The Force won’t be with them: David Benioff and D.B. Weiss exit Star Wars

Enlarge / David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have opted to focus on their lucrative development deal with Netflix.

reader comments

114 with 82 posters participating

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Former *Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss will no longer be developing the next Star Wars film trilogy for LucasFilm, Deadline Hollywood reports. Instead, they’ll be focusing on developing new films and series for Netflix, part of a lucrative nine-figure deal they signed in August with the streaming giant.

“We love Star Wars,” Benioff and Weiss told Deadline Hollywood. “When George Lucas built it, he built us, too. Getting to talk about Star Wars with him and the current Star Wars team was the thrill of a lifetime, and we will always be indebted to the saga that changed everything. There are only so many hours in the day, and we felt we could not do justice to both Star Wars and our Netflix projects. So we are regretfully stepping away.”

Benioff and Weiss signed onto Star Wars back in February 2018, before the much-maligned (by fans) final season of *Game of Thrones* aired on HBO earlier this year. They had been developing a series called *Confederates* for HBO, a fictionalized alternative history of the US where the South

won the Civil War and slavery remained legal. The series was tabled, ostensibly due to scheduling conflicts rather than in response to an online outcry over the controversial premise. Then came the backlash against the *GoT* finale, even sparking an online petition with 1.75 million signatories calling for a remake. (As we noted in our review of the finale, that's not how any of this works.)

The duo has kept a fairly low public profile since then before igniting a fresh controversy with a panel appearance over the weekend at the Austin Film Festival. The men adopted a self-deprecating stance that didn't land well with the audience, joking about their lack of experience and marveling that George R.R. Martin entrusted his life's work into their hands as they pretty much learned the ropes on the job. So the news that Benioff and Weiss are no longer involved with *Star Wars* might be seen as good news by many.

It does kind of throw a fork in the works for Lucasfilm's long-range plans for the franchise. Currently, *The Mandalorian* debuts on the new Disney+ streaming service November 12, and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*—the final installment in the most recent trilogy that concludes the long-running "Skywalker saga"—hits theaters December 20. The Benioff and Weiss project was intended to launch the next stage of the Star Wars cinematic saga, slated for 2022.

Full plate

Fortunately, Lucasfilm still has plenty of other projects in the works, most notably a Star Wars spinoff series featuring Obi-Wan Kenobi, with Ewan McGregor reprising his role as the iconic character. It was announced at Disney's annual D23 Expo in August, along with another Star Wars spinoff ("Untitled Spy Series") for Disney+ featuring *Rogue One*'s Cassian (Diego Luna) and his best droid buddy, K2 (Alan Tudyk).

It sounds like Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy isn't

closing the door entirely on having the duo in the Star Wars fold at some point in the future, however. “David Benioff and Dan Weiss are incredible storytellers,” she told Deadline Hollywood. “We hope to include them in the journey forward when they are able to step away from their busy schedule to focus on Star Wars.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1593169

See on Apple TV+: Less Game of Thrones, more unintentionally funny Syfy

Enlarge / Jason Momoa’s character in *See* would like to ask you some questions. They’re mostly about what the heck things look like, because his character is blind. So is pretty much everyone else.

reader comments

19 with 15 posters participating

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When Apple TV+ launches on November 1, it brings with it five original titles: four TV series and one movie. This seems like a modest start, but it’s four more titles than Netflix had when it first started hocking original programming in February 2013.

The difference is Netflix's first release, *House of Cards*: it was an out-of-the-box critical hit (and landed in a cozy bed of other familiar TV and film options). For Apple TV+, things aren't so clear-cut. Of the four series on offer, the most ambitious is the science-fiction story *See*. Apple never came directly out and said this show was its *Game Of Thrones*-like series, but the size and scope (and the casting of Jason Momoa) draw natural comparisons. Of the three episodes screened for review, that ambition is absolutely on display.

But *See* is no *Game of Thrones*. It's closer in nature to the campy fantasy of the 1980s or a SyFy Saturday night movie like *Zombie Tidal Wave*, albeit with a much larger budget.

- Momoa's character uses every sense other than sight to survey the intense battle to come.
- Magha (Hera Hilmar) eventually gives birth to children who can see. That's special in this series' post-apocalyptic tribal universe.

On paper, *See* looks like the type of show a streaming service with deep pockets and a flair for disrupting established norms would put its chips on. Centuries after a worldwide pandemic wiped out 99% of the population and blinded all the survivors, small bands of sightless humans live in nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes in the Pacific Northwest. One day, a tribe called the Alkenny take in a lost pregnant woman, Maghra (Hera Hilmar). After being wed to the tribe's chief, Baba Voss (Jason Momoa), who has no heirs, she gives birth to a pair of twins with an ability no one had experienced in hundreds of years: sight.

Using a visual medium like television to imagine how the human race would survive without vision is a bold choice. Apple TV+ has committed to doing so conscientiously, with the production hiring consultants, cast, and crew who are blind or have low vision. The series works hard to avoid ablest clichés, with

scenes that frame the intimate use of touch to define how close (or how far) characters are in their connections. And the “heightened sense of hearing” angle plays incredibly with a top-notch surround sound system. Every snap, crackle, and sigh that rings through the world’s river-lined forests and solemn bonfires allows the viewer to understand this is how the characters experience the world, without tipping into obtrusive.

Mano-a-urso?

Would that the rest of the show lived up to that standard. It’s not easy to pull off fantasy of this nature without accidentally falling face-first into campiness. The first step is to know there’s a fine line to walk. Unfortunately, *See* doesn’t seem to have noticed. The show’s first scene features Alfre Woodard as Paris, the tribe’s midwife, “singing” the twins into the world. Jason Momoa’s first appearance has him leading his people in a tribal war dance that feels pulled straight from *Game of Thrones*‘ Dothraki, complete with made-up language. Within the first half-hour, the series puts on a full-on tribe-on-tribe skirmish that goes on for the better part of eight minutes. Later on, Momoa attempts to go mano-a-mano (or perhaps mano-a-urso) with a large brown bear.

In the right hands, or as isolated moments with room to breathe, these scenes might have worked. But smashed back-to-back in such a short amount of time, they’re overwhelming. Then there’s the juxtaposition of these scenes against the introduction of the evil Queen Kane (*Blade Runner 2049*‘s Sylvia Hoeks). She reigns from inside a nearby dam, one of the few places electricity still works. Here, the population wears faux-medieval garments that wouldn’t be out of place at a Renaissance Faire, and everyone stands around arguing about their version of urban decay. Hundreds of years after the destruction of modern life in the 21st century, there stands Queen Kane, listening to Lou Reed’s “Perfect Day” on vinyl, on

a setup that looks straight out of 1983 (proof that there will always be hipsters, no matter what befalls civilization).

