Ridiculous in the right way: Unmatched: Battle of Legends

reader comments

3 with 3 posters participating

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

The full name of this game is *Unmatched: Battle of Legends, Volume One*. That last bit is important because there is more *Unmatched* coming. This first set allows us to answer important questions like: who would win in a fight between King Arthur and Sinbad? What if Alice ventured out of Wonderland to carve up Medusa? The matchups in this absurdist fight club are bonkers, and we're only getting started.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…

Restoration Games is the noteworthy publisher that has brought us new editions of classic games like *Fireball Island* and *Stop Thief!* Those designs were given a few nips and tucks, a couple of injections of Botox, and a new wardrobe. They're fresh, but they're also grounded in the past, and they know how to put nostalgia to good use.

Unmatched is something a little different. It's a re-working of 2002's *Star Wars: Epic Duels*, sans license. Without the power of such a massive intellectual property behind the game, Restoration had to be bold, and it partnered with Mondo Games to create a zany melting pot of fictional matchups. The result should put a smile on the faces of even the dourest of curmudgeons. Just try to frown while playing an epic battle between the first expansion characters of Robin Hood and Big Foot in Sherwood Forest. It's too ridiculous and too enjoyable.

But *Unmatched* isn't *Epic Duels*. It uses the same concept of a primary fighter accompanied by a sidekick (as we see with wonderful duos like Alice paired with the Jabberwock, or Arthur with Merlin), but *Unmatched* has a completely different feel with its own unique tempo and mechanisms. The asymmetric

decks powering each hero are more tightly designed, creating a breakneck pace for each 20-minute showdown.

While the game supports three and four player bouts, it clearly is optimized as a two-player affair that's lean and vibrant– in stark contrast to the six-player slug-fests that dominated my *Epic Duel* outings.

This streamlining editorial hand can be felt in all facets of play. The new battlefield, while small, feels dynamic due to a constant push for movement. The clever restriction of drawing cards only by performing a move action—as well as linking several character abilities to maneuvering—really pushes the design into creative places. For a two-player game where you throw down attack and defense cards against a single opponent, *Unmatched* never feels like a mere grind to whittle away at their health.

Finding your main

I had many concerns before playing *Unmatched*. I already love several strong entries in this genre, and I wondered if *Unmatched* could find a place alongside contemporary titles such as *Warhammer Underworlds* or *Mythic Battles: Pantheon*.

Answer: I think it can. *Unmatched* is a unique offering that manages to pair a straightforward ruleset with legitimate depth. It's simple enough that you can play with your 10-year old but engrossing enough to capture your gaming group's extended interest.

There's no deck construction here, and since each character's abilities and cards are preset, the typical card game path of creation to competition is short-circuited. For instance, much of *Warhammer Underworlds'* play occurs before the match even begins. Experimenting with new cards and combos is at the heart of the design. But *Unmatched* allows you to explore your small deck in less time than it takes to watch an episode of

Rick and Morty. By your second play with Sinbad, you should fully understand how to harness his unique Voyage mechanism and pull off electric combos.

The asymmetry here is also gripping. Each fighter has personality and some character-specific mechanisms. Alice changes size, Medusa can turn foes to stone, Sinbad grows in strength as more voyage cards hit the discard pile, and King Arthur utilizes the Lady of the Lake and Excalibur to great effect. Each character offers much to explore with an economical rules weight.

- Some of the ability cards.
- Medusa and some sidekicks.
- Alice's kit.
- The game's battle arena.

Unlike its peers, this feels more like a fighting game. While other designs try to create a stripped-down version of a larger miniatures battle, *Unmatched* wants to give you the feel of *Street Fighter* or *Marvel vs. Capcom*. You pick a "main" and perfect your timing. All of those twists and tricks you hope to find in your deck actually materialize because you're not tearing down your creation and rebuilding a new one after nearly every game.

This fighting-game format, however, is also responsible for *Unmatched*'s weakest spots. There's a strong focus on timing and counter-play here. Instead of deck creation, controlling the tempo and drawing out your opponent's strongest moves at their least advantageous time is at the very heart of this design. This is captured succinctly with the "feint" card, which is quite the mixture of brilliant and awful. It works because it's an elegant weapon to clash over tempo but it also stumbles because it can nullify some of the strongest moments in the game.

Imagine this: you just spent the past 10 minutes carefully

nurturing your hand, building up a set of power moves that includes the shining Excalibur. You've baited your opponent into playing one of their own feints earlier; now is the time to strike. You place Excalibur face down on the table alongside a second card from your hand to boost the damage. Then you and your opponent both flip your cards—and the corners of your mouth drop.

The problem is that every deck has three feints. Their power to undo the most dramatic of plays is frustrating, and it feels like a net negative to the game's momentum. It works, and the game still ultimately succeeds, but a more judicious use of feint cards might have injected more vigor into the experience.

