FTC plans to examine loot boxes with public workshop later this year

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

reader comments

50 with 39 posters participating

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Video game loot boxes

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In response to a request from Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.), the Federal Trade Commission now says it will be convening a "public workshop on loot boxes" later this year.

The FTC said it hopes to attract "consumer advocacy organizations, parent groups, and industry members" to take part in the workshop, according to a letter from FTC Chairman Joseph Simons provided to Hassan. The short note suggests such a gathering could "help elicit information to guide subsequent consumer outreach, which could include a consumer alert."

Elsewhere in the letter, Simons notes the FTC's previous efforts to gauge the marketing and accessibility of violent video games (and other media) to children. And though the FTC in November revealed publicly that it is investigating the loot box issue, Simons also notes that he can't publicly

comment on any potential law enforcement efforts in the space that might be ongoing.

“I appreciate the FTC’s continued engagement on the issue of loot boxes, particularly in regards to the well-being of young gamers,” Hassan said in a statement. “A public workshop on loot boxes is a step in the right direction, and I encourage the FTC to continue working with consumer advocates, parents, gamers, and industry members to ensure that meaningful improvements are made to increase transparency and consumer protections around loot boxes.”

The workshop is the first public sign of any concrete US government action on the issue of video game loot boxes since the FTC investigation was launched. Some observers and politicians liken the purchase of randomized loot boxes full of in-game items to a form of gambling, saying the loot boxes therefore shouldn’t be accessible by children.

State-based legislative efforts to rein in loot boxes in Washington state, Hawaii, and Indiana have yet to lead to any actual laws on the books. Gaming commissions abroad in the Netherlands and Belgium have already ruled that loot boxes constitute illegal games of chance, though similar groups in other countries have ruled the opposite.

In September, Washington state joined with 15 foreign countries in a declaration expressing concern “with the risks being posed by the blurring of lines between gambling and other forms of digital entertainment such as video gaming.”

The industry-aligned Entertainment Software Rating Board started labeling titles with “in-game purchases” last year. When that program was announced, the group said it considers loot boxes to be “a fun way to acquire virtual items for use within the game, to personalize your experience” and that it was “unable to find any evidence that children specifically have been impacted by loot boxes or leading them to some sort

of tendency towards gambling."

In November, the Entertainment Software Association lobbying group said in a statement that "contrary to assertions, loot boxes are not gambling. They have no real-world value, players always receive something that enhances their experience, and they are entirely optional to purchase."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1462781

Halo Infinite now linked to next Xbox's launch, rumor suggests RPG elements

Enlarge / The Halo Infinite logo, as revealed at E3 2018.
Xbox Studios / 343 Industries

reader comments

41 with 32 posters participating, including story author

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As rumors heat up over what to expect from this summer's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), one Microsoft-focused news site has tossed a few more logs on the next-Xbox fire. In today's case, that specifically means *Halo* rumors.

The news comes from Thurrott's Brad Sams, who's currently the leading resource for hints when it comes to Microsoft's plans

for its next wave of Xbox-branded devices. On Friday, Sams pushed forward an unsurprising rumor: that the previously announced game *Halo Infinite* will be confirmed at E3 2019 as a "launch title" for Microsoft's next console (or consoles, more on that in a moment).

What makes this rumor a little more interesting is that Sams offered context we hadn't yet heard about the game:

> *With a brand new game engine, the team behind [Halo Infinite] is trying to make the story adapt to decisions the user makes and the game may have more RPG (role-playing game) elements than prior versions of the series.*

This news conveniently lands on the same week that EA's long-awaited game *Anthem* launches for Windows PC, Xbox One, and PlayStation 4. The uneven game saw the developer BioWare actually reduce its RPG-like, decision-driven philosophy, thus depriving the company's fans of the substantial "conversation wheel" options seen in series like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*.

Sams' information doesn't clarify whether to expect anything in *Halo Infinite* as plot-altering as the conversations in BioWare's famed series, but such mechanics would certainly be a big step for *Halo,* a series that has previously hinged on linear plots. Information about *Infinite* is otherwise quite scant beyond last year's reveal that it will be rendered by the new "Slipspace Engine" (as opposed to either previous engines or the likes of Unity or Unreal).

