Kingdom mixes zombie outbreak with political intrigue in winning combo

Enlarge / Not your typical “Romero” zombies: the undead in *Kingdom* turn fast, move fast, and seem to only come out at night.
YouTube/Netflix

reader comments

17 with 15 posters participating

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A disgraced crown prince in medieval Korea must outsmart a power-hungry rival clan and battle a zombie outbreak before it wipes out the country in *Kingdom*, a genuinely thrilling new period drama from Netflix. It’s based on a popular South Korean webcomic, *Kingdom of the Gods* by Kim Eun-hee, who also adapted it for television.

(Mild spoilers below.)

The series is set in Korea’s Joeson period, a medieval dynasty that lasted some 500 years (1392-1897). The current king has been ill with smallpox (supposedly) and confined to his palace, with only his physicians, royal guards, and young pregnant wife, Queen Cho (Kim Hye-jun), allowed to see him. Not even the king’s only son and heir, Crown Prince Lee Chang (Ju Ji-hoon) has seen his father in the last 10 days, and there are rumors that the king has died, with all the civil unrest that entails.

We learn from the opening credits and pilot that the king is being kept *technically* alive by artificial means—in this case a "resurrection plant" brought by the visiting physician, Lee Seung-Hui, that transforms the king into a flesh-craving undead beast. The term "zombie" is never used, but that's clearly what we're dealing with here. It's purely for political gain. The queen's father, Cho Hak-ju, heads up the Haewon Cho clan, who have been gradually eroding the king's power and influence with an eye toward replacing the crown prince (born to a concubine) with a legitimate heir—assuming the queen gives birth to a son.

The suspicious crown prince heads out to the provinces to find out what the physician did to his father, accompanied by a loyal servant, Mu-Yeung (Kim Sang-ho). He's also being framed for treason by the Cho clan, so it's as good a time as any to leave the palace.

- A pregnant Queen Cho (Kim Hye-jun), stepmother to the crown prince, seeks to disinherit him.
  YouTube/Netflix
- The head of the Cho clan, Cho Hak-ju (Ryu Seung-ryong), seeks to usurp the throne.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Who can say how many bodies Cho Hak-ju has dropped in the pond?
  YouTube/Netflix
- Seo-bi (Bae Doo-na) is a nurse at a village hospital when the first outbreak occurs.
  YouTube/Netflix
- The corpse of a young man who died under mysterious circumstances shows up in a village.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Sometimes the dead don't stay dead.
  YouTube/Netflix
- You really don't want to grab a zombie's attention.
  YouTube/Netflix

- A nurse at the hospital is overwhelmed by the undead corpses of the afflicted.
  YouTube/Netflix
- More zombies about to rise.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Preparing to fend off a horde of the undead.
  YouTube/Netflix
- The crown prince (Ju Ji-Hoon) defends his people with flaming arrows.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Mu-Yeung (Kim Sang-ho) is a loyal aide to the crown prince.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Yeong-sin is way better with a rifle than he should be—which makes him a valuable ally.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Beom-Pal (Jon Seok-ho) is a local magistrate who is dubious about the threat of plague.
  YouTube/Netflix
- There's a strange ruckus coming from inside the boat's hold.
  YouTube/Netflix
- A quarantine might be a sensible strategy, but tell that to those struggling to survive.
  YouTube/Netflix
- A master in a mountain village might know the secret to defeating the plague.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Heavy is the head that may one day wear the crown.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Queen Cho consolidates her power.
  YouTube/Netflix

Naturally, the king's "affliction" soon spreads. The zombie king kills the physician's young assistant, and the body is brought back to his clinic in the remote village of Dongnae, where the people are starving. One of the patients, a former

soldier named Yeong-Sin, makes a meaty stew with the dead man's body and serves it to the unsuspecting patients, who wolf it down. The head nurse, Seo-bi (Bae Doo-na) is horrified to find that this turns all of them into flesh-eating monsters, along with anyone they bite.

These zombies have more in common with those in *World War Z* than classic Romero movies: they turn fast, they can move fast, and for some reason, they only seem to rise at night. Decapitation is the best way to kill them, although fire seems to be effective, too. Seo-bi and Yeong-Sin didn't eat the stew, so they don't turn. They just have to figure out how to fight off a zombie horde and keep the disease from spreading to more heavily populated towns—with the help of the crown prince and anyone else who manages to survive. But that's easier said than done with a zombie plague.

Writer Kim Eun-Hee has said that he originally planned to adapt his webcomic into a "webtoon," where the crown prince would be much younger, but he seems pleased with how this fleshed-out, live-action drama turned out. The production values are stunning, bringing the historical period to life in rich detail, although doing so pushed the series well over budget and beyond the planned four-month production period. Each of the six episodes (there were originally supposed to be eight) cost roughly $1.78 million to make, according to *Variety*, and I think it was well worth the investment.

Plot-wise, it's a juggernaut, with plenty of sword-play, suspense, and hints of comic relief. *Kingdom* ends with one heck of a cliffhanger, but fortunately season 2 is already in the works, with production slated to begin next month. Hopefully we won't have to wait too long to find out what happens next.

