Our favorite gaming studios, expos, museum exhibits—in a photo blowout

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Ars Gaming Week 2019

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When we publish galleries dedicated to gaming exhibitions, events, and landmarks, it’s not a way to put off writing work. For one, we have to write all of the freaking captions (and also try to make *some* of them equal parts funny and informative). There’s also the matter of a bunch of trained writers doubling as professional photographers while finding ourselves overstimulated by the coolest video games old and new. Hey. It’s a living.

But while the work of shooting, editing, touching up, and publishing these collections is more involved than they might look, we love making them. There’s something to be said about basking in the glow of an expertly crafted gaming-event gallery. I liken it to the digital equivalent of a freshly mowed yard. There’s a certain, I dunno, majesty to it. At least, without the whole “sunlight” thing.

Thus, to conclude our dedicated Ars Gaming Week event, we

invite you to bask in years of our digital yard work, all taken from our favorite gaming-related events.

Exhibits: Three game-filled museums across the USA

When we heard that a traveling 2015 museum exhibit would combine the words “Smithsonian” and “gaming history,” we rushed over with a camera and a critical eye. The resulting exhibit technically revolved around centuries of American innovation in “consumer technology.” In good news for us, that meant video games, toys, and other electromechanical fare figured prominently behind glass, which you can see in our gallery below. (Click through the article’s link for more non-gaming photos from the exhibit, but we left the calculators in here.)

- Ralph Baer’s original “Brown Box” prototype, arguably the first ever TV video game, is a large part of the reason Kyle Orland wanted to check out this Smithsonian gaming exhibit from 2015.
- A close up on the Brown Box controller and its pasted-on labels.
  Kyle Orland
- A side view showing the thick wiring connecting the controllers to the box itself.
  Kyle Orland
- The circuitry and wiring inside the Brown Box wasn’t exactly elegantly laid out…
  Kyle Orland
- A video screen behind the Brown Box showed an example of the “Brown Box” gameplay, an unscored game where two dots bounced another dot between them.
  Kyle Orland
- Baer’s actual workshop, rebuilt in the lobby of the museum. Small child shown for scale.

Kyle Orland

- Did I mention Baer created the classic pattern-matching game Simon? Because he did. He did not invent the giant eraser, though.

Kyle Orland

- Looks like Baer was working on some sort of rhythmic drumming toy here…

Kyle Orland

- A few of the awards bestowed on Baer, including a commendation from the President George W. Bush.

Kyle Orland

- A beat up box for the Odyssey, the first video game console, hides underneath the side of Baer's desk. I wonder if Baer actually kept one there while he was working…

Kyle Orland

- A facsimile of the front entrance to Baer's lab, which happened to be the basement of his Manchester, NH home.

Kyle Orland

- A circuit board for the now hard-to-find Apple I computer

Kyle Orland

- There was an entire section devoted to the art of icon design in the "Silicon Valley" part of the exhibit.

Kyle Orland

- Aw, thanks Steve!

Kyle Orland

- Some much-deserved credit for Apple icon design guru Susan Kare.

Kyle Orland

- The exhibit featured a large dot-matrix puzzle where you could design your own icons, which would then show up on a Macintosh Classic screen. Neat!

Kyle Orland

- A college-style bulletin board tries to capture the hobbyist/enthusiast nature of early computer building.

Kyle Orland

- Bill Gates' real, heartfelt plea for enthusiasts to pay for the "Basic" programming language is met with a sticky note encouraging piracy from the exhibit makers. Harsh!
- Keyword: "was."
- From left to right, the 1973 Xerox Alto, the 1984 Apple Macintosh, and the 1975 MITS Altair 8800. Three peas in a pod?
- Yeah they do! *high fives self*
- This T-Rex on a set of wheels, invented by one Jerome Lemelson, is the first of many horrifying toys in this gallery.
- "You kids and your iWhatzits… back in my day, *this* was music!" "Whatever, grandpa!"
- The note amusingly calls this a "portable TV." Maybe if you're a bodybuilder!
- "You kids and your Tivo. back in *my* day…" "WhatEVER, grandpa!"
- A visitor tries out a stereograph. From around 1880 to 1910, these were a popular way to view three-dimensional photos taken with a special camera.
- 130 years later, the Oculus Rift is pretty much the same thing, except for a few additions.
- From a section looking at technology in early science fiction and fantasy, this 1908 H.G. Wells book envisioned a year 2000 where "airships would travel the world" and families would place ads for personal pilots.
- An 1867 French copy of Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth" showcases some fantastic blockcut artwork.
- In 1883, R.M. Ballantyne's "The Battery and the Boiler" told a thrilling tale of laying undersea telegraph cables. Which made us wonder… where are the novels about laying fiber optics these days?
- A replica of Charles Babbage's original adding machine, circa 1820. A long way from the pocket calculator…
- Close-up on Babbage's machine.

- Close-up on Babbage’s machine.
- An example of the important mathematical reference tables that Babbage’s engine could generate much more quickly and accurately than a human.
- This circa 1884 “macaroni box” adding machine was literally built within an empty macaroni box.
- Continuing the horrifying toy theme, this 1871 “patent model of a creeping baby doll.”
- From 1871, Montague Redgrave’s “Bagatelle” was an early precursor to pinball. Notice the spring-loaded plunger and tilted playfield.
- Don “Mr. Wizard” Herbert got his own display dedicated to his efforts to bring scientific education to kids.
- Age 13, when a young man’s mind turns to… science!
- You’ve been warned, Channel 4!
- The cotton gin helped spur on the industrial revolution by automating the deseeding of cotton bales. This 1800 model was used in a patent trial surrounding the important device.
- This mid-1800s cash register was referred to as an “incorruptible cashier” by its inventors.
- Thomas Edison is well known for the electric light bulb, but I’m not sure why he isn’t better remembered as the creator of this horrific talking doll prototype.
- In 1934, this creepy “Reddy-Killowatt” puppet was used to increase demand for electricity, and to help increase power plant efficiency in turn.
- When games and toys you played with as a kid are museum pieces, you’re officially old…
- Apple might prefer you forgot the Newton , but the Smithsonian American History Museum would prefer you didn’t.
- A 1977 Hewlett-Packard calculator watch was the height of style at the time. Trust us.
- I take it back… when your first digital camera is a museum piece, you’re officially old…
- Back in 1992, you needed a bulky gizmo like this to make

use of the global positioning system satellites.

- One man's "Trash-80" computer is another museum's treasure…
- "Mommy, why did Superman need two computer geeks to save the day? Also, what was Radio Shack?"

Unlike the Smithsonian's traveling, limited-time exhibit, the National Videogame Museum in Frisco, Tex., is a dedicated, year-round home for some of the most tantalizing gaming rarities we've ever seen. Our 2016 stroll through its many exhibits is too massive to reproduce in this article; I strongly advise anyone who drools at the below collection of prototype hardware to click through for even more rare games-industry memorabilia. (After that, book a flight to the Dallas area and see it for yourself.)

- This gallery is a dive down game-collector wonk, with a mix of super-rare items and collections of various gaming "eras." Here is arguably the most famous of the NES's rare carts.
- But the Nintendo World Championship wasn't the only competition game in town. Blockbuster had its own.
  Sam Machkovech
- Another Blockbuster competition cart.
- Before Mike Tyson, and before the edited Mr. Dream edition, there was this limited-edition Famicom gold cart.
- No, this wasn't Twilight Princess as a playable game. This DS cart had a preview video of the GameCube and Wii game. Pretty odd way to promote the game, if you ask us.
- Not seen in this photo: The drool that dribbled out of my mouth when I laid eyes on that incredibly rare Stadium Events cartridge.
- A slew of rarities.
- The game is real, but it was never legitimately published, seeing as how it was canceled at roughly 95 percent completion. This was a fan-printed box and

cartridge with its leaked ROM loaded onto it. Still, it’s a cool Nintendo relic.

- Yep. Star Voyager’s ship, made by the original designers before drawing that box art.
- Nothing worse than being the only kid in the neighborhood who doesn’t have the sewing machine kit for his or her Game Boy.
- Collect enough tokens, get a Dreamcast-branded portable CD-player. Unsure on whether it loads GD-ROMs…
- This photo of a race-promotional PS2 doesn’t do the paint job justice. Click one more…
- …and gaze upon this beauty. The paint job on these is insanely pretty.
- Company-branded portables have been part of the NVM’s touring show for years. This is not quite as cool as the Marlboro-branded Lynx (which the NVM also had).
- A Gunpei Yokoi toy to the left; a signed Pikmin 2 display to the right.
- More Gunpei. (Remember, he’s the engineer who essentially steered Nintendo away from cards and toward becoming a full-on gaming company.)
- Keep the Gunpei goodness coming.
- Ultra-Hand, Yokoi-san’s breakout toy.
- Ultra-zoom on Ultra-Hand.
- It’s the TurboExpress that you wish you could’ve gotten in the USA.

