these setbacks can produce unexpected benefits, such as fertilizing your soil for enhanced food production. However, once you enter the last third of the game—the so-called “modern era” and later—your nation’s industrial production can start to impact the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and that can have a major impact on

both your overall climate and the disasters that befall it.

According to Beach, *Civilization 6* drew inspiration for its climate change systems from a very peculiar source—the first game in the series, 1991's *Civilization.* Compared to the sprawling complexity of its sequels, *Civ 1's* global warming system is quite simple: once the player starts to produce factories and the like in the industrial age or later, their map will slowly gain pollution. (Like *Civ 6's* disasters, certain cataclysmic events produce massive amounts of it, such as a meltdown of a nuclear power plant.) If the pollution isn't disposed of fast enough, the map will slowly transform, with coasts becoming swamps and once-fecund plains turning into arid deserts. Later games in the series would slightly refine these systems, but with Gathering Storm, Beach and the team wanted to inject fresh ideas that aimed more at rewarding players that took proactive action rather than punishing those who didn't.

While Beach says that the primary goal of this new climate system was to introduce interesting wrinkles to the existing *Civ* formula, he also notes the franchise's heritage as an educational tool even if its young players don't exactly view it as "edutainment." To Beach, climate change is going to become a key moment in human history, whether we want to admit it or not—just like the invention of the wheel, or the scourge of the Black Death—and that's exactly what a *Civilization* game is made out of.

"*[Civ's]* sandbox had been missing any large-scale representation of how the environment has pushed back to check human progress and how mankind has impacted the planet," he says. "Gathering Storm added these new elements to the mix; tools to experience world-scale environmental change. If that lets players appreciate how mankind can shape the planet, it just heightens the game's ability to inform and instruct and hopefully that's a win for everyone."

Though careless play can allow rising water levels wreak devastation on these nations, Gathering Storm does give players plenty of tools to deal with elevated carbon levels. Some of these technologies are specific to the game's "future era" and are entirely speculative in nature, including floating cities and carbon recapture (i.e. sucking the CO2 out of the atmosphere like a giant vacuum cleaner). As Beach tells it, the team wanted to include these as-yet-uninvented techniques in order to emphasize the fact that the apocalyptic future predicted by the worst climate projections is not necessarily set in stone—we have the power to change it, if we so choose. "Technologies such as these—things our contemporary scientists are hoping to unlock—give players a chance to put the world on a positive path, even if they have suffered significant effects from climate change earlier," he says. "They were the final pieces in our efforts to make sure players always had the tools to positively respond to environmental changes if they are so inclined."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1679548

A lost Maxis "Sim" game has been discovered by an Ars reader, uploaded for all



Wow. It may only be an incomplete prototype, but in a breathtaking span of time, *SimRefinery* has gone from a seemingly lost legend to a playable, downloadable video game. (That's its real, full-resolution opening screen, as captured using a DOSBox emulator.) And it's all thanks to an Ars Technica commenter.
archive.org / Maxis / Chevron

reader comments

51 with 40 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

We at Ars Technica are proud to be members of video game archiving history today. *SimRefinery*, one of PC gaming's most notoriously "lost" video games, now exists—as a fully playable game, albeit an unfinished one—thanks to an Ars Technica reader commenting on the story of its legend.

Two weeks ago, I reported on a story about Maxis Business

Solutions, a subdivision of the game developer Maxis created in the wake of *SimCity*'s booming success. Librarian and archivist Phil Salvador published an epic, interview-filled history of one of the game industry's earliest examples of a "serious" gaming division, which was formed as a way to cash in on major businesses' interest in using video games as work-training simulators.

As Salvador wrote in May:

> *Oil refineries are really, really complicated. That's why Chevron wanted Maxis to make them a game like SimCity, to teach the employees at their oil refinery in Richmond, California how it all worked.*
>
> *To be clear, they didn't want a game that was supposed to accurately train people how to run an oil refinery or replace an education in chemical engineering. That would've been incredibly dangerous. What they wanted instead was something that showed you how the dynamics of the refinery worked, how all the different pieces invisibly fit together, like SimCity did for cities.*

But while Salvador gathered a lot of information about how the resulting game *SimRefinery* worked—and how it let users recreate *SimCity*-caliber disasters within its refinery simulation—he was unable to turn up any working copies. "Nobody held onto *SimRefinery* because it didn't seem important," he wrote. "It was a one-off, somewhat unsuccessful training program for an oil refinery in California. In the grand scheme of Maxis, it was one of their least important titles, which has only now become an object of interest in the video game community because of its unavailability."

