Lawrence of Arabia takes on Rasputin in first trailer for The King’s Man



reader comments

38 with 28 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Ralph Fiennes plays T.E. Lawrence, who forms a fledgling spy agency in *The King’s Man*, 20th Century Fox’s prequel to the popular *Kingsman* film series.
Lawrence of Arabia is setting up an independent intelligence agency to take down Grigori Rasputin and Mata Hari, among others, in the first trailer for *The King’s Man*. Even though it’s Director Matthew Vaughan’s prequel to his popular Kingsman franchise, the trailer is conspicuously lacking in the dark humor that made its predecessors so broadly appealing. But there’s enough hyper-stylized action sequences to assure us that, stylistically, this will be very much a

Kingsman movie.

(Spoilers for first two Kingsman films below.)

The Kingsman franchise is based on the Marvel comic series *The Secret Service* by Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons, which spawned two very successful action/comedy spy films. In the first film, Eggsy (Taron Egerton), the young son of a deceased Kingsman agent, is recruited to follow in his father's footsteps by Harry Hart (Colin Firth), aka Galahad. (All the Kingsman agents take on the monikers of the Knights of the Round Table.)

The agency is looking for a new Lancelot, and Eggsy narrowly loses the job to Roxy (Sophie Cookson). But he gets another chance when a second agent is lost in the line of duty, and he joins up with Roxy and Merlin (Mark Strong) to foil a nefarious plot by tech entrepreneur Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson).

Kingsman: The Secret Service grossed more than $400 million worldwide when it debuted in 2014, earning praise for its deft comic touches and hyper-stylized action sequences, although some found the cartoonish violence and occasional low-brow sexual humor off-putting. (There's a massacre inside a church, for instance, and a lot of exploding heads in the climactic finale.) Eggsy was back and in top form for *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017), this time teaming up with the agency's American counterparts, Statesman, to overthrow a drug cartel.

The prequel will explore the origins of the very first independent intelligence agency. Per the official synopsis: "As a collection of history's worst tyrants and criminal masterminds gather to plot a war to wipe out millions, one man must race against time to stop them." Among those tyrants is Grigori Rasputin (played by Rhys Ifans). Historically, Rasputin was a mystic who gained considerable influence in the court of Tsar Nicholas II, only to be assassinated by a

conspiring group of nobles in 1916. Legend has it that it took several attempts to finally kill him. I'm guessing the "unkillable" mythos should provide excellent fodder for his fictionalized portrayal in *The King's Man*.

- T.E. Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) recruits Conrad (Harris Dickinson) for a new spy agency.
- A lone soldier carrying a fallen comrade across a battlefield.
  20th Century Fox
- The Great War has taken its toll.
  20th Century Fox
- Grigori Rasputin (Rhys Ifans) seems to be quite the ladies' man.
  20th Century Fox
- Lawrence has his game face on.
  20th Century Fox
- Political unrest leads to an assassination attempt.
  20th Century Fox
- Mata Hari (Gemma Arterton) takes aim.
  20th Century Fox
- Every walking stick should come standard with a hidden rapier.
- Lawrence has a secret passageway hidden in the library.
  20th Century Fox
- 20th Century Fox
- Hanging on for dear life.
  20th Century Fox
- Conrad knows his way around a pistol… and a tux.
  20th Century Fox
- The once and future Kingsman headquarters.
  20th Century Fox

This first trailer opens on a desolate battlefield during World War I, as a young soldier comes into view carrying a fallen comrade on his back. That young soldier is Conrad (Harris Dickinson), who finds himself being recruited by famed

archaeologist and British officer T.E. Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) to join a fledgling spy agency. (In his pre-*Schindler* days, Fiennes played Lawrence in *A Dangerous Man: Lawrence After Arabia*, which came out 27 years ago.)

“Throughout time, our people robbed, lied, and killed, until one day we found ourselves noblemen,” Fiennes says in the somber voiceover, presumably speaking to Conrad. “That nobility never came from chivalry. It came from being tough. And ruthless. Real power is not found running off to war. Real power lies in understanding who it is you’re truly fighting and how they can be defeated. I know you want to fight. But there are other ways of doing your duty.”

The all-star cast includes Liam Neeson as the first Earl of Kitchener, Charles Dance (aka Tywin Lannister from *Game of Thrones*) as Field Marshal Haig, Stanley Tucci as Merlin, Matthew Goode, Djimon Hounsou, and Alison Steadman. Courtesan/spy Mata Hari (Gemma Arterton) also makes an appearance. The last shot is Lawrence and Conrad standing outside the tailor shop that will become the agency’s headquarters. Maybe we’ll get a sneak peek at the third installment in the main Kingsman series in a post-credit sequence once the film comes out; the two films reportedly were shot back to back.

The King’s Man is slated to hit theaters on February 14, 2020.

Listing image by 20th Century Fox

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1536171

Why is there no smoking in Gears 5? It depends on who you ask



Enlarge / Don’t expect any more cigar-chomping characters to show up in the *Gears* games going forward.

reader comments

111 with 60 posters participating

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The upcoming *Gears 5* will not feature any on-screen depictions or references to smoking, according to the developers at The Coalition. But the precise sequence of events leading to that decision is apparently up for some debate.

The smoke-free story gained attention over the weekend with a report in Variety that linked the decision to a pressure campaign from the anti-smoking advocates at the Truth Initiative. According to Variety, The Coalition decided to remove the smoking references after Truth reached out to Turner Broadcasting, which featured *Gears 5* as part of an invitational tournament filmed during its *ELeague* esports over the weekend.

That sequence seems plausible, especially considering that Truth is a presenting sponsor of the tournament, which is officially titled "Eleague Gears Summer Series Invitational powered by Truth." And Truth has a long history of pressuring media companies to remove smoking references from their products, a move that recently led to changes in Netflix's youth-focused programming.

But The Coalition Studio Head Rod Fergusson said Truth is claiming a victory that it actually had no hand in. "Just to clarify, I've always been anti-smoking and have pushed back on having it in *Gears* since day 1," Fergusson tweeted in response to coverage of the story late Friday. "There was no smoking to remove from *Gears 4* or *5* because there never was any smoking to begin with. And as long as I'm in control, there never will be. Sorry for the confusion."

"My dad smoked," Fergusson added by way of further explanation in a follow-up tweet. "He died of a heart attack at age 38. I was 4."

Before The Coalition took over with *Gears of War 4*, the series featured a handful of prominent tobacco references under the auspices of then-developer Epic Games. COG Michael Barrick, for instance, is rarely shown without a trademark cigar dangling from his lips.