  Sam Machkovech
- That’s pretty much every Madden video game ever released right there. Weirdly, the series’ very first PC release is missing from that pile.
- Nintendo 64DD!
- Some of what’s inside the 64DD box.
- The RandNet online adapter for the 64DD.
- A microphone for one of the Mario Artist software packages. Also, a cute doodle from the 64DD exclusive Doshin the Giant.
- A $2,500 price tag and only two retail games? No wonder

the RDI Halcyon didn’t quite take off.

- Still, I’ll always drool over laserdisc consoles for some reason.
- So simple to operate.
- You couldn’t throw a copy of Zork around without hitting a prototype cartridge or game system at the NVM.
- For example, here’s an early version of the Sega Channel adapter.
- How about a customized Sega Genesis that only worked with a single cartridge—and one that only interfaces with exercise bikes, at that?
- Nights into Dreams onto VHS.
- Some Pong clones.
- The note explains that only 50 of this version of Elemental Gearbolt were produced. The case includes a note warning users that sweat will wear the gold coloring off of the GunCon accessory.
- Putting the “collector” into this collector’s edition of Maximum Carnage for the Super Nintendo.
- Completed boxes for games that were canceled well before completion. Parker Bros. + licensed fare = perhaps we dodged a few bullets?
- No, not the Dreamcast, silly. The Treamcast!
- You have no idea how close I was to shattering this kiosk and stealing this working copy of Thrill Kill. That thing is rare as hell.
- How about a limited-edition, extra-tiny keyboard for the sake of playing Typing of the Dead?
- The complete version of Earthbound, with its box and strategy guide, is rare enough. But a prize related to its scratch-and-sniff promotion? That there’s super raresville.
- Only the world classiest of service for your Super Nintendo.
- Everything that came before and after the Game Genie hack- and cheat-code device.
- Cheat! Cheat! Cheat!

- You know it’s rare when even the museum card begs visitors to help them figure something out. A white-molded Atari 2600. Anybody else ever see one of these?
- Debug and prototype cartridges.
- More rarities.
- Propeller Arena was completed just weeks before September 11, 2001, and it let players very easily crash planes into giant skyscrapers. Sega permanently shelved the online dogfighting sim as a result.
- No, that is not Jet Grind Radio for the N64, though man, I wish Sega had done that.
- Just an old microprocessor development system from the early ’80s. No, really, how many of these things have been so nicely preserved from the personal computing era’s wildest days?
- I snapped this image solely to look up this rip-off copy of Sega’s Chu Chu Rocket. Turns out this was a homebrew clone of CCR for the Mega CD in Europe. I really wish Sega would port the original to other consoles.
- Pervy classics.
- Games that circumvented the NES’s lockout chip. (Yes, there were some Tengen gems on display, as well.)
- Tetris clones.
- Back when third parties would sell adapters that only worked with their own games.
- All you need is an Atari VCS and a Supercharger and these games, and you’re good to go.
- Beating Nintendo to the “call everything Super” trend.
- More Starpath info.
- Coleco’s Atari system clone that played Atari games. Huh.
- Everything you need to clone the Atari 2600 hardware. CommaVid didn’t last after the ’80s game crash.
- PlayStation dev kit.
- Genesis/Sega CD dev kit.
- Sketches for an unreleased game from Fox Interactive.
- These labels and CD cases may look like shady rip-offs,

but these are from a legitimate N64 dev kit.
- More Playstation dev kit stuff.
- Game Boy dev kit devices.
- But before the Game Boy, there were these portable games.
- And these.
- These too.
- So many portables.
- Only requires 50 zillion D batteries, give or take.
- A few of the older-styled portable games were available to play. This Pac-Man was in pretty good shape.
- Honestly, as a grown-up, I kind of want this sort of dorky, shiny Game Boy.
- Double that for this see-through, Famitsu-branded Game Boy Light (a model that never reached the United States).
- So many Boys of Game.
- Many of the post-Game Boy flops.
- Nintendo's older Game and Watch era set off next to the modern portable systems.
- Climber sure looks like Kid Icarus, doesn't it?
- More Game and Watch.
- Donkey Kong 3? Or…. a super-early prototype of the Nintendo Switch?

In 2014, we visited the Indie Game Revolution exhibit at Seattle's MoPOP Museum (formerly Experience Music Project), with the caveat that the whole thing would be dismantled within two years. Turns out, MoPOP has left the exhibit intact as late as 2019 and has even continued regularly updating its showcased games. The below gallery is from an opening-day press preview and thus revolves around games from five years ago. (Their *Tenya Wanya Teens* cabinet is still one of the rarest arcade cabinets in the world, and I recommend anybody near Seattle check it out if they like the weirdness of *Katamari Damacy*.)

- This Seattle museum exhibit, dedicated to independent video games, was only slated to run for two years. As of 2019, it remains (though the following game exhibits have been cycled through in the years since, to add newer titles on a semi-regular basis).
  Sam Machkovech
- Good question, EMP!
- This stood in the way of entrants up until the exhibit's official opening.
- "Pixelated" decorations abound.
- This animated screen ran through many, many stages of gaming's history.
- Never Alone is one of eight displayed games from the Pacific Northwest. This one's a co-op adventure that tells a story about First Nations tribes in the region. One player controls a little girl; the other controls a white wolf.
- Really, not too many museums demand that their visitors "pee!" Tenya Wanya Teens was made by the creator of Katamari Damacy; McMullen pointed out that "this is one of only three customized control boards for this game in existence."
- "The Pacific Northwest employs over 16,000 people in the gaming industry," McMullen pointed out.
- Interview screens.
- More interview screens.
- Republique, made by a Seattle studio.
- Music game Paranomical requires a MIDI controller to play. It's awesome.
- The exhibit's most complicated game by far, Quadrilateral Cowboy asks players to control a squad of hackers with disparate skill sets; it also has some weird time-bending stuff.
- Fencing game Nidhogg, seen here as part of a handsome, coffee-table setup.
- Renowned Twine game creator Porpentine brought her insane Ke$ha game to Indie Game Revolution, which we

figure will weird a few passers-by out.
- Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime, also set up with a gorgeous coffee-table display.
- How the Kickstarter sausage gets made.
- It’s actually about ethics in museum exhibits.
- Might’ve heard of this one.
- All of the keyboards for the exhibit’s computer games have their primary control keys painted white. Also, these are old-style, clicky keyboards, so we at Ars love them.
- Fjords is a brilliant mix of lo-fi platforming and terminal hackery.
- Sentris, a brilliant music game also made in Seattle.
- The exhibit is currently sponsored by Nintendo, meaning the company put this mural up next door…
- …and added an NES Remix demo kiosk on the way out of the room.

Gaming pilgrimages: Firaxis, Valve, and the city of Tokyo

On the eve of *Civilization: Beyond Earth*‘s launch in 2014, developer Firaxis invited fans to a first-of-its-kind Firaxicon event. Our own Kyle Orland took advantage of living near the studio’s Maryland headquarters to swing by, and he snapped photos of everything he could while there, which you can click through below.

- Without this sign, you might think this co assemble heavy machinery inside the nondescript building.
- A smattering of BAFTA and AIAS awards sit just off the side of the main entrance.
  Kyle Orland
- The walls of the main conference room are lined with framed copies of every Firaxis game.

Kyle Orland

- Just a few of the many game magazines that have been graced with Firaxis titles.

Kyle Orland

- More magazines.

Kyle Orland

- “Game Developer Sid Meier Has His Priorities Straight.”
- The Firaxis library, which sits open in the middle of the hallway, has a wide assortment of games to play… for research purposes, of course.
- Also in the library: Model railroad magazines, comic books, fantasy tomes, debug hardware, and… a chess trophy?
- A small selection of the board games available in the library.
- You never know when you’re going to want to play *Dilbert: Escape from Cubeville*…
- Seeing these guys as life-size statues is a lot more intimidating than seeing them as tiny figures on a PC monitor, for sure.
- Who needs wallpaper when you’ve got concept art sitting around?
- A couple of makeshift *XCom: Enemy Unknown* arcade cabinets sitting incongruously under a *Gettysburg* banner.
- Close up on the controls for those *XCom* cabinets.
- The Firaxis offices are a lot like your offices, in a way… except the employees get to be called “Firaxians!” which is cool.
- A sign in the gym encourages employees not to take just “one more turn.”
- If I worked here, I’d be forced to play this every time I walked by and get a lot less work done as a result.
- You’ll want to build your first city in a relatively ghost-free zone in *Sid Meier’s Pac-Man*.
- *Sid Meier’s Asteroids* requires about 50 turns of planning before you can destroy your first asteroid.