The pre-constructed nature of the decks also provides an occasional feeling that the game is actually playing you. Card draw is incredibly important, and the lack of a proper mulligan rule is a bit shocking. The abbreviated play time obscures this weakness somewhat, though.

Some players will also take issue with the sidekicks, which are presented as round plastic discs instead of full-blown miniatures. I threw side-eye at this concept initially, but it didn't take me long at all to embrace the idea. The hero is mechanically divided from the sidekick, and this difference in presentation focuses the spotlight appropriately.

Enlarge / Watch out, Medusa! King Arthur’s right behind you…
The entire package is visually stunning, with some of the most effective artwork ever placed on cardboard. Even the abstracted spaces that obscure most of the board fit the overall aesthetic. (Of course, they also perfectly convey line of sight, as they’re lifted straight from Fantasy Flight’s now defunct *Tannhauser* miniatures board game.)

Unmatched may not have the extended life of the malleable *Warhammer Underworlds* or the explosive drama of *Mythic Battles*, but it’s a smooth game that should have wide appeal. It’s not overly random yet it’s still dramatic. It’s simple yet it doesn’t sacrifice all personality.

If you give this game a shot, you may find yourself blinking at how quickly the first match is over. So you play again, and

soon “just one more” becomes your maxim. Later you will blink once more as you look at your watch and wonder where the night went in such a hurry.

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Ars Technica’s ultimate board game gift guide, 2019 edition

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39 with 32 posters participating

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It’s that time of year again—time to buy more board games than you possibly have time to play.

To aid you in your quest, we’ve once again updated our massive board game buyer’s guide for the year by adding new entries, pruning some old ones, and bringing things in line with our current thoughts. This isn’t necessarily a list of our favorite games of all time; it’s just a big list of games we’re recommending in 2019. The list is divided into sections that cater to different audiences, and we think there’s something here for just about everyone.

Whether you’re looking to pick up your next cardboard obsession or need a gift idea for your weird cousin who’s always going on about “efficient resource trade routes,”

you’re in the right place.

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For fun, here’s a giant gallery of the box art for every game in this guide:

- More *Istanbul!*

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Jumanji: The Next Level is less fresh this time around but still lots of fun

Enlarge / Jack Black, Kevin Hart, Dwayne Johnson, and Karen Gillan star in *Jumanji: The Next Level*.
Sony Pictures

reader comments

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The intrepid gang of teens who played their way out of a video game two years ago is back and facing a new in-game adventure

in *Jumanji: The Next Level,* the latest installment in the popular franchise that originated with the 1995 film *Jumanji*. It's a solid sequel, following the same winning formula that made its predecessor such a big success.

(Spoilers for 1995's *Jumanji* and 2017's *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*; mild spoilers for *Jumanji: The Next Level*.)

The franchise has its roots in a 1981 fantasy children's book by Chris van Allsburg, about two children who discover a jungle adventure board game with the ominous warning, "Do not begin unless you intend to finish." The original 1995 film adaption followed the basic premise pretty closely, although it added several characters, most notably Robin Williams as a grown Alan Parrish and his childhood friend Sarah Whittle (Bonnie Hunt). As a young boy in 1969, Alan finds a supernatural board game called Jumanji and begins to play with Sarah.

The game unleashes actual jungle hazards into the real world, and the only way to make it go away is to face down your fear and finish the game. Of course, this proves complicated: Alan gets sucked into the game and a panicked Sarah stops playing, leaving him stranded for the next 26 years. It falls to two young orphans in 1995 (another departure: in the book, their parents are still alive), Peter and Judy Shepherd (Bradley Pierce and a young Kirsten Dunst), to finish the game he and Sarah started.

Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle (2017) updated the concept for the 21st century, turning the board game into a video game. (It is sometimes cited as the third installment in the franchise, since 2005's *Zathura: A Space Adventure* takes place in the same universe and is based on another of van Allsburg's books.)

In 1996, a disaffected teen named Alex Vreeke (Mason Guccione) is given the board game by his father, who found it on a

beach. He’s not into old school board games, so the game transforms into a video game cartridge. Alex, like Alan before him, also gets sucked into the game, until four high school students discover the game 20 years later while serving detention. It was a clever twist, with the teens taking on avatars—a source of much of the film’s humor—to tackle the various levels of the game, hoping to finish before losing all their allotted three lives.

Choose your avatar wisely

Uber-nerd Spencer (Alex Wolff) becomes Dr. Smolder Bravestone (Dwayne Johnson), an archaeologist/explorer with a “smoldering intensity” and no in-game weaknesses. The shy, brainy Martha (Morgan Turner) finds herself playing the babelicious Ruby Roundhouse (Karen Gillan), whose skills include “dance fighting.” Narcissistic popular girl Bethany (Madison Iseman) chooses Professor Sheldon Oberon (Jack Black), the team cartographer. Jock Anthony “Fridge” Johnson (Ser’Darius Blain) gets to play zoologist Franklin “Mouse” Finbar (Kevin Hart). Eventually they run into Alex, whose avatar is pilot Jefferson “Seaplane” McDonough (Nick Jonas). Their mission: return a magic jewel to a rock sculpture known as the Jaguar’s Eye, before evil archeologist Russell van Pelt (Bobby Cannavale) can steal it back.

