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ISSUE 96 OCTOBER 2023

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contents

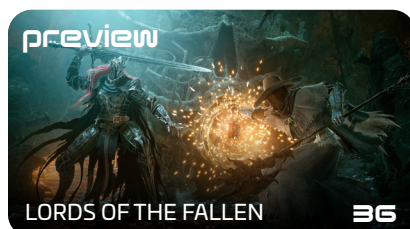


sections

editorial 6

game on 8

give to play 12





MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2
22

welcome

FROM THE EDITORS

CHART NOUVEAU

Consider, if you will, the humble video game map.

This month's cover game, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, has us thinking back on the other *Spider-Man 2*, the movie tie-in that launched in 2004 on PlayStation 2, GameCube, and Xbox. As the first open-world game starring everyone's favorite webslinger, the O.G. *Spider-Man 2* was remarkable and great for a number of reasons, but one aspect that we distinctly remember being wowed by those 19 long years ago (yes, we're old) was its in-game map. At any time, you could pause the action and see the whole game world of Manhattan, with every single building represented as a 3D model.

While it wasn't the first game to feature a pause screen map—even among big 3D open-world games, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* had beaten it to the punch by a few years—the level of detail was frankly astonishing for the time. The closest thing we have to an in-game map for the real world, Google Maps, didn't even start adding 3D buildings until 2007.

In fact, games have been offering virtual maps for so long that gamers of a certain age likely encountered the feature in a game before they did on any other screen. *Doom* and *The Legend of Zelda*

both sported rudimentary in-game maps years before internet mapping pioneer MapQuest went online. And the aforementioned *GTA* games let us drive around with an intuitive map that updated in real time in an era when hardly any cars had built-in GPS units. In a very real sense, playing games prepared us for where technology was headed. By the time the real world caught up, gamers already had practice.

While we can't say for certain that video game maps directly inspired any of the apps we use to navigate the real world today, it's been fascinating to watch both areas develop in tandem, getting more and more of the same features over time. With so many games focused on fantastical, impossible adventures, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that they also, like any artform, reflect the real world, changing alongside broader advances in society. We can't wait to see what helpful gaming feature makes the jump into the real world next (though we're really, *really* hoping it's fast travel).

To close things out, here's a quick map of the issue you hold in your hands. Alongside that *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* cover story, we've also got previews of *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, *Lords of the Fallen*, *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 - Turbocharged*, and *Sonic Superstars*, reviews of *Disney Illusion Island* and *Atlas Fallen*, and, of course, our regular features like Game On and Five to Play.

And remember, if you need help navigating the world of video games, be sure to keep reading *Walmart Gamecenter*, the magazine that keeps you at the center of all things gaming.

Josh Harmon and Mollie L Patterson
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october 2023

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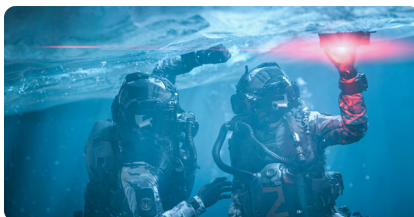
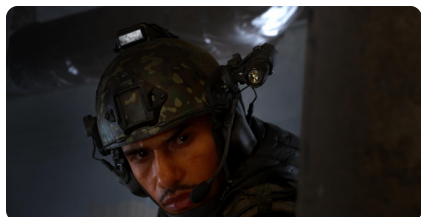
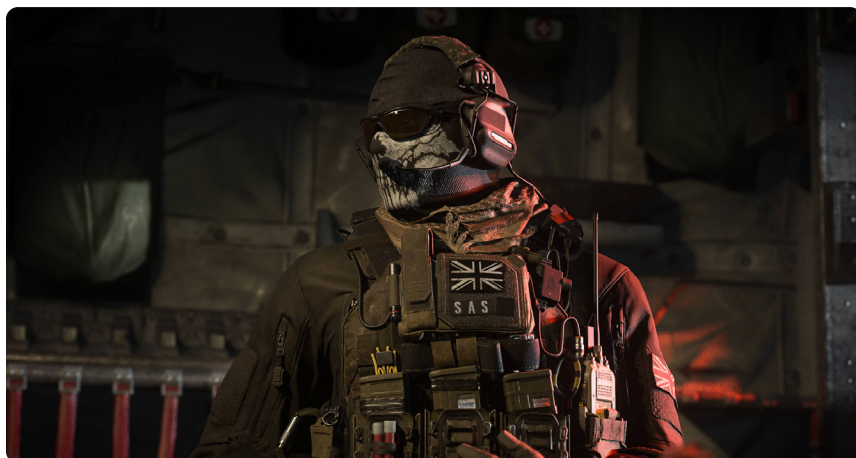
CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE III REVEALED AS THIS YEAR'S ENTRY

Activision has announced that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III* will be the next game in the megahit military shooter series, and it's due out this November.

While it's no surprise we're getting a follow-up to last year's popular *Modern Warfare II*, it is a shock we're getting one

so soon. *Call of Duty* has long alternated between different sub-brands from year to year, meaning *Modern Warfare III* is the fastest direct sequel in over 15 years.

Modern Warfare III picks up the story where the last game left off, with Captain Price and the rest of Task Force 141 working to defeat a new threat.



Well, not *entirely* new. Vladimir Makarov, the leader of the Russian ultranationalists from the original *Modern Warfare* trilogy, is finally entering the rebooted timeline. This new take on Makarov looks just as brutal as the original—and just as willing to use false flag terrorist attacks on his own country to achieve his sinister ends. Given that the last time we fought Makarov he successfully started World War III, Task Force 141 will have a serious challenge on its hands.

On the gameplay front, *Modern Warfare III* looks to refresh the campaign experience with a mix of traditional linear levels and new “open combat missions” that allow players to choose between different load-outs and paths as they play. In multiplayer, *Modern Warfare II* players can carry over their equipment into the new game, which will have 16 core maps—remakes of the original lineup from 2009's *Modern Warfare 2*, all modernized with new gameplay features. Fans can also expect new Ground War maps, the return of *Call of Duty: WWII*'s War mode, and post-launch support bringing 12 totally new 6v6 maps to the game.

In a first for the subseries, *Modern Warfare III* is also launching with a new iteration of the franchise's Zombies co-op survival mode. This time, the action will take place on an open-world map and offer a chance for your squad to team up with other groups to take on the undead threat together.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III releases on Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Windows PC on November 10th. You can catch up on the series by picking up *Modern Warfare II* on Walmart.com or at your local Walmart store.

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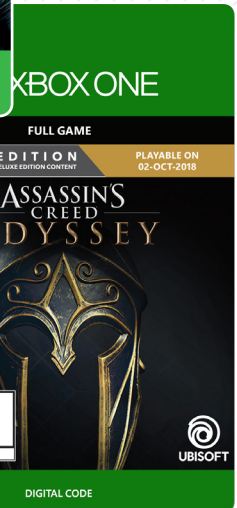
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4.

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* release calendar

SEP

29 **EA SPORTS FC 24**
EA SPORTS / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

29 **FATE/SAMURAI REMNANT**
KOEI TECMO / PS5, SWITCH, PS4, PC

OCT

3 **DISGAEA 7: VOWS OF THE VIRTUELESS**
NIS AMERICA / PS5, SWITCH, PS4, PC

3 **SILENT HOPE**
MARVELOUS / SWITCH, PC

5 **ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE**
UBISOFT / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC

6 **DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS**
NINTENDO, THE POKÉMON COMPANY / SWITCH

6 **SWORD ART ONLINE: LAST RECOLLECTION**
BANDAI NAMCO / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

10 **FORZA MOTORSPORT**
XBOX GAME STUDIOS / XBOX SERIES X/S, PC

13 **LORDS OF THE FALLEN**
CI GAMES / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC

17 **SONIC SUPERSTARS**
SEGA / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

19 **ENDLESS DUNGEON**
SEGA / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC

19 **HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED 2 - TURBOCHARGED**
MILESTONE / XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC

20 **MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2**
SONY / PS5

20 **SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER**
NINTENDO / SWITCH



24 **CITIES: SKYLINES II**
PARADOX INTERACTIVE / XBOX SERIES X/S,
PS5, PC

TRIPLE-A, SINGLE-PLAYER BLACK PANTHER GAME ON THE WAY FROM EA

EA is working to bring Wakanda to life in a new *Black Panther* game. The publisher recently announced the creation of a new studio, Cliffhanger Games, to oversee development on the title, which will be a story-driven, single-player, third-person action adventure set in the fictional African nation.

