GOP, Dem Senators officially introduce loot box, “pay-to-win” legislation



Unlike this ceramic replica, video game loot boxes are not filled with real candy.

reader comments

99 with 69 posters participating

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Video game loot boxes

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Weeks ago, Senator Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) released an outline for the The Protecting Children from Abusive Games Act, aimed at stopping randomized loot boxes and pay-to-win mechanics in the game industry. Today, Hawley was joined by Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) in formally introducing that bill in the Senate, complete with an 18-page draft of its legislative text.

Perhaps the most interesting portion of the bill attempts to define so-called “pay-to-win” mechanics in games. Those are defined broadly here as purchasable content that “assists a user in accomplishing an achievement within the game that can otherwise be accomplished without the purchase of such transaction” or which “permits a user to continue to access content of the game that had previously been accessible to the user but has been made inaccessible after the expiration of a timer or a number of gameplay attempts.”

For multiplayer games, this would also include any purchasable in-game content that “from the perspective of a reasonable user, provides a competitive advantage.”

As far as loot boxes are concerned, the act targets games where purchasable in-game content is randomized or partially randomized. This includes games where you purchase one item for the chance to purchase unknown or random items in the future, closing one potential loophole before it even starts.

Any games fitting the above definitions would be illegal to publish or sell under the act, provided those games were shown to be “minor-oriented” (based on guidelines similar to those laid out in COPPA) or that publishers had “constructive

knowledge” that some players were under 18. The FTC and state attorneys general would have authority to enforce the act via civil penalties, and the FTC would be required to release a report on compliance within two years of its passage.

“The onus should be on developers to deter child consumption of products that foster gambling and similarly compulsive purchasing behavior, just as is true in other industries that restrict access to certain kinds of products and forms of entertainment to adult consumers,” according to an FAQ on the bill from Hawley’s office.

A huge potential reach

The expansive definitions for prohibited content in this act would have far-reaching consequences across the game industry. In mobile gaming, ultra-popular mobile titles from *Candy Crush Saga* to *Clash of Clans*, and countless games in between, use gameplay timers and in-game items to gate progress as almost a matter of course.

Separately, major games ranging from *FIFA* to *Overwatch* rely on randomized loot boxes for the vast majority of their revenue these days. Rulings against loot boxes in Belgium and The Netherlands have forced major publishers to stop selling games in those countries. But the United States is an overwhelmingly larger market where similar prohibitions could have a much larger effect on these publishers’ bottom lines.

“These are very resourceful people, and I’m sure they can design games that don’t rely on gambling directed at children in the center of the game,” Sen. Hawley told Kotaku in a recent interview.

Today’s introduction brings legislation on these issues one step closer to a reality. But similar legislation will also have to be introduced in the House and survive likely committee hearings and markups in both chambers before it can

even get to a full vote by all legislators and potential signature by the president.

“Certainly, the reception we have gotten from parents [and] from gamers has been absolutely tremendous,” Hawley told Kotaku regarding the bill’s prospects for passage. “I think it’s an issue that more and more people are going to care about as they learn about it, and it’ll be the start of a broader conversation.” (Sen. Hawley has not responded to a request for comment from Ars Technica)

Lobbying groups including as Focus on the Family, Common Sense Media, the Parents Television Council, and the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood offered support for the bill in a statement.

The introduction of the act comes after Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.) separately urged the FTC to look into loot box regulation early last year. The FTC plans to convene a workshop on the issue later in 2019.

Update 6:45pm ET: CEO Stanley Pierre-Louis of Entertainment Software Association issued this statement in regards to the senators’ proposal:

> *This legislation is flawed and riddled with inaccuracies. It does not reflect how video games work or how our industry strives to deliver innovative and compelling entertainment experiences to our audiences. The impact of this bill would be far-reaching and ultimately prove harmful to the player experience, not to mention the more than 220,000 Americans employed by the video game industry. We encourage the bill’s co-sponsors to work with us to raise awareness about the tools and information in place that keep the control of video game play and in-game spending in parents’ hands rather than in the government’s.*

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1510221

Now live post-leaks, Star Trek: Picard trailer asks why the “Admiral” left Starfleet



reader comments

241 with 119 posters participating

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- That’s a good-looking vine, alright
- Confirmed: Water exists in the future.
- Why not just let the drones do all the work?
- Confirmed: Shoes exist in the future.
- 2399 is a good vintage, I hear.
- CBS’ reaction to the trailer being put up early, as played by Patrick Stewart.

Star Trek fans briefly turned into Internet archaeologists

today after CBS posted, then quickly took down, the first trailer for *Star Trek: Picard.* Earlier this morning, Entertainment Weekly appeared to have taken down a story about the reveal, but luckily for everyone else the trailer still showed up in Google results as "*Star Trek: Picard* first trailer released." (And this being the Internet, of course, mirrored versions of the trailer soon existed everywhere, showing us the first public glimpse of a show that was last teased at CBS' Upfront presentation in March.)

With rampant unofficial footage of the captain officially out of retirement, however, CBS soon righted the ship and debuted the teaser via the @StarTrek Twitter feed, noting it comes on the anniversary of *The Next Generation*'s series finale.

