Elsa and the gang are back and in a dark place in first teaser for Frozen 2



reader comments

77 with 58 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Idina Menzel and Kristen Bell return to voice Anna and Elsa, respectively, in first teaser trailer for Disney's *Frozen 2*.
We awoke this morning to the first teaser trailer for *Frozen 2*, the sequel to *Frozen*, Disney's inventive 2013 re-imagining of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Snow Queen." The original was such a blockbuster that it will be hard for any sequel to recreate the magic, but the new teaser certainly looks promising.

(Spoilers for original *Frozen* below.)

The first film told the story of two princesses of Arendelle.

The elder, Elsa (Idina Menzel), has the power to control and create ice and snow, but she struggles to control it. When she accidentally injures her young sister Anna (Kristen Bell), local trolls heal Anna but caution that Elsa must learn to control her magic. In response, their parents lock them both away. When Elsa turns 21, she's crowned queen but a spat with Anna after the coronation reveals her magic. She's exiled from the kingdom, flees to the mountains, and builds a gorgeous castle of ice and snow in which to live out her days in isolation. But she doesn't realize Arendelle has also frozen over, endangering the people.

Anna goes off in search of Elsa with the help of an ice harvester named Kristoff (Jonathan Groff) and his trusty reindeer Sven, as well as a snowman named Olaf (Josh Gad). Naturally it all works out in the end because this is a Disney fairytale. *Frozen* earned over 1.2 billion worldwide, making it the highest grossing animated film of all time. It won Oscars for Best Animated Film and Best Song—"Let It Go,' the song Elsa sings as she's building her ice castle. (It's a great tune, and it might be a tad uncharitable to point out its strong similarity to "Defying Gravity" from the Broadway hit musical *Wicked*. Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez composed both.) It also spawned numerous spinoffs in multiple forms of media (including a Broadway musical), making it one of Disney's most profitable franchises.

- A lone figure on a dark, desolate shore
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Elsa gets a running start
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Elsa makes an ice bridge in the waves
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- The ice bridge is just not strong enough
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Meanwhile, younger sister Anna is alone in the castle
  Walt Disney Animation Studios

- Kristoff, Sven, and a few reindeer friends ride to the rescue.
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Elsa protects the snowman Olaf from harm
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Anna suspects someone might be following them
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Their old lives seem so far away
  Walt Disney Animation Studios
- Elsa, Anna, and Kristoff, together again.
  Walt Disney Animation Studios

So of course there was going to be a sequel, although it wasn't official announced until March 2015. Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck are back on board as co-directors, along with original stars Idina Menzel, Kristen Bell, Jonathan Groff, and Josh Gad, with music once again from Anderson-Lopez and Lopez. Nonetheless, it'll be quite the challenge to live up to the smashing success of the original.

We know next to nothing about the story, other than it will also feature Arendelle, and this first teaser trailer doesn't tell us much. It opens with a long sequence of Elsa isolated on a distant shore and trying to run across the water using her powers to freeze the water so she can pass. But she fails (perhaps because, as Nerdist points out, salt water has a higher freezing point). It's notoriously difficult to render fluid-like motions for animation, and this sequence is stunning. We see Anna equally isolated, so clearly the sisters are both in a dark place. Fortunately Kristoff, Sven, and Olaf are riding to the rescue. The final shot, of our trusty reunited crew striding through a forest, ends with a feisty Anna sensing something behind them and drawing Kristoff's sword. I'm sure the gang will triumph once again—and they'll do it with plenty of songs.

Frozen 2 hits theaters November 22, 2019.

Listing image by Walt Disney Animation Studios

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1455717

Amid layoffs, Blizzard won’t release a “major” new game in 2019



reader comments

63 with 46 posters participating, including story author

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Blizzard fans are going to have to wait a little bit longer for any major new titles from the company. In a conference call accompanying yesterday’s quarterly earnings announcement

(where the company announced record results and significant layoffs), Activision Blizzard CFO Dennis Durkin said the company is “not planning a major frontline release for Blizzard in 2019,” and it expects “materially lower financial performance” for the developer in the coming year. That doesn’t mean Blizzard will be taking the year off, of course. The company will be diving into its past catalog for previously announced releases like *World of Warcraft Classic* and *Warcraft 3: Reforged*, both coming later this year. Continuing games like *Overwatch* and *Hearthstone* will also see their usual slate of regular content updates.

But Durkin’s statement makes it clear we’ll have to wait until 2020 for any truly new titles from Blizzard. That includes the recently announced mobile *Diablo Immortal* and any other PC or console-based *Diablo* titles. It also means no new *World of Warcraft* expansion is expected for the year—Durkin specifically used 2018’s *Battle for Azeroth* expansion as a contrast with the 2019 slate.

A rebuilding year

Financially, it might not be a great time for Blizzard to be going relatively fallow. In the call, Activision Blizzard Chief Operating Officer Coddy Johnson noted that, while games like *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch* continue to see growth in raw player numbers, both of those games showed declines in net in-game bookings (i.e. the total amount of money those players are willing to spend on continuing content). That’s a trend that “will take time to stabilize and return to growth,” Durkin added, which is why Blizzard is expected to drive the “majority” of expected revenue declines Activision-wide in 2019.

Blizzard has also struggled with a number of high-profile executive departures recently. Blizzard co-founder and CEO Mike Morhaime left the company in October, and CFO Amrita

Ahuja left last month after joining the company in early 2018. Kotaku has recently reported that Activision has taken an increasingly hands-on role with the management of Blizzard, which had operated relatively independently since the gaming giants merged in 2007.

