Lawmakers express “deep concern” over Blizzard’s Hong Kong protest response



Enlarge / Mei from *Overwatch* has become a grass roots symbol of the Hong Kong protests in the wake of Blizzard’s decision.

reader comments

135 with 80 posters participating

Share this story

A bipartisan group of Senate and House lawmakers has signed a letter expressing “deep concern” over Activision Blizzard’s recent decision to punish Ng “Blitzchung” Wai Chung after the pro *Hearthstone* player expressed support for continuing Hong Kong protests last week. “This decision is particularly concerning in light of the Chinese government’s growing appetite for pressuring American businesses to help stifle free speech,” the letter reads, in part.

Blizzard originally banned the Hong Kong-based player for a year and withheld his prize money after he said “Liberate Hong

Kong, revolution of our age!" in Chinese during the livestreamed event. That penalty was later reduced to a six-month suspension and Chung's prize money was reinstated.

But the letter, addressed to Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick, urges Blizzard "in the strongest terms to reconsider your decision with respect to Mr. Chung. You have the opportunity to reverse course. We urge you to take it."

The letter is signed by an unlikely group of legislators who often spar publicly on major legislative issues: Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.), and Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-N.J.).

Elsewhere in the letter, the legislators cite an employee walkout in protest of Blizzard's decision and calls for boycotts of the company among "gamers around the world" as additional reasons for Blizzard to reverse itself. The letter also makes reference to similar decisions by Apple and the NBA to shut down apps and public discussion of the Hong Kong protests under Chinese pressure (decisions that have drawn their own congressional letters in turn).

"Because your company is such a pillar of the gaming industry, your disappointing decision could have a chilling effect on gamers who seek to use their platform to promote human rights and basic freedoms," the letter says. "As China amplifies its campaign of intimidation, you and your company must decide whether to look beyond the bottom line and promote American values—like freedom of speech and thought—or to give in to Beijing's demands in order to preserve market access."

The letter comes after Blizzard cancelled a recent public event to promote the launch of *Overwatch* on the Switch and ahead of planned protests of the company at November's BlizzCon fan gathering. Blizzard was also forced to punish a college *Hearthstone* team this week for flashing a sign in

support of the Hong Kong protestors during a livestreamed match.

The game industry at large is separately facing congressional pressure over selling in-game items via randomized loot boxes. A bipartisan group of senators introduced sweeping legislation to ban the practice, and the FTC continues to look into it following pressure from Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.)

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1588427

Minecraft becomes a board game, and the results are faithful, fantastic



Sam Machkovech

reader comments

10 with 9 posters participating

Share this story

I’m not shocked that the first-ever *Minecraft* board game is cute and fun. But this new game, made as a collaboration between video game studio Mojang and board game producer Ravensburger, has no right to be this elegant.

Minecraft: Builders & Biomes is breezy. It’s quick. It’s kid-friendly. Yet it’s full of the tricky decisions, competitive countermeasures, and three-moves-ahead plotting that can ratchet a game to the top of a diehard tabletop community’s rankings.

Best of all, it has a goofy, tactile centerpiece that feeds into the gameplay loop while also looking exactly like what you’d expect from a “*Minecraft* board game.” *Builders & Biomes*, which is out now in Europe and launches in the US on November 15, has come out of nowhere to punch my licensed-game skepticism down like a blocky, in-game tree.

Minecraft meets Jenga?

A more accurate name might have been “*Minecraft*: Builders & Battlers.” The object is to rack up experience points before a game-over condition is triggered, and you can do this in one of two ways: build structures or kill monsters (“mobs”). Yes, that sounds generic, and I’ll get to how those objectives run in parallel.

But any conversation about *M:B&B* should begin with its clever twist on resource gathering: the “block base.”

- Here’s the fancy, official photo of the block base.
- Here’s how it looks in real life. The blocks do stay

quite stable, even as players take the blocks off one at a time through the course of play.

- You'll eventually grab tiles off the primary board, but in order to do so, you have to cash in the blocks you've picked up. Notice the bottom-right icons on the bottom-right tile? *These* are the tile's cost in blocks. The other icons refer to what type of biome, material, and building type each tile has, which counts toward the scoring phases.

The game includes 64 chunky wooden blocks split into five colors: yellow (sand), brown (wood), gray (iron), black (obsidian), and green ("wild"). Dump these blocks into a cardboard sleeve until they fit together evenly, then lift the sleeve up. Presto: You now have a block base, four tall by four wide by four deep, and you will spend each session picking it apart with your hands.

In *Minecraft* tradition, you need to "mine" these blocks to build anything, but you can't take a block unless it has at least three sides exposed. At the outset, that means you can only grab blocks from the top layer, and only those on its outer edge. Eventually, as more blocks are pulled away from various angles, certain blocks wedged into the middle of the structure might have three sides exposed.

You'll want to frequently spin the block base around via an included cardboard sheet in order to see which blocks might have inadvertently opened up. Plus, be careful about which blocks you take, because with each block you remove, another block—perhaps the exact one your opponent wants—could open up with your choice out of the way.

In one more cool twist, the game's scoring phases revolve around the block base's four layers. On your turn, you can grab blocks from whatever layer you want (so long as the "three sides exposed" rule applies). The instant the entire top layer has been removed, one of the game's scoring moments

is triggered. The same goes for when the second and third layers have been completely whittled down; the third layer's completion is, in fact, the game-over condition. This sometimes creates a quandary: do you rush into removing a layer's blocks even if you're not ready to score points and even if those blocks are useless in your building plans, just to stop other players from racking up a higher score?

Pardon my gushing, but I cannot get over how lovely the block base works in action. Its mix of spatial examination and tactile resource gathering is not just cool as a board game mechanic, but also completely on brand for the *Minecraft* universe. Bravo to whoever put this board gaming masterstroke together.

