Ars readers gave more than $33,000 in 2019 charity drive



Enlarge / Giving a little joy.

reader comments

6 with 6 posters participating

Share this story

Last month, we asked readers to donate to our 2019 Charity Drive sweepstakes. Now that the giving is done and the results have been tallied, we can report that Ars Technica readers donated $33,181.11 to Child's Play and the EFF through the charity drive. That's not quite a record for our annual effort, but it does bring our donation total over 13 years of charity driving past the $330,000 mark! Well done, Arsians!

Thanks to everyone who gave whatever they could. We're still

early in the process of selecting and notifying winners of our swag giveaway, so don’t fret if you haven’t heard if you’re a winner yet. In the meantime, enjoy these quick stats from the 2019 drive.

- **2018 Fundraising total: $33,181.11**
  - Total given to Child’s Play: $14,373.88
  - Total given to the EFF: $18,758.00
- **Number of individual donations:** 474
  - Child’s Play donations: 253
  - EFF donations: 221
- **Average donation:** $70.00
  - Child’s Play average donation: $57.04
  - EFF average donation: $84.88
- **Median donation:** $25.00
  - Median Child’s Play donation: $25.00
  - Median EFF donation: $50.00
- **Top single donation:** $1,000 (2 to EFF, 1 to CP)
- **Donations of $1,000 or more:** 3
- **Donations of $100 or more:** 121(!)
- **$1 donations:** 3 (every little bit helps!)
- **Total charity donations from Ars Technica drives since 2007 (approximate): $336,107.01**
  - **2018:** $20,210.66
  - **2017:** $36,012.37
  - **2016:** $38,738.11
  - **2015:** $38,861.06
  - **2014:** $25,094.31
  - **2013:** $23,570.13
  - **2012:** $28,713.52
  - **2011:** ~$26,000
  - **2010:** ~$24,000
  - **2009:** ~$17,000
  - **2008:** ~$12,000
  - **2007:** ~$10,000

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1644561

CBS renews Star Trek: Picard for a second season



reader comments

121 with 89 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) comes out of retirement in *Star Trek: Picard*, coming soon to CBS All Access.
Streaming service CBS All Access has already renewed *Star Trek: Picard* for a second season just over a week before the first season is even set to start airing, Deadline reports.

The announcement was made at the Television Critics Association (TCA), a recurring event at which television networks present their slate of programming to advertisers, the press, and partners. In a *Picard*-themed panel at the

event, the show's cast and showrunner talked about what viewers can expect from the series, which returns to a character who has not appeared on screen since the film *Star Trek: Nemesis* way back in 2002.

Executive Producer Akiva Goldsman said we can expect to see some of the social relevance that the *Star Trek* franchise has been known for. Quoted in Deadline, he said:

> *The marginalization of others, not being open-hearted or seeing with empathetic eyes, this seems to be a pervasive problem we all saw as ripe for healing… Star Trek does its bit to heal social ills.*

Also, series star Patrick Stewart indicated that fans should expect to see familiar characters from *The Next Generation* era in the series, even beyond those already revealed in trailers to date. "It is my hope that, whenever the series wraps, we will have encountered all the principal actors from *Next Generation*," he said.

Below: Images from a recent trailer for Star Trek: Picard.

- Who is that Federation officer in the vineyard?
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Data (Brent Spiner) appears in Picard's dreams.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Just a retired captain and his trusty Number One.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- A mysterious young woman needs Picard's help.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Federation headquarters looks much the same.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- "This isn't your house anymore."
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Picard finds a pilot in Cristobal (Santiago Cabrera).
  YouTube/CBS All Access

- Christobal greets Dr. Agnes Jurati (Alison Pill).
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Raffi (Michelle Hurd) is a former intelligence officer.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Elnor (Evan Evagora) is skilled at hand-to-hand combat.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Picard's still got a few fencing moves.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Seven of Nine (Jeri Ryan) is back with guns blazing.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- It's Riker (Jonathan Frakes)!
- Is that Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis)?
  YouTube/CBS All Access

The renewal was made possible in part by expanded tax credits in the state of California by the California Film Commission. Former Governor Jerry Brown oversaw a rethink of that program that, among other things, resulted in an expansion to $330 million of available credits. Season two of *Picard* secured $20.45 million of this funding, compared to $15.6 million for the first season in the prior year.

The first season of *Star Trek: Picard* will premiere on CBS All Access on January 23, 2020. Episodes will be released in a weekly cadence.

Listing image by YouTube/CBS All Access

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1643163

On eve of PS5, Sony confirms

it will skip E3 for second year in a row



Enlarge / E3 won’t happen with an official Sony presence this year.

reader comments

46 with 35 posters participating

Share this story

On Monday, Sony Interactive Entertainment confirmed that it will, for the second year in a row, not attend the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

The news came in a statement sent to Ars Technica by a SIE representative:

> *After thorough evaluation, SIE has decided not to participate in E3 2020. We have great respect for the ESA as an organization, but we do not feel the vision of E3 2020 is the right venue for what we are focused on this year. We will*

> *build upon our global events strategy in 2020 by participating in hundreds of consumer events across the globe. Our focus is on making sure fans feel part of the PlayStation family and have access to play their favorite content. We have a fantastic line up of titles coming to PlayStation 4, and with the upcoming launch of PlayStation 5, we are truly looking forward to a year of celebration with our fans.*

SIE's representatives did not immediately clarify what the company means by "the vision of E3 2020."

Up until last year, the PlayStation line of products had an official presence at every E3 since Sony launched its first home console. The company's 2019 no-show followed a late-'10s trend of major publishers skipping the official E3 show floor, sometimes in favor of their own off-site events near the Los Angeles Convention Center.

While last year's PlayStation E3 absence could have been written off as a fluke, particularly in a quieter year before a major PlayStation 5 PR push, skipping during a new-console hype cycle could be seen as a major blow for the expo. The Electronic Software Association (ESA), which puts E3 together every year, is already in an uphill PR climb after last August's leak of journalists' and publishers' personal information. This news comes as more publishers favor "direct" online broadcasts to fans or even "festivals" that allow downloads of pre-release software (essentially mimicking an E3-like game-preview experience).

