Chewbacca actor Peter Mayhew is dead at 74

Enlarge / Mayhew arrives at the premiere of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* at the El Capitan Theatre on May 10, 2018, in Hollywood.

reader comments

27 with 23 posters participating

Share this story

Peter Mayhew, who portrayed Chewbacca in all the character's live-action scenes until 2015's *The Force Awakens*, has died at his home in Texas. The British-born actor was 74 years old.

Mayhew was an aspiring actor working as a hospital orderly in 1976 when George Lucas tapped him to play the part. Mayhew's primary qualification for the job was his height: he stood 7 feet 3 inches tall (220 cm). That was tall enough to tower over Darth Vader, played by the six-foot-six (200 cm) David Prowse. Mayhew didn't utter Chewbacca's famous grunts and growls—those were voiced by sound-effects legend Ben Burtt.

According to The Hollywood Reporter, Mayhew went back to his hospital work after playing Chewie in *Star Wars*. He came back to play the character again in *The Empire Strikes Back* and then *Return of the Jedi.* By that point, his character had become famous enough that he could make his living on the convention circuit.

"For more than 30 years, Peter traveled all over the world spending time with his fans and friends," the family wrote in a memorial statement. "Peter developed lifelong friendships with the other cast members and his fans while on the

convention circuit."

Mayhew's character was famously stiffed at the end of the original film—Luke and Han were awarded medals by Princess Leia, but Chewie didn't get one. In 1997, the princess finally corrected that oversight at the MTV Movie Awards. Mayhew appeared—in costume—so that Carrie "Leia" Fisher could drape a medal around his neck.

Mayhew appeared in the 2005 Star Wars prequel, *Revenge of the Sith*.

By the time the new trilogy got under way, Mayhew was in his 70s and suffering from health problems. Videos from around this time showed him walking slowly with the aid of a cane. As his family put it, "he fought his way back from being wheelchair-bound to stand tall and portray Chewbacca once more in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*."

After that 2015 film, he handed off the role to Finish actor Joonas Suotamo, who has played Chewie in recent *Star Wars* films and is expected to play him again in this year's *The Rise of Skywalker* (although he only stands a paltry 6-foot-11).

Mayhew underwent spinal surgery last year to improve his mobility, an operation he declared a success.

"He was the gentlest of giants," Mark Hamill—who played Luke Skywalker—tweeted on Thursday. "A big man with an even bigger heart who never failed to make me smile."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499723

After trailer outcry, Sonic the Hedgehog director tells fans to expect “changes”

reader comments

90 with 73 posters participating

Share this story

- What’s to come of November’s *Sonic the Hedgehog* film? We thought we knew based on a very odd-looking trailer, but Thursday’s news may have changed everything.
  Paramount / Sega
- AHHHHHHH! That is both the caption of what Sonic is shouting in this trailer moment, and my internal voice reacting to the teeth.
- This trailer moment alludes to Sonic having Flash-like reflexes.
- Jim Carrey as Dr. Robotnik and/or Dr. Eggman. What’s the canon on that these days?
- James Marsden and Sonic in a tooth-off.
- As if to make things more awkward, the trailer opens with a stretching sequence, to thus emphasize CGI-Sonic’s weird physique.
- At least he’s packed with ’90s ‘tude.

On Thursday, 48 hours after the world finally saw what this November’s *Sonic The Hedgehog* live-action movie would look like, its director took to Twitter with a surprise announcement: that’s, uh, not what the live-action movie will

look like.

“Thank you for the support,” film director Jeff Fowler posted to Twitter on Thursday afternoon. “And the criticism. The message is loud and clear… you aren’t happy with the design, and you want changes. It’s going to happen.”

After acknowledging the support of film studio Paramount and game company Sega, Fowler included a pretty telling hashtag: “#gottafixfast.” It’s not just a riff on the series’ iconic “gotta go fast” slogan” but rather a stark admission that Fowler’s vague suggestion for a “changed design” is running headlong into a six-month timeframe. The film is still scheduled for a November 8, 2019, release and will be Fowler’s feature-length directorial debut.

Fowler’s tweet doesn’t acknowledge months of public questions and comments about the live-action Sonic design. The murmurs and furrowed brows began in December of last year when the film’s premiere poster debuted, showing a silhouette of the redesigned gaming mascot—long, thin legs and all. The redesign ran head-long into years of 2D and 3D renders of the character across a multimedia landscape of video games, comic books, dolls, and animated series, and it followed a prior teaser poster that showed a real-world city from the perspective of Sonic’s crotch—thus emphasizing his new design’s long, thin legs.

[embedded content]
This week’s *Sonic the Hedgehog* film trailer, which may soon become a relic.
Complaints reached a fever pitch when a series of promotional slides about the Sonic film, prepared by an associated promotional company, leaked in early March. The film’s trailer has since confirmed the accuracy of those March images, though that leak didn’t include one particularly stomach-churning detail: live-action Sonic’s mouth of teeth, a first for the character since it was introduced in 1991.

This week's Sonic film trailer appeared just as promotions for next week's *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu* film ramp up. While longtime Pokémon fans may bristle at the CGI-ized versions of certain characters, those fans certainly dodged a bullet compared to Sonic's diehards. *P:DP* adds a handful of sometimes-lovely, sometimes-odd real-life effects to its character renders, but their designs otherwise conform to the 3D specs that series developer Game Freak has established and refined in years of games dating back to the N64 era.