A family-friendly game with tough tactical decisions

- A sample three-player game. The tiles in the middle represent a shared gameplay board, on which players move their own hero figurines. The three other sheets are each player's personal biome grid, on which they build and place new structures in order to rack up points in the game's three scoring phases.
  Ravensburger
- The shared tile board at a game's outset. Players move between the tiles, not on top of them, and this lets them potentially access or take any of four pieces at a time, should they stand at an intersection.
  Sam Machkovech
- As you move around the board, you'll expose the tiles. Buy the building tiles with the wooden blocks you've accumulated. Battle the mobs with any weapons you've accumulated (including the chests on the board's edges, which require more movement to reach and pick up).
  Sam Machkovech

- The game includes three scoring phases. At each of these, if you have contiguous, matching tiles on your personal board that match these cards' icons, you'll score more points.
  Sam Machkovech

That clever system is the centerpiece to an otherwise familiar resource-gathering game, albeit one where players can only perform two actions on a given turn: take two blocks from the block base, move your hero piece up to two spaces, build, fight a mob, or collect a weapon card. And you cannot perform any of those actions twice in a turn (meaning that you can't grab four blocks and end your turn), so there's a tension to the choices you make and what you may leave available to opponents as they follow in clockwise order.

When you move your hero piece around the board, this also lets you flip over any board tiles adjacent to your hero. Tiles can either be buildings (which you can take off the board and "build" on your personal player board by spending whatever required blocks are listed on that tile) or mobs (which you can battle using the game's combat system).



Enlarge / Every player gets a personal board covered in biomes by default. You'll spend resources to take buildings off the

shared game board and place them on your personal biome grid, and you can replace any biome with another. For example, if you build a mansion on a snowy tile, you can put that tile on top of a different biome. To score a bunch of snow-related points, you may need to do just that.
It’s not as simple as collecting blocks, walking up to building tiles, and spending the required resources. You’re also trying to build a perfect grid on your player board with each scoring round in mind. Each building tile has three icons: one for its biome, one for its materials, and one for its building type. Each of those icons corresponds to one of the game’s scoring rounds. When the first scoring phase is triggered, you’ll want to have as many matching biome squares on your board as possible, and they only count as a combined scoring group if they’re all touching horizontally or vertically (not diagonally). You only get to score one type of biome, not two, so you’ll have to pick your highest-scoring option.

Each player board comes with a bunch of biomes by default, so you can conceivably build only one or two buildings to connect matching biomes (desert, forest, mountain, or snow). But certain biomes are worth more than others, and the more valuable ones require trickier build patterns. You’ll have to cover existing biomes with new ones to, say, chain together the snow biome in an all-squares-touching pattern. And, of course, opponents can keep an eye on what you’re plotting as they too move around the board, pick up the block base’s resources, and snap up limited tiles on the shared board.

After the first scoring phase ends, you’ll receive experience points. Then you have only so much time to lay down new tiles that fulfill the second and third scoring rounds’ conditions: matching materials (sand, wood, iron, etc.), and then matching building types (house, mob lair, bridge, etc.).

Win with mob mentality

- Weapon cards are smaller than the rest of the tiles. But they’re just as important.
- More weapon cards. However many you have, you’ll draw three per battle and hope that you draw more useful cards (swords, TNT) than worthless ones (poison potatoes). The tiny icons on those weapon cards indicate that you can use an additional weapon card or get other perks.

There’s also the matter of combat, which requires spending your limited actions per turn in a completely different manner. If your hero piece is next to a mob on the board of tiles, it can initiate combat. This works by having players shuffle a blind deck of weapons, then drawing three of its cards to reveal how much damage is done. Succeed, and you take the mob’s tile and reap the bonuses listed on the card. Fail, and you simply lose that action (and must wait until the next round to fight again). Sometimes, killing a mob just rewards you with experience points. Other times, you get an end-of-game experience point bonus based on how many tiles you have with certain biomes, materials, or building types. There’s even mob tiles that you can spend to perform one more action on a given turn, which you can either use immediately or save for later. In either case, these bonus moves let you *repeat* an action during one turn. Pretty handy.

Your default hand of combat cards is terrible, however, so you’ll have to move your hero piece to the very edges of the board to pick up additional combat cards if you want to get anywhere with combat. (Considering what some of those mob tiles give out as end-of-game bonuses, you’ll want to seriously consider doing so.) Some of these simply make you more powerful; others grant experience-point bonuses to your combat victories.

But doing this means spending your valuable, limited actions on things like movement and weapon pickups. And that's tough because you keep seeing useful building tiles emerge a few steps away, and you also see your so-called "best friend" whittling down the block base to possibly trigger a scoring round before you've built a perfect grid on your player board. C'mon, Stacy. Don't be a jerk.

So what do you do? Build? Fight? Take blocks? And how will each of those narrow choices hinder or help your opponents? Instead of taking blocks in a way that will give your *M:B&B* neighbor a neat path to a green-colored "wild" block, which can be used to fulfill any building tile's requirement, you might be better off pivoting to combat. By restricting players to two actions per turn, and making its board *just* big enough to require three turns to run from one end to the other, Mojang and Ravensburger can serve up a lot of strategic anxiety with a simple, focused variety of choices.

The result is one of the best gateway board games I've ever seen, in terms of giving kids and board-gaming novices alike a mix of familiar characters and accessible options before setting them down wild paths of strategic possibility. That being said, *M:B&B*'s strategic core hinges on the key decision of "do I build, or do I battle?" The game is elegantly built to make the most of this two-choice core, but I could see some gaming groups yawning at its current focus. But then, as soon as I think of that issue, I immediately imagine a future expansion adding a variable or two to the current, solid formula.

