# Bethesda’s latest Elder Scrolls adventure taken down amid cries of plagiarism



## reader comments

109 with 87 posters participating

## Share this story

- In a series a comparative text samples published on Facebook, co-author Paige Leitman shows significant similarities throughout her “The Black Road” adventure and the Elsweyr adventure published by Bethesda.
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- Argonian, dragonborn… what’s the difference?
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- The caravans just happen to be extremely similar, OK?
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- The carts and wagons just happen to be extremely similar, OK?

Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands

- Chandra Stol is a very common name.
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- Catch the bandits or detect the goblins. Your choice.
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- What do you think?
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- DC13 Constitution checks in sandstorms are a dime a dozen.
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- "Your journey continues…"
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- Delivering statues
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands
- The author credit might be the only thing that wasn't copied almost wholesale…
  Paige Leitman/WotC & Bethesda Netherlands

[**Update 3:52 pm Eastern:** While the original Facebook post linking to the "Elsweyr" adventure has been taken down, the files in question are still accessible via Bethesda's Dropbox.]

A promotional Elder Scrolls-themed tabletop RPG adventure released by Bethesda Tuesday contained widespread instances of apparent plagiarism from a Dungeons & Dragons adventure published by Wizards of the Coast in 2016. That adventure was pulled down from the Internet Wednesday afternoon, and Bethesda now says it is "investigat[ing] the source."

Bethesda's pen-and-paper Elder Scrolls "Elsweyr" adventure (archived here for reference) contains text that in total seems only slightly reworded from the D&D adventure "The Black Road," written by Paige Leitman and Ben Heisler as part of Wizards of the Coast's Organized Play program. The adventures are largely identical throughout their texts, aside from sometimes sloppy replacements of certain words and phrases with synonyms and the changing of certain items and

locations to fit in the Elder Scrolls setting.

The introduction to “The Black Road” reads, in part:

> *There’s nothing like the desert to make people feel small and insignificant. In every direction, huge dunes roll across the landscape, and an even bigger sky looms above. The oasis of Vuerthyl is a motley collection of sun-bleached tents in the vast Anauroch desert.*
>
> *Through various means, it has been arranged that you would meet Azam the caravaneer in the large, Calimshan-styled tent that passes for a tavern here. A pair of tieflings, who seem to be unaffected by the heat, eye approaching visitors warily. The dim interior of the tent is a relief from the bright light and wind, though it’s as hot here as anywhere else. The gentle sounds of a stringed instrument fill the air, and the people inside are hunched over food, drink, and conversation. A dragonborn with rust-colored scales greets you, and guides you to a private table. There are a few other adventurers here.*

“Elsweyr’s” introduction reads as follows:

> *Nothing beats the desert to make people feel small and unimportant. In every direction enormous dunes roll across the landscape, and an even larger empty air skies above it [sic]. The oasis on the border between Cyrodiil and Elsweyr is a colorful collection of sun-drenched tents in the vast desert of Elsweyr.*
>
> *In various ways it is arranged that a group of adventurers would get acquainted with the caravan leader named Kar’reem. His big tent is filled with several Khajiit, which seem unaffected by the heat, they stare at you cautiously. The dim interior of the tent is a relief compared to the bright sunlight from outside, even though it is still as hot inside as out there. The soft sounds of stringed instrument [sic]*

> *fill the air, and the people are busy over eating, drinking, and conversation [sic]. An Argonian servant escorts you to an empty table.*

The similarities often extend to gameplay and scenario details as well. Here's a description of a caravan players can encounter in "The Black Road":

- Four wagons, each pulled by two foul-tempered camels
- One wagon carries the caravan's food
- One wagon carries the caravan's water and a shipment of medicinal herbs
- One wagon carries a shipment of weapons
- One wagon carries the statue of Angharradh
- The caravan travels and sleeps in two shifts every day. Travel from predawn until noon, sleep from noon until late afternoon in the shade, travel from late afternoon until after dinnertime. Sleep from after dinnertime until predawn.

And here's a description of a caravan in "Elsweyr" that appears the same point in the adventure:

- Four carts, each pulled by two horses
- One cart carries all food
- One cart carries all water and medicines
- One cart carries a large load of weapons
- One cart carries the statue
- The caravan travels in two shifts every day. From early in the morning to the afternoon, then rest and sleep until late in the afternoon. And from late in the afternoon to sunset.

These are just a few examples of the significant similarities between the two adventures. A Bethesda spokesperson told Ars, "We're digging in deeper to figure out what happened, but in the meantime, we've pulled the adventure based on what has been brought to light." Representatives for Wizards of the

Coast have yet to respond to a request for comment from Ars.

Bethesda's Facebook post announcing the "Elsweyr" adventure (link since removed), which says it comes from "our friends over at Bethesda Netherlands," contains many comments from D&D players complaining about what they see as a rip-off. That includes Paige Leitman, listed as a designer and author on the D&D adventure. She posted a lengthy Facebook thread titled "How They Plagiarized Our Adventure, An Annotated Powerpoint Presentation," highlighting many examples of overwhelmingly similar text in the two works.

"Hey, *The Elder Scrolls Online*, would you please let your legal team know?" Leitman writes. "This is REALLY not cool."

In response to a request for comment from Ars, Leitman said she had "no comment until both authors have a chance to fully discuss it and understand the ramifications."

In the video game realm, it can be hard to prove copyright infringement absent direct copying of "expressive elements" like artwork, music, and sound effects. Even games that copy mechanics and general game flow wholesale may not meet a legally actionable standard for infringement. In the case of a written, pen-and-paper game like this, though, the direct and overwhelming similarities in the stories and their wording could amount to a clearer case of copyright infringement. As IP lawyer David Lizerbram wrote in 2017 regarding D&D copyrights, "You're free to describe, discuss, or criticize any published content in any format that you like… However, you should avoid copying chunks of text or reproducing images." And Bethesda's changing of a few words and settings here and there likely wouldn't protect it against a substantial similarity argument in court.

The video game version of *Elder Scrolls Online*'s Elsweyr expansion will be available via PC early access May 20, with Xbox One and PS4 versions hitting on June 4.

*Listing image by Bethesda*

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1501881

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# Disney delays Avatar quadrilogy, dates three live-action Star Wars films



Enlarge / How much Disney-Marvel-Fox can you possibly stomach over the next eight years?
Disney / Aurich Lawson

## reader comments

202 with 130 posters participating, including story author

## Share this story

As part of the recent fusing of multiple movie empires, Disney made a massive announcement of film release dates on Tuesday relating to everything under its corporate, cinematic sun.

And we mean *everything*.

Let's start with the biggest official news of the document: every film in the upcoming James Cameron Avatar quadrilogy (yes, four more Avatar films) has been bumped at least one full year, with *Avatar 2* now slated to launch on December 17, 2021. That day, by the way, was *Avatar 3*'s original release date, but that third entry has now been bumped a full two years, to December 2023.