[embedded content]
Trailer for Netflix's original series *Kingdom*.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1446999

Chris Pine shines bright in TNT’s new crime/noir drama I Am the Night

Enlarge / Fauna Hodel (India Eisley) and journalist Jay Singletary (Chris Pine) team up to track down Fauna’s birth mother.

reader comments

5 with 5 posters participating

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A burnt-out journalist and an innocent teenage girl find themselves drawn into a web of murderous intrigue in *I Am the Night*, a moody, atmospheric miniseries from TNT that owes much of its tone to classic LA *noir*—and part of its plot, namely, to the infamous Black Dahlia murder. But anyone hoping for another lurid rehashing of that still-unsolved crime might be disappointed. *I Am the Night* is as much about race, personal identity, and facing down one’s demons.

(Mild spoilers for pilot episode below.)

Chris Pine (*Wonder Woman, Outlaw King*) shines here as Jay Singletary, a former Marine with PTSD who now scrapes out a dissolute living as a tabloid paparazzo. He used to be a legit journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* before his coverage of a 1949 indecency trial ended his career. A prominent real-life physician named George Hodel (Jefferson Mays, *The Americans*)

was accused of molesting his teenaged daughter and suspected of having committed the Black Dahlia murder. Thanks to Hodel's powerful, well-connected friends, he was acquitted in the former and never charged with the latter.

> *"Some stories don't want to be told. Some stories will eat you alive."*

Jay is seeking redemption of sorts by tracking down Hodel's now-grown daughter, Tamar, for a follow-up story, hoping to prove the doctor's guilt once and for all. "Some stories don't want to be told," Jay's long-suffering editor, Pete Sullivan (Leland Orser, *Berlin Station*), warns. "Some stories will eat you alive." He would prefer Jay focus on the recent "Bloody Romeo" murder of a young woman.

Eventually, Jay crosses paths with 16-year-old Fauna Hodel (India Eisley, *Underworld Awakening*), who has just arrived in LA after discovering she is George Hodel's granddaughter. She's been raised as Patricia Greenway in Sparks, Nevada, with a black family, and much of her story arc centers on trying to find her place as a mixed-race woman in a deeply segregated world. That involves getting to know her wealthy white biological family and hopefully tracking down her biological mother, the long-missing Tamar.

It might be surprising to see director Patty Jenkins returning to the small screen after her blockbuster success with *Wonder Woman*, especially since she had to juggle making the miniseries around working on the sequel, *Wonder Woman 1984*. Jenkins told the *Los Angeles Times* recently about meeting the real Fauna Hodel years ago and reading her 2008 memoir, *One Day She'll Darken*. (Jenkins' husband, Sam Sheridan is one of the screenwriters who adapted Hodel's book for *I Am the Night*.) Then Pine heard the story and told Jenkins, "You have to do that story. That story's incredible!" He soon signed on to play Singletary, and here we are.

Longing to belong

- The Black Dahlia murder of 1947 has never been solved.
- Fauna Hodel (India Eisley) encounters a stranger at a bus stop, en route to Los Angeles.
- The mixed-race Fauna feels isolated from both white and black communities.
- Jefferson Mays plays George Hodel, a creepy Hollywood gynecologist with a dark secret or two.
- Editor Peter Sullivan (Leland Orser) tries to warn off journalist Jay Singletary (Chris Pine) from pursuing George Hodel.
- Haunted by the 1949 story that ruined his career, Jay just can’t let it go.
- Connie Nielsen plays Corinna Hodel, George’s ex-wife.
- Corinna Hodel welcomes Fauna to her home.
- Golden Brooks plays Jimmy Lee Greenway, Fauna’s adoptive mother.
- Sepp (Dylan Smith) is a lackey for George Hodel.
- A page from history: the infamous Watts riots of August 1965 provide a backdrop to the main plot.

The Black Dahlia case is one of the most gruesome unsolved murders in American history. On January 15, 1947, the mutilated body of a young woman was found in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. The resident who discovered the body initially thought it was a mannequin, because it was severed at the waist into two pieces, with the lower half posed about a foot away from the upper half. (The crime scene photos are graphic and not for the faint of heart.) Chunks of flesh had been stripped away, the victim’s face was slashed from the corners of her mouth to her ears, and her intestines were neatly tucked under the body.

The body was soon identified as that of 22-year-old aspiring actress Elizabeth Short. An autopsy showed evidence that Short had been restrained prior to her death, possibly raped, and

likely died from loss of blood. Mercifully, the worst mutilation occurred after death. But the severing of her body had been done with a surgical precision—there's only one spot on the body where this can be done without breaking bones—prompting speculation that the culprit had medical training. There was little forensic evidence otherwise, just a boot print at the scene and a bloodstained cement sack that may have been used to transport the body.

The LAPD launched a massive investigation that yielded almost 150 suspects, but no arrests were ever made. Countless books written since then claim to have solved the Black Dahlia case. One of the most notable was written in 2003 by Steve Hodel, a former LAPD detective and the son of the LAPD's prime suspect: George Hill Hodel Jr., a wealthy Hollywood physician who was also suspected of having murdered his secretary. Steve Hodel put together a strong circumstantial case for his father's guilt, but that's not the same thing as definitive proof.