Cliffhanger is promising “an expansive and reactive world that empowers players to experience what it is like to take on



the mantle of Wakanda’s protector, the Black Panther.”

Cliffhanger studio head Kevin Stephens formerly led Monolith Productions, the developer behind *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Shadow of War*. Those games memorably featured the Nemesis system, which populated the world with enemies who would remember their interactions with you—and hold a grudge. The mention of a “reactive world” may point to a similarly innovative approach at the heart of the *Black Panther* game.

This isn’t the only Marvel game EA has in the works, and it’s not the only game featuring Black Panther currently in development. EA’s Motive Studios is building a game based on *Iron Man*, and a World War II-era Black Panther will feature prominently alongside Captain America in a still untitled adventure game on the way from *Uncharted* creator Amy Hennig and Skydance New Media.

You can shop for all the latest Marvel video games at Walmart.com or your local Walmart store.

XBOX GAME PASS CORE REPLACES XBOX LIVE GOLD

For over 20 years, Xbox Live Gold has been the go-to subscription service for Xbox gamers who wanted to play online together with friends or against unknown competitors from around the world. But now, Microsoft has announced that Xbox Live Gold is no more.

In its place, say hello to Xbox Game Pass Core, the recently launched replacement subscription service that gives you access to all of the online multiplayer features of your Xbox console, while also offering access to a special selection of Xbox Game Pass titles.

As opposed to the other tiers of Game Pass, which at the time of writing feature over 400 games to choose from, Xbox Game Pass Core provides a “library of over 25 high-quality games” according to Microsoft. As a few examples, subscribers can play titles such as *Among Us*, *Forza Horizon 4*, *Halo 5: Guardians*, *Doom Eternal*, and *Gears 5*.

No matter which tier of Xbox Game Pass plan is right for you, you can always pick up digital subscription cards on Walmart.com or at your local Walmart store.





BELOVED CHARACTERS RETURN TO THE FIGHT IN NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL 2

Back in 2021, developers Fair Play Labs and Ludosity, along with publisher GameMill Entertainment, teamed up to release *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl*. A new take on Nintendo's beloved *Super Smash Bros.* series, the fighting game saw a wide array of iconic Nickelodeon characters battling it out to determine which star would shine the brightest.

Now, the trio are coming together again to give fans a bigger, better, and brawl-ier experience in *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2*. According to GameMill, the sequel is "a wholly new game experience that's more accessible and competitive than ever, made for fans of every skill level."

Of course, the first thing fans of the original will want to know is which new characters will join the roster. So far, we've received three confirmations: SpongeBob's ill-tempered neighbor Squidward Tentacles, show antagonist Plankton inside a giant (to him) mech, and 11-year-old boy genius Jimmy Neutron. *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2* won't just focus on the new fighters, however, as the returning cast will receive refinements and even more variety in their fighting abilities.



In fact, the core gameplay is getting some major overhauls over the original *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl*, as the entire game has been "rebuilt and reimagined from the ground up." Character models and stages are receiving much-improved visuals as well, and new ultra-powerful Supers can put the finishing touch on an opponent in order to secure the win. What's more, your friends won't be able to hide behind the excuse of owning a different gaming platform than you do, as *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2* will offer seamless crossplay for its four competitors, boosted by improved netcode across consoles and PC.

Also getting a boost in the sequel are the selection of additional modes. At launch, *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2* will offer up a "unique campaign featuring roguelike elements," according to GameMill, where players must stop *Danny Phantom* archvillain Vlad Plasmius from conquering the Nickelodeon universe. Or, when you don't feel like getting deep into a campaign, you'll be able to jump into a slew of minigames either alone or with friends, competing in challenges such as Pinch the Blimps, Whack-a-Bot, and Irken Armada Bootcamp Survival.

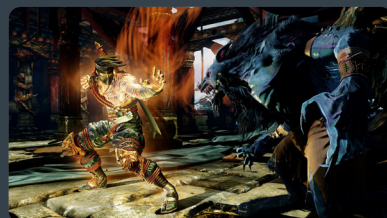
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2 is set for release this fall on Xbox Series X/S, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, PS4, and PC. To pre-order one of the various editions that'll be available—or to pick up the original *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl* if you don't already have it—head over to Walmart.com or your local Walmart store.

AFTER FIVE YEARS, KILLER INSTINCT GETTING NEW UPDATES

In *Walmart Gamecenter #94*, when opening our preview of *Baldur's Gate III*, we wrote that "in our hobby, nothing is ever truly dead."

We bring further validation of that statement with this latest piece of surprising news: After five years of silence, *Killer Instinct* is now about to get a brand new 10th anniversary update.

"The whole time, we've been listening to our players, and it's time—again—where this *Killer Instinct* that we've been having so much fun with, it's time to evolve it one more time," James Goddard, head of *Killer Instinct* at Xbox, said in a surprise announcement during this year's EVO fighting game championship.



According to Goddard, the team's first step is to update the matchmaking and other related services, a process that started back in May. Beyond that, the game will utilize the power of the Xbox Series X and Series S to bump the maximum resolution to 4K. Goddard then revealed that the game's former developer, Iron Galaxy, has returned to help build the update, which also includes a balance patch for the game's roster targeted for this fall.





1

* BUY NOW

MORTAL KOMBAT 1

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS. GAMES / **DEVELOPER** NETHERREALM STUDIOS / **PLATFORMS** XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, PC / **RELEASE DATE** 09.19.2023

It's important to know when to ask for help. That seems to be the lesson the good people of NetherRealm Studios are trying to impart with the newest installment of this bloody good fighting game series. Not only will *Mortal Kombat 1* boast an all-new story mode in a rebooted universe, but when playing solo or against others, you'll be able to ask a fellow kombatant to help you out mid-brawl as a Kameo Fighter. When fighting Johnny Cage as Liu Kang, for instance, you can have Sub-Zero jump into the fray and hit Johnny with a freezing blast. Kameo attacks are also contextual, and can be deployed twice in rapid succession, even within the same combo, provided you have enough juice in the Kameo meter. Just be careful, as Kameo Fighters are people, too, and can be injured, though they can also take the brunt of an attack meant for you.

[W]hen playing solo or against others, you'll be able to ask a fellow kombatant to help you out mid-brawl as a Kameo Fighter.

s to play



2

* BUY NOW

FAE FARM

PUBLISHER PHOENIX LABS / DEVELOPER PHOENIX LABS / PLATFORMS SWITCH, PC / RELEASE DATE 09.08.2023

"*Fae Farm* is a cozy farm sim where you and up to three other players can adventure together on the magical island of Azoria. You begin by arriving in Azoria and crafting humble accommodations on a starting homestead. Over the course of your adventures, you'll explore a varied world filled with mysteries, befriend numerous people, and delve into the depths of Azoria in an effort to return the land to its former luster. We're all huge fans of the genre, so we took inspiration from such games as *Harvest Moon* and *Animal Crossing*. But we were also inspired by some of our favorite adventure games, such as *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, and wanted to give you that same sense of wonder. Where *Fae Farm* is different is that we've hand-crafted a unique world and aesthetic, one filled with magic that manifests itself in nearly all aspects of the gameplay and story over time."