Since the new Sonic design's leak, original members of the *Sonic the Hedgehog 1* development team have offered their own conflicting opinions on the matter. After the March leak, series programmer Yuji Naka said he was "shocked" by the redesign and was particularly baffled by why the character's hands had become covered in white fur, instead of being covered in gloves. Another Naka tweet expressed hope that a live-action Sonic eventually conforms to the "rounder" shape of head and eyes from his original design.

> 今まで色々なソニックが現れたが全てを好きでいたい。私はソニック映画のトレーラーを観た。大人も楽しめるものを期待していたが心配です。
> *So far, various Sonics have appeared. I loved all Sonics. I saw a trailer of Sonic's movie. I was expecting adults to have fun too. I am worried.* *pic.twitter.com/QgBfrTJ700*
>
> *— Naoto Ohshima (@NaotoOhshima)* *May 2, 2019*

Meanwhile, shortly before Fowler's change of heart, original series artist Naoto Ohshima posted his own sketch of the new live-action design (shown above). The sketch's caption includes a message of support for the film and concern about knee-jerk reactions: "I was expecting adults to have fun, too. I am worried."

In the meantime, while we wait to see whether next week's live-action *Detective Pikachu* film truly breaks the "video game curse" on movie adaptations, I recommend enjoying last

year’s *Rampage*—which doesn’t necessarily break that curse, but at least has a darned good time playing fast and loose with its ’80s arcade inspirations.

Listing image by Paramount / Sega

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499649

Xbox’s new Code of Conduct: yes to “get wrecked,” “potato aim,” no to hate

Enlarge / An artist’s approximation of an Xbox Live player crossing the lines as set by Microsoft in a new Xbox Community Standards page this week.
Getty Images / Sam Machkovech

reader comments

72 with 50 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

An apparently new page at the official Xbox website, dubbed “Community Standards for Xbox,” was recently unearthed by members of the ResetEra gaming forums. The page appears to be the first of its kind from a console online-gaming provider, as it translates the legalese of Microsoft’s existing “services agreement” to straight-up “l33t” speak.

The page, which has yet to see a signal-boost from Xbox

representatives like Phil Spencer or Larry “Major Nelson” Hyrb, goes into detail about 10 major points in Microsoft’s Services Agreement—the form you must scroll through and click “accept” on when creating any Xbox or Microsoft account. These 10 points have been rephrased slightly to better reflect an Xbox use case and are followed by examples of hypothetical activities, including smack talk.

The most notable section may be the “keep your content clean” category. In Microsoft’s official agreement, this is described as follows:

> *Don’t publicly display or use the Services to share inappropriate content or material (involving, for example, nudity, bestiality, pornography, offensive language, graphic violence, or criminal activity).*

The Xbox Community Standards page breaks this down into a few more discretely defined categories, and one of these is titled, “know the difference between trash talk and harassment.” It includes an acknowledgement that “a little trash talk is an expected part of competitive multiplayer action,” then clarifies: “hate has no place here.”

A dictionary-like description of harassment offers examples such as “negative behavior that’s personalized, disruptive, or likely to make someone feel unwelcome or unsafe” and is written in an “includes but is not limited to” way. The standards page then offers five examples of acceptable in-game trash talk, each seemingly plucked from a popular online-gaming genre like FPS and racing, then later tweaks each into an unacceptable version.

The nice list:

- Get destroyed. Can’t believe you thought you were on my level.
- That was some serious potato aim. Get wrecked.

- Only reason you went positive was you spent all game camping. Try again, kid.
- Cheap win. Come at me when you can actually drive without running cars off the road.
- That sucked. Get good and then come back when your k/d’s over 1.

And the naughty list:

- Get <sexual threat>. Can’t believe you thought you were on my level.
- Hey <profanity>, that was some serious potato aim. Get wrecked, trash.
- Only reason you went positive was you spent all game camping. KYS, kid.
- Cheap win. Totally expected from a <racial slur>.
- You suck. Get out of my country—maybe they’ll let you back in when your k/d’s over 1.

(Before you go fragging the messenger—yes, yes, we know, “get rekt” is the standard online spelling of that phrase.)

No more loot caves?!

As the document is pretty long, we’re not going to list it beat-by-beat, other than to point out a few notable points in the document. They may not seem all that new to Terms-of-Service veterans, but Xbox has listed them a bit more discretely in this document.

A section on “harmful behavior” goes into great detail about cheats and exploits. But it also includes a warning for “using ‘mods’ that are not explicitly supported by a game developer,” which is a wide net that could include actions like unlocking keyboard-and-mouse support in an Xbox game that doesn’t formally support it and “using exploits to ‘duplicate’ in-game items,” which many players could consider nothing more than taking advantage of a developer’s buggy code to tap into PvE

perks like *Destiny 1*‘s famous “loot cave.”

A “fraud” section explicitly prohibits “charging another player to help them complete a level in a game,” which could put a wrench in the works of “online companion” services that offer such paid pro-gamer help. Meanwhile, the “keep your content clean” section includes a request that players not “use your activity feed as a platform to promote controversial politics”—which could lead to trolls mass-reporting any phrases relating to women, people of color, or the LGBTQ community.

The document concludes with a reminder of what happens to accounts with repeat infractions: “Under permanent suspension, the owner of the suspended profile forfeits all licenses for games and other content, Gold membership time, and Microsoft account balances.” This kind of suspension doesn’t appear to restrict access to Xbox’s disc-based games.