> *25 years ago today, 'All Good Things' brought us to an end. The end is only the beginning.* #StarTrekPicard *to stream exclusively on* @CBSAllAccess *in the United States, Amazon* #PrimeVideo *in more than 200 countries, in Canada on* @SpaceChannel *&* @CraveCanada *https://t.co/MQp0eP0ovM pic.twitter.com/m9sDqvS8Mo*
>
> *— Star Trek (@StarTrek)* May 23, 2019

"Fifteen years ago today you led us out of the darkness," a voiceover intones elliptically over a vineyard that evokes images of the potential future in *Next Generation* finale *All Good Things….* "You commanded the greatest rescue armada in history. Then, the unimaginable. What did that cost you? Your faith? Your faith in us? Your faith in yourself?"

As we see a crate of Bourgogne bottles labeled Chateau Picard, the voiceover concludes: "Tell us, why did you leave Starfleet, Admiral?" Focus in on Patrick Stewart's stony face and cut to a logo shot over a gentle flute version of the *Next Generation* theme's opening sting. (Hey, I know a Starfleet captain who plays the flute!)

What happened?

Stewart said at Star Trek Las Vegas this month that “20 years will have passed” between the *Next Generation* setting we know and the *Picard* series. That would place the show in about the year 2399, 20 years after the setting of *Star Trek: Nemesis*, making Picard about 94 years of age.

That’s all to say we know very little about what might have happened “15 years ago” to cause an Admiral Picard to abruptly lose faith after a rescue mission and the “unimaginable” happenings that followed it. The description does evoke some parallels with Picard’s capture and assimilation by (and subsequent rescue from) the Borg, and the vineyard setting evokes some ties to his recovery directly after that trauma. But it’s hard to know how much to make of those thematic links at this point.

Executive Producer Alex Kurtzman hinted to TV Guide earlier this month that “the destruction of Romulus will play into the series,” which would certainly qualify as the kind of “unimaginable” act that could shake the usually unflappable Picard. “What has happened to him in that period of time [since *Next Generation*]?” Kurtzman said to TV Guide. “Have there been occurrences that force him to reckon with choices that he’s made in his life? How do you hold on to being the person everybody loved when the circumstances around you may have changed so radically? Those are the big questions that we’re asking.”

Star Trek: Picard will premiere on CBS: All Access in the US and Amazon Prime internationally at the end of 2019. Famed novelist Michael Chabon is among the executive producers.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1510019

Mario Kart Tour beta hands-on: Microtransactions land like a nasty blue shell



Enlarge / This is the only *Mario Kart Tour* closed beta image we're officially allowed to share.

reader comments

69 with 55 posters participating

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Nintendo's first racing game for smartphones, *Mario Kart Tour*, is barreling like a red shell toward a free-to-play launch on iOS and Android later this year. But today's kickoff of a closed-beta test (only on Android, only for randomly invited users) makes me wonder whether Nintendo and its development

partner, DeNA, should tap the brakes in a huge way.

From a sheer gameplay standpoint, *Mario Kart Tour* is actually a pretty solid facsimile of the classic series, albeit with a couple of puzzling design decisions. But the game's path to monetization is the most brazen yet applied to a Nintendo smartphone app.

Don't look! Don't you dare look at the leaked videos!

In good news, *Mario Kart Tour* plays much like the series' past 25 years of home and handheld versions. Race on go-karts through cartoony racetracks while picking up and using weapons (turtle shells, banana peels) and boost items ("nitro" mushrooms, mostly). In this version, your kart automatically accelerates, so use your fingers to steer left or right, tap weapon items to activate them (with a forward- or back-flick to direct them as needed), and pick from one of two drifting options to trigger "micro-boosts" in speed.

We'd love to officially show you how *MKT* looks—because that's the best part of the game—but Nintendo has expressly forbidden screen or video capture for anybody who landed an invite to the game's closed beta period. (To clarify: I'm the only Ars staffer to win the random-draw lottery for this beta period, and we didn't get any special press treatment in terms of access.) But we can't stop you from seeing what other users have captured and anonymously shared in the beta's first 12 hours as a live service.

[embedded content]
A video we found on YouTube of, uh, something. Though embedding doesn't work, click to have the video pop up in another tab.
On my personal smartphone, a Samsung Galaxy S9, *MKT* renders Wii U-caliber 3D imagery quite well. The game's usual

characters, go-karts, and lively racetracks all look remarkably detailed and bubbly, with 3D geometry benefiting a handsome polygon budget, while my tests have run at a fluid 60fps refresh in apparent 1080p resolution, with nary a stutter.

Additionally, every racetrack appears to be a port of an existing classic series track—a great idea to keep costs down and keep fans happy for a free-to-play game, in my opinion—but that exposes the game's weirdest design restriction. Most Mario Kart racetracks benefit from a wider field of view (FOV) so that players can keep an eye out for upcoming turns, hunt for shortcuts, position themselves for item pickups, and aim weapons at opponents. Yet *MKT* mandates that players hold their phones in "portrait" orientation.

I've played my fair share of Mario Kart split-screen content, particularly modern two-player modes that split the screen in half horizontally, yet even that ratio at least adjusts the camera angle for maximum track visibility. *MKT*, for some reason, puts its camera pretty tightly behind racers. As a result, if you haven't memorized a track or get stuck behind a random obstacle (like a giant dinosaur's stomping feet in *MK Double Dash*'s Dino Dino Jungle), expect to be flummoxed by this camera limitation.