Still, the LAPD found a nude photo of Short in Hodel's personal effects, suggesting she may have been one of his girlfriends. And a file on Hodel and the Black Dahlia murder unearthed in 2004 by the LA District Attorney's Office revealed the LAPD had bugged the doctor's private residence and had been preparing to charge him with murder in 1950, when Hodel fled the country for China. He died in 1999.

Family values

- Fauna wants to get to know her biological family.
- Fauna's curiosity could lead her into danger.
- Fauna finds herself at a very strange "Happening"
- Creepy masks are a common theme.
- A debauched party *chez* Hodel: Hollywood's famous Sowden House.
- Hodel clearly has his kinky side.
- Who is this creepy masked beast?

- Jay comes to a shocking realization.

The Black Dahlia story inspired and informs *I Am the Night*, but the infamous cold case is only referenced briefly here and there, with no long flashback sequences to reveal sensational details. The show assumes the allegations against George Hodel are true, and it focuses on the personal implications of that over 15 years later for Fauna and Singletary, whose lives were both indelibly marked in different ways by those events.

Jenkins' well-known attention to detail pays off spectacularly for *I Am the Night*. Apart from the period-accurate costuming, set design, and music, many of the historical details are intact. Jay Singletary is a fictional character, but the *Los Angeles Examiner* was a real tabloid that resorted to some shady tactics to get the scoop on Short's family background when news of the murder broke. The real George Hodel lived in the famous Sowden House in Hollywood, designed by Lloyd Wright (son of Frank Lloyd Wright), and it provides a sumptuous backdrop for decadent parties in the miniseries. Hodel really was tried in 1949 for molesting his 14-year-old daughter Tamar and was acquitted.

Even the fictional Hodel's love for surreal modern art has some basis in reality: Steve Hodel wrote that his father's fascination with Man Ray (particularly the photographs *Les Amoureux* and *Minotaur*) may have been an inspiration for the crime. That's pure speculation, but the fact that Jenkins weaves those tiny details into her narrative fabric (there's also a brief nod to Man Ray's *Ingre's Violin*) is a testament to her skill as a director.

Pine is a gifted actor who built his career playing (mostly) noble heroes and the occasional charming rake, and portraying the tormented, rather seedy Singletary really gives him a chance to show off his range. He's helped by an equally gifted cast, including Eisley, who brings just the right note of tough vulnerability to Fauna. Jenkins takes her time setting

things in motion, and that patience mostly pays off in the end. The real Fauna Hodel was diagnosed with cancer and tragically died just before the miniseries began filming in 2017. But I'd like to think she'd be pleased with how *I Am the Night* treated her story.

I Am the Night airs Monday nights on TNT through March 4, 2019.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447783

Should PC games cost less on Epic's Games Store?

Aurich / Various Games

reader comments

162 with 82 posters participating, including story author

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Yesterday's news that Deep Silver's *Metro Exodus* is moving from Steam to Epic's Games Store was notable for what it says about Valve's position running PC gaming's dominant online storefront. But for consumers, it was perhaps more notable for the impact it had on the game's pricing.

If you pre-ordered *Metro Exodus* though Steam before yesterday, you paid $60 (and will still receive that preorder on Steam). If you preorder the game today on the Epic Games Store or buy

it there after its February 15 launch, you'll pay just $50.

And yet despite that price reduction, Deep Silver will be actually make *more* money per sale from the Epic Games Store than it did from Steam. The 88 percent revenue share Epic offers on a $50 sale ($44) is more lucrative than the 70 percent revenue share Valve offers on a $60 sale ($42; though that number goes up a bit after $10 million in sales).

Passing the savings on

Somewhat more surprising is the fact that *Metro Exodus* is the first game to effectively pass on the savings from Epic's favorable revenue-sharing terms to the consumer. As of this writing, the rest of the limited selection of games available on both the Epic Games Store and Steam all list the same developer-set price on both platforms (save those that Epic temporarily offers for free on a rotating basis).

That's not how pricing often works in the world of traditional consumer goods. There, retailers usually end up paying a standard wholesale price to the manufacturer, then marking up that price to cover their costs. A smaller retailer markup means that the store can offer lower prices to attract more customers (yes, there are often confounding factors involving bulk orders and MSRP enforcement, but indulge me).

Imagine if the same wholesale logic applied in current online game sales. Say a publisher wanted to make $10 "wholesale" every time it sold a copy of its game, regardless of the online storefront. Taking the "retail markup" (i.e., revenue-sharing percentages) into account, that game would end up costing $11.36 on the Epic Games Store and $14.28 on Steam. On the Discord Store, which gives publishers 90 percent of all sales, the game would only cost $11.11. Buying directly from the publisher's website, players could pay just $10.

Prove your worth

Those lower prices might not be enough to entice players away from the higher-priced Steam version, of course. Many players like having their game libraries and friends lists centralized in one place. The Steam app also offers features that aren't yet matched by all other game launchers, from easy screenshot sharing to robust forum communities to a built-in music player.

Valve argued as recently as November that "the value of a large network like Steam has many benefits that are contributed to and shared by all the participants." The company was talking about attracting developers to the platform, but the same could be said from the player's point of view as well.

