Despite a solid finale, Preacher’s final season was mostly a godawful mess



reader comments

18 with 18 posters participating

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- Jesse (Dominic Cooper) and Tulip (Ruth Negga) have a plan to rescue Cassidy (Joseph Gilgun) from the Grail.
- Cassidy is having a rough go of it.
- Cassidy’s torturer, Frankie Toscani (Lachy Hulme).
- Herr Starr (Pip Torrens) and Lara Featherstone (Julie Ann Emery) are keen for the onset of Armageddon.
- The prime minister of New Zealand shouldn’t incur Starr’s wrath.
- Jesse hitches a ride on a camel.
- Jesse and Cassidy try to shoot their way out of Masada.
- The Saint of Killers (Graham McTavish) and Eugene (Ian

Colletti) hunt for Jesse.
- Starr welcomes Hitler (Noah Taylor) to Masada.
- Meet Hot Jesus (Tyson Ritter), who has been replaced by Humperdoo (also Ritter) as God's chosen Messiah.
- God (Mark Harelik) enjoys a relaxing glass of wine while putting his final plan in motion.

It's Team Jesse versus the Grail, as a vengeful God vows to bring on the apocalypse, in the fourth and final season of *Preacher*, AMC's adaption of the DC comic series created by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon. It pains me greatly to say this, since I love the show despite its flaws, but this final season is mostly an unfocused, rambling, incoherent mess. Fortunately, it's ultimately redeemed by a satisfying and surprisingly moving finale.

(Some spoilers below, especially for prior seasons.)

Preacher follows the madcap adventures of Jesse Custer (Dominic Cooper), the titular preacher (and former con artist) who inexplicably becomes the chosen host for Genesis, aka, the embodiment of the Word of God. This grants him the power to force people to do whatever he wants, including accidentally sending poor Eugene Root (Ian Colletti)—nicknamed "Arseface" because of a failed shotgun-suicide that left him with a badly puckered maw—to hell. Jesse is joined in his misadventures by his childhood sweetheart and partner in crime, Tulip (Ruth Negga), and a hard-partying, sweetly profane Irish vampire named Cassidy (Joseph Gilgun).

Jesse and the gang spend much of season two in New Orleans, stalked by more Grail agents and a soul-less assassin dubbed the Saint of Killers (Graham McTavish) as they search for a missing God (Mark Harelik). Season three finds the team splintering, as Jesse finds his way back to his childhood home, Angelville, to confront his voodoo queen gran'ma, Marie L'Angelle (Betty Buckley). The Grail is still angling to get its hands on Genesis, too. By the season finale, the

Grail leader, Herr Starr (Pip Torrens), has kidnapped Cassidy—knowing Jesse and Tulip will try to rescue him—and amassed an army at Masada to greet them.

The fourth season picks up right where we left off, as Jesse and Tulip concoct a plan to rescue Cassidy. Cassidy, in turn, is having a rough go of it: his vampiric healing ability means that the Grail's chief torturer, Frankie Toscani (Lachy Hulme), can use him for student experimentation in his advanced torture class. That mostly involves repeated circumcisions and using all the discarded foreskins in an anti-aging beauty cream manufactured out of Brooklyn. (Male viewers, be forewarned: many gruesome things are done to male genitalia throughout the season, including an involuntary castration by dingo. You'll likely be wincing and instinctively crossing your legs *a lot*.)

- God with the toy models he uses to manipulate his creation.
- Jesse meets Jesus De Sade (James Smithers).
- Jesse smites those who would exploit the innocent.
- Jesse and his pilot, stranded at sea.
- Eugene is finding the Saint of Killers isn't the friendliest travel companion.
- Cassidy "enlists" the Archangel's (David Field) help to escape.
- Cassidy and the Archangel, free at last.
- Archangel has a forbidden love with a demon (Sue-Ellen Shook).
- "Let me go… "

Meanwhile, the Saint of Killers continues to track the preacher—he can sense whenever Jesse uses Genesis to influence someone—accompanied, for some reason, by Eugene. Jesse still hosts Genesis and has refused the Grail's offer to be the new Messiah, which means the job must fall to Humperdoo (Tyson Ritter), a direct descendent of Jesus Christ (aka "Hot Jesus,"

also played by Ritter). All those generations of in-breeding haven't been kind; Humperdoo is basically a mentally challenged child in a grown man's body. This is all messing with God's master plan, and the Almighty is losing patience. He's going to put the apocalypse in motion with or without Jesse's help. But first he's going to make Jesse and his companions and even Starr suffer. Because he can.

The show still has many strengths, most notably the strong performances of Gilgun and Negga, lending genuine depth and pathos to Cassidy and Tulip's relationship, in light of the complicated romantic triangle with Jesse. This season, we get some relevant backstory for Cassidy in particular, before he became a vampire. It explains the psychological underpinnings of his capacity to endure torture and makes his feelings for Tulip—who loves him but will always choose Jesse in the end—especially poignant. And the series is still wildly irreverent, with God staging an elaborate televised revue to mark the onset of the apocalypse, and Hot Jesus negotiating with Hitler (now in charge of hell) over who will get which human souls once it's all over.

We also learn a bit more about the origins of Genesis. Last season, we finally got an explanation for why a deeply flawed small-town preacher like Jesse Custer got to be the chosen vessel for Genesis when so many other holy men exploded into bits when Genesis entered them. It turns out that Genesis is not purely divine but a mix of good and evil that requires a vessel with precisely the same mix. Now we know that Genesis is the offspring of a forbidden love between an Archangel (David Field) and a demon (Sue-Ellen Shook). And like any parents, they'll do whatever it takes to protect their offspring.

- Tulip discovers God's trailer with all his models.
- Jesus and Hitler in negotiations for souls.
- The Grail moves out in force.

- Featherstone rescues a badly injured Starr.
- The Saint of Killers and Jesse ride off to confront God.
- God demands Jesse love him. Or else.
- Starr restored to his former beauty by God.
- Featherstone turns on Starr.
- Cassidy incognito.
- Tulip and Jesse prepare to stop the apocalypse.
- Archangel and his demon lover take on the Saint of Killers.
- Eugene decides to be a rockstar. Busking is a good place to start.
- Til the end of the world.