How does Nintendo make this easier for players? By making it impossible to fall off racetracks or by having karts auto-drive through near-wall collisions. I frequently cheated my way toward hard-to-reach shortcut paths by driving headlong into walls, only to have my kart automatically veer into a shortcut. It's an inelegant solution to an inelegant problem. (Rudimentary AI doesn't help; though the game shows "real-life" usernames on karts, they're all controlled by bots.)

I'm also not entirely enchanted by *MKT*'s take on drifting, which is by default set to a weird "turn for long enough to start drifting" setting. I had to go into the settings menu to

toggle “manual drift” so that the instant I started turning, I could get a time-shaving drift maneuver started (and even pull off a “snake” maneuver to chain mini-boosts over and over by dragging my finger back and forth across the screen). There’s simply no other way to effectively rack up drift boosts.

However, that meant I can no longer optionally tap to the left or right for finer-tuned adjustments, which are nigh essential to guiding a racer toward a shortcut, a boost pad, coins, or other elements littered on an average Mario Kart racetrack. With a widescreen ratio, I might have had more screen real estate to activate this as a button-press. There *is* a motion-sensing option, which allows you to tilt your phone for small nudges while otherwise drifting using your fingers, but I detest its current beta implementation, which triggered too many false turn attempts.

Timers, loot boxes, a zillion currencies, and pay-to-win issues

Now for the very, very bad news. I’m going to list the beta’s current smartphone-nonsense issues with a few caveats. First, you can’t use real money in the game’s beta period. Second, any of the below issues could change between now and the game’s public, free-to-play version coming later this year. With that out of the way:

MKT has timers. Your ability to play the game is gated behind a “hearts” currency. Every start of a race costs one heart, and your default meter maxes out at five hearts. It takes roughly 12 minutes for a single heart to refill, while the game’s opening portion constantly refills hearts as part of the early leveling-up process. It’s unclear at what point this ample heart supply runs out and players are stuck either waiting on timers or spending an “emerald” currency for more hearts, which can either be earned in-game or (eventually) paid for with real-world money.

Additionally, the game's progression system to access new racetracks, through a single-player campaign, is hard-gated by its *own* set of timers. As I type this, I'm waiting *a full hour* before I can unlock the game's "Toadette Cup" of three racecourses, even though I've otherwise met its requirement of other progress. There's no way to pay in-game currency or real-world money to speed that unlock up.

MKT also has loot boxes. The game's aforementioned emeralds are required to access the game's loot. Spend five emeralds (no idea how much that will cost in real-world money) to get a single, random unlock of a mascot character, a go-kart model, or a "glider" accessory. Unlike past games, differing characters and karts don't appear to come with standard control trade-offs like strength, acceleration, top speed, and so on.

Instead, each of these pickups varies in "rarity"… and that rarity indicates how much they affect major racing factors, including: top speed, coin-earning rates within a race, likelihood of picking up mid-race weapons and items, ability to hold multiple mid-race items at once, *and* multipliers for your "driver points" (DP) total at the end of a race.

That last one is the real kicker, because progress in the single-player campaign isn't about getting first place. It's about gaming *MKT*'s DP system, which is affected by your end-of-race standing but also by mid-race actions (number of items used, number of mini-boosts triggered by drifting, number of jumps) *and* by the DP attached to whatever character you bring into a race.

This part gets confusing. Each character, kart, and glider has a numerical DP value that you bring into every race, and if any of those are higher in rarity, they start out with a higher value by default. But they can all have their DP raised by grinding through more races. Which, after a while, will require managing that heart's currency. And you'll need to

bring in as many DP as possible at a race's start once you get further into the campaign, because your DP total at the end of a later race must be *quite* high to accrue its "total completion" DP boost. Getting total completion of a race instance doles out "stars," and you need stars to access more of the game's cups of courses. (You can only claim each race's stars once, though you can replay each cup's three races over and over if you want. So long as you have enough hearts, anyway.)

Oh, and here's an unwelcome new Mario Kart twist. *MKT* doles out *further* boosts and bonuses if you pick the "correct" racer for each course. You'll pick a track within one of the game's "cups," then be told that certain characters, karts, and gliders are enhanced, but only for that track. Most of them appear in the interface grayed out, as if to remind you, "Gosh, it sure would be nice if you owned more of these 'plus' and 'plus plus' options, wouldn't it?" Worse, this pre-race selection screen includes a one-touch shortcut to the "shop" interface to remedy this restriction.

Pick a side, Nintendo

MKT endlessly needles players about its assault on the structure of classic Mario Kart games—as in, pick a favorite character, freely race through familiar courses, and unlock new stuff by way of standard gameplay mechanics. With that paradigm blown up by an obnoxious blue shell of in-app economies, and no apparent way to access multiplayer with either friends or strangers, I'm pretty disappointed by MKT's current state.

The best I can say is that it presents the very core idea of Mario Kart pretty clearly, and its simple touch controls are just good enough to show total novices why the series might be a blast to play on traditional consoles. But as a possible time-killing option for anyone who takes Mario Kart the

slightest bit seriously, I’m at a loss. Players might be willing to forgive sloppy, imprecise controls or shrug off the smartphone world’s need to monetize free-to-play games. But having both issues in the same product is too much.

