THE VIDEO GAME GENERATIONS NEWSLETTER

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Issue #18 – September 6, 2025

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Loading Screen

Name something that goes together better than video games and licensed IP. I'll wait...

All joking aside, licensed games haven't always been the safest bet when it comes to quality and doing justice to the source material. This week, I'm writing about 21 games that nailed it. Not only do they justify their existence, but they're all great games that are additive to the IP they represent.

Weekly requisite dose of AI nonsense. It's supposed to be a film reel running through a device and becoming an 8-bit video game.

Mini-reviews for this week are a few of the games included in my list, plus a few of the honorable mentions. First, though, and as usual, we'll start with some recent events (and some complaining).

Recent Events

Cronos and *Hell Is Us* Silently Delayed

It's a good day when I get to go on a rant here in Recent Events. That said, it's a bad day.

I was looking forward to starting *Hell Is Us* today after finishing *Lost Soul Aside* last night (I write this on Thursday morning). I have time off work for it, in fact. I knew something was up last night when my pre-order status on Best Buy didn't change to "preparing" or "ready" or whatever it usually does, the night before. This has been happening all too frequently for the past few months.

So far, there hasn't been an official announcement, but it may not be just a Best Buy issue this time. In the past, I've searched around other stores in the area so I could just cancel my pre-order and pick up someplace else. I'm having no such luck. It isn't available anywhere and it's listed as "out of stock".

My "plan B" was to start *Cronos: The New Dawn* tomorrow, which is when it releases. Now I'm finding out that it is *also* delayed.

The alternative is to buy digitally... but no, no thank you, not for big full-priced releases.

Now I'm weighing my options. I pay launch day prices for launch day games. It makes less sense to me weeks or months later, when my hype has died down and I've moved on to other games. At this point, though, I'm in "wait and see" mode for official announcements.

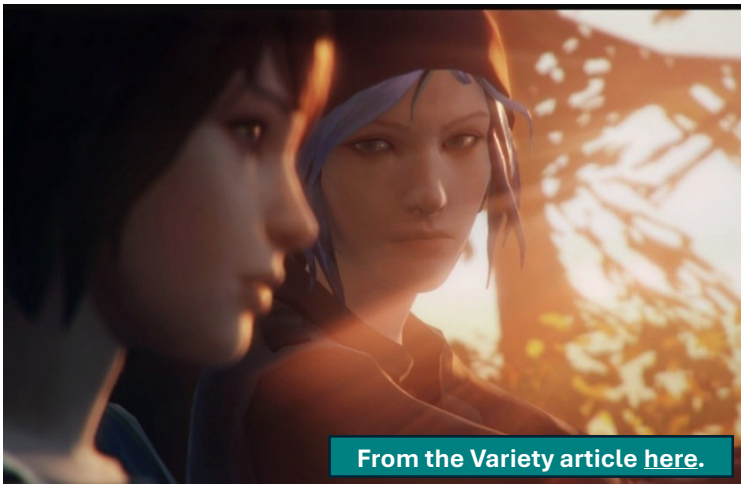
Update: Disregard most of that. I found *Hell Is Us* in stock at GameStop a few blocks away and have already started playing it, so at a minimum, it wasn't delayed *everywhere*.

Cronos, though, seems to have been pushed back to September 19. That's a full two weeks after launch. The only upside is that I hadn't planned to play it immediately anyway.

Life is Strange Is Set to Get a TV Series

I first heard about this on Kinda Funny Games Daily, but they cited variety.com as a source, so that's the source I'm going with as well.

I wonder how closely they'll adhere to the story of the game. It does seem to be based on the first game, involving Max and Chloe, set in fictional Arcadia Bay. It's being developed at Amazon MGM Studios, and they've done well with shows like *Fallout* (among others).



From the Variety article here.

Source:
https://variety.com/2025/tv/news/life-is-strange-tv-series-amazon-charlie-covell-luckychap-1236509181/

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007: First Light Is Set to Release March 27

I was tempted to watch Sony's recent State of Play that was all about IOI's *James Bond* origin story game, but I try to steer clear of seeing too much about a game that interests me in advance. It tends to ruin the experience of discovering those things in-game for myself.

For things like price and the release date, I can get all that from articles after the fact, like the one at IGN I've linked as a source below.

It's slated for March 27 next year, priced at the typical AAA current-gen standard of $70 (plus tax; there's always tax here). It's also getting even pricier deluxe and limited editions.

Source:
https://www.ign.com/articles/007-first-light-release-date-confirmed-during-sony-state-of-play

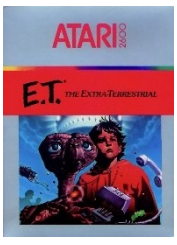
The Worlds You Know

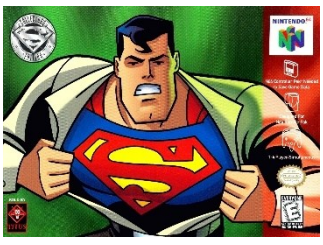
Games based on licensed IP (Intellectual Property) have been around almost as long as video games. The earliest examples aren't so much licensed, as simply "used without permission". It must have been the gaming wild west in the early days. I even released my own games in the late 80s based on *Doctor Who* and *The Smurfs* (see issue #13). Ha! I crack myself up. Imagine a game called *Doctor Who and The Smurfs*; but I digress.