*Avatar 4* gets a one-year delay to December 2025, and *Avatar 5* will remain in production an additional two years with a scheduled launch of December 17, 2027. Assuming traditional movie theaters even *exist* by then.

If you're assuming lightsabers or superheroes are sweeping in to take that December 2020 slot, think again. Disney doesn't appear to have an action-tentpole film primed to replace that December 2020 slot in its calendar; instead, an "untitled Marvel movie" will launch on November 6, 2020.

Disney's recent pledge that Star Wars would take a theatrical break after this year's *Rise of Skywalker* has been confirmed by this schedule, and it's a remarkable one: three years. If this release schedule holds, we won't see a live-action Star Wars film in theaters again until 2022, when a slate of three untitled, live-action films will release every two years in December. Meaning, "untitled Star Wars" will land in theaters on December 16, 2022, December 20, 2024, and December 18, 2026. Last we heard, this was the live-action film trilogy that Disney CEO Bob Iger teased in late 2017 with *Last Jedi* writer-director Rian Johnson at the helm.

And while we're on the subject of Lucasarts: that Indiana Jones live-action sequel announced in 2016, with Harrison Ford attached, is still floating around in Disney's release schedule, only now marked with a release date of July 9, 2021.

We're not sure exactly how the Marvel Cinematic Universe will shuffle around post-*Endgame*, but we at least know Disney has no shortage of Marvel films heading to theaters. In addition to April 2020's launch of *The New Mutants*, an X-Men film helmed by Fox, eight "untitled Marvel film" projects are slated to launch in the years 2020-2022. Unlike its Star Wars and Avatar arms, Disney is apparently choosing to be conservative about making superhero release-date promises any further than that. (Sorry to everyone hoping for some version of *Iron Man* in 2027.) As a reminder, Sony is handling the launch of this July's *Spider-man: Far From Home*, and it may very well have other Marvel-related theatrical projects in the works.

Pixar isn't going anywhere, either, with four untitled projects scheduled between 2020-2022 (and none slated for release dates after that).

The rest of the list includes a variety of already announced projects under the Disney and Fox umbrellas, including the live-action YA book adaptation *Artemis Fowl* (now delayed to May 2020), a feature-length version of the TV series *Bob's Burgers* (July 2020), an animated version of the fantasy graphic novel *Nimona* (March 2021), and a CGI-animated film of a wholly new IP, *Ron's Gone Wrong*, from new production house Locksmith Animation (November 2020).

This list doesn't reflect the fact that Disney has plans for new series from every arm of its production empire in the works for Disney+, the new online video-streaming service slated to launch in November of this year. That may very well be where more side-stories and one-offs in the Star Wars universe land, to avoid repeats of underwhelming fan response

to releases like *Solo: A Star Wars Story*.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1501387

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# Claptrap voice actor accuses Gearbox CEO of assault, underpayment



Enlarge / Claptrap, unsurprisingly, finds himself in trouble in a scene from the *Borderlands* series.

## reader comments

96 with 73 posters participating

## Share this story

The voice of *Borderlands*‘ Claptrap, David Eddings, is going

public with allegations of abuse and underpayment against Gearbox and its CEO, Randy Pitchford. The allegations, which have drawn partial denials from both Pitchford and company spokespeople, open up a new front in some messy PR and legal battles for the company and its corporate leader.

The latest war of words started when Eddings, who also worked as a Gearbox VP of business development until 2017, said he wasn't reprising his vocal role as the robotic Claptrap in the upcoming *Borderlands 3* because, "for the first time, I insisted on getting paid for my performance and all of a sudden they couldn't afford me."

Eddings also made reference to the $12 million executive bonus Pitchford allegedly took, according to a January lawsuit, without his employees' knowledge.

In a statement to IGN, a Gearbox spokesperson said that "Gearbox works to treat and compensate all voice actors at industry standards. We offer the opportunity for salaried employees to voice characters in the game, but is not a mandatory responsibility to their job requirements. In this particular case, now that he was no longer an employee, we offered him an industry-standard rate, but were not able to reach an agreement. We are confident and happy with Jim Foronda as the voice of Claptrap, and we are confident our fans will be too."

But Pitchford added to that official response the next day on Twitter saying that Eddings "was offered 2x scale – twice union rates. He refused the offer." He added in a follow-up that "Eddings is bitter and disgruntled about having been terminated… I don't want him to do it unless he wants to do it, as motivation affects performance."

Eddings fired back yesterday in a Twitter thread saying that he had offered to come back as Claptrap for "free," provided Gearbox pay "past royalties owed plus an apology for something

I’ve never spoken about publicly until now: Randy physically assaulted me in the lobby of the Marriott Marquis at GDC 2017.” The thread goes on to allege that Pitchford was “stalking [Eddings] on social media” and that Eddings is “happy to be free from the half-truths and full-on deceptions, and thankful to no longer hear people referred to as ‘muggles’ like a con-man refers to a ‘mark.'”

A 2K/Gearbox spokesperson was not immediately available to respond to these latest allegations.

Eddings’ comments come after Pitchford said last month that voice actor Troy Baker, who played Rhys in the *Borderlands* games, was “told by the audio director that he turned [the role] down” for *Borderlands 3*. Baker later said in an interview with OnlySP that he “would love to come back” to the series but had been rejected for the role by Gearbox. “I would fact check before I tweeted out to the Internet,” Baker said at the time in reference to Pitchford’s tweet.

The news also comes amid an ongoing, wide-ranging lawsuit against Gearbox from former general counsel Wade Callendar. The suits allege fraud and breach of fiduciary duty on Gearbox’s and Pitchford’s parts, including allegations that Pitchford “abused the privilege of credit card access by charging unapproved, wholly personal expenses, including family vacations, gun club memberships and firearms accessories, and trying to get six-pack abs.”

“The allegations made by a disgruntled former employee are absurd, with no basis in reality or law,” Gearbox said in response to those lawsuits. “We look forward to addressing this meritless lawsuit in court and have no further comment at this time.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1501341

# Birth of Middle Earth: Tolkien biopic explores beloved author’s early years



YouTube/Fox Searchlight

## reader comments

44 with 23 posters participating

## Share this story

Teasing out the myriad influences on any artist creating a timeless masterpiece is tricky business, but Finnish director Dome Karukoski does an admirable job of it in *Tolkien*, an evocative dramatization of the late linguistics professor and

beloved fantasy author’s early life.

Per the film’s official premise: “As a child, J.R.R. Tolkien becomes friends with a group of fellow artists and writers at his school, with whom he finds inspiration and courage. Their bond of fellowship grows with the years, as they experience life together. Meanwhile, Tolkien meets Edith Bratt, with whom he falls in love. But when World War I breaks out, Tolkien’s relationships with his friends are tested, an act which threatens to tear their “fellowship” apart.” Nicholas Hoult (*The Favourite*) heads the cast in the title role, with Lily Collins (*Okja*) playing Edith.

