Real learning in a virtual classroom is difficult

Enlarge / A virtual classroom setup.

reader comments

100 with 73 posters participating, including story author

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“Remote teaching sucks. It’s yucky, and it is not the future of education.”

Thus spake my wife, a high school English teacher with many years of experience. And she’s right. I teach at a university, and we have also moved to virtual lessons in the face of COVID-19. Even before the current crisis, I already made extensive use of digital tools in the classroom. However, virtual lessons are a poor substitute for actual in-person instruction. Let me take you on a tour of a future that we all should be trying to avoid. (It isn’t all doom and gloom, though; we’ve discovered some hidden treasures as well.)

The problem is that teaching is an *intimate* activity: students give up a certain degree of control to the teacher and trust that person to help them master some new topic. It doesn’t matter how big the class, that intimacy is unchanged for the teacher. Teaching is *personal*. Yes, from the student’s perspective, a one-on-one lesson is more personal than a lecture delivered to 500 students. But the anonymity and safety in large classes does not mean that teachers are not seeing and modifying their approach via instantaneous feedback from their classes.

Teaching is a performance. Anything that comes between the teacher and the student reduces the connection between the two. In that sense, all forms of technology interfere with the intimacy of teaching and consequently impair performance. The counterpoint is that technology, including the humble whiteboard, tries to make up for the limitations of being human, and that is often a worthwhile effort.

Set your permissions

Video technology, virtual whiteboards, and all the rest of it simply don't allow for a connection. And, when introduced at such short notice… well, you can imagine the chaos. For example, my daughter is getting virtual lessons via Google Meets, but the permissions for the meeting are never set correctly (I am not sure if Google Meets even has the flexibility). Kids are able to mute the teacher *for everyone* without the teacher noticing. They can choose their own nicknames—with predictable results—and kick each other out of the class. In other words, classroom management has a whole range of different problems that requires a different skill set and, most importantly, planning.

I can also see and hear—I've been listening in—the teachers struggling with the lack of instant feedback. How do you know if the students have understood what you've just said? How do you even know they are still in the room? Short answer: the teacher often doesn't know.

Donna, my wife, uses Microsoft Teams, which I am also more familiar with. To make the lesson really work, she has found that you need very strict behavior rules—all microphones are muted until requested. Most cameras are generally off to keep bandwidth under control. She sets the digital permissions for each meeting so that the potential for disruption is minimized. She has established an etiquette: questions go in the chat, only unmute when invited. If she misses a question,

you may interrupt.

Just after lessons began, Donna received an email from her school: “We strongly advise you not to turn on your camera.” The school administrators were worried about their teachers being unwilling stars in *Bestiality: A Beginner’s Guide*, and I can’t say I blame them. But, the other side of the coin is that teaching without video makes the connection between the teacher and student even worse. Donna decided to keep her camera on, damn the consequences. The feedback: the students appreciate even that poor connection.

Interestingly, her students have been super well-behaved. They clearly don’t like the environment, but they are making the best of it.

Digital silver lining

It was not all bad, either. The unexpected benefit was the Teams environment. Teams provides a setup specific for the classroom, with a class notebook, based on OneNote. The notebook has a class materials area that is read-only for students. Donna places all the lesson material there. It has a collaborative area that everyone can play in. Joint assignments can be done there.

OneNote also has individual student notebooks that the teacher can see and comment on. Donna can see progress and offer immediate feedback. She has found that the students are quicker to begin with their work than in a real classroom. In fact, she is so taken with the setup that she is thinking about creating classroom Teams—assuming that Teams is still available in her school next academic year—in the future.

In addition, Teams provides methods to create, do, and submit assignments digitally. Neither I nor Donna have had a chance to make use of this yet, but it looks at least as flexible as dedicated (and expensive) electronic learning environments

(*cough* Blackboard *cough*). I certainly intend to make use of it in the future.

Hunting for the perfect board

My own experience has been slightly different, of course. First of all, I teach subjects that involve equations, and I really need to be able to draw diagrams. I immediately purchased an iPad with a Pencil. Yes, other solutions are available—our department provided everyone with Wacom tablets—but I have a lot of software licenses for iPad software and experience with the device. It was worth the additional cost.

I spent three or four days investigating whiteboard solutions. For instance, OneNote lets you draw notes, but they only appear later in the classroom notebook, and the options for usage were quite limited. Microsoft also has its own whiteboard. I was very excited to discover that I could draw rainbow-colored unicorns and less excited to discover that what I drew was not what was broadcast. I was downright downcast when I opened the feature cupboard and found it bare. In the end, I purchased a subscription to Explain Everything. Explain Everything lets me broadcast my whiteboard (I use it in blackboard mode) to the students, but they have no access to the board itself.

Teams can be set to record the entire lesson, meaning that my smiling face, along with the blackboard, are captured together. The recording is then available for streaming right from the class chat, which is very nice.

Teams also handles multiple devices remarkably well, intelligently muting one device and treating one as a kind of assistant to the other. But that seamless control will also lead you astray. In one of my lessons, Teams captured the wrong screen: my smiling face was explaining stuff that was hidden from view.

[embedded content]
A very poorly given lesson on why an EM-drive cannot work. It also happens to show some of the limitations of using the app Explain Everything alone on an iPad. I especially love the way the audio and the video are perfectly synchronized.