Alas, much of the season makes very little sense, with characters aimlessly traversing the globe from Masada to Australia and plenty of places in between. It's as if the writers had to produce 10 episodes but only had sufficient material for four or five. For instance, there's no good reason for a side plot where Jesse confronts a cadre of perverts after abandoning Tulip when he learns she once slept with Cassidy. Eugene's character arc has lacked direction since last season, and the rationale behind his continued presence on the show is even less clear now.

Plus, the writers have taken the show's already over-the-top approach to comic book violence to ridiculous extremes. They're trying so hard to shock, but when you open your series with balls-to-the-wall carnage, it's tough to keep upping the ante without viewers simply become numb to the horrors. I've praised the show in the past for leaning into the crazy without apology, "achieving a perfect tonal mix of horror, humor, and pathos." But the tone has been consistently off this season.

It's all in support of the central theme, I guess, which seems to be that God is a sadistic, narcissistic, manipulative bastard. I mean, he wiped out his earlier creations, the dinosaurs, with an asteroid because a dinosaur ate its own

feces—and then burped in God's face. God nonetheless craves unconditional love from his creations, repeatedly testing people by inflicting all manner of calamities and then becoming enraged when they don't respond with gushing devotion, like the Biblical figure of Job. There's a telling moment when God is watching a replay of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, ending with Abraham effusively telling God how much he loves him, over and over. Those were the good old days, from God's perspective, and he's ready to subject the human race to a similar fate as the dinosaurs and start over with a new, less rebellious creation.

I'm all the more frustrated that so much of this final season proved a joyless slog to watch, because the last two episodes mark a welcome return to *Preacher*'s top form—a reward for anyone who managed to stick with it to the end. It's equal parts funny, horrifying, and emotionally satisfying, especially when it comes to the fates of Jesse, Tulip, and Cassidy. It's a shame that earlier episodes never reach the same level, but at least the series got a solid farewell in the end.

Listing image by AMC

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1576793

Indigestion, save ends: Wendy's releases a massive D&D-style tabletop RPG



reader comments

58 with 47 posters participating

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- Yes, this Wendy’s-themed tabletop RPG exists, and it’s pretty robust.
- Your majesty.
- Your incredibly non-subtle villain, who looks like a clown and traffics in frozen beef. Hmm.
- Your realm. Some of these regions are not mentioned in the accompanying, pre-made adventure, which makes us wonder if the Feast of Legends will ever get a…. wait for it… second helping.
- A baked potato with a wizard’s hat. Yes.
- Some sample character sheets for level-two characters.
- Only five trait stats, instead of six. Here’s the Wendy’s twist on a typical wizard.
- “Dual wielding” isn’t nearly as awesome sounding as this.
- The DM guide in the book includes a lot of detailed

maps, along with flavor text mocking Wendy's fast-food rivals.
- If only all chicken nuggets were served this way.
- Feel free to ignore these optional house rules.
- Yeah, I'd order these dice if they were for sale. Critical redhead!

Unhealthy food and games have been official bedfellows for decades, beyond the snacks that line your average video- or board-gaming marathon. This includes licensed cereal characters in '70s and '80s board games, cartoon food icons as pixelated gaming mascots, and modern promotional games like Burger King's *Sneak King* and KFC's recent *I Love You, Colonel Sanders*.

It's not the subject matter we necessarily deem worthy of a brief at Ars, but this week, Wendy's got our attention by rolling a veritable D20 die down our clogged arteries and into our hearts.

On Thursday, the fast-food restaurant chain released Feast Of Legends: Rise From the Deep Freeze. This free, 97-page PDF slaps cheeseburgers, fried chicken, Frosty desserts, and French fries onto a Dungeons & Dragons-style adventure that revolves around the years-old Wendy's slogan of "fresh, never frozen" (a phrase that is literally chanted by townspeople in the village of, ahem, Freshtovia).

Two Beef Patties, please

So, yes, this is a 97-page advertisement for Wendy's fast food, but we're shouting it out for a few reasons. First, it's an elegantly streamlined version of D&D, somewhere between that game's 4th Edition and 5th Edition rulesets, and it revolves around standard-issue D&D tropes like multi-sided die, rolling for initiative, building a character with varied stats, performing a limited number of actions and moves per turn, encouraging creative decision-making (aided by dice

rolls) when outside of combat, and maneuvering warriors on a grid of squares whenever battle breaks out.

As a newbie-friendly twist on D&D, Feast of Legends automatically chooses abilities and powers for each of its classes, and it also shrinks D&D's six ability scores down to five. Whether you want to augment your heroes' stats by spending gold on Wendy's themed weapons ("spork") or armor ("red polo, black visor") is up to you.

Second, Feast of Legends includes a particularly robust starting campaign, designed to get players up to a D&D equivalent of level-five experience. Each step of the way includes towns, maps, puzzles, and custom-created monsters. Anybody with reasonable D&D expertise can pick this campaign apart to remove the most egregious fast-food branding should they want to run friends through a silly one-off tabletop campaign, either using these rules or a preferred system (D&D, Pathfinder, etc).

And lastly, the people who made this campaign are clearly having a gas with the ludicrous tie-in branding possibilities. Instead of creating characters based on classes like Fighter, Rogue, and Wizard, players instead select from the following groups: Order of the Beef, Order of the Chicken, and Order of the Sides. Dig deeper into those hierarchies, and you can absolutely make a party where a Frosty ice wizard can grant an automatic buff to the rogue-healer hybrid represented by French fries. Or see as the guide's writers give the common "dual wielding" trait a new name: "Two Beef Patties."

That's not even getting into the world-building enabled by a Wendy's-verse, set in a massive nation called Beef's Keep. Dip a sacred chicken nugget into a magical fountain, and it becomes a key. Face off against a boisterous villain known as the Beef Bandit, and he creates a monstrous diversion: "I hope you're ready for the toy that comes with your meal, because you won't be happy to come face-to-face with the Frÿsta!" (The

not-so-subtle digs at frozen beef patties and clown mascots keep up from there.)

