KeyForge: The red-hot card game where every deck is unique—and unchangeable

Charlie Theel

reader comments

44 with 33 posters participating

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As a concept, *KeyForge* is enthralling. The game is the latest effort from legendary *Magic: The Gathering* designer Richard Garfield—and the big idea here is that every sealed deck is unique. Decks are pre-constructed and can't be altered; there's no card chasing, and there's certainly no over-arching "meta" game that must be respected. This is a head-to-head two-player battler like no other.

The "unique" gimmick is great. The initial card pool numbers 370, and each 37-card deck you snag off the shelf consists of a completely one-of-a-kind mixture. This is accomplished via cryptic algorithms that govern deck construction. These 37 cards become *your* deck, your personalized slice of *KeyForge* that no one can take away. The bizarre naming conventions of each set only further the mystique and foster an emotional attachment to your cards.

Keys and vaults

Yes, there *is* a setting for *KeyForge,* but it's almost irrelevant. Your deck represents the followers and the

abilities of an Archon, an all-powerful being. These Archons live and die in the artificial world of the Crucible. This maelstrom is a ravaged place where champions scavenge keys in hope of unlocking hallowed vaults. So we battle as we always do.

Two unique concepts govern play. The first is that this design bucks the standard collectible card game (CCG) trend of attacking your opponent's life pool. You can still throw blows back and forth, but in *KeyForge* it's creatures defeating creatures as a means to slow an opponent's engine or to eke out an advantage. The way to victory lies in amassing precious Æmber.

You will excavate this resource by triggering effects and then reaping Æmber with creatures. In a clever twist, each creature can forego violence against an opponent to farm the golden fuel. This makes even the weakest of agents useful in pushing toward victory.

You must turn in six Æmber at the beginning of a turn if you want to forge a key—achieving victory if this key is your third. Garfield astutely focuses play around this simple "three key" goal, always nudging you forward and offering a

clear direction. It’s also a refreshing change of pace to swap out direct violence against opponents for a race with escalating tension.

The second unique component of *KeyForge* is the house system. Each deck includes cards from three of the game’s seven factions. You must choose to activate one of these houses on each turn, which restricts your ability to play cards. You will run into situations where your hand is jammed with Aliens, but you *really* want to activate that line of Brobnar creatures you deployed earlier. This is a simple and clean decision point with nuanced strategic implications.

You may play cards from the chosen house freely from your hand and without cost. Those cards deployed to the table in previous turns may also now be activated to attack other creatures or to reap Æmber. There’s a balance to be struck between playing free-wheeling action cards and maintaining a strong table state. Each deck approaches this balance from its own angle and results in some of the game’s more subtle considerations.

The house system naturally emphasizes card draw. This is an issue in the genre as a whole—random draw having a significant impact on results—so it’s somewhat unfair to single out *KeyForge*. Those moments of anguish when you get the “right” or “wrong” card form some of the most satisfying sequences of play. Even at its worst, this is a much more pleasant system than attempting to top-deck “land” over multiple rounds.

The use of three houses per deck, the randomly generated deck lists, and the volatile board state all produce a style of play that is very swingy. The entire affair can end in an explosive 10 minutes—or it can lag to 35 as you grind out each chunk of Æmber. By its very nature, *KeyForge* is an unpredictable experience.

- Some of the KeyForge tokens in the starter set.

- Check out the unique card names…
- The game in play on the table.
- A sample of the card selection.
- The full starter set next to a single deck.

Crucibles and minds

KeyForge is an extraordinarily solid game. Its buy-in is incredibly small, as you can toss ten bucks at a deck and then cobble together the necessary other components. The full "starter set" is a nice product, but its primary asset is a pile of tokens you can easily replicate from other games or with household items.

The hope here is clearly for this less expensive, less time-intensive system to gain widespread traction. It doesn't seem ludicrous to imagine running into fellow hobbyists at a convention and having everyone pull out a deck of cards that's uniquely theirs. If this notion is realized, then *KeyForge* will become a common language for the gaming community writ large. It could be to 2018 card gamers what *Settlers of Catan* was to 1995 board gamers.