Move slow and still break things

Explain Everything also lets you share a board independently as view-only or collaboratively, so the students can access the material independent of the Teams environment. Not only that, you can easily add media to the board. This includes pictures, video, audio. Whatever you choose, Explain Everything puts it on the board.

Enlarge / An eye diagram that is very badly explained.
By combining Explain Everything with Teams, I found that chalk-and-talk-style lessons go reasonably well. I had to keep track of the chat to ensure that I answered questions (not easy), and I had to be reminded to slow down—normally I use the confusion apparent on the students' faces as my reminder. A couple of times, the board appeared to freeze on the broadcast screen but not on my iPad. This is one of my greatest fears for chalk-and-talk: if it's going wrong, how would you know and how would you fix it?

Digital technologies also clash. I make use of an environment called NearPod to create self-study lessons. Usually, the students work through the material in class, and I walk around

to see how things are going. I discuss the material with individuals as well as have whole class discussions and give mini-explainers. This turns out to be almost impossible in a virtual class. I have no way of seeing what the students are doing. Sure, I can look at the NearPod report, but that is not the same. Instead, all feedback has to be student initiated. It was impossible for me to gauge how the lesson went.

Similarly, we are also running practical classes via Teams. Apart from the obvious problems—I cannot poke around in their setup to help them learn to debug—even screen sharing has weird issues. I found it really difficult to *show* the students what needed to be changed in their code (the students are learning LabView, a graphical coding environment). Once in control of a student's screen, the precision is low and the lag is too long to accurately point and click at tiny lines or precisely indicate what needs to be changed. It was, in a word, horrible.

No place for humans

Virtual teaching is surprisingly energy-sapping. In the class, if you are doing your job right, there is a positive feedback. You give lots of energy, but you also receive a lot back from the students. In a virtual environment, it doesn't matter how much you give, you get nothing back. Even the very stillness—you have to sit at your computer for a few hours to give the class—eats away at your energy and mood. There is no positive take on this: removing the most enjoyable part of teaching makes it a horrible job.

It goes horribly wrong for the students, too, especially the shy students. These are students who don't ask for help. In class, I pick them up. I help them, and they grow out of their shells. That's all gone now.

So, what is the verdict? My youngest, who stands accused of driving a body while under the influence of hormones, has

reacted about as positively as you might expect: “I fucking hate it.” My students are also pretty forthcoming with their opinion. I also loathe the virtual aspect. We all accept the need under the circumstances, but I expect the amount of forgiveness from students will decay exponentially. On the bright side, the tools that I’ve discovered may well be used for many years to come as an adjunct to in-person lessons.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663644

Killing Eve S3 trailer drops; new season will debut two weeks early

reader comments

18 with 14 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer are back for a third season of *Killing Eve*.
Good news for those looking for fresh TV fare while sheltering in place: the third season of *Killing Eve*, the Emmy Award-winning spy thriller series starring Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer, is coming to TV two weeks early.

“We know how adored this series is and we know how keen people

are for great content right now," Sarah Barnett, president of AMC Networks Entertainment Group and AMC Studios, said in a statement. "This season of *Killing Eve* digs deep psychologically, and with actors like Sandra Oh, Jodie Comer, and Fiona Shaw, the results are nothing short of astonishing. We literally couldn't wait for fans to see it."

(Some spoilers for first two seasons below.)

Based on Luke Jennings' series of thriller novellas, *Codename Villanelle*, *Killing Eve* features a self-described psychopathic killer for hire named Villanelle (Comer), who is so good at her job that she frankly starts to be a bit reckless with her assassinations, much to the consternation of her handler, Konstantin (Kim Bodnia). Her string of corpses catches the attention of an MI5 officer named Eve Polastri (Oh), who is obsessed with female killers and correctly guesses there is a new player among their ranks. Eve's insight earns her a spot on a top-secret MI6 team led by Carolyn Martens (Fiona Shaw).

The strangely perverse attraction the two women feel toward each other drives the dramatic tension in *Killing Eve*, leading to a sexually charged cat-and-mouse game where it's not entirely clear who is the predator and who is the prey. Each sees a bit of herself in the other—and that naturally causes serious conflict between Eve and her long-suffering husband, Niko (Owen McDonnell). The first season ended with a bona fide cliffhanger: when the two women finally meet, they curl up on Villanelle's bed for what the killer thinks will be a romantic interlude. Eve stabs her with a knife and flees, leaving Villanelle to bleed out (or so she thinks).

- Who is that strange, sad clown figure standing in the distance at a a children's birthday party?
- It's Villanelle (Jodie Comer), whose heart doesn't seem to be in the role.
  YouTube/BBC America

- This child is about to feel genuine terror.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Let it out, Villanelle. Breakups are hard.
- At least she has palatial new digs.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Posing as a piano tuner, perhaps?
  YouTube/BBC America
- Villanelle has lost none of her kooky-chic style
  YouTube/BBC America
- The perfect bad breakup outfit.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Konstantin (Kim Bodnia) tells Villanelle that Eve is still alive.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Carolyn (Fiona Shaw) tells Eve that Villanelle is back.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Taking in the news.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Definitely time to change that shirt, Eve.
  YouTube/BBC America
- Possibly another female assassin?
  YouTube/BBC America
- A tense standoff
  YouTube/BBC America
- “Admit it, Eve. You wish I was here.”
  YouTube/BBC America