As DeNA and Nintendo put final touches on this app, I suggest the developers pick a side: attach an annoying economy to a deeper control scheme and more legitimate online options, or make it cheaper and less obnoxious to watch Mario drive himself.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1509503

All hail the Chosen One: Schwarzenegger and Fassbender to star in Kung Fury 2



Enlarge / David Sandberg will reprise his role as Kung Fury, a Miami detective with superpowers who travels through time to take out Hitler.

reader comments

39 with 35 posters participating

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Kung Fury is a ridiculously over-the-top short film that became an instant cult classic, racking up over 32 million views on YouTube since it debuted in 2015. And according to The Hollywood Reporter, there's now going to be a feature-length sequel, *Kung Fury 2*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Fassbender signed on as co-stars. It will go into production at the end of July, primarily filming in Bulgaria and Germany.

Created by (and starring) Swedish filmmaker David Sandberg (not to be confused with *Shazam!*'s David F. Sandberg), the original *Kung Fury* pays tribute to cheesy 1980s action flicks

and included a cameo by David Hasselhoff as the voice of vehicle navigation system Hoff 9000. It's the story of a renegade Miami police detective with kung fu superpowers who goes back in time to take out Hitler (aka "Kung Führer"). Along the way, Kung Fury (yup, that's his name) gets a little help from Thor, a couple of Viking babes, a computer whiz who can transform into a robot, and Triceracop (a man with the head of a triceratops). Together, they form a fighting force dubbed the Thundercops. What's not to love?

Sandberg wrote the script and shot a trailer with friends to launch a Kickstarter campaign to complete the original short. He ended up raising $630,000 and somehow cobbled together *Kung Fury*. It was shot in Sweden and used stock footage (for the giant wolf ridden by Viking babe Katana), miniature models, and even included a short animated "heaven" sequence. It debuted at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, and even though it didn't win any prizes, it proved an instant favorite among critics.

As for the sequel, per The Hollywood Reporter:

> *The action is set in 1985, the best year ever. Miami is kept safe under the watchful eye of Kung Fury, the greatest damn cop of all time. His Thundercops are the ultimate police force assembled from across history to defeat the villainous Kung Führer, Adolf Hitler. But after the tragic death of one of their members causes the group to disband, a mysterious villain emerges from the shadows to aid in the Führer's quest to attain the ultimate weapon. Kung Fury must travel through space and time to save his friends, defend the prestigious Miami Kung Fu Academy, and defeat evil once and for all.*

For all those who wondered what Sandberg could accomplish with a decent budget, it looks like we're about to find out.

[embedded content]
The 2015 action/comedy short film *Kung Fury* is getting a

feature-length sequel.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1508355

Drink like it’s 1985: Coca-Cola revives New Coke for Stranger Things 3



reader comments

132 with 89 posters participating, including story author

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[embedded content]
New Coke, *Stranger Things*-style
Stranger Things season 3 is coming to Netflix this July 4, and it’s going to be set in the year 1985. As a period detail, the show is going to make reference to New Coke, a disastrous 1980s effort from Coca-Cola to update its namesake drink. For

those not old enough to remember, New Coke was met with a massive consumer backlash and a very public climbdown by the company.

But to commemorate New Coke's newfound pop culture relevance, Coca-Cola is going to sell 500,000 cans of New Coke as a *Stranger Things* tie-in. They'll go on sale online on Thursday May 23 at 17:00 EDT. The resurrected drink is also going to be available at World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta on certain days starting June 3. Cans will carry special *Stranger Things* promotional designs, and the company has even remade its original New Coke ad to add a *Stranger Things* twist. The ad will be shown in cinemas.

Marketing tie-ins and product placements happen all the time with major pop culture entities. And normally, a soft drink would do little to deserve such prominent placement in a TV show. But of course, New Coke is no ordinary soft drink; it was a major news story for the three months or so that it was on the market at the time.

Coca-Cola introduced New Coke with great fanfare in 1985. Consumers in blind taste tests showed a preference for a sweeter, crisper tasting drink—like Pepsi or Diet Coke—to the longer-lasting, bitter-edged sweetness of regular Coca-Cola. While many consumers expressed a brand preference for Coca-Cola, blind testing revealed that they actually preferred the taste of Pepsi. Accordingly, the Coca-Cola company developed a new Coke formula, essentially Diet Coke sweetened with HFCS rather than aspartame. This was brought to market as a replacement for the old Coke, rather than a new variant alongside it. The new formula used the same can design, just with a "New" banner.

While it was successful in taste tests and even successful in limited trials as a fountain drink, its introduction to the wider Coke-buying public proved disastrous. Not so much from a sales perspective—it was accepted and preferred across much of

the US—but from a public relations perspective. Coke drinkers in the South regarded the reformulation with hostility, as if a vital part of their identity had been dismissed as inadequate and replaced without their consent. They loudly complained about the new formula and demanded that Coca-Cola revert to the original.

Even in a pre-Internet feedback loop era, when faced with this noisy backlash—along with complaints from bottling companies about the way Coca-Cola priced the new formula's syrup—the company relented. The original formula was sold side by side with the new formula, with the new one retaining the Coca-Cola name and the old one being "Coca Cola Classic." In 1992, the new formula was rechristened Coke II, and in 2009 the company finally stopped putting the word "Classic" on old formula bottles.