- Your guess is as good as ours.
- Fun fact: This *Galaxian* cocktail cabinet was actually running a copy of *Congo Bongo* at one point.
- Tour-goers and employees were encouraged to take a move on the communal chess board, which led to this odd configuration of pieces…
- And the most important leader of all… YOU!
- The overflow awards cabinet includes plaudits like the *Maximum PC* "Kickass Game" award.
- Behind these bobbleheads is Sid Meier's actual office. We're told he's a real person who actually still comes in to design games, not a marketing construct. Crazy, I know.
- You've got to love a waiting area that has *PC Gamer* and *Game Informer* right next to *National Geographic*.
- Back at Firaxicon, attendees mill about with employees in the hallway.
- The golden trophy awarded to the winner of the day's *XCom: Enemy Unknown* tournament.
- The board game area was a constant cacophany of dice rolls and occasional arguments.
- The board game version of XCom uses a mobile app to keep track of timed actions and assign enemy units to the board.
- Asia was so overrun with enemy UFOs that we decided to give it up for lost at about this point.
- Just after this shot, the competitor on the right missed a "90 percent success" headshot and was thus knocked out of the tournament.
- The main attraction, for many: an hour with a pre-release version of *Civilization: Beyond Earth*.
- This was the kind of crowd that would watch with rapt attention as a Firaxis employee reset a demo station.
- Nicely personalized headphones and mice adorned each demo station.
- Think hard… the fate of space rests on your next decision!

- Every great civilization is really a generational story…
- Meier holds forth with fans at a Firaxicon fan gathering in 2014.
- The Firaxis team signs posters and other items brought in by fans.
- Meier did not end up signing this baby, but we wouldn't have been surprised if he was asked to.
- "See, mom, this is why I told you not to throw out those old game boxes for all those decades!"
- The signature line got so long that staffers eventually limited attendees to one signed item each.
- Firaxis president and CEO Steve Martin introduces Meier to the assembled crowd.
- Attendees munch on dessert as they listen to Meier hold forth.
- XCom designer Jake Solomon (right) grills Meier with some tough questions. Well, not really… but it was a light-hearted and illuminating interview anyway.

We've been fortunate to visit Valve Software's headquarters a few times, and that means we've cataloged two of the company's offices. Our most recent visit included many snaps of Valve's current Bellevue, Wash., headquarters, which is pictured below. The associated article includes even more photos of other Valve office zones, including a room full of rare merch and a kid's playpen. You can also rewind time to the company's Redmond, Wash., offices and see even more rare concept art and office decorations in an article dedicated to 2016's SteamVR reveal.

- The most interesting new art at Valve's new office is stuck up against the company's cafeteria wall.
  Sam Machkovech
- It's such a big tile piece that I had to take two photos.
  Sam Machkovech
- You can't have a Valve office without THE valve, which

Gabe Newell’s brother built for the company years ago. It weighs approximately 80 pounds, according to Valve devs.

Sam Machkovech

- Companion Cube and bowling pins, placed precipitously above a SteamVR demo station.
- More companion cubes dot a lobby.
- An awards array.
- Nice arrangement for these zillions of AIAS awards.
- Valve’s first physical game publisher, Sierra, made this for Valve after the company launched *Half-Life 1*.
- This is the Aegis of Champions held by the winning team of Valve’s major annual *Dota 2* tournament, the International.
- More Aegis info.
- They also let scrubs like me hold the thing. Eat your heart out, Team Newbee.
- Valve has had a version of this logo-etch design in its offices for over five years at this point.
- Gosh, if only that sign wasn’t there.
- *Team Fortress 2* character Saxton Hale faces off against a bear on this striking carpet that I nearly didn’t notice as I stepped on it.
- A Valve-branded guitar hangs out in another lobby.
- *Half-Life* series concept art.
- The Citadel.
- The fact that this domineering *Half-Life 2* art piece hangs in a workplace seems disconcerting to me. Is that supposed to inspire employees to work harder?
- *Portal 2* as a film poster.
- More Saxton Hale, arranged on a wall next to other *TF2* characters.
- Heating up.
- How about a little rocket launcher in your kombucha today?
- The time-to-crate metric from walking into Valve to seeing this “award” was roughly 20 minutes. You’re

slowing down there, Valve.
- Elevator lobby with Heavy artwork. (Valve's last offices had similar murals on every floor.)
- Cafeteria seating area.
- The view from the compost bin.
- Most rooms have this *Portal* and SteamVR-inspired accent art.
- Some toys.
- I'd love if this is how Valve and The Behemoth announced a *Dota 2* and *Castle Crashers* crossover project.

We've never toured a Japanese video game studio, though based on what we've seen in documentaries, those offices tend to be quite drab. Still, we've definitely been to the home nation of such monumental companies as Taito, Nintendo, Sega, and more, and that means we've explored its many expansive arcades—which continue to thrive in bustling districts like Akihabara. Kyle Orland documented his Japanese travels as part of his Tokyo Game Show coverage in 2013, while I documented my own visit a few years later. The below gallery includes a variety of arcade machines, and it runs in semi-chronological order in terms of earlier, more historic machines first, followed by newer, card-based examples later. (Click through to its source article for even more arcade photos, along with a ton of shots from retro gaming stores and a few board game shops, to boot.)

- Behold: Natsuge Museum, the best (and easily tiniest) arcade in all of Akihabara. It's crammed full of classic Capcom, Sega, and Konami cabinets, including a few classics that never made it stateside.
- A closer look at that Super Hang-On bike machine.
- The room's current piece de resistance: a fully functional, riveting *Thunder Blade* cabinet. (Natsuge Museum regularly rotates its selection, so I was happy to see this one.)
- Sit in that chair, grab the throttle, and hold on for dear life.

- It’s hard to convey in photos, but this chair weaves and wobbles as you fly through the game, and the sensation is hair-raising.
- Plus, the cabinet’s original speakers have clearly been upgraded to kick up a tremendous ruckus.
- Kinda makes the room’s other Sega racing classics feel a little wimpy. (Just kidding. These rip, too.)
- Natsuge Museum prides itself on operating solely with original hardware and circuit boards for its playable games. I got an awesome look at how the Natsuge sausage is made when one machine broke down mid-session. Yep, that was a live repair, and the game-history nerd in me started freaking drooling.
- Notice those gray pods on the cabinets?
- Those are some fierce speakers.
- Some of these cabinets had stools to sit on, which were *loaded with subwoofers*. As a result, playing this classic Capcom beat-‘em-up felt like I was in the middle of an earthquake.
- Such delicious, classic cabinets, all lined up to match.
- What a beaut.
- A closer look at some of those cocktail cabs in the middle of the room.
- Old arcade posters, original art at the top-left.
- Our look at Natsuge concludes with signatures from game-making luminaries.
- Off to another legendary arcade, Mikado, down the road from my hotel. Its upper floor included row after row of fighting games. (I had been one block away from this place for nearly a week before seeing Brian Ashcraft’s recommendation on Kotaku.)
- This was maybe a fifth of the selection on this fighting-game floor alone.
- Dig on those button panels.
- One corner was dedicated to turn-of-the-century arcade wrestling games. One of these kiosks is so legitimate that it includes optional Dreamcast controllers.

- We move into the back of this arcade's lower level, and… what's this in the far-right corner?
- A *Starblade* sit-down cabinet?! This may look like any average oversized '80s shooting-game cockpit…
- …but inside is the wildest mix of early polygonal graphics and scattered, weirdly shaped screens ever seen in an arcade!
- But Namco can't have all the fun here. Here's Sega with *POWER DRIFT*.
- I get a kick out of this racer, especially with the crazy hydraulic seat in the Japanese cabinet. Otherwise, I think the only people who love this game are Sega Saturn apologists.
- Also, some classic Sega licensed baseball.
- Japan doesn't skimp on its sit-down cabinets.
- Or its widescreen ones.
- A few shmups pile up in this arcade's lower level.
- A magazine about arcades, available to freely read while hanging out in an arcade? I freaking love Japan.
- This train-conductor cabinet includes beautifully rendered imagery, on par with a high-end computer running Unreal Engine 4.
- But the gameplay revolves around driving a legitimate train in safe, fast, efficient, and comfortable fashion. Meaning, no races or crazy stuff. It's solely for train freaks. FYI: 900 yen is about eight bucks, but the pricing structure on this game is a little fluid.
- Card games are *everywhere* in Japanese arcades. Here's an unattended soccer game…
- …and here's how the NFC-enabled "table" screen looks with a full deck. One patron was generous enough to let me take a detailed snap between his sessions as a soccer team "manager," which had him dragging and rearranging cards to instruct AI-controlled characters on where to go and how to play.
- Another card game, in which players manage armies by moving cards around a screen.