The second season opener found Villanelle in a Paris hospital as Eve unsuccessfully tries to find her, before being called back to London to rejoin her MI6 team to track a new female serial killer, nicknamed the Ghost. Eventually, Villanelle and Eve join forces to find out what tech-company heir Aaron Peel (Henry Lloyd-Hughes) has to do with the string of assassinations. And in the season finale, Villanelle takes her revenge, shooting Eve amid Roman ruins and leaving her for dead.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*) served as showrunner for the first season, while Emerald Fennell took over the reins for S2, and Suzanne Heathcote will serve as showrunner for the third season. Based on the trailer, it looks like the stakes are being raised higher than ever for S3. Per the official premise:

> *Season 3 continues to follow the lives of Villanelle, the assassin without a job, and Eve, the ex-MI6 operative hiding in plain sight. All seems fine until a shocking and personal death sets them on a collision course yet again. The journey back to each other will cost both of them friends, family, and allegiances, and perhaps a share of their souls.*

"I just had a really bad breakup," we hear Villanelle say in a voiceover, as we see her dressed as a clown at a children's birthday party—no doubt yet another assassination mission. "But when I think about my ex, I realize—I am so much happier now she's dead." Cut to a clown-faced Villanelle screaming in rage and terrifying a small child. Apart from the occasional outburst, Villanelle seems to be thriving, with luxurious new digs and plenty of work to keep her busy.

Then Konstantin shows up and tells Villanelle that Eve is still alive, while Carolyn tells Eve that Villanelle is back, setting off another spiral into their mutual obsession. The montage that follows gives little away in terms of plot, but all the elements that made the show such a fan favorite seem intact. Villanelle has clearly lost none of her kooky-chic fashion sense, while Eve continues to choose comfort and pragmatism over style. And who is that mysterious middle-aged woman going head-to-head with our favorite assassin?

Killing Eve returns April 12, 2020, on BBC America.

Listing image by YouTube/BBC America

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663842

Amid pandemic closures, GameStop says it’s seeing increased business

Enlarge / Ah, for the carefree days when you could wander into a GameStop and not worry about keeping six feet from other shoppers…

reader comments

31 with 27 posters participating

Share this story

You might think that GameStop being forced to close a majority of its global retail storefronts due to concerns about the novel coronavirus would be bad for business. But CEO George Sherman said in an earnings call last night that the retailer has “seen an increase in store and online traffic over the past few weeks” that might actually help its bottom line.

“Despite having most of our European stores closed for the last few weeks, the increased demand for our products across the world has led to a positive 2% comparable sales results for the March month-to-date period through Saturday,” GameStop CFO Jim Bell said during the call. “As millions of consumers adapt to remote work, play, and learning, we’re pleased to be able to serve their needs,” Sherman added.

Though that’s an impressive statistic at first blush, it looks a bit weaker when you put it in context. “Through Saturday,”

for instance, doesn’t cover the time since GameStop finally decided to close all of its US stores (which make up the vast majority of its worldwide retail space) to regular foot traffic. “I think when this all began, there was a pretty good level of demand that we saw while our stores were fully opened and that is the sales period that Jim talks about when you talk about through Saturday of last week,” Sherman noted.

The first few weeks of March also saw the release of *Doom Eternal* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, two highly anticipated games that weren’t matched by any similarly large March launches in 2019. Given that, a mere 2-percent bump in year-over-year sales could be seen as relatively disappointing.

Even since shutting down normal operations in the US, though, Sherman said those stores are “still fulfilling increased demand for our products through our contactless curbside delivery process we call delivery at the door.” Most of those “curbside delivery” stores are operating with a single employee these days, Sherman said, with staffers volunteering for shifts “so it begins with a team member that wants to be there.”

A tough year coming

Caveats aside, GameStop is looking for any small signs of improvement after months and months of bad news dating to well before the virus outbreak. That bad news continued into the company’s latest fiscal quarter (which ended Feb. 1). Comparable store sales were down a whopping 26 percent during that crucial holiday sales period, rounding out a 19.4 percent drop for the full fiscal year.

GameStop closed 320 of its more than 5,000 global stores during fiscal 2019, and Sherman said it plans to close at least that many again in the 12 months to come. But he insisted on the earnings call that this “de-densification” is

part of a long-term plan that’s not “related to recent business trends.” Those closings will lead to “far more efficient, far more profitable stores” as “we transfer sales to nearby stores” that will remain open, Sherman said.

GameStop, like much of corporate America, is suspending formal earnings guidance until the full economic effects of the coronavirus are better known. But Sherman said the company continues to see 2020 as a “transitional year” whose bottom line won’t fully turn around until “a material sequential improvement of the console launch.” And despite some early worries among industry watchers, Sherman said that “as of now, we have no indication of any impact on the product launch or delivery date [for the Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5], which is expected in time for holiday 2020.”

We’re a bit skeptical those new consoles will be enough to buoy the company in the long term, though. That might be especially true if extended coronavirus shelter-in-place orders get more gamers used to the idea of downloading new titles without the need to leave the house. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663762

Epic Games is now a third-party multi-plat publisher, secures three big studios

Enlarge / The first three studios with Epic Games Publishing deals are as follows: Playdead (Limbo, Inside), Remedy (Max

Payne, Alan Wake, Control), and gen DESIGN (whose staff was responsible for Sony exclusives like Ico, Shadow of the Colossus, The Last Guardian).
Collage by Aurich Lawson

reader comments

10 with 9 posters participating

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Epic Games: The engine maker, the game maker, the storefront handler… and now the games *publisher*.