As a long-time Diet Coke fan (though Vanilla Coke Zero is my true love), this is perhaps one of the most exciting promotional tie-ins I've ever seen. I've never had New Coke, though of course am aware of its reputation, and the prospect of being able to at last try a can has me on tenterhooks. It's been my lifelong ambition to drink a can of New Coke, and I'm thrilled that I might finally get the chance.

Listing image by Netflix/The Coca-Cola Company

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1508875

World of Warcraft Classic

beta testers are reporting vanilla WoW features as bugs



reader comments

65 with 52 posters participating, including story author

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- Blizzard has released a few images of *World of Warcraft Classic* that cater to players' nostalgia. Certainly, a select few dedicated vanilla *WoW* players will remember trying to take down Ragnaros.
- They'll also remember the OG armor sets.
- Shamans sure have changed a lot since vanilla *WoW*. So has Orgrimmar, for that matter.
- One thing that hasn't changed: Blizzard's skill at making excellent CGI cinematics.
- Those early low-poly models, though—ouch.
- Fans will look past the graphics to enjoy nostalgia-laden zones like Westfall as they were pre-*Cataclysm*, though.

Nostalgic World of Warcraft (WoW) fans have been calling for game publisher Activision-Blizzard to release *World of Warcraft Classic* for years, and they're finally getting their wish. *World of Warcraft Classic* is now in beta, but some players have been surprised by what they've found when playing it.

WoW Classic seeks to recreate the "vanilla *WoW*" experience—that is, *WoW* as it existed before a series of seven game-altering major expansion packs from 2007's *The Burning Crusade* to 2018's *Battle for Azeroth*. To achieve this, Blizzard has rebuilt the game based on archived data from back in 2005 and 2006 (patch 1.12 is the goalpost—the current game is on patch 8.1.5). The company has committed to meticulously presenting the experience *exactly* as it was back then—warts and all—with only a small number of unavoidable or critical changes.

The argument for this is simple: what makes classic *WoW* great to one player might be different from what makes it great for another. And who are Blizzard's designers to say which old features were just good or bad design for each player? It's an approach that shows Blizzard believes (at least to some degree) that *WoW* doesn't just belong to its creators but to its fans. That struggle between authorial intent or game design orthodoxy and "the player is always right" is at the heart of many of gaming's big contemporary controversies. But so far, Blizzard seems committed to its plan with regards to *WoW Classic*.

So committed, in fact, that modern WoW players are trying the beta and reporting what seem like bugs today but what were actually intended functionality 13 years ago. This became such a common occurrence that Blizzard publicly posted a list of known non-issues called the "*WoW Classic* 'Not a Bug' List." For example, hitboxes for the Tauren player race are much larger than those of other races. In a modern game, this would be seen as a serious balance issue (see: *Apex Legends*). But

it’s what vanilla *WoW* was like, so it has been faithfully reproduced.

There are even items that really do seem more like bugs than anything. For example, from the notes:

> *NPCs which offer multiple quests may inconsistently display them as a dot or a “!” on the available quests list. They were inconsistent in 1.12, and we’ve reproduced the exact inconsistency they had back then.*

Some players have been surprised by these apparent flaws—even players who have been eagerly awaiting *WoW Classic*‘s release based on fond memories of vanilla *WoW*. In truth, it has been so long since *WoW* first released, players’ memories may not always be accurate. Some details might be fresh, but others might be lost in time, and it’s those lost details that could surprise players revisiting the original experience in *WoW Classic*.

Blizzard community manager Kaviax alluded to that in the post on the *WoW Classic* forums that included the list of known non-issues, writing:

> *As we’ve discussed before, the nature of WoW Classic sometimes invokes different memories for different players, and this leads to certain misconceptions for some about what is or isn’t working as intended.*

Most people who have spent years playing massively multiplayer online games will tell you that there’s something special about the first one you played, too—and *WoW* was the first for many people. You can become so swept up in the uniqueness of your first experience that you overlook many flaws. It’s likely many look at *WoW Classic* with rose-colored glasses, just as many simply forgot which features were added when. And some of today’s *WoW* players may be too young to have even

played vanilla *WoW* as it once was.

That’s not to say that everyone has an unrealistic vision of what vanilla *WoW* was like. There were already plenty of people on the *WoW Classic* forums pointing out that perceived bugs are just recreations of the original game. And as noted before, a flaw to one player is a key component of the original positive experience to another. *WoW Classic* will surely please plenty of purists in spades. But this goes to show that it won’t be for everyone who has fond memories of the game circa 2006.

For some of us, those memories are just that—memories, imperfect as they are fond.

Listing image by Blizzard

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1508139

A disillusioned Aaron Paul longs for someone “real” in Westworld S3 trailer



reader comments

75 with 57 posters participating

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[embedded content]
HBO released the first teaser for *Westworld* season 3 right before last night's *Game of Thrones* finale.
HBO took advantage of the record number of viewers tuning in to the *Game of Thrones* finale last night to release the first teaser for season three of *Westworld*. The teaser is deliberately vague on details, but it looks like we're in for a dystopian near-future scenario set not in the original theme park but in the real outside world.

(Some spoilers for first two seasons below.)