Looking past 2019, though, Durkin is optimistic that "Blizzard's pipeline of PC, console, and mobile content is richer than ever." Activision says it's planning to increase the number of developers working on its major franchises—including *Overwatch*, *Warcraft*, *Hearthstone*, and *Diablo*—by 20 percent in the coming year. Those new resources will help with "several PC and console releases" for after 2019, including "other Warcraft games" and "several projects underway for the [*Diablo*] franchise" Johnson said.

For now, though, Blizzard is a long way from its prolific 2010 to 2016 period, which saw five major games (*Starcraft II*, *Diablo III*, *Hearthstone*, *Heroes of the Storm*, and *Overwatch*) launch in a seven-year span. Then again, considering that Blizzard focused pretty exclusively on *World of Warcraft* expansions for the seven years before that, maybe we shouldn't be too surprised.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1455735

Metro Exodus: A beautiful, brutal single-player game—with insane RTX perks



Enlarge / Four seasons of Metro await.
Deep Silver / 4A Games

reader comments

142 with 81 posters participating, including story author

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The best thing I can say about *Metro Exodus*, to anybody unfamiliar with its place in a trilogy of post-nuclear, first-person monster combat games, is that this is the best Eurojank game I've ever seen.

"Eurojank" is an unofficial term for that class of sprawling, verbose, and oftentimes glitchy action/RPG titles originating from Eastern European nations like Russia, Poland, and Ukraine. (At the top of that heap is *The Witcher 3*, whose previous two games were decidedly less even; more recent examples include *Elex*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and *The Technomancer*.) And rarely do these games hold players' hands, usually because they lack tutorials or because of unclear GUI elements.

Metro Exodus, like the two Metro games that 4A Studios made before it, has all of those qualities in spades—though it's definitely the most accessible Eurojank shooter I've come across. And yes, calling this the "most accessible Eurojank shooter" is like calling Taco Bell the "most flavorful national Mexican chain restaurant." But its strides toward accessibility are important, because this is a game of high highs and so-so lows. You'll need to slog through some obvious imperfections. Do that, however, and you're in for the kind of player- and challenge-respecting solo experience that people say they're always dreaming about in comment threads about always-online games.

Plus, in this game's case, there's a particular beauty in store for anybody who ponied up for one of Nvidia's new RTX-series graphics cards. As a result, I spent my review period focusing quite a bit on the RTX experience and came away mostly impressed. What kind of game makes you okay with trading frames for ray tracing boosts? A game like *Metro Exodus*, that's what.

Winter, spring, summer, and fall

- These images are all taken from live gameplay on PC's "high" settings preset. (Unfortunately, something about Metro Exodus blocks our normal screenshot pipeline, so these are all captured without guns in our first-person hands.)
- This looks like some sort of pre-rendered stuff, but seriously, that's in-game.
- Giant, hulking, leaping beasts.
- This is a peek at a snowy chunk of Moscow. Artyom later hops a train to a different part of Russia for a longer snowy adventure.
- Between stops, hop a train with comrades and discuss life, love, and loss.

- I bet stuff isn't very nice in there.
- Not nice at all.

For anybody who skipped or doesn't remember the previous *Metro* games—based on the books of Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky—*Exodus* starts out with a lengthy pre-rendered sequence that sums up the *Metro* universe in ridiculously tidy fashion. A nuclear apocalypse has forced Russia's citizens into an underground network, where they've built their lives anew, only to face two equally deadly forces: supernatural monsters and political friction.

Now, silent protagonist Artyom has begun putting more muscle into a personal quest: to find signs of life elsewhere on Earth. To do this, he disobeys direct orders, goes topside, and—sure enough—finds more than he or his comrades had ever expected.

What follows, as has been revealed in hands-on previews of the game, is a significant change of pace for the series. The prior games' underground focus meant that its combat-loaded levels were decidedly linear affairs, albeit ones with satisfying firepower and decent stealth-path options. *Metro Exodus* still has a linear thrust, but it also gives players a massive canvas of outdoor spaces, which appear in each of the game's "seasons."

When a new chapter begins, you'll usually land in a massive, architecture-filled instance that can be traversed however you please. Instead of using invisible walls or artificial barriers, *Exodus* makes its open-sky zones some of the most dangerous ones in the game. You can get from point A to pretty much anywhere in a given zone, whether on foot or with optional transportation (like a rowboat in the first "winter" zone). But once you're outside the demarcated paths, the worst monsters—big, hulking, hairy beasts with terrifying snarls—are more likely to be on the prowl *and* run in packs *and* see you in the open-air valleys that separate you from an intriguing

tower or power facility.

The result is a lovely risk-reward equation to manage as an open-world gamer. Is an optional run to an interesting-looking building worth the trouble? Will you pick up a killer new weapon attachment or a boatload of crafting supplies, and will the amount of ammo and health packs you burn through be worth it? 4A Games pushes the needle on this adventuring quality by doing a pretty remarkable thing in open-world games: keeping its 3D architecture diverse and interesting, while managing some clever content copy-and-pasting across giant ecosystems. (Also, you won't face a single loading screen when you're in a particular zone.)

Anybody who disliked *Fallout 4*'s generic landscapes as much as I did will be delighted by the environmental post-nuclear storytelling and discovery opportunities that *Exodus* contains. Every harrowing run in this game has *something* to peel back and savor.

Exodus is also careful to keep some of the game's basics manageable amid the challenging parts. Crafting and "cleaning" add some complication and flavor to weapon upkeep, but these systems revolve around a simple item currency. A clunky map can be accessed on your character's wrist, thus filling the screen, but you also get a nifty compass to check in a pinch. And most of the game's UI is relegated to an indicator on your guns and wrist, but you can always tap a button for a quick flash of all-important numbers for ammo and inventory.

Issues with AI, on-boarding, and dialogue

But it's not all roses on *Exodus*' journey into the apocalypse.