Update: Shortly after this article went live, a Microsoft representative provided the following statement to Ars Technica: “Community Standards for Xbox, which launched on April 30, makes it easier to understand what kind of behavior is acceptable on Xbox Live and what is not, and how to positively contribute to the global Xbox community to ensure it is safe, welcoming and inclusive of everyone. The standards are not a new set of rules, but are a call to action that empowers every player to evaluate their behavior and adjust accordingly in order to be a force for good.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499615

Pitchford promises no “free-to-play junk” for Borderlands 3

Enlarge / Four new classes that you’ll have to level up the old fashioned way… for the most part.

reader comments

116 with 80 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Yesterday’s rollout of the first public gameplay footage for *Borderlands 3* went about how you’d expect, with all the requisite guns, explosions, and colorful characters that have been standard for the series from the jump. But some confusingly worded comments about the game’s post-launch monetization have required a bit of clarification from Gearbox CEO Randy Pitchford and others in the company.

During yesterday’s streamed presentation, Pitchford announced that “we’re gonna do some kickass campaign DLC, and I’m sure we’re going to do all kinds of fun customizations like heads and skins. But we’re not doing any of that free-to-play junk. There’s not going to be any microtransactions, there’s not going to be any of that nonsense.”

That specific wording led Game Informer to tweet out an article clarifying that the cosmetic items Pitchford mentioned (i.e. “fun customizations like heads and skins”) are indeed being sold via microtransactions (i.e. small payments). That means Pitchford’s statement that “there’s not going to be any microtransactions” isn’t technically accurate.

Game Informer's tweet, in turn, led Pitchford down an emotional, 18-tweet rant about his words getting twisted out of context. "Our post-launch plans are in flux, but I made a commitment that *Borderlands 3* would not pursue F2P style monetization," Pitchford wrote in that thread. "There will be tons of cosmetic drops as (free) loot in *Borderlands 3*," he said in a follow-up Wednesday evening. "Currently there are no plans for any cosmetic DLC, but I anticipate there will be customer demand post launch that we will be excited to meet just as we did with additional optional cosmetic DLC for *BL2*."

Borderlands producer Chris Brock offered further clarification in an interview with GamesIndustry.biz. "When we say 'no microtransactions,' what we're really trying to say is that we're not trying to nickel and dime people," he said. "We'll probably make content after launch that we will sell, but we also don't intend to take what *Borderlands* was and then chop it up into chunks and sell it."

Creative Director Paul Sage further clarified to PC Gamer that skins, heads, and auxiliary equipment will be available for purchase, but there were no plans for so-called pay-to-win items or a games-as-a-service style of monetization.

XP boosts?

That all seems clear enough, despite Pitchford's perhaps overenthusiastic wording. But where things get a little more iffy is in the game's special editions. An $80 Deluxe Edition, $100 Super Deluxe version, and $250 'Diamond Loot Chest Collector's Edition" all contain "Equippable XP & Loot Drop Boost Mods," according to marketing materials.

By paying a bit more over the $60 base game, in other words, you get an advantage that helps you win the game. This isn't that uncommon in modern game launch marketing—games like *Evolve* were doing it years ago. But it does sound a bit like a one-time example of the kind of "pay-to-win" mechanics

Pitchford was rejecting.

A 2K spokesperson tried to clarify that messaging in an interview with PC Gamer last month. “While *Borderlands 3* is not a competitive game, where boosts could lead to direct player advantages and be considered a competitive concern, we still take balance of the progression and loot systems in the game very seriously,” the spokesperson said.

“We are still fine-tuning these systems in *Borderlands 3*, and the benefits the boosts in the Deluxe, Super Deluxe and Collector’s Edition will provide, but at this stage we can confirm that the Loot and XP boosts will both be level capped and tied to specific pieces of gear, similar to boosts in past *Borderlands* games,” he continued. “The intent is to give those players an initial boost, but not something that permeates the entire *Borderlands 3* experience indefinitely.”

Gearbox’s SHiFT code system of old will return, as well, which allows players to hunt for and redeem free codes (found in and out of the game) in exchange for in-game loot. In *BL3*‘s case, that system will tie into average Twitch stream watching—so if you watch someone redeem killer loot, you may get an automatic SHiFT bonus in your *BL3* account as a viewer.

Long story short, it sounds like Gearbox is committed to avoiding the worst excesses of randomized loot box purchases and free-to-play-style, skip-the-grind treadmill monetization. But despite some confusing statements, that doesn’t mean that cosmetic microtransactions and paid boosts are *completely* absent from the game.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499351

Epic acquires Rocket League studio, bringing game to Epic’s store this year

Enlarge / The blue car represents Psyonix leaping over Steam’s… orange car? Look, it’s a loose metaphor. Work with me here, people.

reader comments

153 with 78 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

In a surprise move today, Epic Games announced it has “signed a definitive agreement” to acquire San Diego-based Psyonix and its 132 employees, who make the hit car-based soccer game *Rocket League*.

As part of the deal, the PC version of *Rocket League* will be moving to the Epic Game Store “in late 2019,” Epic announced. “In the meantime, it will continue to be available for purchase on Steam; thereafter it will continue to be supported on Steam for all existing purchasers.” Psyonix says it will continue to sell and support *Rocket League* on other platforms, including the PS4, Xbox One, and Switch, going forward.