- A closer look at that machine.
- I didn’t see anybody playing this two-year-old Pokemon game, which requires plastic “disks” that contain *Pokemon* characters (which can be evolved and trained by using them in repeat sessions).
- In spite of zillions of arcade games that require cards to operate, I struggled to find any actual card vending machines for these games in arcades. I swear that I looked. Here’s one of only two I saw.
- I never figured out what these Paseli cards were about. And the disproportionate cartoon lady nearby wasn’t talkin’.
- As an American who grew up near a Battlemech arcade center, I envy Japanese kids who get networked battle-pod arcade games to this very day.
- All I could figure out by watching other people play is that the game takes forever to start and never stops feeling slow.
- On our way of one Akihabara arcade, and these awesome posters appeared, stuck to a drab wall. There’s a lot of this “cartoon art on drab walls” stuff in Japan.

Expos: Cosplay, weird controllers, and esports

This section begins with one of our favorite near-annual traditions: going hands-on, feet-on, and even butt-on (not “button,” we’re seriously talking tushies) with some of the weirdest gaming controllers ever made. The Game Developers Conference has hosted an “Alt Ctrl” pavilion for many years running, filled out with one-off experiments made by small, indie teams (including some really cool college-program creations). The below gallery highlights some gems from the 2017 collection, while other years are just a click away: 2015, 2016, and 2019.

- Fancy yourself a vinyl-scratching master? *vinylOS* is a bullet-hell shooter that lets you spin a record to rotate your spaceship, then quickly "scratch" the record back and forth to fire a bullet at the enemies coming at you. (All images are created by a projector above the white record.) Play is much smoother than that description suggests.
- To play Alt.Ctrl IGF award winner *Fear Sphere*, you have to crawl into an inflated plastic bag, then hold a giant flashlight and aim it at the dome's walls. This projects a small, lit-up bit of your view. You then spin around in the real world to illuminate objects in the game. Another player outside of the dome asks you questions and directs you based on what you see. (Think *Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes*.)
- How *Fear Sphere* looks from inside of its weird, plastic dome. The effect in motion is pretty convincing.
- *Close the Leaks* has four players controlling the movement and rotation of a spaceship by letting their hands off their own tube. This pushes air out of one of four rockets on the ship, but it also slightly depletes the ship's oxygen. The group must not only manage combined movement but also make sure not to waste precious air.
- *Emotional Fugitive Detector* uses face-tracking sensors in an intriguing way. One person sits in front of a sensor and must give hints to a person sitting outside the box of a certain emotion. If the person in the box moves their facial muscles too much, an alarm goes off and both players lose. The person outside the box must perceive which of four emotions is being represented and press the correct button to save the other player's life. While the face-sensing stuff was wonky, the concept and execution were still fun to play with.
  Sam Machkovech
- *Orpheus Quest* combines *Guitar Hero*, lasers, and a harp. Strum the right laser string to the beat with your

fingers.

- *UFO Bellies* asks teams to smash colors to match whatever color flashes on the screen. (Words for other colors appear to trick players.) For secondary colors, the teams must match the right pair (red+blue, etc.) to proceed.
- *Objects In Space* can be played solely with a computer, but if you want the "pure" experience, you can build your own wired kit—and the cool part is, you can go to their site and download instructions to make your own!
- "It controls more like a submarine," I was told by a demonstrator, and that bore out. Every button and knob controlled some different aspect of defenses, missile launches, rocket thrusts, and more.
- *Objects In Space* wouldn't boot until I turned this key, attached to some fun, fuzzy dice.
- More buttons for navigation. I got a small taste of the game's apparently expansive mission-based structure. *Objects In Space* was probably my favorite of the whole Alt.Ctrl exhibit.
- In *Zombie Crawler*, you pull an endless loop of carpeted pedals to move forward—then slam your hands on either side to dodge left or right.
- Another angle of the rig and its "attack" buttons.
- This rhythm game mapped its pedals to real-life objects, which I had to slap when mice ran over them. (This, conveniently, played to the rhythm of a song, full of obnoxious "meow" effects.)
- A peek at what players saw in VR.
- *Sand Garden* combines kinetic sand and a Kinect 2.0 IR tracker. Create mounds of sand based on the demands of the on-screen world, to produce woods, lakes, or mountains as your settlers demand. Think of it like a Play-Doh version of *Doshin the Giant*.
- *Cylindrus* lets up to four people control a small LED bulb (their spaceship) as it moves around a full sphere and shoots at some obstacles while dodging others.

- Another *Cylindrus* angle.
- *Schadenfreude* makes players communicate with each other using pads of paper with clues on them. Players try to win mini-games mastered by one button presser (as if your group were actually in an elevator). The cramped-space part isn't required, however.

Ars Technica is far from a dedicated esports resource, but we never pass up an opportunity to watch pro gamers be the very best, like no one ever was. Our trips down esports-gallery lane include games like *Rocket League* and *Dota 2*, but arguably our archives' funnest event is the most homegrown one we've ever seen. In 2016, Super Smash Con was loudly operating as a celebration of the GameCube classic *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, even as Nintendo pressed forward with its 2014 version of the series for Wii U. You can argue that the older game is better for mechanical reasons (wavedash, all day), but we prefer to let community events like this, in the below gallery, count as a significant metric. (Super Smash Con still operates to this day, though it currently makes room for the series' triumphant Switch version.)

- Hiiiiiiii!
- Ever wondered what hundreds of people playing a 17-year-old game looks like? Now you know.
- The last time I saw this many CRT TVs in one place was the 1997 Consumer Electronics Show (not really)
- Not enough flat-panel TVs have fold-out speakers that double as a screen cover.
- To the Centreville High School class of 1997: Thank you. Sincerely, *Super Smash* Con.
- N64 controller grip styles: compare and contrast.
- The main stage competitors get cushy seats to aid in their intense focus.
- A custom-colored, logo'ed controller can give you the psychological edge you need in a tough *Smash* match.
- With hundreds of people playing a game that requires

smashing the joystick as hard as possible over and over again, custom replacement joystick casings are a hot commodity.

- The colors. THE COLORS!
- When a pro like ESAM plays in the preliminary pools, a hallway-blocking crowd has a way of forming.
- Fun fact: If Trela signs your controller, it actually unlocks a super-secret special move for every character.
- The two types of *Smash* spectator: joyful and quietly appreciative.
- This match got so intense one spectator started eating his controller. Literally.
- The commentators calling the action were actually pretty far away from the players, to avoid distraction, we suppose.
- When your entire gaming rig fits in your suitcase, you never even need to unpack!
- You're not hallucinating… the *Super Smash Crusade* fan game includes a bevy of fan-fiction favorites as characters, from Phoenix Wright to Goku.
- *Super Smash Flash* evoked a sense of childlike wonder in these… children.
- *Brawlout* helps prove that the "platform fighter" genre is about more than just *Smash Bros.*
- Any '80s kid will have fond memories of playing *Flappy Bird* on the NES…
- Well before the Wii remote, the Super Scope bazooka for the SNES worked on the same essential technology.
- A bargain at twice the price.
- A game practically no one wanted when it came out is now a $200 collector's item. These facts are related.
- Is it wrong that I wanted to launch a cartoon bird at this booth?
- Man, this *Pokemon Go* lure really works fast!
- This Virtual Boy user was not included in Steam's recent hardware survey.
- Looking cool and intense when using such a cute bongo

controller is nearly impossible, but this guy is doing his best.

- I swear I did not stage this shot with those Little Mac boxing gloves in the corner. He actually took them off so he could start playing!
- This is like 90% of the reason to have kids.
- Despite the (seriously) on this Neo Geo marquee, *Ninja Baseball Batman* was not working. Wow. Very bust. No work.
- Shortly after this photo, this competitor played a *Brawl* match on the big stage. Of course he played as Kind Dedede.
- I would play a game that mashed up *Super Mario Galaxy* and *Pokemon* all day.
- Show me ya' moves!
- A group from the Urban Evolution parkour gym put on a "live action" *Smash Bros.* show.
- Wheeeeeeeee!
- You're never too old to pretend to be Pikachu.
- Oh my god I am dying of cuteness.
- Dyinnnnnnnng. Tooo cuuuuuuute!
- Shirtless She-Shulk

The Super Smash Con gallery includes a healthy dollop of cosplay, which is a good reminder that most of our convention coverage has included snapshots of fans dressed as their favorite gaming and geek-culture characters. Picking a favorite is hard, because the events we've attended have all had their share of incredible, handmade handiwork. But we'll focus on PAX East 2016 in the below gallery. (Though, really, you should hit up our "cosplay" tag collection for even more gaming costumes modeled over the past seven-plus years.)