The earliest example of a game licensed legitimately I can find is *Superman*, based on the DC license and created for the Atari 2600 in 1979. Other sources say it's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in 1982 (also for Atari 2600), holding the Guiness World Record, but looking into it further, that's apparently the first game based *on a movie*, not the first licensed IP game.

On a side note, I miss the days when Google didn't offer up its "AI Overview" on searches. The results always look legit, as if this is the authoritative answer, but I often find it misses some nuance in the question or at other times is just plain wrong.

Licensed games started out as cash grabs. That's not to say they aren't now, but at least there's quality and merit to the ones I'll be highlighting in this week's feature. Everybody knows the infamous examples like *E.T.* on Atari 2600 and *Superman 64*, but for a long time, getting a good and worthwhile licensed game was rare. They existed, but you were more likely to get nonsense and shovel-ware; little more than a recognizable name slapped onto something that failed to capture the spirit and essence of the IP.





I debated (with myself) on how I wanted to approach this topic. Should it be a top 10 or top 20 list? I ended up with 21 games. Should I rank them in some way, from least to most favorite? I love all these games, and the problem with ranking is that the ones at the bottom tend to carry a connotation of "the worst" or "bad" and I that doesn't describe any of these.

Should I put them in order by their Metacritic score? That serves as a benchmark for critical reception, sure, but I'm having my own crisis of faith when it comes to aggregate scores lately. Now's not the time for another rant, but I'm starting to think too many gamers put too much stock in aggregate review scores.

What I'll do is list them in order by release date. That gives the list some sense of direction. The alternative was to randomize it completely, but I like this better.

I've tried to stick with major well-known properties, aside from maybe one of them, which I'll point out when I get there. Also, each entry is for a single game, not a series, but I'll mention others in the series or maybe other related licensed games at the same time, as honorable mentions. My top pick is often the first game in the series, but not always.

The list is made up of games I've played and enjoyed myself. If I've overlooked something obvious, it could be because it isn't a game I ever got around to playing.

I'm not trying to be all-encompassing here, either. This is just meant to be a brief tour through my personal favorite licensed games, not a comprehensive exploration of all the biggest licensed games ever made.

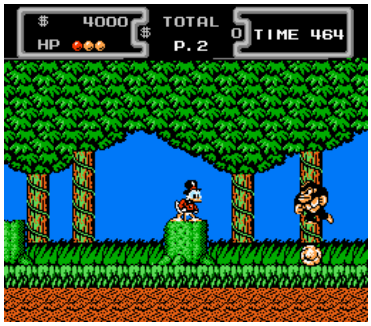
With all that said, let's get started.

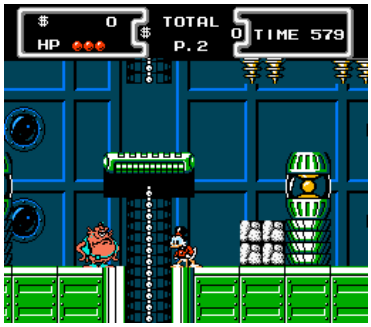
DuckTales

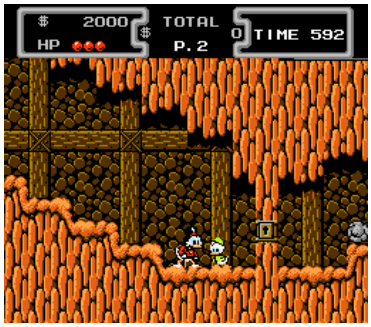
Released: September 14, 1989
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: NES

Many of the NES-era Capcom games had a certain recognizable look, feel, and sound. While the *Mega Man* series might be their most high-profile games back then, they had plenty of licensed games too (even a game based on the movie *Willow*).

My pick, though, is *DuckTales*. I played it back then and loved it. The 8-bit graphics were great, the music was great, and it used a fun pogo mechanic that I hadn't seen before. Granted, many of the NES-era games were known to introduce mechanics that hadn't been seen before because it was an age of experimentation, but still.







My honorable NES-era mentions go to *Uncle Fester's Quest* (which I wrote about in my list of the 20 weirdest games I've played, back in issue #14), and both of the games based on the *Golgo 13* manga (*Top Secret Episode* in 1988 and *The Mafat Conspiracy* in 1990), which I only ever finished (finally) by using the save-state feature of the Retron 5 when I played them again in 2014. The NES had quite a few other miscellaneous licensed games.