“In the short term, nothing will change at all!” Psyonix writes in a blog post accompanying the announcement. “We’re still committed to providing Rocket League with frequent updates that have new features, new content, and new ways to play the game for as long as you’ll have us.”

“In the long-term, we expect to bring *Rocket League* to the

Epic Games store and to leverage our new relationship to grow the game in ways we couldn’t do on our own before,” the post continues. “We believe that bringing *Rocket League* to new audiences with more support is a win for everybody.”

Psyonix also says it sees the acquisition, which is due to close in May or June, as “significantly increas[ing] our potential reach and resources” for the game as an esport.

“We’ve been working closely with Epic since the early days of *Unreal Tournament*, and we’ve survived changing tides as partners, so combining forces makes sense in many ways,” Psyonix founder and studio director Dave Hagewood said in a statement. “The potential of what we can learn from each other and accomplish together makes us truly excited for the future.”

The Psyonix acquisition is the latest aggressive move for Epic, which is flush with cash following the massive success of *Fortnite*. Since launching the Epic Games Store late last year with a Steam-beating revenue share of 88 percent for developers, the studio has gone about buying up numerous high-profile exclusives for the platform and giving away free games every other week to attract customers.

Founded in 2001, Psyonix worked behind the scenes on Unreal Engine games, including *Gears of War*, *Mass Effect 3*, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, *Bulletstorm*, *Unreal Tournament III*, and *Unreal Tournament 2004*. The company didn’t have a breakout hit to its own name, though, until 2015’s *Rocket League* became a standout release of the year. The game reached 50 million unique players as of last September, according to Psyonix, and offered a $1 million prize pool for its most recent esports season.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1498835

First teaser for Veronica Mars revival is everything we loved about the series

reader comments

46 with 35 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
National Treasure Kristen Bell is back as everyone's favorite PI in Hulu's miniseries of *Veronica Mars*.
Marshmallows, rejoice, for Hulu has dropped the first teaser for its miniseries revival of *Veronica Mars*. Based on the footage, it looks like a return to peak form for our favorite sassy, taser-wielding, crime-fighting heroine.

(Spoilers for first three seasons and the 2014 film below.)

The cult-classic crime drama premiered on UPN in 2004 and continued for three seasons. The last season ran on UPN's successor network, The CW, and despite some improvement in the ratings, the series was officially canceled in June 2007. As my Ars colleague Sam Axon wrote last fall, "Between its ties to struggling new broadcast networks and the fact that it was way too smart and had way too much social commentary for its own good—especially for a series that was framed as a teen show but that in a lot of ways really wasn't—the series met an early mid-season demise with low ratings."

He added, "*Veronica Mars* wasn't a ratings hit on broadcast TV, but on Hulu, maybe it doesn't need to be."

> *Think an edgy, irreverent Nancy Drew armed with plenty of sass and a taser.*

Season 1 set the overall tone of the show: elements of SoCal *noir* and high school drama punctuated with witty dialogue and a smart, savvy heroine who was just vulnerable enough to still be human. Think an edgy, irreverent Nancy Drew armed with plenty of sass and a taser. High school junior Veronica Mars struggles in the aftermath of the murder of her best friend, Lily Kane. She used to date Lily's brother, Duncan, giving her status among Neptune High's privileged, ruling cool kids, despite her humble roots. She's since become an outcast, and she spends her time helping out her PI father on various cases while trying to solve Lily's murder, culminating in a terrific twist ending.

In season 2, Veronica becomes involved with bad boy Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring), Lily's former flame, and solves the mystery of a devastating school bus crash that killed many of her more underprivileged classmates (those from wealthy families would never deign to take the bus). And in season 3, she was a freshman at Neptune's Hearst College. This was the weakest of the seasons, in part because the writers tweaked the format from a single overarching mystery (with various smaller standalone cases interspersed throughout) to include two different completely separate mysteries. It just didn't hold together as well as the prior two seasons. Still, it broke my heart when the show was cancelled.

- Would-be mugger about to meet Veronica's trusty taser. YouTube/Hulu
- Capturing the moment for Instagram. YouTube/Hulu
- Veronica's troubled high school sweatheart, Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring), is still a hottie.

YouTube/Hulu

- The spark is still there for these crazy kids.
  YouTube/Hulu
- It’s spring break in Neptune and everyone’s getting into the spirit.
  YouTube/Hulu
- An explosion ruins the mood.
  YouTube/Hulu
- The city hires Mars Investigations to find the culprit.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Father and daughter make a killer PI team.
  YouTube/Hulu
- “Follow the money.” Patton Oswalt’s pizza delivery guy offers some advice.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Clyde Prickett (J.K. Simmons) is a fixer for the Casablancas family.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Yeah, nothing suspicious about this at all.
  YouTube/Hulu
- The violence escalates.
  YouTube/Hulu
- And escalates even more.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Trading in her taser for a gun.
  YouTube/Hulu

The series lived on via DVD (streaming wasn’t all the rage back then) and continued to build a small but fiercely loyal audience. In 2013, creator Rob Thomas, Bell, and others banded together to launch a Kickstarter campaign to make a follow-up feature film. The campaign raised $5.7 million, well over the $2 million target. The film showed Veronica nine years later, living in New York City and about to join a prestigious law firm. Then ex-boyfriend Logan, now a lieutenant in the US Navy, asks her to clear him of charges that he murdered his girlfriend. Once the main mystery and various subplots come

together, Veronica takes over Mars Investigations instead of returning to New York.