The report doubles down on Sams' previous pieces about multiple Xbox-branded devices launching during the next console cycle, which he says are known within Microsoft by code names "Anaconda" and "Lockhart." His sources indicate that this pair of machines would support all "next-gen" Xbox games, though games on the more powerful Anaconda machine would enjoy exclusive perks. That sounds a lot like how Xbox One X games have higher resolutions or more graphical features

than those on the standard Xbox One, but Sams has yet to nail down the exact differences for games on both “Next-box” devices.

Today’s report clarifies a “fall 2020” release window for Microsoft’s “next-gen consoles,” though it doesn’t confirm whether Microsoft currently plans to launch both the Anaconda and Lockhart simultaneously or whether one may be held back for the sake of a staggered release. There’s also the matter of a possible disc-less Xbox One option, which Sams previously predicted would launch by “Spring 2019”; we’re still waiting for more information on that one.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1462723

Why putting Xbox games on Switch isn’t as ridiculous as it might sound

reader comments

92 with 62 posters participating

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Here at Ars, we tend to be skeptical of the regularly recurring rumors that two major video game competitors are going to be merging or teaming up in some way. From the early 2000s whispers that Microsoft would buy a struggling Sega to

suggestions that Apple should buy Nintendo, these rumors often reflect wishful thinking at least as much as actual insider knowledge.

That said, we're still intrigued by recent rumors that Microsoft could be bringing certain Xbox One games—and a version of its Xbox Game Pass subscription service—to the Nintendo Switch and other consoles.

As the current scuttlebutt has it, an Xbox app to be released for the Switch would let players with an Xbox Game Pass subscription play a selection of Xbox One games on Nintendo's hardware. High-end games would work on Nintendo's lower-end hardware thanks to streaming via Microsoft's recently announced Project xCloud. Meanwhile, Microsoft would also sell certain low-end first-party Xbox One games, like the *Ori* series, to the Switch directly, according to the rumors.

These latest reports originate with a video from Direct Feed Games, who cites "several" unnamed sources creating "teasing and hinting [that] has reached a point to which I can no longer ignore it." The Direct Feed Games channel is mainly known for extremely basic gameplay videos, though, and it has a spotty history of accurate rumor reporting. Last March, the channel confidently but incorrectly stated that "*Call of Duty* will come to Switch in 2018," for instance.

But Game Informer also cites its own sources as saying that Xbox Game Pass on Switch could be announced "this year." And the usually reliable Windows Central says that they've been "hearing for almost a year that Microsoft was aiming to put Xbox Game Pass on Nintendo Switch, and even PlayStation 4."

Venturing outside the walls

The idea of Microsoft bringing its games and services to competing consoles isn't as ridiculous as it might seem at first. Xbox's Phil Spencer may have already hinted at it in a

December interview with Gamespot, where he said Game Pass "started on console, it will come to PC, and eventually it will come to every device." Back at E3 2018, Spencer similarly said a future Microsoft "game streaming network" would bring "console quality gaming on any device." He specifically cited phones and PCs at the time, but the Nintendo Switch definitely counts as "any device."

There have been other signs Microsoft is interested in opening up its walled console garden. Just this month, the company revealed that it will soon let Xbox Live integrate with Switch and mobile games, letting players bring their "gaming achievement history, their friends list, their clubs, and more" along with them beyond Xbox hardware. That comes years after Microsoft opened up cross-platform gameplay for Xbox One titles and introduced a "Play Anywhere" initative linking PC and Xbox One purchases and game progress.

On top of all that, there's Microsoft's PlayFab Multiplayer Servers, which have maintained SDKs for Xbox, Windows, PlayStation, Switch, iOS, and Android despite a Microsoft buyout in early 2018.

Microsoft has taken baby steps to bringing its own games to competing platforms in the past, as well. *Minecraft* is the biggest example, but that game was already a multi-platform behemoth well before Microsoft bought publisher Mojang, and the game simply remained so under the new regime. But there have been Microsoft-published games on Steam and iOS/Android, and Microsoft-owned properties like *Viva Pinata* and *Age of Empires* have shown up on the Nintendo DS, too.