Goldeneye 007

Released: August 23, 1997
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Nintendo 64

Before *Goldeneye*, I didn't care at all about the *James Bond 007* movie franchise. I knew it was a long-running thing, and I knew it was spawned from novels by Ian Fleming, but it was just never something that sounded like my kind of thing.

Rare's N64 classic changed all that. I had probably caught bits and pieces of earlier films when they aired on network TV back in the 1980s, but Goldeneye was the first one I watched on purpose.

From there, I kept up with the series through the Pierce Brosnan era and the Daniel Craig era. We don't know who'll next play the man with a license to kill, but we do know IO Interactive has a James Bond origin game releasing in just a few months.

I never did dip back into older Bond films, but I have Tina Turner's *Goldeneye* theme song in my Spotify play list. It's a banger, even if it's a little funny that the lyrics take poetic license as if referring to *Goldeneye* as a person.

I doubt the original holds up today, given that we didn't have dual-stick controls yet, but I have fond memories of the first game's single player campaign. I loved seeing it all "come to life" when I later watched the movie.

My N64-era honorable mention goes to *Shadow Man*, based on a Valiant Comics series. My mini-review of the remaster from Nightdive Studios can be found in issue #4.

SW - Knights of the Old Republic

Released: July 15, 2003
Mini-Reviewed: No (but KOTOR 2 is in this issue)
Version played: Original Xbox

My console RPG experience prior to *Star Wars: KOTOR* was mainly from SNES-era games like *Final Fantasy* and *Chrono Trigger*. Enter *Knights of the Old Republic*, a fully realized third-person RPG set in one of the biggest universes ever, and I was hooked.

It probably didn't look as good on Xbox as these PC screenshots make it seem, but that was still a viable, worthwhile version to play. It also has one of gaming's most memorable twists, which I certainly won't spoil here.

This was peak Bioware, before they went on to make *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* in the Xbox 360 generation. *Jade Empire* was good too, but it was more action-oriented and of course not based on any franchise or license.

The only honorable mention that makes sense here is *Knights of the Old Republic 2*. I only played it for the first time a few years ago, in 2020, by way of backwards compatibility on Xbox One. It was from Obsidian, which is now a Microsoft-owned studio. They made *Fallout: New Vegas*, and a sequel to their original IP *The Outer Worlds 2* is out next month.

My mini-review for *KOTOR 2* can be found later in this issue. I remember it being good until it suddenly and surprisingly started glitching out on me.

Escape From Butcher Bay

Released: June 1, 2004
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Original Xbox

Is this cheating? I mentioned in the introduction that one of my picks isn't based on a hugely popular franchise, and this is it. The only *Riddick* movie at that point was *Pitch Black*, which kind of got retroactively added to a *Chronicles of Riddick* "series" that didn't exist when it was just a one-off. The *Chronicles of Riddick* movie was released later that same month, though, with this game serving as a prequel to *Pitch Black*.

I'm a sucker for sci-fi, especially when it involves space travel, aliens, and fits into what might be called *space opera*. In the case of *Butcher Bay*, it's not a galaxy-spanning adventure, but rather an experience set within the prison where Richard B. Riddick is held.

It helps that *Riddick* actor Vin Diesel himself was involved in its development. His game studio (Tigon) partnered with Starbreeze to make the game, and members of Starbreeze later went on to form Machine Games, who you may know from the more recent *Wolfenstein* games and the excellent *Indiana Jones* game from last year.

As honorable mentions go, all I have for this is the follow-up, *Assault on Dark Athena*. In retrospect, it was probably fine, but I remember being really disappointed by it. I remember it feeling way more like a run-of-the-mill first-person shooter than the cool action stealth adventure game that *Butcher Bay* had been.

Ghostbusters – The Video Game

Released: June 16, 2009
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Xbox 360

It was pitched as the *Ghostbusters 3* we would never get in movie form. In some ways that remains true, with *Afterlife* and *Frozen Empire* feeling more like spiritual successors than direct sequels, even though they *are* direct sequels, but I digress. There was also the reboot starring Kristen Wiig and Kate McKinnon, but that's in some weird alternate reality non-canon thing that I don't fully get.

In the game, which is set in first person, you play as a nameless silent protagonist called "the rookie" as you team up with the original Ghostbusters to save the proverbial day.

There have been plenty of *Ghostbusters* games over the years, but this is my pick for the best one. Well, I haven't played most of the others myself, although the kids and I enjoyed *Sanctum of Slime* (also on Xbox 360) and I tried but couldn't much get into *Spirits Unleashed*, given that it was meant to be played in asymmetrical 4v1 multiplayer and going it alone is a bit lacking.

I guess I don't have any other honorable mention of any note for this one.

Batman – Arkham Asylum

Released: August 25, 2009
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Xbox 360

It was either this or *Arkham City* for my first *Batman* mention. In the end, *Asylum* won the coin flip, which wasn't so much a coin flip, but rather recognition of its more Metroidvania nature (which appealed to me).