If those network effects and exclusive features are really important to Steam users, they'll be willing to pay the additional markup imposed by Steam. If they aren't, other stores should be willing and able to undercut Steam's costs to attract new customers. In any case, the retailers would have to earn the value of their markup compared to other options.

Try it on for size

Game makers will charge what the market will bear for their games, of course. It's hard to fault the publishers on the Epic Games Store for trying to keep prices level and pocket the additional share of revenue that Epic is offering.

At the same time, I can't help but wonder if publishers wouldn't benefit from lowering costs to reflect their increased cut. Evidence from Valve's annual sales show that discounting a game's price even slightly can have a marked effect on sales volume, which could more than make up for the lower per-sale margin.

Deep Silver obviously sees the value in trying out a new pricing scheme in Epic's new, lower-markup world. Then again, Deep Silver has the benefit of being one of those select games sold exclusively on the Epic Games Store. Epic's Tim Sweeney told Ars last month that the company would "sometimes fund developers to release games exclusively through the store." Neither Epic nor Deep Silver would comment on whether such a deal was in place for *Metro Exodus*, but we can only assume that the publisher has a bit of an Epic-backed financial cushion behind its new pricing experiment.

Regardless, we can only hope other publishers will try lowering prices in proportion to the lower costs imposed by new digital storefronts. It's a move that could benefit game makers, players, and the online gaming ecosystem all at once.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447913

Game retailer GameStop says it can't sell itself, sees stock dive 27%

reader comments

115 with 83 posters participating

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International gaming retail chain GameStop announced on

Tuesday that one major save-the-company decision—to find a private buyer for the company and its subsidiaries—had been called off.

The announcement ushered in the public company's largest stock-value dip in over 10 years, seeing it plummet in one day from $15.49 to (as of press time) $11.28—a dive of roughly 27 percent.

The Texas-based gaming retailer had been linked to acquisition rumors, as *The Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this month that multiple private equity firms had been circling GameStop—and its subsidiaries, including the merch-focused ThinkGeek and the gaming magazine *Game Informer*. That report had suggested a deal might close by mid-February.

However, Tuesday's statement indicated that prospective deals fell through "due to the lack of available financing on terms that would be commercially acceptable to a prospective acquirer." The rest of the statement offers little clear hint of the company's next steps beyond pumping the cash from a recent subsidiary sale into options such as "reducing the company's outstanding debt, funding share repurchases, or reinvesting in core video game and collectibles businesses to drive growth."

GameStop had already hinted at drastic action in calls to investors over the past year. The company had failed to satisfy growth-hungry investors in spite of its attempts to expand and diversify its used- and gaming-products sales reach with the acquisition of chains like Spring Wireless and SimplyMac. GameStop concluded its sale of Spring Wireless earlier this month for over $700 million, but even that didn't jumpstart investors' hopes. This month's stock high of $15.93 is well short of its 2013 peak of over $46.

The gaming retailer, which emerged from the squished-together remains of Babbage's, Software Etc., and FuncoLand in 2000,

became a publicly traded company two years later. When it swallowed up EB Games in 2005, GameStop become arguably the biggest gaming retailer in the world. In the years since, the company has been bullish about creative solutions to plummeting used-game sales, mostly in the form of retail-chain acquisitions. But one of its biggest attempts—becoming its own game publisher—has fizzled with the low-performing likes of *Has-Been Heroes* and *Song of the Deep*.

In December, the company informed investors that it expected to miss expectations for its Q4 2018 report due to "underperformance of certain titles, weakness in pre-owned and recent sales promotions," and a sales skew toward hardware that the company hadn't anticipated.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447871

Nvidia CEO warns of "extraordinary, unusually turbulent, disappointing" Q4

Enlarge / Nvidia's RTX 2080Ti launched in September 2018 at an MSRP of $1,199. Nvidia's latest financial estimates indicate that this thing didn't exactly fly off of store shelves.

reader comments

90 with 68 posters participating, including story author

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On Monday, Nvidia took the unusual step of offering a revised Q4 2019 financial estimate ahead of its scheduled disclosure on February 14. The reason: Nvidia had already predicted low revenue numbers, and the hardware producer is already confident that its low estimate was *still* too high.

The original quarterly revenue estimate of $2.7 billion has since dropped to $2.2 billion, a change of roughly 19 percent. A few new data points factor into that revision. The biggest consumer-facing issue, according to Nvidia, is “lower than expected” sales of its RTX line of new graphics cards. This series, full of proprietary technologies like a dedicated raytracing processor, kicked off in September 2018 with the $1,199 RTX 2080 Ti and the $799 RTX 2080.

“These products deliver a revolutionary leap in performance and innovation with real-time raytracing and AI, but some customers may have delayed their purchase while waiting for lower price points and further demonstrations of RTX technology in actual games,” Nvidia said in a statement. As of press time, only one retail game, *Battlefield V*, has tapped into the RTX-only raytracing system.