The broad strokes of those formative years provide the backbone of the film. In 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in modern-day South Africa while his bank manager father, Arthur, had left England to manage a branch of the British bank there. When Tolkien was three, his mother, Mabel, took him and his younger brother, Hilary, for an extended trip to England. His father was meant to join them but died of rheumatic fever, leaving the family with no source of income. Mabel and the children wound up living in Birmingham with her parents, and the nearby village of Sarehole would end up inspiring various scenes in Tolkien’s novels.

Mabel died when Tolkien was 12, and a local priest, Father Francis Xavier Morgan, assumed guardianship of Tolkien and his brother and ensured they received a good education. It was at King Edward’s School that Tolkien met Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Bache Smith, and Christopher Wiseman, forming their own artistic society: the Tea Club and Barrovian Society, or T.C.B.S. That brotherhood anchors the film, which follows the young, idealistic dreamers who wanted to change the world with their art as they march off to defend Great Britain in World War I.



Enlarge / J.R.R. Tolkien reading in his study at Merton College, Oxford, in December 1955.
Haywood Magee/Stringer/Getty Images

Later (after the events of the film), Tolkien bonded over a shared love of Norse mythology with Narnia-creator C.S. Lewis when the two men met at Oxford as professors in the 1930s. Along with several other Oxford-based writers and scholars, they began meeting regularly at a local pub called The Eagle and Child, fondly dubbed The Bird and the Baby. The Oxford Inklings, as they came to be called, were arguably the literary mythmakers of the mid-20th century, at least in England. That is the period of Tolkien's life most familiar to fans of *The Hobbit* and The Lord of the Rings trilogy. In fact, Lewis was the first to read early drafts of Tolkien's imagined world. Tolkien later credited Lewis with "an unpayable debt" for convincing him the "stuff" could be more than a "private hobby."

But most of us are less familiar with Tolkien's formative years. "To me it was surprising, as I always envisioned Tolkien like everyone else: with his pipe at The Eagle and

Child, debating with C.S. Lewis about elves," said Karukoski. "Then I found out he had all this background, being an orphan, finding his friends, going to war. The story is quite amazing." So Karukoski set out to bring it to life on film.

> *"For me, what is most important is to find the emotional truth of the character."*

Making a film about such a well-known and beloved literary figure is always a daunting prospect, especially in light of the sometimes litigious Tolkien Estate. The Estate did release a statement in April clarifying that the family "did not approve of, authorize, or participate in the making of this film" and "they do not endorse it or its content in any way." But a spokesman for the estate told The Guardian that statement wasn't a harbinger of legal action. The intent was simply to distance the Tolkien Estate from *Tolkien* the film, lest people confuse the director's artistic vision with historical fact.

Karukoski isn't bothered at all by the statement, which he thought was "quite respectful. I didn't feel offended." In fact, he has invited Tolkien family members view the film with him, with the hope they'll see he has treated their forebear with great respect. That said, he readily admits to taking some creative license with the facts of Tolkien's life in his interpretation of the author as a character.

"Almost any biopic or real-life story needs alterations, because everyday existence is not that exciting or cinematic. At the end of the day, the narrative flow must work," he said. "For me, what is most important [for a biopic] is to find the emotional truth of the character."

Still, there are many factual flourishes throughout. Tolkien really did fall in love with a fellow boarder, Edith, only to be forced to choose between her and an Oxford education, thanks to Father Francis (played by Miles O'Brien himself,

Colm Meaney). A scene in a Birmingham teahouse where the couple toss lumps of sugar into the hats of fancy diners is largely accurate (except the real Tolkien and Edith sat on a balcony and tossed the lumps into the hats of passersby below). Edith was briefly engaged to someone else but broke it off when Tolkien declared he still loved her. They married after the war ended. And the tragic fates of two T.C.B.S. members are also part of the historical record.

- Image from forthcoming film *Tolkien*.
  YouTube/Fox Searchlight
- Image from forthcoming film *Tolkien*.
  YouTube/Fox Searchlight
- Image from forthcoming film *Tolkien*.
  YouTube/Fox Searchlight
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  YouTube/Fox Searchlight
- Image from forthcoming film *Tolkien*.
  YouTube/Fox Searchlight

While the film explores the many early influences that would one day feed into Tolkien’s writings, it largely avoids the trap of drawing overly direct parallels between biographical elements and Tolkien’s art. “There are no sign posts, no vision of something that is finished,” said Karukoski, noting

the author would have hated any attempt to claim a specific scene or character was directly inspired by specific events in his life.

For instance, when young Tolkien's mother reads his a story about Norse mythological hero Sigurd slaying a dragon, the boy envisions the classic knight on a white horse scenario. That image turns into a darker, fallen knight later on in the film, as Tolkien faces the horrors of World War I. "We are not expressing that it is specifically a certain character [in his fiction]," said Karukoski. "We're expressing how his mind works. It is like he has the instruments and is slowly adding his own music."

Tolkien's spirituality (he was a devout Catholic) most certainly influenced his fiction, but it's woven into the fabric of his world-building and hence is much more subtle than the nakedly allegorical approach of C.S. Lewis. (The Narnia books in particular are blatant Christian allegory, and Tolkien, who revered the symbolic power of myth, objected to that ham-fisted treatment when he read the manuscript: "It simply won't do, you know.") Showing that aspect of Tolkien proved the most challenging for Karukoski. He ultimately cut a scene in which Father Francis administers last rites to a dying patient because it just didn't fit with the overall flow of the film. (It will be included among the DVD extras, however.)

The fact that so much of the film's drama hinges on Tolkien's interior life was a challenge for its star, Nicholas Hoult, but the actor proved more than up to the task. "He has so many characteristics that Tolkien himself had, to build upon," said Karukoski. "He has the intelligence. He's funny, which Tolkien was. He has this wonderful playfulness in him."

Hoult prepared for the role for months, even learning how to draw illustrations like the author, "because that also tells us about the character, how your hand moves, what's your

temper when it moves," said Karukoski.

For Karukoski, making the film provided an extra layer of insight when he went and re-read Tolkien's books—and he hopes it will do the same for other fans. "You don't have to be a Tolkien fan to see the film; at it's core it's a story of friendship and love," he said. "But if you read the books after you see the film, I think you will better understand the profundity and the poetry in them."

*Tolkien* is holding special screenings nationwide on May 7 and opens officially on May 10, 2019.