- By your powers combined, I am Captain Cosplay!
- Child-rearing done right.
- This *Full Metal Alchemist* cosplayer freaked me out with her portable head every single time.

- This cosplay always seemed to be looking directly into my soul, no matter where I stood.
- These “orcs must live” protesters were doing a good job of attracting attention to the new “Orcs Must Die” game.
- Hey, you gotta do something with all those leftover common cards… why not make some clothing?
- These cosplayers are kids now, but later they will be squids… now.
- The speaker system on this cosplayer actually pumped out ’80s music, making us wonder what it sounded like from the inside.
- This cosplayer sat completely unmoving, posing for pictures for a good five minutes. That is dedication.
- *Undertale* cosplay saw an unsurprising surge in cosplay at this year’s show.
- If you don’t understand this costume, go play *Undertale* right now.

Listing image by Kyle Orland

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1555979

Why people keep falling for viral hoaxes

reader comments

12 with 10 posters participating

Share this story

The Internet is dark and full of terrible sources of information. Sometimes it seems like every day brings a new one to the list. There are the toxic conspiracy theories, deepfakes, and fake news mills. And then there are good old-fashioned Internet hoaxes. You know the ones—the sort of fear-mongering, copypasta-esquewarnings that came in the form of cryptically bolded email chains a decade ago, and today dot the social media feeds of your friends and relatives.

In comparison to the targeted disinformation campaigns that have dominated headlines in recent years, social media hoaxes seem almost quaint. *Aw, we used to get duped by all-caps chain texts that claimed we would end up cursed if we didn't forward it to five of our friends!*

That is, at least, until you realize that they're somehow still around.

The most recent iteration roared into the public consciousness earlier this week, after users—including some celebrities and high-profile public figures—took to Instagram to share a poorly photoshopped photo of a typo-ridden creed perpetuating an old hoax. The meme, which again, is totally fake, claims an imminent change to Instagram's privacy policy could cause "everything you've ever posted … even messages that have been deleted or the photos not allowed [sic]" to become public, and will give Instagram permission to use your photos and data "in court cases in litigation against you." It goes on to claim that the only way to protect your precious intellectual property and dear DMs is to share the following message and warning, which will totally, definitely stop Instagram from being able to make any claim to your data.

Like the Momo challenge and most other hoaxes before it, it

was nonsensical and easily debunked by a quick Google search—and, of course, quickly went viral anyway.

Make no mistake, it's not because people are stupid, says Whitney Phillips, a professor at Syracuse University who studies misinformation and how it is amplified online. These sorts of hoaxes have staying power because of the peculiar way people process information and arrive at beliefs. When confronted with new information, humans don't always do the logical thing and evaluate it on its own merits, Phillips says. Instead, we often make snap decisions based on how the information adheres with our existing worldviews.

If the story pushed by a meme or hoax fits in a way that feels like a coherent narrative to a critical mass of people, it's game over, says Phillips. She credits this phenomenon with playing a major role in the duping of upwards of a dozen celebrities on Tuesday.

"If you're a celebrity in particular, you're going to have some additional sensitivities to the exposure of personal private information, because there's a market for your personal private information above and beyond the average person's" (see: the Fappening). "So it makes a lot of sense that these are the kinds of narratives that would resonate with people," Phillips explains. "That doesn't mean at all that they're even the tiniest bit true. But that's not how belief works."

The Texas Capitol is a really nice building?
Instagram @governorperry

The narrative that Big Bad Instagram is going to take all of your most intimate personal data points and use them for nefarious secret purposes is the sort of story that is primed to appeal to the average person, as well, Phillips says, because it contains a kernel of truth: You have all this data out there on the Internet, and God knows who has access to it. Chances are, at some point, some part of it will end up being used in a way that you don’t want, and you have no control over it whatsoever.

Of course, it doesn’t help that the very same platforms where

so much info is shared are the vectors through which the misinformation designed to co-opt that fear spreads.

“The brain is set up to give us easy answers … so if there’s a hoax that appeals to people’s emotions or intuition, it’s going to trick people, because a lot of people just don’t spend that much time thinking about the things that they see on social media,” says Gordon Pennycook, an assistant professor of behavioral science at the University of Regina in Canada who studies decisionmaking. “Social media is partly to blame, too, because it’s set up to drive engagement, and that engagement often comes at the cost of shutting off people’s brains a little bit.”

Even in cases where users may have an inkling that the content they are choosing to amplify could be inaccurate, the desire to share often wins out, Pennycook says. (See: all of those hoax posts Tuesday with semi-self-aware captions like “Sharing just in case!”)

“Basically, what we find is that accuracy is not the thing that is foremost on people’s minds [when deciding to share something,]” he explains. “The act of sharing something is often performative.”

It is this that gives Internet hoaxes their surprising staying power, Phillips says. So long as users’ motivations for sharing aren’t based in the realm of facts, fact-based solutions aren’t a viable remedy.

“When you have a misinformation campaign, it’s not enough to just fact-check something,” Phillips says. “You actually have to tell a different coherent story, so that people can have that cohesion that our brains really want.” She says that even in situations like this week’s—where the stakes of the hoax at hand are so low that it’s quite literally become a joke—misinformation is still misinformation.

“Sure, this is quote-unquote low-level, and not necessarily

doing anybody any harm, but the basic process and mechanism is the same as when you're talking about anti-vaccination misinformation or trans health misinformation," Phillips says. By ridiculing those who were duped instead of examining why it is that such a broad swath of people were primed to readily accept and amplify this misinformation, she says, we are missing the forest for the trees. And that doesn't bode well for any of the more serious disinformation challenges yet to come.

This story first appeared on Wired.com.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1557255

Telling Lies takes an intimate, expansive view of interactive storytelling

reader comments

17 with 13 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

- Who could this woman be? We're not telling.
- Who is he talking to? You'll have to find out for yourself.
- This faux computer desktop is your interface for

searching through the game's clips. The "Solitaire" is pretty good…

- Don't we all.
- Oh, did I say something funny?
- You can scrub through the videos at will, but only slowly.
- Behind the scenes shot of Barlow working out some conspiracy theories, probably.
- A good director knows how to point.

Four years ago, Sam Barlow surprised the game industry by reviving the moribund and seemingly outdated genre of full-motion-video games. Barlow's *Her Story* was a well-made, gripping, and ambiguous tale of murder and mania, told exclusively via conversational video snippets that players could search through via deduced transcript keywords.

But *Her Story* was tight and focused to the point of practical claustrophobia; every scene involved one actress whose character was interrogated in a single, mostly empty room over the course of a few in-game days. Barlow's latest FMV effort, *Telling Lies*, expands the same basic concept to great effect, packing many more characters, environments, and lengthy plotlines across roughly six hours of raw video and months of in-game time. The result is a slow-burning and deeply intimate character study with a plot that would feel cliché if not for its incredible presentation.

Random walk

Like *Her Story*, the player interacts with *Telling Lies* by searching through a video database and watching the clips. This time, though, that database is sourced from an intelligence agency, apparently stolen by your "viewer" character Snowden-style before her access could be completely cut off. Right away, it's apparent your goal is to search through the data before spreading it to the wider world. "When

you use the uploader it will erase the hard-drive, so please do that before they take you into custody," read a note that accompanies the USB drive containing the database. "(Which they will—you know this, right?)"

The game's first suggested search—"LOVE"—brings up the in-game, per-search limit of five videos and quickly introduces you to some of the database's few recurring characters (I'm being intentionally vague throughout this to avoid spoiling anything). Looking through these clips, you quickly figure out that you're usually watching just one side of a Skype or Facetime-style video conversation.

The other half of that conversation might also be included elsewhere in the same search, or you may have to go digging for it separately by using a different search term and cross-referenced timestamps. Figuring out what words might unlock the unheard half of a conversation—or unearth new lines through the dozens of clips in the database—is, by and large, the extent of the "interactivity" in the game.

[embedded content]
But searching semi-randomly through the database is more than just a cute little word puzzle. Viewing *Telling Lies*' story in this way lets the plot and character development unfold in unique and unexpected ways. You may search for a word or phrase expecting one specific clip, only to find that term repeated in a totally unexpected clip from a different character and time range altogether, unlocking a completely new plotline in the process.

You may start a clip thinking you know who's on the other end but by the end discover that a formerly unknown character is part of the conversation. Or maybe you'll stumble on a clip recorded months after the apparent start of the database, stumbling on the end of a plotline that makes little sense until you discover the motivation that was explained in another clip months earlier.