Thanks to the game's tile-based board, its expansion possibilities seem pretty huge, and I'm hopeful that the game can eventually grow beyond its four-player limit as well. For now, at least, M:B&B is a no-brainer recommendation for any family in search of a good 3- or 4-player game to share, not to mention a solid, 45-minute addition to a grown-up board gaming group's shelf.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1584347

When MS Paint ruled the fandom world: An innovative webcomic, 10 years later



Enlarge / Webcomic creator Andrew Hussie broke the fourth wall repeatedly within many of his creations. Here, he drew himself next to a person named “Ms. Paint,” a play on the fact that his creations were part of the “MS Paint Adventures” collection.
Andrew Hussie

reader comments

22 with 21 posters participating

Share this story

Rewind to the Internet of 10 years ago and you’ll find an era that made sense for an odd, beloved webcomic like Homestuck. It debuted in April 2009 as a one-off lark from avid webcomic maker Andrew Hussie, and its modest premise—four teenage friends playing a video game—could have been a one-and-done comic miniseries. (Its arrival within the appropriately named MS Paint Adventures, or MSPA, spoke to its modesty.)

From there, the series gradually expanded in scope to become an epic science fantasy story about children from different cultures coming of age without adult supervision. They learn to work together in spite of cultural differences, individual traumas, and the feeling of isolation that comes from being an

adolescent in a rapidly changing world—and, in doing so, they defy an evil time traveler with the power to create a new and "better" universe.

Homestuck is a product of its time. It's built on media tropes from when it was written, and its aesthetic evolved with the Internet's tastes, from jokes about TV shows and adventure games to social media and anime references as the story wrapped up in 2013. But one thing that remained constant and set a tone for how creators would operate online in the years that followed is the tight-knit relationship between Homestuck's author and his fans.

Be careful what you wish for, fans

- The story of Homestuck starts simply enough, with readers moving the plot along by clicking "commands" in every page, as if prodding along a text adventure of old.
  Andrew Hussie
- We eventually give the boy in this first panel a name.
  Andrew Hussie
- And for a while, we follow John as he both obsesses over a video game and completes tasks in his own life as if they too are in a video game.
  Andrew Hussie
- Eventually, the universe of Homestuck spirals into some strange directions.
  Andrew Hussie
- One of those strange directions involves a mysterious character named Doc Scratch.
  Andrew Hussie
- As the Homestuck story continued for years, it began speaking quite directly to its most involved fans. Like in this panel, which announced to readers: "Be who you've become, and who I didn't. Consume the fruits of

> an existence I could never understand.
> Andrew Hussie

Hussie has always been very aware of his readers, and his relationship with them has been complicated. Like his earlier comics, the beginning of Homestuck relied heavily on reader input through a suggestion box, mostly for humor but also to advance the plot. (The suggestion box no longer exists, but Hussie's explanation of how he used it differently for different comics remains on MSPA.) Hussie often mocked readers for suggesting that characters do stupid things, and he used a strawman character called MSPA Reader as a surrogate for audience reactions.

Eventually, Hussie changed gears. He shut down the suggestion box while offering the fantastical, fictional explanation that it had been destroyed by meteor showers from the comic. But requests kept pouring in on social media, so Hussie decided to acknowledge them with the cruel irony embodied by several of his characters. Fans would ask questions about characters who were mentioned briefly or casually; Hussie would drop them into the story and then find ways to murder them. He did this most blatantly with so-called "troll" characters, introducing 12 of them in quick succession and then allowing one of them to go on a murderous rampage and kill half of these new characters, including a fan favorite.

Hussie took responsibility for this cruelty through an in-story avatar trapped within the comic by the fourth wall, who occasionally reveled in the angst he caused his readers. Death in the Homestuck setting is cheap and reversible, so it often felt like Hussie was threatening to kill off beloved characters—or keep readers in suspense for their resurrection. Hussie's tyranny did nothing to diminish his appeal to engaged fans. But that apparent cruelty hid a surprising lesson that turned out to be a core theme of Homestuck.

In establishing himself as a series character who could speak

directly to his fans, Hussie connected Homestuck's universe with the real world and created an opportunity for both his fans and his characters to share his power as narrator—or even to steal it.

Who is telling the story?

At any moment in Homestuck, who is narrating and what are their biases? The answers to these questions suddenly became important when control of the story was stolen from Hussie's in-story avatar. The narration was picked up by Doc Scratch, an animated doll with a featureless cue-ball head who was preparing the universe for the arrival of his creator, the evil time traveler Lord English—both a reference to Richard "Lord British" Garriot of the Ultima games and an extended billiards metaphor that Doc Scratch was also a part of. Doc Scratch was glib, providing little information in many words in order to misdirect the reader. Hussie eventually became frustrated enough to steal his story back, setting off a series of battles between Hussie and his characters for control.

The most important of these battles was with Caliborn, a younger version of Lord English who was an avatar for a particularly abusive type of real-life fan. Caliborn manipulated and murdered his twin sister Calliope, who represented a kinder, more community-based fandom, and eventually gained the power to reshape spacetime however he wanted, starting by murdering Hussie's avatar in a spectacular example of Death of the Author.

But even with Hussie dead, Lord English didn't "win," as per the Homestuck story. And the way he lost relied on the way Hussie broke the fourth wall to share narrative control not only with his characters but also with his fans.

Truth in the eyes of many beholders



An army of ghosts from dead-end Homestuck timelines and fanfiction, getting ready to fight the series' evil character Lord English.

The structure of Homestuck's universe explicitly allowed for fanfiction. It leaned into the science-fiction trope of multiple dimensions within its settings, using "dreambubbles" to explore alternate timelines. Some of the comic's canonical story weaved its way through these dimensions, and exploring them became more important to the story in the latter half of Homestuck's run. This was important to the fandom, because this was also when Hussie began updating the comic more sporadically.