Nvidia’s work on server-side and datacenter technologies also appears to factor into the revised estimate. In a letter to shareholders, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang pointed to “economic uncertainties” and “a number of deals [that] did not close in the last month of the quarter” as driving factors for reduced estimates in a sector that he admits is already unpredictable by default. Huang cited a “sharply decelerating” global economy, particularly in China, as well.

These pitfalls came in addition to a factor that Nvidia had already recognized as a driver for reduced revenue: a dive in cryptocurrency demand and, thus, a plunge in sales from eager cryptocurrency miners. That “excess mid-range channel

inventory” was in line with Nvidia’s expectations, the statement said.

Huang went so far as to call Q4 2019 “an extraordinary, unusually turbulent, and disappointing quarter,” though he did so after listing a number of initiatives that he believes will drive increased revenue going forward, including: the launch of the $349 RTX 2060 graphics card; a new wave of RTX-powered laptops, which combine the company’s increasingly mobile-friendly products with more RTX perks; and increased functionality for its datacenter products, including “deep learning inference, data analytics, and machine learning,” to satisfy more AI-hungry enterprise customers.

This revision comes ahead of consumer GPU rival AMD’s launch of the Radeon VII, a 7nm-process graphics card coming to stores on February 7 for $699.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447455

Apple hopes to offer a Netflix-like subscription service for games, report claims

reader comments

51 with 41 posters participating, including story author

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- *Old Man's Journey*, a popular premium mobile game on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon
- *Alto's Odyssey* on an iPhone 7.
  Samuel Axon
- The main gameplay view in *Civilization VI* on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon
- *Cat Quest* on an iPhone XS.
  Samuel Axon
- *Battleheart 2* on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon
- *Stardew Valley* on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon
- *Galaxy of Pen and Paper* on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon
- *Alien: Blackout*, a follow-up to *Alien Isolation*, on the iPhone.
  Samuel Axon

Apple's push to focus more on software services may extend to games, according to a report by Cheddar. The report cites five people familiar with the matter who claim that Apple has been talking to game developers about bringing games into a subscription bundle, and it cites two people who say Apple is also exploring the possibility of launching a game-publishing arm.

The sources said that Apple was talking with developers about its plans in the second half of 2018. No details were provided about the nature of the service or what kinds of games would be included. It's difficult to imagine an elegant way of including free-to-play games, which make money through in-app-purchases for game-related services and add-on content, in a paid subscription package.

But while games with that model are prominent on Apple's iOS

App Store, there are still several popular and critically acclaimed games with an up-front cost model—*Alto's Odyssey*, *Civilization VI*, *Galaxy of Pen and Paper*, *Stardew Valley*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Cat Quest*, *Alien: Blackout*, *Battleheart 2*, and *Old Man's Journey*, to name just a few.

Many mobile game developers I've spoken with have told me that their games live or die by whether they receive a featured spot on the App Store, and that's decided exclusively by Apple.

The importance of a spot in the App Store is especially true for paid games as opposed to free-to-play games. That's because free-to-play games are a better fit for the alternative or additive path of driving user acquisition and revenue with advertising on platforms like Facebook. Paid games tend to sell for only a couple of dollars, and that means the average lifetime value of a player is less than the cost of attracting that player through advertising. On the other hand, players who spend dozens or even hundreds of dollars on in-app purchases in free-to-play games are spending enough to justify the user-acquisition cost.

All this is to say that Apple could create real value for the games it publishes simply because it owns the platform and can promote those games in a way that ensures their success.

As we've reported many times before, Apple is seeking aggressive expansion in the services part of its business, which includes the App Store, software subscriptions, iCloud, AppleCare, and Apple Music, among other things. It had previously met with iOS software developers to pitch them the idea of launching their own subscription services for powerful productivity apps and the like, and it plans to launch a Netflix competitor for streaming TV and movie content in the near future.

iOS is one of the world's most vibrant gaming platforms, but

Apple’s other platforms like the Mac and the Apple TV have floundered for game players. Consensus in those ecosystems is that Apple has simply not made games on those platforms a big enough priority. That could improve on the Mac, at least, with Marzipan, an internal project at Apple that seeks to make it easier for app developers to make games that work on both iPhones and Macs. A subscription service that would give players access to popular, premium games that work on both their phones and laptops could make Apple platforms more attractive for players.

Listing image by Samuel Axon

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447323

Epic Games Store snags Metro Exodus away from Steam [Updated]

Enlarge / A screen from *Metro: Exodus* or an artist’s conception of Steam’s future storefront if there trends continue?

reader comments

255 with 129 posters participating, including story author

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Epic Games and Deep Silver announced today that the PC version

of *Metro Exodus* will be downloadable exclusively through Epic's recently launched Game Store starting February 15.

Deep Silver CEO Klemens Kundratitz specifically cited "Epic's generous revenue terms" in his reveal, which gives the game maker 88 percent of all revenue (compared to the industry-standard 70 percent on most other PC storefronts). That revenue-sharing system is "a game changer that will allow publishers to invest more into content creation, or pass on savings to the players," Kundratitz said. "By teaming up with Epic we will be able to invest more into the future of Metro and our ongoing partnership with series developer 4A Games, to the benefit of our Metro fans."