Perhaps silliest of all, the game's rules include an optional buff or penalty based on whatever you eat at your gaming table of choice. Did you order from Wendy's? Add some stat bonuses to your rolls. (A Wendy's salad will do wonders for your "defense" stat, apparently.) Did you settle on pizza? Your "charm" stat will go down two points.

Whether or not you take anything about this campaign seriously, anybody who counts themselves as a seasoned D&D fan (or just really into seasoning, ahem) should give the free PDF a flip-through, or watch the nerdy folks at Critical Role run their own FoL campaign on Thursday night. If you miss that Twitch showing, it'll likely be archived at their YouTube channel.

Listing image by Wendy's

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1579497

Super Mario Maker 2 catches up with 1998, lets you play online with friends



reader comments

4 with 4 posters participating

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- This brand-new startup sequence (as of version 1.1.0) revolves around four-player hijinks. Frequent *SMM2* players know this scenario, when one player has a key and others try to snatch it to beat them to the exit.
- A Nintendo game that lets you connect specifically to your friends? We'd love to be in a universe where that was just a given, but, hey, this is Nintendo we're talking about.
- This is the new room-creation interface for friends-only *SMM2* matches. Another menu lets you see all of your online Switch friends who are waiting in their own created lobbies.
- Some rules you can define for your friends-only lobby. Simply let the game's Course World system serve level after level for your lobby, should you wish, or pick specific, previously downloaded levels, if you want to curate a perfect multiplayer setlist.

- A full breakdown of changes in today's patch.
- Straightforward enough.
- If you don't connect your voice to a Nintendo Switch Online app, you have other communication options.

Though *Super Mario Maker 2* was the first game in the decades-old Nintendo series to support online multiplayer, the feature premiered in late June with a curious twist. Its owners could jump online and play a slew of custom-created levels in either versus or co-op modes, but only against strangers.

Shortly before the game's Switch launch, Nintendo acknowledged how crazy this sounded and promised that friends would eventually be able to pair up in these online modes via friend lists. In the months that followed, Nintendo remained utterly silent… until the wee hours of Tuesday night, when the game's 1.1.0 patch went live.

We can confirm that *Super Mario Maker 2* now works like most every other online game we've ever played. We were able to contact people we knew on a Nintendo Switch friend list, start a *SMM2* session, and play with (or against) said friends. (Only Nintendo could merit an entire article about playing an online game with friends in 2019.)

Part of the newsworthiness is how desperately the game needed this update. As a Switch game, *SMM2*'s network performance can vary wildly based on whether players use Wi-Fi (the system default) or plug in an optional Ethernet adapter. While many genres of online game, particularly fighting and shooting, have evolved over the past 20-plus years to accommodate the realities of online lag and latency, the precise art of Mario-style platforming hasn't been so lucky.

As a result, it's pretty common for *SMM2*'s online players to randomly matchmake with at least one excruciatingly slow player. In this situation, all players must wait until every player receives data packets before they can jump, run, or

do *anything* in a versus game. Our routine tests of the game over the past few months have included too many of these freezes to keep track, usually resulting in half-second or full-second pauses between each frame of animation until the culprit bad-connection player disconnects.

Other updates

The 1.1.0 patch notes also hint to a new online quality-of-life feature. Nintendo says the game will now check for connection stability before an online match launches, and it'll automatically cancel a match if all players don't reach a certain latency threshold. This may very well reduce the aforementioned latency-pain scenario for future players in random matchmaking, but how well it works remains to be seen.

Should you wish to engage in voice chat with friends, however, you still have to jump through the Switch-specific hoop of downloading and installing the Nintendo Switch Online app on an Android or iOS device, at which point you can activate your phone's microphone. In good news, at least, the NSO app automatically buzzes on your device when you jump into a *SMM2* friends-only lobby, and its integration is as seamless as a required, additional online device can possibly be. But voice chat only works in a friends-only *SMM2* match, and only with this NSO app.

The biggest additional change in the 1.1.0 patch is a new wireless LAN mode, which lets four Switch consoles in the same room connect to each other via the same LAN connection, as opposed to using the Switch's built-in Bluetooth option. (If you're wondering: yes, this will likely result in more stable local-multiplayer sessions.) Meanwhile, level creators will appreciate a mild control tweak that allows touchscreen and controller button options simultaneously. (Before, you had to pick one or the other.)

Listing image by Nintendo

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1578283

Life after the Joker: Harley Quinn finds a new gang in Birds of Prey trailer



reader comments

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[embedded content]
Margot Robbie reprises her role as Harley Quinn in *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*.
Margot Robbie chewing up the scenery as love-crazed villain Harley Quinn was one of the best things about the 2016 DCEU film, *Suicide Squad*—so much so that Warner Bros. and DC Films have been developing a trilogy of films focusing on the

character. Now we have a trailer for the first of those: *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of Harley Quinn)*. And while it's still far too early to make a call one way or the other as to the film's merits, it looks like it could be a lot of R-rated Harley-centric fun.

Birds of Prey is based on the long-running comic series of the same name, originally focused on Barbara Gordon (daughter of James Gordon), aka Batgirl. Barbara reinvents herself as the Oracle after an encounter with the Joker paralyzes her from the waist down. Oracle teams up with Black Canary, an accomplished martial artist with an ultrasonic superpower known as the "Canary Cry." Various other characters have come and gone over the course of the series, most notably (for current purposes) a former mafia princess turned vigilante dubbed Huntress.

(Some spoilers for *Suicide Squad* below.)

Harley Quinn also appears occasionally in the comics as part of a team dubbed The Secret Six (which also includes Deadshot), but the film version places her squarely centerstage. Screenwriter Christina Hodson wanted to reinvent the crazed psychiatrist, so in the film, Harley's rocky, abusive relationship with the Joker has ended, leaving her at loose ends. She eventually joins forces with Black Canary (Jurnee Smollett-Bell), Huntress (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), and Renee Montoya (Rosie Perez)—a former police detective who goes by the Question in the comics—to protect a young girl named Cassandra Cain from sadistic crime lord Black Mask. (In the comics, Cassandra is the third incarnation of Batgirl.)

- Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) confides in Black Canary (Jurnee Smollett-Bell).
- Harley's recovering from the baddest of bad breakups. YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Chop, chop.

YouTube/Warner Bros.