The first issue—and it's a big one—is the AI. As of press time, there's still something weird going on with human

enemies' responses to your presence. This typically errs more on the side of "why doesn't that guy see me," as opposed to "how did that guy see me through a wall." Some of the game's epic firefights and stealth missions are made easier by shooting your gun into the air, thus triggering your foes' wonky searching AI.

Sometimes, they'll come right toward you for easy kills (aided by the game's generous and silent throwing knife weapon, which can be tossed and then retrieved from a corpse for constant reuse in a game with limited ammo). Sometimes, they'll glitch-walk off a building's edge and hover in a way that stops them from accurately targeting you. Sometimes, they shout "I see him!" while facing in the opposite direction and standing still, so you can take your sweet time and line up a killing blow.

It's not all bad. The game's monsters are a bit less prone to this stupidity, which solidifies their importance as an open-world "police" force of sorts. And don't count on that "shoot in the air" gimmick to work in many of the firefights. In some of the best missions and moments, there's no getting around the use of stealth, flanking, or other smart combat, and thank goodness. But there's enough AI wonkiness to mute the sense that *Metro Exodus* must be played a certain way to overcome its daunting difficulty. And I find *Exodus* is more fun when played in that "oh crap oh crap oh crap" mode.

Next up on the negatives list is the game's rough on-boarding and introduction to how the *Metro* universe works. If you don't dig through help menus, which themselves are a bit thin, you'll never get an explanation about occasionally required gas masks or about what on-screen button prompts mean when a new weapon appears on the ground. In some cases, a single tooltip appears for a new in-game system and then vanishes forever if you miss it. In my case, I still have no in-game answer to exactly how to "mark" distant objects when I see them through a pair of binoculars—and that's no small thing

for a game that asks players to search far and wide across massive landscapes.

The same issue goes for the game's health system, which indicates player damage by making the screen's border redder and redder and adds heavy breathing. At what point am I a single hit away from death? Does a health kit fully heal my character? And if my gas mask runs out of air tanks, how long can I survive before Artyom chokes? This is all a bit unclear.

- Deep Silver sent Ars Technica the game's special edition, which includes this very heavy Artyom-versus-beast statue. This set, minus the game, costs $149.99.
- It comes in a "radioactive drum," and styrofoam bits love to cling to it.
- Uh, guys, not sure if you noticed, but there's a whole bunch of wide space around this floating door entryway.
- Backside is quite detailed, if you're into that sort of thing for your pricey gaming statues.

Last up is the plot, which isn't bad as much as it is uneven and verbose. *Metro* series fans already know what they're in for: the plot is primarily doled out in "stay awhile and listen" stretches of expository dialogue. These emerge primarily when you're back at your home base and chatting with fellow soldiers, but they also come up when you happen upon a non-violent NPC in one of the game's massive zones and they start yapping and yapping.

Do you like a game whose combat and discovery mechanics are *entirely* divorced from stop-and-wait delivery of lengthy, meandering dialogue, always spoken by over-eager actors with thick Eastern European accents? If so, you're in for some genuinely likable moments of character development; they're just firmly nestled in the kinds of overlong stories that might have you saying "get on with it, man" after a while. The spoilable plot beats, on the other hand, feel like fine B-

movie cheese. Sometimes, these are full of scare-quote “important” messages freighted with fromage. (And sometimes filled with comically intense evil, too.)

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1454153

Danish haunted-house studies seek to reveal the seductive appeal of horror



Enlarge / Visitors to a haunted house in Vejle, Denmark, respond differently to being confronted by “scare actors” depending on whether they are “adrenaline junkies” or “white-knucklers.”

reader comments

23 with 20 posters participating

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It’s no secret that many of us here at Ars are genuine fans of horror. As a child, I would compulsively devour horror short stories and watch classic movies on late-night TV, like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) or *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). Then I’d lie awake at night in terror, convinced a werewolf was lurking just outside my bedroom window. (In reality, it was a trick of light and shadow against the curtains.) That’s the central paradox of horror: we both fear the experience of watching a scary movie, or reading a terrifying book, and compulsively seek it out.

According to Mathias Clasen of Aarhus University in Denmark, we seek out being afraid in controlled settings as a means of confronting our fears in a safe environment. Clasen specializes in studying our response to horror in books, film, video games, and other forms of entertainment, and he is the author of *Why Horror Seduces*. It’s one way we can explore “issues of morality and evil and the contours of our own psychological landscape,” he said. “We find and challenge our own limits. And we may even practice coping strategies. It does not make us fearless, but it does seem to make us better at regulating fear.”

Like me, Clasen has a lifelong love of horror, even though as a child he was terrified of scary stories. “I would have nightmares and would sleep with the lights on,” he admitted. That changed in his teenage years. “What psychologists call a hedonic reversal took place,” he said. “I started feeling this weird attraction [to horror] that I couldn’t really understand.” He devoured the writings of Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.P. Lovecraft. While earning his various degrees in literature, he found a rich collection of dark

gothic material in the English literature canon.

> *"Horror provides us with a means for peering into the dark at no risk and almost no cost."*

Eventually, the horror genre became his specialized area of research. "I think some of my colleagues feel that what I do is kind of morally dubious, but they let me do my stuff," he said. "Horror provides us with a means for peering into the dark at no risk and almost no cost. It's a way of simulating threats. The challenge is to take an almost trivial observation like that and explain it scientifically."

Just last year, Clasen co-authored a study examining the dominant personality traits of horror fans. He and his colleagues—PhD student Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and personality psychologist John A. Johnson, professor emeritus at Penn State University—recruited more than 1,000 North American participants via crowd-sourcing with Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They had their subjects take the standard Big Five personality test—currently the professional standard for social psychologists who study personality—and looked for correlations between those results and whether the participants did/did not like horror.

"We found a positive correlation between one of those Big Five traits called openness to experience, also called intellect imagination," Clasen said.