Epic Games Publishing came into formal existence on Wednesday by announcing plans to fund, launch, and promote new multi-platform video games. The announcement hinged on two key points: which studios had already signed to EGP and what financial terms EGP games developers can expect.

While most game publishing deals aren't typically laid bare for the public, Epic has already chosen to confirm some of EGP's financial nitty-gritty. In addition to letting studios retain "100%" control of their intellectual property (an increasingly popular term for game-publishing contracts), EGP also promises to fund "up to 100%" of all game development costs. "Once costs are recouped," Epic says, developers will earn "at least 50% of profits." (That mix of "up to" and "at least" in the last two points may imply that those figures vary as a pair—meaning, if a developer pays for more of its dev costs, it might stand to claim more profit-sharing in the long term. Epic has not clarified that point.)

Unsurprisingly, Epic CEO Tim Sweeney described these terms as "the publishing model we always wanted for ourselves when we worked with publishers [as an independent game studio]," but we're still left with some questions, all of which Epic has declined to answer as of press time. EGP is touted as a "multi-platform" effort, but will EGP games ever be available

outside of Epic Games Store on PC, and/or will those games' console versions launch later than their PC versions to give Epic Games Store any form of timed exclusivity? Can EGP partners develop separate games as indie efforts or for other publishers while they're part of an EGP deal? And will each game include a *Fortnite* outfit-and-dance tie-in? (The last question is a joke, but considering that Epic made a *Fortnite* skin for the Mixer game-streamer Ninja, anything's possible at this point.)

Three notable studios have already signed on, and Epic says that each studio will launch its "next" game through its EGP partnership. Remedy Entertainment first rose to popularity with 2001's *Max Payne*, and its latest game, *Control*, won Ars Technica's 2019 Game of the Year honors (and marked its first game as an independent developer after a 12-year deal with Microsoft). Playdead launched both of its previous games, the indie darlings Limbo and *Inside*, with timed exclusivity deals on Xbox consoles. And genDESIGN is led by Fumito Ueda, the director responsible for PlayStation-exclusive classics *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus*.

One of these deals sees Epic returning to a previous EGS partner, since Remedy reportedly claimed a paycheck in the $10.5 million neighborhood for launching *Control*'s PC version as a timed EGS exclusive. Epic says details on these studios' upcoming EGP titles, and additional developers and games, should arrive "in the coming months."

[embedded content]
Epic Games Publishing announcement video, featuring quotes from involved developers.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663313

Check out the first trailer for Hulu's new animated series Solar Opposites

reader comments

19 with 17 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Justin Roiland and Thomas Middleditch provide the voices for Korvo and Terry, whose alien family must learn to fit into middle America.
If you devoured the latest season of *Rick and Morty* when it debuted last November, chances are you're already itching for season five. Sadly, if the series' history tells us anything, we're likely in for a long wait. But in the meantime, *Rick and Morty* co-creator Justin Roiland and former head writer Mike McMahan are bringing a new animated series to Hulu, called *Solar Opposites*, about a family of aliens forced to take refuge in middle America.

The trailer just dropped, and it looks like the show will channel a lot of the same outrageously in-your-face, madcap energy that's made *Rick and Morty* such a nerdalicious delight. Per the official synopsis:

> *Solar Opposites centers around a team of four aliens who escape their exploding home world only to crash land into a move-in ready home in suburban America. They are evenly split on whether Earth is awful or awesome. Korvo (Justin Roiland) and Yumyulack (Sean Giambroni) only see the pollution, crass*

> *consumerism, and human frailty while Terry (Thomas Middleditch) and Jesse (Mary Mack) love humans and all their TV, junk food, and fun stuff. Their mission: protect the Pupa, a living super computer that will one day evolve into its true form, consume them and terraform the Earth.*

Naturally, Roiland himself—the man responsible for Rick Sanchez's unique burp-talking speech patterns—will be voicing Korvo. Thomas Middleditch voices Terry, with Sean irambrone and Mary Mack voicing Yumyulack and Jesse, respectively.

And it looks like we'll also be hearing from all kinds of A-list talent in guest cameos, including Alan Tudyk, Alfred Molina, Amanda Leighton, Andrew Matarazzo, Andy Daly, Calum Worthy, Chris Cox, Christina Hendricks, Echo Kellum, Eric Bauza, Gary Anthony Williams, Gideon Adlon, Jacob Vargus, Jason Mantzoukas, Jeannie Elias, Jesse Mendel, Jon Barinholtz, Karan Brar, Kari Wahlgren, Ken Marino, Liam Cunningham, Maurice LaMarche, Miguel Sandoval, Nat Faxon, Natalie Morales, Neil Flynn, Phil LaMarr, Rainn Wilson, Rob Schrab, Ryan Ridley, Sagan McMahan, Thomas Barbusca, Tiffany Haddish, Tom Kenny, Vargus Mason, and Wendi McLendon-Covey.

The trailer opens with resident alien Terry in a panic, car-jacking an unsuspecting motorist and running down a random ostrich to deliver shocking news to the other members of his family: "We don't have noses!" It seems the family has fled their doomed home planet and for some reason chose to land on Earth. "My scans didn't indicate it was a human-infested crap hole without a single redeeming value," Korvo declares in his defense.