One among many

Add it all together, and you can paint a picture of a Microsoft that is less interested in continuing to fight another battle in the traditional my-way-or-the-highway console wars. Microsoft is currently losing that war pretty

badly, as measured purely by hardware sales (Microsoft says that is not how it measures things, for what it's worth). Microsoft has also been struggling a bit to attract as many big-name exclusives to its platform, making the walled console garden approach look even less viable for the company these days.

Letting previously exclusive games and services outside the Xbox hardware ecosystem probably wouldn't *help* the consumer appeal of Microsoft's own console offerings. But getting Xbox-branded games and services onto other platforms would let the company bring in revenue from a much bigger pool of potential players—even if Microsoft's share of that revenue would be smaller than that directly from Xbox hardware.

For Nintendo, allowing Xbox-branded Game Pass streaming is another checkbox that could help drive already healthy Switch sales, and such a move would let the company extract an easy cut of any Switch-based revenue Microsoft generates. Nintendo has already used server-side game streaming to bring high-end games like *Resident Evil 7* to the Switch in Japan, so the concept isn't an entirely new one.

Even if the rumors are true, none of this means Microsoft will be pulling a post-Dreamcast Sega-style departure from the console hardware business. After all, at the last E3 Spencer said that it was "deep into architecting the next Xbox consoles [that will] set the benchmark for console gaming."

What Microsoft might be setting up is a situation more akin to its place in PC gaming. There, Microsoft publishes its own games, runs its own online storefront, makes its own hardware, and even provides the operating system that runs it all. But despite worries from some corners, Microsoft hasn't taken any real steps to flex its muscles and try to make PC gaming a console-style walled garden.

That could be because such a system would be harder to pull

off on an open platform like the PC, or it could be because today’s Microsoft is growing to accept a world where it provides games and services to multiple platforms, not just its own. If rumors are to be believed, perhaps we should all get more used to that approach, even in the console space.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1462589

Bowser will replace Reggie Fils-Aimé as Nintendo of America president

Enlarge / If your name is Mario and you work at Nintendo of America, watch out.

reader comments

44 with 41 posters participating, including story author

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After 16 years at Nintendo of America, president, COO, and famed spokesperson Reggie Fils-Aimé will retire from his roles this year. His last day is April 15, at which time he will be replaced by senior VP of sales Doug Bowser, according to a press release.

Fils-Aimé joined the company in 2003 as executive VP of sales and marketing before becoming its president and chief operating officer in 2006. For years, he has been the public

face of Nintendo in the United States at press conferences and online marketing streams, and he has become the personification of the gaming brand for millions of consumers, players, and onlookers. He became the subject of numerous memes, and he sparked the “my body is ready” meme popular on Internet gaming forums.

A new age of gamer memes seems to be upon us, though, because his replacement bears the same name as the primary villain of the company’s beloved Mario video game franchise. Doug Bowser has been with Nintendo since 2015, when his title was vice president of sales. He was promoted to senior VP in 2016.

According to Bowser’s LinkedIn profile, he was a vice president at EA prior to his role at Nintendo. He held three different VP roles there: one over global demand planning, another over Americas publishing, and another over retail planning and marketing. Before that, he spent 23 years at Procter & Gamble in various sales and marketing roles. He graduated from the University of Utah in 1984 with a BA in Organizational Communication, Business.

His profile doesn’t say anything about kidnapping princesses, spewing fireballs, or planning elaborate demises for Italian plumbers. But that’s probably for the best.

Neither Fils-Aimé nor Nintendo provided a reason for Fils-Aimé’s departure, and it’s possible that he simply wanted to retire. He previously saw Nintendo through some difficult times, including a prolonged period when the Wii U didn’t land with consumers and analysts called on the company to get out of the hardware business entirely.