As of this writing Monday morning, *Metro Exodus* is still listed on Steam and available for preorder on the service, as it has been since August. The Steam version is listed for $60, though, $10 more than the Deep Silver says the game will sell for on Epic's storefront. Deep Silver says it will honor any players who pre-ordered the game from outside the Epic Games Store "will receive their game as expected."

[**Update:** The *Metro Exodus* Steam page now notes that the game will be removed from Steam "later today… due to a publisher decision to make the game exclusive to another PC store. The developer and publisher have assured us that all prior sales of the game on Steam will be fulfilled on Steam, and Steam owners will be able to access the game and any future updates or DLC through Steam."

"We think the decision to remove the game is unfair to Steam customers," the statement continues. "Especially after a long pre-sale period. We apologize to Steam customers that were expecting it to be available for sale through the February 15th release date, but we were only recently informed of the decision and given limited time to let everyone know."]

Deep Silver's move is the latest blow to Steam's de facto

position as the predominant distribution platform for PC games. Previous *Metro* games have been downloaded by millions of players on Steam, according to estimates from Steam Spy's tracking algorithm.

Earlier this month, Ubisoft's *The Division 2* became the first big-budget game from a major publisher to abandon Steam for Epic's storefront. A handful of indie titles, like Supergiant's *Hades*, have also gone exclusively with Epic's storefront since its December launch.

Just before Epic announced its store, Valve changed its own revenue-sharing terms to be more generous to games that generate at least $10 million in revenue. But Valve's revenue sharing still tops out at 80 percent for sales past $50 million, which is less generous than Epic's baseline 88 percent share on all sales.

Discord announced last month that it would begin offering developers on its Discord Store platform 90 percent of all revenue from listed games.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447217

Fortnite puts an end to random loot box purchases

Enlarge / What… what are you doing with that hammer?

reader comments

42 with 37 posters participating, including story author

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Video game loot boxes

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Epic Games is getting rid of *Fortnite*‘s version of paid, randomized loot boxes with its next update. As of the upcoming Patch 7.30, “Save the World” mode’s usual daily randomized offering of a “V-Bucks Llama” will be replaced with a new “X-Ray Llama,” which has its contents visible before you buy it.

Players can either purchase those items for 50 V-Bucks (roughly 50 cents, depending on bulk purchase) or wait for the Llama selection to refresh the next day. Similar item-filled llamas earned solely through gameplay will still hold random items. *Fortnite*‘s more popular Battle Royale mode does not use paid randomized loot boxes.

“We believe it’s important that the Llamas you buy have what you want, and that you can earn awesome items just for logging in and playing,” Epic said in a blog post announcing the move over the weekend.

Despite Epic’s framing the decision as a matter of its “beliefs,” outside pressure may have had just as much to do with the company’s change of heart here. Randomized loot boxes are now considered illegal gambling in Belgium and the Netherlands, forcing other developers to change their games to operate in those regions (though EA is currently defying that decision in Belgium). Gambling regulators in 15 countries and Washington state have also joined together to put pressure on game makers that use the randomized item distribution method,

and the FTC has pledged to investigate the practice in the US. In the face of this pressure (and general fan backlash), games like *Destiny 2* and *Middle Earth: Shadow of War* have turned off paid random loot boxes completely in the past year. Now that the most popular game in the world is turning away from the practice, maybe we'll see that trend spread even farther.https://arstechnica.com/?p=1447197

Hayao Miyazaki doc: An analog animation master finds new technical challenges

reader comments

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The trailer for *Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki*
If the name Hayao Miyazaki means anything to you, new documentary *Never-Ending Man* will, too. The film provides a pretty intimate, charming portrayal of the legendary animator from the announcement of his retirement (September 2013) through much of the production on *Boro The Caterpillar,* Miyazaki's first film done entirely with CGI (that short film debuted last year).

Throughout a short hour-ish run time, this documentary

maintains a very narrow focus. *Never-Ending Man* really only consists of footage of Miyazaki at home or at the studio, and it relies solely on interviews directly with the man or with collaborators on this project. The approach allows viewers to draw their own conclusions about why this work remains great and what makes Miyazaki tick rather than having any longtime observers or contemporaries spell such things out.

Even at this age (in his 70s), Miyazaki has an incredible dedication to detail, for instance. To make a less-than-15-minute short about a caterpillar, he's putting insects under a microscope and working through several hand-drawn interactions before anything shows up on a computer screen. In early film footage showing pre-CGI life at Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki stands over young illustrator shoulders and offers nuanced feedback: "It's important to draw full human beings, you're drawing people not characters," he tells them, soon offering slight critiques on a character's running form or how they hold a bundled up blanket. Later when working with CGI, Miyazaki may not understand or have comfort with the tools and medium, but he continues to share similarly micro observations. "The turning motion is too adult like," he says, watching an early render of Boro looking around his landscape. "Babies don't turn their heads so sharply."

Miyazaki seems to know he's a throwback and never shies away from this—he smokes cigarettes still and insists initially on having the background landscape for *Boro* drawn by hand—but what makes him an all-time great is perhaps the man's desire to make contemporary work, things that take advantage of all these new techniques and abilities, in spite of those urges. "You think CGI offers new possibilities? That's not it," he says when asked why bother when fans would inevitably turn out for more of his previous stuff. "I have ideas I may not be able to draw by hand, and this may be a way to do it—that's my hope. It's a new technology."