This potential feels realistic due to the boundaries this game crosses. It should have wide appeal to those who have drifted from the CCG scene, burnt out on deck building and "keeping up." It's enticing to novices, since the rules are simple and cost is minor. The commitment is so small, in fact, that even those heavily invested in the competitive *Magic* or *Netrunner* scenes will likely give *KeyForge* a shot and play casually.

Beyond the broad appeal and interesting mechanisms, the most intriguing aspect of the game is the psychological element. That concept of a "unique and unchangeable deck" is fascinating. I quickly noticed that newcomers did not want to play with the two constructed teaching decks found in the starter set. They wanted to graduate to randomized card sets,

to get a feel for what they deemed “authentic” *KeyForge*.

It’s also a bit limiting. Having a pre-constructed deck where you can’t tinker with card lists or alter your collection does ease play and lower barriers, but it also means you may reach a point at which you have squeezed everything possible from your deck. You can’t then break it down to its elements and reconstruct a new legal deck—though you can purchase a new deck and repeat the process all over again. While games like *Magic* can be exhausting and expensive to keep up with, they do at least provide continued depth as you tweak your deck endlessly.

This all becomes even more complicated when you factor in the range of deck quality. The algorithm that generates *KeyForge* decks is supposed to balance them all, and while balance seems relatively stable across most builds, I have noticed decks focused on Dis and Shadow houses that seem… extremely formidable. This concern may take some time to shake out, as players discover strategies and counter-strategies, but it remains a concern about the system at its outset.

Yet for all of these worries, *KeyForge* clearly succeeds. The strongest asset of this new product approach is actualized in community. By this I mean that it’s a release that’s as exciting to *talk* about as it is to play. Trying to crack the rules of the algorithm and to compare unique experiences is at the heart of this game. It lives beyond the boundaries of play, and it promises to keep *KeyForge* going strong for months to come.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428647

Get your binge on: Season 3 of sci-fi gem Travelers is out now

Enlarge / *Travelers*.

reader comments

73 with 47 posters participating, including story author

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One of our favorite streaming shows of the last few years has been time-travel adventure *Travelers*.

The world of the future is in some ill-defined crisis, and the only way this can be averted is to send people back in time to make better decisions. But in a *Quantum Leap*-style twist, only people's consciousnesses can be sent back in time. To minimize disruption to the timelines, the mastermind of this plan, the Director, uses people who were just about to die as its targets, narrowly averting their deaths (at least most of the time) and allowing a traveler to resume their life.

Enlarge / The poster for *Travelers* S3.

Thousands of travelers have been sent back; the show follows a group led by *Will & Grace* star Eric McCormack. He's an FBI agent who originally toppled to his death down an elevator shaft. But now he's accompanied by, among others, an overdosing heroin addict, a woman beaten to death by her cop partner, and a woman who turned out to not really exist at all when the travelers discover her life story was a fabrication.

As well as the trials and tribulations of completing their difficult mission without breaking cover, the travelers discover that they're not the only people going back in time. A rival group from the future seems intent on derailing their plans, and in the second season, a renegade traveler gets in on the action, kidnapping people and generally laying waste to their plans. These difficulties are having ripples in time; the future that our travelers knew has already been substantially disrupted, putting their knowledge and past allegiances on shaky ground.

The first two seasons were aired in Canada before hitting

Netflix for worldwide distribution. The second season ended on a cliffhanger, with the future of the world—and the show itself—hanging in the balance. Luckily, eventually the show was recommissioned, and the resulting 10-episode third season is a Netflix exclusive. Netflix released it today, perfectly setting up the weekend for a good eight-hour binge. Is it time to clock out yet?

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428595

Discord Store to offer developers 90 percent of game revenues

Enlarge / Discord wants to attract more developers to its game store as it continues to expand beyond simple communications features.

reader comments

166 with 101 posters participating, including story author

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Discord has announced that it will start taking a reduced, 10-percent cut from game revenues generated on its online store starting next year, one-upping the Epic Games Store and its recently announced 12-percent cut on the Epic Games Store.

“We talked to a lot of developers, and many of them feel that

current stores are not earning their 30% of the usual 70/30 revenue share," Discord writes in the announcement. "Because of this, we now see developers creating their own stores and launchers to distribute their games instead of focusing on what's really important—making great games and cultivating amazing communities.