In a more recent study, published in *Poetics* last month, Clasen collaborated with two of his Aarhus colleagues. All three co-authors are fascinated by the cognitive science of religion, seeking to uncover why invisible supernatural agents play such a huge role in religious belief systems around the world. Horror taps into the same impulse. Co-author Uffe Schjodt studies so-called "dysphoric rituals," which are rituals that are psychologically or physically painful, like walking on hot coals or sticking needles in the skin. Co-

author Marc Malmdorf Andersen studies different forms of play, while Clasen has a hypothesis that, for many people, horror *is* a form of play.



Enlarge / A “scare actor” terrifies guests by threatening them with a chainsaw. Or, in psych-speak, he does so via “a behavioral display of violent hostility and dissonance-inducing mask.”
Andres Baldursson/Baldursson Photography

For their study, the Aarhus team took advantage of the annual Dystopia haunted house in Velje, Denmark, housed in an old fish factory and run by a group of horror enthusiasts, with as many as 300 volunteers pitching in for the entire month of October. In many ways, a haunted house is the perfect laboratory simulation. “We can’t invite people to the lab, hide behind a cover, then jump out and yell, ‘Boo!'” said Clasen. It’s unethical, for starters, but also less immersive. And it turns out that immersion is pretty key to generating fear.

A haunted house “is designed to situate you as the protagonist in a horror story that unfolds in the empirical environment

and in real time," he said. "If you buy into that premise and feel you are personally invested in the things that happen, just like when you're playing a computer game, the emotional response is going to be so much stronger. Many of the fear-regulation strategies people use serve the function either of sustaining immersion or breaking immersion."

Junkie or knuckles?

The team asked people attending the haunted house if they would participate in the study; in the end, there were 280 participants. Those who agreed had to choose which coping strategy to employ: try to maximize their fear or minimize it. (The paper describes the two groups as "adrenaline junkies" and "white-knucklers," respectively.) Clasen *et al*. found that satisfaction levels were roughly similar in both groups, regardless of whether participants chose to lean into their fear or try to tamp it down.

But while white-knucklers can minimize or down-regulate their fears, the study showed they can only do so to a certain extent. "It's actually not possible to completely extinguish your fear," said Clasen. You can tell yourself it's just the cat knocking around in the basement, not a chainsaw killer, but "the fear system doesn't care. It doesn't operate on statistical probability, but on the need to keep the organism alive."

Clasen and his collaborators are still analyzing tons of data from a follow-up study collected in 2017, where they strapped heart-rate monitors onto the participants and outfitted several of the haunted-house rooms with infrared cameras. That way they could measure heart rates and also track posture and facial expressions.

"The hypothesis is that there's a sweet spot between too much fear and not enough fear, between predictability and unpredictability, where you feel you have a certain amount of

control over the situation, but there's still a degree of unpredictability," said Clasen. A third study still in progress will examine the relationship between fear and memory.



Enlarge / "Scare actors" in zombie makeup exhibit cues of hostility and contagion.
Henriette Klausen

Granted, not everyone appreciates the genre. "Lots of people, when you say the word 'horror,' hear sh**ty slasher films from the 1980s," said Clasen. "But horror is so much more than jump scares. [The best horror] gives us psychological, social, or moral insight into the extremes of human experience. It's psychologically realistic, no matter how outlandish the monsters are." Hence his love for King's novels and Lovecraft, as well as the recent Netflix adaptation of Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House*.

"Lovecraft said, 'Fear is the oldest and strongest emotion.' I think that's true," said Clasen. "We know that the fear system is one we share with a vast range of animals. It's ancient,

buried deep within the brain, the structures that produce fear." We all know what it feels like to be afraid, and we share many of the same fears. Authors like King and Lovecraft and filmmakers like John Carpenter take that to the next level and turn it into art. "They have an extra well-developed sense not only of how to scare people but how to make people invest emotionally and enjoy being scared," he said.

As for the emergence of horror/comedy mashups, like *Scream*(1996), *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), or *Shaun of the Dead* (2014), to name a few, that might be tied to the notion of horror as a sense of play, "I think those kinds of intelligent engagement with genre conventions are a way of providing a playful experience," said Clasen. He sees horror as experiencing something of a renaissance in recent years, prompting a cultural reevaluation of the genre. Perhaps the horror comic subtype is a byproduct of that reevaluation. "I think [horror] is becoming much more recognized as an artistically interesting genre," he said.

Doctor Strange Director Scott Derrickson would agree. He made his name directing horror films like *Sinister* (2012) and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), and he considers horror "an undervalued form of movie art." As he said on the *Mindscape* podcast last October, "[People] like [horror] for the same reason they like roller coasters: it's the powerful feeling of fear, which I think is arguably the most powerful human emotion." [*Full disclosure: the host of* Mindscape *is my spouse, Caltech theoretical physicist Sean Carroll.*] "For people who are serious horror fans, it gets to some of the most important human questions about good and evil, about metaphysics, the questions of the afterlife, and the meaning of existence and how unspoken and unspeakable fears can be tapped into by great horror."

[embedded content]
Mathias Clasen shares a few lessons from a terrified horror researcher: TEDx Aarhus University.

DOI: *Poetics*, 2019. 10.1016/j.poetic.2019.01.002 (About DOIs).

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1452673

Video: To make 1997's Blade Runner, Westwood first had to create the universe



reader comments

51 with 36 posters participating, including story author

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[embedded content]
Shot by Sean Dacanay and edited by Justin Wolfson. VFX by John Cappello. Click here for transcript. And if you want a close-up peek at the awesome Ladd-style logo Aurich cooked up for

this video, you can get that right here.
Welcome back to “War Stories,” an ongoing video series where we get game designers to open up about development challenges that *almost*—but not quite—derailed their games. In this edition, we focus on a genre particularly near and dear to my dead, black Gen-X heart: the adventure game.