The *Gears of War* series, which has always been rated M for Mature by the ESRB, is well-known for featuring significant

amounts of violence and gore that might make on-screen smoking seem like a minor issue. But Turner Senior VP Seth Ladetsky noted to Variety that removing tobacco references doesn't have nearly as much impact on the nature of the game as removing or toning down the violence would. "As you remove these images, it does have an impact," he said regarding the imagery's influence on real-world smokers.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1536193

Flay your mind: Stranger Things S3 just might be the show's best season yet



Enlarge / Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and the gang are back to

face down yet another supernatural threat to Hawkins, Indiana, in the third season of *Stranger Things*.
YouTube/Netflix

reader comments

109 with 73 posters participating

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***Warning**: This story contains spoilers for episodes 5-8 of* Stranger Things*' third season, following up on Nathan Matisse's slightly spoiler-y review of episodes 1-4. You can read our non-spoiler preview of the new season here, or catch up on what's come before with past Ars stories on season one and season two.*

Everyone's favorite teen sleuthing squad is back, taking on Russian operatives, local corruption, and the latest supernatural evil to emerge from the Upside Down in the third season of Netflix's *Stranger Things*. Anyone who feared the series might be losing its luster, three years on, should rest easy: season three is just as good as the first—in some respects, even better.

The first season was set in November 1983, when an accident at a secret government lab opened an inter-dimensional portal and unleashed a supernatural threat from a different dimension onto the unsuspecting town of Hawkins, Indiana, in the form of a creature dubbed the Demogorgon. The source of that accident? A young girl with psychokinetic powers, known only as Eleven (Milly Bobby Brown). She escaped the lab and was befriended by a group of preteens whose friend Will (Noah Schnapp) mysteriously disappeared into an alternate dimension dubbed the Upside Down. They teamed up to find Will and defeat the monster that took him.

In season 2, we learned that monster was just the tip of the iceberg, and an even more powerful entity, dubbed The Mind Flayer, threatened the town, possessing poor Will, who was

still traumatized by his stay in the Upside Down. Eleven managed to close the portal, but the final scene showed the Mind Flayer still lurking ominously in that dark mirror image of Hawkins.

In season three, Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Will, Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Max (Sadie Sink), and Eleven are growing up and pairing off, with all the usual melodrama that goes along with such scenarios. Mike's sister Nancy (Natalia Dyer) is still dating Will's older brother Jonathon (Charlie Heaton). Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) isn't dealing well with Mike and Eleven's teen romance, while Will's mother, Joyce (Wynona Ryder), is struggling to cope with the great personal loss she suffered last season.

Our plucky teen heroes learned a lot about the Mind Flayer over the course of two seasons. But the monster has also been learning about them, and it's back to take revenge—and it knows Eleven is the only real threat standing in its way. In the trailer, we learned that the Mind Flayer was never trapped in the Upside Down when Eleven closed the portal at the end of season two. It has been lurking in Hawkins this entire time, which means it has found a new host: Max's older stepbrother, Billy (Dacre Montgomery). And Billy is recruiting more townspeople as hosts, all with the aim of building a creature that can take out Eleven once and for all, leaving it free to flay the minds of pretty much everyone else alive.

Summer sleuthin'

- "You can't have America without Erica."
- Maya Hawke joins the cast as Steve's Scoops Ahoy co-worker, Robin.
- The "Scoop Troop" (including Erica) almost steals the entire season.
- Teen sleuths on the trail of clues.
- Eleven and Max's budding friendship blossoms at the

Starcourt Mall.

- Local newspaper reporter Bruce Lowe (Jake Busey) is an embarrassment to journalism even before the Mind Flayer arrives.
- Bickering odd couple Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper (aka "Fat Rambo") are tracking down a Russian plot.
- Eleven probes the Upside Down for more clues.
- Billy is about to meet the Mind Flayer.
- Hopper gets stood up on his first date with Joyce.
- Cary Elwes is appropriately smarmy as corrupt Mayor Larry Kline.

The best part of this new season is how tightly plotted it is; the pacing is well-nigh perfect, even if it takes several episodes before the purpose behind various developments becomes clear. Given the complicated narrative and sheer size of the cast—not to mention the need to give all the leads key roles in the approaching showdown—that's no small feat. There are a lot of moving pieces.

While Eleven, Mike, and the rest of the gang are just as delightful as ever, the colorful supporting cast frequently threatens to steal the show, most notably the "Scoop Troop." Dustin joins forces with reformed high school jock Steve Harrington (Joe Keery), Steve's co-worker at Scoops Ahoy ice cream parlor, Robin (Maya Hawke, spawn of Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke), and Lucas' precocious little sister Erica (Priah Ferguson). They discover the Russians are building a secret lab under the new Starcourt Mall, with the help of the corrupt Hawkins mayor, Larry Kline (Cary Elwes).

The other supporting standouts include investigative journalist/conspiracy theorist Murray Bauman (Brett Gelman), who still has that keen relationship insight he showed in season two, this time directed toward the unspoken tension between Joyce and Hopper. They need him to translate for Alexei (Alec Utgoff), a Russian engineer only too willing to dish on the machine they've been building under the mall to

reopen the portal to the Upside Down—so long as he can watch Looney Toons and get a steady supply of cherry-flavored Slurpees.

As my colleague Nathan Matisse pointed out in his review of the first half of the season, Nancy and Jonathan are stuck in the weakest storyline, interning at the local paper. But even that leads somewhere in the end, as the pair (eventually) discovers that people are being possessed by the Mind Flayer. As in prior seasons, eventually all those threads converge and lead to a showdown with the Mind Flayer—this time at the Starcourt Mall.

(MAJOR spoilers below. Stop now if you haven't finished watching the season.)

Eleven has always been the Hawkins secret weapon when it comes to beating back the Mind Flayer, although the rest of the cast certainly contributed. In season three, the Duffer brothers up the ante by effectively taking Eleven out of the equation. She gets bitten by the Flay-Monster (a huge, shape-shifting thing with Graboid-like tentacles), and despite removing the parasite planted in her leg, that brief infection neutralizes her telekinetic powers.

It's a savvy move, since otherwise the finale would have seemed too much like a retread from seasons past. In the end, it takes a village to defeat the Mind Flayer and save the world. Every main cast member brings some unique attribute to the table: Nancy's marksmanship, for instance; Jonathan's mechanical know-how; Dustin's supersized ham radio (dubbed "Cerebro"); and Lucas' love of powerful fireworks. Unable to rely on her powers, Eleven can still use her prior access to his memories, and her natural empathy, to reach whatever is left of Billy's mind, prompting him to redeem himself by making one last courageous stand against the beast that has hijacked his brain. The bully gets a hero's death.

The biggest twist in the season finale is Hopper sacrificing himself so that Joyce can blow up the Russian machine, closing the portal and cutting off the Flay-Monster from its energy source, the Upside Down. It's likely to break fans' hearts even more than the heroic death of lovable dweeb Bob Newby (Sean Astin) in season two. Like Billy, Hopper has his issues, stemming from the loss of his daughter and subsequent breakup of his marriage. He's been slowly crawling his way out of a dark emotional hole, thanks to Eleven and some nascent sparks with Joyce. The wordless look of anguish that passes between Joyce and Eleven when the latter realizes she's lost her father is far more devastating than any dialogue could have conveyed.

It's not over yet

Netflix hasn't officially renewed the series for a fourth season, but given the record-breaking viewer numbers, it's just a matter of time. A mid-credits scene hints 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, they drag off a Russian prisoner and lock him in a room with a captive Demogorgon, which proceeds to devour the screaming prisoner.