"Turns out, it does not cost 30% to distribute games in 2018," the announcement continues. "After doing some research, we discovered that we can build amazing developer tools, run them, and give developers the majority of the revenue share."

The move comes alongside a coming expansion of the Discord Games Store, which launched earlier this year with a tightly curated selection of games that now includes roughly 100 titles. The coming "self-serve publishing platform" will allow developers "no matter what size, from AAA to single-person teams" to access the Discord Store and the new 90-percent revenue share.

With tens of millions of users already turning to Discord as an online voice chat and general communication solution, the Discord Game Store has a built-in audience of users potentially interested in buying games. The company has also tried to differentiate its store with the "First on Discord" program, giving prominent placement to a handful of promising indie games on the service in exchange for timed exclusivity. Discord's paid Nitro subscription program also gives free access to dozens of games as well as other premium Discord communication features.

A growing threat to Steam?

For well over a decade now, major game platforms on consoles, PC, and mobile (including Discord) have generally followed Steam's lead in taking a 30-percent cut of revenues from any games sold through their online stores. The first major crack in that de facto standard came last week, when Epic launched

its own store that only takes a 12-percent cut of total revenues. Unlike Discord's newly open policy, though, Epic still maintains tight curation of its store, with an extremely limited game selection so far. Valve recently announced slight alterations to Steam's revenue sharing terms but only for titles that have made at least $10 million in revenue. That's fine for the biggest publishers, but it probably won't do much to help dissuade smaller game makers from considering the friendly revenue terms on these newer platforms.

Where Steam still has an advantage, of course, is in the sheer momentum of its network effects. As the market leader for years now, Steam is where millions of PC players still overwhelmingly turn to find their online friends, manage their game libraries and patches, and look for personalized, algorithmic recommendations for new games (especially during heavily promoted sales). Already, many gamers are chafing at the prospect of managing more distinct game platforms, each with their own siloed game stores and launchers, just to play their collection of PC games.

That said, gamers could consider these new platforms if exclusive and/or free games they want are on offer, or if they already have another reason to log in (e.g., voice chat and *Fortnite*). Offering more generous revenue-sharing terms could also be enough to entice developers to move their titles to platforms besides Steam, helping to break the chicken-and-egg cycle of developers simply flocking to where the players already are.

It's still early, and Steam is still a behemoth, but these kinds of aggressive moves from the likes of Epic and Discord could represent the greatest threat to Valve's dominance in PC game distribution so far.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428577

Blizzard shifts developers away from Heroes of the Storm

Enlarge / *Heroes of the Storm* will continue to increase this character roster going forward, but maybe not as quickly as previously.

reader comments

89 with 47 posters participating, including story author

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Blizzard may only have seven active games listed on its Battle.net launcher at the moment, but that list includes some of the biggest in the gaming world. So when the company announces it’s shifting its development priorities away from one of those ongoing online titles, it’s a big deal.

So it is with last night’s surprise update on the status of Blizzard-universe MOBA *Heroes of the Storm*. Blizzard now says “we need to take some of our talented developers and bring their skills to other projects,” and thus have “made the difficult decision to shift some developers from *Heroes of the Storm* to other teams.”

This doesn’t mean the immediate end of the game or anything of the sort. Blizzard promises continued active support, “with new heroes, themed events, and other content that our community loves, though the cadence will change.” We’re guessing that last part means the “cadence” will get less frequent, for what it’s worth.

Blizzard also says it's cancelling esports plans surrounding the game, and it won't renew the Heroes Global Championship and Heroes of the Dorm programs for next year. That suggests *Heroes of the Storm* wasn't able to get the expected traction in the lucrative esports market, where the biggest online games can really cash in on their popularity. That fact alone suggests Blizzard's promises of robust "long-term sustainability" for the game might not pan out for years and years.

Heroes of the Storm has been far from a flop for Blizzard, with an estimated 6.5 million players as of April, according to Superdata. But that number paled in comparison to the tens of millions of players (and even more regular esports viewers) for genre heavyweights like *Dota 2* and *League of Legends*. It seems there just wasn't room in the market for a third MOBA—even a well-received one with Blizzard's backing—to succeed at that kind of scale.