Challenge accepted

Unsurprisingly, the savvy, computer history-minded readers of

Ars Technica took this proclaimed rarity as a challenge, and a new user signed up to comment on the article with an intriguing image upload: an apparent copy of *SimRefinery* on a single 3.5-inch disk, labeled only with the game's title in Times New Roman and a black-and-white Maxis logo. The anonymous user, who goes by the username "postbebop" and has so far not replied to our requests for comment, credited the disk to a "retired chemical engineering friend" who had work experience at Chevron in the early '90s.

After teasing a plan to recover the disk's contents and upload them to archive.org, postbebop went silent. Until today!

- "Not all parts are complete" is the operative phrase of the day. Though, really, Ars Technica could use help from legitimate chemical engineers to make sense of what in this game *does* function properly.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Like other Maxis "Sim" games, *SimRefinery* includes a separate mini-map interface. Grab its highlighted square to move the visible boundaries of the gameplay window.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- See that barn at the top-right? That sure looks like a *SimFarm* barn, doesn't it? Maxis Business Simulations was known for lifting art assets from other Maxis projects to get prototypes across the finish line, so that similarity isn't surprising.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Lit up at the bottom.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- The recovered disk includes a "demo" sequence, and this functions as a predetermined gameplay demo with particularly long pauses. It's likely that this prototype was shown off in a live demo, with a speaker explaining during the pauses how the game would function as a training tool.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron

- The demo reel proceeds to open and click through various interfaces.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- I won’t lie: I have no idea what these mean. I’m hopeful smarter Ars readers might share some insights.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Well, *that* explains everything.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Buy! Sell!
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Time to build a plant. (Most of the interface’s buttons don’t work, but if you click the buttons on the wide-view window, it will toggle different options on the main window, which is how I got to this point.)
- Without any budgetary notice stopping me, I prep this plant for building.
- Boom! My very first alkylation plant!
- Just another day at work, drumming up non-toxic, abrasive catalysts.

The anonymous Ars user returned to our comments section on Thursday to confirm that they’d uploaded the disk’s contents, after an apparently annoying extraction process, to archive.org for everyone in the world to download and play. The above gallery is a peek at how the incomplete prototype version of the game functions as emulated using DOSBox. While that archive.org link will let interested users play the prototype in any Web browser, the full game download also includes an intro.bat file; booting that with an application like DOSBox will play a pre-recorded demo of how the game is meant to function. This demo has a few explanatory prompts, but it also has long, unexplained pauses, perhaps meant for a live demonstration by MBS staffers to interested Chevron managers.

Since many of the on-screen buttons don’t function properly, and the disk doesn’t include anything in the way of

instructions or documentation, understanding exactly what works in this incomplete build of *SimRefinery* is still quite vague. For now, we know that you can use the game's menus to mix "recipes" that include potentially explosive compounds like C4 and MTBE. A peek at Salvador's Twitch stream of the game revealed at least one apparent fire, along with calamities like "regenerator upsets," which he created with help from his most engineering-minded chat members.

So, yes, chaos is certainly possible within this incomplete version of *SimRefinery*, which Salvador's article would remind you was a major point of the software: "If you start breaking the refinery, you can see how ruining one part of the plant will affect the other parts of the plant," he wrote. We heartily invite all of you to fiddle with the prototype and cause as much intentional—and absolutely educational—refinery destruction as possible. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681508

A detective hunts a costumed vigilante in Major Grom: Plague Doctor trailer



reader comments

14 with 13 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
Major Grom: Plague Doctor is adapted from the Russian comics of the same name.
A rogue detective who doesn’t always play by the rules hunts a costumed vigilante serial killer in the first English-language trailer (well, subtitled) for a Russian superhero film called *Major Grom: Plague Doctor*, directed by Oleg Trofim (*Ice*). There’s some pretty strong *The Punisher* vibes here, as well as *V for Vendetta.* The *Major Grom* comic books, created by Artem Gabrelyanov, have been likened to the early *Batman* comics in tone, which might explain the *Dark Knight* overtones as well.

(Some spoilers for the Russian comics below.)