She then dismisses her servants to “pray,” which it turns out means a variety of sexual acts (solo or group) while dramatically reciting plot plots. Everything down below is off screen; this isn’t Cinemax, or even HBO.

But *See* still feels like overkill, considering that even HBO decided “sexposition” of this nature was passé by 2015. And it’s a curious decision when we consider rumors that Tim Cook wanted Apple TV+ to be viewed as a PG-rated destination. Paired with the first half of the episode cutting back and forth to the birth of Maghra’s children, Kofun and Haniwa, we can come to a troubling conclusion: of the three main female characters, two are mostly reduced to their vaginas, and the show obsesses over what’s coming out or going in.

Stay for the unintentional hilarity

Queen Kane isn’t the only one strangely stuck on mid-20th-century pop culture either. Part of *See*‘s theme is that those with sight will change the world because they will read books and learn from the mistakes of the past. But it seems hard to swallow that a pair of teenage children raised to hunt and fish in a technology-and-vision free world are going to connect to George Orwell’s *1984* or understand the racial dynamics at play in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

These books may represent great works to the Apple execs who greenlit this show. In the actual story at hand, they’re as incongruous as the plastic water bottles that still populate the landscape. At least it makes sense that the water bottles haven’t disintegrated over time.

Pitfalls like these might be inevitable when a company whose focus has always been about the delivery of entertainment suddenly tries to make entertainment itself. Unlike Netflix,

which has slowly morphed from “videos through the latest medium” to an entertainment company, no one would mistake Apple for the latter, at least not yet. Sure, they’ve been in the business of music for nearly 20 years, but iTunes was always just in the service of selling iPods and iPhones. The move into movies and television by iTunes (now Apple TV) was never about the content itself; it was about hardware.

With two billion devices (give or take) already in the pockets of consumers, ready-made to stream an integrated service that’s priced to move at $4.99 a month, it makes a bit more sense that Apple would spend over $1 billion to enter this entertainment sweepstakes. But reports of bumpy series development had us fearful of how Apple’s TV-development chops would play out.

See is fascinating in its bizarrely campy way. Most of the twists that are set beyond the third episode are easy to guess, or they’re telegraphed loudly enough that they aren’t surprises. That being said, given the opportunity to keep bingeing, I would probably watch on, just for the unintentional hilarity. The show is not quite “so bad it’s good,” as much as it is “passable enough to put on in the background on a lazy evening.”

The show heralds a new era where bad science fiction is no longer easily defined by cheap CGI sharks or lousy lighting effects. Sorry, SyFy, but the so-bad-it’s-good stuff now looks as expensive as everything else in the streaming era. At least by attempting to aim for “does it seem like the sort of thing one might call ‘The Next *Game of Thrones*,'” *See* has landed somewhere far more experimental than it might have done otherwise. Just don’t be surprised if you find yourself laughing in all the wrong places.

See *premieres on Apple TV+ on Friday, November 1, with three episodes before moving to a weekly format.*

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1592525

Watchmen and the golden era of the single-season series

Enlarge / A small army of Rorschachs.
YouTube/HBO

reader comments

89 with 68 posters participating

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HBO’s choice to adapt two critically acclaimed book series, *Game of Thrones* and *Watchmen*, may seem like a case of two peas in a pod. They’re game-changing works in their respective fields with cult followings and “unadaptable” reputations.

But *GoT* and *Watchmen* differ in a key respect: where they sit on the “epic television” spectrum. Arguably, both examples prove, in very different ways, that TV series needn’t last multiple seasons to be considered “great.”

When *Game of Thrones* ended in May of this year, a small cottage industry of worriers fretted that this was somehow the end of HBO. But the channel is already back with a new high-profile series, inspired by Alan Moore’s comic classic *Watchmen*. Showrunner Damon Lindelof insists that, like its source comic, he plans to stick to a “limited series” run, instead of any intention to run the series for multiple

seasons.

HBO's *Watchmen* results, so far, are promising—and recall the golden era of the TV miniseries. What happens when a series' run is truly limited and every episode's stakes matter? Let's rewind to other classic, memorable examples of the limited series to advocate for what *Watchmen* already appears to be getting right.

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell (BBC series)

[embedded content]
Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell trailer
Some series are willing to take a slim novel of 300 pages and stretch it into season upon season of TV. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there's the BBC's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. Susanna Clarke's story, set on an alternate, magical earth, is a doorstopper of a tale. (My copy rings in at 1,006 pages.) Most production studios would have rung a half-dozen seasons out of it. But the BBC condensed the novel's events into a single seven-episode story.

The series used the visuals of the medium to lay out the world-building, trusting the audience to absorb through the setting what the novel took pages and pages of footnotes to explain. It proved there was no need to belabor the point. Even better, the series swerved from the book's inconclusive ending, killing off Lascelles, for instance, and making the disappearance of Norrell and Strange into another dimension feel less like a loose end and more like the only outcome that could possibly make sense.

Watchmen (Comic)

In the world of comic books, nothing ever ends, and that has been the reality ever since the format was popularized in the

United States in 1938. From *Superman* radio plays that went on so long they became TV series, to today's Marvel Cinematic Universe, this is a genre where not even death can stop the next issue. But not *Watchmen*.

Alan Moore and David Gibbons defied what was not only an accepted norm but a hallmark of the entire superhero oeuvre by creating a single 12-issue run with a definitive ending from which there was no miraculous return for anyone. (Not that DC Comics didn't try.) Rather than turning audiences off, it earned the series respect rarely afforded to comics. By limiting its characters to a single adventure, *Watchmen* only explored its characters' lives during this small slice of time. We never learn, for example, how the emotional wallop of carrying the secret of the "Alien Monster" hoax emotionally affects these characters long-term. Instead, they will forever remain as strange and complicated in the imaginations of readers as they were when it began.

Good Omens (novel, Amazon series)

Like comics, fantasy is another genre where authors will keep churning out volume after volume. One of the brilliant exceptions to this rule is the collaboration between Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett, with their satirical story of the apocalypse, *Good Omens*. The book was wildly popular, and it would have been easy for the two beloved authors to continue a collaboration. But part of why the book's laughs work is the brevity of it all. Any attempt to keep it going would have assuredly fallen flat as the novelty of that first hit wore thin. After all, once you've stopped the apocalypse, is there really a way to top it in a sequel?