Nintendo staged a remarkable comeback with the Nintendo Switch, but the company is again grappling with slowing sales as it seeks to find a way to make the Switch appeal outside of its dedicated, core audience.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1462265

Follow-up to Haunting of Hill House will reimagine The Turn of the Screw

Enlarge / The perpetually locked red door is a central mystery of Netflix's adaptation of *Haunting of Hill House*.

reader comments

18 with 15 posters participating

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The Netflix adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* was a critical and ratings hit last year, and the streaming giant has announced plans for a second season—or more accurately, a second installment in what is now a horror anthology series. Deadline Hollywood reports that *The Haunting of Bly Manor* will adapt Henry James' classic ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*, which is very much in the same vein of psychological gothic horror as the classic Shirley Jackson tale upon which season one was based.

The Haunting of Hill House shared the top spot in Ars' 2018 list of our favorite TV shows with BBC's *Killing Eve*. We loved Mike Flanagan and Trevor Macy's inventive re-imagining of Jackson's novel, at once a Gothic ghost story and a profound examination of family dysfunction. And yet it stayed true to the tone and spirit of the original, aided by dialogue, narration, and other small details from the source material.

Small wonder that it garnered award nominations from the Motion Picture Sound Editors, Writers Guild of America, and Art Directors Guild.

Rumors of a possible second season began swirling soon after the series started streaming. Flanagan eventually confirmed plans to to turn it into a horror anthology series, with a whole new ghost story and fresh characters. (He opined in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that the Crain family featured in *Hill House* had suffered enough.)

Past incarnations

- Title illustration for 12-part serialization of Henry James' novella in *Collier's Weekly*, 1898.
  John La Farge/Public domain
- Deborah Kerr starred in the 1961 British adaptation, *The Innocents*.
- The BBC's 2009 film adaptation left critics divided.

The Turn of the Screw, published serially in *Collier's Weekly* in 1898, tells the story of a governess hired to look after two orphaned children by their absent uncle at his Essex country house, Bly. **(Beware: 121-year-old spoilers ahead.)** Soon after arriving, the governess sees figures of a man and woman she suspects may be spirits. She learns from the grim housekeeper that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, had an affair with another servant, Peter Quint, and both died. They also seemed to have had an unhealthy attachment to the children, Flora and Miles, and the governess suspects the children can see the ghosts, too. Since it's Henry James, it all ends in tragedy.

Literary scholars and critics have been debating the novella ever since it was first published because James was deliberately ambiguous as to whether the governess is seeing actual ghosts or simply going mad and imagining them. That

debate carried over to the 1961 British Film adaptation, *The Innocents*, starring Deborah Kerr—probably the best of the many versions of the tale that have been adapted for various media. The screenwriter, William Archibald, assumed the ghosts were real; the director, Jack Clayton, preferred to be true to James' original ambiguity.

It's far too soon to know much about how Flanagan and Macy will approach the material, but judging by their fantastic *Hill House* adaptation, they may fall on the "the ghosts are real" side of the debate. But I'm confident they can also do justice to the psychological complexity and many subtexts of James' novella, leaving just a bit of ambiguity to tantalize the viewer.

Netflix clearly shares that confidence, since *The Haunting of Bly House* is part of a broader deal to produce original films and series. Flanagan and Macy are currently in post-production on *Doctor Sleep*, an adaptation of Stephen King's 2013 follow-up to *The Shining*. "Mike Flanagan and Trevor Macy are masterful at creating authentically frightening stories that leave audiences on the edge of their seats but unable to look away," Cindy Holland, vice president of original content, told Deadline Hollywood. "We're excited to continue our partnership with them on *The Haunting* series and future projects to come."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1461865

Dreams will finally launch this Spring on PS4 for $30—in

“limited early access”

Enlarge / This Spring, Media Molecule’s latest “play, create, share” game could be yours… once we figure out what they mean by “limited early access.”

reader comments

12 with 10 posters participating

Share this story

Dreams, the first major PS4 exclusive from longtime PlayStation developer Media Molecule, is finally almost here. But if you think its protracted development cycle is anywhere near over, think again.

PlayStation Blog has the news today: starting “this Spring,” gamers will be able to buy the latest “play, create, share” title from the makers of *LittleBigPlanet* for $29.99 ($39.99CDN in Canada, €29.99 in Europe). But there’s a catch: this version of the game will be given a loud “early access” label, a rarity on the PlayStation Store.