The original *Major Grom* comics were published between 2012 and 2015, later spawning several spinoffs. The protagonist is Major Igor Grom, a detective in St. Petersburg who has mean martial arts skills and takes part in the occasional amateur boxing competition (aka Russian Fight Club). He has a tendency

to bend the rules, which irritates his young rookie partner, Dmitry “Dima” Dubin, who prefers to play things by the book. Grom’s love interest is an investigative reporter named Yulia Pchelkina, whose skill set proves useful in helping solve Grom’s various comic book cases. A billionaire social media mogul named Sergey Razumovsky is Grom’s archnemesis. Razumovsky is a philanthropist by day but murders homeless people by night, all in the name of cleaning up St. Petersburg.

Those cases have involved human trafficking rings, a gang of female bank robbers who like to dress up as fairy tale princesses, and child abductors, as well as the vigilante serial killer the Plague Doctor, who metes out justice to those whom the system has failed to convict. The killer’s identity is protected by donning the distinctive costume historically associated with his moniker. In the comics, at least, Grom wins their first encounter, but the Plague Doctor returns in a later arc (*The Game*), abducting and killing many of Grom’s close friends (including poor Yulia). Grom ends up depressed, unable to sleep, haunted by nightmares, and ultimately resigns from the police force. The spinoff comics follow his adventures as a private investigator.

Bubble Comics announced their formation of a film division, Bubble Studios, at the 2015 Comic-Con Russia, starting with a short prequel film, *Major Grom*, in which Grom (played by Alexander Gorbatov) foils the plans of a trio of bank robbers wearing masks of characters from a popular Soviet cartoon about hockey players, *Puck! Puck!* (Yes, the cartoon is real.) The short film made its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2017 and was screened for American audiences at San Diego Comic-Con that same year, accompanied by a panel Q&A with the creators. The final scene depicts the Plague Doctor, in full costume, tossing a lit match to the ground and letting it blaze.

- Our hero, Major Igor Grom (Tikhon Zhiznevskiy).
- A judge presiding over a distasteful case.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- The accused doesn’t look too concerned.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Whatever he did to this little girl is probably really bad.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- But he is released anyway.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Ah, but who is that dark costumed figure?
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Every vigilante should have built-in flame throwers.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- All that’s left of the accused.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Grom is tasked with solving the case.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Learning more about the Plague Doctor.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Grom’s partner, Dima (Alexander Seteykin), appreciates the costume design.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- A Plague Doctor sighting.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Investigative journalist Yulia (Lyubov Aksyonova) might have a lead.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Bank robbers wearing cartoon *Puck! Puck!* masks.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- Go get ‘em, Grom!
  YouTube/Bubble Comics
- “I achieved justice.”
- The next generation, ready to fight.
  YouTube/Bubble Comics

The feature film, *Major Grom: Plague Doctor* picks up where the

short left off, with the vigilante killer taking out numerous high-profile and wealthy individuals who have managed to escape justice for their crimes. Judging by the trailer, the film will hew closely to the original comic story arc. (Gabrelyanov did help pen the script.) We even get to see Grom taking on the bank robbers in *Puck! Puck!* masks, although Tikhon Zhiznevskiy replaces Gorbatov as Grom in the feature film. Alexander Seteykin plays Grom's partner, Dima, with Lyubov Aksyonova as Yulia and Sergei Goroshko as Razumovsky.

This is the second Russian feature film to grab some attention this year, starting with *The Iron Mask* (aka *Viy 2: Journey to China*). *The Iron Mask* is a Russo-Chinese fantasy adventure with a bonkers trailer that played up the campy antics of Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, even though they were not, technically, the stars. As I wrote when the trailer dropped earlier this year, "The tone is constantly shifting, the dialogue seems silly, and frankly that's some questionable CGI."

But it's the kind of silly that can be a lot of a fun in the right setting, and Schwarzenegger seemed to be having a blast gleefully vamping it up in a tricorn hat: "You're not going anywhere! It's the Tow-ah!" It's been available in the UK on digital platforms since April. (I haven't been able to find it yet on any US platforms accessible to me.) The UK critics mostly savaged the film, alas. Danny Leigh of the Financial Times described it as "a film daubed in CGI, with dialogue by Google Translate, and a narrative logic so bamboozling it could pass for avant-garde." Ouch. At least The Guardian found the Chan/Schwarzenegger fight scenes "diverting."