It also established the *Arkham*-style combat and what feels like a modern era of licensed superhero games finally being good and noteworthy. "Detective mode" also originated here, to which countless other games owe their scanning system (although *Assassin's Creed* may have had something similar with Eagle Vision in the first game, before *Arkham*).

If I *was* ranking these, Arkham Asylum would need to be near the top, not just for its impact on licensed games and superhero games, but for how great and fun it was when it released.

The rest of the Arkham games deserve an honorable mention too. I think *Arkham Knight* is probably better than people remember it, and Arkham Origins, while not developed by Rocksteady, is still a really good game.

In issue #17 last week, I included my mini-review of *Gotham Knights* on the topic of games with a Metacritic score in the 60s or lower that I enjoyed. It's not quite an ideal successor to the *Arkham* games, but it's good.

The Walking Dead - Season 1

Released: April 24, 2012
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Xbox 360

TellTale was making adventure games before *The Walking Dead* (including a series of games based on the CSI TV show), but this is the one that caught mainstream attention and set them on the course of releasing game after game after game based on licensed IP that would eventually lead to their closure.

Technically, TellTale is back, but it's mostly a different company with the same name. They haven't been nearly as prolific as the old TellTale, but the focus still seems to be on narrative adventure games. That's what they pioneered with season 1 of *The Walking Dead*, where their earlier games had been more classic point-and-click adventure style.

I don't think I'm the only one who still uses "TellTale style" as a shorthand way of describing this kind of choice-driven narrative adventure with lasting consequences, and again, it was *The Walking Dead* where they firmly established that.

Honorable mentions include their episodic *Back to the Future* point-and-click adventure series and both of their *Batman* games (which have mini-reviews later in this issue). I'm not counting *Tales from the Borderlands*. It's great, but it's licensed from *another video game*. A *dishonorable* mention goes to their *Game of Thrones* series, which I strongly disliked. My mini-review is included later.

South Park - The Stick of Truth

Released: March 4, 2014
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: Xbox 360

I was surprised to realize that *The Stick of Truth* is more than 11 years old now. It feels like only yesterday when I was making my "new kid" and having him explore *South Park* and some other very questionable locations.

This wasn't the first *South Park* game, but it might be the first *good* one. That's due in part to the involvement of the two creatives behind the series, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, who wrote the script and voiced their characters. It's also from an era when the internet mob hadn't somehow randomly decided that all Ubisoft games are bad (spoiler: they're not).

The sequel, *The Fractured but Whole*, gets an easy honorable mention here. It's in some ways more interesting with its superhero civil war storyline than the wizards and magic plot of *The Stick of Truth*, but I still prefer that first game more in almost every way. Combat in *Fractured* got a grid-based tactical makeover to the simpler system in the first game, but both are good and worth playing. I'd be really surprised if they don't still hold up today.

Middle Earth - Shadow of Mordor

Released: September 30, 2014
Mini-Reviewed: No (but *Shadow of War* is later)
Version played: Xbox 360

At this point, I don't think I could explain *what* the *Arkham*-style combat system is, or why it felt so perfect and inventive when it was introduced in those *Batman* games. It involves quick actions that let you flow from enemy to enemy like a choreographed dance, with prompted counter attackers, blocking, and vaulting over adversaries to give them a good kick from behind. They call it the FreeFlow system, and it just feels *so right*.

Whether it was a mandate by WB or just sister studios sharing their systems, it went on to be used in both *Middle Earth: Shadow* games and the *Mad Max* game, as well as inspiration for the melee and gadget combat used in games from other publishers entirely.

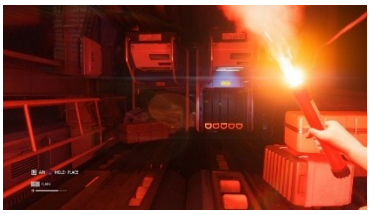
This game added its own new system to the lexicon of video game terms by way of its "Nemesis System", where low-level enemies would rise through the ranks when defeating you, and even carry the scars and memories of prior battles. I remember people asking at the time why WB didn't patent such a cool idea, and when they did, people were angry.

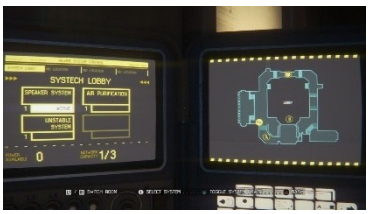
That might be why it hasn't appeared in any other game besides this game's sequel, *Shadow of War*, which gets an honorable mention and a mini-review later in this issue.

Alien - Isolation

Released: October 6, 2014
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: PlayStation 4

Horror games aren't my go-to genre, but at this point I've played enough of them to write a feature (which I just might, for "spooky season" next month). I've probably built up more of a tolerance now, but there was a time when I could only play one for a couple hours without needing to take a break. It's not so much a matter of being scared as just the feeling of dread, uncertainty, and isolation.