“If you participated in the [closed] beta and felt like *Dreams* wasn’t fully featured enough for you yet, or you wanted more Media Molecule game content, then Early Access might not be for you,” Media Molecule director Siobhan Reddy wrote on Wednesday. The sales pitch seems targeted at excited content creators who are ready to dive into the game, even without a full-fledged “campaign” mode or finalized UI and tutorials.

- What kind of thing are we going to create? We’ll follow the green “imp” to a “game” section.
- Welcome to Media Molecule’s pre-made landmass for this

E3 demo.

- In this image, you can barely see imps starting to clone trees by grabbing them and pressing a controller shortcut.
- More tree cloning!
- With the camera rotated (using joysticks), a question emerges: how can we cross that gap?
- Simple: we'll clone a stone-ground object a few times and chain it together using our DualShock 4 as a motion controller.
- The mountain we're heading toward could be bigger, so we'll clone it…
- …and while the "clone" button is held down, we'll rotate a joystick to create an attractive swivel effect for our new landmass.
- One tool lets you adjust the look of the world around you by altering the paint strokes, colors, and lighting of the general sky.
- After changing to a red sky, we can grab the sun with our imp and move it to the opposite side of the sky (or pull it beneath the planet for a spooky moonlight effect).
- Scanlines, pixellation, chromatic aberration, and VHS-tape effects can be applied to the full scene as you see fit.
- Oh, shoot. There's a gap from the bridge to the island. Let's use the "action recorder" to make a floating bridge object.
- That yellow path is a recording of the tester's controller motion. You can use this to record motions of any object in a *Dreams* world.
- Animation options allow us to loop, speed up, slow down, add wobble, and do other weird stuff to any object's animation pattern.
- Unsurprisingly, Media Molecule will pack *Dreams* full of pre-made objects (just like they did for *LittleBigPlanet*).

- What’s the most dangerous thing we could add to this level?
- Lava. A big, stretchable and customizable lava pool, in fact.
- Only two pre-made characters were available in our pre-E3 demo, but this screen shows hints of a few more to come.
- Here’s a shot of the build mode’s “test” option, in which we run Foxy up to the bridge and make him jump on the floating part of the platform.

What’s more, Sony has added an unclear asterisk to the launch: that this early access title will have “limited” availability. Since it will only be available as a digital-download purchase on the PlayStation Store, that raises some questions. Will Media Molecule only sell a certain number of licenses before shutting the listing down? Will the early-access version only be available for purchase for a certain amount of time? And will early-access buyers need to pay *more* money once the game launches to access updates like a new campaign mode? Media Molecule hasn’t clarified any of those points.

Without a clearer indicator of what the developer means, antsy fans may want to sign up for Media Molecule’s newsletter, which promises to have the first update on this front. (Access to the game’s last closed beta was previously put behind a newsletter-subscription requirement, so the dev seems serious on this point.)

Sony’s official dabbling in early access only has one other clear example: *The Tomorrow Children*. This free-to-play, craft-and-survive game from Q-Games (founded by Dylan “Star Fox” Cuthbert) never actually emerged from its “pre-launch” period. Eager fans could pay $30 to get into the game early in exchange for some in-game items, but those became moot when the game’s servers were shut down roughly one year later.

Otherwise, the PlayStation Store has no official “early

access” category, unlike the small-but-official “game preview” selection on Xbox One’s game-download shop (and an even bigger one on PC gaming storefront Steam). In the case of *Dreams*, at least, its most recent closed beta made clear that the game’s canvas is already ready for fan-made 2D and 3D adventures. We’ve already seen some wild stuff from that beta’s fanbase, including a total recreation of the notoriously delisted Konami horror experience *P.T.*, embedded below.

Still, *Tomorrow Children* is a good reminder that Media Molecule could change course and eventually leave its early purchasers high-and-dry—especially for a new game that apparently relies on server log-ins to access community content.