This news follows a CES appearance last week in which Sony reiterated previously announced information about the upcoming PS5 console, including its "holiday 2020" launch window and a vague description of its technical prowess. The only brand-new information at CES 2020 was the official PlayStation 5 logo.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1643189

Jared Leto is perfectly cast as a bloodthirsty antihero in Morbius trailer



reader comments

56 with 40 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Oscar winner Jared Leto stars as Dr. Michael Morbius in Sony Pictures' forthcoming film *Morbius*.
A brilliant doctor suffering from a rare blood disease goes to extreme lengths to find a cure and becomes a monster who craves human blood in the first trailer for *Morbius*, based on the popular villain (and later, antihero) in the *Spider-Man* comic books.

Sony's film adaptation of the character is intended to be part of a new shared universe of films along the lines of the Marvel model. The studio hopes to spin-off the Sony Marvel Universe (SMU) from its successful *Spider-Man* franchise. The 2018 film *Venom* kicked off the series, starring Tom Hardy in the title role. Critics slammed it, but *Venom* went on to gross over $850 million worldwide, and a sequel is slated for release this fall. So Sony decided to move forward with the planned *Morbius* movie, tapping Daniel Espinosa (*Life*) to direct—a solid choice, since Espinosa clearly knows how to merge science fiction and horror. Jared Leto will play Morbius.

Based on the trailer, *Morbius* will focus on the character's origins. Per the official synopsis:

> *One of Marvel's most compelling and conflicted characters comes to the big screen as Oscar winner Jared Leto transforms into the enigmatic antihero, Michael Morbius. Dangerously ill with a rare blood disorder, and determined to save others suffering his same fate, Dr. Morbius attempts a desperate gamble. What at first appears to be a radical success soon reveals itself to be a remedy potentially worse than the disease.*

- Michael Morbius as a boy is taunted by schoolboys because of his illness.
- Young Michael finds solace in chess.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Jared Harris plays Michael's mentor.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Doing research in the lab.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Treating and comforting a gravely ill child..
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Dr. Morbius is honored with a Nobel prize…

YouTube/Sony Pictures

- …but his body is still ravaged by a rare blood disease.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- His fiancée, Martine (Adria Arjona) does her best to help.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Could the answer be in this remote part of the world?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- A blood ritual. Of sorts.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- A beast in a cage?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Damn, that’s quite a transformation.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- His transformation brings special powers.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Matt Smith plays Loxias Crown, friend to Mobius who also suffers from the same rare blood disease.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Michael Keaton reprises his role as Adrian Toomes, aka Vulture, from *Spider-Man: Homecoming*
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- The monster emerges.

The trailer opens with a flashback to Michael Morbius as a young boy, already ill and on crutches, being bullied by obnoxious schoolboys. He finds solace in chess and a mentor in Jared Harris’s character. “You have a gift, you always have,” the mentor tells an adult Morbius. “If there’s an answer to your disease, you’ll find it.” There are scenes of Morbius winning a Nobel Prize, working with a sick patient, and spending hours in the laboratory in search of a cure. Acknowledging that he ought to have died years ago, Morbius wonders, “Why am I still here, if not to fix this?”

And despite living longer than expected, he’s quickly running out of time.

Morbius decides that desperate measures are in order—something "not exactly legal." We see him land via helicopter in a remote location, cut his hand to draw blood, and extend that hand at the entrance to a cave. A swarm of bats flies out, and somehow Morbius is transformed into the Living Vampire. (This looks like a departure from the original comics, in which Morbius is transformed via a failed biochemical experiment involving radiation rather than magic.) Now he feels "more alive than ever," with increased strength, speed, and echolocation abilities. The downside: "an overpowering urge to consume blood."

We also catch glimpses of Matt Smith as Loxias Crown, a friend to Morbius who suffers from the same rare blood disease, and Michael Keaton, reprising his role as the super villain Vulture from *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Adria Arjona plays Morbius's fiancée, Martine Bancroft, and Tyrese Gibson plays FBI agent Simon Stroud, who is hunting the doctor-turned-murderous-monster. His partner, Alberto Rodriguez, is played by Al Madrigal.

This actually looks like a great role for Leto, whose Joker portrayal in 2016's *Suicide Squad* has been rendered largely irrelevant (fairly or unfairly) in the wake of Joaquin Phoenix's masterful, Oscar-nominated performance in *Joker*. Morbius is a different kind of complicated character—a man struggling to reconcile his conscience with the desire for a cure that turns him into a monster—that's perhaps better suited to Leto's brooding style.

"How far are we allowed to go to fix something that's broken?" he asks his mentor, who replies, "Until the remedy is worse than the disease." But who gets to decide when that threshold has been crossed?

Morbius hits theaters July 31, 2020.

Listing image by YouTube/Sony Pictures

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1642887

The tiniest controller we've ever tested is a lot better than you might think



Enlarge / At 73mm long, the 8Bitdo Zero 2 controller, like its predecessor, is shorter than a standard Amiibo figurine. The reason we're reviewing it? It turned out to be serviceable in a pinch.
Sam Machkovech

reader comments

40 with 33 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Over the years, we've become frequent users of 8BitDo game controllers, particularly the company's "legacy" line. You won't find a much better maker of unofficial gamepads made for classic consoles' ports (NES, Genesis, Super NES), and those models also come in Bluetooth-equipped flavors, ready to run on modern consoles and PCs.

Between its classic and modern gamepads, 8BitDo clearly favors the SNES' controller as an archetype, and that goes for the company's "Zero" series as well. Hence, if you see a Zero gamepad in a photo by itself, you may wonder what's so special about it.

That's probably why people photograph the 8BitDo Zero series next to tiny objects for scale. At 73mm long and 36.5mm wide, it's barely bigger than an adult's thumb and dwarfed by an average GI Joe figurine. After receiving and unboxing my very own 8BitDo Zero 2 gamepad (the newest model, introduced one month ago to retailers), I laughed incredulously. Seriously, 8BitDo? Who in the world do you think would play games with one of these?