But *HotS*' biggest competition may have come internally. With games like *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch* raking in money with tens of millions of players and robust esports scenes, even a minor hit like *Heroes of the Storm* starts looking like it might not be worth the smaller return on investment. Add in Blizzard's plans for new *Diablo* games on both mobile phones and PC, as well as other rumored projects, and you can see why *HotS* might end up being relatively neglected.

We can't help but think of Epic's crowdsourced *Unreal Tournament* revamp, launched in alpha back in 2015. That project quietly stopped receiving updates last June, just as *Fortnite* started taking off, before development was officially confirmed as dead just this month. That's not a perfect analogy for *Heroes of the Storm* (which is still receiving updates), but probably echoes the long, slow decline the game can expect as Blizzard shifts its focus to its biggest hits.https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428557

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse just became your must-see December film

Enlarge / Spider… sweatpants? That's just one of the many weird things you'll find in the hilarious, entertaining *Into the Spider-Verse*.

reader comments

84 with 53 posters participating, including story author

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I'll keep this glowing review short for two reasons: because I'm on vacation, and because there's not much I need to say to make my point.

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse is right up there with *Black Panther* and *Deadpool 2* as one of the best comic book adaptations in theaters this year. What's more, it's easily the best comic-nerd film in years to warmly embrace the kinds of viewers who know their comics canon front and back, all without intimidating the inevitable kid and newbie viewers attracted to this incredibly family-friendly adventure.

Miles and Peter and Gwen and…

- Peter Parker (Jake Johnson) and Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) put on their thinking hats. (Their Spider-

thinking hats, maybe?)

- Miles starts out with his own makeshift costume…
- … but eventually finds his way to a lab full of other options.
- I'm a big fan of his final suit. (WARNING: The next image includes the other Spider-people I didn't reveal in the review. You've been warned.)
- Peni (Kimiko Glen), Spider-Ham (John Mulaney), and Spider-Man Noir (Nicolas Cage) round out the rest of the cast. They're all fantastic in their own ways. (I'd kill for more Mulaney/Cage films. They're a pretty terrific comic-relief duo here.)

If you've seen the posters or looked at the film's title, you might have figured out the film's big twist: this is a film about Spider-people, not just one Spider-Man. (Just in case you've been living in a cave, I'll spare you a few specific details on who does and doesn't make a cameo, and you can remain ignorant by not clicking through the above gallery; its final image gives away the whole cast.) In very good news, this angle does not disrupt or dilute *Spider-Verse*'s focus on a few important characters and their relationships.

Mild-mannered, teenaged whiz kid Miles Morales (voiced by Shameik Moore) gets his first feature-length turn as a Spider-hero, seven years after his Marvel Comics debut. Some of his backstory will look familiar: streetwise Brooklyn kid is forced to attend a fancy prep school by his parents, doesn't fit in, yadda yadda yadda, spider-bite, hero. The exact nature of his relationship with both his father (a by-the-book cop, voiced by Brian Tyree Henry) and his uncle (a cooler ne'er-do-well, voiced by Mahershala Ali) diverges from some of Miles' comic stories, but the film establishes the Morales family dynamic so briskly—and sets up Miles' internal conflicts in such touching fashion—that you'd think this had been the original Miles story all along.

On top of that story, Miles must also face off against a

version of Peter Parker that doesn’t exactly match up with the Spider-Man from his personal collection of comic books. We get a few fan-wink moments when Miles tries to rationalize the Spider-Man he’s heard of with the one he meets, and these winks are fun enough. But more importantly, *Spider-Verse* establishes and intertwines an interesting pair of redemption stories for both characters.

This narrowed focus means that once a bunch of other Spider-people show up, they’re relegated to supporting-role status—meaning, they offer more in the way of visual gags, comic relief, and surprise action moments. And these are all solid, fan-service stuff. For most of the supporting Spider-people, their here-and-gone-again status doesn’t feel abrupt; Spider-Gwen is a noticeable exception, because her cross-dimensional warping leaves her with minimal stakes in this adventure. She’s not dumped with a one-dimensional romantic-projection role, thankfully, but it’s not much more substantial than that—and the result is a relative waste of stellar voice actor Hailee Steinfeld.

Comic patina?