I found the final film, released in 2014, a bit disappointing, nice though it was to see the gang back together again. While critics praised the strong writing and solid performances, it really only drew in diehard fans of the show, earning about $3.3 million at the box office, although DVD and Blu-Ray sales were stronger. After that, hopes for any more of Veronica's adventures seemed dashed for good—until Hulu announced last year that it would revive the series. Per Variety's synopsis:

> *In the new installment, spring breakers are getting murdered in Neptune, thereby decimating the seaside town's lifeblood tourist industry. After Mars Investigations is hired by the parents of one of the victims to find their son's killer, Veronica is drawn into a mystery that pits the enclave's wealthy elites, who would rather put an end to the month-long bacchanalia, against a working class that relies on the cash influx that comes with being the West Coast's answer to Daytona Beach.*

According to creator Thomas, the miniseries is set about five years after the film's events and will "take *Veronica Mars* back to its hardcore So-Cal *noir* roots." It will also focus on a single overarching case, so this looks like it will be a true return to peak form.

Enrico Colantoni is back as Veronica's PI dad, Keith Mars, and Mars Investigations now seems to be a father-daughter business—technically it always was, no matter how much Keith tried to prevent his teenage daughter from interfering. Noticeably absent from the teaser are fan favorites Wallace Fennel (Percy Daggs III), Cindy "Mac" MacKenzie (Tina Majorino), and Eli "Weevil" Navarro (Francis Capra), although they are listed as cast members for the miniseries.

Veronica Mars S4 starts streaming on Hulu July 26, 2019.

Listing image by YouTube/Hulu

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1498675

Game with hidden Ruby interpreter pulled from Nintendo Switch eShop

reader comments

53 with 38 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
A video demonstrating *A Dark Room*‘s hidden Ruby interpreter, which still works in previously downloaded copies of the game.
Last week, developer Amir Rajan revealed an interesting Easter egg hidden in the Switch version of *A Dark Room*, an inventive text-based adventure that was ported to the console early last month. If you plug a USB keyboard into the system and hit the “~” key while the game is running, you get a functional Ruby interpreter suitable for coding simple programs directly on the console.

This weekend, though, Nintendo decided to remove the game from the Switch eShop, leading Rajan to tell Eurogamer that he “deeply regret[s] how this has blown up.”

In a Mastodon thread revealing the Easter egg, Rajan said the

hidden in-game coding environment was “an attempt to capture the magic of coding in its purest form.” In a world of complicated, Internet-connected, IDE-based game engines, he writes that he wanted to “show the next generation that magic does exist in this world. That you can create something from nothing.”

Rajan’s initial announcement proudly proclaimed that the in-game Easter egg “effectively turns every consumer spec-ed Nintendo Switch into a Ruby Machine.” But speaking to Eurogamer after the game was pulled on April 26, he suggested that the “simple toy sandboxed environment” created in the game is really only capable of drawing simple lines, squares, and labels, as well as playing sound files from the game itself.

“You can’t even render an image with the damn thing,” Rajan said. “So yes, if your app is composed completely of labels, squares, and lines… then it lets you build an app without having to perform any hacks.”

Still, the initial reports of the Easter egg “framed [it] as this massive exploit,” Rajan said. “And of course it’s the community that exploits these things that pushed it up to that level. I’m partly to blame with my sensationalized media posts.”

Nintendo might be understandably antsy about a hidden feature that lets Switch users seemingly write “arbitrary code” on their consoles. An unintentional memory leak in the level editor for obscure 3DS platformer *Cubic Ninja* ended up being the key to running homebrew code on that platform, after all. Then again, games that let users write their own code in protected environments are not banned or unprecedented on Nintendo platforms. *Petit Computer* has been available on the 3DS eShop since 2012, letting users code simple versions of *Flappy Bird* and others games using a programming language called Smile Basic. Players can then share those creations via

QR code.

Considering that, it seems *A Dark Room*‘s removal may have less to do with the a ban on coding and more to do with the fact that the feature was hidden from Nintendo’s usual software testing and approval process. As Rajan himself told Eurogamer, “It was a last second ‘spark of inspiration,’ and I snuck it in assuming that plugging in a USB keyboard and pressing the ‘~’ key wasn’t part of the test plan.”

For now, Nintendo hasn’t responded to a request for comment on the matter. *A Dark Room*‘s publisher, Circle Entertainment, says it is “liaising with Nintendo to clarify on the next steps and will deal with the matter accordingly; they are regretful circumstances and we apologize for the issue… Until we clarify the next steps with Nintendo we can’t offer any further comment.”

A Dark Room is available, sans coding Easter egg, on iOS, Android, and via Web browser.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1498621

Oculus Quest review: 2019’s best new gaming system is wireless, affordable VR

Enlarge / The Oculus Quest, as enjoyed by an invisible model.

reader comments

94 with 60 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

I can take the Oculus Quest with me practically anywhere, pull it over my eyes, map out a VR space with my hands, and quickly start playing some of the best VR games currently on the market. That “anywhere” includes, for instance, the bathroom in the food court beneath Valve Software’s headquarters.