And not just any adventure game—we were lucky enough to be able to sit down with Louis Castle, co-founder of legendary game developer Westwood Studios. Castle’s hands were on some of the most famous titles of the 1990s, including *Dune II*, the *Legend of Kyrandia* series, and, most famously, the *Command & Conquer* franchise. But as wonderful as those games are—and as many hours as I spent lost in the woods of Kyrandia as a teenager—none of those mean as much to me as Westwood’s 1997 cinematic adventure game, *Blade Runner*.

You know the score, pal

Adventure games were one of the two ur-genres of true computer games (with the other being the arcade-style shooter), and as a child of the ’80s, adventure games were what got me into gaming. The genre reached its peak in the early to mid 1990s, with some of the best-remembered LucasArts and Sierra titles making their appearance thereabouts. But by the end of the decade the wheels had come off the cart, and it was clear that the genre was being eclipsed by the rise of the first-person shooter.

With the economic realities of the adventure game market in the mid-’90s becoming apparent, Castle’s pitch to create an adventure game set in the *Blade Runner* universe that would look and feel almost indistinguishable from the film itself might have seemed a little barmy. Worse, in order for the game to justify the amount of time and money required to meet that level of fidelity, the title wouldn’t just need to sell well—it would need to become one of the best-selling adventure

games of all time (a difficult thing to do when your target genre has clearly aged past its prime).

Flipping the tortoise

Castle's team faced a considerable number of challenges in bringing the cinematic world of *Blade Runner* to life using the technologies of the day, most of which stemmed from having to invent, from whole cloth, a way to seamlessly mesh their pre-rendered world with animated voxel characters (it turned out to be vastly more complicated than simply sticking a sprite in front of the background). Tackling this issue introduced an entire interconnected tapestry of difficult problems to solve, very few of which are faced by modern developers who can pick from ready-made game engines to license and use.

Fortunately for all of us, Westwood stuck with the challenge, even though finishing the game required more money than originally planned. The company built a title that isn't just an homage or reflection of the original *Blade Runner*—it's a legitimate companion to the movie, fleshing out the world in complementary ways and answering some key questions about the fictional 2019 described in the film. Although it's somewhat difficult to play on modern PCs and suffers from an unfortunate lack of legitimate buying options, it remains a game worth finding and playing—the branching story makes for a high degree of replayability (something absent from a lot of adventure games), and it still looks and plays pretty darn good.

And that budgetary goal of needing to be the best-selling adventure game to date in order to make a profit? *Blade Runner* managed that, too.

I'll tell you about my mother

This isn't the only thing we were able to film with Castle,

either—he was also kind enough to spend some additional hours with us talking about *Command & Conquer*, which had its own surprising number of challenges (like figuring out how to do hundreds of units' worth of pathfinding on a minimum-spec machine). Castle was happy to go pretty deep into the weeds on the technical issues faced, and we were happy to let him. Stay tuned for that video in a week or two!

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1454867

Following lawsuit, Activision starts refund program for Guitar Hero Live



Enlarge / You could get paid for your now-crippled version of *Guitar Hero Live*.

reader comments

7 with 7 posters participating

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American players who purchased *Guitar Hero Live* recently may be eligible for a refund being offered by Activision. The move comes after a lawsuit over the December shutdown of the game's streaming "Guitar Hero Live" mode, which included more than 90 percent of the game's available song library.

Activision's support page was updated recently to announce what it is calling a "voluntary refund program" for anyone who purchased *Guitar Hero Live* between December 1, 2017 and January 1, 2019. Those players have until May 1 to fill out a claim form and submit proof of purchase (a receipt or credit card statement) for a refund up to the purchase price.

Activision announced last June that it would be shutting down the Guitar Hero TV servers in December, more than three years after the game's late 2015 launch. That move cut off in-game access to more than 480 in-game songs that were only playable via live streaming channels or microtransaction rentals through the server. Console versions of the game still have access to 42 songs included on the game disc, but the iOS and Apple TV versions of the game are now completely unplayable. In September, Californian Robert Fishel filed a proposed class action lawsuit against Activision over the Guitar Hero TV shutdown. That suit alleged that marketing materials promising "an always-on music video network… running 24-hours a day, seven days a week" amounted to false advertising and that the shutdown was not "disclose[d] prominently and conspicuously" before it took place.

Fishel's lawsuit was voluntarily dismissed without prejudice on January 22, according to court filings, a move that allows Fishel and his lawyers to file again in the future. As it

stands, Fishel, who says he purchased the Apple TV version of *Guitar Hero Live* on September 22, 2017, will not be eligible for the refund program.

“If I do this [lawsuit] it’s not for me, it’s for the public,” Fishel told Ars in an email before the suit was filed. “I gotta say, I’m typically fine knowing that server-based games will go offline, but… as far as I’m aware that guitar is useless at this point. I don’t think any other games support it and furthermore Apple TV is still a thriving platform so there’s no reason they shouldn’t let me play it offline…”

Neither Fishel nor his lawyers were immediately available to respond to a request for comment.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1454367

After glitch grants access, Bethesda says locked Fallout 76 vault will open



Enlarge / You can’t legitimately access this *Fallout 76* vault yet, but you can take a peek inside.

reader comments

41 with 35 posters participating

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Bethesda has confirmed that a locked vault in *Fallout 76* will eventually open, but the admission came only after a player was briefly trapped in the locked area due to an in-game glitch.

The saga started this weekend when Reddit user McStaken posted pictures from inside the mysterious vault, which appears on the *Fallout 76* map but can’t be entered through normal gameplay. McStaken said he “didn’t intend to end up” in the vault and entered accidentally while participating in another event.