Enlarge / A good example of how astonishing this film can look at its best (but also how stupid its “comic” dithering effect looks).

Even without its comic tie-ins, *Spider-Verse* stuns as a purely CGI adventure film. An unfortunate “comic print” patina covers the entire film, which results in obnoxious dithering and pointillism effects. That’s the only complaint I have to offer. Everything else—the variety in scenery, the level of detail, the fight choreography, the over-the-top web-slinging that would be impossible to stage in a live-action film, and the Technicolor dreamscape of the final battle—is jaw-droppingly good.

Couple that with some clever takes on existing character canon and the fun surprises that emerge thanks to the multiverse conceit, and you have something that I describe in the

following glowing fashion: *Spider-Verse* feels more like a complete, fun graphic novel than any comic-book film in recent memory. I would not hesitate to suggest this to any friend, family member, parent, or random stranger this holiday season.https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428413

Spock smiles in the face of danger in new trailer for Star Trek: Discovery S2

Enlarge / Spock relishes the prospect of danger. “Are you smiling, Spock?” “Yes, Captain, I believe I am.”
CBS All Access

reader comments

84 with 68 posters participating

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Everyone’s favorite sober-minded Vulcan, Spock, cracks a rare smile in a new, action-packed trailer for *Star Trek: Discovery*‘s upcoming second season. This go-round, the crew of the USS *Discovery* will be facing its greatest threat yet: a being or entity intent on wiping out all sentient beings in the Universe.

Discovery is a prequel to the original *Star Trek*, set roughly 10 years before Captain Kirk and his crew took over the USS *Enterprise* and boldly went where no man had gone before. The

first trailer debuted at New York Comic Con back in October. That's when we learned that last season's Captain Gabriel Lorca has been replaced by iconic character Christopher Pike (Anson Mount). The Klingons have hair again (fans did not care for the bald look), and Michelle Yeoh returns as the former ruler of the Terran Empire, Philippa Georgiou.

We also saw the debut of Rebecca Romijn as Number One and got our first glimpse of a young, bearded Spock (now played by Ethan Peck). His appearance is linked to the mysterious vision of a "red angel" experienced by his adoptive sister, Science Specialist Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green). Spock also had recurring visions of such a creature, but the first trailer was coy about what it might mean.

- The USS *Discovery* in all her glory.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- A lone figure deciphering mysterious symbols etched into the floor.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- YouTube/CBS All Access
- The USS *Discovery* encounters a strange phenomenon.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Is the mysterious "red angel" a friend or foe?
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- A first glimpse of the red angel.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- The red angel clearly has a corporeal form… of sorts.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Spock puts the whammy on a nurse.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- An ethereal sight.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- An unexpected bad development.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Careful! That pretty blue object might not be as harmless as it seems.

YouTube/CBS All Access

- There’s always time for a bit of luuurv…..
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Science Specialist Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) on guard.
  Science Specialist Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green)
- An alien visitor arrives.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Captain Pike (Anson Mount) replaces Captain Gabriel Lorca this season.
  YouTube/CBS All Access

This second trailer expounds a bit more on what, precisely, is at stake. Georgiou and Section 31 are alarmed by the appearance of several red bursts, which typically signal the arrival of the red angel. They think the mysterious figure should be considered dangerous. Spock is not so sure.

But there is definitely cause for concern, since the red angel showed him an apocalyptic vision. “Someone or something is going to end all sentient life in the galaxy,” Spock tells Pike. “There is a great responsibility at hand. This could be the defining moment for multiple civilizations, millions of lives. The future may be determined by our actions—yours and mine.”

Chances are, the crew of the USS *Discovery* will emerge victorious, since, as Saru (Doug Jones) says, “*Discovery* will not allow a catastrophe on her watch.” No matter the outcome, season 2 looks like it could be a wild ride.

Star Trek: Discovery S2 will debut on CBS All Access January 17, 2019.

[embedded content]
Star Trek: Discovery season 2 trailer.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428111

Hands-on: Switch’s NES controllers offer unmatched old-school authenticity

Enlarge / Now you’re playing with power.

reader comments

65 with 53 posters participating, including story author

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Playing old-school games on the Switch thus far has been a choice between various control compromises. You can use two Joy-Cons held in two hands, but the tiny buttons and lack of a true d-pad make this setup less than ideal. Holding a single Joy-Con sideways eliminates the d-pad completely and forces you to curve your grip around a hand-crampingly small control surface. A Switch Pro Controller or various third-party solutions can solve these problems, but they come with relatively high prices and some added features you don’t need for classic games.