During Homestuck's long hiatuses, the fandom began to get creative. They not only wrote a gamut of fanfiction, as is usual for the Internet, but they published much of it as webcomics that looked a lot like Homestuck. They also used Homestuck's visual style, dominated by hand-drawn images accompanied by extended dialogues, to write original stories. The dreambubbles were populated by the fans' imaginations. Appropriately, the official end of Homestuck was partly illustrated by freelancers from the fandom, and it welcomed all of these alternate timelines into Homestuck's canonical possibility space. In Homestuck terms, fans armed the spirits of the dreambubbles to fight Lord English.

In a bittersweet twist, this army of spirits was inspired to fight by the ghost of an alternate-timeline Calliope. She managed to defeat her version of Caliborn, then discovered she could not win their game without his powers and sacrificed herself so that her ghost could help the other series' heroes defeat Lord English. Learning about her sacrifice not only inspired Homestuck's protagonists, it also inspired readers to create their own stories and represent themselves within Homestuck's world.

Homestuck’s timeline of increasingly long silences punctuated by bursts of activity inadvertently sold its audience on one of its grandest themes: that everyone’s choices matter. Hussie may have toyed with his fans, making them brutally aware that they had no control over the story they loved, but he did give them that control in the end, intentionally or not, and Homestuck’s universe is richer for it.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1588019

Review: Zombieland: Double Tap delivers wise-cracking, brain-splattering fun



Enlarge / Columbus, Tallahassee, Wichita, and Little Rock face

a new kind of zombie in *Zombieland 2: Double Tap*.
YouTube/Sony Pictures

reader comments

12 with 10 posters participating

Share this story

The makeshift family unit that slays together stays together in *Zombieland: Double Tap*, Director Ruben Fleischer's follow-up to his 2009 hit film *Zombieland*. This hotly anticipated sequel succeeds in recapturing much of the original's magic, with plenty of wit, gore, and playful callbacks to delight diehard fans. And let's just say you'll definitely want to hang around through the closing credits.

(Some spoilers below.)

In the first *Zombieland,* a virulent form of human-adapted mad cow disease sweeps across the United States, transforming most of the nation's populace into ravenous zombies. The film follows a ragtag group of unlikely survivors—Columbus (Jesse Eisenberg), Tallahassee (Woody Harrelson), and orphaned sisters Wichita (Emma Stone) and Little Rock (Abigail Breslin)—on a road trip in hopes of finding some place yet untouched by the disease, ending with a pitched battle against zombie hordes in an abandoned amusement park. Audiences (myself included) loved the mix of horror and dark screwball comedy, especially the "Zombie Kills of the Week" and Columbus's hilarious survival rules—cardio, limber up, beware of bathrooms, and buckle up, for instance—often illustrated by various doomed souls who failed to heed those rules. It was a fresh, fun take on the "zom-com" format.

While the original cast expressed enthusiasm for a sequel in the wake of *Zombieland*'s success, the project languished for several years. All four main cast members have been nominated for Academy Awards, and Emma Stone actually won the Best

Actress Oscar for her role in *La La Land* (2016). Fortunately, each of them retained sufficient fondness for their *Zombieland* experience to return for the sequel. They're clearly still having a blast with these characters, aided this time around by cast newcomers Zoey Deutch, Rosario Dawson, Avan Jogia, Luke Wilson, and Thomas Middleditch as additional survivors of the zombie apocalypse.

Ten years have passed for our protagonists in *Zombieland: Double Tap*—a reference to Columbus's Rule #2: don't get stingy with your bullets with zombies, shoot them twice to make sure they're dead. They've become a makeshift—rather dysfunctional—family unit, and they're a tightly disciplined zombie-killing team, eventually settling into the abandoned White House in what's left of Washington, DC, to satisfy Columbus' strong desire for a permanent home. Zombies have evolved, too, splintering into different subspecies. There are the "Homers" (as in Homer Simpson), the slow-moving, dim-witted classic Romero zombies; the "hawkings," which are faster and smarter; and the "ninjas," who sneak up on their victims and attack suddenly. There are also rumors of a newer breed of "super zombie," much more agile and significantly harder to kill.

- Tallahassee's Twinkie totem decorates the grille of the Beast.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Battling zombies in what's left of DC.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Wichita and Little Rock, armed and ready.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- The gang finds a once-prestigious new home.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Tallahassee thinks he'd make a terrific president.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Tallahassee tries to get his makeshift family into the holiday spirit.

YouTube/Sony Pictures

- Little Rock meets the man of her teenaged dreams.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Does Berkeley (Avan Jogia) look like the kind of guy who'd be carrying around a bunch of weed?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Columbus picks up stray survivor Madison (Zoey Deutch).
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- A "hawking" zombie.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Columbus ducks at just the right moment.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Nevada (Rosario Dawson) shows she's just as tough as the rest of the gang.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Tallahassee channels his inner Elvis.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- R.I.P. the Beast. Death by Monster Truck.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Doppelgängers! Albuquerque (Luke Wilson) meets Tallahassee in full-on Elvis mode.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Flagstaff (Thomas Middleditch) is a doppelgänger for Columbus.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- When will they learn that zombies are drawn to noise and lights?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Kill them with fire!
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- A monster truck rides to the rescue.
  YouTube/Sony Pictures
- Who is this celebrity cameo in a post-credits sequence?
  YouTube/Sony Pictures

There are other human survivors of the zombie apocalypse, but our ragtag band prefers to keep to themselves. That

isolationist strategy is starting to falter, however, as a now-teenaged Little Rock is craving outside companionship with people her own age (namely boys) and pushing back against Tallahassee's over-protective father-figure instincts. Things have also gotten stale in the romance department between Columbus and Wichita, whose commitment and intimacy issues start to resurface. So one day the sisters abandon the men to strike out again on their own. Old habits die hard.

When Little Rock falls for a hippie survivor named Berkeley (Avan Jogia) and runs off with him, Wichita goes back to the White House—only to find Columbus has hooked up on the rebound with a ditzy survivor named Madison (Zoey Deutch). But Little Rock is in danger—a horde of super-zombies is in hot pursuit of the couple—so the group sets off to find her.

