

With titles like *Battletoads* and *Grounded*, Xbox Game Pass is inching closer to becoming like Netflix

You probably know the feeling: you set out to find something new on Netflix, but end up spending more time browsing than actually watching. There's just so much there that it can be hard to make a choice. Recently I've been having the same issue every time I turn on my Xbox.

Game Pass, Microsoft's subscription service, is much like Netflix and other video streaming services in that, for a monthly fee, you have access to a broad range of experiences. If you follow Microsoft's marketing, you'll know that Game Pass is a place for the company's big first-party games. With a subscription you can play every *Halo* or *Gears of War* title. When *Halo Infinite* is available next year, you won't need to buy it – the game will debut on Game Pass at launch.

Steadily, though, the service has become home to a much larger array of games. The blockbusters are still there, but so are the smaller or quirkier titles that won't necessarily sell subscriptions, but can keep players hooked once they sign up. Take *Battletoads*, for instance. The game, which launches tomorrow, is perhaps the ideal Game Pass game.



Grounded.

Battletoads is a return of the iconic beat 'em up from 1991, and largely stays true to the original. That means hard (though not *quite* as punishing) side-scrolling action; strange, colorful levels to explore; and humor designed to appeal to a 12-year-old. There are a lot of things I don't like about *Battletoads*. The voice acting is cringe-worthy, and I'm not really into the new art style, which gives it the feel of a direct-to-video show from the '90s. It's certainly not on par with the recent revival of *Streets of Rage*, which was perhaps the ideal modern beat 'em up.

Here's the thing: none of that really matters. When a game is available through a subscription service and you're not paying for it directly, it changes how you evaluate it. Think of it like this. I'll watch a terrible movie like *Bright* on Netflix, but I'd never pay to see it in a theater. The same goes for games. *Battletoads* isn't amazing, and I'm not immune to its flaws, but I'm enjoying it enough to keep playing – and chances are I might not have ever played in the first place had it been available only as a direct purchase.

Game Pass is starting to hit a critical mass of these kinds of

experiences. Not just games that are maybe below average yet interesting, but also titles I wouldn't have thought to try if they had a price tag attached. I'm not a big fan of survival games, yet here I am playing the recently-launched *Grounded*, which is essentially *Honey I Shrunk the Kids: The Game*. You play as a tiny teen trying to survive a suburban backyard, where ants are the size of small cars and a single drop of water can save your life. It's fun to just wander around for an hour, watching how the bugs interact with each other, and learning a few crafting recipes. It's also a game I wouldn't have experienced if it weren't on Game Pass.

A subscription service needs more than just big hits. You may sign up for Netflix to watch *The Witcher*, but you also need things like *Too Hot to Handle* or *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* to round out the experience. For me, the Game Pass library has already hit that sweet spot. Aside from *Battletoads* and *Grounded*, over the last few days alone I've played *Carrion* (a thrilling action game where you are the monster, escaping a human lab), *Spiritfarer* (a beautiful management game about death), and the original *Final Fantasy VII* (I've been thinking about going back to it since April).



Carrion.

I also downloaded *The Master Chief Collection* to refresh my memory before *Infinite's* launch, and *Sea of Thieves* because, well, I keep meaning to try it. Oh, and *Alan Wake*, because the upcoming expansion for *Control* got me in the mood. I've also been considering another playthrough of *Dragon Quest XI* and... well, you can see the problem here.

Game Pass isn't perfect, and notable titles still come and go like any subscription service. (*Red Dead Redemption II* is the most recent example.) But it's still the first gaming service where I've felt paralyzed by choice in this way. Even Apple Arcade, which I still use, hasn't managed this. Instead, an interesting game comes out once or twice a month, I play it on my iPad, and then I forget about the service until I get a new notification. I don't have a queue on Apple Arcade the way I do on my Xbox.

Now I just need help figuring out what to play next.

<https://www.theverge.com/2020/8/19/21376137/xbox-game-pass-battletoads-grounded-netflix-streaming>