Today is a big news day for Oculus, the Facebook-owned virtual reality headset manufacturer. The company’s two recently announced VR headsets, the $400 Oculus Quest and the $400 Oculus Rift S, now have release dates (May 21), pre-order announcements (right meow, right here), and a review embargo lifted after nearly two weeks of hands-on time.

But as you may have seen, there’s other VR news today: preview embargoes for the Valve Index, which you can also read about on Ars today, have been lifted, too. Thanks to those neighboring testing periods, I did, in fact, get an opportunity to test one of Oculus Quest’s use cases in the heart of one of its main competitors. It ended up being a pointed comparison. While the Index builds upon the home VR ecosystem as we know it—the cables, the connected “gaming” PC, the exterior sensors—the Oculus Quest throws all those requirements in the trash.

That “untethered” Quest bullet point is harder to sell in a press release. This headset’s freedom needs many days of testing in the real world to really sink in, and it’s softened by a few reality checks and questions (not to mention the F-word that is Facebook). But, by golly, I played a convincing, satisfying, and comfortable game of *Beat Saber* (you know, Brie Larson’s new favorite game) roughly 15 floors below Valve’s own world-premiere event, safely waving my hands around a

spacious bathroom, with a kit that fit in my messenger bag. It only required 75 seconds of setup and loading.

This is not *Jetsons*-style hovercars or a cure for cancer, but the Oculus Quest version of the VR future is still pretty sweet to me. And the proposition here could be a milestone for this current generation of VR offerings: a cool, affordable, and low-friction step into legitimate VR experiences.

Cruz control

- Behold: The Oculus Quest, as photographed in my messy home.
  Sam Machkovech
- A gray fabric lining around most of the unit is a nice touch.
- Just like on the original Oculus Rift, the Quest's side straps include some elastic slack so you can pull them off your face when you have them set to your ideal tightness.
- USB Type-C port and one of the headset's two 3.5mm headphone jacks.
- The other headphone jack and the power button.
- On the bottom, you can see the volume buttons and the physical IPD (inter-pupillary distance) slider.
- A closer zoom on one of the headset's four sensors. Each is angled enough to enable something apparently wider than a 180-degree tracking zone.
- Bad news: Oculus Quest will *not* work without syncing it up to your smartphone at least once. (The same is true of last year's Oculus Go.) Good news: once you sync it once, you can uninstall the Oculus smartphone app and never use it again.
- The usual lens warnings before diving in.
- Oculus Quest (left), HTC Vive Pro (right). Vive Pro gets some added bulk thanks to its "pro"-grade strap and

> physical earbuds, as opposed to Oculus Quest's use of recessed built-in speakers.
> Sam Machkovech

With that ridiculous anecdote out of the way, let's step back for a second.

The Oculus Quest landed in our homes nearly two weeks ago, following eyes-on time at no less than four major press events. As it turns out, the version we first saw more than two years ago, dubbed the Santa Cruz, is pretty similar to the hardware shipping to customers next month.

It has always had a Snapdragon 835 system-on-chip (SoC) foundation or something comparable. It has always had a pair of handheld Oculus Touch controllers, complete with a mix of buttons, joysticks, and finger-tracking capabilities. It has always employed an internal OLED panel at a remarkable 2880×1600 resolution. And it has always been advertised as a six-degrees-of-freedom (6DOF) VR system. Jump up, crouch, and step in any direction, and the Quest's array of built-in sensors will neatly map your head and hands to a virtual environment.

That full head and hand tracking makes the Quest a completely different class of VR than other untethered "mobile" headsets, such as Samsung's Gear VR, Google's Daydream, or Oculus' own standalone Go headset. Those 3DOF systems take the standard motion sensors found in a modern smartphone and translate their inputs to track real-life head motion… so long as a user keeps their butt planted in a chair. Stand up or step to the side, and the 3DOF VR illusion is broken. What's more, 3DOF systems can't track hand or controller motions in relative space, limiting users to wonky laser-pointer or Wii Remote controls.

Guardian of your galaxy

Not so with Oculus Quest. Out of the box, you can expect to see its handheld controllers tracked perfectly in any virtual environment—and Quest wastes no time selling this fact with its on-boarding process. As a first step, you'll don the headset (after initializing your Quest via a required Android or iOS smartphone app) and see a 3D, grayscale version of your real-world surroundings. The app's introductory video advises you to clear enough space in your preferred indoor location to wave your arms all the way around and step side to side (I once heard this described as a minimum of "two yoga mats" of floor space). If you want to go bigger than that amount, feel free.

Once you put your headset on in this cleared space, you'll be asked to map out your boundaries, which you'll do by drawing a "safe" zone in your real-life room. This is known as the "Guardian," similar to SteamVR's Chaperone system. Once it's active, any real-life steps close to its edge will throw up virtual walls as a warning.

Should you wish to use Quest in a tiny space or at a desk, pick the "Stationary" option in the Guardian menu, and you'll be surrounded by a default-sized dome. Be warned, quite a few games won't work without more real-world room to roam, but you'll still be able to browse around the Oculus Home interface, which includes a Chromium Web browser with built-in 360-degree video support.

Again, this is all happening without any external sensors or webcams to set up. Quest's four built-in sensors, which the company calls the "Oculus Insight" array, gather data about your play space and your position inside it. Oculus says the Quest can "memorize" up to five play spaces at any given time. So if you throw your Quest in a backpack, set it up at a friend's house, then go back to your home's VR room and put it

on, the Quest will often respond by loading the Guardian boundary you already drew and asking you to confirm if it's still accurate.