ISAAC EPP, GAME DIRECTOR, PHOENIX LABS

"Over the course of your adventures, you'll explore a varied world filled with mysteries, befriend numerous people, and delve into the depths of Azoria..."



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Nintendo



s to play



EA SPORTS FC 24

PUBLISHER EA SPORTS / **DEVELOPER** EA VANCOUVER, EA ROMANIA / **PLATFORMS** XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PS4, PC / **RELEASE DATE** 09.29.2023

"EA Sports FC 24 represents a new era for The World's Game, football (or soccer). You'll find the best players from the biggest clubs, leagues, and competitions around the globe playing together in the most authentic football experience ever created, with access to more than 19,000 athletes across 700 teams and 30 leagues, representing both men and women footballers. For EA Sports FC 24, we're introducing three cutting-edge technologies powering unparalleled realism in every match: HyperMotionV (available on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC), which uses volumetric data from more than 180 professional men's and women's football matches to ensure player movements accurately reflect real-world action; PlayStyles optimized by Opta, which makes athletes more authentic by interpreting real-world player data from Opta and other sources; and an enhanced Frostbite Engine, which delivers The World's Game in lifelike detail, bringing a new level of immersion to each match."

SAM RIVERA, SENIOR PRODUCER, EA SPORTS

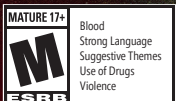
"You'll find the best players from the biggest clubs, leagues, and competitions around the globe playing together in the most authentic football experience ever created..."

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With Xbox Series X|S

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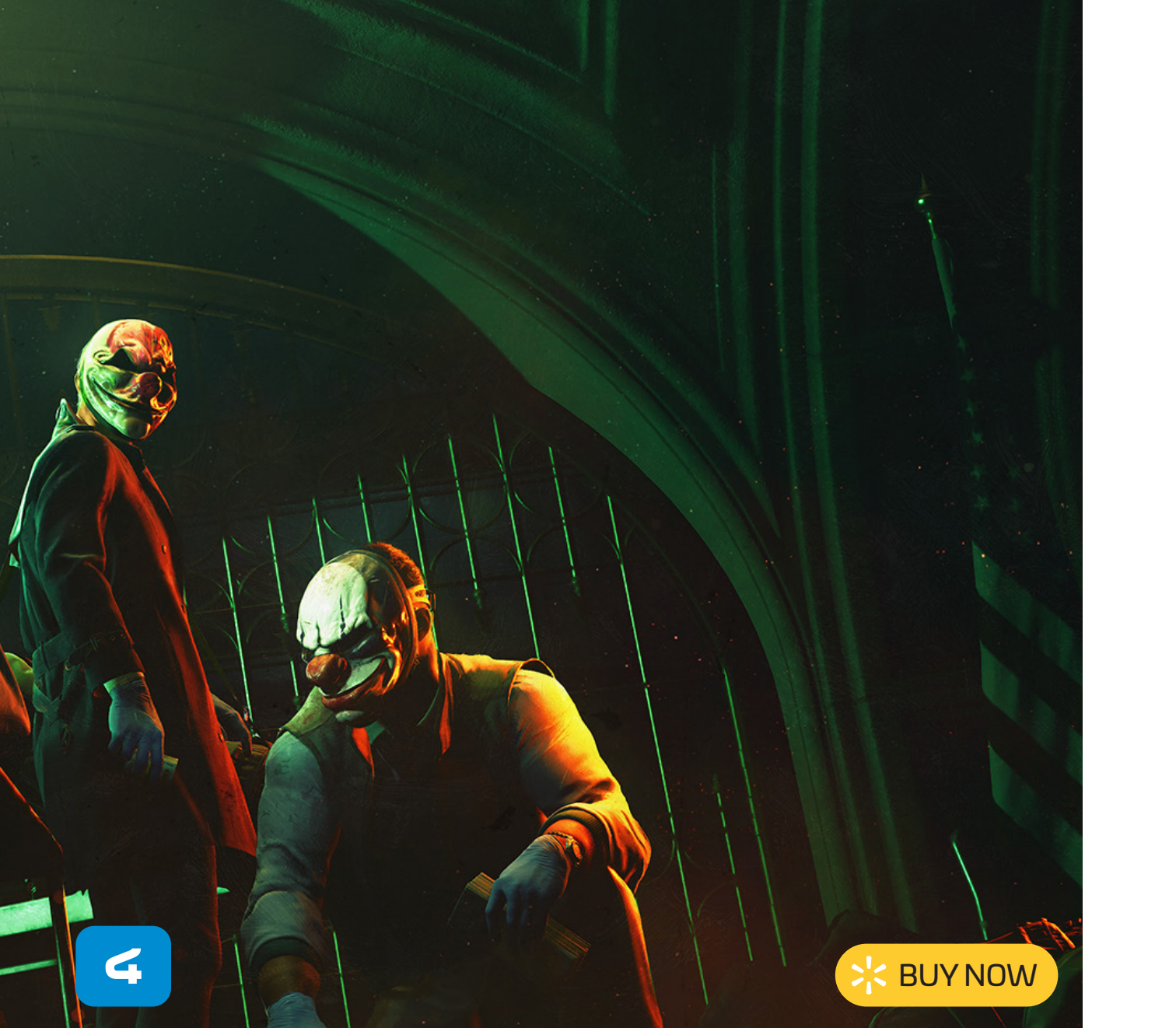
Microsoft



Game and consoles each sold separately.







PAYDAY 3

PUBLISHER DEEP SILVER / **DEVELOPER** STARBREEZE ENTERTAINMENT / **PLATFORMS** XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5, PC / **RELEASE DATE** 09.21.2023

"While there are other 4-person co-op games, and ones with heisting and robbery themes, no other series combines the two in the way *Payday* does. In *Payday 3*, the gang—Dallas, Hoxton, Wolf, and Chains—didn't retire quite as clean as they thought they did and, five years later, are forced back into a life of crime in New York City. An evolution of the series, *Payday 3* has a living, breathing world, with the streets of the city coming to life with pedestrians walking and cars driving. Civilians are also more of a resource; you can use them as human shields, or can use hostages when negotiating with first responders. *Payday 3* also features 100 new skills, ensuring that you and your crew have the right ones for the job, as well as an updated arsenal of weapons players can customize with modifications or paint jobs."

ALMIR LISTO, GLOBAL BRAND DIRECTOR/HEAD OF COMMUNITY, STARBREEZE ENTERTAINMENT

"An evolution of the series, *Payday 3* has a living, breathing world, with the streets of the city coming to life with pedestrians walking and cars driving."



5

* PREORDER

FATE/SAMURAI REMNANT

PUBLISHER KOEI TECMO / DEVELOPER OMEGA FORCE / PLATFORMS PS5, SWITCH, PS4, PC / RELEASE DATE 09.29.2023

"*Fate/Samurai Remnant* is an action RPG set in the age of the samurai. A peaceful town is suddenly engulfed in the flames of the Waxing Moon Ritual, a battle in which seven participants summon historical heroes called 'Servants' to fight each other. A mysterious Servant named Saber appears in front of main character Iori Miyamoto, and [they] always act as a team of two, [utilizing] various cooperative moves and breathtaking pursuits when fighting enemies. In addition to the hack-and-slash element of *Remnant*, you can also combine special mountings to create a powered-up sword that looks just the way you like it. This is (probably) the first time 'sword maintenance' is represented in a game. Iori, a samurai, takes care of his beloved sword every day, and a well-cared-for sword with a good grip will buff the amount of experience gained by the player."