Spoiler alert: The teens succeed in mastering the game—learning some valuable lessons about identity and friendship in the process—and Fridge smashes it to make sure nobody ever gets trapped in Jumanji again. *Welcome to the Jungle* was a genuinely fun (and funny) film, with clever twists on the original film and plenty of sly nods to common tropes of video gameplay. The film opened with an initial weak showing at the box office; it was playing opposite an obscure art house film called *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. But positive word of mouth soon boosted attendance, and the film went on to gross $962 million globally. When studios see those kinds of

returns, they naturally start thinking about a sequel.

- A remnant of the Jumanji video game.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Spencer (Alex Wolff) just can’t leave well enough alone.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Danny DeVito plays Spencer’s cranky grandpa, Eddie.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Martha (Morgan Turner), Bethany (Madison Iseman), and Anthony aka “Fridge” (Ser’Darius Blain) come to see Spencer.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Spencer has vanished into the game.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- “I hate this part.”
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Martha’s avatar is once again Ruby Roundhouse (Karen Gillan).
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Grandpa Eddie lucks out and gets to be Dr. Smolder Bravestone (Dwayne Johnson).
- What about Grandpa Eddie’s buddy, Milo (Danny Glover)?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Milo gets to be Franklin “Mouse” Finbar (Kevin Hart).
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Fridge is stuck with Professor Sheldon Oberon (Jack Black).
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- One life down, two to go.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- In-game guide Nigel Billingsley (Rhys Darby) is back, too.
- Eddie struggles to grasp the concept of being inside an in-game avatar.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Ruby Roundhouse, aka Martha, checks out her updated

character traits in the game.
Sony Pictures

- Trying to outrun a herd of large ostriches.
  Sony Pictures
- A precarious crossing.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Pursued by vicious primates.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Pilot Jefferson “Seaplane” McDonough (Nick Jonas) is the avatar for Alex Vreeke.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- A daring climb.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures

The trailer for *Jumanji: The Next Level* dropped this summer, promising another fun romp through the game world. A despondent Spencer, now a student at New York University, comes home for Christmas and digs out the pieces of the video game in the basement. He repairs it and once again gets sucked into the game. Seriously, did Spencer learn nothing from the prior film?

When Fridge, Martha, and Bethany come to the house to visit, they find the game running and quickly realize what happened. They resolve to go back into the game to rescue their friend—except this time they don’t have time to choose their avatars. Spencer’s crotchety grandfather, Eddie (Danny DeVito), and his elderly pal Milo (Danny Glover), get sucked into the game, too. Wacky hijinks ensue, starting with who gets what avatar.

Grandpa Eddie finds himself in Dr. Smolder Bravestone, while Milo ends up with the Finbar avatar. Martha is still Ruby Roundhouse, Fridge is now Sheldon, and when they find Spencer, he’s playing a new avatar: a master thief named Ming Fleetfoot (Awkwafina). Bethany inexplicably gets left behind, eventually enlisting the help of an adult Alex (Colin Hanks). They, too, end up in the game, Alex once again playing the pilot, and

Bethany a beautiful black stallion named Cyclone. This time, the quest involves recovering another magic jewel (the Falcon's Heart) from ruthless warlord Jurgen the Brutal (Rory McCann, aka the Hound from *Game of Thrones*), who killed Bravestone's parents, per the in-game backstory.

> *Dwayne Johnson once again proves he has serious comedic chops.*

The cast delivers strong performances, especially those playing the avatars, who must channel both their characters and the individual tics of whoever is playing those avatars. Dwayne Johnson once again proves he has serious comedic chops, deftly mimicking Danny DeVito's vocal inflections, accent, facial expressions, and mannerisms. Sure, the life lessons each character learns are a bit too Movie of the Week—the same was true of *Welcome to the Jungle*—but it's nice to see the rather bitter Eddie gradually come to terms with getting old. ("Aging is a gift. I forget that sometimes.")

If anything, *The Next Level* is *too* similar to the 2017 film, despite bringing fresh faces and a few surprising twists into the mix. That's partly due to the inherent predictability of video game design: there's only so much you can do with the premise, and you know going in that the outcome will be much the same as the last time. What was an innovative reinvention in *Welcome to the Jungle* is now familiar, and hence less surprising. But it's still a lot of fun, and it's the kind of entertaining film that tends to do well in the holiday season. A post-credits scene hints at the possibility of yet another sequel. If so, let's hope it finds a way to reinvent the basic formula one more time.

