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2024

GAMING
PREVIEW
AND
HOLIDAY
GIFT
GUIDE





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Volcanic Red Cobalt Blue

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Sterling Silver

Available 01.26.2024

PLAY
HAS NO LIMITS™

cover story



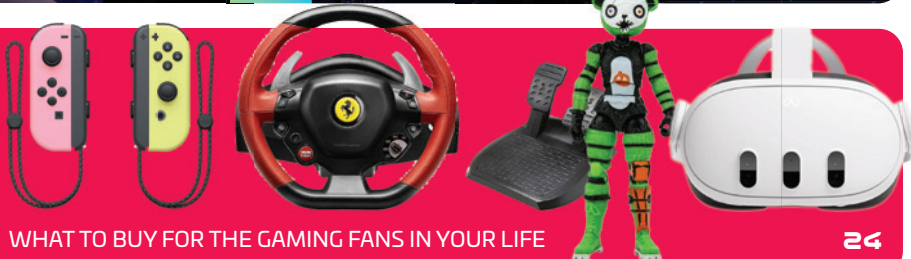
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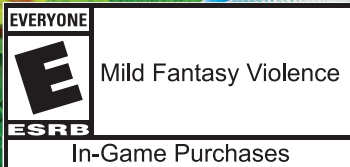
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welcome

FROM THE EDITORS



THAT'S A WRAP!

Here we are again, at the end of another great year for all things geeky and about to start a promising new one. This issue, we're delivering out a guide to the biggest video games launching in the next 12 months, which gives us the perfect opportunity to reflect on the major shifts in the gaming industry during 2023.

And there's no question that the past year proved to be a hugely eventful one for the world of gaming. Even though we don't yet have a sense of its long-term consequences, the biggest story may well be Microsoft finalizing its deal to buy Activision Blizzard following months of drama, adding even more hit franchises, including *Call of Duty*, to Xbox's impressive first-party roster.

Sony kept on rolling with new PlayStation hardware—the new PS VR2 headset and a slimmed-down PS5—and kept hit exclusives like *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* flowing. Then there's Nintendo, who delivered instant classics for both the *Zelda* and *Mario* series. Equally exciting is the buzz that the Big N is hard at work on a successor to the Nintendo Switch. Very impressive efforts from all three big players, if you ask us.

Elsewhere, however, the gaming industry looked somewhat uncertain about how its future might unfold. Widespread layoffs and studio closures reflected just how many crucial aspects of gaming are still up in the air. Does the future lie in a virtual-reality metaverse, or on 2D screens? Will the industry move to subscription services and streaming, or are traditional consoles and game purchases here to stay for the long haul? Are ballooning budgets for the biggest triple-A games sustainable?

We can't say we have the answers to any of those questions, but we *can* say with some certainty that the near-future looks bright. Just take a look at our cover story for this issue. A big open-world *Star Wars* game? Yes, please. Plenty of long-running classics like *Alone in the Dark*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Prince of Persia* being reinvented for modern audiences? Exciting stuff, and that's just the start.

Of course, if you're looking for immediate recommendations, we also have Five to Play, Parting Shots, and reviews of two of those big 2023 games we just mentioned above—*Super Mario Bros. Wonder* and *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*—to point you in the right direction. And let's not forget our annual gift guide, in case you have some last-minute shopping to do for a few of your favorite geeks.

So read on, and let *Geek Magazine* be your guide to the world of all things geeky!

Josh Harmon and Mollie L Patterson

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winter/jan 2024

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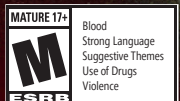
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INTO THE STARFIELD

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STARFIELD

Microsoft



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MEET THE SLEEKER, SLIMMER, AND SURPRISINGLY MORE CUSTOMIZABLE PLAYSTATION 5

For those of us who obsess over not only the video games that we play, but also the hardware that we play them on, seeing consoles get mid- to later-life revisions can be an exciting time, even if those revisions are less about new features and more about cosmetic differences.

With Sony's latest announcement of a new hardware revision for its hot-selling PlayStation 5, we're thankfully getting both.

According to Sony, the new PS5 "has been reduced in volume by more than 30

percent, and weight by 18 percent and 24 percent compared to the previous models." The official specs put it at 358mm in height when standing vertically, meaning it'll be just over 1.25 inches shorter than the original PS5. As well, the new model will weigh 3.2kg and 2.6kg (with and without optical drive), versus the previous model's 4.2kg and 3.6kg respectively.

Another advantage of the revised PS5 is that it'll now come with 1TB of internal storage. While it can be easy to forget, the original model actually only came with 825GB built in, so this is a small—but much appreciated—bump.

By far the most interesting feature of Sony's new PlayStation 5 model waits just under its surface. The single-piece covers of the original model have changed to four separate panels, with the top two (when standing vertically) now sporting glossy plastic. The secret, though, is that one of the matte panels now hides an expansion bay for an Ultra HD Blu-Ray Disc Drive.

Previously, customers had to choose between a PS5 with a built-in optical drive, or the



digital-only model without one. Now, if you initially go with the lower-priced option, you can always add an optical drive later. And, should you decide one day that you prefer the slimmer look, you can remove the drive and swap to the svelter side cover. With this change, Sony has created one singular model of its console that can satisfy two different markets at the exact same time, where you can always choose one route and then decide later to go the other.

By the time you read this, the new PlayStation 5 model should already be on store shelves, with the older models possibly still around until all of their stock has sold. If you'd like to pick up your own revised PS5, check out Walmart.com or your local Walmart store.



4 out of 5

Members of the team who made the original *Super Mario Bros.* who also worked on *Super Mario Bros. Wonder*

\$1,000

Amount WWE superstar Randy Orton reportedly paid someone to level up his *Elden Ring* character

1 million+

Copies both *Lies of P* and *Lords of the Fallen* sold in their respective first months

1

Wii U consoles bought at retail in September 2023 per industry tracker Circana, the first such sale in 16 months

2

Number of discs for physical copies of *Horizon Forbidden West Complete Edition*, a first for a PlayStation 5 title

HOW DIGITAL DOWNLOAD WORKS

1.

Select

Select a digital download card from the latest participating game titles available on the Xbox One and PlayStation 4...

2.

Purchase

Purchase your digital download card at the register...

3.

Keep

Keep your receipt and locate the download code printed at the bottom...



4.

Redeem

Redeem the code printed on your receipt in your game console to download (when available) and then Play First without returning to the store!

ENTER CODE



Walmart* gaming release calendar

JAN

- 16 **ALONE IN THE DARK**
THQ NORDIC / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC
- 18 **PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN**
UBISOFT / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC
- 19 **ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION**
NINTENDO / SWITCH
- 26 **LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH**
SEGA / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC
- 26 **TEKKEN 8**
BANDAI NAMCO / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

FEB

- 1 **GRANBLUE FANTASY: RELINK**
CYGAMES / PS5, PS4, PC
- 2 **PERSONA 3 RELOAD**
ATLUS / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC



- 2 **SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE**
WARNER BROS. / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC
- 13 **BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN**
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- 16 **MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG**
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SQUARE ENIX / PS5

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- 8 **UNICORN OVERLORD**
ATLUS / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, PS4



GAME INDUSTRY VETERANS MOVE ON

Change, as they say, is inevitable. That's certainly true for the video game industry, where we recently saw three big changes at three totally different companies.