Moreover, many of the funniest bits may be screamingly funny the first time, but they can grow tired if stretched. The rewriting of biblical passages to reflect modern British parlance, like "26 And the Angel said, 'I had it here only a

moment ago, I must have put it down somewhere, forget my own head next,'" are great. But they would never be enough to keep a trilogy afloat.

- The angel Aziraphale (Michael Sheen) and the demon Crowley (David Tennant) team up to avert the Apocalypse.
  Amazon Prime
- The beginning of a beautiful friendship.
  Amazon Prime
- Aziraphale and Crowley in days of old.
  Amazon Prime
- It all started with Eve and the apple.
  Amazon Prime
- The book that foretold it all: *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch.*
  Amazon Prime
- Angry villagers converge on the cottage of Agnes Nutter, accused witch.
  Amazon Prime
- The quaint London bookshop owned by Aziraphale.
  Amazon Prime
- That is a disastrous haircut, Crowley.
  Amazon Prime

But it's not just the book that opts for brevity. When Amazon Studios agreed to an adaptation, the streaming service went with a single run of six episodes rather than stretch it over several seasons. One only wishes STARZ had done the same for Gaiman's other novel-turned-TV adaptation, *American Gods*, which is still dragging along long after the novelty has worn off.

Chernobyl (HBO series)

Just as *Game of Thrones* ended, HBO accidentally reminded the world that fantasy and long-running series were not the only road to a hit. *Chernobyl* was brutally short, five episodes all

told, during which the series dove into the corrupt government layers that both caused the accident and then compounded the damage with a cover-up. Though it did condense history to make its larger point, it kept the narrative super tight.

- A scene of the reactor explosion.
- Adam Nagatis plays a firefighter who is called to the scene in the immediate aftermath of the explosion.
  Adam Nagatis
- Emily Watson plays an amalgam of scientists in her role as Ulana Khomyuk.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Boris Shcherbina and Soviet nuclear physicist Valery Legasov try to decide what to do next in the aftermath of the reactor explosion.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- A firefighter’s wife tries to visit him in a Moscow hospital.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Adrian Rawlins plays Chernobyl chief engineer Nikolai Fomin.

This meant that scenes of those exposed to radiation fallout never went on too long, and the pacing meant even the worst of the scenes, like the mass murdering of infected dogs, were as much left to the audience’s imagination as put on screen. This allowed audiences to absorb the horror of the incident without ever feeling like it was gratuitous. By the time the finale rolled around, the series had done the impossible. It beat out the most-watched titan of HBO, *Game of Thrones*, in digital viewership. It turns out all you need to get audiences to tune in is a riveting story told well.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591845

The Vast of Night is an alien encounter film like no other

reader comments

15 with 14 posters participating

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[embedded content]
A festival circuit trailer for Amazon's *The Vast of Night*.
AUSTIN, Texas—Everyone kinda, sorta knows the story of *The Vast of Night* before they even hear of this movie. Filmmaker Andrew Patterson readily admits he partially based his debut feature on a real-life event—the 1965 Kecksburg incident—and even the initial idea that led him to researching Kecksburg struck Patterson as familiar. "I have a document in my phone of three or four dozen single line movie ideas," he told Ars. "This one said, '1950s, black and white, New Mexico, UFO film.'"

But *The Vast of Night* ultimately doesn't hinge on how its plot plays out. This small budget, tightly scoped sci-fi film has wowed festival audiences enough to attract Amazon money largely on its spectacle—individual images you'd gladly frame for the office wall, dialogue that draws you in no matter the subject, sonic flourishes that stick with you long after the credits roll. Talking to the filmmaker after a recent Fantastic Fest screening, it becomes hard to shake the feeling he'll be managing a much larger studio budget of his choosing

in the very near future.

“We knew we were working in a genre that was shop-worn, nothing new,” Patterson says. “We wanted to let people know, ‘OK this is an abduction in New Mexico—we know this story, you know this story. How can we find a way in and do something special, to make something new?’ I wanted to make it like the films I enjoy, which are usually about people learning about each other, their dynamics and relationships. So, OK, I want to start this like it’s a Richard Linklater movie… then we get side-swiped into something extraordinary.”

- Fay (Sierra McCormick) is a go-getter student who bought a tape recorder and works the switchboard.
  Amazon / YouTube
- Everett (Jake Horowitz) is a radio DJ willing to train Fay on interviewing techniques. (He has Rivers Cuomo style crossed with McConaughey speech.)
  Fantastic Fest / Fons PR
- Whitney, Texas is pretty stunning when viewed through the right lens (it plays Cayuga, New Mexico in the 1950s in this film)
  Amazon / YouTube
- *The Vast of Night* has its period pieces down pat, including some delightful classic cars and driving style.
  Amazon / YouTube
- This is very much *not* like the modern NBA game, but 1950s New Mexico High School basketball rivalries bring all the townspeople together.
  Amazon / YouTube
- The current trailer’s official title image…
  Amazon / YouTube
- …but the film impressed enough people in Austin, Texas to get the Mondo treatment during Fantastic Fest 2019.
  Fantastic Fest / Fons PR / Mondo

Midwestern maker mojo

Patterson has worked as a videographer and amateur filmmaker around Oklahoma City for years, partially financing *The Vast of Night* from funds gained through shooting Oklahoma City Thunder promotional videos. All those reps have evidently built an incredible technical base for this first-time filmmaker. It may have taken four years to go from script to screen, but the craftsmanship behind this film only grows more impressive (and becomes more glaringly obvious) as the story unfolds.

To start, *The Vast of Night's* period touches appear seamless but took a lot of care. Basketball in the 1950s, for instance, has no three-point line or modern backboards, and the game didn't feature endless pick-and-roll. So for the big rivalry game that would occupy most of the town in this story, Patterson and co. scoured Oklahoma and Texas until they found a gym in Whitney, Texas that could look the part. "We went and counted gyms, looked at 400 or so," he says. "We sanded the floor, got rid of the three-point line—and that's a $20,000 cost, but I'm glad we did it. I'm enough of a sports guy that if I saw that *and* glass backboards, c'mon."