Jumanji: The Next Level opens this weekend in theaters.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1631679

The next Xbox has a name and a new design: Behold, 2020’s Xbox Series X

reader comments

127 with 93 posters participating, including story author

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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.

The next Xbox console, slated to launch in holiday 2020, finally has a name: Xbox Series X. The system that was formerly dubbed Project Scarlett also has a bold, vertical design and a slightly modified controller, as seen in the above gallery.

Xbox chief Phil Spencer took the stage at Thursday night's The Game Awards to reveal the new monolith-shaped console, which Gamespot reports is roughly as wide as an Xbox One controller and roughly three times as tall. Its appearance came at the end of a trailer full of apparent Xbox Series X "real-time" rendering, which included Halo's Master Chief, a red sports car (potentially from the Xbox-exclusive racing series Forza), and a soccer match.

Important details were confirmed by a few angles of the new Xbox console: an apparent disc drive; a vent-covered top with either painted or backlit green coloring; and a slightly modified update to the Xbox One gamepad. This new controller looks largely like the current generation's default controller, but it has a new circle base to its d-pad and a new button in the controller's middle that resembles an "upload" icon from Windows. Spencer has confirmed that this will function as a "share" button (much like a similar button on PlayStation 4's DualShock 4) and that the new Series X controller will be compatible with existing Xbox One systems, not just the new Xbox Series X.

In a press release issued shortly after the Game Awards

reveal, Microsoft confirmed good news for anybody with tightly organized shelves near their gaming TV of choice: the Xbox Series X “supports both vertical and horizontal orientation.”

Spencer spoke at The Game Awards to offer a few sales pitches about the console, though most of these were repeats of statements from this year’s E3 reveal. He told players to expect to be “instantly absorbed in your games,” presumably hinting to the console’s reliance on SSD architecture for faster game loads. He emphasized three bullet points: “performance, speed, and compatibility.” And he announced that “our 15 Xbox game studios” are all working on games for the new console before revealing the first game built with Xbox Series X in mind: *Hellblade II: Senua’s Saga*, made by Ninja Theory (a studio Microsoft formally acquired in 2018).

[embedded content]
Xbox Series X reveal
Listing image by Xbox

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1632263

Review: Castle Rock’s signature slow burn pays off in tight, twisty finale

reader comments

9 with 9 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Lizzy Caplan portrays Annie Wilkes, one of Stephen King's most memorable characters—from the novel *Misery*—in the second season of Hulu's anthology series, *Castle Rock*.
A nurse on the run with her teenaged daughter ends up stranded in a small Maine town where something evil lurks in the second season of *Castle Rock*, Hulu's psychological horror anthology series that draws inspiration from the works of Stephen King. The series was a surprising breakout hit last summer, and this new season doesn't disappoint, bringing the same slow burn and unexpected twists leading to a riveting finale.

(Mild spoilers for season one and season two below.)

The fictional town of Castle Rock features in so many of King's novels that co-creators Sam Shaw and Dustin Thomason thought they could use it as an organizing principle for their storytelling. The series is less a direct adaptation of King's works and more new stories set in the fictional town that occasionally bump up against various books. The biggest King influences for season one were *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*—in other words, a prison-centric setting with themes of crime and punishment. *Shawshank* tells the story of a prisoner's disappearance, while *Castle Rock*'s focus is the mysterious appearance of a prisoner nobody knew about.

Season one opened with the suicide of the local prison warden, Dale Lacy (Terry O'Quinn) and the discovery that he secretly kept a mysterious young man—known only as the Kid (Bill Skarsgård)—captive for decades. Not only did the Kid not age, violent outbreaks seemed to follow in his wake. The show remained cagey about who the Kid was, whether he was a monster or a victim, even in the finale, with its distinctively King-like denouement.

The season highlight was the heartbreaking seventh episode, "The Queen," told entirely from the point of view of Ruth

(Sissy Spacek), whose age-related dementia is rapidly worsening and affecting her ability to distinguish between the present and the past. (At several points, she walks out of a conversation in the present and into a different conversation in 1991.) The episode has deep personal resonance for Shaw, whose own mother suffered from dementia and died unexpectedly a few days after he started writing the series. I called it "the most beautifully constructed, superbly acted hour of television of you're likely to see this year."

Castle Rock's second season doesn't have a single standalone episode of quite the same caliber, but it still packs a punch. The source material this time around is King's award-winning 1987 novel, *Misery*, featuring one of his most memorable characters, Annie Wilkes, a psychotic (and murderous) former nurse.

In the novel, a middle-aged Annie rescues her favorite novelist, Paul Sheldon, after a car accident in which he breaks both legs. Paul's last novel killed off the central heroine of his Victorian romance series, Misery Chastain, as he had grown tired of the character and wanted to write crime novels. But his "Number One fan," as Annie calls herself, refuses to accept Misery's demise and holds Paul captive, forcing him to resurrect Misery in a new novel—or else. The 1990 film starred Kathy Bates as Annie, who won an Oscar for her performance, which included an infamous scene in which Annie chops off Paul's foot with an axe to ensure he can't escape.