RYOTA MATSUSHITA, DIRECTOR, KOEI TECMO GAMES

"Iori, a samurai, takes care of his beloved sword every day, and a well-cared-for sword with a good grip will buff the amount of experience gained by the player."



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cover story

* PREORDER

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

BACK
IN
BLACK

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER
SONY INTERACTIVE
ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER
INSOMNIAC GAMES
PLATFORMS
PS5
RELEASE DATE
10.20.2023



With *Marvel's Spider-Man*, Insomniac Games delivered spectacularly on the promise of letting players become the web-slinging hero in a sprawling open-world experience. But for many Spider-Man fans, some of the game's most exciting moments came at the very end, in the form of the mid- and post-credits stingers.

To cap off an epic adventure that saw Peter Parker face down some of his most memorable villains, Insomniac upped the ante for any future sequel in a big way. Now Miles Morales had his own spider-powers, giving this universe not one, but *two* Spider-Men. And lurking just around the corner to menace them both was an even bigger and more iconic threat: the sentient black alien goo known as the symbiote. Those two teases will finally pay off in *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*.

"Like we did in our first *Spider-Man* game, our goal is to deliver what people love about the symbiote



from all forms of media, but also put our own spin on certain things," explained senior creative director Bryan Intihar.

Other than Spidey's origin story, the symbiote saga is the most re-

visited storyline across *Spider-Man* comics, animation, movies, and games. In *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, we'll definitely see some familiar events unfold: Peter merges with the symbiote, gaining new powers, but with some not-so-great changes to his personality. And we know the symbiote eventually finds a new host, using what it learned about Spider-Man to become one of the hero's most dangerous foes, Venom,

■ It wouldn't be the symbiote saga without at least some light body horror.

"[O]ur goal is to deliver what people love about the symbiote...but also put our own spin on certain things."

BRYAN INTIHAR, SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR

SWINGING IN

We asked the developers at Insomniac Games what aspect of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* they were most excited for players to experience. You'll find the answers from five key members of the team throughout the cover story.

JACINDA CHEW
SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

"I'm excited for people to experience our story as it unfolds via gameplay. Although we've been teasing a lot, there is still much more we haven't revealed. I've spent a lot of time working on everything Venom and symbiote, so there will be many interesting visuals that will accompany the symbiote story, especially since the symbiote can take on and create so many different forms due to its nature."

"When it came time to choose our villains for this game, we made a conscious decision to mix things up thematically..."

BRYAN INTIHAR, SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR

chillingly voiced in the game by *Candyman's* Tony Todd.

But we should expect the unexpected, too. Intihar has confirmed that Venom will have a different host than the usual Eddie Brock, though exactly who remains a mystery. (Fan theories based on the trailers point to Pete's good friend Harry Osborne, but that may just be misdirection.) And having Miles as a second playable hero, more experienced after his starring role in an eponymous 2020 spin-off, offers opportunities for even bigger surprises as the story unfolds.

What's more, Venom won't be the only villain our Spider-Men face. Just like the first game drew heavily from

Spidey's rogues' gallery, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* will draw a number of classic baddies into the story—many of them sharing a common thread, according to Intihar.

"When it came time to choose our villains for this game, we made a conscious decision to mix things up thematically," he said. "While the game relied on tech for several of our adversaries, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* has more of that 'science gone wrong' or monster feel."

It's certainly safe to call Venom monstrous. Also confirmed to appear is Lizard, the reptilian alter ego of Dr. Curt Connors created in a failed lab experiment, so he clearly





ticks both boxes. Beyond that? You may want to start combing through your *Spider-Man* back issues to see what science-y, monster-y baddies you can find.

Besides Venom, however, the villain who's featured most prominently in what we've seen of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* is Kraven the Hunter, who's drawn to New York City by the prospect of going toe-to-toe with not just Peter and Miles, but their foes as well. Given that a great strength of Insomniac's *Spider-Man* games has been their narratives, and particularly the nuanced way they treat their supervillains, a big dude in leopard print who's just, like, *really* into hunting may not seem like the most natural choice. But the writing team made sure their version of Sergei Kravinoff had enough depth to fit into this universe.

"Kraven was a fun and challenging character to work with," said Jon Paquette, senior narrative director. "On the surface, he's a very simple character—he's a hunter looking for the ultimate prey. But we had to dig a little bit deeper, and ask the question

"Why?" No spoilers, but for us the answer always has to come from a very human place. Our characters, *all* of them, need to have relatable human motivations and emotions."

Of course, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* is doing more than just telling the next chapter of the story. Insomniac is also using the sequel to push the envelope when it comes to gameplay, with an improved or expanded approach to everything that made the first game a joy to play. Chief among those pleasures was getting around New York City using all of

■ Peter's symbiote powers are especially handy when it comes to crowd control.

MIKE FITZGERALD TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

"I could list any number of little bits of this game, from exhilarating action sequences, to hilarious Spidey quips, to emotional story moments that hit me right in the gut. But nothing beats that moment when you run straight up the side of a tall skyscraper and launch yourself up over the edge to see a massive city laid out before you, full of big adventure, little details, collectibles, Marvel easter eggs, and a dramatic *Spider-Man* story just waiting to be uncovered."

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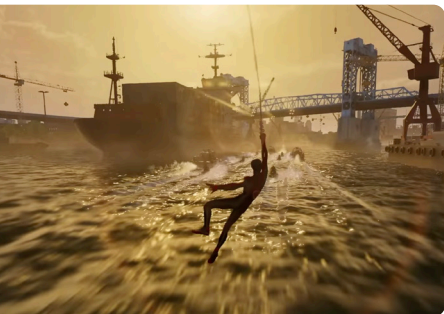
XBOX SERIES X|S

XBOX ONE

PS5 | PS4

NINTENDO
SWITCH





WITH GREAT POWER COMES... WAY FASTER SWINGING

Marvel's Spider-Man 2 is the first game in the series to release exclusively on PlayStation 5. For Insomniac Games, being able to design the game to take full advantage of the console's technological horsepower meant a chance to push the graphics and gameplay even further.

"In *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, you'll find yourself in a city that's twice as big as before, and packed with far more detail and activity than in our past *Spider-Man* games," explained Mike Fitzgerald, technical director. "Coney Island, in particular, is an area that teems with life in a way that would have been impossible on older hardware."

What's more, Fitzgerald shared that the PS5's added power, coupled with some new movement abilities, will allow Spider-Man to swing through the city twice as fast as in previous games. "Combine that with the Slingshot Launch that lets the player go even faster and we're exercising the low latency and exceptional bandwidth of the PS5 storage infrastructure in a way that's crucial to the design of the game."



■ Norman and Harry Osborn will clearly play a major role in the story—but will things go exactly how we expect?

Spider-Man's varied abilities, so it's no surprise that Insomniac has expanded the experience there, both by enlarging the map (see sidebar "Hometown Heroes") and by adding new ways to get around.

"For *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, we wanted to give the players new and exciting options for traversal," said Ryan Smith, senior game director. "Since swinging is the core of our Spider-Man traversal experience, we wanted to make sure that the new abilities would work with our swinging system and build upon that core."

One flashy addition on that front is the ability to glide through the air using Web Wings, which also serve as a neat reference to the underarm webbing Spider-Man sometimes sports in the comics. "You can build up a ton of speed and height by swinging, then you can pop the Web Wings and glide along using that speed," Smith told us. "It's really fun to weave back and forth between the two as you travel the world. We have upgrades

for both Web Wings and swinging to add depth to the whole experience."

No matter how you get around New York, you'll want to keep a closer eye on your surroundings, too, as a few new traversal options are tied to the environment. There's the Slingshot Launch, where you

"For *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, we wanted to give the players new and exciting options for traversal."