- This dog will probably treat her better than the Joker.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Mary Elizabeth Winstead plays Helena Bertinelli, aka Huntress.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- A vigilante is born.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Rosie Perez plays Renee Montoya.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Harley's a girl who can appreciate explosions.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Victor Zsasz (Chris Messina) is a deranged serial killer.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Who is this villainous person?
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Ewan McGregor plays crime lord Roman Sionis, aka Black Mask
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Harley channels Marilyn in her head space.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- A suitably foreboding secret headquarters.
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- "This is just like a sleepover!"
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Would you trust this woman?
  YouTube/Warner Bros.
- Girl power, Birds of Prey style.

The trailer opens with Harley drunkenly confiding in Black Canary at a bar. "You know what a harlequin is?" she slurs. "A harlequin's role is to serve. It's nothing without a master." We see her cutting off her blue-dyed ponytail and engaging in target practice with the Joker's image—all part of the emancipation process invoked by the film's subtitle. As Edith Piaf croons on the soundtrack, we also meet Huntress and a

brutal crime lord named Roman Sionis (Ewan McGregor), aka Black Mask.

It seems Black Mask is hoping to be Harley's new master ("You need me, Quinn), and she's not interested. When Harley comes to the aid of young Cassandra Cain (Ella Jay Basco), she further incurs his wrath. Black Canary, Huntress, and Renee Montoya are also being chased by Black Mask, so they all team up to take on the crime lord once and for all, figuring they have a better chance of defeating him as a group. Oh, and there's also a crazed serial killer, Victor Zsasz (Chris Messina), who carves his own face to mark each of his kills.

As for where we'll next see Harley Quinn, she's slated to appear in the upcoming movie *Gotham City Sirens*—which means we might see her teaming up with Catwoman and Poison Ivy—and in as-yet-untitled film focusing on her relationship with the Joker. Robbie will also reprise the role in a "soft reboot" called *The Suicide Squad*, currently slated for an August 2021 release, with *Guardians of the Galaxy* director James Gunn at the helm.

Birds of Prey hits theaters February 7, 2020.

Listing image by YouTube/Warner Bros.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1577959

Sony slashes PlayStation Now streaming prices ahead of

Google Stadia launch



reader comments

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With Google prepping its Stadia streaming service for launch next month, and Microsoft rolling out a Project xCloud steaming test this month, you'd be forgiven for forgetting that Sony has been streaming hundreds of PlayStation games through its PlayStation Now service for years. Sony is doing its best to remind you of that fact, though, announcing today that it is slashing the all-you-can-stream subscription price for PlayStation Now to $9.99 a month (down from $19.99), $24.99 a quarter (down from $49.99), or $59.99 a year (down from $99.99). Current subscribers will see the reduced price on their next billing cycle.

A PlayStation Now subscription includes streaming access to over 800 games from across the PS2, PS3, and PS4 libraries on

a PS4 or PC (but not mobile phones or previously supported Smart TVs). PS4 users can also download over 300 PS4 games with their subscription, and today, those streaming and downloadable libraries are expanding to include *Grand Theft Auto V*, *God of War* (2018), *Uncharted 4*, and *Infamous: Second Son*.

PlayStation Now launched in 2014 with a ridiculous a la carte rental pricing plan, but the service quickly pivoted to an all-you-can-play subscription model a few months later. Back then, the lowest price available for that subscription was $15 a month, three times the current monthly rate for an annual subscription, and the service only included access to 100 PS3 games. The service works pretty well if you have a decent Internet connection, thanks in large part to Sony's 2012 acquisition of streaming platform Gaikai.

The reduction to $60 a year makes PlayStation Now currently much more economical than Google's Stadia, which will require a $10/month subscription and hardware investment at launch (though Google says a free tier is planned for next year). Stadia users also have to pay a la carte for the vast majority of games on the service, aside from monthly freebies offered with the subscription.

The new lower cost is also cheaper than Microsoft's Xbox Game Pass, which starts at $9.99 a month for downloadable access to just over 200 Xbox One and Xbox 360 games. Microsoft hasn't announced pricing or catalog availability for its upcoming Project xCloud streaming service.

Back in May, Sony revealed that it had attracted 700,000 subscribers for PlayStation Now. That's a somewhat uninspiring result for a subscription service approaching its sixth year on the market, especially when you consider that over 100 million PS4s have sold worldwide. But that hasn't stopped Sony Interactive Entertainment President and CEO Jim Ryan from saying, "we believe the streaming era is upon us and is about

to begin a period of rapid growth.” https://arstechnica.com/?p=1577921

It’s official: We’re getting a 4th season of Stranger Things from Netflix



reader comments

31 with 27 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Stranger Things will be back for a fourth season, Netflix confirms.
In a move unlikely to surprise anyone, Netflix has officially announced that there will indeed be a fourth season of its mega-hit series *Stranger Things*. The announcement comes with

its own brief teaser, featuring spooky imagery from the Upside Down and the phrase “We’re not in Hawkins anymore” as bells ominously chime.

(Spoilers for first three seasons below.)

When we last left our plucky teenaged sleuths and their allies, they had successfully beaten back a third attempt by the so-called Mind-Flayer to escape the Upside Down and take over the town of Hawkins, Indiana, where the series has thus far been set. But that victory did not come without a cost: Eleven lost her telekinetic powers after being bitten by the Flay-Monster. And her adoptive father, fan favorite Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) sacrificed himself to save the town in the season three finale. Eleven is taken in by Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), and the entire Byers clan moves away from Hawkins—and really, who can blame them?

The teaser gives little away as to what season four will be about. But series creators Matt and Ross Duffer (collectively the Duffer Brothers) have hinted that season four will open up the storytelling to include plot lines outside of Hawkins, with the Russians and their captive Demogorgon be playing a major role.

A mid-credits scene following the third season’s finale hinted that season four will likely delve further into the as-yet-unanswered Russian question—namely, why were the Russians trying to open the gate to the Upside Down after Eleven and the gang went to such great lengths to close it in season two? The scene takes us to a secret base in Russia, where two guards approach a prison door. “Not the American,” one guard says. Instead, the guards drag off a Russian prisoner and lock him in a room with a captive Demogorgon, which proceeds to devour the screaming prisoner.