First up is Pete Hines, the head of publishing at Bethesda, who recently announced his retirement after 24 years at the company. Hines cited plans to "begin an exciting new chapter of my life exploring interests and passions, donating my time where I can, and taking more time to enjoy life."

Next up is another major name at an equally epic gaming powerhouse: Donald Mustard, the former chief creative officer at Epic Games.

"I have enjoyed nearly 25 years in the game industry collaborating with some of the most talented people ever, and I am

so proud of what we have made together," Mustard said, who then noted that he felt excited to be able to spend more time together with his wife and family.

Last up is the departure of Hideki Kamiya from PlatinumGames. Kamiya got his start working at Capcom on titles like *Resident Evil 2* and *Devil May Cry*, and is known for his colorful personality and love of "stylish action" games. Unlike Hines and Mustard, however, Kamiya seems to have plans to jump back into game creation after a bit of a break.

To pick up some of the great games these three men have helped bring the world, check out your local Walmart store or Walmart.com.



STAR WARS JEDI STAR OUTS PLANS FOR ANOTHER SEQUEL

To the chagrin of many a game developer, one of the best sources for gaming leaks often comes from inside the house—or, should we say, the recording booth.

The latest voice actor to say something they maybe shouldn't have is Cameron Monaghan, who helps bring to life Jedi Knight Cal Kestis. While appearing as part of the *Star Wars Jedi* Game Series Panel at this year's Ocala Comic Con, Monaghan seemingly confirmed that *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* won't be the last that we see of Cal.

"We're working on the third [game], and we're in the process of doing it right now," Monaghan replied when casually asked what he had coming up work-wise. "That's a big undertaking, and [there's] been some conversations so far, but hopefully when all things are said and done, we'll be able



to go in and make something really cool for you guys again."

Neither EA nor *Star Wars Jedi* developer Respawn Entertainment have made any official statements on a third game in the series, but one now seems pretty likely. To check out the latest chapter of Cal's journey, pick up a copy of *Star Wars: Jedi Survivor* at your local Walmart store or Walmart.com.



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Nintendo

CYBERPUNK 2077 RESURRECTS VOICE ACTOR USING AI

CD Projekt RED has spent the three years since *Cyberpunk 2077*'s rocky launch working to improve the sci-fi RPG, culminating in a recent launch of an overhaul patch and expansion, *Phantom Liberty*, both of which have proven a hit with fans and critics. But to continue telling the game's story, the studio had to get creative with a move that feels fittingly, well, cyberpunk.



As the studio told Axios, actor Miłogost “Miłek” Reczek, who provided the Polish-language voice-over for ripperdoc Viktor Vektor, passed away in 2021, before he had a chance to record any lines for *Phantom Liberty*. Instead of recasting, however, CD Projekt RED sought permission from Reczek's family to replicate his voice using artificial intelligence—and they agreed.

To pull it off, the developers hired a new actor, Janusz Zadura, to record the lines, and then worked with AI company Respeecher, using their algorithm to modify the audio and create an authentic Reczek soundalike.

While it's not quite as advanced as *Cyberpunk 2077*'s story, which centers on a digital clone of the long-dead Johnny Silverhand, it's certainly proof the future is getting closer every day.

You can pick up a copy of the (much improved) *Cyberpunk 2077* at Walmart.com or your local Walmart store.



ACTIVISION BLIZZARD (FINALLY) JOINS MICROSOFT

Activision Blizzard King, the company behind major franchises like *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Candy Crush*, is now officially a part of Microsoft, after a lengthy acquisition process came to a close in October.

Just how long has it been? Well, our sister mag *Walmart Gamecenter* first wrote about the deal a whopping 15 issues ago, way back in April of 2022. The months that followed brought a seemingly endless parade of lawsuits, regulatory actions, public back-and-forths, extensions, pledges, and no doubt a lot of sleepless nights across the industry. In the end, though, the record-breaking \$69 billion deal went through.

Though we can't say for certain what the future will hold for the new Microsoft-owned Activision, history may provide somewhat of a guide. After Xbox's previous blockbuster acquisition of Bethesda parent company Zenimax, back catalog titles made their way onto Game Pass, with subsequent new releases like *Starfield* arriving day one. Xbox has confirmed that, due to the lengthy acquisition process, we'll have to wait until 2024 for Activision Blizzard games to arrive on the service, but there's no question that at least some older titles will get there at some point, nor that future titles will (eventually) launch directly onto Game Pass. But this year's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, for instance, wasn't on the service at launch, and won't be there until sometime next year.



Exclusivity remains more of an open question. While some key Bethesda titles, like *Starfield* and *Redfall*, have only launched on Xbox and PC, Microsoft has also allowed other brands it's acquired, like *Minecraft*, to continue on rival platforms, even for brand new games and spin-offs. And of course, the biggest title in the Activision stable, *Call of Duty*, certainly isn't leaving other platforms behind, at least for the foreseeable future. Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer repeatedly pledged publicly, and eventually signed deals, to ensure the series stays on PlayStation consoles for at least a decade—and to bring future games to Nintendo's platforms.

While Microsoft initially took a fairly hands-off approach to Bethesda, that did eventually change. In late October, Microsoft restructured its gaming division to give then-Xbox Game Studios head Matt Booty more direct oversight and control over all its owned studios, including Bethesda, promoting him to “president of game content and studios.” While it's unclear at time of writing if or when Activision's numerous studios will fall under this new hierarchy, the timing of the reorganization certainly points toward that eventuality.

For now, you can pick up games from the more than 35 studios Microsoft now owns at Walmart.com or your local Walmart store.



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*Starfield, Forza Motorsport: expected 2023. Game catalog varies over time, by region, and by device. Xbox Cloud Gaming (Beta): requires supported game and may require supported Bluetooth® controller (each sold separately). Select regions and devices. Streaming limitations apply, server availability and wait times may vary. Requires internet, ISP fees apply. xbox.com/gamepass



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC / RELEASE DATE 12.07.2023

"Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora is a first-person, open world action-adventure game where you explore the Western Frontier, a never-seen-before part of Pandora. You can do this with the great speed and agility of a Na'vi on foot, or by soaring through the skies on your own Banshee. You also use your superior speed, strength, agility, and knowledge of Pandora to defeat various enemies, including soldiers, flying units, and even such mechanical units as turrets. But because you're a Na'vi raised by humans, you can use both Na'vi weapons, which are quiet, precise, highly customizable, and perfect for stealth players, and human weapons, which are loud, destructive, and suited for run-and-gunners. Also, because we're telling a completely standalone story, you don't need to have seen the films to enjoy *Frontiers of Pandora*. We believe our messages of self-discovery and fighting for your home will resonate with all types of players."

"We believe our messages of self-discovery and fighting for your home will resonate with all types of players."