RYAN SMITH, SENIOR GAME DIRECTOR

RYAN SMITH
SENIOR GAME DIRECTOR

"I'm most excited for players to go on an epic journey with two Spider-Heroes. Whether it's switching between heroes while exploring an expanded Marvel's New York, upgrading and customizing Miles' and Peter's unique abilities or shared tech, or the high-stakes story that will challenge our heroes like never before—having both Miles and Peter together is a huge part of this game, and I can't wait for everyone to experience it."





can use rooftop structures to hurtle Spidey forward with a huge speed boost, and wind tunnels and up-drafts that can get you gliding faster or higher with the Web Wings.

Both Peter and Miles get new abilities to help them in stealth and

combat, too, but their powers will develop in different directions to reflect their individual stories. For Peter, that means a suite of new skills enabled by his connection with the symbiote.

“For us, the symbiote is all about power and transformation. Peter’s

symbiote combat abilities really reflect that—channeling that power in a more visceral way than we’ve seen before,” Smith said. “These moves also give Peter a way to physically engage multiple enemies, launching them in the air with Symbiote Strike or slamming them back down with multiple symbiote tendrils.” Still, given the corrupting nature of the symbiote, it’s a safe bet that it won’t feel entirely like a power-up. Smith teased “other ways that we’ll see the symbiote’s power and the effect it has on Peter reflected in gameplay,” which sounds at least a little ominous.

■ Thankfully, Miles has new and returning Venom powers to help him out of sticky situations like this.



JON PAQUETTE SENIOR NARRATIVE DIRECTOR

“I’m honestly just excited for players to pick up where [they] left off with *Marvel’s Spider-Man: Miles Morales*. There are many new things in *Marvel’s Spider-Man 2*, but a lot of familiar faces as well. And the stakes have never been higher. The experience is just so much fun to play—I can’t wait for people to get the controllers in their hands and jump back into this epic world and story!”



HOMETOWN HEROES

One of the strangest things about open-world *Spider-Man* games is that they've almost universally confined the action to Manhattan. From a gameplay standpoint, sure, it makes perfect sense. Manhattan is the New York City borough with the densest, tallest buildings, making it the best playground for Spidey to swing around. But Peter Parker is, you know, famously from Queens. And *Insomniac* doubled the weirdness when it introduced Miles Morales, whose Brooklyn roots are a big part of his identity.

Well, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* finally lets its heroes play on their home turf, with an expanded map that includes portions of both Brooklyn and Queens. In addition to doubling the area of the game's open world, the new boroughs will offer added variety in the form of neighborhoods with a more residential feel, and recreations of some of their most iconic landmarks.

And if you're worried it won't be as fun to get around without as many skyscrapers, well, what do you think those Web Wings are for?



As for the game's younger Spider-Man, we already saw Miles develop a new set of bioelectric powers in his solo spin-off. These Venom abilities—no relation to the symbiote—will get pushed even further in *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* with Evolved Venom powers.

"Thunder Burst and Chain Lightning are more volatile than his previous bioelectric abilities, putting more

emphasis on the shock of the initial attack and enabling Miles to reach enemies from longer distances," Smith explained.

As for what prompts Miles to develop these new abilities—and why they appear to have changed in color from his earlier Venom powers? Well, there's an unexpected catalyst behind it all, in the form of a returning villain.

■ Don't ever insult Kraven's fashion choices.





“We always want our characters to be growing and changing, so for Miles in this game we wanted to have an internal ‘engine’ for what is driving these external changes.”

JON PAQUETTE, SENIOR NARRATIVE DIRECTOR

“We always want our characters to be growing and changing, so for Miles in this game we wanted to have an internal ‘engine’ for what is driving these external changes,” said Paquette, the senior narrative director. “One of the characters that reappears in our story is Martin Li, aka Mr. Negative. It is this reappearance that triggers the change within Miles. And we’re excited for players to experience how these changes occur, both outside and inside of Miles.”

After the success of *Marvel’s Spider-Man*, no one would’ve blamed Insomniac for delivering a sequel that was essentially more of the same. It’s clear, however, that the team took the promise it made players at the end of the last game seriously. Not only is the studio tackling one of the biggest Spidey stories in the canon

and adding a second playable hero to the mix, it’s also expanding just about every corner of an already teeming experience with new ways to live out the Spider-Man fantasy. It’s an effort so ambitious, you might even call it heroic. [G](#)

■ You think Spidey’s Black Suit could look this shiny on last-gen? As if.

BRYAN INTIHAR
SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR

“Spider-Man has been my favorite superhero since the days I wore Underoos; there’s just something about the character—whether it’s the suit, the heart and humor, the relatability and, of course, the swinging—that makes the character such a fan favorite. And now we get to put people back in the mask and be not one but two Spider-Heroes, each with their own story and abilities, in a massive world that really encourages more exploration and discovery than ever before.”

preview

ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

EYE OF THE TIGRIS

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER
UBISOFT
DEVELOPER
UBISOFT BORDEAUX
PLATFORMS
XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5,
XBOX ONE, PS4, PC
RELEASE DATE
10.05.2023

 PREORDER



It's fitting that a series all about diving into history would eventually have to look to its own past for inspiration. With *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, Ubisoft is attempting to capture the magic of the earliest games in the series with a brand new adventure. Rather than a sprawling, loot-filled RPG like *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, *Odyssey*, or *Origins*, *Mirage* is a more streamlined experience, one with a denser urban setting and a throwback emphasis on stealth and parkour. In essence, rather than re-making the original *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft has instead looked to it as a template for a brand new game while throwing in plenty of modern upgrades to boot.

Mirage follows Basim Ibn Ishaq, a character first introduced in *Valhalla*, through a much earlier chapter of his

story. Basim begins the game as an orphaned thief on the streets of 9th century Baghdad, and we'll witness him discover, join, and climb the ranks of the proto-Assassin group known as the Hidden Ones.

The historical backdrop of the game is a period known as the Anarchy at Samarra, when—to give you the extremely abridged version—the leaders of the ruling Abbasid Caliphate kept getting assassinated, and

the Turks then laid siege to Baghdad, eventually conquering the city and installing their own leader. Obviously, that's pretty fertile ground for *Assassin's Creed*'s brand of stab-happy historical fiction.

Gameplay in *Mirage* offers a blend of the old and new, bringing back a handful of features that have been absent from the series while keeping some more recent additions intact. One returning feature is

■ Though *Mirage* places a throwback emphasis on stealth, sometimes your only choice is to fight head-on.

Ubisoft is attempting to capture the magic of the earliest games in the series with a brand new adventure.





THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

One key component of *Assassin's Creed Mirage's* "classic" approach is its length—or, to be more accurate, its lack thereof. You usually wouldn't expect to hear a developer tout the fact that its latest sequel takes *less* time to complete than its previous games, but Ubisoft has publicly confirmed that *Mirage* will come in at a comparatively breezy 20 to 30 hours, putting it in line with the earliest games in the series.

That's obviously still a lot of game, but it's also a step back from the ballooning runtimes of the most recent games in the series. According to user reported stats on HowLongToBeat.com, the two most recent *Assassin's Creed* games, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, took completionists, on average, over 130 hours to wrap up. Different players have different tastes, of course, and while some may appreciate an experience that takes more than five full days to finish, others may be intimidated by the time commitment. It's nice to see Ubisoft—which has already confirmed another sprawling AC action-RPG is on the way soon, too—is thinking about both groups.

■ Even Basim's outfit and equipment call to mind the first *Assassin's Creed*, though *Mirage* is set three centuries prior.

"social stealth," which allows you to blend into a crowd to sneak past or hide from guards. The notoriety system is back as well, meaning if you take too many high profile actions, guards will more quickly become suspicious of you, even if you're out in a public area.