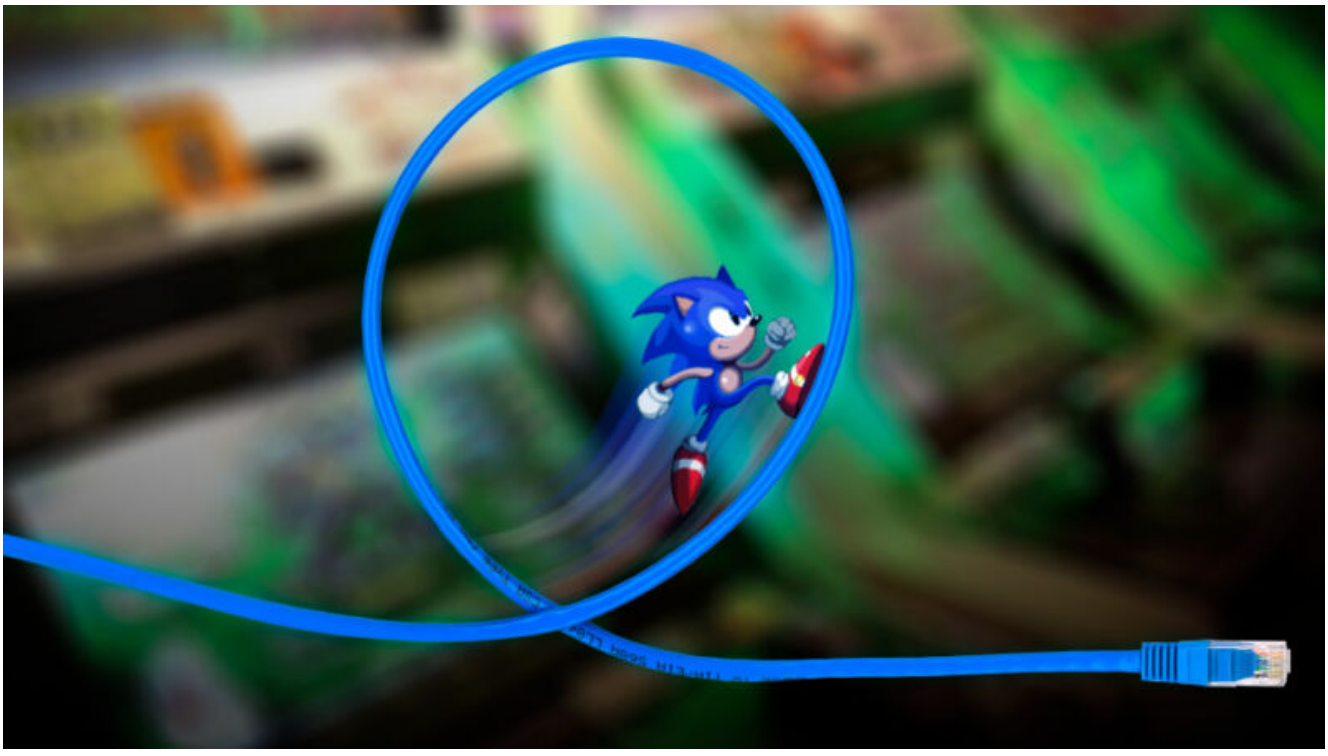
Major Grom: Plague Doctor is clearly a very different beast, taking itself much more seriously. Budgeted at $10 million, the film is still in post-production and due to get a wide studio release in Russia next year. There is no word yet on if/when it will come to the United States. And there's

certainly no guarantee that it will be good; it’s not an especially original premise. But I’d be willing to give it a shot and hope to have that chance.

Listing image by YouTube/Bubble Comics

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681401

How Sega hopes to use Japanese arcades as streaming data centers



reader comments

12 with 11 posters participating

Share this story

If you thought the 3-inch-wide Game Gear Micro was going to be the weirdest announcement out of Sega today, think again. Instead, we give that honor to the company's announcement of a strange and somewhat amorphous concept known as "fog gaming," which seems set to utilize idle arcade machines to distribute a new type of cloud-gaming service in Japan.

Details on the initiative are pretty scarce at the moment—the main source of English-language information is a tweet from a Japanese analyst working from a summary by a Japanese blogger (Google translate) of a story appearing in the new print issue of Japan's Weekly Famitsu magazine. Journalist Zenji Nishikawa was teasing the story last week as a "major scoop" on the level of Wired's revelation of the first PlayStation 5 details last year, which seems a bit grandiose for now.