DREW RECHNER, ASSOCIATE GAME DIRECTOR, MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT





2

* BUY NOW

SUPER MARIO RPG

PUBLISHER NINTENDO / DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX / PLATFORMS SWITCH / RELEASE DATE 11.17.2023

Originally released in 1996, *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* was an epic role-playing game that set Mario, Peach, and other familiar characters on an adventure that incorporated gameplay elements of the *Final Fantasy* series. The result was a classic RPG that inspired Nintendo to make such spiritual successors as *Paper Mario* and *Mario & Luigi*. As for this remake, along with upgrading the graphics and sound, *Super Mario RPG* also adds an “easy” mode and modern improvements to the game’s turn-based combat. Not only can you now hurt all enemy attackers with a single blow, but successful attacks fill a gauge that, when maxed out, allows you to perform a three-character combo attack that differs depending on who you have in your party. You can even, after beating the game, go back and fight the toughest bosses again.

[A]long with upgrading the graphics and sound, *Super Mario RPG* also adds an “easy” mode and modern improvements to the game’s turn-based combat.



s to play





BLUEY: THE VIDEOGAME

PUBLISHER OUTRIGHT GAMES / **DEVELOPER** ARTAX GAMES / **PLATFORMS** XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PS4 / **RELEASE DATE** 11.17.2023

"Like so many families around the world, everyone at Outright Games are massive fans of *Bluey*, so to get the opportunity to work on *Bluey: The Videogame* was such a privilege. We wanted the game to feel like players were actually playing within an episode of the show, while also providing the freedom to create their own fun scenarios and scenes using the instantly recognizable locations, objects, and games seen in the series. While we had to work within a number of constraints given that we use an entirely different process and engine to the TV show, the team at Artax Games have done a wonderful job in matching the style as closely as possible whilst also ensuring the game allows players the freedom to create their own fun activities."

VINCENT GROGAN, PRODUCTION DIRECTOR, OUTRIGHT GAMES

"We wanted the game to feel like players were actually playing within an episode of the show..."

4

* BUY NOW

NARUTO X BORUTO ULTIMATE NINJA STORM CONNECTIONS

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO / DEVELOPER CYBERCONNECT2 / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PS4, PC / RELEASE DATE 11.17.2023

It's been 20 years since CyberConnect2 adapted Masashi Kishimoto's iconic manga and anime series *Naruto* into the 2003 fighting game *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja*. The seventh chapter in the series, *Naruto X Boruto*, boasts over 130 playable characters—the most in this series—including such new additions as Ashura and Indra Otsutsuki. It also features two different story-driven modes: "History Mode" presents previously seen moments from Naruto's childhood up through his final showdown against Sasuke, and "Special Story Mode" features a new story in which the ninja world is threatened by the Fifth Great Ninja War. If you'd rather just fight, though, you can set up matches both online and off in the "Free Battle" and "Network Battle" modes. *Naruto X Boruto* also boasts an option, "Simple Control Mode," which simplifies the game's combos into single buttons, making it easier to pull off the coolest moves.

The seventh chapter in the series boasts over 130 playable characters—the most in this series—including such new additions as Ashura and Indra Otsutsuki.

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Arctic Camo Special Edition.



s to play



5

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PERSONA 5 TACTICA

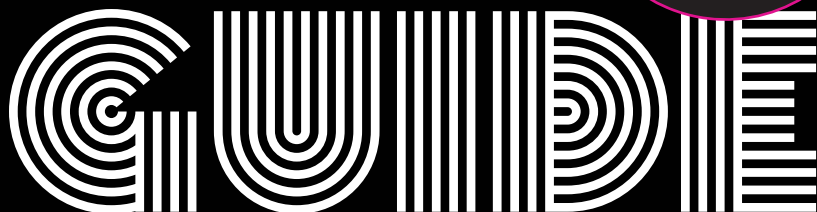
PUBLISHER SEGA / DEVELOPER ATLUS / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PS4, PC / RELEASE DATE 11.17.2023

"*Persona 5 Tactics* is the first tactical RPG in the *Persona* series. You choose three members from the Phantom Thieves [along with newcomer] Erina to form a team, and use their skills and Personas to develop your characters as you conquer stages. Many tactical RPGs depict 'group vs group' battles, but we believed that *Tactics* would not fit into that mold—our goal was to portray the Phantom Thieves working as a team. Also, since each character has their own fanbase, I believe it was necessary to allow players to freely develop and grow their favorites. Some franchise fans may find tactical RPGs to be difficult, but we aimed to provide the sensation and experience of developing characters and organizing party members like RPGs. We've utilized [previous *Persona*] elements in battles, such as the familiar '1 More' and 'Baton Pass' systems, and we have reworked the 'All-Out Attack' as a 'Triple Threat' with a positioning element."

ATSUSHI NOMURA, BUSINESS PRODUCER, ATLUS

"Some franchise fans may find tactical RPGs to be difficult, but we aimed to provide the sensation and experience of developing characters and organizing party members like RPGs."

geek



THE GEEK MAGAZINE EDITORS SHARE THEIR PICKS FOR WHAT TO BUY FOR THE GEEKIEST PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE.

IF YOU CAN'T FIND THEM AT YOUR LOCAL WALMART STORE, ALL OF THESE PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE AT WALMART.COM

ACCESSORIES

DO MORE WITH YOUR GAMING CONSOLE.

THRUSTMASTER FERRARI 458 SPIDER RACING WHEEL FOR XBOX SERIES X/S AND XBOX ONE

With the arrival of *Forza Motorsport*, Xbox Series X/S owners finally have a cutting-edge, hardcore racing sim. But if virtual gearheads want the most authentic simulation experience, they need a compatible racing wheel and pedals, like this model from Thrustmaster designed after the Ferrari 458 Spider. Features include adjustable wheel sensitivity, paddle shifters, and all the buttons you need to navigate your console.



SANDISK MICROSDXC MEMORY CARD FOR NINTENDO SWITCH

The number of great games you can play on Nintendo Switch has grown absolutely massive over the past six years. But even the most expensive model only comes with 64 GB of built-in storage, so unless you want to juggle your save data and games all the time, it helps to have a larger memory card. SanDisk's offerings come in a few different sizes—64GB, 128GB, 256GB and 512GB—to suit your budget and storage needs.



META QUEST 3

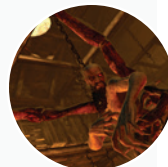
THE LATEST IN STANDALONE VR IS GETTING GREAT REVIEWS.

The new Meta Quest 3 is the most advanced standalone VR headset yet. In this case, standalone means you don't have to connect to a console or PC—everything you need is right there in the headset. While VR is also great for watching immersive videos and exploring whatever the metaverse is, the main appeal is gaming experiences that are unlike anything you can play on a 2D screen.

If you're not up on what VR gaming offers these days, here's a brief rundown of a few titles you can play on the Quest 3.

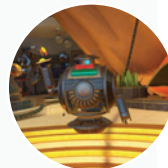
RESIDENT EVIL 4

This is a full, beginning-to-end remake of the survival horror classic built with virtual reality in mind. If you thought the original was scary, try fighting a chainsaw dude in VR.