In another throwback, *Mirage* ditches experience points and an endless stream of loot in favor of more straightforward progression. As you complete missions and climb the ranks of the Hidden Ones, you'll unlock new tools, provided to you by the inventor (and real-life historical figure)

Abu Jafar Muhammad. Basim's arsenal will grow to include smoke bombs, blow darts, throwing knives, and, of course, the iconic hidden blade.

As for those newer elements, *Mirage* gives Basim access to a bird companion—the eagle Enkidu—which he can use to scout his surroundings, continuing a feature first introduced in *Origins*. Basim also has an entirely new ability in the form of Assassin's Focus, a power that lets you queue up multiple assassinations before stringing them together seamlessly, with Basim moving so quickly it seems like he's actually



Lest you think you'll be chain-stabbing your way through the whole game, you'll need to charge up Assassin's Focus by performing successful stealth kills first.



teleporting. Lest you think you'll be chain-stabbing your way through the whole game, you'll need to charge up Assassin's Focus by performing successful stealth kills first.

With its mix of classic and modern gameplay elements and a story that will take players to the birthplace of the modern Order of Assassins, *Assassin's Creed Mirage* looks poised to be a fitting tribute for the series' 15th anniversary—and in a way that's especially fitting for the saga. After all, it's an entirely new game that's tapping into the genetic memory of its distant ancestors. So *meta*. [G](#)



preview

✱ PREORDER

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

RETURN OF THE LORDS

If we were to ask you to make a list of your favorite or most memorable games inspired by FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series, *Lords of the Fallen* might not be a title that instantly springs to mind. And yet, the 2014 release by developer Deck13 is incredibly important, as it was one of the first games that helped expand the Soulslike subgenre beyond the franchise that inspired it.

While *Lords of the Fallen* was quick to build upon the foundation that *Dark Souls* had laid, it certainly took its time in crowning a successor. Just shy of 10 years since the original's release, CI Games' relatively new studio Hexworks has set out to revive the series in a new game of the same name.


Although it's taken time to get here, creative director Cezar Virtosu told us that the team hasn't forgotten what's come before, nor is it ignoring

any of the lessons learned from its predecessor.

"We're very thankful for the work Deck13 and CI Games did back in 2014—especially since our original goal was to build from their foundations, evolving the franchise to be competitive years down the road," he said. "We also went out of our way to address feedback from the first game, and have made the combat more fluid and faster, in addition to

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER
CI GAMES
DEVELOPER
HEXWORKS
PLATFORMS
XBOX SERIES X/S,
PS5, PC
RELEASE DATE
10.13.2023



**"We also went out of our way to
address feedback from the first
game, and have made the combat
more fluid and faster..."**

CEZAR VIRTOSU, CREATIVE DIRECTOR



TILL DEATH DO YOU (NOT) PART

Back in the early days of the *Souls* series, players could enlist the help of friends and strangers online when in need of a bit of assistance. As time went on, developers put more effort into expanding the scope and methods for players to work together in such games.

Now, in *Lords of the Fallen*, developer Hexworks has built the *entire* game to be playable cooperatively.

"Effortless co-op was one of the first things we put on paper three years ago," explained creative director Cezar Virtosu. "We felt it was sorely needed, especially in these lands of horror—it is much more enjoyable to gasp at an in-game locale or apparition alongside someone else, sharing that moment of discovery before ultimately suffering together."

At any time, the host can invite one other player into their game, no matter if they're a friend or a total stranger looking for some jolly cooperation. If the guest dies, they aren't sent back to their world. Instead, the host can resurrect them the next chance they get. The host will also make all important decisions, such as when to switch between the worlds of Axiom and Umbral—but guests *will* get to keep any spoils they've found when returning home.



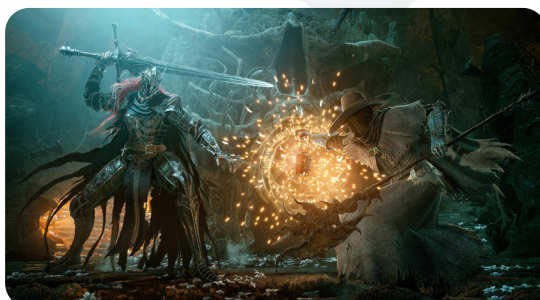
■ We're pretty sure we had an '80s heavy metal album with this exact scene for its cover art.

more ergonomic control-wise. The [new] bosses were the cherry on top of those priorities."

Of course, a *lot* has changed in both the world of Soulslikes and in video games in general in the last nine years, so thankfully, this *Lords of the Fallen* won't just be a game

that's shackled to the past. Hexworks is working to give everything about the sequel its own unique flavor, from exploration, to the death loop, to environmental storytelling—with that last area especially taking some interesting new turns.

"The first thing on the order of business was to ground the game's fantasy, taking it from the previous high fantasy into darker and more gothic territory," Virtosu explained. "We set out to make more *Lords of the Fallen*, not something else entirely, but also to greatly expand on all aspects. To create the World of the Fallen, a launchpad for other stories, big and small."





“The first thing on the order of business was to ground the game’s fantasy, taking it from the previous high fantasy into darker and more gothic territory...”

CEZAR VIRTOSU, CREATIVE DIRECTOR



explained. “Umbral is a parallel world, where the corruption of the real world is made reality. It is not just a visual allegory. Its nature and purpose is insidious and disturbing. But I’m not going to spoil it here.”

Still, as dark and intimidating as the worlds of Axiom and Umbral seem, we couldn’t help but notice that the game’s official website stills offers up this simple phrase: Dare to hope. Is there a chance that *Lords of the Fallen* could break from the usual Soulslike tradition, and offer players a happy ending filled with sunshine and rainbows and kittens?

“The game is not all doom and gloom, of course, and there are rays of tranquility and tenderness even in such a twisted world like Mournstead,” Vertosu replied with a laugh. “As for the endings, well—I guess you will have to play and see.”

One piece of that darker atmosphere is Umbral, a realm of the dead that exists together with Axiom, the realm of the living, in the world of Mournstead. After dying in Axiom, players get transported to Umbral, where they can fight to resurrect themselves to get another chance at victory. In talking to Vertosu about Umbral, he pointed out that it’s “not just a shadowy death realm,” but rather a twisted mirror of reality where lost souls will face threats not only physical, but also mental and emotional.

“It began with our desire to expand on the ‘corpse run’ paradigm and allow the player to recover [from] or play through their failure,” Vertosu



preview

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HOTWHEELS UNLEASHED² TURBOCHARGED

TOYS, TURBOCHARGED



FACT FILE

PUBLISHER

MILESTONE

DEVELOPER

MILESTONE

PLATFORMS

XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5,
SWITCH, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC

RELEASE DATE

10.19.2023



No matter if it involves vehicles with two wheels or four, if there's a style of professional racing that takes place somewhere out there, chances are Italian developer Milestone S.r.l. has made a game based around it at some point. In 2021, however, the studio tackled a type of racing bigger—or, should we say, smaller—than anything it ever had before: the world of Hot Wheels.

Now, Milestone is back to build upon that original release in *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged*, a sequel that hopes to run circles around its predecessor. The most obvious place to start in that goal would be with the Hot Wheels themselves, and *Turbocharged* will not only give players more to pick from, but also a much wider variety of vehicle types as well.

"With a huge roster of over 130 vehicles, we are sure that we have something for every Hot Wheels fan out there," producer Domenico Celenza told us. "We have iconic Hot Wheels Originals, modern and classic manufacturer's replicas, supercars,

racing cars, bikes, ATVs, Monster Trucks, and many more."

Of course, half of the fun of getting access to all of those new Hot Wheels is then having fantastical tracks to race them on, and *Turbocharged* will have plenty to provide in that regard. On the surface, there's an interesting new mix of locales in the game, from the Backyard, to a Mini Golf course and separate '80s-style Arcade, to more unique choices like the Museum or the Gas Station. It's the actual surfaces of those tracks, though, where the real change comes in.