There has been much online speculation that "the American" refers to Hopper, since we never actually saw him die, plus loyal fans aren't quite ready to give up hope that David Harbour and his "dad bod" will be back at some point. Or perhaps it refers 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.

The Duffer brothers recently hinted to *Entertainment Weekly* that season four will open up the storytelling to include plot lines outside of Hawkins—and that yes, the Russians and their captive Demogorgon will be playing a major role. We've already seen some of that in season two's "The Lost Sister" episode, where Eleven went to Chicago to find Kali (Linnea Berthelsen), another young woman with special powers—also the victim of Brenner's secret laboratory. It's no coincidence that the Byers family moved out of Hawkins, taking Eleven with them. We'll probably see Eleven grappling with the loss of her powers (hopefully just temporary) in the fourth season, and maybe Kali will come back into the picture, given how influential she was in helping Eleven realize the full potential of her telekinetic ability.

The Duffer brothers have also said that they are likely to end *Stranger Things* after a fourth (or possibly a fifth) season. Frankly, I'm not sure how much further they can raise the dramatic stakes before it all becomes a bit too familiar and repetitive. But given how well they developed everything for this fantastic third season, I'm willing to take season four on faith—for now.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1534271

RetroArch will be Steam's biggest emulation launch yet,

coming July 30



Coming to Steam on July 30.

reader comments

58 with 45 posters participating

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RetroArch is coming to Steam as a free download on July 30, marking what appears to be the largest non-commercial emulation launch ever on Valve's digital download storefront. The news came on Friday via an announcement from Libretro, the open source development collective that maintains the RetroArch launcher app for a massive range of operating systems.

In an email interview with Ars Technica, Libretro's Daniel De Matteis claimed that the software's impending launch did not require any conversations with Steam over the storefront's rules about emulation. However, there does appear to be a fuzzy dance going on with this launch, as Friday's announcement includes the following curious claim: "While there is nothing particularly [sic] about RetroArch or the Libretro API that has anything to do with emulators, most do… use it for this purpose." We're not sure what *other* use case is enabled by RetroArch, honestly. Its menu system revolves around finding, downloading, updating, and booting "cores"

that are dedicated to emulating classic video game consoles, and by default, it leads users to cores that advertise compatibility with games from popular consoles made by Nintendo, Sega, Sony, and others.

Valve doesn't appear to have any public-facing rules about whether emulators are allowed on Steam, and poking around Steam reveals a few limited emulator apps. A pair of announcements about rules for Steam's discussion boards, meanwhile, make patently clear that discussions *about* emulators are expressly forbidden—and are classified as a "piracy" topic. Valve representatives did not immediately answer our questions about RetroArch.

- RetroArch's current vanilla front-end, which users can skin and customize to their heart's content. Before loading any software, however, users will need to load a "core," which is essentially a system-specific emulator.
- Don't have any cores? Never fear. RetroArch will point you to dozens of them to download directly to your computer.
- It's a *lot* of options, even multiple per popular console. But many require a BIOS file, which you can either rip directly from a console you own or find in other ways.
- The list is quite long, and it's all built into RetroArch directly.
- The PS3-like interface also lets users turn RetroArch into a multimedia-viewing app, complete with audio, photo, and video tabs.

The version of RetroArch coming to Steam on July 30 will be identical to the one you could otherwise download from RetroArch's official site, though the team is limiting Steam's launch to Windows "to make sure we can handle the demand" before adding MacOS and Linux options down the line. Thus, whatever you download from Steam won't include any emulators,

per se. Instead, the app will direct you to emulator download options with only a few clicks through its default, online-connected interface. Crucially, RetroArch does *not* include download links within its app to console-specific BIOS files. For most RetroArch emulators, you'll need one of these to boot any software, and if you don't rip a BIOS file directly from your legally owned console, you may enter a legally gray area as a result. (The same goes for whatever games or ROMs you load into said emulators, as well.)

De Matteis tells Ars that this Steam version has been in the works "for a few months now," and he expresses specific interest in using Steamworks' Web API for future RetroArch builds. If such features are built, he says, that would create a fork in RetroArch's build distribution; until then, what you download from RetroArch's official site will be identical to the builds on Steam. (In a long-story-short explanation, De Matteis says that the Web API may prove necessary for the following red-tape reason: "There are certain licensing 'how many angels can stand on the head of a pin' issues that pertain to the Steamworks SDK and how the GPL license interprets what constitutes a system library or not.") "We have bandied about the term 'cross-platform game console' a lot, and a lot of people might not really know what that means," De Matteis says. "But we hope as we add more and more platforms on which RetroArch can run, people will start realizing what we're going for—and why porting applications to the Libretro API is such a powerful and compelling thing that has nothing but positive benefits for users and developers alike."

This article has been updated to clarify emulator availability on Steam.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1535297

Atari 2600 rarity Extra Terrestrials goes on sale for $90,000



reader comments

40 with 33 posters participating

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Got $90,000 burning a hole in your pocket? If so, you seemingly have a rare opportunity to purchase one of the rarest Atari 2600 games in existence.

Extra Terrestrials (not to be confused with the notorious movie-licensed Atari 2600 flop *E.T.*) was an actual Atari 2600 game sold near the tail end of the 2600's commercial existence in early 1984. But the cartridge was almost completely unknown, even among the Atari collecting community, until

October of 2011. That's when a copy turned up as a contribution to Canada's Personal Computer Museum in Brantford, Ontario.

With a bit of research, curators at the museum were able to determine that the game's maker, Skill Screen Games, was centered around the Banting family of Burlington, Ontario (making this the only Canadian-produced Atari 2600 game, to boot). The Bantings, hoping to cash in on the Atari craze and the continuing hype around the *E.T.* movie, hired a programmer named Herman Quast to write a simple two-player maze game for the Atari 2600, with plans to sell that game through distributors for the 1983 holiday season.

After a delay pushed the release into early 1984, though, the great video game crash of 1983 had pretty much eliminated any chance of an unknown (and pretty derivative) game finding interest from distributors. But the Bantings decided to see their investment through, producing roughly 100 cartridges and selling them door to door in the area, according to the creators.

It's worth how much?

[embedded content]
The first public video of *Extra Terrestrials*' (uninspiring) gameplay, posted by the Computer History Museum in 2011.
Fast forward to 2011, when this unknown and unheralded game found its way to the museum. After tracking down the creators and backing up the ROM for archival and distribution, curators produced a limited edition run of 100 "Special Edition" carts for the collector's market. The museum has since obtained two more of the game's original run of cartridges and discovered a fourth that currently belongs to developer Herman Quast.

But this is seemingly the first time that a copy of this little-known gaming rarity has been up for private sale. The seller, who has a perfect feedback rating going back for years

on eBay, says they "purchased this game from a seller who found this game in the Brantford area close to the site of production. I paid a premium price for it myself and it is very difficult for me to make this choice but I thought I would open the opportunity to the world to get their hands on a truly unique piece of gaming history."