That makes their situation different from previous players who have been able to force their way into Vault 63 and other locked in-game locations using a Power Armor glitch. Once

inside, these players found a spacious, partially furnished vault, complete with overseer's office, wrecked kitchen, and even a terminal reading "Nice Work Assholes" (a possible hidden message for potential hackers?).

While McStaken says they were eventually able to get out, they expressed worry about being banned for even unintentionally accessing the locked vault. That wasn't a completely unfounded fear, since Bethesda recently banned players who gained access to *Fallout 76*'s hidden dev room and its unreleased items. In that case, though, the publisher was clear that banned players were "using 3rd party applications to get into these areas."

In any case, Bethesda community manager Jessica Finster responded to McStaken's post to clarify that "these Vaults are still under construction, but we look forward to sharing more on how they will become part of the game. In the meantime, we also appreciate when players like yourself let us know about stuff like this. We have shared with the team and will let you know if we have any follow-up questions."

A Bethesda representative also followed up with Polygon to confirm that McStaken "shouldn't have to worry about a ban. Sounds like they weren't abusing an exploit, and letting us know is a good thing we definitely appreciate."

While we all wait for the vault to officially open, programming errors like these mean we can still enjoy videos and screenshots of the areas in their still-unfinished states. Who says video game glitches are never a good thing?

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1454319

Our favorite two-player board games, 2019 edition



reader comments

7 with 5 posters participating

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If you’re anything like us, Valentine’s Day brings to mind iconic images of candlelit dinners, boxes of chocolate, roses, and, of course, board games.

“What tabletop games are best for couples?” is a question we get all the time here at Ars Cardboard, and today we’re answering (again) by reprising our 2016 two-player guide with fresh new picks for 2019. Of course, you don’t have to be romantically linked to your gaming partner to enjoy these titles; our recommendations are perfect for any time your group is running behind and you only have one other person to push some cubes with. Or maybe you don’t have a group—all you need to play these games is one other willing (or kinda-sorta willing) partner.

The games below are new-player-friendly card and board games (sorry, we're not tackling miniatures or wargames today) that can be played in an hour or less. While most board games accommodate two players—many quite well—we've found that the best two-player experiences are often those built from the ground up for duos, so we're sticking with two-player-only games for this list (including one that has recently added support for other player counts).

If your favorite game didn't make the cut (and with the endless list of great two-player games, it may not have), share your picks with us in the comments.

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7 Wonders Duel

7 Wonders Duel, a two-player version of the modern classic *7 Wonders*, retools the civ-building-with-cards mechanism of the bigger game into something quick, tense, and interesting from turn one.

On every turn, spread across three "ages," you select an available card from the table in front of you and either build it with resources, discard it for money, or use it to build one of the game's titular "wonders." Building cards gives you wood, stone, glass, bricks, parchment, scientific achievements, military power, or luscious, unadulterated victory points.

You win the game in one of three ways: victory points, military invasion, or complete scientific dominance. (A clever military track across the top of the game spaces uses a "push-pull" mechanism between players to track military supremacy; move the shield pawn all the way into the opponent's base and the game ends immediately.) Along the way, you'll build your personal set of wonders to provide powerful bonuses, more

resources, and occasionally additional turns.

While the full *7 Wonders* uses card drafting to make these same mechanisms work, *Duel* relies on drawing from specific geometrical card arrangements, such as a pyramid in which every other row of cards is face down and certain cards are only available once the cards below them are removed. This turns the process of card collection into a puzzle of its own, as you don't want to expose powerful cards that you want (or cards you want to deny your opponent) until you're in a place to snap them up.

Best of all, the whole thing offers a meaty experience in around 30 minutes and stores its goodness in a small box. Stop what you're doing right now and go buy this game.

Jaipur

The best gaming partner you have access to might just be your real-life partner. And unless your significant other is as much of an uber-gamer as you are, you'll need to pull out something less intimidating than *Terra Mystica* when you want to get a game in. Atop the pantheon of two-player games sits the storied "couples game," and *Jaipur*, a game about trading goods in India, is perhaps the perfect realization of the form. It's a snap to teach, it plays in about 30 minutes, and it's interactive in the best of ways.

At the beginning of the game, both players are dealt a hand of cards representing various goods—spice, silk, leather, etc.—and camels, which aren't goods but can be used in trades. A central market of five more goods cards is dealt to the middle of the table. On your turn, you're presented with a deceptively simple choice: get new goods or sell the goods you already have. To get goods, you can either trade cards with the market or take a card from the market without giving anything up. If you decide to sell, you'll discard all the goods of a certain type and be rewarded with tokens

representing money. The value on the money tokens goes down as more and more goods are sold, so you want to sell quickly to get the best price. But conflicting with this "SELL NOW" mentality are the stacks of bonus tokens. The more goods you sell at once, the better bonus you'll get. Do you sell your two silk now to get the best price, or do you hold out and hope to collect more so you can get that nice, juicy five-card bonus token?

Jaipur is a great game of tug-of-war that provides a surprising amount of tense decisions within a small decision space.

KeyForge: Call of the Archons

- Charlie Theel
- Some of the *KeyForge* tokens in the starter set.
- Check out the unique card names…
- The full starter set next to a single deck.

Any self-respecting list of two-player tabletop games must include a card dueling game, and our pick this year is Richard Garfield's super-hot 2018 release *Keyforge: Call of the Archons*. The game's schtick is an odd one: *Keyforge* is a CCG-style card game that forbids deckbuilding. Instead of asking you to buy booster packs or chase down coveted cards on the secondhand market to build a killer deck, *KeyForge* wants you to let it do heavy lifting for you. Specifically, an algorithm assembles every deck and assigns it a unique name and card back—you buy it and play it, no alterations allowed.