[embedded content]
Trailer for Fox Searchlight's biopic *Tolkien*.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499995

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# BlizzCon 2019 tickets revolve around invasive, poorly reviewed smartphone app




Enlarge / This image of an exclamation-mark warning next to a BlizzCon logo was uploaded by Blizzard Entertainment itself,

not us.
Blizzard Entertainment

## reader comments

125 with 75 posters participating

## Share this story

BlizzCon, the annual fan expo hosted by game studio Blizzard Entertainment, typically doesn’t struggle to sell out—and the event’s first wave of tickets did just that on Saturday, May 4. But it wasn’t until those tickets went on sale that the studio’s fans noticed a curious new rule for the event: you can’t enter without installing a third-party, non-Blizzard app.

On April 25, Blizzard announced its plan to require the AXS Ticket app, created by the AXS ticketing service, on either iOS or Android for all BlizzCon ticket purchasers. At its site, Blizzard explains:

> *The app displays a QR code (one code for all of your tickets), which changes at regular intervals to help guard against dupes and fraud. Because of that, we won’t be able to accept paper tickets, confirmation emails, or screenshots/photos of the QR code at BlizzCon registration.*

The same site adds a caveat: “If for some reason you find yourself at the show with a dead mobile device or some other unexpected issue preventing you from accessing the app, don’t worry. Just head to the Solutions Desk at registration and they’ll help you out.” Blizzard has yet to clarify what the process of “help you out” will entail—as in, whether attendees will have to wait in a line and then manually enter AXS credentials into an official BlizzCon terminal to prove their purchases, since, again, traditional proof-of-purchase documents are apparently not going to work.



Enlarge / One reason BlizzCon tickets sell out so quickly is that they come with limited-edition goodies, both physically and in-game. This year, attendees can claim one of two physical statues, thus pledging their allegiance to either the Alliance or the Horde.
Blizzard Entertainment

The news comes just as the dust has begun to fade on BlizzCon 2018's biggest PR gaffe: the reveal of *Diablo Immortal*, a smartphone-only version of the classic dungeon-crawling series. Fans were surprised to see a smartphone version of the series instead of anything akin to "Diablo IV" for PCs. That disappointment grew upon the realization that Blizzard had offloaded development duties of a major series sequel to a completely different development studio, NetEase, which has already released Diablo-like games in China chock-full of microtransactions.

At last year's event, the muted response to *Diablo Immortal* and its lack of ties to the PC prompted a Blizzard staffer to remark, "You guys all have phones, right?" This year's addition of the AXS Ticket app, at the very least, will help Blizzard answer that question.

## "Any number of things"

As with some two-factor authentication apps, AXS' app advertises the ability to generate event-entry codes even if a device is offline, and those codes still correspond with an AXS account's credentials. In spite of this promise, a quick

peek at the AXS Ticket app on Google Play reveals more than 2,000 negative reviews piling up to a 2.2-star rating, with negative reviews dating back far enough to preclude the notion that this is the work of game fans' review-bombing efforts. Those user complaints include the inability to access purchased tickets, the "offline" promise not working with certain ticket types, and greater concerns about information security. The app, as of press time, can ask users to open the following permissions:

- read your contacts
- approximate location (network-based)
- precise location (GPS and network-based)
- full network access
- prevent device from sleeping
- pair with Bluetooth devices

Some of these permission requirements relate to other non-BlizzCon services within the AXS app, including a ticket-resale marketplace and an event search system. But other settings, particularly about Bluetooth, have left us puzzled. Again, should an annoyed user wish to block AXS' access to their device's contact and location data and simply access AXS' website for a temporary QR code, their only option as of press time is planning to wait at BlizzCon 2019's Solutions Desk.

AXS has already spoken to this complaint by issuing an apparent form response to multiple Google Play reviews: "We understand your apprehension. Any number of things can happen to PDF or paper tickets. Whereas when you use the AXS app, you get a revolving digital barcode that is not just a ticket, but is your identity. We understand the frustration of needing to use an app, but hope you find the process easy and secure when it's time for your event!"

We're unsure exactly how the AXS Ticket app is immune to "any number of things" that might afflict a PDF or screenshot of a

vendor’s unique QR code. And clearly Blizzard hasn’t fallen entirely in love with digital-only ticketing services, as BlizzCon will still revolve around physical badges, not constant phone scans. Additionally, our information security reporting team can neither point to examples of rampant QR code fraud at events, nor flatly declare that there are no such vulnerabilities in the wild. Neither Blizzard nor AXS mention anything about price-inflating scalpers in their push for the app, by the way, and AXS’ app makes abundantly clear that ticket resales are not just allowed but downright encouraged within the app.

It’s another setback for a game developer that is already struggling with the frank admission that it won’t have a “major frontline release” for the rest of 2019, though BlizzCon’s November timing does leave it room to get fans excited about whatever the company has in store in 2020.

In an email, Blizzard Corporate Communications Manager Dustin Blackwell provided the following statement to Ars:

> *After working with AXS for over a year on our ticketing for the Blizzard Arena Los Angeles, we decided to work with them for BlizzCon as well, given the good ticketing and access experiences they’ve been able to provide for our esports events. Their ticketing system is fully app-based, and that provides some additional security benefits, such as helping to avoid ticketing scams by ensuring that the person who purchased (or received via transfer) the ticket is the only person who has access to that ticket—i.e., so someone can’t claim to sell you a ticket but not actually transfer it to you. The app does use a QR code, but as a security measure, the code updates every 60 seconds, so printing it out is not an option.*

Blackwell also reiterated the company’s promise to help attendees at the Solutions Desk—and the fact that attendees

will immediately transition to a physical badge upon entry.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1500755

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# HBO’s new Chernobyl mini-series shows how good science is undermined by secrecy



## reader comments

133 with 62 posters participating

## Share this story

[embedded content]
Chernobyl (2019) | Official Trailer | HBO
When reactor four at the Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded in April 1986 outside of Pripyat, Ukraine, the whole world watched in horror as tidbits of information leaked out of the

tightly controlled Soviet Union. But conflicting official and scientific reports made it difficult to know the extent of the disaster.

The piecemeal accounts of how Chernobyl unfolded have made the disaster ripe for over-dramatization and under-dramatization, depending on the storyteller's politics and attitude toward nuclear energy. But HBO's new five-part mini-series *Chernobyl* stands out: it has the benefit of an extremely well-researched script that isn't afraid to make tasteful modifications to the story to keep the viewer from getting bored and drowning in names.

In short, Chernobyl, which debuts on HBO tonight at 9pm ET, is worth the watch.

## Disaster of human proportions

The series primarily follows Soviet Nuclear scientist Valery Legasov (played by Jared Harris), Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Boris Shcherbina (played by Stellan Skarsgård), and another Soviet nuclear physicist named Ulana Khomyuk (played by Emily Watson) as they investigate why reactor four exploded and decide how to respond to it.

Legasov and Shcherbina are historical figures; Khomyuk is a fictional character made to represent the dozens of scientists who helped investigate the crisis as it unfolded. This change is a welcome one, because five hour-long episodes are not enough to learn a *Game of Thrones*-sized cast of characters.