2mm of travel?! Nice

- The 8Bitdo Zero 2 is so small that you can place two of them on an adult palm and still have room for spare change.
  Sam Machkovech
- The D-Pad: bigger than a dime, smaller than a quarter.
- The same goes for the ABXY array.
- Use this photo if you want to trick a friend into thinking the Zero 2 is bigger than it really is.
- Two boxes for two controllers.
- Roughly 3mm of visible D-pad protrudes; roughly 2mm of this plastic depresses. It's certainly more than a

comparable tiny D-pad on systems like Nintendo GameCube and 3DS.

- These L and R buttons, on the other hand, are pretty rough. You won't want to depend on these in a pick-up session of *Street Fighter II*.
- A Zero 2 in the hand…

I got my answer when I packed for a recent family getaway. After filling my modest duffel bag and barely squeezing in a low-powered laptop, I sneaked the 14.7mm-thick 8BitDo Zero 2 into a side pocket. Within days, when I sought temporary holiday reprieve from my family, I unsheathed the tiny controller, downloaded some retro games from my online collection, and said to myself, "a cramped gamepad is at least better than *another* political conversation with Uncle Al."

To my pleasant surprise, 8BitDo starts this gamepad off with a crucial emphasis on its D-pad. At roughly the size of an American dime, this small D-pad is comparable to some of Nintendo's smallest takes, like you'd find on a GameCube controller or a Nintendo 3DS console. But unlike those offerings, 8BitDo allows its Zero 2's D-pad to protrude ever so slightly farther from its body. Pressing down on any edge of the D-pad offers a full 2mm of action, and this has a satisfying sense of travel when a thumb is in its depressed, rounded center—built for the sake of neatly rocking from left to right or up to down.

The D-pad's quality was borne out by my own feverish *Tetris* testing, which worked whether I rapidly tap-tap-tapped in one direction or pivoted to a crucial "up to fast-drop" maneuver in newer *Tetris* games. When I imagine various times that I might rely on the Zero 2 as a controlling option, I think about how a good D-pad is the primary differentiator from other on-the-go options, whether that's a spare Joy-Con turned sideways, a weak laptop's keyboard, or a phone's on-screen buttons. I'd rather play *Tetris* or *Super Mario Bros.* with my thumb on this D-pad than relying on those other options.

Small size, medium issues

That’s an imperative asterisk, of course. Do you have a better D-pad gamepad option nearby, one designed with full palms and comfortable grips in mind? If so, neither model of the Zero is easy to recommend. Its ABXY button array is surprisingly robust in terms of offering satisfying button depth and a perfect balance of button spacing. That means every button is close enough for easy thumb adjustment but distant enough to not feel claustrophobic. But in a game that requires regular use of all four buttons, the inability to brace the controller in a palm flares up.

My ideal Zero 2 gameplay scenario is something like *Sonic the Hedgehog*, which only requires one action button. Anything more than that and I would find myself in a funny constant readjustment situation, always wishing I could better cradle this tiny thing against the rest of my hand. If 8BitDo engineered this with a pair of plastic, attachable wings, I might sing a different tune. Even crappy plastic that simulates the palm-friendly rests of the SNES controller would be better than nothing.

Meanwhile, the included L and R buttons are embarrassingly bad. Pressing them in isolation is tricky enough, owing to their minuscule width, but trying to do so while juggling D-pad and ABXY commands is nigh impossible without bracing the Zero 2 on a table or a knee.

Portability is the point



Enlarge / The 8BitDo Zero 2 comes with everything seen here: a nylon carrying strap and a micro-USB cable for charging and updating controller firmware. (The controller does *not* work in wired mode, only Bluetooth.)
Sam Machkovech

One final note about the buttons regards the carefully recessed Select and Start buttons. Both of these are a slight pain to use, because they require a focused, angled push of a finger and are firmer to the touch than the other buttons. This is very, very good news for the controller's use case of "toss in a bag and forget about," because the Start button doubles as a power button.

I only have anecdotal testing under my belt, but I've tossed the controller into a loose bag for days multiple times over the past month and found no major dives in its "8-10 hours" of battery life. The same goes for casual mashing of the controller's face onto my palm. Unless you're trying to press the Start button, you won't turn the thing on (and the Zero 2 times out after about 30 seconds, should it get pressed and fail to sync to a preferred game system or device).

That clever design emphasis clarifies to me what the Zero 2 is

all about. 8BitDo’s latest tiny controller is meant as a critical backup for desperate nerds on the go. It fits into most any tiny pocket. It withstands accidental button taps while traveling, so that it doesn’t constantly run out of juice. And it’s been engineered with a loop slot on its body, so you can insert a nylon band or keychain and make it a part of your daily accoutrements.

We’re bummed to see that Zero line’s upgrade to the Zero 2 model only changes its wireless protocol options for better compatibility with modern consoles, as *some* kind of hand-friendlier tweak could’ve come by now. But if the Zero line is completely new to you, and its limited sales pitch sounds like it’s worth $20, say hello to your new best pocket gaming pal. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1641207

The Witcher’s Netflix success: How three timelines somehow became cohesive



Enlarge / Netflix’s version of *The Witcher* exercises wiggle room with three types of source material. For the series’ spread of main characters, that’s good news.

reader comments

131 with 83 posters participating

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The Witcher is Netflix’s surprise hit of the year, a series that seemed from the outset an unlikely-to-succeed adaptation greenlit in the foolish hope of finding the “next *Game of Thrones*.” Despite middling reviews from critics, the show has become one of Netflix’s 10 “most popular” shows of 2019, an honor it achieved with barely 11 days left in the year.

Even more surprising is its path to success. Netflix’s *The Witcher* turned out to be a catchy, bingeable series not because of a blind faithfulness to the original work but by showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich disregarding how the

original material was structured. By sticking with the spirit of the stories, instead of following them letter-of-the-law style, *The Witcher* was far more successful than anyone could have imagined.

100 years, one Continent, three timelines

- Geralt of Rivia.
- Henry Cavill's portrayal of Geralt has drawn lots of raves, but it's not the focus of this review.
- Not that we don't love giving sultry Henry a stare-down on occasion, anyway.
- But Cavill does a great job working alongside his fellow leads.

When *Game of Thrones* arrived in 2011, one of the ways it reeled in fans was its almost slavish allegiance to the source material. Entire segments of dialogue were lifted directly from the page. Major plot points came in the same order as they did in the books, including Ned Stark's death before the season finale. When the show added scenes out of order, such as Cersei and Jaime's scene over Jon Arryn's body in the pilot, they too were lifted directly from other parts of the novels.