But beyond the intriguing distribution premise, the game is a ton of fun to play. There's no mana economy to manage; instead, each deck has cards from three of the game's "houses," and you can only play and activate cards from the house that you declare as active at the beginning of your turn. Creatures you play can attack each other, of course, but

the goal of the game is not to reduce your opponent's health to zero. Instead, three "keys" must be constructed by using the game's "ember" resource, and collecting ember is one of the actions available to creatures, forcing you to choose between attacking and resource gathering. There are a lot of fun and interesting decisions to make.

KeyForge has a nascent tournament scene, but although the game has some baked-in mechanics for balancing powerful cards and decks, I'm not sure the game has competitive legs. As a kitchen-table brawl between friends, though, it's a blast. A starter set, which includes tokens and four decks (two handcrafted "learning" decks and two regular, algorithm-constructed decks) is available for around $40, or you can just pick up two $10 packs and see what you get.

Patchwork

A light, two-player game about quilting from the designer best known for the heavy serf farming epic *Agricola*, the heavy Frisian farming epic *Fields of Arle*, and the heavy dwarf farming epic *Caverna*? Yup—and it couldn't be better.

Patchwork is a two-player game about picking up fabric pieces and assembling them, *Tetris*-like, onto your personal square game board while simultaneously trying to maximize the number of "buttons" (essentially, money) that these pieces deposit in your personal treasury. The game uses a wonderful circular movement mechanic to ensure that on each turn, players have a choice of just three fabric pieces—but that these three change constantly.

The rules can be explained in a couple of minutes, the gameplay is quick (20 minutes) and non-confrontational, and play is smooth and engaging. Many *Tetris*-like puzzle games have flooded the market over the past few years, and *Patchwork* remains our favorite.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1452971

Nintendo: 3DS sales falling “faster than anticipated”



Enlarge / Just a few of the many 3DS hardware options still being supported by Nintendo.

reader comments

69 with 51 posters participating

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Since just before the Switch launched and as recently as October, Nintendo has continued to insist that the 3DS can

exist alongside the Switch as a lower-cost, lower-powered portable gaming alternative. Over the last two years, there have even been some signs of life for the aging portable's continued market health.

But 2018 might be seen as the year the market finally started slipping away from the aging 3DS. Hardware sales for the 2018 calendar year were just 2.85 million, down over 57 percent from the year before. That's a marked change from the 2016 to 2017 period, where 3DS sales worldwide fell just nine percent year-over-year (despite the intervening launch of the ultra-hot Switch in 2017).

Nintendo's new president Shuntaro Furukawa admitted in a recent Q&A that "the Nintendo 3DS market has contracted faster than we anticipated." But in practically the same breath, he once again committed to supporting the system alongside the Switch going forward.

> *Currently many of consumers [sic] who newly purchase Nintendo 3DS are consumers purchasing Nintendo 3DS as their first game system. Nintendo 3DS is appealing as a portable game system, that is easy to carry around since it is small and light, and at a very desirable price point. Demand still remains from parents looking to purchase a first game system for their children. That is why our basic policy is to proceed with both Nintendo Switch and Nintendo 3DS in our dedicated video game platform business.*

While Nintendo may continue making and supporting 3DS hardware, it's not showing much interest in continued software support for the more than 74 million systems already out there. The Nintendo website's list of upcoming 3DS games features just four titles at the moment, including only one (*Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn*) developed by Nintendo itself. Maybe Nintendo will announce more 3DS software in the coming months (as it did in the opening months of 2018), but at the moment,

it’s slim pickings.

For what it’s worth, Nintendo seems optimistic that 3DS sales won’t continue falling in the immediate future. The company projects sales of 2.6 million systems for the fiscal year starting in April, which would be essentially flat compared to fiscal 2018. That seems pretty optimistic given the usual sales trajectory for aging Nintendo portables. In any case, at least Nintendo’s little-portable-that-could is aging better than the Vita.https://arstechnica.com/?p=1453625

Lego Movie 2 isn’t just amazing—it’s also the Solo we always wanted



Enlarge / This image's colors make me wish Optimus Prime was in the film. He's not. That's pretty much my only complaint about this family-comedy masterwork.

reader comments

13 with 12 posters participating

Share this story

Confession time: I was not a massive fan of 2014's *The Lego Movie*.

I'm not a heartless idiot, of course. I enjoyed it. When it comes to the filmmaking duo that is Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, I'm ride-or-die since the *Clone High* days, and at its best, *The Lego Movie* saw them bounce between heart and weirdness in delightful ways. But the film's "surprise" reveal

and its reliance on zillions of Lego-tweaked pop-culture references felt enough like a crutch to take me out of my investment in the film's strange brand of wit and heart.

I say all of this before uttering a word about *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part* to make something clear: I absolutely lost my marbles watching this pitch-perfect, hilarious, full-steam-ahead sequel. *Lego Movie 2* is everything I hoped for from a film that comes with established characters and setting, and its comfort with the first film's gimmicks means it spends less time trying to prove itself and more time letting its varied characters grow and explore in exciting new territory.

Plus, by the end, I found myself panic-sobbing in a huge way, absolutely appreciating its heartfelt message. *Lego Movie 2* is a film that makes quite clear that, unlike the first film's song, everything is *not* always awesome—and that maybe there's still room for Emmett-level cheer and positivity in a world where even Lego minis suffer and struggle.

Spoiler-free reasons to see this film

- This gallery specifically removes a few of my favorite gags that could be spoiled. Click without fear. For example: it's not a spoiler to point out that Wildstyle can sometimes be brooding.
- Even though Emmett will always try to cheer her up!
- The film explores Wildstyle and Emmett's evolving friendship in some lovely ways.
- The film begins exactly where *Lego Movie 1* ended, so this image might look familiar.
- Ars readers know that I was a little cold on *Lego Batman* as a film, but however you felt about that one, rest assured that the character's hyperbolized gruffness is used to very good effect in *Lego Movie 2*.