If you're new to the series, the titular *Westworld* is one of six immersive theme parks owned and operated by a company called Delos Inc. It's essentially Live Action Role Play (LARP-ing) combined with a choose-your-own-adventure experience. The park is populated with a "cast" of very human-looking androids, called hosts, who follow a bunch of intertwining narratives, rebooting the same narrative every

day. The park's well-heeled visitors can pretty much do whatever they like to the hosts—rape, pillage, torture, murder—and they do so more often than not, because they don't see the hosts as anything more than unfeeling props in their private dramas.

But the hosts are much more complicated than that, and their creator—co-founder and park director of Westworld Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins)—has a plan to "awaken" one host in particular named Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) to true sentience. The result is a bloody massacre at the end of season one, as the reprogrammed hosts rise up to take revenge on the guests.

Naturally, Delos responds by sending in security forces to quell the uprising and prevent any hosts from escaping the confines of the park into the real world outside. It proved a futile effort. In the season two finale, three of the Hosts were shown entering the real world in the central timeline: Dolores, Bernard (Jeffrey Wright), and former Delos executive Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson), except she's really Dolores' consciousness inhabiting a rebuild of Charlotte's body.

The responses to *Westworld*'s second season were mixed. But Ars' Lee Hutchinson picked it as his top series for our annual TV Technica roundup last year. "Yes, it's needlessly baroque, nearly to the point of being impenetrable," he wrote. "Yes, the layering of the plot means you really do need to watch every episode more than once to get the full measure of what's going on. Yes, a timeline diagram really does help… I still think it's the best TV show of 2018."

- Adrian Paul was hoping for a better robot world.
- Granted, there are some nifty futuristic car designs. YouTube/HBO
- Looks a bit like a hovercraft. YouTube/HBO
- This looks like the old Delos Inc. headquarters.

YouTube/HBO

- Is that Charlotte Hale or a Host inhabiting a clone of her body?
  YouTube/HBO
- Never trust an attractive blonde woman at a gala.
  YouTube/HBO
- Choosing a playbook?
  YouTube/HBO
- A well-timed heist.
  YouTube/HBO
- Who is this mysterious murderous woman?
  YouTube/HBO
- Dolores has found a new mission in this new world.
  YouTube/HBO

The teaser that aired last night opens with a weary voiceover. “Sometimes it seems like the world looks all right,” a man says. “Like they put a coat of paint on it. But inside it’s rotting to pieces.” We see Aaron Paul [*corrected*] walking along streets that seem familiar, only with strange futuristic touches. I suspect this is the future that emerged after the three hosts left the park, and we’re in for more multiple shifting timelines in season three to reveal how everyone ended up there. “They said it would make a better world, smooth out the rough edges,” Paul’s character continues. “But that was a lie. I guess the rough edges are the only thing I’m hanging onto.” That, and a bit of armed robbery at a charity gala to augment his day job earnings as a worker drone.

There’s no sign of Bernard and just a fleeting shot of Charlotte Hale lounging by an infinity pool. But in the final moments, we catch a glimpse of a very different-looking Dolores, as Paul’s character muses that he needs to find someone “real.” (If Dolores is no longer inhabiting Charlotte’s body, who is?) It looks like *Westworld* will be continuing the theme so nicely articulated by Hutchinson last year: “We are crude hunks of self-animating meat—obstacles

standing in the way of the hosts' path to true self-actualization. It's time for us to die and for the hosts to inherit the Earth, because in [supervillain] Ford's mind, only a true 'original work' has worth. The hosts, as created beings, are such a work."

The humans are still around in this brave new world. Or are they? If we've learned one thing from watching the first two seasons of *Westworld*, it's this: who can tell who's human or not, or even what's real anymore?

Season three of *Westworld* will debut on HBO at some undetermined date in 2020.

Listing image by YouTube/HBO

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1507915

Report: Sony employees caught off guard by Microsoft cloud partnership



Enlarge / The kinds of Azure server racks that could soon play host to Sony content under a recent cooperation deal.

reader comments

60 with 46 posters participating

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Following Microsoft and Sony’s surprising announcement of a cloud gaming partnership last week, Bloomberg has a bit of behind-the-scenes analysis that uses unnamed insider sources to explain how the deal came about.

Though Sony confirmed to Bloomberg that talks between the two console giants had been going on since last year, the announcement still caught rank-and-file employees at Sony off guard, according to Bloomberg’s sources. “Managers had to calm workers and assure them that plans for the company’s next-generation console weren’t affected,” as Bloomberg summarizes the view from inside the company.

Sony has already spun its 2012 purchase of streaming gaming company Gaikai into over 700,000 subscribers for its cloud-based PlayStation Now service, which launched in 2015. But Sony’s server and network infrastructure has proven insufficient to provide the “as good as local” experience promised (but yet to be proven) by major competitors like Google’s recently announced Stadia service. That led Sony to reach out to other companies with more established cloud infrastructure to expand its streaming gaming footprint.

Bloomberg’s sources suggest that Sony was at one point discussing expanding its cloud gaming ambitions through Amazon Web Services, which already hosts the infrastructure for PlayStation Network’s online gaming. One person “familiar with the matter” told Bloomberg the two companies “couldn’t agree on commercial terms” for the deal. Amazon is planning to launch its own cloud-based gaming service soon, according to a January report from The Information.