"We wanted to enrich our environments by giving them more purpose

"With a huge roster of over 130 vehicles, we are sure that we have something for every Hot Wheels fan out there."

DOMENICO CELENZA, PRODUCER



FAST FIVE

Developer Milestone is putting a lot of work into expanding *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged* over its predecessor, and that’s certainly the case when it comes to modes. In addition to the classic Quick Race and Time Attack options, producer Domenico Celenza let us in on five totally new modes that’ll also be coming in the game.

First up is Elimination, where every few seconds, the drivers at the end of the pack get eliminated from the race. In Drift Master, players try to achieve the highest score by drifting with precision and consistency. Then there’s Way-points, which challenges racers to find the fastest route in reaching markers that appear around the environment.

While all of those new modes are playable both solo and in multi-player (either local or online), the final two additions—Grab the Gears and Clash Derby—are exclusive to online sessions. Grab the Gears pits players against one another in a battle to gather objects scattered around the area, whereas Clash Derby rewards aggression by awarding players points when they ram into their opponents as fast and as hard as possible.



and a greater sense of challenge,” Celenza explained. “Players will encounter grass, wood, dirt, and carpets as new terrain, and they will soon learn that each has its own rules, and that not every vehicle is suitable for each terrain.”

Beyond the expected, *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged* also brings updates and refinements to other parts of the original game’s experience as well. Jumps and lateral dashes introduce new movement maneuvers, which Celenza called “a very important addition to the game, because they give more options to the players to overcome the challenges they face on the tracks.” Joining them will be the new Skill System, which offers players the ability to add perks to their vehicles in order to modify its characteristics.

“The Skill System is a response to the needs expressed by our players after the release of the first *Unleashed* game,” said Celenza.

“Looking back, we realized that what we did was good, but maybe not flexible enough to let them fully customize their vehicles to fit their ideal style of gameplay.”

From everything we’ve already mentioned, to other elements like a revamped campaign, enhanced Track Builder, and new Sticker Editor, *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged* is looking to rev up both that flexibility and gameplay depth for fans of the original *Unleashed*. While we’ll have to wait until we get our hands on the final game to see if Milestone was indeed successful, nearly 30 years of racing game experience has us pretty confident in how things will turn out. [G](#)

■ *Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged* offers up a far bigger variety of Hot Wheels vehicle types to collect and race.

“Players will encounter grass, wood, dirt, and carpets as new terrain, and they will soon learn that each has its own rules...” DOMENICO CELENZA, PRODUCER





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A vibrant 3D game scene from Sonic Superstars. Sonic the Hedgehog and Knuckles the Echidna are running on a green, mossy platform. The background features a large, ancient stone temple with a waterfall and palm trees under a sunset sky. Sunflowers and other tropical plants are scattered around the platform.

preview

✱ PREORDER

SONIC SUPERSTARS

BLAST-FROM-THE-PAST PROCESSING

Baggy jeans, bucket hats, fanny packs, and 2D *Sonic*. It's official: The '90s are back in style.

With this fall's *Sonic Superstars*, Sega is looking back to the Blue Blur's Genesis-era sidescrollers and reimagining them for a modern audience. Yes, there are 3D visuals, four-player co-op, and a new set of game-changing Chaos Emerald powers, but in terms of level design, structure, and even the feel of gameplay, *Superstars* is as close as you can get to a classic *Sonic* experience without dusting off your old cartridges.

That means, of course, that you'll have to work your way through differently themed zones—12 in all, with up to three acts apiece—rushing from left to right, collecting rings, fighting enemies, dodging hazards, and defeating bosses, all to stop the evil Dr. Eggman and his robotic army. The levels Sega has shown so far perfectly capture the open-ended nature of the best retro *Sonic* stages. With so much verticality and so many alternate paths forward, *Superstars* isn't about working your way through a linear stage while keeping an eye out for hidden collectibles, like most

other modern 2D platformers. It's about improvising your own path and trying to move forward with fluidity and speed.

To keep things fresh, *Sonic Superstars* incorporates zone-specific mechanics, like vines to grind atop in the Speed Jungle Zone, or extendable platforms in the Sky Temple Zone. The biggest addition, however, might be those Emerald Powers, which you unlock as you collect Chaos Emeralds. You can activate these powers on demand at any point, but once you've used up your charge, you'll need to replenish it by reach-

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER
SEGA
DEVELOPER
ARZEST, SONIC TEAM
PLATFORMS
XBOX SERIES X/S, PS5,
SWITCH, XBOX ONE,
PS4, PC
RELEASE DATE
10.17.2023



■ No, this isn't Green Hill Zone. It's Bridge Island Zone, though the lush grass, palm trees, and water are an obvious nod to *Sonic's* most iconic setting.

ing the next Star Post checkpoint. There are seven Emerald Powers in total, including Vision, which reveals hidden items, Slow, which brings the action to a crawl to help you pull off trickier segments, and Water, which transforms your character into good old fashioned H₂O, letting them climb up waterfalls and move freely in underwater segments.

Sonic Superstars also offers four different playable characters—Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, and Amy Rose—with each character getting exclusive

stages tailored to their abilities, as well as a special Emerald Power that's unique to them. Sonic, for instance, gains his homing attack from the 3D games, while Knuckles can attack enemies head-on by straight-up punching them.

For some years now, the *Sonic the Hedgehog* games have struggled with whether they should focus on the classic era or try to do something new. With *Sonic Superstars*, Sega is betting that the right answer is actually, "Why not both?" [G](#)

...as close as you can get to a classic *Sonic* experience without dusting off your old cartridges.



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ATLAS FALLEN

ATLAS DOESN'T FALL, BUT DOES STUMBLE A BIT

After scoring sleeper hits with *The Surge* and *The Surge 2*, developer Deck13 decided to branch out into bigger and more unexplored territory with *Atlas Fallen*, a new open-world sandbox action RPG that lets players loose in a literal world of sand. While it's a good game in its own right, it doesn't quite have that certain something that made the studio's previous two games so appealing.

Atlas Fallen's weakest quality is its story, as its tale of a malevolent god named Thelos enslaving the land of Atlas is filled with some overly familiar character tropes and narrative beats. Even so, we were always curious to see what would happen next, and while the story's twists never got quite as surprising as we'd hoped, they did come often enough to keep things interesting.

On the other hand, the world of *Atlas Fallen* turned out better than we expected. Rather than one giant open world, the game is broken into smaller sections, each of which offers up a nice level of freedom in where players can go and what they can do. We spent our first few hours just taking in the sights, and found that

we'd already accomplished some of our required goals once we returned to the main storyline. A few of the gimmicks that Deck13 added to the world can get repetitive and annoying—we're looking at you, light beam puzzles—but we also appreciate that the developer didn't go crazy dotting the landscape with an overabun-

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER

FOCUS

ENTERTAINMENT

DEVELOPER

DECK13

PLATFORMS

XBOX SERIES X/S,
PS5, PC

RELEASE DATE

08.10.2023





■ It's impressive how diverse *Atlas Fallen*'s world feels even though it's mostly sand with the occasional green spaces.

dance of unnecessary, time-wasting filler content.

Far and away, the biggest aspect to *Atlas Fallen* is its combat, and it's clear how much work Deck13 put into all of the systems surrounding that. The basics of combat are fun, and deeper elements like the game's movement mechanics and unique parry system keep battles fast-paced

and exciting, but it's the Momentum gauge that's the real star here. The more it builds, the more special abilities and attacks players have access to, and the more damage they can unleash—but also, the more damage they themselves take. It's a risk-reward system that gives *Atlas Fallen* a special feel of its own, but it's also not without its faults.