- Emmett isn’t so sure about this new visitor.
- Neither are Emmett’s buddies.
- Tiffany Haddish voices a new character (center) whose motives are never entirely clear. *The Second Part* benefits from this quality in her character.
- Meanwhile, another new character shows up with apparent wisdom. And a ton of dramatic irony attached.

I’ll be careful about plot and spoilers in talking about *The Second Part* beyond giving series fans a perfectly reasonable clue: this one picks up exactly where the sequel-teasing *Lego Movie 1* left off. The universe that main characters Emmett, Wildstyle, Batman, and their friends lived in has some new, confusing visitors, and the film begins with Wildstyle’s dark, pessimistic narration offset by blink-and-you’ll-miss-them visual gags to sum up who’s still around and how they’re doing.

The first apparent difference this time around is that there’s no mysterious “Kraggle”-caliber plot device. Within the first 10 minutes, references to the prior film, along with silly descriptors of the aforementioned new visitors, make pretty clear what “outside” factors are at play in the sequel’s toy-obsessed story. If you’re 10 years old, you might not pick up on the hints until the film’s resolution emerges, but either way, they’re not important.

Instead, *Lego Movie 2* is the rare family film where a totally obvious plot resolution feeds the emotional appeal that much more. As Emmett and Wildstyle separately struggle to recognize their true personalities, the movie heaps on foreshadowing and dramatic irony in ways that let it breathe for what Lord and Miller do best: crack wise and witty.

Every plot beat is orchestrated and timed impeccably, all in service of levity, goofiness, and good-hearted jokes. This may very well be the filmmaking duo’s giddiest film yet, ripe with sight gags, non sequiturs, and joke density. Think of how you

felt the first time you saw a Lego mini waddle around comically as an attempt to pantomime a human action. Now imagine Lord and Miller becoming so comfortable and fluent in that comedic language that such gags happen all of the time—and hinge less on pop-culture references and more on wackadoodle, early-'90s humor sensibilities. (Speaking of: there's one very obvious reference to *Clone High* that longtime fans will high-five each other about.)

I get the feeling there was a math formula at play for this film's production crew. The filmmakers knew exactly where the "too much funny" line was, deliberately stepped over it for *one* more killer joke, then relented to let characters fill their lungs with the air of character development and empathy. This happens again and again, like when Emmett applies his master-builder prowess at building stupid things or when a certain gang of wild animals pops the comedy balloon with the kind of comedic impact that would make a Shakespeare "chorus" want to immediately retire.

Morgan Freeman's elder-wizard character Vitruvius has departed, and Lord Business has taken a backseat, but I point out this stuff less as a spoiler and more as an indication of how this sequel has grown from its source material. In Vitruvius' place is a new "adviser" character, voiced by a surprise actor who does a nimble job of needling his best buddy for the sake of both comedy and character development.

And in place of Lord Business, we get a wacky character voiced by Tiffany Haddish who has been written and animated to basically let the actor loose on her inimitable brand of comedy. Whether or not Haddish is your cup of movie tea, there's no denying that she's a perfect match for the tension-breaking character she portrays. I delighted in seeing her play an uncompromising version of herself in a PG film.

Duo > *Solo*



Enlarge / As Ars' chief "ugh DC Studios films" naysayer, I gotta hand it to *Lego Movie 2*: its judicious application of pop-culture references, including some great Justice League moments, is top-notch.

Additionally, since we're talking about this film at Ars Technica, I'd be remiss to leave out one juicy insight: that *Lego Movie 2* feels very much like a response to the firing of Lord and Miller from *Solo: A Star Wars Story*.

Lego Movie 2 includes a few moments of blasting off into space and what could be seen as "interdimensional" discovery of new places, lifeforms, and personalities. And as I watched wild-eyed wonder meet high-momentum action while so many jokes fell like delightful dominoes, I couldn't help but think: *this* is what I wanted from *Solo*. With Lord and Miller's roles excised, *Solo* devolved into a basic rattling of plot beats and monologues. I always felt like *Solo* was the originally planned film, minus Lord and Miller's influence, without a substantial "plus" portion to make up for the gap.

Lego Movie 2 fills that gap.

In terms of special effects and digital wizardry, *Lego Movie 2* doesn't necessarily push the technological limits. Which is fine by me. Like in the first film, this sequel tempers its

CGI with janky frame-rate interruptions so that the results look like a classic stop-motion adventure. Instead of pushing next-generation, uh, Lego rendering, *Lego Movie 2* simply ups the ante for sweeping views full of immaculately constructed brick buildings and thousands of organically choreographed mini-figs. The whole thing still looks cute in the kind of way that melts away so that you can focus on front-and-center characters and their sight gags.

This song's gonna get…

And, yes, there's another catchy song. (Its inclusion is itself a delightful meta-universe joke, at that.) But the original film's song mantra, that "everything is awesome," also gets turned on its head, and even typing that out has me welling up with emotion. I'm not going to lie: everything in my home country of the United States has not been awesome since the last *Lego Movie* came out, and that fact isn't lost on children and families who have to look at headlines and reckon with bizarre fallout in ways that can be pretty traumatic.

Somehow, some-freakin'-how, *Lego Movie 2* focuses its story on troubled, optimistic characters in a fantasy, PG-rated universe—and *still* anchors its resolutions and moral message on overcoming such omnipresent dread, no matter what age you are. It's a film about surviving the modern political era without mentioning a single politician or current event by name. They just don't teach masterful tactics like that in creative-writing class. Bravo, Lord, Miller, and co.

All of it—the laughs, the breakneck pace, the feeling of hope I can draw from whenever I think about this film's message—make this the most no-brainer recommendation for a film I've seen in years. Run your little mini-fig legs to a theater as soon as you can to see *The Lego Movie 2*.

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