- Just your random alien carjacking
  YouTube/Hulu
- Never mind the dead ostrich, there's important news!
  YouTube/Hulu
- "We don't have noses!"

- Fleeing the home planet
  YouTube/Hulu
- Somehow they ended up on Earth.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Someone’s a *Star Wars* fan—check out the t-shirt.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Protect the Pupa!
  YouTube/Hulu
- And don’t feed the Pupa candy.
  YouTube/Hulu
- An offer from your friendly neighborhood heroin dealer.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Robots R Us
  YouTube/Hulu
- These are the “Gooblers”
  YouTube/Hulu
- Falling into a black hole. That can’t be good.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Battling teen zombies
  YouTube/Hulu
- A gruesome predicament
  YouTube/Hulu
- YouTube/Hulu
- A rampaging monster.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Of course they drive a Prius…
  YouTube/Hulu

They face the usual suburban challenges: alternate street parking for street cleaning, children’s birthday parties featuring magicians, bigoted schoolyard bullies (“Go back to Uranus!”), and, um, random heroin dealers. But there are also teenaged zombies, a black hole created in a lab, and strange creatures called “Gooblers”—not to mention the tiny little creatures vomited up by the aforementioned Pupa whenever someone gives it candy.

All eight episodes of the first season of *Solar Opposites* will premiere on Hulu May 8, 2020. "*Solar Opposites* is coming!" Roiland and McMahan said in a statement. "We can only show you the teaser right now, but the whole season will be out in a matter of weeks! Stay inside and stay healthy so you can watch and love this show and call us geniuses and all that shit."

Listing image by YouTube/Hulu

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663174

Valve opens up about Half-Life: Alyx, Source 2 engine on Reddit

Enlarge / Valve released this promotional illustration for *Half-Life: Alyx* on Tuesday, thus revealing a bit more about the game's "Multi-tool" system we've mentioned in previous reports on the VR-exclusive game.

reader comments

64 with 46 posters participating, including story author

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With approximately two months left to go until their next game's launch, the developers at Valve opened up to the throngs at Reddit for a thousands-strong "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) session on Wednesday. Unsurprisingly, most of the

questions were ignored—especially ones that mentioned the number 3—but the team still revealed some new and interesting tidbits about March's upcoming VR-exclusive game *Half-Life: Alyx*.

Perhaps most importantly, the development team insisted that the game is still on schedule to launch in its announced window of March 2020. "With the exception of some tweaks to the absolute final scene, the game is done," an unnamed staff member said in one post. "We let the Valve Time happen before we announced the game." This statement alludes to the company's tradition of letting release schedules slip until a game reaches "it's done" territory, but that wasn't clarified in further answers.

That means the game's full suite of movement options within VR are complete, Valve said, "including things like Seated, Left-Handed mode, etc." The new game's suite of "accessibility" features are still being iterated on, particularly support for one-handed play.

In another answer, Valve confirmed that the game is currently designed for fluid two-hand play, which may make any one-handed modes tricky to implement:

> *Our weapons all require only one hand, but they can be optionally grabbed and steadied by your offhand. We really wanted to focus on simultaneous two-handed play throughout the game, so we needed the player to always be able to easily have a free hand. We keep that hand pretty busy with gravity gloves, movement, world interactions, flashlight, and so on.*

Additionally, Valve said a variety of contextual menus and indicators will "keep the player's eyes on the environment as much as possible, including over-the-shoulder inventory systems and at least one menu revealed by flipping your real-life wrist.

No longer “maintaining a fragile fiction”

The *HL:A* team repeatedly referenced the legacy of older *Half-Life* games. Longtime Valve writer Erik Wolpaw used the AMA as an opportunity to insist that original series writer Marc Laidlaw has actively participated with the current game’s writing team, despite no longer being employed by Valve. He wrote:

> *We’ve never been able to figure out where the rumors of us falling out with Marc came from, because there’s no truth to it. He’s been super generous with his time throughout the development of HL:A, answering many questions from Erik, Jay, and Sean as they hammered away on the story. As is always the case with Marc, we send him an email, and he sends us a response, and then roughly 40 more replies to his own email.*

Unfortunately, as of press time, Valve hasn’t answered the AMA’s questions about Laidlaw’s work on an apparent *Half-Life 2: Episode 3* plot outline.

Wolpaw said the new game’s writing and tone are in line with existing *Half-Life* titles, which he described as “closer in tone to the *Portal* games than they are to, say, *The Last of Us*.” He insisted that the new game’s use of a speaking protagonist, a first for a single-player Valve game, is “mostly liberating” and makes players feel like “they’re actually an active participant in the scene.” He acknowledged the fun that the Portal team had writing around its mute protagonist but indicated this wasn’t a good fit for another *Half-Life* game in the modern era: “It’s a lot more tricky when you have to maintain a fragile fiction that the player character can talk but simply isn’t for some reason.”

The AMA only included vague hints about returning enemies and characters from previous games (other than popular characters

like the Headcrab, which were already outed by the game's reveal trailer). One cool tidbit came from an unnamed developer about under-the-hood systems carried over from older games: "There are some things we think we did better in *HL1* than *HL2*."

To make their point, this developer claimed the new game's Combine Soldiers are based on AI routines from the first *Half-Life* game.