Alien: Isolation wasn't the first horror game I ever played. I enjoyed (as much as one can "enjoy" participating in a nightmare) the *Silent Hill* games and the *Dead Space* series, for example, but there was something different and memorable about this one. Part of that may be how well it captured the *Alien* universe and the feeling of being relentlessly stalked.

A sequel is supposedly in the works, but I can't remember hearing anything about it in a long time. With game cancellations being so prevalent these days, I'm not putting much faith in ever seeing it released.

As an honorable mention, I would suggest the *Alien Trilogy* on PS1. I only played a *little* of it, and what I did play seemed like a generic first-person shooter that's *very* difficult to play now when I'm so used to modern twin-stick controls. It could use the Nightdive Studios remaster treatment, if such a thing was possible given the licensing.

Mad Max

Released: September 1, 2015
Mini-Reviewed: No
Version played: PlayStation 4

I don't know why I was never a bigger fan of the *Mad Max* movies. To this day, I've yet to watch the *Furiosa* movie. The whole series has been instrumental in shaping a pop culture view of a hypothetical near-feature post-apocalypse in a destroyed wasteland.

The 2015 video game, though, was something I thoroughly enjoyed. For melee combat, it uses the same "FreeFlow" system seen in the *Batman: Arkham* games and the *Middle Earth: Shadow* games. In keeping with the spirit of the movies, though, a big part of gameplay involves car combat. I remember the visceral feel of slamming sideways into enemy vehicles to send them crashing or to mess up their pursuit.

"Mad" Max Rockatansky in this game isn't modeled after Mel Gibson from the original movies, or Tom Hardy from *Fury Road* (which released earlier that same year). Not just that, but it felt like a game that didn't require any knowledge of the film franchise at all, to play and enjoy. In that way, it's less additive to the IP than some other games I've listed are to theirs, as more of a stand-alone reimagining.

My honorable mention goes to the bombastic RGG Studio's game *First of the North Star: Lost Paradise*, which is based on a manga/anime series that was itself inspired by *Mad Max: The Road Warrior*.

Maruel's Spider Man

Released: September 7, 2018
Mini-Reviewed: No (but *Miles* and *Spidey 2* are later)
Version played: PlayStation 4

I didn't have any history with any of the older *Spider-Man* games when I played Insomniac's take on Marvel's web-slinger in 2018. The ones from Neversoft, Treyarch, and Beenox are supposed to be pretty good, but Insomniac is now the de facto authority when it comes to bringing Peter Parker and his supervillain rogues gallery to life in video game form.

What Rocksteady did for *Batman*, Insomniac did for *Spider-Man*, by giving him fast and fluid combat abilities and web-swinging traversal that makes navigating New York City pure joy.

The game takes place outside the MCU canon in a fiction created by Insomniac. It of course doesn't stray too far from the canon (which admittedly I'm not well-versed in), with enemies like Doc Oc, Kingpin, and Rhino, and series staples like Mary Jane and Aunt May. It also honors other Spider-Man incarnations by way of its multitude of alternate costumes.

Both *Miles Morales* and *Spider-Man 2* are of course my honorable mentions, and my mini-reviews for both appear later in this issue.

Terminator Resistance - Enhanced

Released: April 30, 2021
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Technically, *Terminator: Resistance* was released in late 2019 on Steam, then consoles in early 2020, but the "enhanced" version came out in 2021, even though I didn't get around to playing it until 2024. Sheesh, that's a lot of dates.

The main reason I played it then is that I had recently finished *Robocop: Rogue City* by the same developer (Poland-based Teyon), which was an excellent game true to the spirit and vibe of the movies, with great visuals that at times looked photorealistic.

This game also captures the vibe and spirit of *Terminator*, in a sense. Rather than being set in present-day (aka "the past"), it delves into the resistance movement headed up by John Connor in the future.

My honorable mention here is a stretch, since it isn't based on a movie and has nothing to do with the *Terminator* franchise. The game is *Metro 2033* (and its two sequels), based on the Dmitry Glukhovsky novels, and is another first-person shooter set in another future post-apocalypse where humans are just trying to survive.

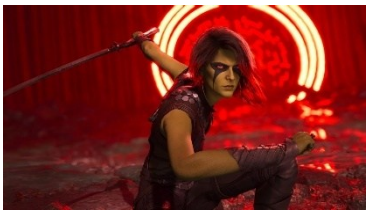
Maruel's Guardians of the Galaxy

Released: October 26, 2021
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Insomniac is of course not the *only* studio making great games from Marvel properties. Square Enix published this game developed by Eidos-Montréal in 2021, and it was one of my favorites that year.

Sadly, not everybody enjoyed it, whether it was due to a cast of characters that were kind of like their MCU counterparts but not quite, or combat that not everybody vibed with.

My conspiracy theory is that some of it was from misinformation, assumptions, and the ever-present self-fulfilling echo chamber boosted by people who never even played it. Square Enix had also published *Marvel's Avengers* (from Crystal Dynamics) the prior year, which was focused on multiplayer and live service gimmicks. I think too many people never gave *Guardians* a shot based solely on the reputation of *Avengers*.