In our tests, that Guardian "memory" only failed in one case. When the lighting had changed severely, from day to night, I had to redraw my boundaries. And though Quest doesn't work in pitch-black environments, I was still able to comfortably use the headset in my home's naturally dark lighting. Even when I shuffled certain things in my living room—primarily my office chair and coffee table, which I'm always moving for the sake of VR tests—I could re-enter the Quest with its tracking unfazed.

Just be warned, Oculus Insight *isn't* smart enough to detect a wandering pet or child that might alter your playspace while you're immersed in VR. Quest's tutorial videos include no less than *four* examples of a cartoon avatar picking up a dog, as if to emphasize how much dog death Oculus is forecasting thanks to wild Oculus Quest use.

Listing image by Sam Machkovech

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1493277

Valve Index reveal: The best of VR's first generation—but is it worth $999?

Enlarge / Say hello to the Valve Index, developed and

manufactured by game studio Valve.
Sam Machkovech

reader comments

112 with 65 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

BELLEVUE, Washington—The Valve Index, a new virtual reality system from the creators of beloved video game series like Half-Life and Portal and the mega-popular Steam game store, is an aspirational product. Its sales pitch, as explained by various Valve staffers, revolves around the VR experience of tomorrow.

Headset specs		
Valve Index	**HTC Vive Pro**	
Display	2880×1600 (1440×1600 per eye) “fast-switching” LCD panels	2880×1600 (1440×1600 per eye) AMOLED panel
Refresh rate	90Hz, 120Hz, or 144Hz	90Hz
Field of view	130 degrees with integrated FOV “eye relief” knob	110 degrees
Audio	Near-field off-ear speakers with 3D directional audio support; built-in microphone	Integrated adjustable earcups with 3D directional audio support; built-in microphone

PC connection	Custom single-piece cable	Custom single-piece cable with PC junction box
Optional Bundled Accessories	Two wireless motion-tracked controllers with rechargeable batteries, two SteamVR 2.0 room-scale tracking stations	Two wireless motion-tracked controllers with rechargeable 960mAh batteries, two SteamVR 1.0 room-scale tracking stations
Modularity	Front trunk (“frunk”) expansion port with USB 3.0 connector; front-facing stereo cameras	Front-facing stereo cameras
Price	$499 ($999 with two tracking stations, two controllers)	$799 ($1,099 with two tracking stations, two controllers)

That’s a nice way of saying that Valve is going for features and dreams rather than affordability with its $999 Valve Index kit, which ships “by the end of June” after “limited” pre-orders go live on May 1 for users in the contiguous US and most of Western Europe (the UK is left out for now).

But through the course of Valve’s reveal event, its aspirations for VR’s future became abundantly clear—and abundantly *conservative*. If you saw last month’s news about

Valve’s VR headset and began dreaming big, today is the day to scale those dreams back.

The Valve Index does not read your brain waves, does not track your heart rate, and does not track your eyeballs’ motion. The Valve Index does not innovate with an “inside-out” tracking system. It does not include an array of secret cameras or sensors and does not bounce sound waves via hidden or embedded speakers. The Valve Index does not employ a shrunken, “infinite pixel” panel or come with a revolutionary new take on foveated rendering. The Valve Index does not include a built-in processing unit. It must be connected to a gaming-caliber PC with a long cord trailing from the back of your head.

Also, the Index was not introduced alongside a new Valve video game. We learned in February 2017 that three Valve VR games are on their way, but this week’s Index event wasn’t used to premiere any of them. In fact, that bad news was met with more bad news: only *one* Valve VR game is slated to launch by the end of 2019, and we didn’t get to see or test it. (For better or worse, this game will not be an Index exclusive.) Valve’s Doug Lombardi says there’s “no announcement” on the two other games “at this time.”

- Valve provided a few of its own handsome Valve Index photos, which are mixed up with our own.
- The Valve Index’s speakers hover above your ears, so you never feel them touch you.
- View from above the Index.
- View from below the Index. That slider is for interpupillary distance (IPD) adjustments.
- This backside clamp cinches the Index to your head, much like the PlayStation VR.
- This “eye relief” knob mechanically moves the Index’s pair of lenses closer to your face in ways that supposedly work better for glasses-wearers and large-

headed users than traditional eye-spacer dials.

- Another view from below, this time with a glass head. Sam Machkovech
- Valve provided this image as a preview of what the “five degree” lens angling looks like internally.
- One Valve staffer told me where they bought this glass head, and I subsequently forgot. Pier One? Sam Machkovech
- More Index.
- Side angle of the fit without a head.

So what *is* Valve’s big aspiration for the future of VR as far as the Index is concerned? The answer is long-term comfort. In Valve’s eyes, that goal doesn’t (yet) include features that we have been dreaming of, such as reducing the clutter of an average PC-VR experience, dropping the price, optimizing performance with eye-tracking systems, or liberating users with true, cordless freedom. Valve wants to convince us that Index is as good as VR users are going to get at a $999 price point in 2019—and that it delivers $999 worth of VR quality in 2019.

“Oftentimes with virtual reality, people want to say what’s ‘good enough,'” one Valve representative said during an informal Q&A. “And their sample size for ‘good enough’ is five minutes [of VR use]. One of the driving factors for our game teams, and externally for our partners, is that we want long-form VR experiences.”