With no previous sales for *Extra Terrestrials* on record, it's hard to say whether this cartridge is actually *worth* $90,000, even to the most intense Atari collectors. Retro gaming expert Racketboy estimated its worth at $7,000 to $15,000 back in October 2018. That valuation put it somewhat below *Air Raid*, another oddly shaped, incredibly rare Atari cartridge that sold for over $33,000 in 2012.

[embedded content]
A video highlighting some contemporary news reports about the discovery of *Extra Terrestrials* in 2011.
Even at $90,000, *Extra Terrestrials*' asking price is below the $100,000 garnered for a pristine, sticker-sealed test market copy of *Super Mario Bros.* earlier this year. But that was a (thus far) one-of-a-kind find that represents one of the most well-regarded and culturally significant games of all time. While *Extra Terrestrials* has an interesting history, it's not a game that brings up nostalgic memories or anything more than historic curiosity for pretty much anyone.

For what it's worth, it seems like this eBay listing has already been ended and then re-listed, seemingly due to a fraudulent buyer. So serious bidders interested in spending $90,000 on a single Atari cartridge only, please.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1535407

Stranger Things 3, eps. 1-4: Hawkins, Indiana, will never be the same



Enlarge / Perhaps teen romance can split ‘em up temporarily, but you can’t keep the gang apart for long if evil lurks around Hawkins.

reader comments

66 with 45 posters participating

Share this story

***Warning**: This story contains some spoilers for episodes 1-4 of* Stranger Things*‘ third season. You can read our non-spoiler preview of the new season here, or catch up on what’s come before with past Ars stories on season one and season two.*
Russians. It always had to be Russians.

Maybe it should be called Gorbachev’s Law, but put any kind of get-the-gang-together action story into the 1980s, and eventually modern democracy’s favorite villain must rear its head. And in *Stranger Things 3,* the show wastes no time—this

go-around may be once again centered in Hawkins, but S3's very first scene shows there's no going back after the events of the show's first two seasons. The scope and scale of evil facing our favorite now-teenage heroes grows simultaneously as they do.

Of course, precisely *how* the larger number of baddies—the Russians, the shady Starcourt Mall employees, the supernatural Upside Down forces that seemingly watched *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 version obviously, this being 1985) since last season—intersect, what they're working toward, and why they choose to prey upon the already unfortunately victimized town of Hawkins remains a mystery for *Stranger Things 3*'s second half. But if the first four episodes of Netflix's current flagship have shown us anything, it's that the Duffer Bros. recognized their show's familiar, nostalgic formula needed to change. And luckily for those of us raptly watching, they appear to have a story in mind that can accommodate such evolution.

- Perhaps *Stranger Things 3*'s real MVPs: The Duffer Bros. (Matt Duffer left, Ross right) and Priah Ferguson, who plays Lucas' little sister, Erica.
  Tina Rowden/Netflix
- Will the Wise is no longer constantly possessed, but he's still very much figuring out his place in his new teen world.
- Joyce and Hopper remain a satisfying detective duo in S3.
- We have a Scott Clarke sighting!
- Any Steve and Dustin adventures remain gold in S3, and once again their comedic side quests appear to not be so tangential.
- Girl power is pretty dang effective and enjoyable in *Stranger Things 3*'s first half.
- Billy, once a normal jerk, now perhaps a much more dangerous wolf in jerk's clothing.

- Mrs. Wheeler, hear us out, this is *not* a good idea on many levels (even if it’s an amusing bit for the elder fans).
- Uh, thanks Heather. We’ll pass for now.
- The more we learn about Cary Elwes’ Mayor Kline, the less we like the guy.
- And the award for best addition to the S3 cast so far goes to…

Growing up is hard to do (the show makes it look easy)

The most striking thing from the first half of *Stranger Things S3* is how grown up the show has become. Yes, physically our kid heroes have become teen heroes. But rather than struggling with that (and, say, rushing to produce as much as possible before actors age and look implausibly out of middle/high school), the story has grown in logical ways to accommodate how life as an early teen is different from life as an almost teen—and it neatly ties this coming-of-age material to the series’ usual dark-and-eerie fun.

Initially, the thing that most occupies and complicates life for Mike, Eleven, and the gang isn’t another demon prince, it’s the demands of puberty. The group has coupled off to an extent—Mike with Eleven, Lucas with Max, Will with dying dreams of another round of D&D—and struggles to define a new normal. Never mind larger group dynamics, what does healthy dating look like for never-been-kissed Mike Wheeler and never-been-out-of-the-lab Eleven? New (again) dad Jim Hopper certainly doesn’t think he’s seeing it, as most nights at the household involve Mike and El kissing the night away, and the fallout from this has ripple effects for the series early on. So far, the only time we see all the kids together may be when they welcome Dustin home from his summer camp.

Luckily, everyone has plenty to do while paired off. The boys (Mike, Lucas, and Will) initially have the most grounded-in-reality task: they're heartbroken, don't understand relationships, and simply must get over fleeting sorrow. Doing this only further opens a divide, though—in perhaps his best performance to date, Noah Schnapp (Will) gets a standout sequence in episode three as he gives Mike a piece of his mind after the constant hyper-focus on the girls pushes Will to snap. Mike thoughtlessly tries to defend himself ("I'm not trying to be a jerk, but," he begins. "We're not kids anymore—what did you think? We were never going to get girlfriends? We're going to sit in my basement and play games for the rest of our lives?"), sending Will stomping off for a little reflection time… which eventually proves crucial to the group's ability to sniff out the fact something's up in town.

The girls, on the other hand, take action. Eleven has always had the ability to mentally teleport elsewhere when her senses are deprived, so she and Max are spying on the boys before moving onto some telepathic spin the bottle. It eventually lands on Max's older brother, Billy (effectively last season's one-note jerk), revealing that perhaps the Upside Down hasn't been so neatly sealed off from the real world. The two groups come to the same conclusion in dramatically different ways before reuniting to do something about it, engaging in a slick action sequence where they must lure a possibly demonic Billy into a public pool sauna in order to burn some Mind Flayer out of him (nicely leveraging knowledge they discovered last season).

[embedded content]
The latest trailer for *Stranger Things S3.*
A sequence like this perhaps couldn't have existed in earlier seasons. There's a repeated sense of genuine danger—Billy nearly stabbing his sister; El getting choked out by a human—that would have felt "too much" previously. The show has always been TV-14 (the very first episode involves a monster

hunting down a young kid and lab workers getting murdered by something supernatural), but its cast and content have aged up to that line now. Barb (and Bob!) died for this.

Luckily, things aren't all dark CW drama around Hawkins. As much fun as it is to watch our heroes unravel whatever mystery and address whatever danger awaits them, the show's undeniable potency comes from the fact that audiences love these characters and want to watch them being themselves. Looking back on S3's first half, the most delightful moments likely come from Hopper continuing to be rough around the edges (fighting off a hangover but piecing together clues of a larger problem alongside the always capable Joyce Byers) or time spent at the mall with the Scoops Ahoy crew—Steve, new co-worker Robin, and repeat customers Dustin and Erica.