In any case, the "fog gaming" concept seems to be centered around converting Sega's massive infrastructure of Japanese arcades and arcade machines into a kind of widely distributed streaming-gaming data center. Those cabinets—and the decently specc'ed CPUs and GPUs inside them—are only in active use by players for perhaps eight hours a day at a busy location, according to Adam Pratt, an arcade operator who runs industry website Arcade Heroes. The rest of the time, those machines could serve streaming gaming content to homebound players, without the need for an immense, Google Stadia-sized data center investment.

In theory, at least.

A uniquely Japanese idea

This kind of "fog computing" idea—where work is distributed between "edge node" devices rather than hefty centralized servers—isn't exactly new. Router-maker Cisco has been integrating the concept into its "Internet of Things" devices

since at least 2014, for instance. Meanwhile, IEEE standardized an open fog computing architecture in 2018.

But using otherwise dormant arcade hardware for a purpose that extends beyond the arcade walls is a relatively radical new idea for the game industry.

Japan's still-robust arcade scene seems perfectly suited for this kind of experiment. Sega alone already owns and operates dozens of game centers distributed throughout the country, usually near major population centers. Sega arcade machines can be found in third-party Japanese game centers as well.

- My arcade gallery begins with easily my favorite find of my Japan travels: *DanceRush Stardom*. Notice the on-screen indicator, which looks like a *Guitar Hero* note grid…
- This tells you when to put one foot down (or, in this case, two) and how far to the left or right. Otherwise, you can step as far forward or backward as you please. This affords players an opportunity to truly dance while playing, and dance they did.
- Since I was pretty intimidated by the *DanceRush* spectacle, I instead opted to play a similar game using my fingers. It asks you to tap your fingers on a touchpad to coincide with *Guitar Hero*-like notes…
- …but its gimmick is an "air action" sensor that asks you to snap your wrist at an exact moment, as if you're also playing percussion.
- This game, which didn't have a name in English characters, drew crowds in many arcades' "bemani" sections.
- This bemani game has a clearer emphasis on crazy-fast piano playing.
- This train-conductor cabinet includes beautifully rendered imagery, on par with a high-end computer running Unreal Engine 4.

- But the gameplay revolves around driving a legitimate train in safe, fast, efficient, and comfortable fashion. Meaning, no races or crazy stuff. It's solely for train freaks. FYI: 900 yen is about eight bucks, but the pricing structure on this game is a little fluid.
- The newest version of *Mario Kart* for arcades.
- Horse-racing simulators are no joke in Japan. However, they're all very dimly lit, so this is the best photo I got. Some of the horse-racing game stations include extravagant set pieces with toy horses on rotors running around a physical track. I'm very, very sad that the photos I snapped of those didn't turn out.
- Shortly after I took this photo of a paid VR arcade kiosk, an employee stared me down and shook his head. Nobody else cared about arcade photos I took; just the VR station handlers. Ah, well.
- This new "physical" version of Pong rolled out in Japanese arcades recently. The ball and paddles are plastic pieces, and their movements have an uncanny resemblance to video game movement.
- Unfortunately, the delay between trackball twists and your paddle's movement is laggy enough to make this a pain in the butt to play. But it's fun to watch.
- An apparent tie-in video game as part of the *Valkyria Chronicles* series.
- I just liked this spinny ship wheel as a controller.
- Interior of elaborate video arcade.*Gundam Extreme* Versus *Maxi On*.
- A multiplayer arcade version of *Bomberman*, with female inclusion.
- You might have expected this placard for *Bombergirl* to include scantily clad cartoon ladies, but this was a surprising example of tasteful female representation in a Japanese arcade. (Most Japanese arcade games include bright, colorful placards made of cardboard.)
- Card games are *everywhere* in Japanese arcades. Here's an unattended soccer game…