I EXPECT YOU TO DIE 3: COG IN THE MACHINE

In this puzzle game (the third in a popular series), you're a James Bond-style secret agent trying to escape from devilishly designed contraptions.



RACKET CLUB

Playable solo or in multiplayer, this title takes elements of pickleball and tennis to create a familiar but fresh new racket sport that plays to VR's strengths.



CONTROLLERS

MAYBE THEY NEED A REPLACEMENT, MAYBE THEY JUST WANT A FRESH LOOK. WHATEVER THE REASON, CONTROLLERS ARE ALWAYS A SOLID GIFT FOR GAMING GEEKS.



XBOX ELITE WIRELESS CONTROLLER SERIES 2 - CORE (BLUE/BLACK OR RED/BLACK)

Now available in Vibrant Red or Blue, the Xbox Elite Wireless Controller Series 2 – Core offers all of the core (pun intended) features of the Xbox Elite Series 2 at a lower price. The adjustable-tension thumbsticks, shorter hair-trigger locks, and standard face buttons can then be further customized using three different profiles. Then, if you want to upgrade to swappable analog sticks, back paddles, and D-pad, you can always do so later.

PLAYSTATION 5 DUALSENSE WIRELESS CONTROLLER (VOLCANIC RED OR COBALT BLUE)

These two new colorways are functionally identical to the standard DualSense controller that comes with the PlayStation 5, meaning you get the same advanced haptic feedback, adaptive triggers, and touchpad functionality, in addition to the usual buttons and sticks. But now they're red—like lava!—or blue—like cobalt! Mineral-tastic! Look, we decided we were going to make all the gift guide entries the same length, so bear with us.



DUALSENSE EDGE

Built to look and feel like the standard PS5 controller you already know and love, Sony's first official pro controller then beefs up functionality with changeable analog stick caps, adjustable trigger sensitivity, additional back buttons, and a host of profile options for customizing your controller just the way you like it. Our favorite feature? If you have any problem with the analog sticks, you can easily swap them out rather than replacing the whole controller.

TOYS

FOR KIDS, COLLECTORS, OR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO PLAY.

FORTNITE SQUAD MODE 4 PACK (UNVAULTED EDITION) WALMART EXCLUSIVE

This Walmart-exclusive *Fortnite* action figure set features four different fully articulated, glow-in-the-dark figures inspired by some of the battle royale shooter's Epic-tier skins: Skull Trooper, Peely Bone, Spooky Team Leader, and Brainiac. Each figure comes with a different harvesting tool, so you can pretend they're building, having a melee showdown, or just gathering to contemplate why in the world a banana has bones.



LEGO PIRANHA PLANT

At this point, there have been numerous releases in LEGO's series of *Super Mario* sets, but the new LEGO Piranha Plant has to be one of the most surprising—and definitely one of the coolest. Built using 540 pieces and standing 9 inches tall, the Piranha Plant is a perfect gift for Mario fans to set up on a desk, sit on a shelf, or even sneakily hide among some real-life plants as a fun surprise.



NINTENDO SWITCH JOY-CON (PASTEL PURPLE/PASTEL GREEN OR PASTEL PINK/PASTEL YELLOW)

Over the past six years, Nintendo has done a great job of offering a variety of color options for the Switch's Joy-Con controllers, letting you slide a bit of extra personality onto the sides of your system—perfect for showing off on the go. This year, the Big N introduced two new pastel pairings, offering a softer vibe than previous options. Of course, you can also mix and match these new colors with your other Joy-Cons to be a real trendsetter.

MOVIES, TV, BOOKS, AND MORE

OLD MEDIA CAN HELP SCRATCH YOUR GEEK ITCH, TOO.

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE BLU-RAY

While 1993's *Super Mario Bros.* has gained something of a cult following at this point, this year's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* is the film that we've all really been waiting for. Created by *Minions* makers Illumination, the film sees Mario and his brother Luigi pulled into the Mushroom Kingdom, where they go on an adventure full of fun action scenes, colorful locations, and Nintendo cameos around every corner.



THE LAST OF US SEASON ONE BLU-RAY

Movies and TV shows based on video games haven't usually been great, but HBO's *The Last of Us* proved that an adaptation can satisfy both fans and the broader viewing public. Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey lead the Emmy-nominated series, which stays true to the spirit and overall narrative of Naughty Dog's post-apocalyptic survival horror game, but also reinvents key elements. Beware that, like the game, this one's not for kids.



GRAN TURISMO: BASED ON A TRUE STORY BLU-RAY

How do you make a movie about one of the world's most beloved racing sims? You base it on the real-life story of a teenager who loved that racing sim and then translated that fandom into an actual career as a professional race car driver. Watch the fascinating life of Jann Mardenborough unfold thanks to the talents of David Harbour, Orlando Bloom, Djimon Hounsou, Geri Horner, and Archie Madekwe as Mardenborough.



THE OFFICIAL FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S COOKBOOK

Anyone who's played the *Five Nights at Freddy's* games knows the series has one huge unanswered question. No, it's nothing to do with the animatronics that come to life and attack you. We're talking about something way more important: What does the food at Freddy Fazbear's Pizza taste like? Now you can find out, with over 40 recipes including pizza, burgers, and, uh, "Funtime Freddy's Dirty Wedges."



POKÉMON ADVANCED COLORING BOOK

If the kids you know are anything like the kids we know, then there are two things they're pretty certain to like: *Pokémon* and coloring.

For kids like those, you can't go wrong with the *Pokémon Advanced Coloring Book* from Bendon, which offers 40 high-quality, easily removable pages of beloved characters portrayed in some never-seen-before artwork. And, remember: Adults can relax by coloring some 'mons too.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ESSENTIALS KIT

Between the theatrical release of a big-budget movie starring Chris Pine, *Honor Among Thieves*, and the massively popular *Baldur's Gate 3* hitting PC and consoles, 2023 has proven to be a banner year for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Amid all that buzz, your friends or family may be curious to try the tabletop RPG that started it all, and this kit has everything you need to run your first campaign—except other players to round out the party.



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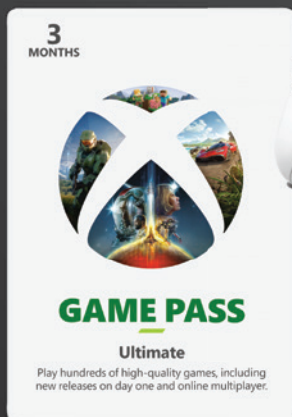
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12 FOR

LET THE *GEEK MAGAZINE* EDITORS TAKE YOU ON A WHIRLWIND TOUR OF A DOZEN OF THE MOST EXCITING GAMES DUE OUT NEXT YEAR.

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

TBD 2024

With at least three new movies on the horizon, a veritable flood of series coming to Disney+, and an ever-expanding universe of books, comics, and games, we may finally be hitting peak *Star Wars*. So what better time is there for the arrival of the first ever open-world action game set in a galaxy far, far away?

Out next year from Ubisoft and Massive Entertainment, *Star Wars Outlaws* follows a new character, Kay Vess, as she seeks to pull off one of the biggest heists in the history of the Outer Rim—a score big enough to let her start a new life.