A decade later, this direct transposing of what's on the page to the screen is par for the course, a been-there-done-that, as *His Dark Materials* is learning to its detriment. We've seen other creative ways around this expected narrative allegiance, particularly HBO's *Watchmen* jumping 30 years into its original story's future. But maybe a full-source remix doesn't have to be such a scary option.

That's why *The Witcher*'s "three timelines" format matters. It gives the show a sense of sprawling narrative—not across continents, but across time. It covers nearly a century of

history of the land known only as “the Continent,” from the flashbacks to main character Geralt’s childhood in the Season 1 finale to the fall of Cintra in its premiere. Much of Yennefer and Ciri’s stories are more indirectly alluded to in the subtext than directly adapted from the page. But by pulling out those undercurrents and making them text, the show gets to fill in and shade the Continent’s history in a way that many straightforward adaptations lose in bringing their stories to screen.

Short stories, long novels, epic games

This decision was likely borne of necessity because of the franchise’s history. *The Witcher* straddles three real-world eras of fantasy storytelling, beginning in the late 1980s. During a time when male-centric, battle-heavy stories dominated the genre, Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski began *The Witcher* as a series of short stories centered on Geralt of Rivia, a mutated human trained to serve as one of the Continent’s monster exterminators. These were gathered into two collections, *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*, which were followed by full-length novels in the mid-1990s. Those stories centered on Geralt but also expanded to put a spotlight on Princess Cirilla of Cintra and the sorceress Yennefer of Vengerberg. In the mid-aughts, *The Witcher* franchise was then successfully adapted into a whopping three video games, based on the short stories.

As good as it is to have so many built-in fanbases, that meant Netflix had three distinct groups to please: the short story lovers, the novel fans, and gamers who expect a lot of gravelly voice work and monster-on-Witcher action.

This meant the show couldn’t just start at the beginning and go in order. That would risk most of a season without Yennefer and maybe even two without Ciri, both of whom arguably become

more important than Geralt by the time the fourth novel, *The Tower of the Swallow*, rolled around. To allow both characters to stand on their own required extrapolation, creating histories for them that were independent of Geralt, so audiences could get to know them. Say what you will about "strong women characters" emerging in mid-1990s fantasy, but Netflix's remixing of the story order does a much better job of telling these women's stories—and in organic, compelling fashion.

That doesn't mean Hissrich created everything from whole cloth. Much of Yennefer's time training at Aretuza, the magical academy for women, is extrapolated from things she says to Geralt or Ciri in the novels or observations Geralt makes about her. In the first three episodes, for instance, she's depicted as born with a hunchback—sourced from Geralt's observation at the end of their first short story together, "The Last Wish," that her shoulders are uneven, and somehow she must have used magic to straighten her spine. Likewise, the outline of Yennefer's early love affair with follow mage Istredd is extrapolated from a conversation Istredd has with Geralt in *Sword of Destiny*'s "A Shard of Ice."

This is a huge departure from *The Witcher* books, where Yennefer is introduced initially as a supporting character and love interest of Geralt. The video games also don't treat her as a main protagonist; one cannot play the game as Yennefer. But by showing her story, instead of telling via exposition, she becomes a three-dimensional protagonist from the jump. Watching her navigate (or fight against) the politics involved within the Brotherhood of Sorcerers does a far better job in showing how and why Yennefer became who she is by the time Geralt meets her than merely seeing her from his point of view.

Reordering to create order



Enlarge / The character of Yennefer has never been playable in the popular *Witcher* video games, but the books spent years setting her up as a vital, main character. Netflix's version runs from there.

To fit Yennefer and Ciri's solo stories in, the showrunner had to pick and choose which monster-versus-Witcher battles to stage. The show works in quite a few by having each episode contain a "Monster of the Week." The adventure with the Striga, for instance, was the first short story ever written, under the title "The Witcher," so skipping it was not an option. The show dedicates the "A-Plot" of an episode to it, one that includes direct visual references to the Striga adventure in the video game, to the point of restaging some of the game's cut scenes.

But, notably, its attached story doesn't come until Episode 3, after "The Butcher of Blaviken" (from "The Lesser Evil") and the elves (from "The Edge of the World"), both of which were later stories. Moreover, if one lays out the show's timeline,

the Striga falls circa 1238. That puts it much closer to the show's present-day of 1263 (the date of Cintra's Fall and The Battle of Sodden Hill) than the scenes of Geralt's childhood or Yennefer's training to be a sorceress at Aretuza.

By putting the Striga encounter later, Hissrich ensures viewers have already gotten to know Geralt somewhat, including his of-the-time, anti-political "refuse to choose" attitude. This means his decision to choose to do the right thing in the Striga story packs a bigger emotional punch. It also gives the character more of a development arc than these mostly disconnected short stories provided.

By letting the audience piece together a far more expanded timeline, linking these stories so they feel like one sweeping epic, *The Witcher* stays far more faithful to the story than any video game-like shot framing. After all, what are video games, if not puzzles? What are doorstopper-sized fantasy stories like *Game of Thrones* but an exercise in discovering how all the characters will eventually encounter each other? By keeping the sense of having to solve something, Netflix's *The Witcher* creates a series as enjoyable as the original books and games, while making something wholly new for fans to consume. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1641955

Review: Cowboy Bebop becomes a boardgame



Enlarge / Get ready to relive iconic moments from the series… by playing cards with icons on them.
Charlie Theel

reader comments

25 with 18 posters participating

Share this story

Welcome to Ars Cardboard, our weekend look at tabletop games! Check out our complete board gaming coverage at cardboard.arstechnica.com.

It's been years since I watched *Cowboy Bebop*. I remember borrowing imported VHS tapes and flying through the series ("bingeing," as the kids today call it). I still remember Faye's tragic return home, the iconic confrontation at the cathedral, and the many scenes of violence backed by beautiful jazz. The show is electric, burned into my brain.