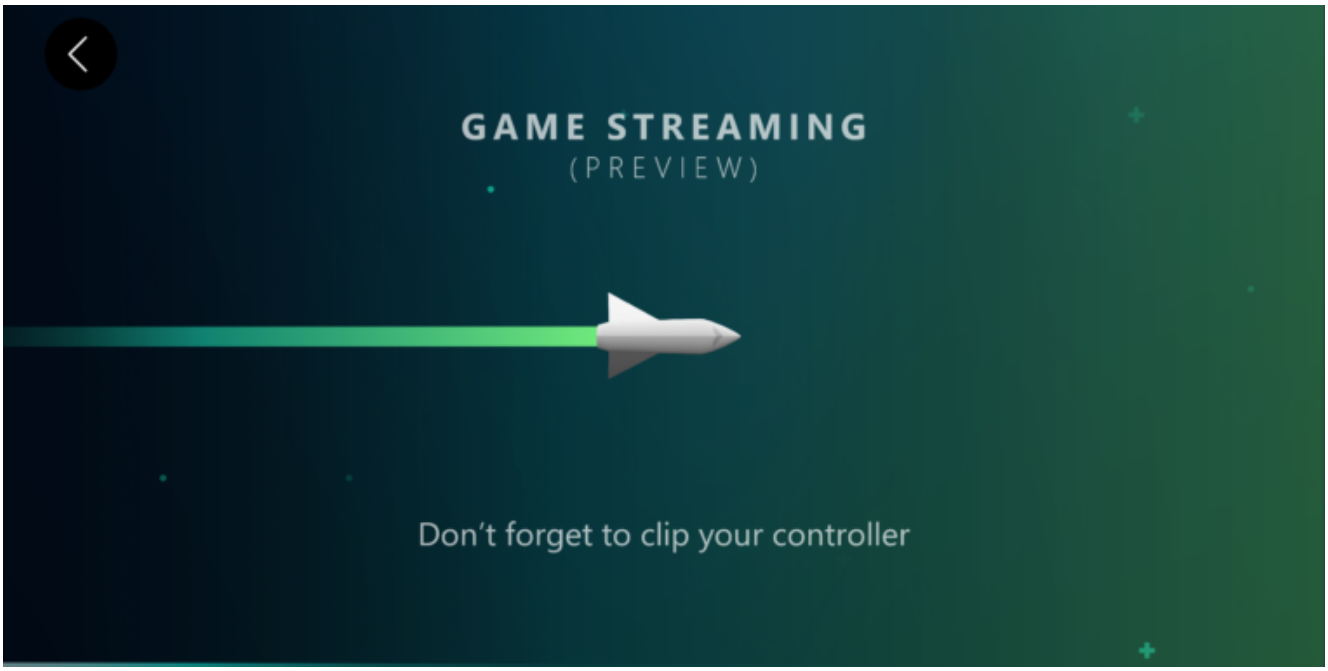
One of the original film's greatest strengths was that Harrelson, Eisenberg, Stone, and Breslin all had such great on-screen chemistry, and the past decade hasn't diminished that one whit. They settle back into their respective roles with ease, and they always bring some sense of warmth beneath the constant bickering and occasional eruptions of temper. Among the supporting cast, Deutch practically steals the entire movie as the perpetually pink-clad Madison, who somehow managed to survive on her own hiding out in a mall freezer for years, armed only with a can of mace. Wilson and Middleditch are delightful as bizarro doppelgängers to Tallahassee and Columbus, even if they don't hang around for long. And yes, Bill Murray—whose accidental death at the hands of Columbus was a comedic highlight of the first *Zombieland*—makes a brief cameo.

Granted, the plot is a bit thin, the humor is a bit broad, the lesser characters are stereotypes, and things get wrapped up a bit too neatly in the end as our intrepid zombie slayers pair off. But that's the "rom-zom-com" genre for you, and honestly, somebody has to start repopulating the human race. Above all, the film resists the temptation to take itself too seriously.

The jokes and sight gags come hard and fast, and if a few fail to land, no matter—there are plenty of other laughs to be had. All I really wanted from a *Zombieland* sequel was to reconnect with my favorite characters and relish some wise-cracking, brain-splattering, zombie smackdowns. On that score, *Double Tap* delivers.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1586915

Project Xcloud preview serves as a passable, portable Xbox One



reader comments

35 with 21 posters participating, including story author

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- Remember the old Xbox “Jump In” ad campaign? Apparently it’s back.
- This loading screen was up for about 60 seconds before the start of a new game.
- Yup, that’s me.
- Microsoft wants to know what you think after every stream during the preview.
- How about I just write a longform impressions article rather than using your form?
- It’s a tiny indie game, you’ve probably never heard of it.
- Tapping the on-screen Guide button brings up this menu, letting you connect with XBL friends.
- *Gears 5* looks pretty good, even on a tiny phone screen.
- Reading those captions might require squinting or getting really close to the screen when playing on a phone…

Through nearly two decades of Xbox game consoles, Microsoft has never followed Nintendo’s and Sony’s lead in attempting to create a dedicated portable gaming system. Project Xcloud, which entered a limited public beta test this week, is an interesting end-run attempt at filling in that hole. Instead of downloadable games running locally, you stream games running on powerful remote servers over Wi-Fi. Instead of dedicated hardware, you use the smartphone you probably already own.

After spending a few days playing “portable” Xbox One games at home via Xcloud, we’re somewhat warming up to the idea. But there are enough hassles and caveats that we’re glad Xcloud isn’t serving as a full-on replacement for Microsoft’s existing gaming strategy just yet.

Head in the clouds

After getting approved for the preview, setting up our Xcloud test was as simple as logging in to the free Android app with a Microsoft account and connecting the controller via Bluetooth. There were about 60 seconds of loading when first starting up a game, but much less when switching back to an existing game after briefly moving to another app on the phone.