The Vast of Night team took the same obsessive approach toward more central aspects of the film like the radio station and switchboard, too. (Patterson initially toyed with the idea of a stage play, and those locales would've been two of three main sets.) To help these young actors better sink into the world and roles, Patterson wanted to make sure the switchboards used for the film could be *actually used*. They called up the Oklahoma City Museum of Telephone History and connected with passionate switchboard collectors in the area, eventually finding four functional switchboards and an enthusiast willing to modify them for 2019. "He got under the hood and got them functioning again, then he built a system where you can make calls," Patterson says. "You could pick up

your cell phone, call the box, and then [Sierra McCormick, who plays Fay] could hear you in her headphones."

The old-school looking radio station required even more small film ingenuity. The team made a set for the interior of the station and hosted it next to the basketball court at the Whitney gym… because they didn't actually have permission to go into a radio station to film. "We knew they were going to bulldoze [the building for the town radio station] a month later, and the company had said, 'Yeah you're good to use it,'" Patterson recalls. "So we put that tower on top, those call letters in front, and then they said, 'We're not comfortable with this, we're not going to sign off.' And then we went and shot it—it's in the movie. The production design team did a lot of work. Luckily it's night, so we got away with murder. 'There's a neon sign in the distance—someone throw some duvetyne over it. Do we have permission? No. OK, no one's awake, go do it.' That way we could keep our dirty little secret—there's a Subway five feet away."

Listing image by Amazon / YouTube

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591407

Full motion, full emotion: Bandersnatch's Emmys as a (literal) game changer

Enlarge / That's Netflix's *Emmy award-winning* original film, *Bandersnatch*, thank you very much.

reader comments

15 with 15 posters participating

Share this story

By being eligible for, and winning, this year's Emmy for Outstanding TV Movie and Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media Within a Scripted Program, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* effectively exists at a crossroads between television and interactive fiction. The Netflix-produced narrative adventure merges choice-based interaction with the high-production value of prestige TV to create something that resists easy definition, not least in established awarding bodies.

This isn't a first for the format, though its last wave was dormant for nearly two decades (and nowhere near the Emmy threshold). TV shows in the '80s tried involving viewers with toys as "interactive" add-ons. The CD-ROM era invited TV-grade drama to computers and game consoles.

In recent years, several smaller creators have resurrected the form, blurring the lines between straight live-action drama and video game. This August, two such works were released—Flavourworks' *Erica* and Sam Barlow's *Telling Lies*—to tell stories that go far beyond FMV (full motion video) games of the '90s and stretch the simple 'either-or' branching nature of *Bandersnatch*.

"Not taking turns with the game designer"

- Holly Earl stars as the character Erica in the FMV game of the same name.
- A fingerprint cursor appears when players can make choices or affect objects in the real world.

Flavourworks

- Decisions, decisions.
- Press down and move a joystick to open this desk.
- *Erica* uses video in clever ways to animate real-world objects as you manipulate them in game-like fashion.
- Players must piece together Erica's mystery, Flavourworks
- Title screen.

"People had been trying to make film and games work together for decades, and it always felt like it didn't serve either medium very well," Jack Attridge, Creative Director and co-founder of FMV game studio Flavourworks, tells Ars. "The production value and quality of storytelling wasn't there for it to be a good film, and the fidelity of interaction wasn't there in video for it to be a good game."

With a background in filmmaking, Attridge founded Flavourworks to reconcile these disciplines. Rather than taking the *Black Mirror* tact of infusing rudimentary choices into an already polished tele-drama, Flavourworks developed a game through filmmaking, creating a symbiosis between the two forms. *Erica*, their first release, is a first-of-its-kind attempt at this seamless blend of film and gaming.

"For us, it was important that we made a game first that happened to be filmed," Attridge says. "The big thing with that was, would we make the same design decisions if we weren't filming it? And the answer was yes." In this interactive drama, the audience is neither watching nor playing, but participating, from directly telling the titular Erica what to do, to sometimes controlling the camera in the scene and exploring the environment. The pacing was key, Attridge says, to balance the lean-back nature of movie-watching with the lean-forward nature of gameplay.

"We had this important rhythm we wanted to create of making sure the player was interacting every 15 to 20 seconds,"

Attridge says. “Then rather than having these token interactions, rather than having this character that can just say whatever they want, and go on this big adventure, they’re taking the player along for the ride, and then if the player doesn’t feel like they want to speak or act, then the character doesn’t have to speak or act. This is to try and allow it to feel like they’re not taking turns with the game designer at playing the character.”

The timing of the meet-cute

- Behind the scenes shot of Barlow working out some conspiracy theories, probably.
- This faux computer desktop is your interface for searching through the game’s clips. The “Solitaire” is pretty good…
- Who is he talking to? You’ll have to find out for yourself.
- Don’t we all.
- You can scrub through the videos at will, but only slowly.
- Oh, did I say something funny?

Sam Barlow’s *Telling Lies*, published through Annapurna Interactive, takes a different approach. Instead of building on the FMV framework of being a live-action choose-your-own-adventure, Barlow’s interest is a study of a modern trend: how taking in media piece-meal through YouTube and social media has altered the way we understand stories.

“If you see the meet-cute first, and then you see the relationship going horribly wrong, there’s an emotional journey there,” Barlow tells Ars. “But if you see the relationship going horribly wrong, and then see the meet-cute, now there’s some dramatic irony there because you have already foreshadowed where this is going… this additional thing of encouraging people to skip around in videos, to watch them

forwards and backwards, was another way to kind of screw around with that experience of what it means to actually sit and watch video.”

Functionally a police procedural, there’s very little linearity in *Telling Lies*. Instead, participants are given the dual role of investigator and editor. A makeshift desktop interface teases out the story’s mystery, and it allows players to view and review assorted video clips to not only come up with their own timeline, but also their own pace. Everyone’s version of the twists and turns happens slightly differently, adding a meta-layer where different players may then discuss and compare their experiences to get the most out of the story.

Allowing for any and every available eventuality

One part of the FMV-game equation that is easily overlooked is the human element—as in, actually casting actors. Thanks to looming skepticism about being a video game, getting past agents and managers for casting wasn’t always easy. In lieu of not being part of a major franchise, or having backing from a streaming service to persuade the likes of Logan Marshall-Green and Alexandra Shipp, it was Sam’s pedigree as a BAFTA-winner for 2015’s *Her Story* that got his foot in the door.

“They were like, ‘I see this guy won a BAFTA with his previous game,'” Barlow explains. “Some actors we actually got quite far in the conversation before they realized it wasn’t just doing a voice, even though they’d read the script, just because they’d been told it was a video game. Then when we’d meet and talked about how we would shoot it, they generally got more interested.”