Enter Nintendo, which is offering subscribers to its new Online service the ability to buy two wireless, Switch-compatible replica NES controllers for $60 (on top of the $20 a year subscription). After spending a few hours testing the little guys (just before pre-orders start shipping out) we found them to be competent, authentic throwbacks with some important limitations.

Truly authentic

Anyone with fond memories of gripping an NES controller in their youth will be happy to hear that Nintendo got the authenticity darn-near perfect with these replicas. Everything from the sizing to the tactile feel to the springiness of the buttons and the d-pad is practically indistinguishable from a brand-new NES controller you might have bought three decades ago. This isn't that surprising, since the wired NES Classic Edition controllers had the same level of fidelity, but it's still nice to see.

- Not a very fancy box, all told.
- How to charge.
- Look ma, no wires.
- The stubby little L and R buttons. Also notice the slight differences between the "left" and "right" controller, when it comes time to snap them onto the Switch.
- The wrist straps make the shoulder buttons much less stubby.
- The positioning of the "release" button on the back is the only real difference, here.
- You can technically use the controllers when plugged in this way, but really this is mainly for charging.
- Aside from the wires, from the front it's hard to distinguish between a real NES controller (top), an NES Classic Edition controller (middle), and an NES controller for Switch (bottom).
- Size comparison between a Joy-Con (with wrist strap), NES controller for Switch, and a Switch Pro Controller.

The only really noticeable differences between a real NES controller and the Switch-based replica are the lack of wires and the familiar Joy-Con groove along the top edge. This allows you to plug the controller into the Switch itself for easy syncing and charging (we haven't gotten through a full

charge yet, but the battery level display suggests one will last for dozens of hours). After a quick update to the Switch's NES emulation app, the controllers worked as well as you'd expect, with no discernible input lag.

Playing these emulated NES games with a replica of the controller they were originally designed for proves pretty crucial to appreciating them correctly. There's something about rolling your thumb around a real, accurately sized d-pad and resting the pads of your thumbs on the little indentations of real NES buttons that feels better and truer than fighting with a tiny Joy-Con. This really is the way these games were meant to be played.

The NES controllers also offer the same stubby, recessed L and R buttons you'd find on a traditional Joy-Con. You can slide a standard Joy-Con strap on top of this groove to help raise and enlarge those shoulder buttons, and you'll probably want to access some Switch-specific features in the NES app. The L button takes screenshots, the R button returns to the home menu, and both together bring up the in-game menu needed to switch between games.

Can it do more?

When these replica NES controllers were announced, Nintendo warned that they were designed to work only with the Switch's downloadable selection of classic NES games. Our testing, though, found that the replica controllers were more than suitable for a variety of old-school and retro-styled games found elsewhere on the system.

- The Switch UI recognizes the NES controllers as distinct when they're plugged in.
- …and also when you sync them to the system wirelessly.
- At the bottom, you can see new menu control options that show up specifically when the NES controllers are

connected.
- On-screen instructions for the new menu controls.
- L + R = Suspend Menu.

The Switch's UI makes it clear that the system sees these replica NES controllers differently from standard Joy-Cons. That said, the system also treats the inputs from the controller just like those from a set of Joy-Cons that just so happen to be missing analog sticks and a few face buttons. The d-pad and face buttons are perfectly suitable for navigating system menus and performing basic Switch functions, provided you don't need the Home or Screenshot buttons (though syncing up nearby Joy-Cons can give you access to these functions in a pinch).

Those inputs are also enough to offer full control over a surprisingly large array of Switch games (sometimes with a bit of menu fiddling). That includes modern platformers like *Super Meat Boy* and *Celeste*, puzzle games like *Lumines Remastered* and *Puyo Puyo Tetris*, classic re-releases like *Ikaruga* and *Namco Museum*, and many more. Even *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* was perfectly playable using the controller, with enough buttons for acceleration, braking, drifting, and items (though reaching around the controller's sharp edges to hit the shoulder buttons so frequently was a little uncomfortable).