These sequences work tremendously well because not only do we get more of what we love from characters, but their continued capability runs counter to what you expect from all the comic relief. Maybe Hawkins will once again need Eleven to be at the center of any hope to fight off evil, but Hopper and Joyce or our International ice cream sleuths will inevitably have a part to play in connecting the larger puzzle.

Whether or not things wrap up as tidily as they did in seasons past, the first half of *Stranger Things S3* renews our confidence in this world (and its potential expanded universe) going forward. There are clearly more ideas to explore stemming from Hawkins: new life challenges, greater evils, more impacts being made on life elsewhere (and we're not even talking about potential Mormon camp girlfriends sequestered in Utah). Just as inevitably as the season's early evils will interconnect, so too will our heroes reconnect as a larger group and figure out how to battle back. And ultimately, if the Russians are once again playing with Herculean forces humanity doesn't yet know how to control or contain, well, HBO reminded us how that turns out in May.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1534041

Want to be more creative? Playing Minecraft can help, new study finds

reader comments

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[embedded content]
Iowa State University psychologist Douglas Gentile's latest study suggests that playing some video games, like *Minecraft*, can have a positive impact on creativity.
Minecraft is one of the most popular computer games, having sold more than 100 million copies since its release in 2011. Claims that it boosts creativity have been circulating for several years, and now there's a bit of scientific evidence to back up that claim, according to the results of a new study published in Creativity Research Journal.

Co-author Douglas Gentile is a psychologist at Iowa State University. His speciality is studying media influence on children, including video games, television, film, music, even advertising. That includes both positive and negative effects, from video game addiction and a possible link between media violence and aggression, to how playing certain games can improve surgeons' skills.

"The literature looks like it's conflicted when it truly

isn’t,” said Gentile. “There’s studies showing games increase aggression, and others showing it can increase prosocial behavior. From the outside it looks like they must be good or bad, but that’s not the way the world really works. This dichotomous thinking doesn’t allow us to actually see what’s going on, because we pick one idea and then we apply it to everything.”

Gentile’s co-author and grad student, Jorge Blanco-Herrera, is a former pro gamer who wanted to explore the purported link between playing *Minecraft* and creativity for his master’s thesis. *Minecraft* is technically a sandbox video game, meaning that players aren’t provided with a specific back story, prepared quest, or much direction at all. They are free to use the game space however they like, using the tools and blocks of the game to build pretty much anything, from a simple shack to a high-rise hotel, a basic truck, or a working TV. Someone just recreated a Bob Ross painting in *Minecraft*. Gentile compares it to a virtual Legoworld.

“Given what we know about how games can have powerful effects on other dimensions, it’s not an unreasonable claim; it’s just untested,” said Gentile, although there could be internal Microsoft research on the subject. Yet that claim is often cited as an argument in favor of bringing computer games into schools. “That seems reckless to me, that we’re making policy decisions in schools based on a claim that has no real scientific evidence,” he said.



Enlarge / Study participants were split into groups, with some playing *Minecraft* and others playing a race car video game or watching TV.
Iowa State University News Service

For their study, Gentile *et al.* recruited 352 volunteers and had them spend 40 minutes either playing *Minecraft*, playing a NASCAR race car video game, or watching a TV show (*Crocodile Hunter*). Some of the subjects playing *Minecraft* were "primed," meaning they were instructed to play as creatively as possible. Then the subjects were asked to complete specific tasks designed to measure their creativity.

It was a challenge finding just the right metric to measure something as nebulous as "creativity." They chose two tasks often used in such experiments. In one, participants were asked to come up with as many uses as possible for a paper clip and a knife, respectively. The second task required subjects to draw an alien creature from another world; the more said creature resembled a human, the fewer points the subject received for creativity.

The results were clearest with the alien drawing task:

subjects who had played *Minecraft* without any priming performed the best. “So the basic idea that *Minecraft* can enhance creativity does seem to be right, at lease in some circumstances,” said Gentile. But he was surprised to find that subjects who played the directed version of *Minecraft*, where they were instructed to be creative, did not show the same effect. In fact, they proved to be the least creative among the four groups, based on the chosen task.

This might be due to added pressure or self-consciousness on the part of the subjects, or perhaps it indicates a shift in motivation; the group has several potential hypotheses. “We have no way of knowing which is correct, because we didn’t expect that effect,” said Gentile. “We thought those two conditions would be the same, or maybe even the one where we primed creativity would be the most creative. There seems to be something about choosing to do it that also matters.”

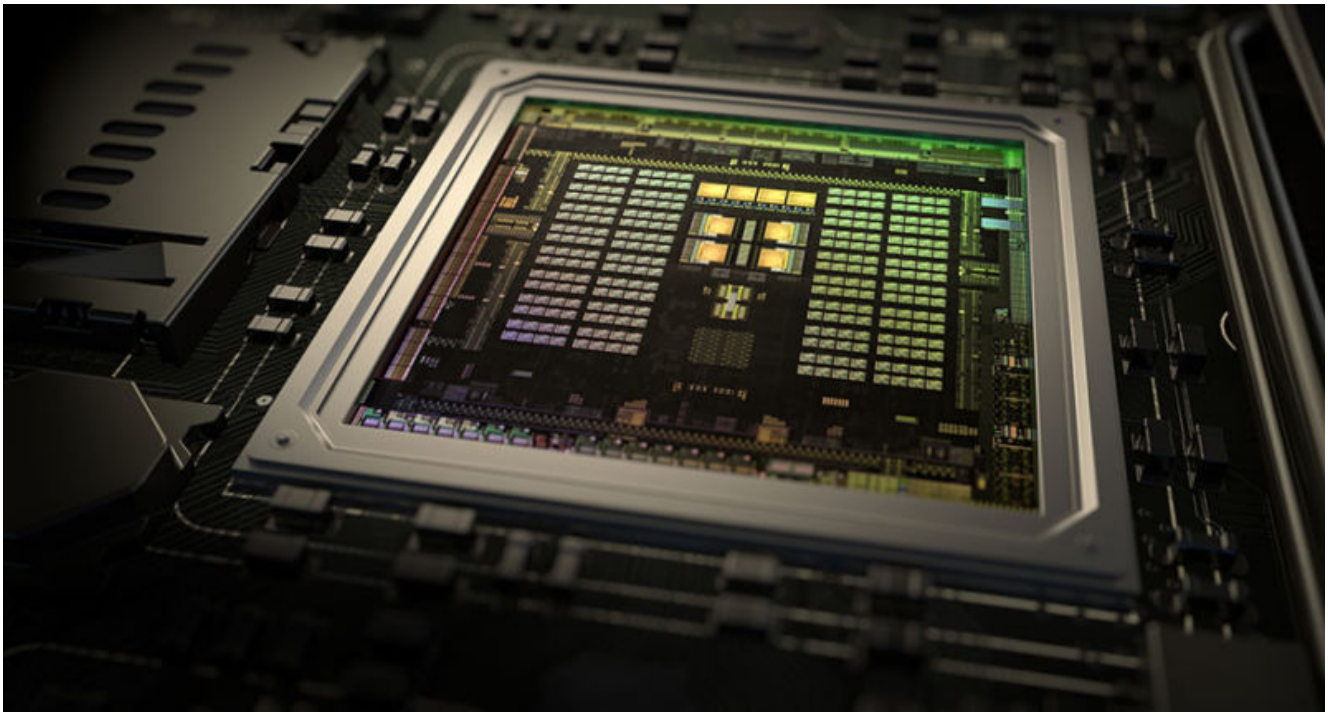
“As a scientist I’m just interested in documenting the effects that it has. Whether or not you think it’s good or bad—that’s a value judgement,” said Gentile, pointing out that the military, for instance, values the increased aggression effect of some video games, while your average parent probably would not. “The research is starting to tell a more interesting, nuanced picture. Our results are similar to other gaming research in that you get better at what you practice, but *how* you practice might matter just as much.”