Outlaws is set between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, so its events coincide with the height of the Galactic Civil War. It's a time of great peril, but also the perfect era to make plenty of credits if you've got guts and flexible morals.

Kay's journey will take her across the seedy underbelly of the galaxy, as she crosses paths with the Empire and several criminal syndicates, including some familiar to fans and others newly created for the game.

So far, Ubisoft has confirmed four explorable locations: the iconic desert world of Tatooine; Kijimi, a snowy planet first seen in

The Rise of Skywalker; Akiva, a jungle world created for the 2015 novel *Aftermath*; and Toshara, an original moon full of windswept canyons. Judging by some of the released footage, we may also be headed to Cantonica, Kay's homeworld and the site of casino city Canto Bight, as seen in *The Last Jedi*. Being an open-world game, each planet will have its own wide map to explore, with a single world comparable in size, Ubisoft has said, to two of the regions in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.

While on the surface of planets, Kay will have access to iconic speeder bikes, good not just for crossing long distances but also for high speed chases and mounted combat. And to keep the open-world feel alive even while planet hopping, Kay will also be able to seamlessly fly to and from orbit in her ship, the *Trailblazer*, engaging in dogfights and jumping to lightspeed to cross the galaxy.

It's a time of great peril, but also the perfect era to make plenty of credits if you've got guts and flexible morals.





Kay won't be alone on her quest, either. So far, we know for certain that she'll have at least two important allies, both of whom fill classic *Star Wars* roles. First is ND-5, a reprogrammed Clone Wars-era commando droid, ticking the boxes for both "robot companion" and "hulking co-pilot." Second is Nix, a little creature called a Merqaal who resembles a furry axolotl. That sets *Outlaws* up to easily satisfy the franchise's quota of "cute, cuddly, and merchandis-

able"—you know, Groggu, porgs, Ewoks, Lobot, et cetera.

Surprisingly, Nix isn't just there to look adorable, either. He'll actually play a role during gameplay, with Kay able to issue commands and have him flip switches, distract guards, or retrieve weapons. It's a neat touch that helps to compensate for the fact that, unlike many *Star Wars* game protagonists, Kay isn't a Force user, just a regular, non-powered scoundrel. While

she'll be able to make use of stealth tactics and some gadgets like a grappling hook, she primarily uses blasters in combat, with access to both pistols and rifles.

All told, *Star Wars Outlaws* is shaping up to be an ambitious project that offers something different from the franchise's other games—both in its grand scope and its focus on the shadier side of the universe. As you get ready to embark on this new adventure, just remember: Always shoot first.



FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX / PLATFORMS PS5

02.29.2024

On paper, *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* is the second part of Square Enix's three-part remake of one of its most beloved RPGs of all time. Now that Cloud and his friends have escaped from the looming walls of Midgar, a vast world awaits, filled with familiar locations from the original game such as Nibelheim, Cosmo Canyon, and the Gold Saucer.

While it's a direct continuation of the previous game, *Rebirth* will bring with it a number of gameplay and core upgrades to offer a better and more expansive experience. One big new addition to combat is Synergy Abilities. These special attacks feature two party members teaming up, and one neat factor of that is that every





potential pairing has its own unique Synergy Ability. As well, the arrival of additional playable characters on the team will offer even more variety in battle. As one example, Red XIII brings with him a special “revenge gauge” mechanic, which offers added options to those players who use him more defensively.

Of course, if you’ve played the first chapter of the trilogy, *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, and have seen any trailers for *Rebirth*, then you know that things aren’t quite that simple. Whereas the previous chapter teased the idea that something

The seeds that were sown by Tetsuya Nomura and the rest of the development team now look to be sprouting...



strange was going on in the retelling of the original game’s events, the seeds that were sown by Tetsuya Nomura and the rest of the development team now look to be sprouting, promising some big revelations and shocking continuity shifts for anyone who thinks they know what’s coming next.

In smaller terms, even slight differences to those locations mentioned above are hinting at some bigger storyline implications, including how we’ll be visiting each area and in what order. We’ve also seen the introduction of two key members of the cast—Cait Sith and Vincent Valentine—but much like with Yuffie, their arrivals might

not come quite when or where fans of the original game would assume.

On a bigger level is everything going on between Cloud, Zack, and Sephiroth. We don’t want to get too into all of the speculation going around about the trio for those trying to avoid spoilers, but we certainly seem to be on track for some wild twists as they walk ever closer to their destined—or, perhaps, not so destined—outcomes.

And, speaking of characters potentially avoiding their expected fates: Let’s just say that we’re not feeling too comfortable about placing any bets on a certain florist’s potential future just yet.



ALONE IN THE DARK

PUBLISHER THQ NORDIC / DEVELOPER PIECES INTERACTIVE / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

01.16.2024

While Capcom's PlayStation release *Resident Evil* gets credited with coining the term "survival horror" and helping create the subgenre, it was a different release four years earlier—Infogrames' *Alone in the Dark* in 1992—that truly laid the groundwork for everything that would follow. After choosing between protagonists Edward Carnby and Emily Hartwood, players were tasked with surviving the terrors that awaited in Derceto, a haunted mansion owned by Emily's late uncle.

The original *Alone in the Dark* is still considered a groundbreaking and influential horror experience to this day, and now, over 30 years later, THQ Nordic and developer Pieces Interactive look to take players back to Derceto in a modern-era remake.

Positioned as a "love letter" to the original, 2024's *Alone in the Dark* retains the first game's dedication to exploration, puzzles, combat, and storytelling, all reworked in a contemporary third-person



action horror title. While THQ Nordic has expressed that it was important to retain the spirit of what Infogrames' release offered players, they also had the goal of crafting something that could grow and evolve beyond just a simple remake.

One obvious example of that is the game's overall presentation and cast of characters. Technology has advanced far from what was possible back in 1992, and *Alone in the Dark* showcases just how much is now possible with horror games in



Over 30 years later, THQ Nordic and developer Pieces Interactive look to take players back to Derceto in a modern-era remake.

terms of atmosphere, lighting, and creating a sense of tension and suspense. Both Edward and Emily are back, now brought to life thanks to the voices and likenesses of David Harbour (*Stranger Things*) and Jodie Comer (*Killing Eve*), respectively. Depending

on whom you choose, you'll see alternate sides of the same story, get varying reactions from characters, and come at situations from different perspectives.

Another way that *Alone in the Dark* expands upon its predecessor is in its balance



between fighting creatures and solving puzzles. Of course, combat in these types of games has come a long way over the years, and our heroes will have far more options for dispatching the creatures they meet along the way. Delving into the mysteries of this world will be just as important as fighting monsters, however, and you can now decide how much help you get in that regard. If you need that assistance, it'll be there—but if you'd rather conquer the challenges that await within the dark halls of Derceto alone, then you'll be able to prove that you're up to the task.





PRINCESS PEACH: SHOWTIME!

PUBLISHER NINTENDO / DEVELOPER NINTENDO / PLATFORMS SWITCH

03.22.2024



Though Princess Peach has been playable in way too many *Mario* games to mention here, the Mushroom Kingdom's pink potentate has almost never starred in a game of her own. In fact, if you can believe it, the upcoming *Princess Peach: Showtime!* for the Nintendo Switch is just her second-ever turn in the spotlight, after 2006's *Super Princess Peach*.