I never played the TellTale series based on *Guardians*, so I can't give that an honorable mention. It's on my backlog, though.

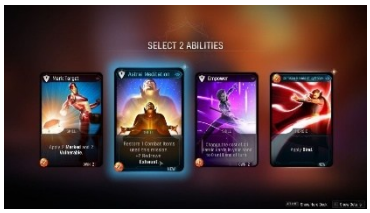
What I can shout out are two Marvel-based games from the Xbox 360 generation, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and *Deadpool*. I'm kind of glad I played *Deadpool* way before the Ryan Reynolds movies, because I genuinely prefer Nolan North's outstanding performance as the Merc with a Mouth, and his split personality portrayal, which is lacking in the movies.

Marvel's Midnight Suns

Released: December 2, 2022
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Continuing with Marvel properties (and this is the last one on my list), *Midnight Suns* was a big and pleasant surprise for me. It's not directly based on a comic, but pulls in characters from multiple comics to form a team of heroes to battle a supernatural force.

Although you create your own character called "The Hunter", you team up with Wolverine, Spider-Man, The Hulk, Iron Man, and Captain America. The cast also includes lesser-known characters, although some of them are more iconic now thanks to the MCU (Captain Marvel and Doctor Strange, for example, although Blade and Ghost Rider are on the team as well). There's even Magik (a character I didn't know at all) and Nico Minoru, who I only know from the *Runaways* series that aired on Hulu a few years ago.



Gameplay involves exploration of the grounds around their base, social ties (hanging out with a team member or the group), and tactical turn-based combat using ability cards to build each character's loadout. It's a really unique game and one that should have gotten far more attention.

For honorable mentions, a shoutout (I guess) to *Marvel Rivals*, which my son loves but I've never played (I'm just not a live service multiplayer kind of gamer). Also, *Marvel's Avengers*, which I mentioned earlier. I liked it more than most people did, and my mini-review appears later.

Hogwarts Legacy

Released: February 10, 2023
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, on page 16 of issue #15
Version played: PlayStation 5

Hogwarts Legacy distanced itself from the *Harry Potter* franchise by telling a story set some 100 years in the past, yet it very much captured the look and vibe of the franchise; particularly the movies, where the sights and sounds of it all were established by director Chris Columbus.

I didn't expect to enjoy the game as much as I did. I was never a series super-fan (I said the same in my mini-review), but the movies were fun, and I read the first book, before the problematic anti-trans stance taken by author Rowling began to retroactively sour things.

I have three honorable mentions, although none of them are directly related to this franchise or to the developer (Avalanche). These are three picks for games based on books and literature. Granted, *Hogwarts* is more of a tie-in for the movies than the books they're based on, but it all ends up the same.

First is *Dante's Inferno*, based on Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, which was a fun hack-and-slash action game in the *God of War* vein.

Second is CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher* series, based on Sapkowski's novels about Geralt of Rivia and his adventures as a Witcher. My reviews for the two big *Witcher 3* expansions are included later in this issue.

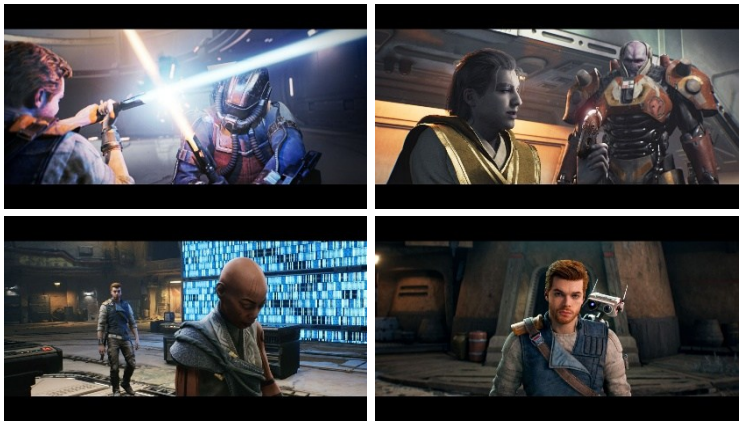
Third, I enjoyed a little-known game called *Bedlam*, adapted from Christopher Brookmyre's novel of the same name. He apparently worked with the studio to bring his story to life in video game form, which is fitting given that the story is *about* video games.

Star Wars Jedi - Survivor

Released: April 28, 2023
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, on page 34 of issue #11
Version played: PlayStation 5

This is the only series entry where my pick goes to a game other than the first in that series. Well, *Star Wars* forms a broader series of its own, but I mean Respawn's *Star Wars Jedi* series in particular.

I picked *Survivor* because it improved on what the original game started, both in gameplay and world design, and just ended up being a better experience overall (despite some technical issues with screen-tearing, which the first game might also have suffered from).