The preview app currently offers full access to a selection of four titles: *Halo 5: Guardians*, *Gears of War 5*, *Killer Instinct*, and *Sea of Thieves*. Each seems relatively forgiving for the streaming Xcloud format in its own way. *Halo 5*‘s generous auto-aiming lessens the impact of control latency on precise targeting. *Gears of War 5* already has significant input latency when running on a local Xbox, perhaps making any additional Internet-based latency less noticeable. *Killer Instinct*‘s combo-heavy gameplay has generally forgiving timing windows which make frame-perfect inputs less of a necessity. And *Sea of Thieves* is a relatively casual exploration game where quick reactions are not crucial.

All that said, for the most part, playing though Xcloud on a good Internet connection feels practically indistinguishable from local play. Diving in to *Halo 5: Guardians* on my phone (with a cloud save automatically downloaded from Xbox Live) felt like slipping into a familiar coat, with the same smooth frame rate and snappy controls you’d expect on an HDTV. While there may have been a frame or two of added delay between my inputs and the on-screen action compared to the local version, I’d be hard pressed to tell the difference in a blind test.

Where the Xcloud experience did often suffer was in image quality. While games would usually start at crisp HD resolutions, the image would sometime downscale very noticeably in the middle of play, resulting in grainy textures

and washed out colors. This usually coincided with other people in the house making use of the same Wi-Fi network while I was playing, but not always.

Notably, the reduction in image resolution usually didn't come with a similar downgrade in the apparent frame rate or control latency, which the Xcloud software seems to wisely prioritize. The one exception to this was during a session of *Killer Instinct* played while also streaming a baseball game on the TV and downloading files to a nearby laptop. Under this stress test (which reduced usable bandwidth on the phone to about 8Mbps), the game would noticeably stutter and sometimes stop altogether for a fraction of a second before running through the missed frames at super speed to catch up.

Microsoft representatives have suggested in the past that Xcloud should work well under "single digit" Mbps scenarios. Based on our early tests, though, you may want at least a little bit of a buffer above that to ensure smooth, high-res gameplay.

A nice bonus

Thus far, Project Xcloud feels like a relatively painless way to get "portable" versions of full-fledged Xbox One games on your phone. I put "portable" in quotes there, of course, because Xcloud still requires a pretty good Wi-Fi connection and router, meaning playing away from the home is difficult to impossible in most situations (and streaming at home will also be difficult for many).

As average home and mobile bandwidth continues to increase, though, these problems could start to seem less and less relevant. And unlike Google's all-in-on-streaming Stadia, Microsoft says it's not aiming for Project Xcloud to fully replace the kind of local console gameplay you're used to (for now, anyway). That makes it a bit easier to grade it on a curve as a kind of "added bonus" mobile access option for when

you can’t play on the big screen.

Microsoft hasn’t announced pricing or game access details for Xcloud yet, but we could see it being something of a killer extra feature added on to the company’s existing Game Pass Ultimate subscription plan in some way. Merging downloadable access to hundreds of games on consoles and PCs with instant streaming access to those same games on the phone could be a compelling combination that helps bridge the gap to what Microsoft sees as an “inevitable” streaming gaming future. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1587841

Explaining how fighting games use delay-based and rollback netcode



Aurich Lawson / Capcom / Getty Images

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96 with 35 posters participating

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Ricky “Infil” Pusch is a long-time fighting game fan and content creator. He wrote The Complete Killer Instinct Guide, an interactive and comprehensive website for learning about Killer Instinct. This article was originally published there.

Hang around the fighting game community for any period of time, and you’ll hear discussion about why playing fighting games online can be frustrating. A genre built on twitch reflexes and player reactions, fighting games can struggle at times to translate their offline success to online environments. Good online play is possible, though, and nothing is more important for realizing this goal than choosing the right approach to netcode.

At its core, netcode is simply a method for two or more computers, each trying to play the same game, to talk to each other over the Internet. While local play always ensures that all player inputs arrive and are processed at the same time, networks are constantly unstable in ways the game cannot control or predict. Information sent to your opponent may be delayed, arrive out of order, or become lost entirely depending on dozens of factors, including the physical distance to your opponent, whether you’re on a Wi-Fi connection, and whether your roommate is watching Netflix.

Online play in games is nothing new, but fighting games have their own set of unique challenges. They tend to involve direct connections to other players, unlike many other popular game genres, and low, consistent latency is extremely important because muscle memory and reactions are at the core of virtually every fighting game. As a result, two prominent strategies have emerged for playing fighting games online: delay-based netcode and rollback netcode.

There’s been a renewed sense in the fighting game community that rollback is the best choice, and fighting game developers who choose to use delay-based netcode are preventing the growth of the genre. While people have been passionate about this topic for many years, frustrations continue to rise as new, otherwise excellent games repeatedly have bad online experiences.

There are relatively few easy-to-follow explanations for what exactly rollback netcode is, how it works, and why it is so good at hiding the effects of bad connections (though there are some). Because I feel this topic is extremely important for the future health of the fighting game community, I want to help squash some misconceptions about netcode and explain both netcode strategies thoroughly so everyone can be informed as they discuss. If you stick around to the end, I’ll even interview some industry experts and community leaders on the topic!

Before we dig into the details, though, let’s get one thing straight.

Why should I care?

Both companies and players should care about good netcode because playing online is no longer the future—it’s the present.

While most other video game genres have been this way for a decade or longer, fighting game developers seem to be resistant to embracing online play, perhaps because of the genre’s roots in offline settings such as arcades and tournaments. Playing offline is great, and it will always have considerable value in fighting games, but it’s simply the reality that a large percentage of the player base will never play offline. For many fighting game fans, playing online is the game, and a bad online experience prevents them from getting better, playing or recommending the game to their

friends, and ultimately causes them to simply go do something else.