Cloud-based gaming seems to have captured the imagination of

investors across the gaming industry; Sony's stock price jumped nearly 10 percent on Friday, its biggest one-day gain in a year and a half. But Bloomberg notes that analysts at IHS Markit still expect cloud gaming to represent just 2% of game industry revenue by 2023. That's one large reason why this partnership, as surprising as it is, probably doesn't mean much for the immediate future of the console wars.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1507797

Required gamer viewing: The history of M2's Japanese retro-port empire



reader comments

6 with 4 posters participating, including story author

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- You may not know Japanese game studio M2 by name, but you've probably played one of its retro-revival projects.
  My Life In Gaming
- Arguably the craziest story told in this documentary is the studio's creation of a *Fantasy Zone 2* port from the Master System to an original System-16 arcade board. To do this, the studio hard-wired additional RAM onto the System-16 architecture.
- After that, they coded the entire game anew on System-16 to get its sprites and palette just right, then back-ported *that* to the PlayStation 2.
- The studio's first major project: *Gauntlet 4*, which began life as a port of the very first *Gauntlet*'s arcade version to Genesis hardware.
- Original letters sent from Atari's Tengen division to M2, making requests for more console-friendly boosts to the port they'd made.
- A zoom on the letter's request for an "adventure" mode.
- The original M2 prototype sent in response to Tengen's letter.
- A rare look at M2's first *Gauntlet* prototype.
- In order to get *Space Harrier* working on PlayStation 2, M2 had to do a rare thing in PS2 development: access the console's PS1 architecture.
- Eventually, M2 worked on original games for the burgeoning WiiWare platform, including *Gradius Rebirth*…
- …*Contra Rebirth*…
- …and *Castlevania Rebirth*.
- Screenshots don't do the *Sega 3D Classics Collection* justice, considering how much work went into their new 3D-depth effects.
- All of the classic games within the *Yakuza* series on PS3 and PS4 are courtesy of M2's emulation efforts.
- And if you love crazy Japan-only shoot-'em-ups, you can

thank M2 for porting a few to modern consoles as part of its ShotTriggers series.

If you speak a certain language about classic video games, you probably know about M2, a Japanese game studio responsible for dozens of impressive arcade and console ports to newer home consoles. Yet even if you don’t, a new hour-long documentary about the studio should still be considered required viewing for anybody who loves the best Japanese games of the ’80s and ’90s.

Produced by My Life In Gaming, a video channel known for a laser focus on retro gaming, the M2 Complete Works documentary (embedded below) is a sweeping, decades-long look at a game studio renowned among dedicated gaming fans. That’s because M2 has produced some of the most impressive ports, emulations, and even fully blown remakes of classic series by Sega, Konami, Capcom, and SNK. (Listing them all would bury the embedded video below, but to get a sense of how impressive M2’s work is, look into the *Sega 3D Classics Collection*. This series saw M2 deconstruct many original Sega arcade and console games, then fully rebuild them with pitch-perfect emulation *and* 3D depth effects for the Nintendo 3DS.)

The MLIG production duo of Coury Carlson and Marc Duddleson fill their documentary with original insights from M2 staffers, starting with the studio’s college-aged efforts to build an arcade-perfect version of *Gauntlet* for the Sega Genesis and working up to its acquisition of dozens of ’90s industry vets to keep the studio going through the ’00s and ’10s.

[embedded content]
M2 Complete Works, produced by My Life In Gaming (tap the “gear” icon to toggle English subtitles for the documentary’s Japanese speakers)
As this is a major historical retrospective, the documentary skips some technical minutiae, but you can still expect to learn some fascinating things. A few examples: The PlayStation

2 port of *Space Harrier* was hamstrung by too slow of a CPU for emulation's sake, so the team tapped into the console's included PS1 processor to offload processing of functions like audio; the studio spent its own personal money on making a crazy reimagining of *Fantasy Zone 2*, which forward-ported the game from the Sega Master System to a System-16 arcade board; and M2's first PSP project had to be redrawn from scratch upon learning that the system's specs "on paper" didn't match with reality, yet they still somehow managed to pull it off.

The studio is about to make waves once more as handlers of Sega's Genesis Mini hardware, launching this September with 40 pre-installed games and meant to wash down the bitter taste of AtGames' awful "mini Genesis" plug-and-play systems. Thus, you'll probably want to give this documentary a full watch to gear up for that exciting emulation project (if M2's work on the Nintendo Switch's stellar *Sega Ages* series isn't enough for you, anyway). A Blu-ray version of the documentary was briefly available as part of a Limited Run Games bundle, which has since sold out; we'll update this report if we hear word about that Blu-ray option, and its expanded features, getting a second release.

Listing image by My Life In Gaming

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1507587

Everyone is "gun-fu" fighting: John Wick 3 is

almost as good as the original



Enlarge / “It wasn’t just a puppy.” Keanu Reeves is back, declaring war on the High Table in *John Wick: Chapter 3: Parabellum.*

reader comments

6 with 6 posters participating

Share this story

John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum is blowing up the box office this weekend with a projected $56.8 million opening. No sequel is likely to match the lean, mean, revenge-filled fury of the original film, but *Parabellum* comes close. Director Chad Stahelski knows exactly what his audience wants. This third installment advances the assassin’s underworld mythology while stringing together a series of spectacularly choreographed

fight sequences showcasing some of the finest stuntwork you're likely to see onscreen.

(Spoilers for first two films and mild spoilers for *Chapter 3* below.)