“The American” may refer to Hopper, since we never actually saw him die and no corpse was ever recovered. Alternatively,

“The American” could refer to Dr. Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine), the scientist who found and exploited Eleven in the first place. He supposedly died at the hands of the first Demogorgon in season one, but there’s a brief mention in season two that Brenner is still alive. Chances are, season four will find Eleven struggling to accept the loss of her powers and (one hopes) getting them back somehow.

A standalone episode from season two brought a runaway Eleven to Chicago, where she met Kali (Linnea Berthelsen), another young woman with special powers who was a subject in Brenner’s laboratory. There’s a good chance she will make a reappearance, and we may discover other similarly gifted characters as well.

The Duffer Brothers have said that they are likely to end *Stranger Things* after a fourth (or possibly a fifth) season. And they have just signed a lucrative multi-year film and TV development deal with Netflix, Deadline Hollywood reports, although little is known about the details. So the ending of one series is likely to herald the beginning of something new and, hopefully, equally compelling.

“We are absolutely thrilled to continue our relationship with Netflix,” the Duffer Brothers said in a statement. “From our first pitch meeting to the release of *Stranger Things* 3, the entire team at Netflix has been nothing short of sensational, providing us with the kind of support, guidance, and creative freedom we always dreamed about. We can’t wait to tell many more stories together—beginning, of course, with a return trip to Hawkins!”

Listing image by YouTube/Netflix

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1577229

BBC drops first trailer for new adaptation of H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds



reader comments

103 with 67 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Martians invade Earth in *The War of the Worlds*, a new BBC adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel.
The BBC dropped the first trailer for its upcoming adaptation of the classic H.G. Wells science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*. The three-part miniseries is set in Edwardian England—just a few years after Wells published his novel—and it looks like it will be a fairly faithful treatment of the source material, as the people of Earth fight to survive in

the face of a Martian invasion.

(Spoilers for the 1897 novel below.)

First serialized in 1897, *The War of the Worlds* was published as a book the following year and has remained in print ever since. Told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator, the story opens with astronomers on Earth observing what appear to be explosions on the surface of Mars through their telescopes. Soon after, a meteor falls to Earth, which turns out to be a capsule housing large, tentacled aliens. The creatures do not come in peace; instead, they use their tripod fighting machines to destroy much of the town of Woking and its surroundings with their heat rays and poisonous black smoke.

Great Britain's military forces prove powerless in the face of the aliens' more advanced technology, and eventually the Martians conquer London as well. The surviving humans (including the narrator and his brother) go into hiding to avoid being scooped up as nourishment for the invaders from the Red Planet. Ultimately, the Martians are felled by disease, lacking immunity to many of Earth's natural pathogens. Or, as Wells phrased it, they were "slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this Earth."

With its treatment of what was then-visionary science and technology, Wells' novel proved hugely influential beyond the usual literary circles. It inspired physicist Robert H. Goddard, among others, who went on to invent the liquid-fueled rocket and helped usher in the modern space age. The novel also inspired numerous adaptations in film, television, radio, and video games. Perhaps the most infamous adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* was a 1938 radio broadcast directed and narrated by Orson Welles. The director's decision to frame the first part of the hour-long broadcast as a news report led to some 50 or so gullible Americans fleeing outside in terror (far less than the million panicked people reported by

newspapers at the time).

- A shooting star? Or something more ominous?
- Amy (Eleanor Tomlinson) and George (Rafe Spall) investigate the crash site.
  YouTube/BBC
- There’s something inside!
  YouTube/BBC
- This politician thinks there’s nothing to worry about.
  YouTube/BBC
- But… what’s that looming behind yonder tower?
  YouTube/BBC
- Cue George’s shocked face
  YouTube/BBC
- Amy and Frederick (Rupert Graves) also gaze upwards in shock.
  YouTube/BBC
- The infamous Martian tripod fighting machine.
  YouTube/BBC
- That’s not going to be much use against the Martian heat ray.
  YouTube/BBC
- Ditto for the cannon.
  YouTube/BBC
- People flee as the Martians destroy villages.
  YouTube/BBC
- Poisonous black smoke plus the heat ray prove to be a devastating combination.
  YouTube/BBC
- Earth is starting to look a bit like Mars.
  YouTube/BBC

The first film adaptation was released in 1953 and won an Oscar for visual effects. That film in turn spawned a sequel TV series in the 1980s, whereby the Martians were stored in suspended animation instead of dying off. When they accidentally reawaken, another war of the worlds breaks out.

The 1996 blockbuster film *Independence Day* arguably owed a great deal to Wells' novel, including a clever twist on the viral angle. Most recently, in 2005, Tom Cruise starred in director Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, a loose adaptation of the novel set in America rather than England that proved to be a critical and box office success.

This latest adaptation follows the standard premise, with some impressive visual effects of its own. Per the official synopsis:

> *Set in Edwardian England, this new adaptation of H.G. Wells' seminal tale—the first alien invasion story in literature—follows George (played by Rafe Spall) and his partner Amy (Eleanor Tomlinson) as they attempt to defy society and start a life together. Rupert Graves is Frederick, George's elder brother, and Robert Carlyle plays Ogilvy, an astronomer and scientist. The War of the Worlds tells their story as they face the escalating terror of an alien invasion, fighting for their lives against an enemy beyond their comprehension.*

The trailer opens with an ominous announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, it seems that something has arrived in England." What appears at first to be a shooting star heralds the arrival of the first Martian capsule. Soon the Martians and their tripod fighting machines are attacking the country, even as a politician in deep denial declares there's nothing to be concerned about. The British military is unable to repel the alien forces. But if the miniseries hews as closely to the novel as it seems, there's probably a microscopic surprise in store for the alien invaders.

The War of the Worlds is slated to air later this year on BBC.