That said, a large number of Switch games that are designed with the assumption of analog stick controls—everything from *Breath of the Wild* to *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*—can't be controlled with the NES controllers. Even some games designed for digital directional input require more than the NES controller's four action buttons—games like *Dead Cells* and *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* are missing crucial inputs without a full complement of Joy-Con buttons.

Of course, these games aren't what the Switch's NES controllers were designed for. When it comes to their intended purpose—offering a truly authentic control option for NES

games played on Switch—these controllers serve their role at a reasonable price (assuming you want two of them). The ability to play some Switch games as well is just icing on the cake. If you want a controller that offers better control options for any and all Switch games, though, invest in a Pro Controller.

Specifics aside, we hope these NES controllers indicate a willingness on Nintendo's part to experiment more with new controller designs for the Switch. We'd love to see Joy-Con options that offer a split-handed version of the GameCube control scheme, for instance, or a Joy-Con with a trackball in the place of the analog stick, or simply bigger options with larger buttons and a true d-pad. The Switch's modular control design seems ripe for novel new ideas, and we hope Nintendo has some in the offing.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428003

Not dusted for good? There's a sequel in the works for Doctor Strange

Enlarge / Benedict Cumberbatch will reprise his role as Doctor Strange, despite the events of *Avengers: Infinity War.*

reader comments

6 with 6 posters participating

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Avengers: Endgame doesn’t hit theaters for several months, but sources have told *The Hollywood Reporter* that a *Doctor Strange* sequel is already in the works.

Spoilers follow for *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Doctor Strange*.

Sure, the good doctor was dusted along with half of all living things in the universe in *Avengers: Infinity War*. We never believed they were all truly gone for good, and this news confirms it. Marvel, however, declined to comment.

There’s no script yet; that should be in the works early next year. But per *The Hollywood Reporter*, Benedict Cumberbatch will return as Stephen Strange, along with Benedict Wong as his right-hand man, Wong. Rachel McAdams is rumored to be returning as well, as Stephen Strange’s somewhat-reluctant love interest, while Scott Derrickson will reportedly return to the director’s chair.

That’s all the details we have right now, but the ending of the first *Doctor Strange* certainly set things up for Baron Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor) to return as a worthy opponent. Mordo became disillusioned when he discovered that the Ancient One (Tilda Swinton) he followed so devotedly achieved her long life by drawing on power from the Dark Dimension. A post-credits scene showed Mordo taking away the mystical energy that another acolyte had been using to walk despite being paralyzed in an accident. So it makes sense he would play some role in the sequel.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1426901

Doom’s next expansion pack, made by John Romero, will be free—or cost up to $166

reader comments

50 with 37 posters participating

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- The logo for Sigil, a new map pack for the ’90s shooter *Doom*.
- The titular box for the Beast Box special edition, which is inspired by the id Anthology box. It will be numbered and signed by John Romero.
- A booklet-style case that includes the game, the soundtrack by Buckethead, and behind-the-scenes information.
- Inside: a 16GB floppy-disk-themed USB drive.
- It comes with a T-shirt too, natch.
- A SIGIL-themed coin, because I guess you need this?
- An art print by Christopher Lowell.
- Two stickers are also included.
- The full package, as presented in a marketing image. Notable: the as-yet-unrevealed pewter statue of John Romero’s head on a pike.

John Romero—co-creator of the classic and influential 1990s first-person shooter *Doom*—has announced that he will release 18 new levels for the game for its 25th anniversary next year.

Scheduled for a mid-February 2019 release, the free megawad of

levels will be called “Sigil.” Romero’s website describes it as “the spiritual successor” to the fourth episode of *Doom*, picking up “where the original left off.” It will include nine single-player levels and nine multi-player Deathmatch levels.