- Reactor employees after the explosion.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Adam Nagatis plays a firefighter who is called to the scene in the immediate aftermath of the explosion.
  Adam Nagatis
- A firefighter's wife tries to visit him in a Moscow

hospital.
Liam Daniel/HBO

- Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Boris Shcherbina and Soviet nuclear physicist Valery Legasov try to decide what to do next in the aftermath of the reactor explosion.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- A scene of the reactor explosion.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Emily Watson plays an amalgam of scientists in her role as Ulana Khomyuk.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Adrian Rawlins plays Chernobyl chief engineer Nikolai Fomin.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Craig Mazin, Jared Harris, and Stellan Skarsgard on set.
  Liam Daniel/HBO
- Shooting a scene that takes place in the rubble of a newly exploded reactor.
  Liam Daniel/HBO

From the opening scene, it's clear that the drama will be personal and political, rather than finger-wagging at, say, the hubris of man for trying to contain the power of the atom. Instead of vilifying nuclear power, *Chernobyl*'s real villain is the decades of fear and scrounging ambition that warped the minds of people with the slightest shot at power under the Soviet regime.

The secrecy maintained by Soviet officials, and the reluctance of lower-rung people to tell their superiors that something terribly, terribly wrong had occurred, sent two dozen firefighters to early graves. *Chernobyl* doesn't shrink from showing the audience how agonizing those deaths were.

The Soviet patchwork of misinformation and over-compensation to the disaster left partners, hospital workers, and children exposed to radiation poisoning, and it sent hundreds of thousands into a forced diaspora whose necessity is still

being debated today. (And honestly, if you're feeling at all weepy or sad, save the fourth episode for another day.)

That said, the series doesn't lean on over-fictionalization to goose the drama. Those familiar with how the Chernobyl disaster played out know that three Chernobyl employees were sent under the reactor in the days after the explosion. The divers made their way through extremely radioactive and flooded passageways in order to manually open a sluice that would drain away the water, lest the exposed reactor fuel melt through the floor above and create a second and more massive steam explosion.

Early tellings of this story often have the divers dying the same kind of gruesome death that the first-responding firefighters died, but more recent accounts suggest that they didn't follow such a predictable path. Instead, they survived for years after the event but fell into obscurity. *Chernobyl* depicts the divers' moment in tense detail, but the series holds back from killing those characters off for cheap melodrama.

For all its worth as a political drama, the series also doesn't skimp on explaining—in broad but not simplistic terms—the physical causes behind the reactor explosion. The final episode is the most technical and also the most dramatic, as Legasov must choose between offering the official version of the events that led to the explosion or the correct version of those events to a national and international audience. Viewers come away understanding the fatal flaw in Chernobyl's RBMK reactor, but they also leave with a complicated feeling of both empathy and revulsion for Legasov that didn't exist before the episode started.

## Navigating conflicting accounts

After viewing the series, Ars hopped on the phone with the show's writer and creator Craig Mazin, who spent years

researching the disaster. Mazin's thoughtful answers confirmed that *Chernobyl* was made with truth as an intention: the writer said he used every bit of information that was available to him to source his work, "from books that were written by Soviet scientists who were involved, to nuclear agency reports, audio tapes, photos." Mazin also utilizes the book *Voices of Chernobyl*, which collected first-person accounts of the disaster.

In his research, Mazin found that "there are some facts that aren't consistent with each other." In those cases, "I defer to the less dramatic version of things," the writer said.

"There are things that happened there that are so shocking and horrifying that you want to be unblinking… but you don't want to cross a line into the sensational," he added. So in order to be accountable when dramatizing such a contentious topic, Mazin and HBO have also released a companion podcast, where Mazin catalogs the changes that he made to adapt the story for TV on an episode-by-episode basis.

Like all worthwhile historical drama, *Chernobyl* contains a tinge of today's politics. Ars asked Mazin how he viewed modern nuclear power in the context of researching the 1986 disaster. His response? "I'm pro nuclear power, I think that nuclear power is essential to combat climate change, and I want people to understand just why [the Chernobyl disaster] happened.

"The Soviets… made a flawed reactor more dangerous, and even just the incident itself: they were running a safety test that shouldn't have been run," the writer added. "Because I think nuclear power is so essential to our future, I think it's really important that we treat it with as much care and respect as we can, because it can be devastating."

Ultimately, Mazin hoped to show that the Chernobyl disaster happened because of lots of small decisions, especially those

decisions to hide or downplay truth in the hopes of pleasing superiors. This is even reflected in the "hero" character of Legasov, who has a healthy fear of how devastating the crisis before his eyes is becoming, but who worked in lockstep with the people who created the conditions that led to the disaster.

"[Legasov] wasn't a bad guy," Mazin said. "What he was, was like all of us, I think, going along to get along. When we're not in crisis… we go along, and we continue to do so until a crisis dislodges us from our daily lives… then one day a nuclear power plant explodes and you can't keep going through your day pretending that these little decisions don't amount to big problems."

*Listing image by Liam Daniel/HBO*

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# Facebook's cryptocurrency might work like loyalty points



Enlarge / Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg checks his phone during the annual Allen & Company Sun Valley Conference, July 13, 2018 in Sun Valley, Idaho.
Drew Angerer/Getty Images

## reader comments

96 with 71 posters participating

## Share this story

If Facebook’s pivot from town square to private living room wasn’t laden with enough irony, here’s a new twist: Big business, it appears, has been invited to join us by the fireplace.

On Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported new potential details about Facebook’s long-awaited cryptocurrency plans. The company is reportedly seeking dozens of business partners, including online merchants and financial firms, in an effort to extend the reach of its blockchain-based marketplace. Facebook’s would-be partners are being asked to pitch into an

investment fund, valued at $1 billion or more, that would serve as backing for Facebook's coin and mitigate the wild speculative swings that make cryptocurrencies like bitcoin hard to spend. The pitch, according to the Journal, involves offering merchants lower fees than credit cards.

Some were quick to note that this would reduce Facebook's ability to make money from payments in the short term. But that may not matter much—if, in the end, Facebook's crypto effort is really all about getting you to spend more time glued to Facebook.

WIRED

Facebook appears to be already building out the plumbing to make its marketplace a reality. At its F8 developer conference last week, the word "blockchain" was notably absent. But even as Zuckerberg emphasized the company's plan to reorganize your Facebook experience around intimate relationships, his update included plenty of ways money would be involved. "I believe that it should be as easy to send money to someone as it is to send a photo," he said, alluding to "simple and secure payments" as a core feature of his privacy-forward vision. That apparently extends beyond the peer-to-peer payments available on Venmo and Facebook's own Messenger app. In a series of keynotes, Facebook execs touted a litany of commerce-focused improvements: better checkout for Instagram's digital mall, donation stickers, and a new tool for small business owners to list items on WhatsApp.