That's not to say I didn't enjoy *Fallen Order*. It was also a great game and makes the perfect honorable mention at this point.

I've mentioned this game twice before, in issue #11 which was about recognizable movie and TV actors in games, then again in issue #16 where little robot sidekick BD-1 was in the "S" tier of "little guy" companions.

In theory, Respawn is working on a third game to end the *Jedi* trilogy and wrap up the journey of Cal Kestis after the events of *Survivor*. With major layoffs earlier this year, though, it seems like another example where the future of the series may be less than certain.

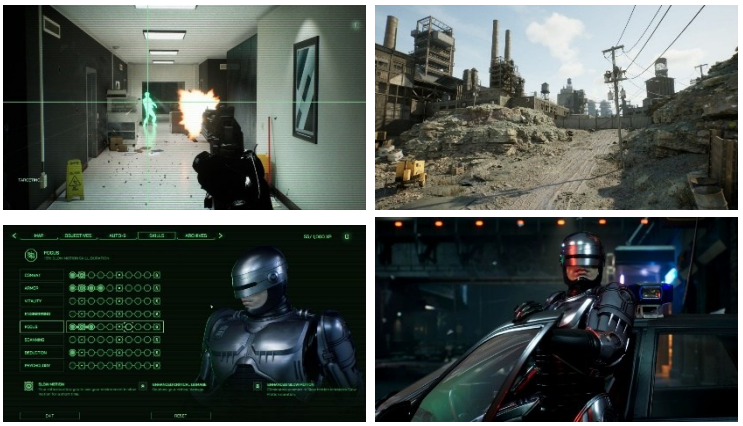
Both games in the series so far are worth playing. The combat and systems are a bit *Souls*-like, and the *Star Wars* vibe is perfect.

Robocop - Rogue City

Released: November 2, 2023
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Before playing this game, I hadn't seen the original movie in decades. I remembered three things vividly, though. One, that goofy old guy on TV announcing "I'd buy that for a dollar!" Two, the ED-209 malfunctioning and shooting some ill-fortuned guy during a demonstration of OCP's latest crime-fighting robot. Three, Alex Murphy gradually getting fragments of his original memory back after dying and being brought back in cyborg form.

Playing the game prompted me to watch the original three movies again, and wow, those stop-motion special effects don't hold up too well anymore. I'm not sure I had even seen the third movie before, because I didn't remember Peter Weller's role as *Robocop* being recast to a different actor entirely (Robert John Burke).



As with *Terminator: Resistance* (which I wrote about earlier in this issue), developer Teyon made a game that's true to the IP and did great in capturing the look and feel of the movies. The visuals are stunning in Unreal Engine 5, and it may have been among the first games to use it.

For an honorable mention, I've got nothing. I guess I'll put *Tron: Evolution* here, which really has nothing to do with *Robocop* and isn't even all that great a game. My mini-review for that game appears on page 35 of issue #11.

Avatar - Frontiers of Pandora

Released: December 7, 2023
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Ubisoft's licensed open world game based on James Cameron's *Avatar* movies was great, yet it was overlooked by gamers at large. I chalk this up to three things that worked against it.

One, despite the box office popularity of the movies, *Avatar* seems to be a bit of a meme among gamers, who (from what I've seen) tend to consider it shallow and forgettable. I somehow keep forgetting myself that the main character is named Jake Sully.

Two, it was easy to dismiss as a reskinned *Far Cry*, which is a bit reductive, even though I say as much in my own mini-review, appearing later in this issue. I'm not tired of the *Far Cry* formula, though, and might never be.

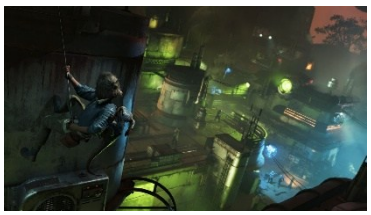
Three, and I mentioned this earlier, there's a subset (maybe a big subset) of gamers who've convinced themselves Ubisoft games are bad. They may be getting their disdain for Ubisoft as a company conflated with the quality of their games, which is a mistake.

My pick for an honorable mention is a bit of a joke, but it's all I've got. My mini-review for *Avatar: The Burning Earth* appears later in this issue. Yes, it's not even the same franchise, and it's one of the rare games I played to completion but found to just be a bit "meh".

Star Wars - Outlaws

Released: August 30, 2024
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: PlayStation 5

Speaking of Ubisoft and popular gaming opinions skewing towards the negative, this is another recent Ubisoft licensed game that kind of got the cold shoulder from gamers.



For me, it was probably the best *Star Wars* game I've ever played, even surpassing Respawn's *Star Wars Jedi* games and *Knights of the Old Republic* (both of which I wrote about earlier) as my favorite game set in the *Star Wars* universe. Everything about it is so authentically *Star Wars*, even with (mostly) new characters and a story that has nothing to do with the plight of the Jedi.