So *Cowboy Bebop: Boardgame Boogie* is immediately appealing. This is a 60-minute cooperative game where participants play Spike, Jet, Faye, and Edward, and it has a similar feel to titles like *Star Wars: Outer Rim*, *Firefly*, and even *Tobago*. You will spend most of the game on the repetitive grunt work of chasing bounties and earning Woolong to keep the *Bebop*'s lights on, creating enough food and cash so you can buy just enough time to deal with each character's personal issues.

Gameplay is about a group of bounty hunters, but it's not really about the bounty hunting. You're really dealing with iconic moments from the show, such as Faye finding a tape of her past and Spike preparing for his meetup with Vicious. These are called "Sessions," randomly selected for each character and forming the goals for each session.

So you soar about, pushing the *Bebop* from Mars to Venus and chasing quarries like Chessmaster Hex. The game uses an action point system where you visit abstracted locations to gather leads, hunt the wanted, and eventually resupply. The core loop of gaining information which leads to a pursuit and to subsequent reward is the heart of play.

Leads are vague indicators, such as "Mars" and "Bar." They are earned by meeting up with contacts and are later assembled into groups of three, which point to a specific subset of

locations on the board.

Say your current leads are “Earth,” “Spaceport,” and “Market.” You can head to that location and pursue the bounty for picking up Asimov Solensan—but the catch is that each wanted criminal requires one specific lead (such as Asimov last being seen at a spaceport) to make this a legal encounter. (If you had picked up “Venus” and “Desert” instead, you could have encountered Asimov at the Venus spaceport and turned the place over with a dizzying chase.)

This system is less about discovering the exact location of a bounty; it’s more about gaining enough clues to assemble a valid combination. It works as a light mechanism that manages to convey a feeling of hunting an evasive quarry with little overhead.

The chases at the climax of these jobs are the best moments in the game. Players spend cards from their hands to meet symbol requirements on their target, possibly collaborating with the rest of the crew. Each in-game character has an asymmetric deck as well as three special abilities to lean on. Hitting a thug that requires a lot of fight? Make sure Spike’s there to administer a beat down. Got a job that calls for hacking? Hopefully Ed’s on the ground.

A touch of drama arrives in the “jam” mechanism. This is a random pull off the deck which gives you an additional symbol which must be met. The toughest bounties require pulling several jams. This introduces an element of uncertainty into chases and adds tension to the game that goes beyond the continual threat of starvation.

But the chases and captures aren’t really what the game’s about. It’s mostly the busy work—albeit an enjoyable kind—where you turn rewards into fuel and food so you can keep on keeping on. The bigger goal is to deal with each character’s personal Session, a two-step process of hitting a

certain location and discarding a cargo load of symbols. These are the “big deal” moments where Spike confronts Vicious or where Faye gets a glimpse of her past.

Unfortunately, they’re anything but a big deal.

- Some of the “bad guy” bounties you can chase.
- Gathering the leads needed to find your bounties.
- Chasing a bounty involves having the right symbols.

“Before I knew it, the dream was over”

The characters are the heart of *Cowboy Bebop* and their past is the lifeblood pumping through the show. *Boardgame Boogie* understands this, just not completely.

Each Session functions as a story high point, a key episode from the series that we can identify with and immediately recall. But the execution of these capstone moments in the game feels mundane. This is mostly due to their simplicity.

Sessions function just like bounties, in that you’re tossing down plenty of symbols and working the hand management mechanic, but they have no runway or lead up. They simply trigger and resolve with a whimper. Each is essentially a blip over the course of play, one that eats up your resources and requires elements of strategy and cooperation, but which doesn’t form a meaningful narrative or even a stable arc for the game.

The designers clearly aimed for a simple and direct overall design, attempting to balance mainstream accessibility with a touch of flavor and strategic decision making. This is a worthy goal, but the game feels like it could have been much more. Higher-impact Sessions could have required more “heft” and thus functioned as special moments to anchor the

narrative. This could have been accomplished while still appealing to a wider target market, much as we saw in the recent—and terrific—*Jaws* board game.

The Sessions should haunt you. They should add new mechanisms into play, like event cards to be encountered or special locations to visit. The character stories should gnaw at you until dealt with and then reward you appropriately. They should be more than a box to check before your payout can be given in the form of a win.

Instead, we're left with a game that's pleasant but not quite a hit.

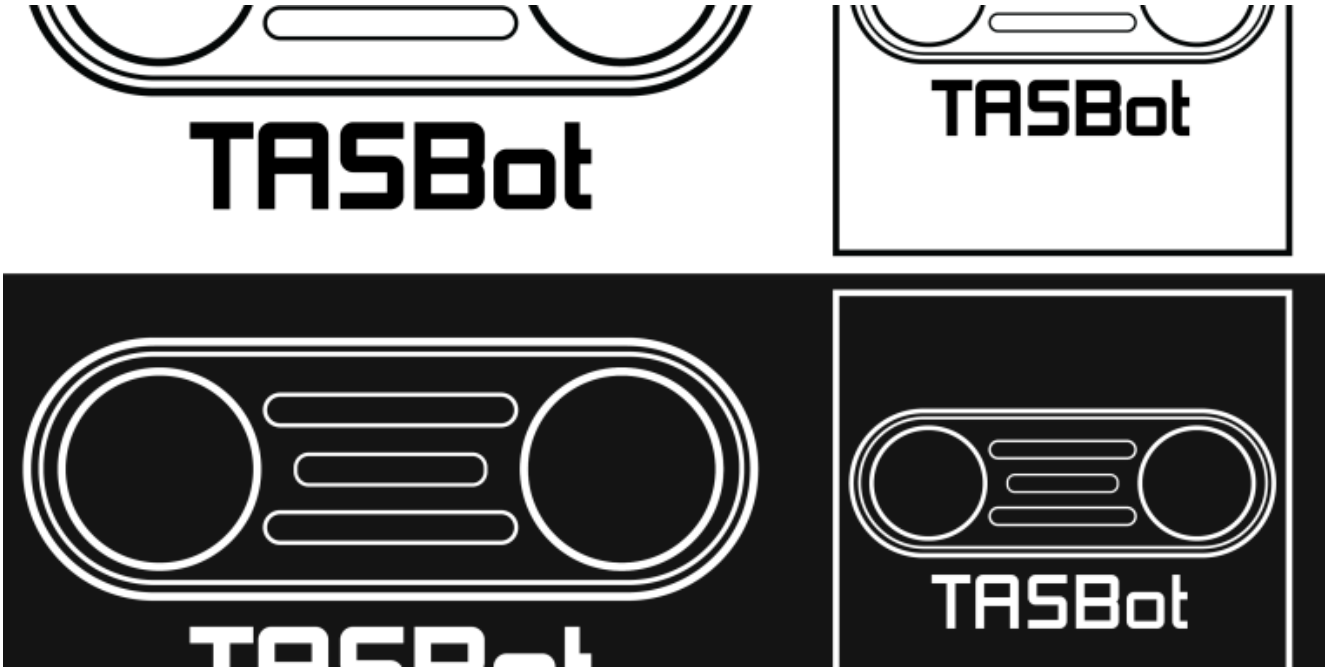
If you re-watch *Cowboy Bebop,* you may be surprised. Across the 26 episodes are some absolutely stunning moments, but linking those triumphant scenes is a fair amount of filler. *Boardgame Boogie* feels like we're playing the filler between the flashes of brilliance. It still offers a taste of what we love, but it's not a full meal.