Listing image by YouTube/BBC

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1577061

Preview: Unmatched, a deck-battling game where Bruce Lee can fight King Arthur



reader comments

16 with 14 posters participating

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- Your combatants in this *Unmatched* play through: martial arts legend Bruce Lee…
  Nathan Mattise
- …and sword and sorcery legend, King Arthur.
  Nathan Mattise
- A look at a basic *Unmatched* board
  Nathan Mattise
- Other character sets include a trio of *Jurassic Park*

raptors…
Nathan Mattise

- …and Alice, of *In Wonderland* fame.
Nathan Mattise

AUSTIN, Texas—It should have been obvious. But when I approached the Mondo Games rep at Fantastic Fest about playing a round of *Unmatched*—the recently released spin on deck battle board games—I quickly stood paralyzed by choice. Should I use the *Jurassic Park* raptors? What about Alice of *Wonderland* fame? Or maybe Robin Hood?

"You should definitely play Bruce Lee," the rep suggested, directing me to a different board. And with that, our battle commenced: the greatest martial arts fighter of all time against… the mythical King Arthur? Huh?

When "deck battling" gets mentioned, most minds probably go to the classic collectible trading card games: *Magic The Gathering*, *Pokémon*, *The Star Wars Customizable Card Game*, *The Star Trek Customizable Card Game*, etc. These games developed cult followings for their combinations of complex strategy, varying play styles, and multi-faceted gameplay. But they also alienated other gamers because the process of acquiring cards could get expensive—and building a successful deck required significant thought and time.

Unmatched, a game created in partnership with Restoration Games, kinda-sorta tries to find a middle ground. It's deck battling, but the decks have been premade. Players can still use varying play styles, but those styles have been attached to specific characters. (Bruce Lee ain't here to dink and dunk you with range attacks; it's melee time, folks.) Because of this, the setup and learning curve are greatly simplified (though options for expansive customization are, too).

Based on our Lee versus Arthur play through, however, this is one time where a half-measure might work. *Unmatched* delivers

plenty of strategy despite being accessible enough for a moderate gamer to pick up in a single play. And more importantly, beating down another legendary brawler is pretty engaging… especially when you're doing it with Bruce Lee.

We'll have a full review of the game once we've done some more playtesting, but our preview here should give you a taste of the game's style—and its crazy matchups.

- A character health meter for King Arthur
  Nathan Mattise
- A look at the card types in play in *Unmatched*, with the typical stunning film art you'd expect from Mondo.
  Nathan Mattise
- That red symbol in the upper left indicates this card is an attack card, and the number refers to its hit point value. Cards might also have some pre-, during-, or post-combat bonuses as indicated by the text. (The circled 2 is the card's "boost" value, meaning you can discard the card and add two spaces to your move if desired.)
  Nathan Mattise
- Purple indicates it's a hybrid card that users can either attack or defend with.
  Nathan Mattise
- Blue is a defense card.
  Nathan Mattise
- Yellow cards are "scheme" cards. These essentially give players special abilities during their turn: +1 to all attacks, the ability to fish in your discard for a specific card, the ability to deal direct damage sans defense, etc.
  Nathan Mattise
- In addition to your ~30 card deck, each player comes with this: their character card. These cards indicate how many spaces the character is capable of moving when taking that action (2 for Arthur), starting health (18),

their preferred battle style (Melee here), if they have a sidekick (yep), and what their special ability is (Arthur can use “boost” values towards attacks in addition to movement, whoa).
Mondo Games

- The back of each player card, which outlines the logistics of a turn.
Mondo Games
- *Of course* Arthur has Excalibur available. This was by far the largest hit point value I saw during play.
Mondo Games

Un-complicated

Unmatched uses the oldest competitive premise in the book: beat your opponent in a fight. Each character has a number associated with its health, and the object is to reduce your opponent’s health to zero by using your deck of cards.

Every individual turn encompasses two actions from the following three options: you can move and/or draw a card, you can play a “scheme” card, or you can play an attack card. Those actions can be divvied up however a player would like (moving twice; attacking and then fleeing; etc.), while both the cards and a character’s special ability will often modify what a turn can encompass. Bruce Lee, for instance, has a deck where many attack cards come with a “Gain +1 action” modifier, mimicking Lee’s own ability to get a fury of fists in before an opponent reacts. And Lee’s special ability centers on movement; he gets the option of taking an extra space at the conclusion of a turn.

Speaking of cards and abilities, each character comes with a pre-built, character-specific deck. These decks all contain the same basic components—defense cards, attack cards, hybrid cards (you can attack or defend!), and scheme cards—tweaked slightly for each character’s style. Scheme cards typically

impact the game without starting a battle: +1 to attacks for a given turn, the ability to sift through your discard for a type of card, direct damage dealt to an opponent, etc. Players start with five cards in hand and can carry up to seven before needing to discard. In the event that a game drags on, decks become something of a fuse—after you've used your entire deck once, every new card draw costs two health points. (So, technically, you can win by running from your opponent. Check out the full ruleset [PDF] if interested.)

When a player attacks, they simply choose a card to lay face down on the board. Their opponent gets a chance to defend by doing the same, then each player flips. The top left portion of these cards has a number denoting power, and the numeric difference between attack and defense gets applied to the target's health count. (Ties go to the defender.)

Unlike most deck games, these battles take place on a traditional board. Boards vary depending on which *Unmatched* set you start with (for instance, the *Jurassic Park* one contains a raptor cage with only one road in and out), but the basics remain the same. For most characters to attack, you need to be in the space next to your opponent. But if a character—or a character's sidekick—has range attack abilities, they simply need to be in the same colored zone in order to deliver damage.

- The box for the base *Unmatched* set.
  Mondo Games
- Flip side of that base box.
  Mondo Games
- The base set contains four characters: Sinbad, Alice, Medusa, and King Arthur. Here, we see that Sinbad will be moving quite freely across the board.
  Mondo Games
- A Sinbad attack card
  Mondo Games

- Medusa introduces range attacks, which makes her higher move count an attractive option.
  Mondo Games
- An example of a Medusa scheme card.
  Mondo Games
- Alice is a melee character, but she can focus on offense or defense depending on whether you want to eat those magical mushrooms.
  Mondo Games
- Like Bruce Lee, Big Alice has some higher-total attacks at her disposal.
  Mondo Games

The *Unmatched* expanded universe

Back to the important matter at hand: who wins in a battle between King Arthur and Bruce Lee? In my fight, Arthur intimidated me. His base health was higher (18 to Lee's 14), and he had a sidekick, Merlin. But Arthur quickly showed why hauling a giant sword around is a bad idea; his relative immobility (just two spaces at a time) gave Lee a real travel advantage.