Both *Erica* and *Telling Lies* were largely shot as regular films or TV shows. Completed over a period of several weeks, *Telling*

Lies filmed actors via a makeshift, high-fidelity selfie-cam to produce the perspective of a one-sided video call. Since all the footage would be worked into malleable gameplay in post-production, Flavourworks had to be mindful of what their film crew were doing, making sure their choices fit with the game development side of the process.

“We were still using traditional film conventions in terms of the angles we used, and the pacing,” Attridge says. “But every so often there would be something where I would say to the filmmakers on-set, as well as in post-production, ‘That’s an absolutely valid thing you’ve done there, but because it’s a game, we want to avoid doing that.'”

Likewise, there was an added pressure on Holly Earl, the titular lead in *Erica*, to deliver each narrative arc. Just like Fionn Whitehead and several of his-co-stars in *Bandersnatch*, she had to redo many scenes and interactions over and over, allowing for any and every available eventuality, all the while being wary the viewer was the one in control. “She never had a bad take, and we specifically wanted to keep her quite muted, because we didn’t want it to ever feel like the player stopped being with her and started watching her instead,” Attridge says. “So she would never go off and do this huge action where she’s throwing her arms about and, you know, going off without it feeling like it’s a player input.”

Not “stooping down to ‘click the left button'”

Being on Netflix, *Bandersnatch* was designed for use on anything that can host the streaming service. Made for PC, mobile, and game consoles, *Telling Lies* and *Erica* could demand more potential controls from their audience. Attridge believes Netflix’s restrictions are reductive and says Flavourworks have already turned down some appealing offers: “We have

walked away from proposals by big players in the film world, because in order to facilitate what's required, it would mean having to stoop down the ambition to a level that becomes 'click the left button or the right button.' For us, that fundamentally doesn't work."

That said, their cross-discipline mindset does make Flavourworks feel a tad isolated from either industry. "I do feel like sometimes we don't know if we have a home, because we're too interactive for a Netflix viewer to get," Attridge says. "At the same time, because we have a film aesthetic, there is this preconception that we're not a real game, either."

Being a two-time BAFTA winner, and having Annapurna behind him, Barlow understands his privilege with the freedom he has to push boundaries in such a hybrid space. Ultimately, he hopes that *Bandersnatch*'s Emmy wins open doors for others to follow suit on riskier and forward-thinking crossovers. "As storytellers, we are more maligned, and there was recently the controversy with the WGA not having a video game award," Barlow says. "I think, particularly as a storyteller, having the BAFTAs or the Emmys acknowledge your work helps prepare people for the idea that these might be interesting ways to tell stories." https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591475

Roundup: Three "programming" board games that will tickle your pseudocode

Enlarge / Programming aspects are all over boardgames these days, even on *Fireball Island*.
Charlie Theel

reader comments

17 with 17 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.
“Programming” in board games—where you lay down instructions in advance and then execute them in order—has shown up in everything from 1984’s *RoboRally* to 2014’s *Colt Express*. Several of the most interesting games I’ve played this year rely almost entirely upon this mechanic, which makes the games fun to play while also introducing the concept of programming to young players who might have little to no previous exposure to it.

Here are three of my recent favorites.

Lovelace & Babbage

Scott Almes’ *Lovelace & Babbage* (buy on Amazon) is the most interesting programming game I’ve seen in some time, as it feels like a real board game while asking players to do math on the fly. Granted, the “math” is just arithmetic, but the game actively rewards players who are quick at mental calculation, and the constraints it imposes force everyone to think in different terms about how to get from point A to point B.

The game takes its name from Ada Lovelace (the woman commonly credited with writing the first computer algorithm) and Charles Babbage (who designed some of the first computing machines but never saw them completed in his lifetime). Play as one of those two characters (or choose from two others), trying in each round to get from your starting two-digit number to a different number, using up to five steps. To do this, you can use the allowed operations prescribed on the central board—things like “add/subtract 10” or “multiply/divide by 2” or “reset the number to 55.”

As the game progresses, the board gains more operations, but these no longer include round numbers, so you might end up with instructions like “add/subtract 37.” (You can’t go above 99 or below 0; any such instruction just stops at those figures, rather than returning an error.) You’re encouraged to use these harder instructions because you can gain a few extra points for doing so, while the round-number instructions don’t give you any such rewards.

Lovelace & Babbage makes this even more challenging in two ways. First, it introduces a timed element, where the clock starts ticking for all other players once the first player has reached their goal for the round. Second, players can gain additional bonuses for hitting different numerical targets along the way from their start figure to their goals.

Enlarge / The game components—the “instructions” are on the

center board.
In each round, multiple “patron” cards each show one two-digit number and two symbols; the first player to get that number after any intermediate instruction in their code gets to claim one of the two symbols, while the other remains available for another player (except in two-player games). At the end of the game, players score for having acquired the most of each available symbol, for hitting their goals in each round, and for using the more complicated commands available in the game’s second through fourth rounds.

The combination of arithmetic and programming reminded me of my first encounter with coding back in elementary school, using the now-archaic BASIC programming language to write all kinds of useless but very gratifying bits of code. The mere idea of getting a computer to do something because I wrote a series of commands was enough to get me interested in coding, a skill I worked on until my early 30s. *Lovelace & Babbage*’s mechanic, as with all the programming games I mention here, asks players to work in pseudocode, where you don’t need the programming language itself but write out a general set of instructions (an algorithm) that you can later translate into the language of your choice. Games take under a half an hour and, although the box says this one is for ages 14+, you can play with any child who’s able to handle arithmetic with two-digit numbers.

Quirky Circuits

Quirky Circuits (buy on Amazon) is a cooperative programming game in which players alternate placing instruction cards to the table, but the cards themselves are kept face-down until everyone has played at least one card. Using the Adventure Book format from the company’s other games (*Stuffed Fables*, *Comanauts*, and the new *Aftermath*), *Quirky Circuits* features a one-game puzzle on each page. To solve it, players must issue commands to a robot to move it around a room, picking up

certain items while avoiding other obstacles. Instruction cards can be as simple as move forward/backward one to three spaces, turn left/right, or rotate 180 degrees. But certain robots—the game comes with four—have unique functions or default moves, so the deck of cards you use will change each game and may include instructions specific to each robot.