Indeed, WhatsApp appears to sit at the center of Facebook's commerce efforts—at least to start. At F8, Facebook said WhatsApp Pay, currently on limited trial in India, would expand to additional, unnamed countries later this year. The platform isn't blockchain-based (for now) and is designed for peer-to-peer payments. But with 80 percent of small businesses in India using WhatsApp to market their goods, some form of

payments processing is a natural evolution. In December, Bloomberg reported that the first tests of the crypto coin may occur in India, initially as a way for workers to send money home from overseas.

An added twist from the *Journal*'s report is the possibility that the coin will be integrated into Facebook's lucrative ads ecosystem. The scheme, reportedly still under debate within Facebook, would potentially work on both sides of the ads equation: Merchants could use the coins to pay for ads, and users would be rewarded in coins for viewing or interacting with them. That reflects a growing perception—seen recently in efforts like the Brave browser, which compensates users through a token for clicking on ads—that people should get paid for their attention, not simply help internet giants make money. For Facebook, it also presents a vision of how its ads and eyeballs-driven business could continue in the company's supposedly privacy-first era. The idea is to keep Facebook's coins—and therefore users—tightly enmeshed in the platform.

"I don't believe they're doing anything that isn't in the service of increasing interactions on their platforms," says Joshua Gans, a professor at the University of Toronto. Sending money to businesses presents a challenge, he notes. Compared with friends and family, businesses are more likely to dump their Facebook coins at the end of the month in favor of real money. Gans is skeptical that Facebook would pay users for viewing ads—an immensely tricky system to create—unless it involved something like a rebate for buying a product through a Facebook advertisement. On the merchant side, encouraging businesses to pay for ads and services on Facebook with the coin could be one way of staunching the flow of money out of the system.

As the *Journal* notes, Facebook's foray into blockchain could look a bit like a loyalty-points system—tokens that can be earned through and spent on Facebook services, or cashed out elsewhere though partner merchants. That's not without

precedent among technology companies: Uber, for example, has Uber Cash, which rewards users for purchases both in and out of Uber with app-specific money. Gans notes offerings like the Apple Card hold a similar purpose: It’s a service that, for all the talk of disrupting the credit card industry, is mostly a shiny, heavy way to buy more of Apple’s apps and products.

A Facebook spokesperson reiterated an earlier comment: “Like many other companies, Facebook is exploring ways to leverage the power of blockchain technology. This new small team is exploring many different applications.”

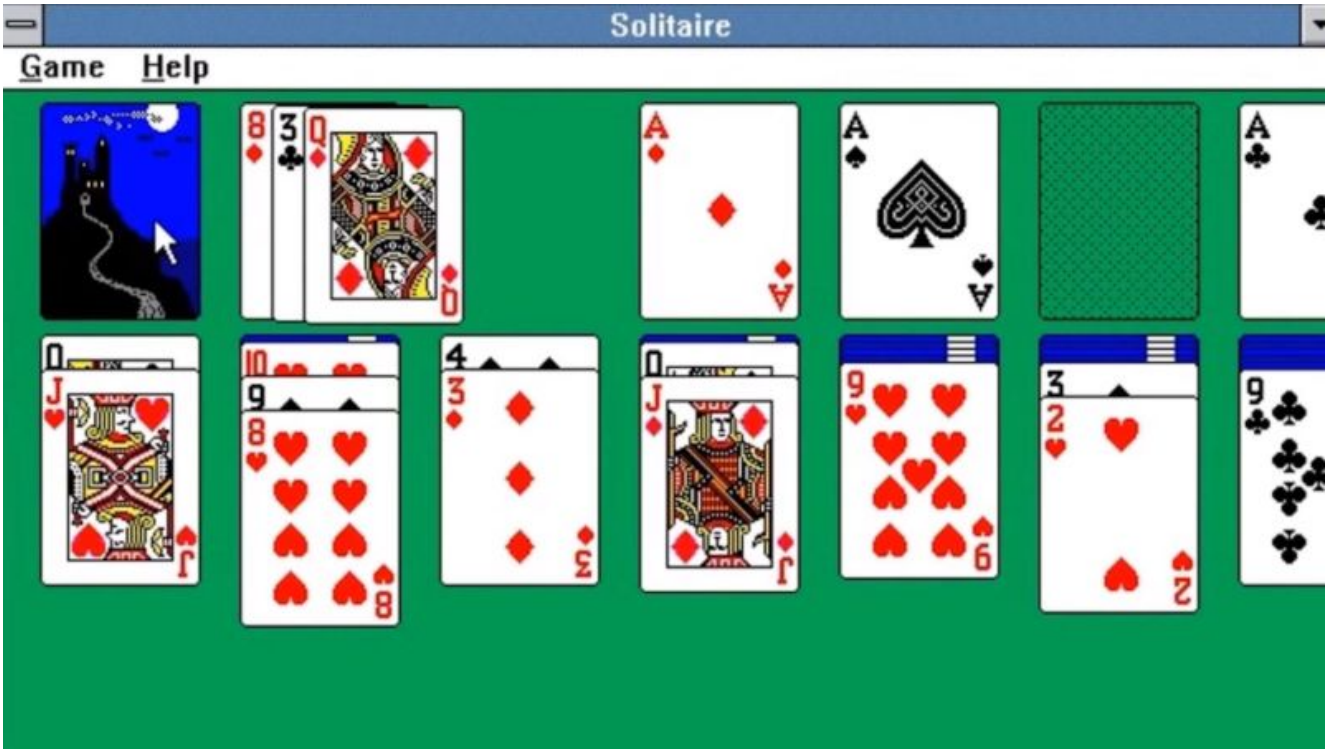
Facebook still faces many challenges, from sorting out how it will oversee the system to assuaging the privacy concerns of users to determining how to funnel money in and out of its currency—a process that, for other cryptocurrencies, is typically handled by exchanges. It also has to contend with the realities of the global economic system, which runs on euros and yen as well as dollars. Even if it backs the currency with a basket of currencies, as reported, it “can’t be stable with every currency in the world,” says Gans. “That’s not how the world works.” Hence the need to enlist financial partners to smooth transactions in and out of Facebook’s system.

Bottom line: It’s very unclear how this will work in practice. “There are a lot of moving parts. Facebook doesn’t always do what we expect,” says Gans.

*This story originally appeared on wired.com.*

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# Windows Solitaire inducted into the World Video Game Hall of Fame




## reader comments

105 with 70 posters participating

## Share this story

The classic Windows game *Solitaire* has joined such landmarks as *Doom*, *Tetris*, and *World of Warcraft* in being inducted into the Strong Museum of Play's World Video Game Hall of Fame. The award recognizes *Solitaire*'s role as a significant part of gaming's history.