Look into my eyes

We're used to stories that develop linearly, sometimes with telegraphed twists that throw everything before into question. In *Telling Lies*, though, you often experience the "twist" before the baseline assumptions it's overthrowing, which ends up making you doubt almost everything. It can be a bit much to keep track of sometimes (I ended up with six pages of notes to remember when certain key events happened in the chronology), but knowing so much more than these characters about their eventual fates can make *Telling Lies* feel like "Dramatic Irony: The Game" at times.

Viewing the story in such a piecemeal fashion has a profound effect on its impact, too. Watching only one side of these video conversations means seeing a lot of awkward silences, where the person you're watching is simply waiting and reacting to a monologue you can't see or hear. You can use a limited fast-forward and rewind feature to scrub through this "dead space" in the conversation and get to the next subtitled bit of dialogue, but you probably won't want to do that often.

That's because the actors in *Telling Lies*, to a person, provide some incredible non-verbal performances to go with the tight script. Every twist of the mouth or raise of the eyebrow will grab your attention and make you wonder just what these characters are responding to (which you can piece together when viewing the other side later). You also end up staring directly and frequently into usually unbroken close-ups on these actors, providing an intimate, confidential connection with their characters that's almost completely unique in the world of TV and film.

The basic story of *Telling Lies* could be told more directly and efficiently by just throwing all the one-sided conversations together in a split-screen and presenting them in chronological order. The result would be a well-acted but

relatively rote six-hour mini-series, with a lot of heavily telegraphed plot points and an ending that borders on the cliché.

I’m sure someone will put together this kind of treatment for *Telling Lies* on YouTube shortly after its release. But experiencing the story that way will take away the sense of serendipitous discovery and non-linear storytelling that makes the game special. After you finally log out of the game’s stolen database, the journey and the characters you’ve studied so closely along the way will stick with you much longer than the events being recounted.

The Good

- Superb acting and a tight script.
- Engrossing, intimate presentation.
- Non-linear, semi-random storytelling feel fresh and serendipitous.

The Bad

- The overarching plot is a bit rote and cliché.
- Can be a bit hard to keep track of what’s going on without notes.

The Ugly

- Not knowing how many clips are left for your “completionist” playthrough.

The Verdict: A well-presented story told in a fresh way. Buy it if you have any interest in new storytelling forms.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1556979

YouTube flags robot battle videos as “animal fights”

Enlarge / The “Great White” bot from King of Bots.

reader comments

4 with 4 posters participating

Share this story

On Monday, several YouTube users had their videos removed from the service due to YouTube’s restrictions on animal fight footage. This was confusing, because the videos in question showed no animals fighting; instead, they showed robots battling.

Robot combat has been around ever since Marc Thorpe launched the inaugural *Robot Wars* in San Francisco back in 1994. It has become popular around the world through shows like *BattleBots* in the US, *Robot Wars* in the UK, and the more recent *King of Bots* in China.

The big televised events usually showcase heavy (200lb/80kg+) bots, but those competitions are infrequent, so smaller weight classes have become popular. These classes require less money and less arena space, and some of the more popular events feature small bots in the “insect weight” classes (150 grams for Ant [UK]/Flea [US]), 1 pound for Ant [US], and 3 pounds for Beetle). Naturally, builders like to record and share videos of these robotic tussles.

On August 19, some of the smaller robots builders received an email from YouTube accusing them of uploading animal fight videos.

Enlarge / The YouTube takedown email to Paul Sinn.
One such message (shown as the image above) reads:

> *Your video was flagged to us for review. Upon review, we've determined that it violates our guidelines, and we've removed it from YouTube.*
>
> *We know that this might be disappointing, but it's important to us that YouTube is a safe place for all. If content breaks our rules, we remove it. If you think we've made a mistake, you can appeal, and we'll take another look. Keep reading for more details.*
>
> ***Video content restrictions***
>
> *Content that displays the deliberate infliction of animal suffering or the forcing of animals to fight is not allowed on YouTube. Examples include, but are not limited to, dog fighting and cock fighting.We review educational, documentary, artistic, and scientific content on a case-by-case basis. Limited exceptions are made for content with sufficient and appropriate context and where the purpose of posting is clear.*
>
> ***Impact on your account***
>
> *Please note that this removal has not resulted in a Community Guidelines strike or penalty on your account.*

Some creators were not so lucky, and they received notices giving them a strike.

Paul Sinn, a West Coast robot builder who has been competing with his family since 2010 as "House of Sinn," had 31 YouTube videos taken down. This resulted in two strikes against his account, which means he can't upload any more content for two weeks. If he gets a third strike within 90 days, he could be permanently banned.

Sinn said:

> *I record the events here in Seattle… and [my brother] records*

> *the events in California. We edit the videos when we can and upload them to my YouTube channel. I currently have 1600+ videos from Flea to Hobby Weight robots. I make no money from these videos, so these videos didn't hurt me monetarily, but some of the best bot designs were taken off—like Dark Pummeler and Launchpad McWhack. Now I have appealed all my videos. I have no plans on quitting in recording or competing.*

Andrew Rossol had several videos removed that he shot at RoboGames2017. Rossol has been uploading videos on behalf of the BattleBots team Deep Six for more than 13 years. "I think it's crazy that this stuff gets flagged," he said.

Rossol's fight videos did include some bot names that might suggest animals, such as "Sliver King vs catKong – RoboGames 2017." But no actual animals are found in the video.

Henry Aird, another Seattle-area builder and competitor, also received takedown notices for videos from a Western Allied Robotics (WAR) event uploaded May 2015. Unlike both Sinn and Rossol, his videos were not named in a way that might give any indication as to their content. They contained no "insect" tags, which puzzled Aird.

"The strange thing is my videos were named '0037' and '0050,'" Aird said. "I didn't change the video names or even tag them—they were just hastily uploaded to my page and sent to someone else to sort out, essentially. And they still got flagged for animal cruelty, so nothing makes any sense to me."

Enlarge / Henry Aird running a robot through combat drills.
The takedown notices make clear that the videos had been “reviewed” by YouTube first. This raises questions about what these reviews look like. Is the “reviewer” a computer program? It seems unlikely that humans actually looked at the videos in question.

We asked YouTube what happened here, and a spokesperson told us that the site sometimes gets it wrong. “With the massive volume of videos on our site, sometimes we make the wrong call,” said the spokesperson. “When it’s brought to our attention that a video has been removed mistakenly, we act quickly to reinstate it. We also offer uploaders the ability

to appeal removals, and we will re-review the content."

There is not, we were told, any prohibition on robot fighting videos.

After the issue was noticed, most (but not all) of the videos made a sudden, unannounced return early on August 20.

Moderation at scale is hard, and it's tempting to turn to algorithms, AI, and machine learning to help. But this story is a prime example of why human judgment remains a part of the digital systems that increasingly influence our lives.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1555937

Review: Pitch-perfect Ready or Not is a sharp and witty blood-soaked delight

Enlarge / Samara Weaving delivers a standout performance in the new horror comedy *Ready or Not*.
Fox Searchlight

reader comments

52 with 33 posters participating

Share this story

An unsuspecting bride finds herself fighting for her life on her wedding night in *Ready or Not*, a wickedly funny, blood-

soaked thriller that made its world premiere last month at the Fantasia International Film Festival in Toronto. I was on board in principle the moment the first trailer dropped in June, but good trailers don't always indicate a good film. Fortunately, *Ready or Not* lives up to its trailer.

(Some spoilers below.)

Grace (Samara Weaving, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) can't believe her good fortune when she falls in love with Alex Le Domas (Mark O'Brien, *Halt and Catch Fire*), a member of a wealthy gaming dynasty—although the family prefers the term "dominion." After a picture-perfect wedding on the family estate, Alex informs Grace that there's just one more formality to be observed: "At midnight, you have to play a game. It's just something we do when someone joins the family." The new family member must draw a card from a mysterious box to learn which game they will be playing.

Grace, alas, draws Hide and Seek, the worst possible card. That's because, as played by the Le Domas family, it has less in common with an innocent children's pastime and more with the classic 1924 short story "The Most Dangerous Game." Grace is the prey, and she must elude detection until dawn to avoid being killed in a bizarre ritual sacrifice.

"They think they have to kill you before sunrise or something very bad will happen to the family," Alex apologetically explains. It has something to do with a mysterious figure named Mister Le Bail, who struck a deal with the Le Domas family forebear several generations ago. He would grant the family great wealth in exchange for the occasional blood sacrifice. Goats usually suffice, but the Hide and Seek card requires a human sacrifice. It's probably nonsense, of course, but the Le Domas family isn't taking any chances.