- …and here's how the NFC-enabled "table" screen looks with a full deck. One patron was generous enough to let me take a detailed snap between his sessions as a soccer team "manager," which had him dragging and rearranging cards to instruct AI-controlled characters on where to go and how to play.
- Another card game, in which players manage armies by moving cards around a screen.
- A closer look at that machine.
- I didn't see anybody playing this 2-year-old Pokemon game, which requires plastic "disks" that contain *Pokemon* characters (which can be evolved and trained by using them in repeat sessions).
- In spite of zillions of arcade games that require cards to operate, I struggled to find any actual card-vending machines for these games in arcades. I swear that I looked. Here's one of only two I saw.
- I never figured out what these Paseli cards were about. And the disproportionate cartoon lady nearby wasn't talkin'.
- As an American who grew up near a *BattleMech* arcade center, I envy Japanese kids who get networked battle-pod arcade games to this very day.
- All I could figure out by watching other people play is that the game takes forever to start and never stops feeling slow.
- On our way out of one Akihabara arcade, and these awesome posters appeared, stuck to a drab wall. There's a lot of this "cartoon art on drab walls" stuff in Japan.
- Behold: Natsuge Museum, the best (and easily tiniest) arcade in all of Akihabara. It's crammed full of classic Capcom, Sega, and Konami cabinets, including a few classics that never made it stateside.
- A closer look at that *Super Hang-On* bike machine.
- The room's current pièce de résistance: a fully functional, riveting *Thunder Blade* cabinet. (Natsuge

Museum regularly rotates its selection, so I was happy to see this one.)

- Sit in that chair, grab the throttle, and hold on for dear life.
- It’s hard to convey in photos, but this chair weaves and wobbles as you fly through the game, and the sensation is hair-raising.
- Plus, the cabinet’s original speakers have clearly been upgraded to kick up a tremendous ruckus.
- Kinda makes the room’s other Sega racing classics feel a little wimpy. (Just kidding. These rip, too.)
- Natsuge Museum prides itself on operating solely with original hardware and circuit boards for its playable games. I got an awesome look at how the Natsuge sausage is made when one machine broke down mid-session. Yep, that was a live repair, and the game-history nerd in me started freaking drooling.
- Notice those gray pods on the cabinets?
- Interior of elaborate video arcade.
- Some of these cabinets had stools to sit on, which were *loaded with subwoofers*. As a result, playing this classic Capcom beat-‘em-up felt like I was in the middle of an earthquake.
- Such delicious, classic cabinets, all lined up to match.
- What a beaut.
- A closer look at some of those cocktail cabs in the middle of the room.
- Old arcade posters, original art at the top-left.
- Our look at Natsuge concludes with signatures from game-making luminaries.
- Off to another legendary arcade, Mikado, down the road from my hotel. Its upper floor included row after row of fighting games. (I had been one block away from this place for nearly a week before seeing Brian Ashcraft’s recommendation on Kotaku.)
- This was maybe a fifth of the selection on this fighting-game floor alone.

- Dig on those button panels.
- One corner was dedicated to turn-of-the-century arcade wrestling games. One of these kiosks is so legitimate that it includes optional Dreamcast controllers.
- We move into the back of this arcade's lower level, and… what's this in the far-right corner?
- A *Starblade* sit-down cabinet?! This may look like any average oversized '80s shooting-game cockpit…
- …but inside is the wildest mix of early polygonal graphics and scattered, weirdly shaped screens ever seen in an arcade!
- But Namco can't have all the fun here. Here's Sega with *POWER DRIFT*.
- I get a kick out of this racer, especially with the crazy hydraulic seat in the Japanese cabinet. Otherwise, I think the only people who love this game are Sega Saturn apologists.
- Also, some classic Sega licensed baseball.
- Japan doesn't skimp on its sit-down cabinets.
- Or its widescreen ones.
- A few shmups pile up in this arcade's lower level.
- A magazine about arcades, available to freely read while hanging out in an arcade? I freaking love Japan.

(Above: A look inside a modern Japanese game center from our own Sam Machkovech.)

Many Japanese Sega arcade machines are also already hooked up to the Internet via the company's long-running All.Net platform, which allows for online competition and lets players track rankings, profiles, and high scores across machines throughout the country. Adapting that high-speed connection so the cabinet could serve as a low-latency streaming gaming hub would take some work (and maybe an online architecture upgrade for the game centers themselves). But it hardly seems impossible.

Japan is already relatively bullish on streaming gaming as a

concept, too. Back in 2018, Capcom released a streaming-only version of *Resident Evil 7* for play on Japanese Nintendo Switch hardware that otherwise would have had trouble running the game. A streaming version of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* hit the Switch in the country a year later. And Square Enix also talked prominently about a new focus on "cloud-native or cloud-centric titles" at the beginning of 2020.

An arcade business savior?