*Solitaire* was first bundled with Windows 3.0. Much like the other notable bundled game, *Minesweeper*, *Solitaire* was there to serve as a secret tutorial: in a time when the mouse was still regarded as a new and exotic piece of computer hardware,

*Solitaire* honed clicking, double clicking, and drag-and-drop skills. As a computerized version of a familiar card game, it was instantly recognizable. It was bundled with every subsequent Windows version, up to Windows 7. Windows 8 replaced it with a much more varied set of card games.

The combination of approachability and bundling means that the game has been installed on more than a billion PCs, and it has likely been played by many billions of people.

Despite its fame and enormous player base, I'd be hesitant to call *Solitaire* a good game. It's a straightforward version of the card game, and aside from the animated card backs and iconic victory animation that sees all the cards jumping out of their stacks and bouncing away, it did little to really take advantage of its computerization.

Perhaps most unforgivable is that many hands of *Solitaire* are simply unwinnable, no matter how skillfully played. Contrast this with the vastly superior *FreeCell*, where in theory every regular game can be won. And both of those pale in comparison to *Minesweeper*, a game that arguably *must* be played on a computer, having no real analogue-world counterpart.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499875

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# After 32-bit purge, GameClub raises $2.5M to bring back classic iOS games



Enlarge / Vlambeer's *Super Crate Box* is among the well-remembered iOS titles being brought back thanks to GameClub.

## reader comments

71 with 46 posters participating

## Share this story

Apple's 2017 shift from 32-bit to a 64-bit code base for iOS has shut the door on countless games and apps designed during the platform's early days. Now, a startup called GameClub has attracted $2.5 million dollars in investment to help fix that problem, working with the original developers to update well-remembered premium mobile games for newer devices.

Games originally coded for older, 32-bit iOS devices can be recompiled for newer versions of the operating system. But that requires access to the original source code, which is

often held by companies that don’t have the interest or ability to try to find a new market for an old, “defunct” game on their own.

“There’s a surprising amount of detective work involved in identifying who owns the rights and who has the source code,” GameClub cofounder and CEO Dan Sherman told VentureBeat recently. “Sometimes those rights are in two different places or were part of a studio or publisher that is now defunct or in the process of winding down, as the original owners move on to other ventures, jobs, or leave the industry entirely. In some situations, the games were effectively forgotten, or the rights were at risk of disappearing into legal abyss, leaving them one step away from the source code being lost forever.”

Updating an older game for new devices also often means fighting with out-of-date SDKs and juggling new screen size options in more recent iOS devices. “Simply getting a game to compile again involves making and documenting loads of fixes, many of which are shared with other games we’re updating that utilize the same underlying engines,” Sherman told VentureBeat. “We then set up an automated build process for each game so we can more easily keep them all up-to-date with future changes and platform requirements.”

Currently, interested parties can sign up for early access to GameClub’s efforts through Apple’s limited access “TestFlight” service. But GameClub is currently working on 50 games that it plans to release directly on the App Store later in 2019.

Those titles will all be available for one-time payments and “free of intrusive ads and microtransactions,” the company says in a statement. That move reflects what GameClub says is “a growing sense of freemium fatigue in the mobile games market – consumers are increasingly fed up with predatory free-to-play microtransactions and incessant ads that are not only annoying, but often inappropriate for children.”

The nine iOS games GameClub has publicly announced for re-release are:

- *Super Crate Box* (Vlambeer) (an Ars favorite)
- *Hook Champ* (RocketCat Games)
- *Hackycat* (Ken Wong)
- *Gasketball* (Greg Wohlwend and Michael Boxleiter)
- *Legendary Wars* (Liv Games)
- *Incoboto* (Fluttermind)
- *Sword of Fargoal* (Jeff McCord and Paul Pridham)
- *Space Miner* (Venan Entertainment)
- *Chopper 2* (Majic Jungle)

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499841

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# Mortal Kombat 11 review: Great gameplay, excessively packaged




Enlarge / Classic characters (klassic karacters?) Raiden and Johnny Cage face off in a nostalgic-themed arcade level.
NetherRealm Studios

## reader comments

85 with 50 posters participating, including story author

## Share this story

The original *Mortal Kombat* was part of the arcade experience that quite literally shaped my life in gaming—I've been a dedicated fighting game community member ever since. Looking back, the entire original trilogy of games feels special, and the early-year hype for *Mortal Kombat 11* recently stirred up some of that nostalgia. After a long time of mostly ignoring the franchise's releases, I was genuinely looking forward to trying a new *Mortal Kombat* game.

As a somewhat serious fighting game player, I'm good enough to know I'm not particularly good. Fighting games are a pretty deep rabbit hole, and there is always more to dig. I'm registered to compete this August in *Street Fighter V* and the new (and still unreleased) *Samurai Shodown* at Evo, the annual

global fighting game event in Vegas. I run a weekly night hosting players for a multitude of fighting games (but mostly *Street Fighter* titles). No matter the preferred title, though, I'm happy to nerd out and talk frame traps or fighting game theory.

I'm a fan of the Mortal *Kombat* series in general, but I stopped paying much attention after the third arcade title in the mid '90s. So before playing *MK11,* I caught up on some quick summaries of the rebooted franchise lore that came along with NetherRealm Studios' (NRS) *Mortal Kombat 9* in 2011. My perspective on the game may very much be that of a lapsed fan these days, but those early titles will always hold a special place.

With all that out of the way, I'll say that *Mortal Kombat 11* gives me mixed feelings.

## Visual feast



Scorpion uppercutting Sub Zero into the air in a spray of blood has been a series staple since day one.

To begin with, the game is gorgeous. NRS is using a highly

modified version of the Unreal Engine 3, and whatever the studio has done makes the game outshine Unreal Engine 4 fighters like *Tekken 7* and *Street Fighter V* in graphic fidelity. Everything from the character models and stages to the lighting and effects oozes high-budget polish. The blood and viscera (we'll get to that!) have never looked so shiny and fluid.

The stage designs might be my favorite part. There's a broad variety of locations, from a ship sailing a blood-tossed sea, to a desert-housed military base complete with a cactus you can scrub your opponent's face on, to a throwback to the original *Mortal Kombat* tournament stage with the audience of orange-robed Shaolin monks—except this time they're silent corpses instead of a sea of bobbing heads.

*Mortal Kombat* has always been a series that emphasized atmosphere, and this might be its strongest atmosphere yet. Smoke and dust swirl in the backgrounds, candles glow softly, and interactable elements (like the aforementioned cactus) give each stage a little extra personality.

The character designs are great, too, with a varied mix of both visual and play styles. The bulk of the cast are old favorites, such as Scorpion, Sub Zero, and Raiden, but there are a few newer NRS-era characters, like the blood-magic-wielding Skarlet and Cassie Cage, daughter of Johnny Cage and Sonya Blade (her parents are in the game, too). Yeah, the game is old enough that the original characters have hooked up to have kids. There's also a handful of interesting newcomers, like Geras, who can manipulate time, or the six-armed Kollector, who has so many limbs he dedicates two just for holding up his backpack.