- Annie Wilkes (Lizzy Caplan) is a nurse with mental issues on the run from her past before ending up in Castle Rock.
- Annie's primary concern is protecting her daughter, Joy (Elsie Fisher).
- Joy finds a friend in local misfit Chance (Abby Corrigan).

- Reginald “Pop” Merrill (Tim Robbins) is the dying patriarch of the local crime family.
- Dr. Nadia Omar (Yusra Warsama) is a Somali refugee Pop adopted as a teenager.
- Nadia’s brother, Abdi (Barkhad Abdi) has a tense relationship with their adoptive father.
- Annie has a violent encounter with John “Ace” Merrill, Pop’s nephew.
- Annie will do anything, even kill, to protect Joy.
- Annie tries to dispose of a corpse at the construction site in nearby Jerusalem’s Lot.
- Annie uncovers an underground burial chamber.
- A flashback to Annie’s teen years with her father.
- Annie may have inherited her mental illness from her mother.
- Annie and Joy surrender to police.
- Ace and Valerie (Alison Wright) outside the infamous Marsten House.
- Pop realizes the truth of just what Ace and his followers are up to at the Marsten House.
- Annie and Joy attempt an escape.
- Joy succumbs to Ace’s weird cult.

In King’s novel, it’s clear that Annie suffers from schizophrenia and/or bipolar disorder. Paul Sheldon discovers a scrapbook of newspaper clippings hinting that Annie was accused and acquitted of killing infants at a hospital maternity ward in Colorado, and may have murdered as many as 30 people. *Castle Rock*‘s storyline focuses on a youthful Annie (Lizzy Caplan) on the run from an unspecified past with her teenaged daughter Joy (Elsie Fisher). Annie takes stints as a nurse in various hospitals and stays just long enough to steal the medication she needs to keep her mental illness in check before hitting the road in search of a utopian vision she calls the “laughing place.”

Naturally, the pair end up in Castle Rock, and Annie takes a

job with the hospital in nearby Jerusalem's Lot—the second of King's trinity of fictional Maine towns, the third being Derry (the setting for *IT*). When Annie's killer instincts get the better of her, she tries to dispose of a body at a local construction site and uncovers a hidden burial site linked via a tunnel to the abandoned Marsten House. (King fans may recall the Marsten House was home to the vampires in the 1975 novel *'Salem's Lot*.) And she inadvertently awakens something evil that has been lying in wait for four centuries.

Caplan gives a fantastic performance as Annie, capturing the character's trademark awkward earnestness, lack of direct eye contact, stiff gait, and odd speech patterns and phrasing ("dirty bird," "cockadoodie," and the like). It's a very human (and humane) depiction of someone struggling to control her mental illness. Annie may be a little crazy, particularly when her meds run out, but she's driven primarily by her love for Joy and proves to be a formidable opponent to anything that would threaten her daughter.

Season two also stars Tim Robbins as a veteran named Reginald "Pop" Merrill. Despite his late-stage cancer, he wields a tight hold on local commerce with the help of his two nephews, Ace (Paul Sparks) and Chris (Matthew Alan). Pop also adopted two Somali refugees as teenagers, now grown: Abdi (Barkhad Abdi), who is building a mall in Jerusalem's Lot, and his sister, Nadia (Yusra Warsama), the medical director at the hospital where Annie works. The family gets sucked into the supernatural threat facing the town(s), too. Over the course of ten episodes, tensions flare, secrets are revealed, and we learn the true nature of what Annie awakened.

As always with a Shaw-created show, the writing is strong and emotionally evocative. It's intricately plotted, with strong character development. Granted, for the first several episodes of the season, the two narrative threads—Annie and Joy's relationship and Annie's secret past, and whatever the hell is going on at the Marsten House—almost don't feel like they are

part of the same series. The Annie storyline feels far more compelling—especially the flashback episode, “The Laughing Place,” which acquaints us with Annie’s childhood.

But gradually the two threads converge as we learn more about the town’s history—including an unexpected twist that provides a link between season two with season one. Here’s hoping *Castle Rock* gets a third season so we can learn more about this common element loosely tying the anthology’s storylines together.

Listing image by Hulu

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1630457

Why new consoles probably won’t be enough to save GameStop

Enlarge / How long will this be a common sight in malls across America?

reader comments

102 with 72 posters participating

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Things continue to look rough for struggling brick-and-mortar game retailer GameStop. This week, the company announced

comparable store sales were down 23.2 percent year over year for the third quarter of 2019. It's a decrease led by a whopping 45.8 percent decline in hardware sales and a 32.6 percent fall in software sales.