Unfortunately for them, Grace turns out to be a formidable adversary despite being "just a blonde twig," as her new

father-in-law Tony (Henry Czerny, *Sharp Objects, Quantico*) calls her. It helps that her new in-laws are shockingly incompetent with the antique weaponry that family tradition dictates they use. Also, a cocaine-addled Emilie Le Domas (Melanie Scrofano, *Wynonna Earp*) keeps slaughtering maids by mistake. ("Does she look like she's wearing a giant wedding dress?")

Grace does seem to have Alex on her side: he still remembers the childhood trauma of watching family matriarch Helene Dumas (Nicky Guadagni, *Lars and the Real Girl*) tearfully protest as her new groom, the love of her life, was dragged off to the sacrificial altar. Alex's perpetually tipsy older brother, Daniel (Adam Brody, *Jennifer's Body, Shazam!*), is also sympathetic to Grace's plight but lacks the resolve to intervene. His own wife, Charity (Elyse Levesque, *Stargate Universe*), has no such compunctions, joining in the hunt with sadistic glee. And while Grace's new mother-in-law Becky (Andie MacDowell, *Groundhog Day, Four Weddings and a Funeral*) quite likes her son's new wife, she will always put the family tradition first.

Ready or Not gets the tone just right throughout, perfectly balanced between humor and horror. Moments like Emilie's husband, Fitch Bradley (Kristian Bruun, *Orphan Black*), watching YouTube videos on "Getting To Know Your Crossbow," provide a bit of comic relief and make those genuinely shocking bloody twists all the more effective. The pacing is crisp, the narrative is tight, it's genuinely suspenseful, and the entire cast is clearly having a blast in their respective roles.

Relative newcomer Samara Weaving in particular delivers a standout performance as Grace—a role that requires her to be, in turn, sweetly submissive, shocked and terrified, and a tough-as-nails badass in a fight for her life. Her wedding dress mirrors her character's inner journey, starting out pristine and gradually getting more ripped and stained with

blood and gore as her hellish wedding night progresses. Per the featurette embedded below, the production team designed 17 different versions of that dress for Weaving, including one incarnation with “so much goat carcass, you can’t even fathom.”

Late August is usually a pretty sluggish landscape when it comes to cinematic offerings, with most major studios holding big releases for the fall. *Ready or Not* brings a welcome bit of sharp-edged sparkle to these dog days of summer.

[embedded content]
Ready or Not featurette: 17 dresses.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1553603

Building a better trivia game with a Jeopardy master and Magic’s creator

reader comments

26 with 19 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

- An example of a *Half-Truth* card. There are three right answers, but you can make progress even if you pick only one.
- Most of these seem like they could poke a kid’s eye out.

- How old was Bill Murray when *The Jungle Book* came out?
- Tenne-seein' is Tenne-believin'.
- Richard Garfield and Ken Jennings' names feature prominently on the box.
- Titans of their respective fields.
- There aren't a lot of complicated rules or boards mucking things up.
- 500 cards are included in the box.

"I think most people's experience playing trivia is just feeling dumb, and that's no way to spend an evening."

That sentence probably doesn't describe Ken Jennings, who holds the record for the longest winning streak on TV quiz show *Jeopardy* after a 74-game winning streak (though he still lost to IBM's Watson in 2011). But Jennings, who actually shared the quote above in a recent interview with Ars, is smart enough to recognize that most people don't find the same joy in "pure" trivia tests that he does.

"If trivia is just knowledge retrieval, it's only fun if you get it right," Jennings told Ars. "It shouldn't just be middle-aged dads trading baseball statistics… It can involve deduction and lateral thinking, different kinds of cognition other than, 'Do I remember this thing my 9th grade teacher taught me.' One is fun, the other is fun only to a very, very small group of people."

Richard Garfield, the storied creator of *Magic: The Gathering* (and, more recently, Valve's *Artifact*), came to a similar conclusion after reading Jennings' book, *Brainiac*. "I was really taken by his love of trivia," Garfield said. "I learned to see trivia as being more than just a black-or-white test of whether you know it or not. Good trivia questions have an art to them, and have many more dimensions."

And so, a bit more than five years ago, Garfield reached out to Jennings to "make a trivia game that really brought those

elements out.” Today, on Kickstarter, they’re finally ready to unveil *Half-Truth*, their attempt to turn the world of trivia games on its ear.

Fixing a broken design

As a game designer, Garfield’s first task in making his own trivia game was to focus on the pain points that make standard trivia quizzes so unsatisfying for many.

“I thought back to my evenings playing trivia games, and I saw that one of the frustrating things was when I hit a long period of time where I knew nothing, or nothing that wasn’t known by almost everyone there,” Garfield said. “Then the one question where I was a master at the subject, where I was the only person who knew, that question got asked to someone else. So right off the bat, I resolved that everybody should be answering every question.”

Garfield also decided to stick with multiple choice questions, so players would always have a potential “hook” that could provide some insight into the answer. After testing cards with one right answer out of six choices, though, Garfield says he “moved to the much more interesting place” where three out of the six options were correct (or “half” true).

The Kickstarter pitch for *Half-Truth*.
That means, at worst, players have a 50% chance of stumbling on a right answer every time. And even if they don’t know the answer, players can improve those chances by eliminating answers they know are wrong or looking for patterns and groupings in the options.

Garfield gave an example from testing where a card asked players to identify which of the six options were types of mushrooms. The three wrong answers—Destroying Angel, Blinding Angel, and Thallid—were drawn from *Magic: The Gathering* cards (perhaps not surprisingly, as the question was written by

Garfield's wife). "This was sort of eye-opening for me; that was a clever way to make it so there were more angles into this card. If you know Magic cards real well, you don't need to know mushrooms at all."

For the "trivia jocks" who might play the game, there's also the option to push your luck and identify two or three answers. This gives you a slight bonus if you're correct but eliminates all of that turn's progress if you get even one choice wrong, introducing some basic risk-versus-reward strategy to the design.

Leveling the trivia playing field

Trivia games are usually lopsided based on who just happens to know (and can retrieve) more trivial information from their brains. But Garfield says *Half-Truth*'s design "gives you this start down an egalitarian path where everybody's got a chance," but without making the playing field completely flat.

"The people who aren't as trivia savvy will feel like they've got more of a chance," Garfield said. "Maybe they won't win, but they'll have their victories. I often try to create my games so that skillful play is an advantage, but it doesn't mean you win every single time."

The hope is to make each question in *Half-Truth* a bit of a logic puzzle that can be solved, rather than a pure test of recall. "Right in front of you [on each card] there are three right answers," Jennings pointed out. "They are right there… you're trying to solve the riddle, figure out which is which."

Jennings recalled winning the first Half-Truth test game he played with Garfield, after a year of development, and thinking, "Yes, exactly, this is how the universe should work. I should win trivia games." When they played again, though, Jennings lost, "and I thought, this is a very smart game, because sometimes the trivia expert has a small edge, but

that’s not always enough… The result is it’s the rare trivia game where you remember feeling smart when you play.

“People don’t feel well-informed,” Jennings added by way of explaining the paralysis many people feel around trivia games. “We’re a very information dense society today. And people feel like they don’t know enough stuff. We’re constantly feeling bad about the stuff that we know.

“The beauty of trivia is that opposite feeling, when something inside your head actually pays off,” he continued. “That’s such an amazing epiphany because it happens so rarely. We spend all this effort stuffing facts into out head, then occasionally, at a trivia board, something turns into real life points and it’s delightful. *Half-Truth* is structured to give more people that experience.”

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GameStop lays off 120 corporate staffers as stock continues to tumble

Brightly lit GameStop storefront.

reader comments

49 with 42 posters participating, including story author

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Major video game retailer GameStop has announced layoffs for 120 corporate staffers, representing a 14% reduction of the company's "total associate base at our company headquarters as well as at some other offices."

"While these changes are difficult, they were necessary to reduce costs and better align the organization with our efforts to optimize the business to meet our future objectives and success factors," GameStop said in a statement. "We recognize that this is a difficult day for our company and particularly for those associates impacted. We appreciate their dedication and service to GameStop and are committed to supporting them during this time of transition."

It's unclear if that number includes staffers at GameStop-owned Game Informer magazine, many of whom took to Twitter today to share news of their unexpected layoffs. Of the 19 staffers listed on the magazine's masthead at least six were let go today, including Managing Editor Matt Bertz.

"I appreciate all the love," Game Informer Editor-in-Chief Andy McNamara tweeted today. "I see it. I feel it. I am trying to get things right with my people. I love Game Informer, its people, and its readers more than any corporation could, and I will address all the issues when I can, but for now I need to focus on my GI family."