You’ll have to own a copy of the original *Doom* to play it, but that’s not hard to come by. But if a free download isn’t enough for you, Romero is offering two special editions that actually cost money. The “standard edition,” which costs $39.99, includes the following:

- *A beautiful demonic standard-sized “big box” featuring the artwork of Christopher Lovell.*
- *A 16GB 3 1/2-inch floppy disk themed USB that includes the free megawad data and extras.*
- *A 2-disc jewel case that includes the free megawad data and soundtrack by Buckethead.*
- *2 stickers: 1 SIGIL and 1 Romero Games.*

But it’s the “Beast Box” edition that makes things truly ridiculous. You can see pictures of most of its various components above, but here’s the list from Romero’s website:

- *A beautiful demonic over-sized box, inspired by the id Anthology™ box, individually numbered and signed personally by John Romero and featuring the artwork of Christopher Lovell.*
- *A 16GB 3-1/2-inch floppy disk-themed USB that includes the free megawad data and extras.*
- *A 2-disc booklet-styled case that includes the free megawad data and full soundtrack by Buckethead and behind-the-scenes information on the original game and the megawad’s development.*
- *A beautiful 8″ x 10″ art print signed by the illustrator, Christopher Lovell.*
- *A SIGIL-themed coin.*

- *A pewter statue of John Romero's head on a spike.*
- *An XL-sized SIGIL T-shirt.*
- *2 stickers: 1 SIGIL and 1 Romero Games.*

That one will set you back $166. The head on a spike is admittedly a nice touch—it's a callback to *Doom II* that fans will recognize. The Romero Games Ltd. website calls these "fan boxes" and notes that they'll only be available from December 10 through December 24 of this year. Generally, we're not inclined to recommend people pre-order games or over-the-top special edition boxes, but collectors might be interested here.

This is not the first time Romero has released new content for *Doom*. Back in 2016, he released his first *Doom* level in 21 years for free. In that same year, he launched a Kickstarter for a new game called *Blackroom* that never quite went anywhere.

Plenty of '90s throwback shooters are out there if you have that itch to scratch—for example, *DUSK*, which is admittedly more *Quake*-like, is launching out of Early Access on Steam in sync with *Doom*'s 25th anniversary—which just so happens to be today.

Listing image by Romero Games Ltd.

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Cryptography failure leads to

easy hacking for PlayStation Classic

Enlarge / The PlayStation Classic’s internal USB, removed and picked at as part of the hacking effort.

reader comments

78 with 62 posters participating, including story author

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In the days since the PlayStation Classic’s official release, hackers have already made great progress in loading other PlayStation games (and even non-PlayStation software) onto the plug-and-play device. What’s more, it seems some sloppy cryptography work on Sony’s part is key to unlocking the device for other uses.

Console hackers yifanlu and madmonkey1907 were among those who were able to dump the PlayStation Classic’s code via the system’s UART serial port in the days after its release. From there, as yifanlu laid out on Twitter, the hackers found that the most sensitive parts of the system are signed and encrypted solely using a key that’s embedded on the device itself, rather than with the aid of a private key held exclusively by Sony. In essence, Sony distributed the PlayStation Classic with the key to its own software lock hidden in the device itself.

Further examination by yifanlu during a series of marathon, Twitch-streamed hacking sessions found that the PlayStation Classic also doesn’t seem to perform any sort of signature check at all for the sensitive bootrom code that’s loaded when

the system starts up. That makes it relatively trivial to load any sort of payload to the hardware from a USB device at startup, as yifanlu demonstrated with a video of a *Crash Bandicoot* prototype running on the PlayStation Classic last week.

These revelations have already led to a couple of open source projects that let PlayStation Classic owners load a USB thumb drive with a correctly formatted payload that can get the hardware to temporarily recognize and run new sets of PlayStation games. The current tools require some decently onerous editing of database or INI files and may not work correctly on every regional variation of the system at the moment. There are also reports of improperly formatted payloads bricking systems, so please take care if experimenting with them yourself.

The relative ease of PlayStation Classic hacking stands in stark contrast to similar efforts on the NES and Super NES Classic Edition systems. Hacking those devices requires dumping the contents of that specific system to a computer over USB, then modifying those files and reflashing the system's kernel using a hacker-coded tool.

In any case, the almost total lack of functional security on the PlayStation Classic itself probably means we're only seeing the very beginnings of what hackers will be able to unlock on the ARM-based system. There is already video evidence of a Linux-based *Doom* port running on the hardware, which probably means getting non-PlayStation emulators running on the console is only a matter of time.

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