Those are hard numbers to spin, especially when they're leading to corporate layoffs and hundreds of store shutdowns (including the newly announced shuttering of all GameStop stores in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden by the end of 2020). But GameStop CEO George Sherman attempted to put a good face on the results in an earnings call this week. There, he argued GameStop's current troubles are a predictable result of the end of the current console generation—and consumer anticipation of upcoming consoles from Sony and Microsoft—as much as anything else.

"With 'generation nine' consoles on the horizon set to bring excitement and significant innovation to the video game space, those anticipated releases in late 2020 are putting pressure on the current generation of consoles and related games, as consumers wait for new technology and publishers address their software delivery plans," Sherman said.

GameStop CFO Jim Bell echoed the sentiment during the call, predicting that "the cyclicality of the console business" will continue to hurt GameStop's sales performance for the next few quarters." After that, though, the company "expect[s] robust sales increases in late 2020 led by the generation nine hardware and software slate."

There's some merit to the argument that GameStop is just the victim of a temporary end-of-cycle downturn at the moment. As Sherman notes, NPD reported "significant double-digit industry declines in new hardware [sales] for September and October" across the US game industry, suggesting gamers might be largely holding off on new consoles until new hardware arrives late next year. And while hardware sales are a pretty low-margin business for GameStop, new consoles get people in the

door and can renew interest in buying high-margin software and accessories for their fancy new purchases.

But there are signs that the end-of-generation doldrums are hurting GameStop's core business more than other parts of the video game market. As NPD noted in its own third-quarter report on the overall US game market, spending on "digital console content" was up, while spending on "physical console content" was down. That's just a single quarter, but it reflects long-standing trends in the US game market since 2010, as consumers have moved away from physical discs and cartridges and toward purely digital gaming. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1631945

E3 without the lines: System Shock, other games to get 48-hour Steam demos

The Game Awards

reader comments

54 with 38 posters participating, including story author

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In an era when traditional game-preview expos like E3 are languishing, a new contender has emerged with an idea we've been privately requesting from game publishers for years: a game expo that any fan and enthusiast can download and enjoy

on their home computer.

Simply titled The Game Festival, this 48-hour event will launch exclusively on Steam tomorrow, Thursday, December 12, as part of the run-up to that evening's broadcast of The Game Awards. Starting at 1pm ET (10am PT) on Thursday, log in to Steam on a Windows PC to access "over a dozen" time-restricted game demos, and these will be available for play for approximately 48 hours. Users will download complete game clients, as opposed to streaming the games from the cloud, and like other time-restricted Steam games, these will require that players remain connected to the Internet to play them during their availability window.

The biggest news, as of press time, is that this slate of demos includes a world-premiere opportunity to play *System Shock*, the repeatedly delayed "faithful reboot" of the '90s classic. (It's not to be confused with *System Shock 3*, an entirely new entry in the series still in production and helmed by co-creator Warren Spector.) The full list of announced Game Festival demos is below:

- *System Shock* (Nightdive Studios)
- *Eastward* (Pixpil/Chucklefish)
- *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus)
- *Moving Out* (SMG Studio/Devm Games/Team17)
- *Röki* (Polygon Treehouse/United Label)
- *Chicory* (Greg Lobanov)
- *Wooden Nickel* (Brain&Brain)
- *Haven* (The Game Bakers)
- *Heavenly Bodie*s (2pt Interactive)
- *Acid Knife* (Powerhoof)
- *The Drifter* (Powerhoof)
- *Carrion* (Phobia/Devolver)
- *SkateBIRD* (Glass Bottom Games)

Curiously, that list is described by Game Awards representatives as "some of the games" involved in the

promotion—which hints at *more* demos potentially landing in players' free-to-try queue. Game Awards host Geoff Keighley has bragged about the show's range of brand-new game announcements (and that they've somehow still not been leaked to forums or news sites), but Game Awards representatives didn't answer questions about whether any surprise announcements will wind up in the demo list after the show airs on Thursday evening.

Ars Technica staffers have been fortunate enough to sample a few games on this list at press events, particularly the bloody-and-fast horror romp of *Carrion* and the *Earthbound*-meets-MS-Paint whimsy of *Chicory*. And now, instead of waiting in lines and huddling up to expo-hall kiosks to sample promising games ahead of their launch, you'll be able to just download their pre-release EXEs and play them comfortably on your schedule (within that 48-hour window, anyway).

The perfect time to strike?

We cannot recall another event offering such a limited-time shot at unreleased games via downloads, which may make The Game Festival the first of its kind. And as game-streaming services tiptoe toward wider availability and improved performance, we see this week's unveil of a time-limited, download-then-demo event as a stepping stone to an eventual future of streaming-exclusive festivals. How long before Microsoft offers paying Xbox Game Pass subscribers a limited-time chance to stream and sample a tantalizing new game via Project xCloud that had just blown up via a YouTube trailer? Might Google Stadia ever do the same for its paying Stadia Pro tier?