Surprisingly, the strongest aspects here are almost ancillary to the theme. The ability of this design to capture core elements of traversing space and finding adventure while only requiring a single hour of your time is actually quite cool. If the game never develops the rich texture of *Firefly: the Board Game*, it still captures fragments of that spacefaring feel with just a fraction of the commitment.

If you crave more of this world and are content to scoot around the blackness, enjoying a few quiet moments in the periphery of its larger story, then you will find some satisfaction in this cardboard distillation. But those hoping for the profundity of another "Ballad of Fallen Angels" had better not waste the fuel.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1642513

Inside TASBot’s semi-secret, probably legal effort to control the Nintendo Switch



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[embedded content]
A sneak peek of the *Super Mario Maker 2* gameplay that TASBot will show off, live, on stock Nintendo Switch hardware and software this weekend
For years now, the TASBot team has shown time and again that tool-assisted speedruns—which can feature superhuman input speeds powered by frame-by-frame emulator recordings—can actually work on unmodified console hardware. Thus far, though, TASBot’s efforts have focused on defunct retro

consoles from the Atari 2600 up through the Gamecube and Nintendo DS.

This weekend, TASBot will finally take its talents into the modern gaming era, showing off expert-level *Super Mario Maker 2* gameplay on an actual Switch during the livestreamed Awesome Games Done Quick speedrunning marathon. And this time, the TASBot team is taking pains to make sure no one else can copy its method—to hopefully avoid Nintendo's potential legal ire in the process.

Flipping the Switch

The effort to let a Linux computer take external control of a Switch game began a bit inadvertently back in 2018, when the TASBot team attempted to partner with the AbleGamers charity. Their goal was to create an Arduino interface that would allow inputs (and pre-recorded input macros) from any controller to be re-mapped into input signals for any console interface.

While that AbleGamers effort eventually fizzled out, it did lead to a generalized Linux-to-Switch controller interface that was published on GitHub. At the same time, other efforts like CommunityController's "Twitch plays Nintendo Switch" were using similar concepts to let a Twitch chat room take control of live Switch gameplay (a la 2014's "Twitch Plays Pokemon" phenomenon).

While these kinds of efforts were fun for random tinkering, they utterly lacked the frame-perfect precision necessary for a successful replay of a pre-recorded, tool-assisted speedrun. "We saw massive inconsistencies," TASBot maintainer Allan "dwangoAC" Cecil told Ars about TASBot testing on the Switch in 2018. "Replay device precision was impossible… TASBot is a player piano—he's playing back a predefined sequence of button presses—but if he doesn't know *when* to send those button presses, it'll never work."

- A circa 2016 version of TASBot shows off his new NES control display
- P4plus2 carries TASBot down the AGDQ hallway to his big show in 2016.
- TASBot circa 2019 sits at the ready in the GDQ practice room
- A visualization of the setup that let TASBot pump arbitrary video through an SNES and streaming audio through an NES.
  Brian Mulligan
- TASBot sits next to MASHBot, which can actually tap a stylus on a Nintendo DS screen.
- Last minute adjustments before TASBot's 2019 AGDQ performance.

By 2019, multiple TASBot team members were working in parallel to try to solve this seemingly intractable Switch timing problem. One branch of effort even tried to insert a "shim layer" onto a hacked Switch console to force the external input timing to line up with the in-game timing, but "we didn't get far because it's against our ethos to modify the console," Cecil said.

At the same time, TASBot team member KNfLrPn was "using the semi-working system to help test [*Super Mario Maker 2*] tech for other [efforts]," they recently told Ars. "So while doing that I kept trying different things just in case, and eventually found a combination of multiple pieces that worked together [to fix the timing problem]."

Prior to that first successful test in December, there was "about five months on-and-off of trying different approaches, different code, different hardware," KNfLrPn added. "Until it worked, we had no idea if it was possible (and actually suspected that it wasn't)."

Approaching the starting line

Though TASBot has taken the first step to breaking open robotic Switch play, its method still isn't perfect. For one, Cecil says the hardware still isn't precise enough for games that require analog input.

In testing on *Breath of the Wild*, for instance, the team tried recording a simple input macro of Link jumping off a tower. But Cecil said slight, frame-level differences between the Linux recording and the controller polling rate during playback led to butterfly effect-style chaos, such that "loading the same savestate and playing [the input] back would result in us landing in a different spot, sometimes substantially so." Using digital inputs on a more deterministic game like *Super Mario Maker 2* eliminates those problems, Cecil added.

Playing on the Switch also means the TASBot team doesn't have the benefit of recording its inputs on robust, TAS-configured emulators, which allow for easy pausing, editing, and re-recording of frame-perfect input sequences that can create literally superhuman performance. On the Switch, thus far "there aren't any tools to make this fast," Cecil said. "This was done laboriously by hand and isn't easy to replicate."

For this weekend's AGDQ demonstration, KNfLrPn specifically designed a level to take these limitations into account; for each level section, they "include[d] a spot where I could get a consistent starting point (You might see in each part there's some kind of wall I could press against)."