In confirming the absence of original Alyx Vance voice actor Merle Dandridge, Valve said she had been approached at the game's outset, "but in the end, felt we wanted to go in a different direction." While Valve didn't clarify that point any further, the AMA went so far as to say, "we hope to work with her again in the future." Could this mean the new game's "younger" Alyx voice actor and Dandridge may eventually be heard simultaneously in some time-traveling loop sequence? It's *Half-Life*, so who knows.

As in previously released games, Valve said it "plans" on adding a commentary track to *HL:A*, though that's "unlikely" to happen in time for the game's March launch. And when asked whether this new game will include a train sequence, like other classic *Half-Life* entries, Valve said flatly, "It's actually illegal to ship a *Half-Life* game if you don't spend at least a little time riding in a train." (Fans immediately jumped on this comment to demand a train sequence be patched into the free *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* tech demo.)

No more jumping, but maybe jump scares?

In terms of raw VR mechanics, Valve confirmed a few details. One biggie is that the game will not include a jumping function but will rather include either automatic "mantling" up climbable surfaces or a "teleport" tap to cross short gaps.

(Assuming the game otherwise includes interesting and tense traversal moments, that should be fine by us; we don't come to *Half-Life* games in search of Turok-like jumping challenges, anyway.)

Barnacles are set to return, though for similar reasons as the above jumping detail, their dangling tongues won't physically lift *HL:A* players. "We experimented with moving the player, but moving the player without their input in VR didn't work very well," Valve said. "As with many aspects of working on this game, we've had to find new ways to take well-worn mechanics and other *Half-Life* staples into the specific framework of VR."

Two of the AMA's shortest answers hinted to some seriously trippy VR-specific moments: "some creatures respond to audio more than others," and "limb dismemberment is not a factor in most combat encounters—but there is a very notable exception." We wonder whether this has to do with the sounds of VR footsteps or whether VR headsets' built-in microphones will be turned on for certain moments in the game. Valve didn't clarify.

Both of those vague hints sound creepy, and one Valve dev, who outed himself as the team's most timid player, answered questions about the game's horror-scare potential within VR headsets at length:

> *Horror is part of the franchise, and through playtesting, we feel like we've gained some confidence about where to draw this line. Some of our gorier visuals tend to evoke a grim fascination rather than revulsion or panic, and apart from myself, we've hardly ever seen anyone nope out of a playtest, even during the creepier sections.*

Boo to lack of SDK, yay to Headcrab bucket

The AMA included some wonky technical breakdowns about the Source 2 engine's sound implementations, including a promising emphasis on the VR game's sound design: "Figuring out ways of making environments sonically interesting for players who want to take their time and explore, which happens much more frequently in VR."

Speaking of wonky, technical breakdowns: Unlike the recent, uneven VR adventure game *Boneworks*, *HL:A* will not include any visible body parts within players' VR view beyond their hands. However, Valve says that its upcoming game actually models invisible arms and legs, primarily to stop nearby geometry (doors, drawers) from colliding unnaturally with your nearby virtual body.

Should fans be excited by the various new systems described in the AMA, particularly tweaks to the Source 2 engine for refined VR development, they'll need to cool their heels for a while. While Valve has told fans that some VR-specific tools will be opened up for tinkerers when the game launches, the same won't happen for the "full" SDK. "This is how we've done SDKs in our previous Source 1 titles as well," Valve said. "Making the game takes precedence, and after that's done, we start looking at what's next."

Valve said that one of the foundational experiments that led to *HL:A* nearly shipped as a playable mini-game in Valve's free VR toy set *The Lab* (thus confirming fans' suspicions after data-mining *The Lab*'s files). This prototype, and a few others, may very well see coverage in Geoff Keighley's upcoming Final Hours video special about *HL:A*'s development process.

On the sillier side, Valve has confirmed that *HL:A* players can

do stupid stuff like pick up a bucket, place it on a Headcrab, and watch the creature skitter around as a moving bucket. “Playtesters all keep reporting it as a bug,” the team said.

For the next two months, Valve said it has designs on releasing a stream of gameplay videos, which will “showcase not just gameplay elements, but also VR-specific elements like different movement options.” We’ll certainly keep our eyes peeled for those, as we’re still waiting on answers about more of the game’s VR-specific mechanics, particularly the Gravity Gloves and the wall-scanning Multi-tool seen in this article’s top illustration. For now, you’ll have to settle on a dump of text, and maybe furrow your brow at the questions Valve *didn’t* answer, by flipping through the rest of the AMA right here. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1647377

Leaked images show Xbox Series X is missing Xbox One’s HDMI input

Enlarge / Yup, the Xbox Series X has ports, alright.

reader comments

159 with 81 posters participating

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Last month, when Microsoft gave us our first glimpse of the Xbox Series X housing, the photo angles provided notably left

out the rear of the console—you know, the part with all the ports for wires and such. Now, a message board leak has apparently revealed what that back side will look like, including a few changes from the old Xbox One line.

The images of an "Xbox Product Name Placeholder PROTOTYPE – NOT FOR SALE," originally posted by NeoGAF user Curry Panda, were later confirmed as authentic by Brad Sams at Thurrott.com (who has a strong track record of reporting accurate internal information about Microsoft's plans). That makes this leak different from a glimpse of the Series X's backside shown by AMD at CES earlier this month—AMD later admitted that imagery "was not sourced from Microsoft and does not accurately represent the design or features of the upcoming console."