When an instruction card is face-down, all that players can see is what *type* of command it shows—a forward/back move, a rotation or turn, or a pick-up-and-drop action. Players can't communicate about what cards they've played, nor can they tell other players what cards to play. (You can tailor this to the skill levels of younger players, though; I found it useful to ask my daughter out loud to think about what moves she thinks I played, and let her talk through it, without telling her explicitly what cards I'd played.) Once all players have played at least one card and there are at least five instructions played in total, the players flip over all cards and execute the commands in order. After each round, the robot's battery level drops by one. The goal is to finish the robot's task, usually involving picking everything up and returning to the start space, before its battery reaches zero.

The game's core challenge, trying to anticipate what instructions other players will play, focuses on deductive reasoning, which I found more akin to debugging than to

straight programming. The process after each round is very clearly a debugging process, where all players get to discuss what went wrong and how to fix it the next time around. The game's first few challenges are straightforward and are clearly designed like a tutorial to get players used to the idea of programming moves and to making errors, since you quickly encounter boards where an incorrect move sets you back (for example, "breaking" an object that must then be cleaned up).

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591793

Sony is trying to sell off PlayStation Vue, but it might have a hard time of it

Enlarge / Sony's PlayStation 4, for which Vue is currently the only cable-lite streaming subscription available.

reader comments

50 with 44 posters participating, including story author

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Sony is seeking to sell off its PlayStation Vue TV business for a figure in the "tens of millions," ending a multi-year experiment in taking on cable companies with lower-cost, "skinny" streaming TV bundles.

Citing people familiar with the situation, The Information reports that Sony began working with Bank of America Merrill Lynch to explore the possibility of selling Vue as the company seeks to raise its stock price by shedding businesses that are not making money. The sources said that Vue loses money largely because of high costs for content, for which Sony believes it pays more than some direct competitors in this space like Hulu or DirecTV because it has less leverage in the TV and film industries.

Sony has approached one potential buyer, sports streaming service FuboTV, but apparently to no avail. The report claims Sony's service has 500,000 US households ad subscribers, and it has raised the prices of its bundles multiple times in a failed effort to achieve profitability. The sale would transfer those subscribers, along with Sony's technology, to the potential new owner. But not all of the service's hard-to-secure content deals would necessarily transfer in the sale, potentially complicating the sale's prospects.

Vue was an ambitious original project when it launched as one of the first broadcast-over-IP cable-replacement services in 2015. Since then, it has been joined in the market by offerings from Hulu, Google, and Sling TV. None of these services have been resounding successes, either, but most of them have many times more subscribers than Sony's. While they offer some unique features, they are fundamentally still cable TV bundles—with much of the baggage that goes with cable, including users paying for networks they don't actually want due to that bundling.

With new, more focused streaming services like Disney+, Apple TV+, HBO Max, and Peacock right around the corner, it's reasonable to conclude that the à la carte model is on a path to victory with US households. While some bemoan the proliferation of these services and ever-mounting subscription costs, services like Netflix, HBO Now, and those upcoming ones at least do not require users to buy into expensive bundles to

access content they want. They also often provide better user experiences in other ways—making them superior to cable and cable replacement services in most people's eyes.

Having worked in the streaming TV business previously, I always knew economics were never there for a single, $10/month subscription to all the nation's most popular TV shows, anyway. As quality standards have risen, TV has gotten more expensive to produce in recent years, not less, even as consumers gradually spend less on cable bundles. Cutting out the middle-man that is the cable company has proven the best way for networks to bankroll today's expensive TV shows.

Unbundling sports network subsidies was never going to be enough to make that original Netflix dream possible, so it came down to two options: replicate some portion of the cable experience via streaming, as Vue and YouTube TV have done, or use a litany of individual content subscriptions, as is the model for Disney+ and its ilk. The market seems to be trending toward the latter.

While Microsoft initially introduced its Xbox One game console as a multimedia device focused on more than just games, Sony has largely kept the messaging around the PlayStation 4 focused on gamers. Sony's dominance in the current console generation has been credited partially to that decision. Even Microsoft eventually followed suit and ended many of its early TV initiatives for the Xbox One in response.

However, that focus makes Vue seem like an awkward fit for the platform, which is another possible explanation for the service's relatively slow growth. It's worth noting, by the way, that Vue is the only cable-like subscription streaming service available on the PlayStation 4. Sony has thus far not worked with Hulu or YouTube to bring their competitors to the platform. That could shift if Vue changes hands, though.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591557

The “original disruptors” go head to head in The Current War: Director’s Cut

Enlarge / “My boys and I caught in a jar what before now has only flashed across the night sky.” Benedict Cumberbatch plays Thomas Edison in *The Current War*.
101 Studios

reader comments

29 with 26 posters participating

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Before Macs vs. PCs, before Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos struggled for dominance in building reusable rockets, there was the late 19th century battle to determine whether direct current (DC) or alternating current (AC) technology would ultimately bring electricity to the world at large. That fascinating period of history has been brought to vivid life in *The Current War: Director’s Cut.* This may be well-worn territory for hardcore fans of science history, but plenty of people have never heard of the so-called “war of the currents,” and Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon (*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl)* has put his own fresh stamp on the saga.

(Some spoilers below, especially for those unfamiliar with the history.)

The Current War is a fictionalized account of the historical

rivalry between Thomas Edison (Benedict Cumberbatch) and George Westinghouse (Michael Shannon) to bring electricity to the masses. Hundreds of central power stations were cropping up across America, each using different combinations of circuits and equipment. Edison's Pearl Street generating station in Manhattan supplied DC power to a few hundred mansions of wealthy New Yorkers, as well as a smattering of mills, factories, and theaters in the city.

Westinghouse espoused AC, with more than 30 plants in operation by 1887. DC current had the Edison name and associated influence behind it, but AC current was cheaper. It could travel farther, supplying electricity to homes across a wider area than DC, and hence Westinghouse's approach required less copper wire and fewer generating stations. The potential payoff for the victor was enormous, so it's a small wonder the battle to dominate this fledgling market got very ugly. In his thoughtful, artfully shot film, Gomez-Rejon showcases the all-too-human foibles as well as the strengths of the central characters, emphasizing their very different styles and philosophies to bring out the tension between ego, ambition, and humility.

"I was fascinated by this rivalry to create the modern world," Gomez-Rejon told Ars. "This is a movie about the original disruptors. It was a mesmerizing opportunity to make a period film that is as much about the future as it is about the past."

[embedded content]
Benedict Cumberbatch and Nicholas Hoult play arch-rivals Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla, respectively, locked in a race to electrify the world in *The Current War*.

Have I heard this one before?