As a few turns passed, I noticed another pattern: many of Lee's attack cards give you an extra action. Instead of being able to attack twice per turn like normal characters, Lee can unleash three or four advances and deplete an opponents' hand, forcing them to draw and move instead of counter. By the time Arthur did use Excalibur (a +6 value, the highest card I saw all day), Bruce had already worn him down. Plus, I had a healthy +4 hybrid card ready for defense (Arthur had a scheme card which allowed him to find the sword no matter if it was in the deck or in the discard).

Ultimately, I deployed a strategy learned from side-scrolling arcade titles of my youth: focus attacks on the main opponent (Arthur), ignore the footmen (Merlin), and get to the finish

line fast. Thanks to Bruce Lee's fighting prowess, I took home my first victory over a gaming company rep for Ars Cardboard. (How's that for ease of learning?) Our one-on-one battle moved briskly and took around 30 minutes.

I left Fantastic Fest interested in sampling other characters to see what styles appealed to me most. But this is where *Unmatched* can start to resemble other deck battlers; it costs some real money. The base set comes with a board and four players (Arthur, Alice, Sinbad, and Medusa) at an MSRP of $39.95, while a separate two-character starter pack (a board with Big Foot and Robin Hood) will set you back $24.99. The Bruce Lee expansion (cards only) is $15.99.

Restoration/Mondo have already announced a slew of other releases: the *Jurassic Park: Raptors v. InGen* board, a Victorian-themed set with Sherlock Holmes, the Invisible Man, Dracula, and Jekyll & Hyde, and a *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* expansion deck. So to get a board and have at least six character options for people to choose from will run you $65. And who can say what *Unmatched's* replay value will be if you don't have a decent variety of character options on hand?

For now, I'm anxious to play again but holding off on my own purchase. Maybe a few friends will get a taste of *Unmatched* and we can pool different sets for the greater gaming good. Here in Austin, I know that my local gaming cafe will eventually have each add-on ready and waiting (thank you for existing, Emerald Tavern).

But however it happens, I definitely plan to find out whether Bruce Lee can take down a trio of raptors.

Listing image by Nathan Mattise

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1576367

On Netflix and next projects, a night in genre-king Bong Joon-Ho’s lecture hall



Enlarge / Seated in the simulcast overflow room for Bong Joon-Ho (center). Evidently the first ~350 person lecture hall filled up an hour and a half early. There were definitely people sitting on the floor in the second.
Nathan Mattise

reader comments

7 with 7 posters participating, including story author

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AUSTIN, Texas—Usually when people line up for two hours or more in Austin, Texas, barbecue awaits at the other end. But the Fleming Lecture Hall at the University of Texas didn't suddenly start producing world-class brisket last Wednesday. Instead, in what may be a first, roughly 700 people lined up and then descended upon the humble classroom for *a lecture* at 5pm on a weeknight.

Technically, it was a guest lecture. And in fairness, it's not every Wednesday that South Korean genre film legend Bong Joon-Ho *(Snowpiercer, Okja*) is both in Austin *and* available to sit for student questions.

But the best genre-film festival in the US (Fantastic Fest) was taking place a few miles south of UT's campus throughout last week, and Bong's latest work, *Parasite,* screened among the closing films. The filmmaker's PR rep also happens to be a UT alum, and so a special campus viewing took place earlier in the week ahead of this—the one time no one seemed willing to skip an evening lecture.

- Earlier this week, Director Bong Joon-Ho in front of what was then known as the Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar (aka the location of Fantastic Fest).
  Jack Plunkett / Fantastic Fest
- L to R: Actor Choi Woo-shik, Actor Song Kang-Ho, and Bong Joon-ho of *Parasite* at the Toronto International Film Festival.
  Vivien Killilea/Getty Images for NEON
- A still from *Parasite* showing the family at the film's center.
  Neon / Fantastic Fest
- Always check your local alt-weekly's event listings, all.
  Austin Chronicle
- Bong clearly has a sense of humor and is game for a lot

(including speaking to undergrads and having an entire screening audience dress like his film's poster).

- Hmmm… Bong Joon-ho is leading a toast after *Parasite* finally screened at Fantastic Fest on Thursday evening.
- …because Alamo Drafthouse founder and NEON productions co-founder Tim League (L) renamed the freakin' entire theater in Bong's honor after the director brought *Parasite* to Texas this week.
- The inscription: "In modern classics like Memories of Murder, Mother, and Parasite, director Bong Joon Ho inspires and challenges us with a pitch-perfect blend of humanity, suspense, humor, and craft. His work reminds us why we love cinema…"

Not film school, but films then school

Bong started by quickly admitting to not being the ideal role model for any future film students in attendance. He studied sociology back in his university days in the 1980s, but really he spent more time in a nearby theater than any classroom. "When I first went to college, I thought, 'I'll major in anything and join a film club,'" Bong said. (The filmmaker took questions in English but largely responded for the audience via a translator.) "So I did and rarely went to class."

But South Korea at that time was itself an education—the country was essentially transitioning out from underneath a military regime, so Bong supplemented his sociology studies simply by keeping his head up. "Society was very dynamic with students still protesting," he said. "Observing the students around me was my education rather than just textbooks."

For fans of Bong's work, that dynamic between those in control and those subjected to it likely sounds familiar. In the sci-

fi/action mash-up *Snowpiercer,* survivors of some climate change counteractions gone wrong live on a train arranged by societal standing. In the horror thriller *Mother,* a small village treats a boy with intellectual disabilities poorly to their detriment. Near-future *Okja* has corporations versus animal activists; *Parasite* is 99% versus the 1%. Often this dynamic gets dressed up in multiple genres, but the central idea is very based in reality.

"With *Parasite*, in the US and Europe, they comment on how the film mixes genres," Bong said when asked about how his films get received differently across the globe. "But Korean audiences see it as close to reality. A lot of people mention how their lives are; some smelled themselves after leaving the theater."

While the writer/director's cultural nuance came on campus, Bong's affinity for genre started long before that. He recalls studying some Asian filmmakers closely at university (like Hou Hsiao-hsien), but "the films that have permeated my body and stay in my bloodstream are the genre films from the US I watched when I was little."