[embedded content]
TASBot makes his public debut at AGDQ 2014, including an arbitrary code execution glitch on the SNES.
From those safe spots, KNfLrPn said they could "start with a guess on which buttons to press for how long, try it, see what happens, adjust, and iterate over and over" until they reached

the next safe spot. By playing a string of successfully recorded sections back from the start, KNfLrPn could then get back to any safe spot to continue the trial-and-error process.

Without the use of emulator tools, recording a few successful minutes of Switch gameplay took “several hours of trial and error, resetting each section and trying something slightly different each time,” KNfLrPn said. “It was also ‘only’ several hours because I specifically designed each section to be easy to reset. Doing it with a ‘real’ level would be even more tedious.”

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Xbox Series X won’t have next-gen exclusives for a while



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- Xbox Series X. It’s tall. And it has a modified controller compared to the Xbox One pad.
- Straight-ahead perspective.
- Phil Spencer confirms “15 Xbox game studios” are working on new games for the console.
- This is a better look at the new controller, along with a peek at at least one front-of-box USB Type-A port.
- Xbox Series X. It’s hovering in a watery landscape.
- Apparent ventilation dots on the top of the console’s tower.
- Dramatic angled view.
- Official logo.
- A sizzle reel of potentially “real-time” rendering includes a dramatic zoom on *Halo*‘s Master Chief. *Halo Infinite* is still slated to launch close to Xbox Series X’s “holiday 2020” launch window.
- Let’s rumble a sports car through a detailed valley. Assumedly taken from the Forza franchise.
- Another dramatic *Halo* landscape view.
- Phil Spencer then showed off new game *Hellblade II: Senua’s Saga*, which he said was “all captured in-engine as being built to take full advantage of Xbox Series X.”
- The apparent real-time rendering of Senua’s detailed face was stunning.
- Lots of eerie, spooky stuff in the *Hellblade II* trailer. Thus, on brand.

Back in the middle of 2016, Microsoft was just revealing the first details of Xbox One Scorpio (which became the Xbox One X), and Sony was just confirming the rumored existence of the PlayStation 4 Neo (which became the PS4 Pro). At the time, we

had a simple question for the console industry's near future:

> *In 2021, will developers still be expected to make games fully compatible with the original Xbox One and PS4 (console hardware that will be pushing eight years old at that point)? Or will developers be allowed to focus on the 'legacy' Neo/Scorpio hardware and (presumably) whatever new top-end upgrade will replace them?*

Now that such a heralded console future is approaching the console present (a year ahead of our original predictions), we at least have a temporary answer as far as Microsoft is concerned. In a recent interview with trade magazine MCV, head of Xbox Game Studios Matt Booty revealed that there are no plans to sequester the first year or two of games for the upcoming Xbox Series X away from compatibility with the original Xbox One.

"As our content comes out over the next year, two years, all of our games, sort of like PC, will play up and down that family of devices," Booty explains. "We want to make sure that if someone invests in Xbox between now and [Series X] that they feel that they made a good investment and that we're committed to them with content."

The console is the new PC

It's hard to overstate how weird the idea of an exclusive-free launch is for a new generation of video game consoles. Back when the original Xbox One launched, for instance, you had to upgrade your aging Xbox 360 hardware if you wanted to play heavily promoted first-party games like *Killer Instinct*, *Forza Motorsport 5*, *Ryse: Son of Rome*, and *Dead Rising 3*, to name just a few. Those exclusives were supposed to be the "system sellers" that would convince otherwise satisfied console gamers to shell out hundreds of dollars for new hardware.

For the Series X launch, though, even heavily promoted launch titles like *Halo Infinite* will apparently still be playable on your original Xbox One (even if that seven-year-old system is old enough to have come bundled with a Kinect). In that same MCV interview, Booty notes that the *Halo Infinite* team "is definitely going to be doing things to take advantage of [Series X]." What Booty doesn't talk about, of course, is how that team may be held back by a requirement to accommodate players on more limited Xbox One hardware.

Booty's interview notably focuses only on first-party content, so third-party developers could theoretically create games that require the power of the Series X. Looking at previous console transitions, though, third-party developers are usually more likely than not to spend the first few years of a new console generation splitting their major games across multiple tiers of hardware. In late 2013, for instance, games like *Battlefield 4*, *Assassin's Creed 4: Black Flag*, *NBA2K14,* and *Skylanders Swap Force* were all launching on the brand new Xbox One and the eight-year-old Xbox 360 versions at the same time.

It's unclear at this point whether early Series X releases will even have to be split into separate versions to work across multiple Microsoft console generations. The history of 2017's Xbox One X suggests a single version of a new game might be playable across three different levels of Microsoft console, with only minor patchable graphical differences between them.

But the Xbox One X was always sold as a "mid-generation" stopgap upgrade which would *never* feature games that *required* an upgrade from the original Xbox One. For the Series X, Booty is limiting that kind of promise to "the next year, two years," implying there will be some point where the original Xbox One (and even the One X) loses developer support and becomes as defunct as the Xbox 360.

When that phaseout will come, and how suddenly it will hit, are still unknown at this point. But the fact that the transition won't even *start* in earnest when the Series X launches is something console owners aren't used to.