Such streaming-tease events would allow game publishers and promoters the chance to fully control player access to software—a key restriction that game makers want when exposing unfinished preview code (and a big reason that a lot of demos

at events like E3 happen “behind closed doors”). But they’d also cut out the bulky middleman of an expo-management group like the Entertainment Software Association, an organization that is already reportedly struggling with organizational woes (not to mention leaks of attendees’ sensitive data). If The Game Festival succeeds by any measure, this could be the beginning of a sea change for how public game-preview events operate. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1631493

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12 years later, players somehow keep Team Fortress 2 alive on the PS3

Enlarge / *Team Fortress 2* on PS3 is the only way to play the “classic” version of the team shooter, without the new guns and features that changed the game drastically.

reader comments

29 with 21 posters participating

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Team Fortress 2 was Lars Nilsen’s favorite game. He’s spent hundreds of hours running between rooftops as the scout in 2Fort and dominating points on Dustbowl as a demoman since he picked up the quirky team shooter in 2011.

After playing consistently for five years, Nilsen took a break in 2016 to focus on other things. Still, the class-based charm

and powerful combo of the heavy/medic uber-charge eventually convinced him to come back. He booted up the game in April of 2019, hoping to get into the habit of erecting dispensers once again.

There was just one problem, though. He couldn't join a match.

That's because Nilsen had been playing the PS3 version of *Team Fortress 2*, a game that has been long neglected by Valve and server host EA since its 2007 launch. While the PC version receives updates from Valve to this day, the PS3 version of the game hasn't received any official updates, patches, or new content since it first came out. In April, Nilsen found he could still connect to the server and mess with his settings, but he couldn't actually play.

Unlike its Xbox 360 cousin, the PS3 version of *TF2* seemed practically dead on arrival in 2007, let alone 12 years later. But this version of the game wasn't dead, as Nilsen would soon find out after joining the Discord server linked in the lobby of the server menu. There, he joined a fledgling community of *Team Fortress 2* players who preferred the vanilla PS3 version of the game over all other versions, despite its many shortcomings.

"The [server] menu was modded [via hacked PS3 save files] so I found the [*Team Fortress 2* PS3 community] Discord through that," Nilsen told me over Discord. "I met some guys through that and I think me and [Adrian Francis] got really pumped up trying to fix this problem [of the dead servers]."

While the game's PS3 servers had gone down sporadically over the years, they had always come back up. In April, though, Nilsen and others in the Discord thought the PS3 game might not be coming back. "I just had a random thought to boot the game up around Easter, I expected it to be shut down," he said. "But was surprised that I was wrong. Since it was technically online still, just not in an optimal state, I knew

all hope wasn’t lost.”

From that sliver of hope, Nilsen, Francis, and other members of the PS3 *TF2* community embarked on a quest to get someone to listen to their pleas.

Searching for Scooter

In late April, Francis and Nilsen started “reaching out to every Valve and EA employee, every customer service department we could, since we didn’t know exactly who was running the servers,” Nilsen told me. “Even though most clues pointed towards EA, we weren’t sure since they would never confirm it.”

Both Nilsen and Francis had been talking with EA customer service representatives through a long Twitter direct message thread. The customer service reps, who always sent them in circles, signed their names as a conversation got started. “Sue” and “Bob” said they couldn’t help the small community because the servers were Valve’s responsibility. Then “Scooter” came into the picture, and he saw things differently.

“[Nilsen] and I tried for ages with EA but they always denied they had anything to do with it,” Francis, a UK-based player, told me via Discord. “But [Nilsen] got lucky one day and managed to talk to Scooter from EA.”

“After wasting hours on outsourced customer service chats to India, I tried to message the EA_Help Twitter account and forgot about it,” Nilsen said. “I later checked my Twitter, and this guy Scooter from EA confirmed to me he sent a request forward and also confirmed that they were running the servers.”

Only a few days later, on May 1, the servers were up and running again. Nilsen, Francis, and others could join a match

and enjoy all the sticky bomb fragging and spy backstabs they wanted to. “It was just plain luck that I got in contact with him,” Nilsen said. “Adrian tried just as hard. And also, if we tried to ask other employees over there, they always say, ‘That’s not EA who handles this, it’s Valve’ even though this other employee confirmed it. So now, it’s always ‘Cut the crap, give us Scooter!’”

Enlarge / Players on PS3 sometimes spend more time talking and problem-solving than actually playing.

Since May, Scooter has had to intervene five or six times to get the servers up and running after brief outages. But with that internal support, the community continues to grow and thrive on the outdated console.

Francis, Nilsen, and others have started a subreddit and Twitter page for the PS3 *TF2* community. They’re trying to expand by reaching out with a server invitation to other players who mentioned the PS3 version of the game on Twitter or uploaded videos of themselves playing on YouTube.

They’ll do whatever they can to keep their favorite team shooter going, at least as long as their PS3 hardware lasts. Nilsen and Ramie Villar, another member, even talked about

buying the servers from EA.