Produced by Martin Scorsese, an earlier cut of *The Current War* was financed by the Weinstein Company. That version premiered

in 2017 at the Toronto Film Festival (TIFF), but then Harvey Weinstein was credibly accused of sexual abuse and stepped down from the company. *The Current War* was shelved and eventually sold off when the company declared bankruptcy. That stalemate was quite the blow to Gomez-Rejon, who was already frustrated with Weinstein's heavy-handed interference in shifting the director's original vision. He also felt a rush to present this film at TIFF even though Gomez-Rejon knew it wasn't ready. He told Deadline Hollywood recently that this period comprised "some of the darkest moments of my life."

It didn't help that Weinstein's version did not fare well at TIFF, and Gomez-Rejon feared his career as a director might be over before it had really begun. Ultimately the story seemed too captivating: the film landed with 101 Studios, Scorsese helped him get back the rights, and producer Timur Bekmambetov funded reshoots with key cast members so Gomez-Rejon could complete the film as he originally intended. To ensure this new version had a fighting chance—and wouldn't suffer from the negative reviews of the earlier version (which has a critics' score of 31% on Rotten Tomatoes)—its official title is *The Current War: Director's Cut*.

The first trailer for the director's cut dropped in June. One of the chief criticisms of the Weinstein cut was that it felt bloated and overlong, with sluggish pacing. The director's cut is ten minutes shorter and has been re-edited substantially to improve the narrative rhythm. And even though the film is shorter, there are five new scenes from the original shoot in London, as well as extra scenes from the reshoot. These scenes better develop Edison's relationship with his wife, Mary, as well as the character of Serbian inventor Nikola Tesla (played by Nicholas Hoult in the film)—notably, how Tesla got royally screwed by investors when he established his arc lighting manufacturing company in 1886. The investors fired him and retained control of his patents, leaving the inventor penniless. Fortunately, Westinghouse heard about Tesla's novel

designs for AC motors and transformers, and he brought the young man on board.

- Benedict Cumberbatch as Thomas Edison.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Michael Shannon plays George Westinghouse.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Nicholas Hoult as Nikola Tesla.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- A glimpse of Tesla’s groundbreaking schematic for an AC power generating system.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Edison preparing to make a grand announcement.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- The inner workings of electrical power in the late 1800s.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- How many inventors does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
  YouTube/101 Studios
- “Gentlemen, I hope you brought your checkbooks.”
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Westinghouse maps out his planned power stations.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Dirty pool: electrocution is dubbed “being Westinghoused.”
  YouTube/101 Studios
- The first electric chair.
  YouTube/101 Studios
- 19th century equivalent of Ars reporters?
  YouTube/101 Studios
- Westinghouse and Edison briefly bury the hatchet.
  101 Studios
- Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon
  101 Studios

Decidedly *not* documentary

The historical “war of the currents” is often presented as a rivalry between Edison and Tesla. In reality, Tesla’s role was initially fairly minor, although it was his genius that ultimately helped Westinghouse snag the contract in 1893 to provide electricity to light up the so-called “White City”—the centerpiece of the Columbian Exposition‘s World of Tomorrow exhibit in Chicago. That successful demonstration was sufficient to give the current war victory to Westinghouse and Tesla.

The film gets many of the historical details right. But this is not a documentary, and adhering too closely to historical fact can ultimately sink this kind of creative re-imagining. “You have to make choices in order to make a movie that is something more than just reproducing the past,” Gomez-Rejon told Ars. “This is about interpreting a moment in time. It’s about the bigger questions and themes, not about getting everything accurate.” That said, the director and his team clearly did a great deal of research, and that effort is reflected in the finished product.

For instance, Edison’s propaganda machine did indeed pump out hundreds of flyers and pamphlets on the dangers of alternating current, even electrocuting animals in front of newspaper reporters. He called this being “Westinghoused.” There really was a collusion with electrical engineer Harold P. Brown to make sure a Westinghouse AC generator was used in the first electric chair, and the collusion was exposed after the theft of 45 letters from Brown’s office. The film presents these as letters from Edison providing technical advice on the design of the chair, preserved rather than destroyed (as he requested) because of Edison’s fame. In reality, the correspondence was more varied and little of it involved Edison directly, but the amalgamation makes for a stronger narrative here.

“This is a movie about the original disruptors.”

Likewise, Gomez-Rejon’s version significantly improves the presentation of the science behind the technology, which was clumsier and more in the vein of lecturing the audience in the Weinstein cut. The director didn’t want to “spoon-feed” the audience, so he sought to provide just enough information to ground them in what is happening—but not to get so bogged down in the technical details that it disrupted the narrative flow. “There were [earlier] versions of the movie that had a lot of information, and it was just confusing,” he said. “There’s a fine line in giving an audience enough to latch onto, before it becomes distracting and then they are not paying attention to the emotions.”

Historically, Westinghouse may have won the war of the currents, but Edison quickly moved on to his next passion project: the kinetograph (an early motion picture camera) and the kinetoscope (to exhibit those motion pictures), essentially launching the film industry with his establishment of Edison Studios in 1894.

Gomez-Rejon found a lovely way to reflect this arguably win-win outcome via a new framing device at the start and close of the film. Edison’s wife, Mary, has died and left him a message on his phonograph, saying how much she’d like to see Niagara Falls when it is frozen over. Niagara Falls is where the couple honeymooned. It’s also the site where Tesla and Westinghouse built their first AC power station. The scenes show Edison and an assistant taking the kinetograph to the falls in the dead of winter and capturing their frozen glory on film to honor Mary.

“He’s able to record a memory in that moment, and also he just trapped the beast again” said Gomez-Rejon. “There is nature trapped in a box, yet again. He lost Niagara [in the war of the currents] but he just took it back. He’s off to the future, still defying nature, taming the elusive by preserving

it in light and sound.”

The Current War: Director’s Cut *is in theaters starting this weekend.*

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591251

Bethesda pledges to fix early “Fallout 1st” bugs and complaints

reader comments

97 with 69 posters participating, including story author

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- Fallout 1st comes with everything seen here. More info on the updates in the gallery.
- Want unlimited storage in *Fallout 76*? You can now pay for it, only as part of the Fallout 1st subscription service.
- Fallout 1st subscribers also get exclusive access to a quality-of-life update: a hub tent you can pop up anywhere in the game.
- And, of course, exclusive outfits for subscribers.
- How “Private World” will look in the game’s menus once Fallout 1st goes live.