Even if you think you have a good connection, or live in an area of the world with robust Internet infrastructure, good netcode is still mandatory. Plus, lost or delayed information happens regularly even on the best networks, and poor netcode can actively hamper matches no matter how smooth the conditions may be. Good netcode also has the benefit of connecting regions across greater distances, effectively uniting the global player base as much as possible.

Bad netcode can ruin matches. This match, played online between two Japanese players, impacted who gets to attend the Capcom Pro Tour finals. (source)
What about those who never play online because they prefer playing offline with their friends? The healthy ecosystem that good netcode creates around a game benefits everyone. There will be more active players, more chances to consume content for your favorite game—from tech videos to spectating online tournaments to expanding the strategy of lesser-used characters—and more excitement surrounding your game in the fighting game community (FGC). Despite *Killer Instinct*'s pedigree as an excellent game, there's no doubt that its superb rollback netcode has played a huge part in the sustained growth of its community.

Good netcode matters, period. So let's talk about it.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1587435

So long, supply drops: Call of Duty gets rid of randomized loot boxes



Enlarge / This image of a *Call of Duty* supply drop falling to the ground can also symbolize the entire concept floating up and out of our lives.

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Video game loot boxes

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In a major reversal for the franchise, Activision has announced that the upcoming *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* will not include a loot-box system. Specifically, the company says that “all functional content that has an impact on game

balance, such as base weapons and attachments, can be unlocked simply by playing the game."

Loot boxes have been a staple of the *Call of Duty* franchise since 2014's *Advanced Warfare*, which included randomized "supply drops" of high-end gear that could be purchased with real money or in-game currency. More recently, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4* introduced a loot-box system four months after its launch, a decision that led to a lot of money for the publisher and a lot of anger from franchise fans.

User interface elements from last month's *Modern Warfare* beta suggested Activision was planning to continue the tradition with a "Lootbox: Common Supply Drop" option in the upcoming game. But developer Infinity Ward took to Reddit earlier this week to offer some pushback on those reports, saying that "right now… we are definitely NOT working on any kind of supply drop or loot box system."

Activision was even clearer in a blog post today saying that the game will forgo randomized item drops in favor of letting players unlock all "weapons and functional attachments" only through gameplay. Much like *Fortnite*, *Modern Warfare* will also feature a Battle Pass system with free and "premium" streams of "cool new *Modern Warfare*-themed content" on a season-by-season basis. That system "will allow players to see the content that they are earning or buying," Activision promises, and will launch later this year, sometime after the game's October 25 launch.

Pushed back by the pushback?

Many gamers have decried loot boxes as a form of unwanted "pay to win" mechanics (or as an egregious way to sell cosmetic items) for years now. But a sustained public backlash against the practice formed in late 2017 after a particularly egregious implementation in *Star Wars: Battlefront II* rose to infamy. That controversy in turn helped lead to numerous

government efforts to curb the sale of randomized in-game items, which many likened to unregulated gambling. Both Belgium and the Netherlands have banned the practice outright, forcing some developers to alter or remove their games in those countries.

Games like *Rocket League*, *Fortnite*, and *Middle-Earth: Shadow of War* have voluntarily removed loot boxes in the wake of that backlash. Meanwhile Apple, Google, and the major console makers have started requiring companies to disclose the odds of getting specific random items from paid loot boxes.

That hasn’t stopped loot boxes from continuing to be a major economic force in the gaming world, and neither has it stopped major publishers like EA from arguing in their favor. But the lack of randomized loot boxes in the next *Call of Duty* feels like a concrete sign that the public pushback against the practice is having an impact on some of the biggest games in the industry. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1587427

$199 Analogue Pocket promises FPGA accuracy for portable retro gaming



reader comments

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- Floating in a sea of portable games.
- Black or white hardware for your black-and-white retro portable cartridges.
- The 615 ppi screen seems like overkill for games like *Tetris DX*.
- All of these cartridges will work with the Analogue Pocket, though some will need adapters.
- Become a chiptune DJ with built-in nanoloop software.
- This dock will let you hook the Analogue Pocket up to an HDTV and wired/wireless controllers.
- Have you held an original Game Boy lately? They’re a lot thicker than you probably remember (and much thicker than the Analogue Pocket).
- Analogue’s Christopher Taber, shown for scale.

If you know the name Analogue, you know the company’s reputation for somewhat pricey but authentic and beautiful HDMI-compatible FPGA (field-programmable gate array)

recreations of classic gaming consoles. Today, the company is announcing that it will extend that line into the portable market next year with the Analogue Pocket, a $199 FPGA handheld that's fully compatible with literally thousands of original cartridges for the Game Boy, Game Boy Color, and Game Boy Advance (and other portables like Lynx, Game Gear, and Neo Geo Pocket Color via planned cartridge adapters).

The Pocket's 3.5-inch, 1600×1440 resolution, 615 pi LTPS LCD display frankly seems like a bit of overkill, considering the Game Boy Advance topped out at 240×160 and about 100 ppi. But Analogue's Christopher Taber tells Ars the Analogue Pocket will sport the same Altera Cyclone V FPGA found in its previous Super Nt and Mega Sg, plus a second Cyclone 10 FPGA "just for developers to develop and port their own cores."

That means it should be trivial for hackers to add aftermarket firmware to the Pocket through the system's microSD card slot, as they have for other analogue products in the past. So don't be surprised if the Pocket gets "unofficial" support for the same NES, Super NES, and Genesis FPGA cores built into previous Analogue products, as well as homebrew cores that support classic systems, from the Atari 2600 to the Sega Master System.

While Analogue marketing materials and Taber both insist that the Pocket "does not support playing ROM files," previous homebrew, jailbroken Analogue firmware has been able to load ROMs stored on SD cards and even dump ROM files from original cartridges for fully digital play (Taber also told Ars to expect "other neat features" accessible through the microSD card slot to be announced in the future).