As a kid, Bong recalls staying up late at night until his family fell asleep in order to watch AFKN, a network broadcasting American productions for servicemen stationed in Korea at the time. He loved the thrillers of John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*), for instance, and obviously these influences became ingrained only to later resurface in things like *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite.*

"They played a lot of midnight films with quite a lot of sex and violence, films you couldn't see on Korean channels at the time," he said. "And because I didn't know English, I'd construct the narrative on my own. I only realized later these are famous films, stuff from John Carpenter and Brian De Palma."

[embedded content]
The trailer for *Parasite.*

Netflix and what’s next

Bong didn’t want to spoil much about *Parasite* for anyone who hadn’t yet seen it—after all, the film will have its US theatrical release beginning October 11. So he kept his comments on the film general, discussing its inspirations (he thought of three central characters: a father, a son, and a maid, and toyed with it as a stage play) and praising the actors (especially longtime collaborator Song Kang-ho). “I wrote the script with him in mind, and a couple of scenes are only possible with him,” Bong said. “He’s basically an amplifier—regardless of what emotions I want to portray through his character, he delivers ten-fold, a hundred-fold.”

Instead, the night’s film discussions turned toward Bong’s other projects. For instance, Bong’s last film to compete at Cannes (*Okja*) eventually landed at Netflix; why not do the same with *Parasite*?

“From the beginning [at Netflix], I was guaranteed the Director’s Cut in the contract and had R-rating approval,” Bong said, expressing admiration for how much control the streaming giant gives creators. “They said, ‘It’s OK if they roll around in blood at the slaughterhouse.’ So whether in the US or Korea, as long as I’m guaranteed control, I’d work anywhere.”

Beyond being the reason audiences are unlikely to see Bong do a Marvel movie any time soon, that control is a big motivator for Bong to continually push for theatrical releases of his films. He sees great benefits in streaming services—more people enjoy films, it encourages archival preservation—but no viewing experience preserves a director’s vision quite like the theater.

“It’s not that the screen is big or you’re watching with others, but it’s the only place you can’t press pause,” Bong said. “Whether it’s Netflix, DVDs, Blu-ray, you can pause to go to the bathroom or because someone is calling. But as a filmmaker, I believe a film is one unit from beginning to end—there’s a pace and rhythm. Just like a conductor or composer, I want that singular unit, and the theater is the only place that preserves that.”

Even though he didn’t want to discuss *Parasite* in-depth, that didn’t stop Bong from teasing his *next* project—something he’s already thinking about and working toward. UT Radio, Television, and Film Department Chair Noah Isenberg moderated the discussion and had read in Korean media that Bong was working on something centered around a disaster in Seoul, so he ended by asking for any information the director would offer up. *What can you tell us?*

“Well, it’s a secret,” Bong began, allowing a moment or two for silence before finally indulging everyone. “I don’t know if you can call it horror, because in all my films the genre is ambiguous. But if you have to describe it, it’s ‘horror-action’ and a disaster that happens in Seoul. I’ve had this idea since 2001, so I’ve been developing it for 18 years, and now I have an obsession. I really do have to shoot this movie.

“To give you one hint, it’s not a film you can shoot in NYC or Chicago: it only works if all the pedestrians on the street have the same skin tone.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1574965

Sony, Marvel bury the hatchet so Spider-Man can stay in the MCU



Enlarge / Spider-Man (Tom Holland) fwips around Manhattan.

reader comments

175 with 80 posters participating

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Spider-Man will remain in the MCU after all, after Sony and Marvel reconciled their differences and came to a new agreement, Variety reports. The studios jointly announced a third Spider-Man film in the Homecoming series this morning.

This is excellent news. Tom Holland's incarnation of Peter Parker was clearly being groomed to replace Tony Stark's Iron Man in this summer's blockbuster, *Spiderman: Far From Home.* And fans reacted with anger and dismay when the news

broke in August that the two companies had failed to agree on terms for future profit-sharing, effectively booting the webslinger from future Marvel films.

“I am thrilled that Spidey’s journey in the MCU will continue, and I and all of us at Marvel Studios are very excited that we get to keep working on it,” said Marvel president Kevin Feige in a statement. “Spider-Man is a powerful icon and hero whose story crosses all ages and audiences around the globe. He also happens to be the only hero with the superpower to cross cinematic universes, so as Sony continues to develop their own Spidey-verse, you never know what surprises the future might hold.”

Why did the two studios fall out in the first place? As we wrote in August:

> *It’s all about money, of course. Under the current arrangement, Disney holds the merchandising rights and gets 5% of first-dollar gross (how much a film makes at the box office on its first day of release), according to Deadline. Sony holds the distribution and screen rights to Spider-Man solo films, starting with Sam Raimi’s 2002 Spider-Man with Tobey Maguire. Disney was pushing for a 50/50 co-financing agreement going forward, which Sony turned down flat. Nobody backed down, and so here we are.*

That fallout also meant Feige wouldn’t produce the next Spider-Man film, despite playing such a critical role in rebooting the franchise in its current incarnation. So perhaps the best outcome for Marvel fans from today’s news is that Feige will be back on board. Under the new agreement, per Variety, “In exchange for lending Feige’s producing prowess, Marvel and Disney will receive roughly 25% of the profits, according to insiders. Disney will retain its merchandising rights. As part of the arrangement, Spider-Man will also appear in one future Marvel Studios film.”

Feige’s re-entry into the Spiderverse is actually the second deal the producer struck with Disney this week. Speaking to The Hollywood Reporter, Walt Disney Studios co-chairman Alan Horn revealed that Feige will also be collaborating with Lucasfilm’s Kathleen Kennedy on a future Star Wars film.

The next Spiderman film in the Homecoming series is currently scheduled for a July 16, 2021 release, and that project will be co-produced by Amy Pascal, who was a producer on the first two Homecoming movies.

“This is terrific,” Pascal said in a statement. “Peter Parker’s story took a dramatic turn in *Far From Home* and I could not be happier we will all be working together as we see where his journey goes.”

Somewhere, the surviving Avengers are smiling.

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