Far and away, the biggest aspect to *Atlas Fallen* is its combat, and it's clear how much work Deck13 put into everything surrounding that.

The Momentum system is powered by Essence Stones, which you can slot into various positions on the gauge to activate once it's built up that far. There are *a lot* of Essence Stones in the game, and we really have to commend Deck13 for giving players so much depth in configuring how their characters fight.

However, so much choice can also feel a bit overwhelming, and runs the risk of players kind of zoning out after receiving their fifth Essence Stone in as many minutes. Also, because it's important to keep up the momentum of the Momentum gauge, most fights with bigger enemies and bosses feature a constant wave of smaller foes as well. These battles can get frustratingly chaotic—especially when the lock-on system and camera can't keep up. More than once, we wished we could just square off against bosses better designed to be faced one-on-one.

Buried in the sands of *Atlas Fallen* is an experience that's genuinely enjoyable more often than it's not, but we're not sure if all players will be willing to dig far enough to find the fun. And, for those that do, some might wish the treasure they uncover had a bit more polish than it does. [E](#)






GAME OF THE MONTH

DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

MOUSE CALL

Though *Disney Illusion Island's* title may pay homage to the classic series of 1990s Sega platformers starring Mickey Mouse, it's clear that developer Dala Studios isn't stuck in the past.

Illusion Island stars Mickey Mouse, Minnie, Donald, and Goofy (with optional four-player co-op), as they work to recover three magical books and save the island of Monoth. Rather than the linear, stage-based approach of *Castle*, *World*, and *Land of Illusion*, Dala has looked to the classic *Metroid* and *Castlevania* games for inspiration. Monoth is one connected map that you're free to explore in non-linear fashion, with lots of optional pathways and certain areas locked off until you've acquired new abilities.

In another shift, *Illusion Island* does away entirely with the idea of

combat. While you'll encounter plenty of enemies along the way, you won't be able to damage them, not even by jumping on their heads. Instead, they're just obstacles to be avoided. Although there are a few more traditional boss battles, these are technically nonviolent as well, since you're never directly attacking anyone.

Still, unlike many games designed with a younger audience in mind, *Disney Illusion Island* doesn't oversimplify its gameplay in an effort to be more approachable. Yes, there may not be combat, but this remains a traditional platformer in the full sense of the genre, with enough depth and challenge to entertain

FACT FILE

PUBLISHER
DISNEY INTERACTIVE

DEVELOPER
DLALA STUDIOS

PLATFORMS
SWITCH

RELEASE DATE
07.28.2023





■ Hot springs hidden throughout Monoth will let you replenish your health with a refreshing soak.

players of any age (and a few mad-deningly well hidden collectibles to boot). Rather than watering down the default experience, *Dlala* has offered numerous options for younger or less skilled gamers to tune that standard difficulty way down. You can simplify the controls, making timings more generous, or even give yourself unlimited hit points.

Co-op extends the inclusivity even further. In splitscreen, each player can tune their own individual difficulty, and there are a number of co-op specific features that reward collaboration. Any player can let

[T]he visuals are impressive, with crisp 2D animation that works well whether you're playing on your TV or the Switch's screen...

down a rope that the others can climb up, allowing players in your group to skip any too-tricky platforming sections as long as at least one person can pull it off. You can also leapfrog over your co-op partners to get a bit of extra distance, and share a hug—aww!—to replenish both your characters' hit points.

If there's any weak link in *Disney Illusion Island*, it's that the setting

and the original characters just aren't all that interesting. Monoth feels a bit like a hodgepodge of random ideas, with a terrarium-themed biome alongside one inspired by a futuristic post office and another based on astronomy (that's also a harbor). While it's admirable that *Dlala* tried to avoid all the standard video game level cliches, the end result of trying to be original is that the world feels a bit like the themes were chosen randomly out of a mouse-eared hat.

Still, the visuals are impressive, with crisp 2D animation that works well whether you're playing on your TV or the Switch's built-in screen, and the voice acted cutscenes mine enough humor from Mickey, Donald, Goofy, and Minnie to keep the proceedings charming enough.

And when it comes to the most important aspect of any platformer—the gameplay—*Disney Illusion Island* hits all the right beats, with enough variety, challenge, and tunability to entertain players of just about any age or experience level. [G](#)





1 ON 1

IMMORTALS OF AVEUM

BRET ROBBINS

FOUNDER ASCENDANT STUDIOS

Founded in 2018, Ascendant Studios is a new independent video game developer located in San Rafael, California. For its first project, founder Bret Robbins and his team decided that they wanted to create an original IP that would be something a bit different from the norm. Enter *Immortals of Aveum*, a first-person action adventure that fuses magic-based shooter gameplay with a fantasy setting that's not as "fantasy" as you might expect. To learn more about the game, we conjured up the main man himself to survive our barrage of questions.

Walmart Gamecenter: What are the challenges—and also the opportunities—in making a first-person shooter based more around fire spells than firearms?

Bret Robbins: Creating a magic-based shooter allowed us to totally redesign the familiar shooter experience that players have become used to. We were able to design from the ground up by our own rules, which is both a challenge and a massive opportunity. Fans of shooter titles will find that *Immortals of Aveum* is just familiar enough to pick up quickly, while being fresh enough that there's a lot to learn and master. We all know what guns look and feel like in a video game, so it was fun to invent entirely original magical gear like Sigils, Totems, and Rings.

WGC: How do the different colors of magic work in *Immortals of Aveum*?

BR: There are three different types of magic used in the game. Force (Blue) magic allows the caster to manipulate physical energy or gravity over distance, like a ranged rifle attack. Chaos (Red) magic controls light and energy and are meant for up close and personal encounters. Life (Green) magic allows control over life, death, healing, and the control of inanimate objects, giving you the power to lock on to targets and deal focused magical power. We encourage players to constantly switch between the three types of magic and use different creative combos and perk choices to take down enemies in unique ways.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

CALL OF DUTY WW2, DEAD SPACE, GEX


WGC: In thinking about other first-person action games based around magic, it's easy to imagine medieval themes and locations, but *Immortals of Aveum* has a unique style to it. What did your team want to do with the game's story and setting in that regard?

BR: When we first envisioned the world of Aveum, we wanted to reject all your typical fantasy tropes. Of course, some of that stuff, like dragons, found its way back in because, well, dragons are just awesome. But we decided early on that Aveum would not be Earth, and that freed us to imagine our world differently. Here, magic is a precious resource that powers the world, ultimately engendering great conflicts and mankind's endless war for control of the magic. In other fantasy IPs, magic is often displayed as a little soft or ephemeral, not as something you would use in a high-intensity combat situation. So, it was a unique challenge to be able to meld the two ideas together to create visceral, powerful spell-casting combat within a first-person shooter setting.

WGC: How does it feel to be part of a new studio that's working on a totally original IP? In this day and age, that certainly isn't as common of a situation as it used to be.

BR: It's not lost on us how rare of an opportunity that is these days, and it feels so creatively fulfilling to create the narrative, combat, and world of Aveum from the ground up. It's hard to release a new IP with a new concept when there are so many well-established franchises out there—and that's especially so this year, possibly the greatest year ever in gaming. I can only hope that the players will be able to feel the amount of love, passion, and hard work that has gone into *Immortals of Aveum* when they play it.

WGC: If you could wield any of protagonist Jak's magical abilities to help you get through your day-to-day life, what would you pick and why?

BR: Not necessarily one of Jak's abilities, but I would love to have my own Sigil in real life. To be able to customize something that helps me accomplish whatever I'm doing would be really convenient. Plus, it just looks flat out cool. 

"We all know what guns look and feel like in a video game, so it was fun to invent entirely original magical gear..."

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