Bethesda's launch this week of the $99/year Fallout 1st "private world" service inside *Fallout 76* immediately drew controversy by charging for features that some feel should have been included with the base game. But the service's first few days have also been affected by a number of unexpected or unintended issues that Bethesda now says it's addressing.

Users in the *Fallout 76* subreddit have been chronicling a list of issues big and small that they've noticed with their Fallout 1st subscriptions. The most surprising, it seems, is that users can't seem to create a truly "private" world only available to invited guests. Instead, Fallout 1st worlds are currently visible and accessible by anyone on the subscriber's friends list.

That's a particularly big problem for players who maintain massive friends lists for trading purposes but don't necessarily want those trading partners hopping into what's supposed to be a private world. Bethesda now says it realizes this, telling Polygon, "We understand this is not what players expected for their Private Worlds… we are looking to provide an option in an upcoming patch that will allow Fallout 1st members to restrict access to their servers more completely."

Other players say they've noticed problems with the scrap box, a Fallout 1st-exclusive feature that allows for unlimited item storage. Some players report they're losing items after they're placed in the boxes, especially when trying to access them in worlds controlled by other players.

After initially claiming that this problem was merely a "display issue," and that all scrap box items were safe, Bethesda now tells Polygon that "we have since found that a small number of players have in fact experienced a loss of scrap items after placing them into the Scrap Box and then loading into a world. Resolving this issue is currently our top priority. We are also exploring ways to restore the missing items."

The most serious accusation from Fallout 1st players, though, is that the newly created “private” worlds they’re accessing are actually being re-allocated from old server instances. Players report seeing dead NPCs, looted junk, and other abnormalities in their worlds from the jump, suggesting someone else had actually been using that virtual space before them.

But Bethesda tells Polygon this is not what’s actually happening. “When a Fallout 1st member starts a Private World, a dedicated world is launched on an [Amazon Web Services] server,” the company said. Sightings of pre-looted containers on “new” servers are likely relics from recent lootings of that same container on another server, which have always persisted across new logins for a time.

To some extent, the kinds of issues reported by Fallout 1st players are to be expected with the launch of any major new gaming service (even one that’s just a modification of a long-extant game). Still, Bethesda already lost a lot of goodwill with last year’s bug-filled launch of *Fallout 76*. The company has acknowledged what it says was “well-deserved criticism” from that launch and implemented an ambitious “year two” turnaround plan for the ongoing game. But player standards may be higher for a game that’s now asking a $100 annual subscription for new features. Here’s hoping Bethesda acts quickly to make Fallout 1st an experience truly worthy of that investment.

Listing image by Bethesda

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591411

Apple Arcade isn’t the only subscription: GameClub revives old iOS games

reader comments

56 with 39 posters participating

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- A screenshot from *Mage Gauntlet*, one of the games on GameClub.
- There are individual game pages in GameClub with screenshots, trailers, and other info—they look similar to Apple’s App Store pages.
  Samuel Axon
- Tapping that “Play” button takes you to the app’s page in the App Store, where you then download the game normally.
  Samuel Axon
- GameClub has achievements of its own.
  Samuel Axon
- And it has its own editorial-curation feed very similar to the main one Apple maintains for the App Store.
  Samuel Axon

Yesterday saw the launch of GameClub, a long-in-development subscription-based service that revised older, deprecated iPhone games for modern software and devices. Curated by former TouchArcade Editor-in-Chief Eli Hodapp—a prominent voice in the world of mobile games who has long opined on the

need for quality premium games on the platform—the service offers a 30-day trial and will charge $4.99 per month thereafter.

The service offers a downloadable app for managing games, but games are downloaded separately from the App Store. The GameClub app can link out to those App Store entries as you browse, however. You can subscribe directly on the device, meaning Apple will get a cut of the subscription as it does for other app subscriptions in the App Store.

Titles offered include premium iPhone and iPad classics like *Sword of Fargoal*, *Orc: Vengeance*, and *Super Crate Box*. $4.99 per month is the same price as Apple Arcade, Apple's recently launched game-subscription service that offers around a hundred carefully curated, premium games—many from prominent creators—across all of Apple's device categories. However, work on this service had been underway long before Apple Arcade was announced.

As is the case with Apple Arcade, though, none of the games on GameClub contains ads or in-app purchases (IAP). Many are early premium hits from the App Store before timer- and IAP-based games came to dominate the charts. Some of those early classics were quite good but got left behind as the App Store transformed. Some even became unplayable on more recent devices thanks to changes to Apple's operating system and hardware. Those games have not only been updated to work on new devices but have seen upgrades like an increase in resolution.

GameClub has promised to update the service weekly with new games, though it's unclear how many will be revived classics and how many will be new titles.

Services like this and Apple Arcade might end up being more consequential for iOS than they first appear. As I noted in my review of iOS 13, Apple has long seemed displeased with the

dominance of free-to-play (F2P), retention-mechanic-based games in the App Store. Its initial volley to solve this problem was an overhaul of the App Store in iOS 11, which removed the focus from automatically generated charts and put it instead on editorial curation. Apple's editors sometimes highlighted F2P games, but they typically focused on those made with quality in mind. They also often pointed out premium games that would easily be lost in the charts otherwise.

With Arcade, Apple has introduced a new way for it to directly elevate games that are focused on positive player experiences instead of addiction mechanics and aggressive IAP revenue. Initial reactions from critics and players to the Arcade lineup have generally seemed very positive, thanks in part to Apple's focus on curating games from established, previously acclaimed or successful creators or on games that had already accumulated a great deal of interest at game festivals like IndieCade.

However, while people have praised the game selection, the service itself is barebones in terms of features. Aside from a different focus in curation, GameClub aims to offer some features that Apple Arcade does not. For example, Arcade doesn't give players or developers much insight about which games are most popular, but GameClub claims it will be "transparent" with developers about revenue, as TechCrunch noted in an interview with a GameClub executive.

In an effort to boost services revenue to counterbalance slowing iPhone sales, Apple had already been pushing developers to move toward a subscription model when it made sense. But services like Arcade and GameClub challenge long-existing assumptions about what a mobile app ecosystem looks like. If Apple and other parties were to bring similar services to non-game apps, as Google has done, the App Store could look very different in just a few short years.

Google also offered a subscription service called Google Play

Pass, but games-industry voices criticized it for directly tying engagement within the apps to revenue rather than an up-front payment to developers for inclusion. This may incentivize the wrong kinds of games, some argue. And while its lineup has some classics, it did not gather as much positive attention for curating quality new titles.

Listing image by GameClub

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1591211