The biggest apparent change from the Xbox One to the Xbox Series X, port-wise, is the lack of the HDMI input that allowed for "pass-through" TV programming on all Xbox One models (and the accompanying IR output that allowed the Xbox One/Kinect to act as a TV remote). That's not a huge surprise, considering how quickly Microsoft stopped stressing this functionality after a major Xbox-as-set-top-TV-box push back in the console's early years. The Series X is also missing the dedicated Kinect port that was already removed from the Xbox One S and Xbox One X, meaning you'll seemingly need a discontinued USB adapter for those particular backward-compatible games.

Otherwise, the connection situation seems pretty standard, with two super-speed USB ports (in addition to one on the front), a digital audio output, and an ethernet jack for wired Internet connections. The power plug looks like roughly the same size and shape as those on the Xbox One S and Xbox One X, suggesting the power cords for those systems may also work with the Series X (and also suggesting the massive external power brick for the original Xbox One may not be necessary).

The Series X also includes an unidentified rectangular port

that looks like it would fit an old CompactFlash portable storage drive. Sams has previously said this port “may be used for debugging but there wasn’t an agreement on the nature of its functionality.” And there are plenty of rear vents to provide airflow as well, in addition to the ones we’ve already seen on the “top” of the system (when it’s stacked vertically like a column).

Getting an additional glimpse at the Series X housing doesn’t give us any idea of what gaming on the upcoming system will be like, but it does make the system feel a little more “real” than Sony’s PlayStation 5, which has yet to be seen publicly as a tangible object. Now, at least, those who decide to upgrade to the Series X can better visualize what the box will look like in their home entertainment centers. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1647305

Monty Python’s Terry Jones joins the choir invisible

Enlarge / Terry Jones playing the organ *au naturel* in Monty Python’s “Blackmail” sketch.
Python (Monty) Pictures | BBC

reader comments

98 with 71 posters participating, including story author

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Monty Python’s Terry Jones died at age 77 on January 21 at his

London home.

Born in Colwyn Bay, Wales, Jones got his comedy start at Oxford University, playing in revues with fellow future Monty Python member Michael Palin. After graduation, he worked as a writer on a handful of BBC shows, including *The Frost Report*, and he performed on *Do Not Adjust Your Set* along with *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*. But it was his work with Python that he is primarily remembered for.

During Python's original four-year run, Jones generally wrote with Michael Palin, and the two would bring their work in progress to the entire group to read through and workshop the material. (John Cleese and Graham Chapman also wrote together, while Eric Idle and Terry Gilliam generally worked alone.) It was in that crucible that Jones, along with the other Pythons, honed their sketch-writing and comedic-timing skills to produce timeless comedy.

Actually getting to watch Monty Python was a chore. I was probably 11 or 12 years old when I became aware of the groundbreaking British comedy troupe, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was instant appointment viewing for me on KRMA, Denver's PBS affiliate. The problem was timing. I could stay up until Python started at 10pm on a Saturday night, but I had to slog through some uninspiring TV to get there. But once the opening strains of "The Liberty Bell March" began playing, the trauma of hearing Hervé Villechaize yelling "Da Plane! Da Plane!" in *Fantasy Island* dissipated in anticipation of watching Python.

Enlarge / Eric Idle, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Michael Palin, and Terry Jones from Monty Python in 2014 before a series of live performances in London.
Philip Toscano/PA Images

Jones was not my favorite Python. In contrast to John Cleese, who was often a simmering cauldron of barely repressed rage, and Eric Idle's iconic smarmy, sketchy blokes, Jones always felt like more of a comedy generalist to me. It's easy for me to pick a favorite Idle, Cleese, Palin, or Chapman sketch. For Jones, though, it's more the memory of his dressing up as a middle-aged woman and delivering his lines in a high falsetto, as he did to hilarious effect as the mother of the false messiah in *Life of Brian*. Or playing the unwitting straight man in sketches like "Candid Photography" while politely enduring Eric Idle's "nudge nudge" patter, that sticks with

me. But no matter what the part, Jones threw his whole self into it—even if that meant playing a naked organist in one of my favorite Python sketches, “Blackmail.”

In addition to writing and performing with Python, Jones co-directed *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with Terry Gilliam and was behind (and in front of) the camera for *Life of Brian* and *Meaning of Life*. Post-Python, Jones directed *Erik the Viking* and *The Wind in the Willows* and wrote the screenplay for 1986’s *Labyrinth*. Jones also developed a keen interest in medieval history, eventually writing a couple of books on Chaucer-era England and hosting some history documentaries.

Jones was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia in 2016, which, among other things, robbed him of his ability to speak. He is survived by his second wife, Anne Soderstrom, as well as his three children.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1647279

Every classic Half-Life game is now free on Steam

Enlarge / Completely free… for now.
Valve / Sam Machkovech

reader comments

66 with 45 posters participating, including story author

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As Valve gears up for the launch of its first official *Half-Life* game in 13 years, the developer has given fans a big freebie to tide them over while they wait for March 2020: every previous official *Half-Life* game for free.

On Tuesday, Valve announced that both *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2*, and each expansion pack and episode published directly by the game maker, would be free for all Steam users for a limited time. As of press time, this offer appears to be a temporary unlock of the games until the VR-only adventure game *Half-Life Alyx* launches in roughly two months; the games' free availability will likely expire after *HL:A* launches. Click the announcement link to check out the eligible game selection (though it doesn't link to the eligible *HL1* expansion packs, which you can find here).