And this time around, that spotlight is literal. That's because *Showtime!* follows Peach on an adventure in the Sparkle Theater, which has been taken over by the

evil sorceress Grape and her Sour Bunch. To save the day, the princess teams up with the theater's guardian, Stella, a character resembling a star atop a bow.

What's exciting about *Princess Peach: Showtime!* isn't just the focus on its leading lady, but the fact that it looks to be truly original among games set in the Mushroom Kingdom. *Super Princess Peach* was just a 2D platformer built around a new set of abilities, including, uh, getting too emotional and crying—no joke. But *Showtime!* is much

more than Peach having another go at the genre that Mario built. In fact, it's difficult to sum up all the things you'll be doing with a single label. Sure, there's still a bit of jumping around and fighting enemies, but the princess will also get into duels, decorate pastries, and hunt for clues to solve a mystery, thanks to a clever system that lets her switch between different roles, each with a new outfit and abilities. *Mario Lite* this is definitely not.

Sure, there's still a bit of jumping around and fighting enemies, but the princess will also get into duels, decorate pastries, and hunt for clues to solve a mystery...





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TEKKEN 8

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO / DEVELOPER BANDAI NAMCO / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

01.26.2024

With the recent releases of new chapters in legendary fighting game franchises such as *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, it's only fitting that another king of the ring, *Tekken*, is now poised to return as well.

Set six months after the previous entry, *Tekken 8* once again builds around the falling out of father and son. Except, instead

of that pair being Heihachi Mishima and his son Kazuya, the family's tragic fate now falls upon the younger Mishima and his offspring, Jin Kazama. And, to make things even spicier, Jin's mother Jun returns after years of being presumed dead.

Tekken 8 retains the tried-and-true 3D combat of previous iterations, as well as

more recent additions such as *Tekken 7*'s Rage Arts. At the same time, it also brings with it some important new options, the biggest of which may be the Heat System. The more aggressive you are in your fighting style during matches, the more Heat gauge you'll build, which you can then spend on options such as showy combo starters, additional moves specific to each character, or new movement techniques.

And, thanks to running on Unreal Engine 5 and focusing specifically on the current crop of consoles, *Tekken 8* will look just as good as it plays. This should especially be true for the game's characters, who have been rebuilt from the ground up with "high-fidelity skin, hair, and muscles that flex realistically to portray lifelike character animation," according to the team.

Thanks to running on Unreal Engine 5 and focusing specifically on the current crop of consoles, *Tekken 8* will look just as good as it plays.





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PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTPELLIER / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

01.18.2024

It's hard to believe—for us oldsters, at least—that it's been more than a decade since we last got a new *Prince of Persia* game. After two franchise reboots, one un-reboot, and a *Sands of Time* remake that's been stuck in development limbo for over three years, you might expect any comeback to be either weighed down by legacy or so radically different from what's come

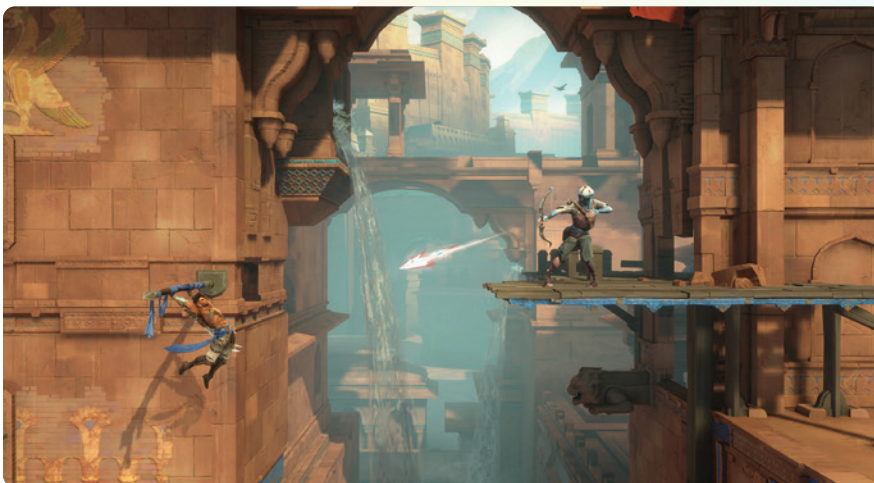
before as to be unrecognizable. But with *The Lost Crown*, Ubisoft Montpellier looks on track to dodge both pitfalls, like the nimble Prince of old avoiding traps.

Yes, this is a return to *Prince of Persia's* very earliest roots as a 2D platformer, but it hardly feels mired in its own history. For starters, you don't even play as the Prince this time around. Instead, you play as a

young warrior named Sargon, battling his way across the Metroidvania-style world of Mount Qaf to rescue the Prince from captivity. The game draws more closely on Iranian mythology than ever before to keep the setting fresh and authentic. And the combat is fast, fluid, and modern, relying on a mix of swordplay, archery, and special abilities to let you string together flashy combos.

This is a return to *Prince of Persia's* very earliest roots as a 2D platformer, but it hardly feels mired in its own history.

Yet, despite all those changes, what we've played still feels at home within the franchise. Sargon will dodge plenty of whirling blades and spike traps, harking back to the earliest games in the series. What's more, some of the time-twisting abilities he employs in combat and puzzle solving would be right at home in the *Sands of Time* trilogy—although, in a neat twist, the bad guys can use them now, too.




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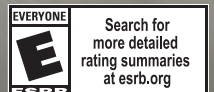


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AVOWED

PUBLISHER XBOX GAME STUDIOS / DEVELOPER OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PC

TBD 2024

With *Avowed*, Obsidian Entertainment is fusing its experience making immersive RPGs like *Fallout: New Vegas* and *The Outer Worlds* with the original fantasy

universe of its isometric *Pillars of Eternity* series. The result looks a lot like *The Elder Scrolls*, especially in its first-person combat mixing magic and weaponry. (We should



note, though, that *Avowed* doesn't sport a full open world, just large, interconnected zones.) You play as an envoy from the Aedyr Empire to the Living Lands, sent to investigate a mysterious plague corrupting the region. The setting also differs from traditional fantasy in one major respect: Obsidian has drawn inspiration from a slightly later era of human history, so early firearms are in play. Forget being an elf with a bow and arrow—the new hotness is *elves with guns*.



LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

PUBLISHER SEGA / DEVELOPER RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

01.26.2024



The zany *Like a Dragon* series—formerly known as *Yakuza*—is bringing together its past and present for a new chapter so ambitious, it can't be contained to Japan. Players will control both original series protagonist

Kazuma Kiryu and his successor Ichiban Kasuga in two different settings: Yokohama's Isezaki Ijincho district and Honolulu, Hawaii, with Ichi on a quest to reconnect with his long-lost mother. Fans can expect the



classic mix of exploration, minigames, and combat, mostly in the new turn-based RPG style (though Kiryu can temporarily shift back into old-school real-time brawling). *Infinite Wealth* goes hard on the side content too, with send-ups of *Pokémon*, *Crazy Taxi*, and even *Animal Crossing*, courtesy of a separate, fully customizable island where you can gather resources, befriend villagers, and build your dream home.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS. GAMES / DEVELOPER ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

02.02.2024



How long have we been waiting to get our hands on *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*? When it was first announced, director James Gunn hadn't even released his movie based on these villains-turned-reluctant-antiheroes yet. Now, he's in charge of the entire DC cinematic universe

and rebooting the whole continuity. Here's hoping the motley crew fares just as well in the world of gaming, with this four-player co-op action romp that sees Harley Quinn, Deadshot, King Shark, and Captain Boomerang trying to save the world from Justice Leaguers like Superman, Batman, and the

Flash after the evil alien Brainiac mind-controls the heroes. It's Rocksteady's first game since *Batman: Arkham Knight*, and also a major departure, with gameplay focused on shooting, floaty, *Crackdown*-style world navigation, and collecting loot.



BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

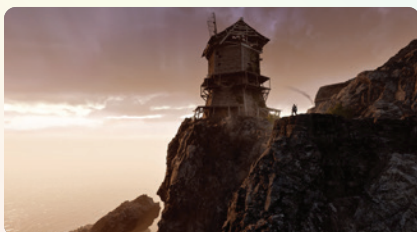
PUBLISHER FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT / DEVELOPER DON'T NOD / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

02.13.2024

This narrative-driven action RPG takes place in Colonial North America, just with way more ghosts than they ever mentioned in the history books. You play as Antea and Red, two lovers who've sworn an oath to rid our world of specters, which gets a little

more complicated when Antea dies and becomes a spirit herself. While developer Don't Nod is playing to its strengths—expect plenty of dialogue trees and decisions that impact the outcome of the story a la *Life Is Strange*—*Banishers* might be its most ambi-

tious title yet, with early footage indicating a scope and polish more in line with *God of War* than the studio's recent work. Particularly Kratosesque is the combat system, which sees you using Red's physical attacks in conjunction with Antea's ghost powers.



GRANBLUE FANTASY RELINK

PUBLISHER CYGAMES / DEVELOPER CYGAMES / PLATFORMS PS5, PS4, PC

02.01.2024



Saying that Japanese developer Cygames is taking its immensely popular RPG *Granblue Fantasy* in an entirely new direction by spinning it off into the RPG *Granblue Fantasy*

Relink might initially seem like it doesn't make sense, but we promise, it does. As compared to the original's free-to-play structure and more smartphone-oriented



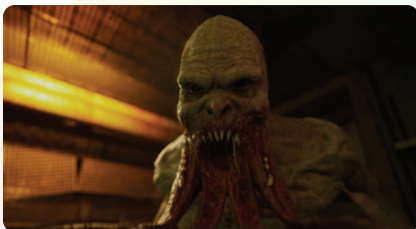
style of gameplay, *Relink* promises to be a full-on epic console experience, far grander in scale and storytelling than anything seen in the series before. Taking control of either a male or female main character, you set out on a journey through the Sky Realm alone or with up to three friends as you meet a variety of new and familiar characters, engage in more action-oriented battles, and follow a mysterious trail left by your father.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

PUBLISHER GSC GAME WORLD / DEVELOPER GSC GAME WORLD / PLATFORMS XBOX SERIES X/S, PC

Q1 2024

Over 14 years after *Call of Pripjat*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chernobyl* returns players to the franchise's version of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a post-apocalyptic, dark science-fiction take on the area surrounding the real-world 1986 nuclear disaster. Playing as a stalker, you'll head



out on a nonlinear journey through a brutal open world filled with dangerous mutants and deadly, reality-warping anomalies. Ukrainian developer GSC Game World blends first-person shooting, survival, and horror together in an experience that

promises to keep you both exhilarated and unnerved as your actions help determine the fate of the Zone and those connected to it. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* has taken a while to get here, but it will hopefully satisfy both longtime fans and new players alike.



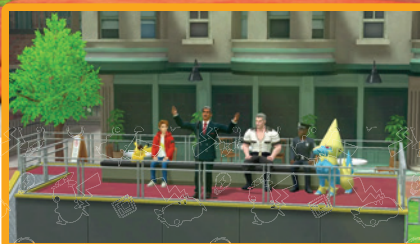
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Nintendo





GAME OF THE MONTH

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

A 2D PLATFORMING WONDER

No doubt needing a break from all of the craziness of the Mushroom Kingdom, Mario and his friends head off to the neighboring Flower Kingdom. Soon after meeting Prince Florian and the Poplins (flowery takes on Toads), things go awry: Bowser shows up, taps into the power of the magical Wonder Flower, and sets off to cause havoc all across the domain.

Thus begins *Super Mario Bros. Wonder*, a new 2D chapter of the series that harkens back to Mario's classic 8- and 16-bit adventures. All throughout the game, creative and colorful stages await, feeling familiar yet fresh thanks to the different creatures, obstacles, and landscapes scattered throughout the Flower Kingdom.

While it's clear that a lot of thought and artistry has gone into the game

on a basic level, stages truly blossom whenever you touch the Wonder Flower hidden in each. The energy released transforms the world in a unique way, from causing Super Stars to rain from the sky, to morphing our heroes into strange new forms. The amount of different Wonder Ef-

fects found throughout the game is staggering, becoming a legitimately game-changing feature that prevents things from ever getting dull.

Also helping in that regard are the new power-ups and the introduction of Badges, selectable special abilities that can boost your jumping

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER

NINTENDO

DEVELOPER

NINTENDO

PLATFORMS

SWITCH

RELEASE DATE

10.20.2023





■ *Super Mario Bros. Wonder's* online features add more to the game than you might initially expect.

skills, protect you from falls, and much more. Given it initially seemed like a completely random choice for a transformation, we really weren't expecting to love *Wonder's* new Elephant form as much as we did, but it's a ton of fun. We were, however, a tad disappointed in the new Bubble Flower. While it does provide for some handy new ways

to dispatch foes, the bubbles pop far too fast to make them as interesting of makeshift platforms as they could have been.

Surprises also come in *Super Mario Bros. Wonder's* multiplayer options. Local four-player couch co-op is still around and enjoyable (so long as you've got players who are good at sticking together), but

it's online where we were caught off guard. While you can't directly play with strangers over the internet, you *can* see them attempting the same stages you are, and even help one another avoid death in certain cases. *Wonder's* online options are technically limited, but genuinely help foster a sense of comradery that we simply weren't expecting.

Saying that Nintendo has produced yet another great new *Mario* game comes as no shock, but even in that, *Super Mario Bros. Wonder* is an achievement that deserves recognition. It is easily the best 2D platformer the series has seen in nearly 30 years, and serves to refresh both the franchise and its titular character. If this is the start of a new direction for Nintendo's side-scrolling *Mario* adventures going forward, then we can't wait to see what the future holds—and that's a wonderful feeling. 🍄

If this is the start of a new direction for Nintendo's side-scrolling *Mario* adventures going forward, then we can't wait to see what the future holds...






MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

SYMB CITY

With 2018's *Marvel's Spider-Man*, Insomniac Games delivered one of the best superhero games in recent memory. The studio proved it understood how to deliver on the central power fantasy of its web-slinging hero, both through acrobatic, hard-hitting gameplay and a story that remixed familiar elements into something new. When it followed up in 2020 with *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, it showed that success wasn't a one-off, delivering an equally great experience centered on a new character. To say that the third game—when the two Spideys would finally team up against one of their most iconic foes—faced sky-high expectations would be an understatement.

Despite that no-doubt daunting pressure, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* suc-

cessfully keeps up Insomniac's hot streak—at least for the most part, and at least where it matters most.

The biggest strengths of this latest entry come from the developer's mastery of the PlayStation 5 hardware. It's not just that the game looks good—though it does look phenomenal—but that the studio has also carefully considered how it can use the extra horsepower to improve gameplay. With a bigger, more detailed New York City to explore (including, for the first time, parts of Brooklyn and Queens), faster web-swinging, and jaw-droppingly speedy fast travel, *Spider-Man 2* is the best showcase yet for how Sony's current-

gen console can deliver experiences that simply wouldn't be possible on previous hardware.

And Insomniac certainly isn't resting on its laurels when it comes to the action, either. Nearly every aspect of the combat system has been iterated upon or reconsidered, with brawls that feel familiar but much deeper than anything in the first two games. Surprisingly, one of the additions that proves to be the most fundamental is actually also the simplest. Instead of dodging enemy attacks, you can now choose to parry them, too, and some attacks can *only* be parried. It's an option that allows you to push more aggressively dur-

It's not just that the game looks good...but that the studio has also carefully considered how it can use the extra horsepower to improve gameplay.

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER

SONY INTERACTIVE
ENTERTAINMENT

DEVELOPER

INSOMNIAC GAMES

PLATFORMS

PS5

RELEASE DATE

10.20.2023



■ Would a Metallica joke be too obvious here?

ing combat, upping the skill ceiling and challenge level without relying on cheap new enemy gimmicks.

Of course, one of the biggest selling points of the game is also the inclusion of an iconic villain, Venom, courtesy of a retelling of the symbiote saga. For those not up on their comics lore, that's a storyline in which Peter Parker gets a new alien suit, realizes wearing it is having some pretty not-great side-effects, and eventually rids himself of it—only for its new host to become the sinister Venom.

It's an ambitious storyline to tackle in a game, and Insomniac ups the challenge factor by putting a fresh spin on the characters and events from the source material, sprinkling in more villains like Kraven, the Lizard, and Sandman into the tale. And that's not even mentioning the biggest change, in that the game features two different playable Spider-Men—Peter and Miles—interwoven throughout the game, each with unique abilities and their own side stories.

Because Insomniac has been so ambitious, the narrative proves to

be the weakest aspect of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*—even if it only seems weak in comparison to its sterling predecessors. There's a lot going on here, sometimes at a breakneck pace, and you may find yourself missing the more grounded approach of the previous two games. We won't get into spoilers here, but the climax in particular is amped up to such an extreme level that it loses sight of what makes the original *Venom* story so compelling. Don't get us wrong: Spidey fans will no doubt appreciate seeing a lot of what unfolds. They just might also find it harder to care about the characters than in past games—and that's a shame, because that heart was a hugely important part of the series.

Still, there's no question that *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* ups the ante on every other aspect of the experience, improving upon its already amazing superhero fantasy in ways we never expected. That's enough to make it worth your time—and then some. [9](#)





1 ON 1

GHOSTRUNNER II

RADOSŁAW RATUSZNIK

GAME DIRECTOR ONE MORE LEVEL

After its release back in 2020, the original *Ghostrunner* became a surprise hit, as its blend of fast-paced first-person action and challenging difficulty provided a satisfying adrenaline rush of an experience set within a post-apocalyptic cyberpunk world. Now, in its sequel, developer One More Level hopes to recapture everything that made the first game a cult classic, while expanding and improving upon the gameplay in a variety of ways. To learn more about Jack the Ghostrunner's latest adventure, we chased game director Radosław Ratusznik throughout Dharma Tower as we tried to get some answers out of him.

Geek Magazine: How would you describe the *Ghostrunner* series to those who might not be familiar with it?

Radosław Ratusznik: It's a fast-paced action game where you take control of Jack the Ghostrunner—a cybernetic ninja equipped with a futuristic katana—fighting gangs, tyrants, and monstrosities of the post-apocalyptic world inside and outside of Dharma Tower. Dying is part of the core gameplay loop, and it's the process for

learning how to beat the more and more complicated challenges that the game is constantly throwing on your way.

Geek: The series has a reputation for having a challenging difficulty curve. What would you say to players who might be scared to give *Ghostrunner II* a try?

RR: I'm not going to lie—it's a challenging game. But still, even if you bounced off from the first *Ghostrunner*, I encourage you to give the sequel a chance! We've [introduced] new ways of dealing with the enemies in combat. Blocking and parrying are new lifesaving features that are simple to learn. Jack is now equipped with a couple of special abilities that you can use quite often to help yourself, such as a shuriken. On top of that, there are powerful Ultimate abilities that will give you aid in the most difficult situations.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

GOD'S TRIGGER, GHOSTRUNNER

Geek: What inspired you to broaden the game's world for *Ghostrunner II*?

RR: In the first game, we kept all the action inside the walls of Dharma, as the deadly solar radiation that is burning the Earth is a serious danger for human beings. It seems that it is not so harmful for Ghostrunners, so finally we are able to leave the Tower. The reason why we are leaving our home is deadly serious, so we are jumping on our newest toy, a motorcycle, in the chase after the deadly AI cult. Players can expect much more spacious arenas outside, and the more open structure on some levels is something fresh and unique for this game.

Geek: Can you tell us more about those new motorcycle sections?

RR: Jack as the Ghostrunner is pretty fast, but we were thinking about how we can make him even faster. So we came up with the idea of giving him a motorcycle as his vehicle. We were putting a lot of effort into this feature to become a new major addition to the gameplay. It is quite arcadey, and it's definitely not a motorcycle simulator, but it's a lot of fun and a pure adrenaline rush!

Geek: What feedback did you take from the first game to improve bosses in *Ghostrunner II*?

RR: The feedback we received was that some bosses were not that exciting because players had to wait quite a long time dodging the bosses' attacks for the short window of opportunity where they could actually attack the boss. Now, you can take a risk and play quite aggressively while dodging or blocking the upcoming attacks, so it is much more skill-related, and when you learn the bosses' attacks you can improve your times without the necessity of waiting for a boss to do some actions.

Geek: Cyberpunk is having a bit of a moment in all forms of media. If you could see Jack cross over into any other cyberpunk universe, which one would you choose?

RR: I personally would love to see a character inspired by Jack in CD Projekt's *RED Cyberpunk 2077* world. I think that kind of crossover would be huge for all the gamers around the world. 🐦

I'm not going to lie—it's a challenging game. But still, even if you bounced off from the first *Ghostrunner*, I encourage you to give the sequel a chance!

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