Another Valve staffer interrupted, saying, “I don’t use VR for 30 minutes a day. I use VR *hours* a day. This is where we ended up. What’s good enough for 20 minutes, 30 minutes, is dramatically different than one hour, two hours. We think tracking, optics, displays, ergonomics, input fidelity, the comfort of your hands—all of those matter a lot.”

“They’re all coefficients, too!” an engineer added. “They’re all related.”

But Valve didn’t hand us a box complete with an Index, a “long-form VR experience” (like, you know, an in-development Valve game), and hours of time to put that hypothesis to the test. Until that day comes, we’re left with spec sheets and an odd series of hands-on, eyes-on impressions.

Field of view of dreams

Index’s interesting elements are as follows: a pair of fast-switching, custom-made LCD panels, with a combined pixel resolution of 2880×1600; an increased field-of-view (FOV) compared to most VR headsets, up to 130 degrees; new handheld controllers, finally launching after years of public teases; a pair of floating, above-the-ear speakers; an empty front-of-headset compartment, which includes a USB 3.0 Type-A adapter and no promises of attachments to come; and a reliance on “lighthouse” tracking boxes already used in systems like the HTC Vive. (We’re also in familiar Vive VR territory with the dangling cable plugged into a gaming PC.)

Let’s start with the Index’s pair of pixel-filled panels, which Valve’s staffers described at length. Instead of a single OLED panel, Index comes with a pair of fast-switching LCDs that have been custom-fabricated with an emphasis on subpixel density. They have been positioned to spread the visible VR FOV further than in any consumer-priced VR headset we’ve ever seen. And they are rated to run at incredibly high frame rates. In addition to the Vive-like rate of 90Hz, the screens can clock up to either 120Hz or 144Hz.

Most consumer-grade VR headsets use a single display panel, which is then translated by a pair of large, curved lenses. The Valve Index twists this convention by using a pair of LCD panels, each sporting a 1440×1600 resolution. That doesn’t make them a combined 2880×1600 panel. Instead, the panels are physically separated, then individually angled at a roughly 5 degree angle.

The result is a wider peripheral distribution by default, but the system also allows Valve to implement a new type of slider. Valve insists that no matter what face shape or pair of glasses you bring into the Index, you can turn an "eye relief" knob to bring the Index's lenses as close to your face as comfortably possible, and the device does so in a way that guarantees a greater effective FOV. After describing most FOV sales pitches as "dishonest" due to many users' faces or glasses obstructing that full FOV potential, Valve insists that its eye relief knob will guarantee a "20 degree" increase in FOV for all users compared to traditional "110-degree" systems. (This works in tandem with a standard interpupillary distance slider, or IPD, found in most VR headsets.)

Additionally, Valve insists that its SteamVR platform will adjust VR games' and apps' rendered imagery to translate across a pair of non-parallel lenses so that developers don't have to individually account for this Index-specific difference.

What sold me on the FOV boost wasn't any particular game demo, however. The demos I experienced were focused on front-and-center content—likely because the games in question need to be compatible with other 110-degree headsets. No, it was a VR movie theater moment, where I virtually sat down and watched 1080p movie trailers streamed directly from YouTube. That's not a great resolution to beam into a high-res VR headset, made worse by YouTube's compression. Yet I was taken aback by this video's full widescreen ratio, as opposed to being letterboxed into a tighter 16:9 square.

I could see most of the virtual cinema screen, as if I was seated in a comfortable real-life theater. I needed to glance a bit left or right for the most peripheral content, but otherwise, I could comfortably take in a giant image at all times. That is *not* how most VR headsets work. This moment stayed with me and helped me realize how awesome Index's FOV boost was when I went home and tried the same demo on my Vive

Pro, which forced me to constantly sweep my glances in either direction to take in a full cinema-ratio image.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1495891

Minecraft creator Notch unwelcome at 10th anniversary due to online conduct

Every *Minecraft* player's worst nightmare.

reader comments

223 with 99 posters participating

Share this story

Blocky sandbox game *Minecraft* is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and Microsoft is planning to celebrate with a press event at the Mojang studio in Stockholm on May 17. But according to Variety, one notable person won't be there: Markus "Notch" Persson, who sold the game he created and the company he built to Microsoft in 2014 for $2.5 billion.

This is no accident. A Microsoft spokesperson told Variety that the reason for his exclusion is the "comments and opinions" Persson has expressed on Twitter, saying that they "do not reflect those of Microsoft or Mojang, and are not representative of *Minecraft*."

Back in March, a number of references to Persson were removed from the game. Microsoft made no statement at the time, but it’s believed to be for the same reason.

Since becoming a billionaire, Persson has earned something of a bad reputation. Shortly before the in-game references were removed, he made such family-friendly tweets as “I’d rather be a fascist cunt than have a feminine dick” (though this was subsequently deleted), and he has tweeted endorsements of both the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracy theories. He has propagated the false claim that people face fines for “using the wrong pronouns” to refer to trans people. Persson has also tweeted right-wing slogans such as “It’s OK to be white,” and he’s said that anyone who recognizes systemic racial biases and imbalance within Western society is racist. In 2017, he tweeted, “If you’re against the concept of a #HeterosexualPrideDay, you’re a complete fucking cunt and deserve to be shot,” though this, too, was subsequently deleted.

Persson’s name can still be found within the credits of the game, but this appears to be the full extent of the association Microsoft wishes to have with him.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1497485