For those who missed the first two movies, John Wick (Keanu Reeves) is a legendary hitman (known as the Boogeyman or "Baba Yaga") who tried to retire when he fell in love and got married. Unfortunately, he's drawn back into the dark underground world by an act of senseless violence after his wife's death. Nothing will stop John Wick from seeking retribution. The first *John Wick* grossed more than $88 million worldwide for a film that cost around $30 million to make, and it was praised for its brisk pace, heart-stopping action sequences, and stylish *noir* feel.

So naturally, there was a sequel. In *John Wick: Chapter Two*, Wick takes on a whole slew of Russian baddies but finds himself honor-bound (per the professional hitman's code) to go on one last assignment. Of course he succeeds—he's John Wick—but the client, Italian crime lord Santino D'Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio), tries to cover his tracks by posting a bounty on Wick's head. Wick ends up killing Santino—newly named to the High Table—inside the Continental Hotel in New York, which is supposed to be a safe space for assassins, and is declared "excommunicato," cutting him off from all the resources the hitman underground usually provides.

And that's where *John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum* picks up, with Wick scrambling to find allies (and ammo) to fight off pretty much the entire underworld of assassins, all of them very eager to claim the $14 million bounty on his head. The title refers to the old adage, *Si vis pacem, para bellum*: "If you want peace, prepare for war." Wick has essentially declared war on the High Table, and the escalation plays out exactly as you'd expect when everyone's favorite dog-loving hitman is involved.

- John Wick, excommunicado.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- Asia Kate Dillon plats The Adjudicator, a member of the High Table
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- “If you think you can take John Wick, you’ve got a nasty surprise coming.” Laurence Fishburne as underground crime lord The Bowery King.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- Anjelica Huston plays The Director of the High Table, who knows John Wick’s true origins.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- NBA basketball star Boban Marjanovic has a cameo early in the film as an assassin who tries to take out Wick in the New York Public Library,
- John Wick also has an affinity for horses
- Channeling Neo: “I need guns. Lots of guns.”
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- Winston (Ian McShane) definitely has the guns.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- Must love dogs: Halle Berry plays Sofia, a fellow assassin and reluctant ally with dogs trained to fight with her.
- The best doggie jujitsu you’ll ever see.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- Wick has a new nemesis in uber-fan Zero (Mark Dacascos), who’s been longing to meet him.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- A fight to the death, no doubt.
  YouTube/Lionsgate
- They have no idea what’s coming.

Parabellum continues to flesh out details of the inner workings of the High Table and its global network of highly trained assassins—one of the most fascinating aspects of the franchise. Yes, it’s a criminal enterprise, but there has always been a strict code of conduct. A High Table

representative known only as The Adjudicator (Asia Kate Dillon) is intent on enforcing that code, targeting not just Wick but anyone who offered him even the slightest bit of assistance. That includes Winston (Ian McShane), manager of the Continental Hotel; an underground crime lord known as the Bowery King (Laurence Fishburne); and The Director (Anjelica Huston), who reluctantly grants Wick safe passage to Casablanca. (The Director also reveals a hint of Wick's own mysterious origins.)

Ultimately, it's all about the fight sequences, and on that score, Stahelski really delivers. He's a former stunt choreographer who worked with Reeves on *The Matrix* movies, after all, and he brought all those years of expertise to bear when he blocked out the fight sequences for *Parabellum*. They're stylish, intense, inventive, and occasionally witty, and Stahelski doesn't limit his repertoire to so-called "Gun-Fu." There are plenty of knives and assorted antique weaponry, numerous styles of martial arts, and a memorable sequence set in a stable where Wick enlists the aid of a horse to deliver some perfectly executed kicks with its hind legs (Horse-Fu!).

> *Halle Berry broke three ribs while training for her fight scenes.*

My personal favorite was Death By Library Book; I guess it would qualify as "Found Object Fu." Wick wields it in the film's very first fight scene, among the stacks at the New York Public Library, to fend off an assassin played by NBA basketball star Boban Marjanovic. The 7-foot, 3-inch Serbian plays for the Philadelphia Sixers. Stahelski told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that he wanted Wick to face off against a much taller opponent in a confined space, but didn't know any seven-foot stuntmen. A producer told him about Marjanovic, a *John Wick* fan who happily auditioned with the stunt team for a couple of hours to win the role. Wick is the star, of course, so the outcome of their face-off is never in doubt. But who knew Bobon's Dante-quoting assassin would be taken out

by a 19th-century collection of Russian folk tales?

The near non-stop action meant months of intense training for much of the cast that often got quite rough. Halle Berry, who plays fellow assassin and reluctant ally Sofia, told late night host Jimmy Fallon she broke three ribs while training for her fight scenes. Those scenes included working with dogs, specifically of the Belgian Malinois breed. Stahelski described them to Vulture as a "leaner, meaner version of a German Shepherd." Clad in doggy Kevlar vests, the canines run point for Sofia during battle, going for an arm, or a jugular, or (memorably) for the groin whenever a bad dude advances. (Dog-Fu!) Stahelski called it "doggy jujitsu," and told Vulture that the dogs were trained to think of it all as play.

For those who expected *Parabellum* would wrap everything up in a nice neat bow, the film ends with one final twist that neatly sets up a possible fourth film. Why would the studio abandon such a popular and profitable franchise? Poor John Wick will have to wait a bit longer to take that well-deserved break from all the killing.

[embedded content]
Training for *John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum*.
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