Fans may very well want to connect the plot dots between the biggest *Half-Life* adventures ahead of *HL:A*'s launch. Valve has announced that the new VR-only game is a "prequel" that takes place between the events of *Half-Life 1* and *Half-Life 2*, while its developers have suggested in interviews that the new game is "the next part" of the series. Hence, you may want to brush up on every tidbit, should the new game contain any continuation of what was left unfinished in *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*. (Reminder: *HL:A* is *not* free as part of this promotion. The new game *does* come for free with the purchase of *any* part of the Valve Index VR system.)

As part of Tuesday's announcement, Valve also confirmed that its developers will take part in a *Half-Life: Alyx* Q&A at Reddit on Wednesday, January 22, starting at noon ET.

Since the games, and their connected expansions, have been available for so long, this promotion may be moot for many Steam users. Valve has frequently discounted the ever-living dickens out of its most classic series, with each of the

series’ disparate releases plummeting to $1 each during various sales. But if you missed those sales, or the series’ PC-gaming heyday, it’s hard to beat the low, low price of “free.” (And if you’ve never owned a *Half-Life* game before, check out the endless rabbit hole of amazing, community-developed mods for both games that you can download and enjoy for free.)

Valve’s free-to-play history mostly revolves around games that function as an online service. *Dota 2* launched in 2013 as an inherently free-to-play game, while popular online shooters *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and *Team Fortress 2* eventually received free-to-play updates. This week’s *Half-Life* giveaway doesn’t appear to come with any new free-to-play marketplace tweaks, which is probably for the best.

This giveaway is also a reminder that Valve can’t claim to be the most generous game-download marketplace of the past year. The rise of Epic Games Store as a launcher and marketplace throughout 2019 hinged in no small part on Epic’s weekly giveaways of free, well-reviewed video games. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1646413

Radiohead.com unveils “The Radiohead Library,” an official band repository

reader comments

9 with 9 posters participating, including story author

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- Welcome to the new Radiohead Library. This is the band's *A Moon Shaped Pool* collection, as seen in a desktop browser.
- The same collection, as seen on a mobile browser.
- The *Kid A* selection.
- It's not all just audio and video; a lot of the site comes with high-resolution scans of the albums' original CD booklet artwork. This page comes from the special hardbound-book edition of *Kid A*.
- And this unhappy look at former British PM Tony Blair comes from a different *Kid A* edition.
- Go back to the Pablo Honey era, and you'll find documents like this first-ever letter to Radiohead Fan Club members.
- Can we buy that exact shirt, Thom?
- Notice that you can create a "library card" at the site without a single iota of data going back to Radiohead. Nice touch, mates.

On Monday, British rock band Radiohead rolled out arguably the most comprehensive one-stop website for a single band we've ever seen—and for an Internet-savvy band like Radiohead, that's saying something.

The Radiohead Library, which can be found at the sensible URL of radiohead.com/library, includes nearly every official studio release since the band's debut album *Pablo Honey* launched in 1993, along with much, much more. Full concerts, TV appearances, CD booklet art, long-lost promotional videos: they're all here.

Whether you visit the site on a smartphone or desktop browser,

it’s formatted to present each Radiohead era as a series of squares and rectangles. The top of the site includes generic, single-colored squares, which each represent a major studio album. Click any of them to reveal the album, its associated EPs and singles, and a scattershot assortment of official music videos, full concert recordings, and other audio and video samples from that album’s era. While you’re picking through each era, you may notice squares with T-shirt logos. Turns out, these link to reprints of classic tour shirts and merchandise from almost every Radiohead album, back on sale for the first time in years.

If you’re a fan of YouTube as a music-consumption service, however, you’re out of luck. Each Radiohead studio recording is linked to Spotify and Apple Music stream options, arguably for the sake of guaranteeing greater global access as opposed to linking to YouTube videos that can suffer from region-restriction headaches. The collection’s direct video links, meanwhile, rely on Vimeo; as of press time, that’s resulting in some serious video-streaming hitches and stutters, perhaps owing to one of the world’s biggest bands uploading dozens of never-before-seen concert and TV-appearance footage in one fell swoop.

Should the full collection prove intimidating, Radiohead offers a bit of curation. Bassist Colin Greenwood is the first band member to appear on the site’s “Curated By” docket with a selection of nine videos, headlined by a killer cover of Carly Simon’s “Nobody Does It Better” taken from a 1995 MTV appearance. Future curation pages will be announced at the band’s Instagram page.

The Radiohead Library follows a similarly massive dump of music by British electronic musician Richard D. James, better known to the world as Aphex Twin. His 2017 archive project offers easier and freer access to decades of music, as it includes its own embedded music player, along with links to purchase copies of his albums, EPs, and singles from there.

Radiohead was among the biggest rock bands in the earliest music-sharing days to embrace the Internet as a distribution platform. The official promotional campaign for 2000's *Kid A* revolved around a series of viral "Blip" videos (which reappear on The Radiohead Library in their entirety this week), while 2007's *In Rainbows* debuted as an online giveaway with an optional purchase attached. Last year, a massive collection of *OK Computer* demo tapes found their way online, and Radiohead responded by temporarily giving those same demo tapes away as a free stream, with an optional purchase's proceeds going entirely to charity. And while the band's YouTube page isn't nearly as comprehensive, it too is loaded with hours of studio recordings and full concerts.

Listing image by Radiohead

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1646195