[embedded content]
Footage of *P.T.* recreated in *Dreams*.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1461491

How did Yoshi’s Island music end up in an official US gov’t Web game?

Enlarge / A shot from the EPA’s *Recycle City Challenge.* Not shown: The *Yoshi’s Island DS* music that played in the background of the game.

reader comments

37 with 29 posters participating, including story author

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A flash game available on the Environmental Protection Agency website since at least early 2017 made surprising use of copyrighted music from Nintendo's 2006 game *Yoshi's Island DS*.

Recycle City Challenge is an extremely simple educational Web game that asks players to answer basic questions about how to reduce waste and energy use. But yesterday, fan site Nintendo Soup was among the first to publicly notice that the Web game used a looping version of *Yoshi's Island DS*' "Underground" theme in the background.

The music, which played in a version of *Recycle City Challenge* accessed by Ars as recently as this morning, has since been removed from the live version on the EPA's website. You can still hear it in this Internet Archive copy of the site, though, and compare that directly to the same song on the *Yoshi's Island DS* soundtrack. Perhaps not coincidentally, a file named "yoshidsunderground.mp3" containing a copy of the song in question was in a music subfolder on the EPA website (as cataloged in this Internet Archive link) until earlier today.

[embedded content]
The *Yoshi's Island DS* "Underground" theme
"The *Recycle City Challenge* game was created for EPA by a contractor," an EPA spokesperson told Ars. "We are looking into whether the contractor received permission to use the music, to the extent permission was necessary in this instance."

Can they do that?

It seems extremely unlikely that Nintendo offered permission or sold a license for a minor track from an aging Nintendo DS release to be used in a relatively unknown US government Web game (Nintendo has yet to respond to a request for comment

from Ars Technica). But there is at least some question as to "the extent permission was necessary in this instance," as the EPA spokesperson put it.

While the *Recycle City Challenge* theme is strikingly similar to the *Yoshi's Island DS* song in question, it doesn't seem to be a direct rip of the actual recording from the original game. Instead, it sounds a bit like a MIDI-style cover version of the song, which is a genre that should be familiar to anyone who frequented certain corners of the Internet since the late '90s.

Using a cover version doesn't put the EPA in the clear here, of course. Even the kind of compulsory cover license usually used to release commercial cover versions of other songs likely wouldn't cover a derivative work like a game soundtrack, according to Cornell Law Professor James Grimmelmann. For that to pass legal muster, you'd likely need direct permission from the original copyright holder for the composition, he told Ars.

The other argument the EPA could make here is that of fair use. "It is technically a non-commercial, educational use," Grimmelmann allowed when examining the guidelines for what determines fair use standards. "However, I don't think it's terribly transformative. Putting the same music on a different game doesn't cause any new insights into [the music]." The fair use argument would be much stronger, Grimmelmann said, if the game was "using [the music] to educate people about [the music] itself. Otherwise, it's just a small factor on the scale."

What's your damage?

The United States government and its subsidiaries can be liable for hefty copyright infringement judgements in cases like these. In 2015, the US Postal Service was ordered to pay $540,000 for unauthorized use of a photo of the Korean War

Memorial on a stamp. Last year, the post office also had to pay $3.5 million to the sculptor of a replica Statue of Liberty in Las Vegas, which was mistakenly used in place of the real thing as the subject of a stamp.

That said, Grimmelmann says he doesn't "see this proceeding into being a major litigation disaster" for the government. "I think Nintendo would be satisfied if they pulled the game and replaced it and apologized."

And while better diligence and procedures could prevent the government from taking part in such apparent infringement in the future, Grimmelmann doesn't think it's necessarily worth implementing draconian copyright checks on every bit of government work. "This is the kind of thing [where] it doesn't make sense for society to spend all its resources to make sure it never happens," he said. "Mistakes like this happen from time to time, and we don't want to say they're completely OK [or] you can do them forever, but I would think the actual damages here are pretty small."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1461291

EA opts Origin users out of "real-name sharing" after complaints

reader comments

67 with 36 posters participating

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Electronic Arts is opting all users out of the “real name sharing” option on its Origin gaming service following complaints that some users may have been entered into the program without their consent.