Can the sinking ship be raised?

The layoffs continue a string of bleak news for GameStop, which still maintains well over 5,000 storefronts across 14 countries. After the company announced it had failed to find a buyer in January, it posted a massive quarterly loss in April, causing its stock to plummet to its lowest point since 2005. Since then, Gamestop saw its CFO and COO depart, instituted layoffs of 50 "field leaders," and shuttered its ThinkGeek

collectibles subsidiary.

As of this writing, GameStop stock is trading at $3.42. That’s down 17% from a month ago, nearly 80% from a year ago, and almost 94% from its peak in late 2013.

In June, new GameStop CEO George Sherman outlined a three-point “Reboot” plan to turn things around at the struggling retailer. Point one in that plan was addressing “selling, general, and administrative expenses,” which seems to be the target of these recent layoffs. The other two points involved “optimiz[ing] the current business,” in part through better prices on used games; and “develop[ing] new revenue streams for the future,” including more involvement digital sales and “immersive interactive experiences,” whatever that means.

Those kinds of changes might not be enough to save GameStop from the seemingly inexorable move towards downloads and Internet streams that claimed other physical media retailers like Suncoast and Tower Records. In any case, we’d imagine the GameStop belt-tightening is going to get even more drastic before any potential turnaround starts to appear.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1555261

Spider-Man is out of the MCU thanks to Sony/Disney standoff

Enlarge / “Mr. Feige, I don’t feel so good.” Marvel Studios

President Kevin Feige will not be producing the next two Spider-Man films with Sony Pictures.

reader comments

151 with 85 posters participating

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Deadline Hollywood reports that future blockbuster films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe will likely be missing a key figure: Spider-Man. Apparently, Sony Pictures and Disney/Marvel have failed to reach new terms for the franchise acceptable to both parties. That means Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige will not be a producer on the two more Spider-Man movies reportedly in the works.

It's kind of shocking news, given that this summer's *Spider-Man: Far From Home* seemed to be setting up young Peter Parker (Tom Holland) as a worthy successor to Tony Stark's Iron Man in future MCU films. But there were hints: Marvel didn't announce any new Spider-Man films at San Diego Comic Con this year—although the studio did reveal a whole slew of projects in development for the next phase of the MCU, now that the original Avengers multi-film storyline has come to a fitting close with *Endgame*.

So what happened? 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.

This is honestly a head-scratching move on Sony's part, given the key role Feige played in successfully rebooting the

Spider-Man franchise with Holland in the title role. Granted, it's understandable that the studio wouldn't want to give up so much of its stake in its most successful (and profitable) franchise. *Spider-Man: Far From Home* was the studio's highest-grossing film ever. But as Deadline Hollywood points out, it's a bit like saying one can win the NBA Championship without Michael Jordan:

> *Feige's first decade at Marvel is largely unblemished, and his consistency has been nothing short of historic: even George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Jackson haven't seen everything turn into a hit, and so maybe only James Cameron has the success record that Feige has achieved. But Feige has done it all in the last 10 years, producing and overseeing 23 superheroes, with not a flop in the bunch. They've all been number-one openers that have collectively grossed $26.8 billion. Feige this year became the producer of the top-grossing film ever for two studios—Sony and Disney—and he produced three of the top-four highest-grossing films this year in Avengers: Endgame, Captain Marvel and Spider-Man: Far From Home. This after scoring the first-ever Best Picture Oscar nom for a superhero film last year with Black Panther. I ca't think of a Hollywood producer/executive who has done anything close to this.*

That said, Sony produced the Oscar-winning *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* independent of Disney, so maybe it's a good business decision after all. Tom Holland and director Jon Watts are still signed on for future Spider-Man movies, among other projects. And Disney/Marvel has all those new projects for the next phase of the MCU in the works. As for Feige, he's taking on the X-Men universe, including Deadpool, on top of everything else in the wake of the 20th Century Fox acquisition. So he'll have his hands full. The only real losers here are MCU fans, who will miss seeing their favorite webslinger mixing it up with the surviving Avengers and other

characters going forward.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1555101

Apple TV+ will launch in November for $9.99, facing off against Disney+ at $6.99

Enlarge / Tim Cook announces Apple TV+ at an event on March 25, 2019.

reader comments

75 with 58 posters participating

Share this story

Disney earlier this year announced that it will launch its Disney+ streaming TV service on November 12 in the United States for $6.99 per month. Yesterday, Bloomberg's Mark Gurman published a report claiming that Apple's competing TV service, Apple TV+, will also launch in November, but likely at $9.99.

Both companies are entering an increasingly crowded streaming TV landscape that already includes the likes of HBO, Netflix, CBS, Showtime, and Starz, among others, and will soon see other major entries like HBO Max, offerings from AT&T, and offerings from NBC Universal.

According to the Bloomberg report, which cites people familiar with Apple's plans, Apple TV+ will launch with a "small selection of shows," including *The Morning Show*, *Amazing Stories*, *See*, *Truth Be Told*, and a documentary series about houses called *Home*. Apple is still mulling over prices, the report says, but is leaning toward $9.99.

The company is also still weighing its options about how to release the content. While Netflix usually releases entire seasons of shows on one day, and HBO releases episodes weekly, one of the options Apple is considering would involve releasing the first three episodes of a season all at once, then pushing episodes weekly after that. Another report this week, this time by Financial Times, claimed that Apple is spending $6 billion on original shows and movies this year.

Disney+ will offer original series at a weekly cadence, plus some back catalog content from its various brands (including Marvel, Star Wars, ABC, Fox, Pixar, and many more) in the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands starting November 12. The service will then launch in Australia and New Zealand on November 19, with all other regions to follow within two years, according to previous statements by Disney leadership.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1554907

The Matrix 4 is officially happening with Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss

Enlarge / We assume the next Matrix film’s title will be different than this. But will it be better? After “Reloaded” and “Revolutions,” well, we don’t know.

reader comments

201 with 136 posters participating

Share this story

It’s official: the *Matrix* film series is coming back with a fourth numbered entry. And it will see the return of original trilogy stars Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss to their respective roles as Neo and Trinity.

Lana Wachowski, who served as co-writer and co-director for all three original trilogy films alongside sibling Lilly, has been confirmed as the sole Wachowski family member (so far) in the writer/director chair. Wachowski will be joined by Aleksandar Hemon and David Mitchell as co-writers, whose names will likely be familiar to Wachowski fans. Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* was eventually developed into a feature-length film by the Wachowskis, while Mitchell and Hemon co-wrote much of the Wachowski-helmed Netflix series *Sense8*.

Warner Bros. Pictures chairman Toby Emmerich on Tuesday gave an official statement on the matter, telling Variety, “We could not be more excited to be re-entering The Matrix with Lana… We are thrilled that she is writing, directing and producing this new chapter in *The Matrix* universe.” In the same report, Wachowski told Variety, “Many of the ideas Lilly and I explored 20 years ago about our reality are even more relevant now. I’m very happy to have these characters back in my life and grateful for another chance to work with my brilliant friends.”

Neither Variety's report nor Warner Bros.' announcement clarified whether Lilly will be involved in the sequel's production. Lilly Wachowski took a leave of absence from *Sense8*'s second season and hasn't been heard from professionally since. They were similarly bereft of any other information about casting, characters, or the film's plot. A tentative production schedule is pegged to begin in "2020." (To clarify: we currently do not know whether the film will be called *The Matrix 4* or if it will receive another weirdly subtitled name. *The Matrix Unboxed*, maybe?)

This news follows rumors and speculation that Warner Bros. was eyeing a motion-picture reboot of the *Matrix* series in 2017, with actor Michael B. Jordan and writer Zak Penn reportedly attached. Those efforts eventually sputtered, and they were never so formally announced and embraced as Warner Bros. has done today with this *Matrix* sequel announcement.

When those 2017 rumors began circulating, Reeves, while promoting the recently launched *John Wick 2*, had mentioned interest in returning to the *Matrix* series, but only with the formal participation of the Wachowskis.

After the original *Matrix* exploded at the box office in 1999—and inspired an entire new generation of cinematic sci-fi moviemaking—its two sequels saw the film's original promise crushed under the weight of a more confusing and sprawling metaverse. A series of underwhelming follow-up video games didn't help the series' reputation, either, though a straight-to-video series of animated featurettes, 2003's *The Animatrix*, benefited from tighter interpretations of the film's characters and ideas. The Wachowskis have since struggled to recapture the same acclaim they enjoyed from the first Matrix film, with follow-up efforts like *Speed Racer*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Sense8* all enjoying a mix of mainstream confusion and niche fandom.

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