After I suggested that the servers would eventually come down for good, Villar replied, “That’s what I’ve heard for over a decade, though. I’m amazed they’re still up, but people have thought they’d get taken down years ago.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1631449

Sony announces plan to publish PlayStation games on non-PS consoles [updated]

Enlarge / Today’s announcement could really use some console logos, because we have no idea which consoles to expect *MLB The Show* on starting in 2021. But it won’t just be PlayStation-branded ones.
MLB / Sony

reader comments

22 with 21 posters participating, including story author

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A Monday night announcement about Sony’s long-running baseball sim series *MLB The Show* included a clause we’ve yet to see attached to a PlayStation series announcement: plans to launch on other consoles.

Sony and Major League Baseball issued a joint statement on

Monday night confirming that their shared license for the series *MLB The Show* will persist for an indeterminate amount of time. This also included a pledge that the series will appear on "additional console platforms beyond PlayStation platforms as early as 2021."

The gazillion-dollar question, of course, is which other console platforms we might expect the series to launch on. Neither Sony nor MLB had any answers to that question as of press time. Sony also didn't hint to doing the same thing for any other current PlayStation-exclusive series.

Since the series began life in 1998 on PlayStation 1, simply titled *MLB '98*, Sony's baseball games have launched exclusively on PlayStation platforms—and, in fact, they've launched on *every* PlayStation-branded device. While other multi-platform baseball sim series have fallen by the wayside in the years since, most recently 2K Sports' *MLB 2K13*, Sony's PlayStation-exclusive take on the American pastime has persisted as an annual release.

Unlike Sony, rival console publisher Microsoft has dipped its toe pretty loudly into multi-console publishing in the past few years. The trend began with *Minecraft*, but Microsoft technically inherited that series' multiplatform status upon acquiring its creator Mojang in 2014. Microsoft's multi-console strategy truly blossomed in 2019 with the launch of former Xbox exclusives *Cuphead* and *Ori and the Blind Forest* on Nintendo Switch.

Could Sony be catching Switch fever, as well? (Nintendo is already hinting to the possibility.) Might Sony go so far as to launch *MLB The Show* on Xbox, thus creating a tangled love triangle of who publishes on whose consoles? Or will this become a bizarre move on Sony's part to support Google Stadia, even though Sony has its own complicated sometimes-streaming subscription service? And either way, how far might Sony and the MLB milk this cloud of mystery, assuming that "as early as

2021” could mean one, two, or even 4,000 years later?

Update: This article’s headline has been updated to reflect the fact that “Sony” at large has published games on non-PlayStation consoles in recent years, mostly in the form of Sony Music Entertainment’s UNTIES entertainment publishing group. But those games are rarely marked with “Sony” or “PlayStation” branding, let alone temporary exclusivity on PlayStation platforms. Today’s news marks the first time a series from Sony Interactive Entertainment with loud ties to the PlayStation brand has been announced for other competing consoles.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1630535

Star Trek and Fallout actor Rene Auberjonois has passed away

Enlarge / Rene Auberjonois speaking at a fan convention.

reader comments

59 with 49 posters participating

Share this story

Esteemed character actor Rene Auberjonois died in his home in Los Angeles on Sunday at the age of 79, The New York Times reports. The cause of death was lung cancer.

Auberjonois was a prolific actor whose 55-year career spanned well over 200 roles. To many, he was the shapeshifting security officer Odo from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. To others, he was Father John Mulcahy from *M.A.S.H.* or Clayton Endicott III from *Benson*. Others still may know him as Paul Lewiston from *Boston Legal* or as Dr. Burton from *Batman Forever*. Many more would recognize him from his numerous guest roles on TV series like *Stargate SG-1*, *Madam Secretary*, *The Good Wife*, *Archer*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Criminal Minds*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and many more.

He also played numerous roles in video games. He voiced Mr. House, a central character in 2010's *Fallout: New Vegas*. He also appeared as Karl Schafer in *Uncharted 2*, Talos in *God of War*, and Janos Audron in the *Legacy of Kain* series. Additionally, he was an acclaimed audiobook reader, and a regular performer on the theatre stage.

Born in Manhattan in 1940, Auberjonois attended now-called Carnegie Mellon University before beginning his career in theatre, film, television, and voiceover. His father was a Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist, his grandfather was a notable painter, and his mother was descended from the family of Napoleon Bonaparte.

While he was not a professional artist like his grandfather, Auberjonois treated the visual arts as a hobby. He was known for selling drawings and other artworks to fans at Star Trek conventions and donating the proceeds to charity.

In the 2000s, Auberjonois reportedly expected to retire from acting, but the success of *Boston Legal* gave his career even longer legs than he had anticipated. He worked all the way until his death.

He is survived by his wife of 56 years, a son and two daughters, and three grandchildren.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1630349