The option to “show my real name on my profile” (as opposed to just sharing an online handle) is buried in the privacy settings for every EA Origin account, as it is for many other gaming networks. But Randi Lee Harper, the founder of the nonprofit Online Abuse Prevention Initiative, recently noted in a Twitter thread that her real name was being shared via the account without any opt-in.

Harper said anecdotal reports and spot checks of others with Origin accounts showed that the setting “has been seemingly randomly enabled” for a number of other Origin users. Accounts created between 2013 and 2015 seem to have more likelihood of having the option enabled by default, Harper said, but she added that she “can’t find any kind of commonality in the data. It seems so random.” (New accounts created today default the real name sharing to be off.)

“I’m of the opinion that there is never a situation that you want to make it possible for a random stranger to link your gaming account to your real name,” Harper wrote. “People that you voluntarily friend, OK, that’s a different story. That this was defaulted to ‘on’ for some people… EA, what the fuck.”

In response to these reports, EA said it is opting all Origin players out of real-name sharing and investigating what, if anything, happened to cause the reported privacy breach in the first place.

“Player privacy is of the utmost importance to us,” EA said in a statement provided to Ars. “We’ve recently began hearing from some of our players that their Origin accounts defaulted to share real names associated with their account. That should be an opt-in setting… It’s important to us that real names are shared only by players who truly want to. We appreciate the community’s engagement on this, and we apologize to our players for any disruption or extra steps this may cause.”

EA’s problem mirrors one faced by Microsoft early last year, when some users complained their Xbox Live accounts were sharing their real names without consent. After investigating, Microsoft said in a short statement provided to Mashable at the time that “we’ve addressed the issue some users may have experienced with their profile.”

Whatever the results of EA’s investigation, this should serve as a timely reminder to always double-check the privacy settings on all of your online accounts to make sure they match your preferences. You never know when the “default” sharing options may not match up with what you (or even the corporations behind those accounts) think they should be.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1459553

Anthem review: BioWare’s sky-high gaming ambition crashes back to Earth

EA / Bioware

reader comments

205 with 130 posters participating, including story author

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BioWare, the developer responsible for *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, has returned with its first new series in over a decade, *Anthem.* It's a pretty big departure for the RPG-heavy studio: a jetpack-fueled, action-first online "looter-shooter." And after a disastrous demo launched weeks ago, we wondered whether we'd even get a playable game.

The good news is that we did, and at its best, *Anthem* feels brilliant, beautiful, and thrilling. At its worst, though, this is a stuttering, confusing, heartbreaking mess of an action game.

The good stuff *Anthem* ultimately offers—artistic design, BioWare-caliber plot, and that freakin' Iron Man feeling—fails to coalesce. Players are expected to log in again and again for missions with friends in true "online shared shooter" style (à la *Destiny* and *Warframe*), but the game's inherent structure makes this basic loop difficult to pull off.

The disappointment we feel perhaps stems from the fact *Anthem* often feels like a classic BioWare single-player quest that was shoved awkwardly into an always-online game.

- All screens from this gallery are taken from real-time gameplay, except where noted. There's a lot to knock about *Anthem*, but man, can it be a looker.
- What's more, when the game is this pretty, it says, "go ahead, fly through this beauty."
- In *Anthem*, if you see it, you can probably fly to it.
- Methinks these wall-lined castles were built before

flying “javelin” suits became all the rage.

- Flying over a prospective battle is a delight, but only one of the four javelin classes enjoys a tantalizing “shield while hovering” perk. Meaning that the three other classes aren’t much good hovering in the open.
- The rest of this gallery is dedicated to random beautiful shots taken from the campaign.
- Rewinding to the game’s opening mission, which is also rendered almost entirely with real-time imagery.
- That creature in the distance eventually causes some trouble.
- This kind of trouble, to be specific.

A bird? A plane? Even better!

Anthem comes complete with its own sci-fi universe, one with no apparent ties to previous BioWare series. In this one, you control a “freelancer,” a class of bounty-hunting soldier decked out in a robo-armor suit called a “javelin.” You learn exactly what happened to your dwindling ranks in an opening mission that sees you and teammates contend with unbeatable odds and suffer from a tragic loss.