DOI: *Creativity Research Journal*, 2019. 10.1080/10400419.2019.1594524 (About DOIs).

Listing image by Iowa State University News Service

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1533167

Evidence points to another Switch hardware revision on the horizon



Enlarge / Could changes be coming to the Tegra X1 chip that powers the Nintendo Switch?

reader comments

41 with 32 posters participating, including story author

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Wednesday’s announcement of the Switch Lite put to rest months of credible rumors that a miniature, portable-focused Switch was on the horizon. But Nintendo still has yet to confirm the other side of some of those rumors: suggestions that the company is planning to upgrade the Switch’s internal hardware in the near future.

Nintendo CEO Doug Bowser recently told CNET that no further updates to the original Switch hardware are coming this year.

But that hasn’t stopped Nintendo-watchers from trying to glean information about Nintendo’s future hardware plans from various tea leaves.

Following the evidence

The most concrete of these hints is an FCC request (noticed by The Verge) that Nintendo filed July 2, seeking a “class II permission change” for the original Switch model. The request says the new hardware revision will feature a “change of SoC type,” a “change of NAND memory type,” and a new CPU board to accommodate those changes.

What will those hardware changes look like? To figure that out, some Switch watchers are looking back to suggestive hardware references that first showed up in the underlying code for Switch firmware 5.0.0 back in March 2018. That firmware was the first to include internal references to both the original Switch hardware configuration—running on original Nvidia Tegra X1 “T210” chips, codenamed “Logan”—and two new configurations sporting a Tegra X1 “T214” chip codenamed “Mariko.” Those “Mariko” configuration references seemingly include space for the newly announced Switch Lite as well as *another* revision of the Switch hardware, like the one referenced in the FCC filing. When originally discovered, many assumed this coming chip revision would be a “hidden” change to the Switch’s internal hardware focused on protecting new Switch units from otherwise unpatchable security vulnerabilities in the X1 chip. These kinds of stealth configuration changes are pretty common in the console world; Microsoft pulled something similar when it replaced the original Xbox 360 internals with a new model less susceptible to overheating, for instance.

But Digital Foundry did a deep dive into some public Nvidia documents that suggest the new “Mariko” chip could be a more substantial upgrade.

Better battery life or better performance?

[embedded content]
Digital Foundry follows the evidence to figure out what exactly is going on with Nvidia's "Mariko" chip
There has been some speculation Nintendo might upgrade the Switch with Nvidia's improved Tegra X2 chip. That would be a true generational CPU improvement over the Switch's current X1 and would lend itself to a true "Switch Pro" style mid-generation refresh, similar to the PS4 Pro or Xbox One X.

But using an X2 chip in a "Switch Pro" would probably require Nintendo to file an entirely new Switch model with the FCC, rather than the simpler "permission change" being sought for the existing model. And Digital Foundry's evidence suggests Mariko's "T214" chip is instead a renamed version of the revised "T210b01" X1 chip that will soon be found in a revision of Nvidia's Shield Android TV (just as the original Switch was a renamed version of the chip in the original Shield Android TV).

While details are still sketchy, evidence suggests the Mariko revision could be using a new 10nm production process (down from the original X1's 20nm process. Besides saving production costs, that would allow for a smaller overall SoC that could use less voltage, which would in turn improve battery life. And improved battery life just happens to be one of the core improvements announced for the upcoming Switch Lite.

But a smaller chip could also allow a Mariko-based Switch to run at a higher clock speed, which could in turn potentially allow for performance improvements in games designed specifically for a "new" Switch revision. That wouldn't be unprecedented; the New Nintendo 3DS line featured a similar internal chip upgrade that allowed for a few exclusive/upgraded games that took advantage of the new

system’s faster clock speed.

While there’s still a bit of speculation involved in all of this, there’s enough evidence now to suggest Nintendo is planning to refresh the standard Switch’s internal hardware in the future, possibly using revised chips similar to those that will be in the Switch Lite. It’s still an open question, though, whether that revision will be a “hidden,” cost-reducing upgrade to the standard hardware or a public “New Switch” line that supports slight performance improvements in select games.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1535153

Stuber review: The world’s worst Uber ride becomes pure popcorn comedy



reader comments

31 with 30 posters participating

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- At this year’s RTX Austin conference (Rooster Teeth’s big animation con), attendees were treated to a surprise film screening.
  Nathan Mattise
- After the screening, RTX invited director Michael Dowse and Kumail Nanjiani up for a Q&A. Unfortunately, Dave Bautista was occupied. “I wish he was here,” Nanjiani admitted. “But he’s off shooting *Dune* right now… wait, that’s announced, right?”
  Nathan Mattise (on an old 2014 Moto G)
- A lot of the action in *Stuber* takes place here: in a Nissan Leaf.

AUSTIN, Texas—July has barely gotten underway, but we have finally reached peak 2019. This weekend, a film whose entire premise hinges unironically on the modern app-driven gig economy will hit theaters.

“Uber hates this movie, by the way,” comedian Kumail Nanjiani said after a crowd of RTX Austin 2019 attendees just watched his ridesharing-meets-’80s-buddy-cop flick, *Stuber.* “It’s about a guy who kidnaps someone in an Uber—it’s like if *Titanic* was made for Carnival cruise ships.”

If hearing “Uber” and “movie” that close together immediately gives you chills, don’t fret: *Stuber* proves to be less of a marketing grab than *Stranger Things 3*. The ubiquitous modern taxi company had no direct involvement even though it had a role to play, says Director Michael Dowse. That’s because of the Kleenex principle: using a fake brand would take people out of the film immediately.

So to avoid getting sued for libel, the *Stuber* team used Uber properly on-screen, which includes rating drivers, setting destinations, and participating in Uber pools (all done without the real interface). Using that foundation, the filmmakers built perhaps the year's most unexpected, over-the-top comedy. And if you need further proof that things were driven by comedy and not commercialism, look to the film's main vehicle—a Nissan Leaf. The gas-less EV just might end up engulfed in flames after a few epic car chases.

"With the Nissan Leaf, we just added a line in ADR [Automated Dialog Replacement, or dubbing]," Nanjiani says. "'No, how did it explode?! It must've been the propane!'—OK, now Nissan is totally cool with it."