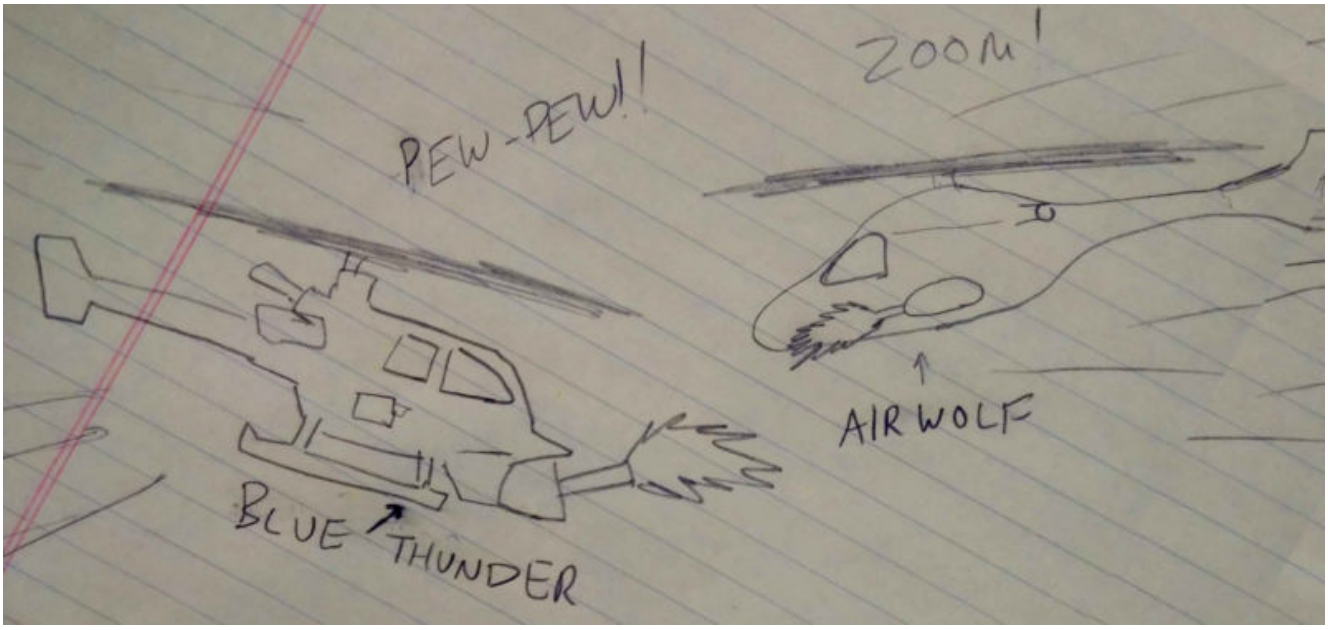
On the PC side, gamers are more accustomed to this kind of gradual obsolescence cycle. In that market, different game makers can set more granular "minimum requirements" for GPU, CPU, and RAM levels, and players can upgrade individual parts when enough games warrant the investment.

In Microsoft's new tiered Xbox hardware universe, the eventual shift from "everything works on Xbox One" to "nothing works on Xbox One" may come a bit more suddenly. Still, it's interesting to see that Xbox One owners won't *need* to upgrade to the Series X later this year to enjoy any exclusive software for the time being.

Listing image by Xbox

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1642495

Forget Top Gun: Maverick—let's settle Blue Thunder vs. Airwolf once and for all



Enlarge / Look at this crap I used to do in elementary school.

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In June 2020, the nostalgia-industrial complex will pump out *Top Gun: Maverick*, which will undoubtedly feature hotshot pilot Tom Cruise slaughtering a few dozen foreigners in order to complete his character arc. Cruise may do the hardest salute you've ever seen, but the real star of *TG:M* could just as easily be his F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet.

The movie is a sequel to 1986's *Top Gun*, which was part of the 1980s' obsession with turning cool vehicles into movie and TV stars. Depending on how pedantic you feel like being, this subgenre/cycle/craze kicked off with either *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979) or *Knight Rider* (1982) and continued through *Firefox*, *Iron Eagle*, *Black Moon Rising*, and no less than 10 *Knight Rider* remakes/sequels/video games before culminating in *Knight Boat*. Even *Magnum, P.I.*'s Ferrari and *The A-Team*'s van were more recognizable than any of their actresses. (I know I just rattled off more Gen X signposts than a season of *Family Guy*, but bear with me.)

Attempts to revive the genre have been mixed. Why? Because now that you can sit down at a computer and make thousands of spaceships out of pixels and Red Bull, the idea of building an entire franchise around one vehicle seems silly. It was only in the ’80s—which came after the rise of the summer blockbuster but before CG-everything—that the vehicle show could flourish. (The closest analogs currently on the market are the *Fast & Furious* movies, which have the technology and budgets to create a world in which muscle cars outnumber people 10 to 1.)

Anyway, thanks to the renewed interest in cool-vehicle franchises spurred by Mr. Cruise’s latest money-printing endeavor, we at Ars decided to settle one of the greatest debates of the subgenre. I have taken it upon myself to decide, once and for all, which is the superior ’80s murder-copter: Blue Thunder or Airwolf?

Editor’s note: **Spoilers for 30-year-old IPs throughout.**

- Blue Thunder’s entrance is pretty sick.
- Here’s a clearer pic of BT in action.
- Roy Scheider’s LAPD pilot Murphy combines a no-nonsense working-class attitude with the simmering anxiety of a veteran with undiagnosed PTSD.
- Airwolf. Note the wingtip machineguns and the belly rocketlauncher.
- Jan-Michael Vincent plays protagonist pilot Stringfellow Hawke; this could be from any episode of *Airwolf*, and he could be saying anything.

Thundering wolf

You remember *Blue Thunder* and *Airwolf*, right?

Blue Thunder was a 1983 movie starring an experimental, machine-gun-toting police helicopter that eventually tears up

Los Angeles. My parents took me to see it when I was five. I cried at the end. (Then they got me a gnarly Blue Thunder toy that could accommodate my GI Joe figures.)

The movie's human star is an LAPD helicopter pilot (played by Roy Scheider) whose name is Murphy, because all movie cops are named Murphy. Murphy uncovers a conspiracy involving the chopper that leads him into the aforementioned aerial dogfight over the streets of LA.

Airwolf, by contrast, was a *totally different thing*. It was a TV show that ran on CBS from 1984 to 1986 before squeezing out one more season on the USA network. It also involved an experimental military chopper flown by a sullen ex-Army pilot with the shockingly preposterous name "Stringfellow Hawke" (played by Jan-Michael Vincent). Like Murphy, Hawke has also stolen his chopper—but he is allowed to keep it as long as he runs missions for a CIA-inspired agency called The Firm (sometimes styled "The F.I.R.M.").

While *Blue Thunder* ends with Murphy destroying his chopper after deciding that it might too easily be abused by Big Brother, Airwolf is a force for good. Hawke is given license to machine gun nefarious Commies, Libyans, Mexicans, rednecks, and other sundry ne'er-do-wells week after week, kind of like a flying *Knight Rider*.

Got it? Good. Now let's turn to the important questions these two helicopter franchises raise. One: which machine is more awesome? And two: would I emerge from this project with my sanity intact?

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