This booming intro mission hits all of the beats you might hope for in a BioWare-ized action game: solid voice acting, killer vistas, soaring music, and epic strange-planet combat. In this first mission, your AI allies are old pros and do a good job of immediately establishing a rapport while you start wielding firepower in third-person perspective. One button fires an equipped military-grade gun; four other buttons are dedicated to special attacks like fireballs and temporary shields.

And one important button sends you into the air, careening in any direction you wish as a jetpack-flying super-soldier. I call this the “WHOOSH” button.

Almost everything about *Anthem*‘s flight system is awesome. The sheer act of lifting off looks, sounds, and feels great, no matter how many times you do it. There’s a timing chain for the required jump-then-boost combo, coupled with a light-and-sound reaction of blasting off. The combined effect implies enough torque to make your real-life head rock back instinctually. Once you’re airborne, the default speed is slow-and-maneuverable for newbies (aided all the more by a useful “hover in place” button), while pressing “forward” delivers a juicy amount of controllable velocity.

I initially recoiled at how this system worked with mouse-and-keyboard controls, but the default sensitivity now feels better than in demo tests, and it comes with a handy on-screen orientation guide. Plus, the demo’s issues with rock-wall collisions have been touched up so that your javelin suit can often bounce off and maintain momentum. (Either way, it works better with a gamepad, but I’m proof positive that mouse-and-keyboard is doable for PC diehards.)

As the above gallery illustrates, there’s a lot of beauty to fly through in *Anthem*. I can only speak to the game’s PC version, which I tested on a beefy system, but I have managed to find the right combination of effects toggles to keep the game at or near 60fps at 1440p resolution. That was certainly not the case when using the same PC to test the game’s woeful demo version.

My only complaint at this point is that these suits overheat when flying for too long. In combat, that trade-off is understandable. Outside of combat (and there’s a lot of non-combat time during missions), I’d rather not stop flying. *Anthem*‘s flight system is right up there with the tortoise-shell skateboarding of *Super Mario 64* and the dash-jumping of *Celeste*. It’s the game’s purest, most crystallized gem of joy-in-movement, and one that I’m glad I get to do again and again.

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Niantic poised to settle Pokémon Go trespassing complaints

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A proposed settlement filed last week could give homeowners some control over whether or not *Pokémon Go*'s augmented-reality attractions show up in and around their property.

Shortly after its launch in the summer of 2016, *Pokémon Go* developer Niantic started fielding numerous complaints about players trespassing on private property to access location-dependent Gyms and Pokéstops in the augmented-reality game. Those complaints eventually developed into numerous lawsuits alleging that Niantic was essentially encouraging trespassing by placing its digital attractions on their property.

Those lawsuits were consolidated into a class action by August, and after winding through the courts for years (and surviving a motion to dismiss), that class-action suit now seems on the verge of a settlement. A proposal filed by the plaintiffs in district court last week (as noted by *The Hollywood Reporter*) outlines a number of ways Niantic apparently plans to solve this problem.

Under the proposed settlement, homeowners will be able to use a Web form to complain about any "points of interest" (i.e., Pokéstops and Gyms) that are within 40 meters of their single-family home. Niantic says it will honor such complaints by removing the POI within 15 days and will maintain a database to ensure new POIs don't get placed there.

Public parks will also be able to request that POIs on their grounds be inaccessible outside of that park's posted hours of operation. And Niantic says new POIs will be reviewed "for the principal purpose of trying to avoid POIs that are more likely to lead to issues with nuisance or trespass." New in-game warnings will also instruct players to "be courteous to members of real-world communities" while playing.

Plaintiffs named in the lawsuit could receive up to $1,000 under the settlement, while Niantic would also be on the hook for upwards of $8 million in legal fees.

While the settlement still needs to be approved by a judge, this seems likely to put an end to a critical conflict between the real and virtual worlds. Without a court ruling on the matter, though, the case won't necessarily set a legal precedent for future situations where location-aware apps start to impinge on real-world space.

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