Prepare to be Stubified

In *Stuber*, Stu (Nanjiani) works at a sporting goods store and drives for Uber part-time so he can make a little nest egg to help/impress Becca (Betty Gilpin, *GLOW*). She's the woman he loves who, naturally, views him as a platonic shoulder to cry on. His bro-y boss Richie (Jimmy Tatro, *American Vandal*) finds the whole arrangement hilarious and opts for Stu rides whenever possible. He even bestows a nickname upon his favorite employee: Stu-ber. (*Editor's note: I know, I know. It gets better. Stay with us.*)

Elsewhere, Vic (Dave Bautista, *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Blade Runner 2049*) works for the LAPD and has been stalling out on his attempts to apprehend the heroin dealer who took out his partner once upon a time. That pursuit has estranged Vic from his daughter Nicole's (Natalie Morales) burgeoning art career—he's been so absent that he scheduled much-needed Lasik on the same day as the opening of her first gallery show.

So, to ensure her father makes the show, Nicole takes her dad's phone and installs Uber (a guy shouldn't drive post-

Lasik, after all). But before Vic sets the gallery as his first rideshare destination, he gets a tip about one more big product drop involving his white-whale heroin dealer. Whatever poor sharing-economy sap accepts this gig will have more than they bargained for—and unfortunately, that sap is mild-mannered Stu.

“Oh, I get it,” Stu says as they begin their ridesharing experience. “Let me drive you to all the Sarah Connors in the city.”

[embedded content]
The trailer for *Stuber*.

A film that knows what it is (and offers nothing more)

Though it hinges on this very modern conceit, *Stuber* absolutely feels like a throwback: a buddy comedy that could’ve existed in the ’80s, ’90s, or early 2000s. These kinds of movies increasingly head straight to streaming or frankly don’t exist given economic realities in the film industry (nowadays, if you don’t swing for the critical adoration of *Moonlight* or the box office of *Avengers*, why bother?). Every once in a while, an indie studio will land on a movie that feels fresh—*Booksmart* from Annapurna delivered a one last hurrah high-school buddy comedy from a woman’s perspective, for instance—but *Stuber* represents a rarity. In an era of sequels, remakes, and adaptations galore, 20th Century Fox has made an original studio comedy. That feels worth championing—even if the film borrows heavily from all the buddy movies that came before.

Stuber‘s reverence for the formula has its pros and cons. On the con-side, that means *Stuber* has no real female characters of substance despite casting three likable actors (Morales, Gilpin, and Oscar-winner Mira Sorvino) in its three largest

female roles. An overwhelming amount of *Stuber* focuses solely on Vic and Stu, and they simply don't have much to do outside of interacting with each other.

For any Neil deGrasse Tyson-like filmgoers who obsess over a logic gap or factual inaccuracy to the point of ruining a filmgoing experience, *Stuber* may not be for you, either. *Why wouldn't Stu just cancel the ride*, you ask? Well, he fears that dropping below four stars would damage his ability to save up enough to help Becca open a spin studio. The contrivances don't stop there.

That said, *Stuber* delivers a surprising amount of fun. It starts with the undeniable chemistry between Nanjiani and Bautista, who prove to be the kind of pairing you'd happily watch adapt a variety of film genres (see also: Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly, Kevin Hart and The Rock, Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, etc.).

"The moment you got them in the same room, it was automatic within a minute of them being in the same frame," Dowse says. "Kumail obviously lends credence to the action; Dave lends credence to the comedy." He wouldn't rule out a sequel or an entirely different movie starring the budding comedy duo.

Throughout *Stuber*, Bautista's physical presence easily plays off Nanjiani's deadpan, self-deprecating, and intellectual comedy stylings. (Dowse says the script itself made everyone laugh, but the filmmakers left plenty of set time for improvisation, too: "You have as many alts [alternate takes] as you can in the edit suite, and you'll have a funnier film. It's mathematics.") Some of the film's best moments come from watching the duo approach the same task in dramatically different ways. Nanjiani's very millennial methods of bad-guy interrogation might be *Stuber*'s best overall bit, and the two actors' opposite fighting philosophies come to a head in perhaps the most delightful battle scene in a film this year.

Ka-blammo

Speaking of which, *Stuber* has a surprising amount of set pieces for a movie that, at times, can feel like *Harold and Kumar (Who's A Cop) Go To White Castle*. Bautista obviously thrives in this aspect, and the film's big bad is played by renowned stunt choreographer Iko Uwais. That means *Stuber* offers a higher caliber of fight sequence than its comedic predecessors. From car chases leveraging Stu's leased Nissan Leaf to shootouts at the veterinarian's office, *Stuber* never entirely forgets its comedic center even when its action-movie tendencies come front and center.

Both Bautista and Uwais did their own stunts. "I'm not Tom Cruise or Jackie Chan—I'll be in my trailer," Nanjiani says. "You can do the shit, then I'll come in and just yell, 'Ahhhh!' If I can help it, I'll never do a stunt in my life."

You may hear about *Stuber*'s plot or catch the trailer and think, "We've done this before, right?" From *Midnight Run* to *22 Jump Street* to *Men in Black*, film history is littered with unlikely mismatched pairs coming together to square off against evil.

But not all of those films have the obvious thought and care *Stuber* displays. When the film has a cop commandeer a person of color's car or an unlikely romance blossom way too quickly, the movie acknowledges such things directly to the audience (usually through a Nanjiani aside). And though it utilizes that familiar, dated machismo (down to the underwritten female characters) and violence of its genre, *Stuber* does so side by side with light commentary about embracing your emotions, admitting you need help, or defining masculinity outside a chiseled Bautista-shaped box.

Stuber won't win at the Oscars or dominate the box office (good luck hitting theaters a week before *The Lion King)*. But a delightful popcorn movie that can reliably deliver laughs

and land a few surprises feels far too rare nowadays. Maybe the film's name could be a bit stronger for promotion's sake, but I wouldn't change anything else about this perfectly imperfect B movie. Marketing clearly hasn't been a priority for *Stuber* anyway.

Stuber *premiered at SXSW 2019 and arrives in theaters this weekend.*

Listing image by 20th Century Fox

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1533615

Lion King remake review: Roaring visuals, but the execution is a hairball



Enlarge / You would *not* like Adult Simba when he's angry.

reader comments

98 with 66 posters participating, including story author

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You have definitely seen *The Lion King* before. That sentence applies to both the 1994 Disney classic and next week's CGI-filled remake. This new version, premiering worldwide on Friday, July 19, has been remade in such a stark, scene-by-scene manner that there's no point in slapping a spoiler warning on this article. Every character from the box-office-dominating Disney classic has returned to retread every plot point and sing every familiar, chart-topping song.

But Disney wants very badly to convince you that you have *not* seen *The Lion King* like this, and in some ways, that sales pitch is accurate. I can confirm that the latest film from Director Jon Favreau is enough of a technical masterpiece to usher in a new level of the question, "is that CGI?" Photorealistic flora and fauna pack each frame of this film, which Favreau directed, in part, by putting on VR headsets and aiming his virtual camera at raw digital assets.