The original *MK* games were made using digitized actors to create all of the poses, creating a much more "realistic" style at the time compared to the more cartoony *Street Fighter*. Now NRS uses 3D models, but it still relies heavily

on motion capture to help animate them and serve as a link back to the tech that started the series off. This has been a mixed success on previous titles, which were deservedly criticized for some odd poses and choices. *MK11* is much improved in that department, but it still retains a bit of a stiff feeling that stems all the way back to the original games. It feels like it's 80-percent a stylistic choice but 20-percent just plain-old bad animation. That's an improvement over past games like *Mortal Kombat X* and *Injustice 2*, though, where the ratio was maybe 50/50, to be kind.

Overall, even taking into account the occasional wonky animation choice, *MK11* is easily the best looking "realistic" 3D fighter on the market. Games like *Dragon Ball Fighterz* or *Guilty Gear,* which are rendered in 3D, but with cel shading techniques, stand out for their style, but if you're looking for finely rendered skeletons of four-armed, half-human half-dragons (RIP Goro), NRS is on top of the pile.



Jacqui Briggs, daughter of Jax from MK2, performing the end of her Fatal Blow attack.

# Fatal blows

All this graphic fidelity of course leads us to the thing the series is most known for: excessive gore and violence. *Mortal Kombat* has always been an adolescent fantasy series—with undead ninja assassins, Shaolin monks, femme fatales, and lightning gods—but it's the fatalities that really put it on the map. You could tear someone's head off after defeating them, then hold it aloft as the spine dangles below. It was a bit exaggerated, but the graphics were realistic for their time.

*MK11* turns the blood up to 11 and really makes the most of the graphic engine. Want to rip someone's face off, smash their skull open, and jab their brain out on your arm spike so you can take a big, juicy bite of it while blood gushes out in slow motion and you mug for the camera? NRS has got you covered. How about vomiting up a torrent of bugs into your victim's mouth, so they can writhe in pain before erupting into a mass of legs, the corpse now being worn like a hermit crab's shell? No problem!

The time-manipulating boss of the story repeatedly rips you in half, or flays the skin from your body, then reverses time to do it all over again. If you can think of a way to tear someone apart, chances are good the game has you covered.

The violence and sadism are excessive, but that's what the series is known for. Every character has two overly involved fatalities, as well as an assortment of shorter kill animations called brutalities. Of the latter, my personal favorite so far is crushing your opponent under a falling *Mortal Kombat* arcade cabinet in a nice series callback. It's gross but mostly in good fun, certainly part of the *Mortal Kombat* package.

With *MK11,* I have two real complaints about the lack of restraint shown by the game's tendency to go overboard. The

first and largest issue involves a new mechanic for the series, called a Fatal Blow.

A Fatal Blow is a move you can do once a match that becomes available when your character drops below 30-percent health. It's a comeback mechanic, meant to give the losing player a chance to strike back. I'm not a giant fan of things that reward people for losing, but making it only work once a match means there's some strategy to when you employ it, at least.

The problem is that the animation triggered by a Fatal Blow is so long. The name is a misnomer: it's not a blow, it's a whole series of them. Johnny Cage, for instance, starts with his glowing green shadow kick, right to the chin, slow-motion blood flying from his opponent's mouth. Next come some more kicks and flips, this time slamming the victim to the ground, his boot to the head, more slow-motion blood flying out. He's not done, though; now he's whipping out his Oscar-look-alike trophy, holding it aloft to let the light gleam off it, before reaching down to smash it across the opposing face. Even *that's* not enough, as Cage finally leaps back, grips the trophy, and stabs it into his foe's chest, with, you guessed it, more slow-motion blood flying everywhere.

The whole thing takes a whopping 12 seconds to complete. That might not sound like a lot, but keep in mind this is an essential game mechanic you're likely to see every single match (sometimes twice a match). Those slow animations add up fast when repeated ad nauseam.

Fatalities are optional, only happening after the match is over. Between multiple fatalities and brutalities, there's also a decent amount of variety. Fatal Blows, on the other hand, are a core mechanic that plays out as the same long sequence every time. They get old very fast, there's no way to skip through them, and they happen mid-match, really killing the flow of the action. I found myself avoiding using my Fatal Blow against the CPU during fights when I was confident I

didn’t need it to win, simply because I didn’t feel like sitting through the animation again.

If the current roughly 12-second Fatal Blows had been divided up into six individual two-second options, randomly selected each time, it would have felt much more satisfying and snappy. As it is, it’s easily my least favorite aspect of the gameplay.

- Scorpion beheading and spearing his arch rival, Sub Zero
- Cassie Cage kicking her mother so hard in the chest her heart flies out.
- D’Vorah’s fatality begins with her vomiting bugs into her opponent’s mouth.
- Baraka ripping off someone’s face.
- After the face ripping comes the brain nom nom nomming.
- Kotal Kahn dropping an idol on his opponent’s head.
- Liu Kang, looking a bit gray in his undead ‘Revenant’ state, punches his foe to literal bits.

The other place the lack of restraint shows through is an ironic result of the care and depth NRS has put into its characters. The long and generally well-crafted story mode offers a lot of chances to build real personalities and feeling into each protagonist. They deal with loss and sadness and family in a relatable way.

And that makes it much more jarring when they sadistically torture each other.

The opening of the story has a fight scene between Cassie and her mother, Sonya, billed as a rite of passage for Cassie’s military promotion. That works as a good excuse for a fight scene. You get to control Cassie, putting a little hurt on her mom. *Wait, huh? Cassie, why are you picking up that power tool? Holy crap, you just jammed it into your mother’s head and started drilling her brain out, blood is flying everywhere. I thought this was a friendly fight? That’s messed*

*up, girl.*

At one point in the story, a character takes a bullet to the leg. He can't fight anymore; they have to help him out. It's very dramatic. He's also the guy who was getting half disemboweled earlier, with spikes jammed through his head, bullets bouncing off coins and into his eyes, and just generally getting ripped to shreds. The disconnect between when the blood matters or not is kinda funny, but it also removes a lot of the story tension.

Even outside of the story, things get weird in *MK11* with the story mode. You can't perform fatalities during story fights, against your family members or otherwise. But in a normal versus match? It might seem like a quibble in a game so awash in violence, but it's a little extra weird to see Cassie kick a hole in her father's chest, sending his heart flying, and then pose behind the gaping wound to make a heart with her hands and send a kiss to the camera.

*Mortal Kombat* and excessive violence had gone hand in hand from the start. But *MK11* can feel like it's trying too hard, with animations that start to feel dragged out and forced. More respect for the viewer's time would have been nice. Ending a match with a long Fatal Blow and then getting the invitation to perform the fatality right after can feel like the *Simpsons* meme: "Stop, stop! He's already dead!"

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