This challenge clearly energized the creator. Colleagues joke

Miyazaki seems to be siphoning energy from the young people around him given the age difference with all the CGI animators. *Never-Ending Man* director Kaku Arakawa even observed physical changes in the animator: according to the film's linear notes, Miyazaki started drawing Boro with very soft pencils (6B) "to compensate for his weakened grip." Over time, "as he got fired up making the CG animation and got absorbed in creating the short, he was drawing with 2B pencils again without realizing it… Mr. Miyazaki was embarrassed to admit it and exclaimed, 'It's not that easy to regain strength!'"

- The animation legend, Hayao Miyazaki. (Spoiler: He does it.)
  Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS
- Want to draw a caterpillar? Probably should observe one, first. "I can't draw a caterpillar with a pencil," Miyazaki says. "So i'll turn to CGI."
  Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS
- Young Hayao Miyazaki from the new documentary, *Never-Ending Man*
  Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS
- Early proof of concepts for Boro, the subject of Miyazaki's first CGI-animated short.
  Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS
- A still from the final product
- Miyazaki won't be abandoning his pencil and paper anytime soon, but he willingly tinkers with Wacom tablets and similar tech.
  Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS

This film clearly has long-time fans in mind. *Never-Ending Man* doesn't spend much time at all catching viewers up on who Hayao Miyazaki is, how he's built his career, or what impact his films made. Such history seems contained to few short film clips and a sequence with Miyazaki flipping through old scrapbooks while acknowledging how fortunate he was in

retrospect that his deeply personal ideas and tastes found larger popularity ("If we tried to please, we'd be forgotten," he says). For someone who's only seen a few of the big works (*My Neighbor Totoro, Howl's Moving Castle*), the film leaves you wanting a bit more historical and outside perspective. It's easy to imagine a documentary that does better to contextualize the obvious legacy here in a way something like last year's *Gilbert,* on raunchy comedian Gilbert Gottfried, did for watchers who know the name but not the whole story.

That said, this film still works as a small portrait of an all-time great still seeking a new challenge, a study of someone anxious to know whether the abilities and ideas that garnered such acclaim can work in what's admittedly a new playing field. *Never-Ending Man* never comes out and says this, but the documentary continuously hints that technology has changed animation forever and may one day render the very thing that made Miyazaki—his unparalleled ability to translate the ideas in his head to paper through impeccable artistic skill—useless. Late in the film, for example, someone's pitching Miyazaki on AI-enabled animation that will be able to emulate human painting within the next decade.

"We can't stop CGI from taking over animated films," Miyazaki says early in *Never-Ending Man.* He's sketching out the lush world for *Boro,* coming to terms with this new reality for his beloved medium. "I did such a detailed layout not because I don't trust them, but I want them to create something even better."

Maybe CGI ultimately will win out—*Boro* debuted to much fanfare, and certainly studios like Pixar have become the premier names in animation today. But analog illustration offers something different even if the process itself isn't as efficient, and it's hard to imagine admiration for that ever totally evaporating. After all, while you may be able to find *Never-Ending Man* playing nearby, you're perhaps even more likely to find *Totoro* or *Howl's Moving Castle,* too.

Director Kaku Arakawa's Never-Ending Man was made in 2016, but it didn't receive a US theatrical release until December of last year. Screenings can still be found in select cities.

Listing image by Kaku Arakawa / GKIDS

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The Good Place lands a punch to the gut in S3 finale with yet another reset

Enlarge / Kristen Bell plays Eleanor Shellstrop, a former "Arizona trash bag" of a human being trying to become a better person in the afterlife.

reader comments

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After wowing audiences for two pitch-perfect seasons, season 3 of *The Good Place* got off to an uncharacteristically bumpy start. But even a less-than-perfect *The Good Place* is still a delight, and later episodes recaptured the magic that earned the series a spot on the Ars list of our favorite TV shows of 2018. The season 3 finale gave us yet another reboot to the basic premise, and it broke a few hearts in the process.

(Spoilers for first three seasons of *The Good Place* below.)

The Good Place has always kept us guessing, from the pilot episode in which Eleanor (Kristen Bell) realizes she's been admitted to paradise by mistake, to that shocking twist in the Season 1 finale that turned the original premise on its head.

Amid the usual hilarious hijinks—can we ever forget Michael's (Ted Danson) brilliant-but-bloody simulation of the Trolley Problem?—season 2 dug deep into the question of whether it is possible for a damned soul to become a better person after death, via the study of moral philosophy. Name one other sitcom that features classroom lectures on Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, and T.M. Scanlon's seminal text *What We Owe Each Other*.

That season ended with another radical reset: Judge Gen (Maya Rudolph) gives Eleanor, Chidi (William Jackson Harper), Tahani (Jameela Jamil), and Jason (Manny Jacinto) one more chance to become better people on Earth.