But while Favreau clearly has the right technology—and the right attitude about how to render his star characters—his efforts are hobbled by the baggage that is a beloved, bubbly Disney film.

Holy wildebeest!

- Scar teaches Young Simba how to roar. (Yes, these animals are built 100% out of CGI.)
- Scar's voice actor, Chiwetel Ejiofor, matches better with his digital character than anybody else. This might be due to Scar's face being slightly distorted and elongated, which brings out his default scowl (and

Ejiofor leans into his wicked dialogue).

- Child actor JD McCrary does fine enough as Young Simba.
- Donald Glover holds his own as Adult Simba; not tremendous, not annoying.
- Some of the most visually striking moments come when Scar and a pack of hyenas threaten Young Simba's life.
- Director Jon Favreau goes all-in with moody, atmospheric lighting.
- Meanwhile, other beautiful moments come from lighthearted, lingering angles.
- The way soft light bounces off every part of Rafiki's face… it's wonderful stuff in action.
- "One day, this CGI kingdom will be yours."
- That fur detail is something else.
- Timon and Pumbaa happen upon a down-on-his-luck Young Simba.
- Billy Eichner's performance as Timon nearly saves this film, it's so good.
- Confirming whether this poor straggler is indeed a lion.

I hate to overuse the word "magical"—especially in a world where tech entrepreneurs attach that word to things as asinine as social-mobile cat feeders—but this year's *Lion King* earns the M-word early on. This film begins the same way as the original: the light of a new day shines upon Mufasa's animal kingdom, and every animal in the (assumedly) Kenyan region marches toward the unveil of their next king.

Scrutinize each of these marching animals, and you'll find the tiniest gaps between reality and computer rendering—just enough to pick out the unrealistic parts. Some awkward ambient occlusion here; an unnatural animation flutter there. If you're as jaded a CGI critic as I am, this stuff will stand out amidst a glorious crowd of incredibly lifelike animals, all romping through thick grasslands and over realistic puddles.

Then tiny baby Simba appears. His CGI debut revolves around

tight zooms on his glassy, watery eyes, his thick fur, and the incredible interplay of light and shadow from a crack in his cave-like enclosure. Then he’s picked up by his parents to be presented from the top of a cliff, and it’s here that little Simba bobbles, claws, and wiggles like a real lion cub. The timing, the awkwardness, and the cuteness of this newborn moment shine like something out of the most unbelievable nature documentary that has ever been filmed. Yeah, it’s magical as hell.

I can easily point to a dozen such “holy wildebeest” rendering moments through the course of the two-hour film, and each revolves around some sort of ridiculous recreation of an animal, nearby environs, or a combination. Simba romps through a dusty, wind-stricken desert, and the particles and wind interact with his fur in mind-blowing fashion. Rain pours over the primary cast during a tense, end-of-film showdown, and water gathers and drips over every animal’s newly bedraggled fur. Simba escapes a harrowing hyena attack inside a crumbling cave, and every ray of light hovers in the air thanks to dazzling dust-particle effects. Chronicling each of these high points could take a while.

Can’t feel the love



Enlarge / There’s a reason you never see John Oliver’s performance as Zazu in trailers: because the beak movements look really, really odd. Oliver’s dialogue and performance are top-notch, at least, but the CGI does his neurotic character no favors.

But that incredible quality is interrupted pretty early on by a curious direction choice: a “realistic” approach to animals’ faces when they talk like humans. While the film applies tight zooms and cinematic camera angles to every conversation between characters, all voiced by popular actors and comedians, the animals’ mouths and eyes do not veer from their proper anatomy. Eyes do not bulge; mouths do not open wide.

On paper, that sounds like absolutely the right call. Favreau’s photorealism efforts would probably look ridiculous if the main characters’ faces turned into exaggerated CGI explosions of emotion as soon as someone piped up. The problem, really, is that the vocal direction team didn’t get this memo. Every actor talks or sings as if they’re going to receive the typical Disney animation treatment, all overemphasizing their lines with an expectation that they’ll look like a character in *Toy Story* or *Frozen*. Instead, this excited dialogue is met with animal mouths that look like

they’ve been filled with peanut butter, and they have the dead eyes to match.

Favreau’s previous CGI-filled Disney remake, *The Jungle Book*, avoided this issue by focusing largely on a human actor and perhaps also by having so many animal characters in that film better resemble humans. Baloo, in particular, lucked out with a slightly goofy facial rendering pipeline and actor Bill Murray to match. Seth Rogen as Puumba is the only *Lion King* actor to get anywhere near Murray’s physical-comedy potential in this film.

The biggest exception to this *Lion King* remake rule is a surprising one: the sequence attached to the love song “Can You Feel the Love Tonight.” You might expect this to be the dorkiest-looking sequence of them all, but instead, its characters romp and flirt *without* having their mouths synced to the song. Here, the visuals sell the lyrics by modeling the courtship of real-life lions with a few playful, Disney-like flourishes—but nothing as weird as a real-life approximation of, say, the *Lady & the Tramp* kiss.

It was after this sequence that a light bulb went off in my mind. What if *The Lion King* was more like this? What if the dialogue was pulled away from the characters more often, via tricks like narration, flashbacks, or sneaky camera angles, so that we could better savor the glorious sub-Saharan vistas and the filmmakers’ ridiculous attention to animal anatomy and behavior?

Not quite king of the jungle



Enlarge / Don’t be shocked: the new film’s version of the song “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” looks weird in action.

As a result, *The Lion King* feels less like a cinematic success and more like a technical proof of concept. Watching this film made me giddy about the *next* film to come, and if Disney were smart about it, they’d give Favreau free rein to build a new epic from scratch. Give him the keys to a complete pipeline of story, dialogue, music, and setting, and I’m confident he’d nail the results.

Lion King gets close, but not quite. Its mismatch of emotive acting and dead-eyed characters may prove boring to kids (my screening was full of distracted kids either loudly complaining or running around the theater, as one anecdote). The vocal performances do very little to bring new life to well-trodden ground, and that’s not helped by a script stuck severely to the source material. (2016’s *Jungle Book* remake effectively rebuilt its familiar characters from scratch and was all the better for it.)

Billy Eichner is the clear standout here, doing so much with his version of Timon that he effectively surpasses Nathan Lane’s tremendous 1994 turn (and as a fan of both Lane and

Eichner, I’m flabbergasted to type that). But everyone else in the acting booth is either ho-hum or disastrous, with Beyoncé Knowles turning in a shockingly wooden performance.

If you’re for any reason dragged to a *Lion King* screening by family members, I believe you’ll still find enough to enjoy and appreciate. But if you have the option, wait to watch the new film’s 4K Blu-ray at your home on mute—and enjoy the better-acted, better-paced 1994 cartoon on a couch in the meantime. (If you really need to watch a feature-length film about furry CGI animals in the real world, I recommend *Pokemon Detective Pikachu*.) https://arstechnica.com/?p=1534163