Apart from technical and cultural compatibility, the fog-gaming concept could be a business lifeline for arcades and arcade game-makers who are struggling under coronavirus quarantine rules. "One contact I have in Japan was telling me that [All.Net] has been bombing out with the pandemic," Pratt told Ars Technica. "Few locations outside of Sega-owned ones were already using it and now they are dropping it… as the fees make it untenable."

"So, if this allows arcades to serve arcade content when closed, that could be a nice lifesaver for Sega and for the [operators]," Pratt continued. "If it is designed to help operators and has reasonable costs, then it could be a great solution to generating income while closed, which is still an issue for so many in the biz… If ops don't get a piece of the payment pie, though, they won't touch it."

There are still a lot of unanswered questions surrounding the technical, economic, and even game selection issues surrounding fog gaming. For now, the concept still seems to be in the research and development phase at Sega, so it might be a while before we see it rolled out to Japanese arcades. After that, it seems unlikely to be a major initiative in the West, where online-enabled arcade machines are distributed much too sparsely to really make the concept work.

That said, fog gaming as currently described is already one of the most intriguing, outside-the-box ideas we've heard come

out of Japan’s arcade industry in years. We’ll be watching with interest to see if Sega can make it work in the coming months.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1680987

Slay the Spire, the decade’s best deckbuilding game, coming to iOS in June



reader comments

23 with 19 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Slay the Spire‘s success story is a remarkable one. As one of thousands of games to land on Steam in 2017, this fusion of roguelite progression and “deckbuilding” mechanics, made by a

heretofore unknown development team out of Seattle, managed to become a phenomenon due entirely to word-of-mouth. The game has since surpassed its "2.0" milestone and climbed the download charts on Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Nintendo Switch.

Yet the game has stayed an arm's length away from smartphone platforms this whole time, in spite of being built primarily using libGDX, a flexible, open source development framework with smartphone-specific hooks. That changes this month, as the development team at MegaCrit ironically used its Steam community page on Wednesday to announce *Slay the Spire*'s next platform: iOS.

- iOS screenshot: *Slay the Spire*'s hero selection expands as you complete more "runs" of the game.
- iOS screenshot: Dragging and dropping cards to attack and defend looks simple enough in this touchscreen sample.
- PC screenshot: For a game that revolves around turn-based card combat, *Slay the Spire* can look quite entrancing in action.
- PC screenshot: You'll need to build a proper deck to survive the game's tougher stretches. Your inventory of attacks, buffs, and heals is subject to a deck's shuffling, but you can still add, augment, and delete cards to try and maximize your adventuring potential.
- PC screenshot: Tough fight ahead.
- PC screenshot: Win a big battle, receive big cards for your deck.

The game's first smartphone port will launch at $9.99 "this month," according to the developers at MegaCrit, with an exact date likely coming during the upcoming Guerrilla Collective game reveal stream, currently scheduled for June 6-8. ("You should try to tune in" on the event's first day, June 6, according to MegaCrit's latest update.)

That price will include every single feature included in the game's existing versions on PCs and consoles—with MegaCrit acknowledging, via a joke about "anime mods," that it won't include Steam Workshop features. Though the post acknowledges plans for an Android port, MegaCrit wasn't ready to estimate when fans should expect that one; "we took the decision to launch the iOS version first."

If you're wondering what the *StS* hubbub is about, consider this comment from our last feature on the game, which included a lovely interview with MegaCrit's staff about the game's genesis. As Ars commenter digital0verdose wrote in 2019:

> *I must have watched half a dozen or so videos on this game trying to understand the appeal. Finally I just downloaded a copy to get my head around what I was missing and within a short period went and bought a copy on Steam. This, for me, was one of those games whose appeal only really came through with hands on play. StS was a fun game whose repetitiveness was not as tiring as I initially expected. Definitely a good purchase and I recommend it to those who, like me, are not really into card based games as you may be surprised.*

Wednesday's announcement includes a mere two screen shots, but they're enough to confirm what we've assumed for some time: that *StS*'s card-based gameplay will translate neatly to a smartphone's touch interface. (And thank goodness; I for one am tired of using makeshift solutions like Steam Link or Xbox Game Streaming to run the game on my phone, as both of these require a gamepad of some sort.) And the *StS* iOS timing is perfect, as another contender to the deckbuilding-adventure throne, *Monster Train*, has been getting our attention (and racking up our play time counters) since its May 21 launch on Steam.

[embedded content]
Ars War Stories: Slay the Spire

Listing image by MegaCrit

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681122