Perhaps taking a nod from the Nintendo Switch, Analogue is designing the Pocket to work on HDTVs via an optional HDMI dock, which will support wired USB and wireless bluetooth controllers (the price for this dock has yet to be announced). For undocked play, the system will sport stereo speakers and a

standard 3.5mm headphone jack (eat your heart out, Game Boy Advance SP). The Pocket also will have a rechargeable USB-C lithium-ion battery pack (Taber tells Ars, “I can assure that everyone is going to be really happy with the battery life”) and an “original style link plug” if you want to play multiplayer *Tetris* like it’s 1989.

[embedded content]
The Analogue Pocket will also come pre-loaded with Nanoloop, a popular Game Boy sequencer/synthesizer that has been aiding chiptune musicians through original Game Boy hardware and a mobile app for decades now.

While there have been cheaper and/or more versatile Game Boy clones in the past, we’re looking forward to seeing how Analogue’s impeccable design chops apply to the portable retro market when we get our hands on the Analogue Portable next year.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1586555

Blizzard calls off public event to promote Switch Overwatch launch



Enlarge / *Overwatch* running on the Nintendo Switch.
Samuel Axon

reader comments

74 with 48 posters participating

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Blizzard has canceled a planned event to promote tomorrow's launch of *Overwatch* on the Nintendo Switch at Nintendo World's New York City retail location. Nintendo announced the cancellation in a Twitter post late last night, attributing the decision to Blizzard and apologizing for "any inconvenience this may cause."

Blizzard has not responded to a request for comment from Ars Technica (Nintendo simply referred our request back to Blizzard). But the abrupt decision to abandon the long-planned event comes a week after the company briefly banned pro *Hearthstone* player Ng "Blitzchung" Wai Chung and stripped him of his tournament winnings. That move came after Blitzchung offered support for the ongoing and long-running Hong Kong protests during an official *Hearthstone* Grandmasters online

broadcast.

The backlash continues

Blizzard later reinstated Blitzchung's winnings and reduced his ban to a six-month suspension, but the damage among many fans seems to have already been done. The replies to Nintendo World's announcement tweet are already filled with hundreds of angry responses, most suggesting Blizzard is kowtowing to Chinese political interests to maintain access to the country's lucrative gaming market.

Had Blizzard gone forward with the *Overwatch* event, those kinds of views would likely have been overwhelmingly and loudly represented by in-person protesters at the Nintendo World store. And those protesters would be interacting with retail staffers and fans that had nothing to do with Blizzard's decision in the Blitzchung case.

The event's cancellation also comes as a group called Gamers for Freedom is organizing a protest targeting Blizzard's annual Blizzcon gathering, planned to take place on November 1 in Anaheim, California. Canceling such a major fan gathering on such short notice would be hard to imagine, after last year's event drew over 40,000 people. That said, Blizzard did fail to stage a Blizzcon in 2012 months ahead of time, citing a need to focus on a number of projects.

Other fans are organizing around the #BoycottBlizzard hashtag to try to put economic pressure on the company over its decision. Such boycott efforts pop up from time to time in the gaming space, often for much less politically fraught reasons. But those grassroots online efforts usually fail to make much of an impact on a publisher's bottom line. In any case, one week later, it seems clear that the story of Blizzard's relationship with China and the Hong Kong protesters hasn't quite blown over as much as the company may have hoped.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1586075

Microsoft wants to use AI to bleep out bad words in Xbox Live party chat



Enlarge / “I’m so happy that I didn’t hear whatever curse word you just screamed at me during our friendly game of *Uno* on Xbox Live!”

reader comments

59 with 46 posters participating

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Today, Microsoft announced that it's rolling out filters that will let Xbox Live players automatically limit the text-based messages they receive to four maturity tiers: "Friendly, Medium, Mature, and Unfiltered." That's a long-overdue feature for a major communication platform that's well over a decade old now, but not really anything new in terms of online content moderation writ large.

What's more interesting is a "looking ahead" promise Microsoft made at the end of the announcement (emphasis added):

> *Ultimately our vision is to supplement our existing efforts and leverage our company efforts in AI and machine learning technology to provide filtration* ***across all types of content on Xbox Live****, delivering control to each and every individual player. Your feedback is more important than ever as we continue to evolve this experience and make Xbox a safe, welcome and inclusive place to game.*

That's all a bit vague, but The Verge reports on the real thrust of that passage: an effort by the company to "tackle the challenge of voice chat toxicity on Xbox Live." That means leveraging Microsoft's existing efforts in speech-to-text machine-learning algorithms to automatically filter out swear words that might come up in an Xbox Live party chat.

The ultimate goal, Xbox Live program manager Rob Smith told The Verge, is a system "similar to what you'd expect on broadcast TV where people are having a conversation, and in real time, we're able to detect a bad phrase and beep it out for users who don't want to see that." While broadcast networks still use live engineers to censor their tape-delayed content (with sometimes disastrous errors), Microsoft's plans involve using machine learning to filter voice communication on a much larger scale without centralized human intervention.

That should be welcome news for users worried about Amazon-style human reviews of Alexa audio commands. Smith stressed that “we have to respect privacy requirements at the end of the day for our users, so we’ll step into it in a thoughtful manner, and transparency will be our guiding principle to have us do the right thing for our gamers.”

While speech-to-text algorithms are getting pretty quick and accurate these days, we’re still probably a way off from a centralized server being able to reliably detect and block spoken swearing in real time. And even a slight delay in transmission could have an outsized impact on players who need instant communication to work together in a fast-paced gaming situation.

In the meantime, Smith said an algorithm could measure an overall “level of toxicity” in group chat and hand out automatic mutings for problematic users. Hopefully that kind of measurement could also impact a player’s rating under the Xbox Live reputation system, which can already lead to bans for excessive profanity in human-reviewed video clips.

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