So demon-turned-human-ally Michael is allowed to head to Earth and save Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason from their ignominious original deaths. Eleanor and the others all really did *try* to become better people at first, but 21st century life is complicated and humans are fallible. A frustrated Michael broke the Judge's rules and intervened again, orchestrating events to bring the Fab Four back together in Sydney, Australia—ostensibly to study how a brush with death can change someone's behavior and thought processes. (Shout-out to Danson's many terrible disguises and bad accents to keep from being found out.)

- Back on Earth, Chidi (William Jackson Harper) forms a romantic attachment to his research partner, Simone (Kirby Howell-Baptiste).
  Justin Lubin/NBC
- The demon Trevor (Adam Scott) infiltrates the research group to sabotage the experiment and ensure the four

humans end up in the Bad Place.
Ron Batzdorff/NBC

- Tahani (Jameela Jamil) gets engaged to her former flame, the “lesser” Hemsworth brother, Larry (Ben Lawson).
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Chidi has a meltdown and turns $880 worth of candy into “chili” in his classroom.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Eleanor finds out her mother Donna (Leslie Grossman) is still alive and living in suburbia under an assumed name.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Tahani confronts her sister Kamilah (Rebecca Hazlewood) about their fractured, competitive relationship.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Jason (Manny Jacinto) tries to save his father, Donkey Doug (Mitch Narito), and BFF Pilboi (Eugene Cordero).
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Michael (Ted Danson) and Janet (D’Arcy Carden) visit Doug Forcett (Michael McKean), who has lived his entire life by the afterlife’s points system.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Jason teaches Chidi how to play “Jacksonville”-style pool.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Janet takes out the horde of demons come to kidnap the humans.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- The Soul Squad finally makes it to the Good Place—or at least the mailroom.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Stephen Merchant guest-stars as Head Accountant Neil.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- The humans are whisked off to Janet’s void, where they all take on the form of Janet.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Judge Gen (Maya Rudolph) hashes out a compromise

solution with Michael.
Colleen Hayes/NBC

- The demon Shawn (Marc Evan Jackson) and Michael tell the Soul Squad about their new compromise.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- The gang decides to recreate the original experiment in Mindy St. Clair's (Maribeth Monroe) Medium Place.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Janet's former boyfriend that she created on the rebound, Derek (Jason Mantzoukas) has come a long way under Mindy's tutelage.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Michael prepares to welcome four new residents.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Soulmates across multiple timelines: can Eleanor and Chidi find each other one more time?
Colleen Hayes/NBC

Bringing its main characters back to Earth was a bold move by the writers, and I initially had doubts the gamble would pay off. The first few episodes *were* a bit lackluster; Earth just isn't as interesting as the crazy surreal illogic of the show's brilliant conception of the afterlife. But I should have trusted there was a bigger plan. The "Soul Squad" (as they later dub themselves) soon learns the truth of their predicament, and the Earthbound experiment is technically over. They are doomed to go to the Bad Place when they die (again), per the Judge's terms. (Chidi's response is to have a meltdown in front of his class by making "chili" out of Peeps and candy, while summarizing virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology, and nihilism.)

Since they are doomed, the Soul Squad decides to try and save their wayward friends and families instead, helping them earn enough points to get to the Good Place. Along the way, Michael learns that no human has earned enough points to get into the Good Place for over 500 years and suspects the system is

rigged. (As always with *The Good Place*, the truth is a bit more complicated—and far more intriguing.)

In negotiations at the neutral Interdimensional Hole of Pancakes (IHOP), Michael convinces the Judge to repeat the original experiment of season 1 with four new mediocre humans, chosen by the Bad Place. The Soul Squad (now dead again and back in the afterlife) will be on hand to assist. But there's always a catch when the Bad Place gets involved, and this one is particularly heartbreaking for fans of the Eleanor-Chidi soulmate coupling. Chidi must be rebooted along with everything else, which will remove his memories of Eleanor.

> *It remains to be seen how much further the writers can take the show's premise.*

As always, there were several instant-classic moments, like Eleanor and Michael debating determinism and free will. When Janet (D'Arcy Carden) whisks everyone off to her void, they all take on her appearance, causing Eleanor to have an identity crisis and giving Chidi the perfect opportunity to pontificate on the philosophy of the self. (It's quite a performance from Carden, who must mimic each character's idiosyncrasies.) And how could we forget Michael's mind-bending mini-tutorial about how time isn't linear in the afterlife? Apparently it "doubles back and loops around," and the resulting timeline just happens to look like the signature of the name "Jeremy Bearimy." (The dot over the "i" is Tuesdays. And also July. And occasionally never.) "I don't know what to tell you," Michael says to the bemused crew. "That's the easiest way to describe it."

I'm 100 percent on board for season 4 now that the Soul Squad is back in the afterlife and we can get back to all the cheesy puns and comic absurdity of that eternal realm. (As a promo for the season's last few episodes, the show's YouTube channel live-streamed five hours of Janet in her Void, occasionally poofing away to do a task before returning.)

It remains to be seen how much further the writers can take the show’s premise. There’s only so many times you can reboot everything until it stops feeling fresh and daring and starts to feel ho-hum. But the writing is so fresh and the philosophical rumination so sharp and witty that I don’t foresee *The Good Place* losing any fans in the near future.

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Janet in her Void: What Actually Happens When *BING*
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