I think some gamers wanted this game to be bad, and so they latched onto any crumb of negativity they could in order to reinforce the notion that it *was* bad. Some of that came from complaints about stealth, which may have been more of a problem in the pre-launch review copies that made up most of the early opinions about the game.

There was also a highly stupid but vocal group of chuds out there complaining that it was "woke" because Kay Vess was an "uglified" female lead character. Those dorks must live in their own little clown world, never seeing real women up close.

My honorable mention is *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*. I never got around to the sequel, although I almost started it once. Maybe someday I'll get to it.

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle

Released: December 9, 2024
Mini-Reviewed: Yes, later in this issue
Version played: Xbox Series X

The newest game on my list is this gem from Machine Games that released late last year. They raised a few gamers' eyebrows with the choice to use a first-person perspective for gameplay, but I was fine with it, for two reasons.

One, their *Wolfenstein* games are first-person and fantastic, so I had a measure of trust that they knew what they were doing.

Two, do I really *need* to see a Harrison Ford character model for the entirety of the adventure, or is it enough simply to embody the character of Dr. Jones? For me, I was okay with the latter option.

The game's big expansion, *The Order of Giants*, was *just* released. I played on Xbox with GamePass, though, before the main game released on PS5 earlier this year, and I'm not really keen on redeeming one of my few remaining 1-month GamePass Ultimate codes just so I can download the game again and play the DLC. I do have a few other Xbox games I still need to play, so maybe I'll get to this DLC when I redeem one then.

My final honorable mention is for *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*, a cult classic LucasArts point-and-click adventure that I remember playing on PC way back in the 90s.

What Didn't Make the List?

I'm pleased with myself for using a measure of restraint in selecting my top picks for favorite licensed games. Too often, I'm tempted to just include *everything* in some form. I did a bit of that with honorable mentions, but quite a few of the licensed games I've played just didn't make the list; for example: *Lego Star Wars III*.

I also restricted my choices to licenses based on movies, TV, comics, and literature. That may have been unnecessary, though, since I don't generally play games based on other kinds of licenses (ex: sports games featuring real teams, the Tony Hawk games, and so on).

There are a few notable omissions that I want to mention as I wrap up this section.

Dozens of Disney properties appear in the *Kingdom Hearts* games, but that didn't make my list since it's a hard thing to pin down to any one stand-out IP or big name.

While nobody else seems to have enjoyed *The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct*, I found it to be immersive and highly engaging. I probably could have used it as an honorable mention earlier, after *TellTale's The Walking Dead*.

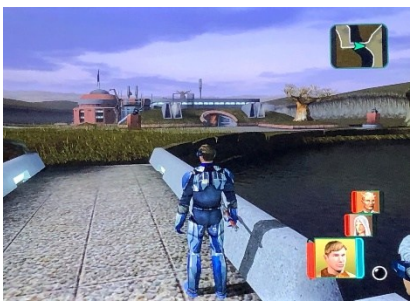
Weird and creepy *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (I played it on the original Xbox) takes inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. People become more and more fish-like as the game progresses. It also becomes more and more difficult to figure out what to do.

The Mummy Demastered was a great retro-styled metroidvania from WayForward using the Tom Cruise film reboot license (which I never saw).

I played *Disney Epic Mickey* on the Wii, with my oldest daughter watching along when she was just a little tyke. We tried playing the co-op sequel together, but we never finished it.

CDPR's *Cyberpunk 2077* is *technically* based on the tabletop RPG (a license), but it didn't really fit with the theme I was going for.

Mini-Review: Knights of the Old Republic II



Full title:
Star Wars - Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords

I played the OG Xbox version on Xbox One. I really liked this one... for about the first two-thirds. It's interesting to see a steppingstone to *Mass Effect**, *Fallout New Vegas*, and *The Outer Worlds*, but then the problems started.

It's an RPG still firmly rooted in dice-based behind-the-scenes mechanics, expressing stats on armor and weapons in terms of roll chances + saving throws, though that's less important at higher levels late-game.

Technical problems too. Lock ups, save file bloat/corruption, weird glitches.

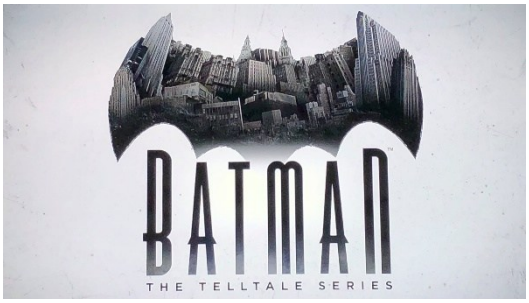
The story is really interesting, although it isn't (and never will be) fully resolved. But between glitches, being "non-canon" now anyway, and showing its age graphic/animation-wise, it probably wasn't worth going back to.

Toward the end, I just wanted to be done. Fun enough though.

*Yes, I know *Mass Effect* was made by Bioware, not Obsidian, but Bioware did make the first *Knights of the Old Republic* leading up to this.

Original Xbox game played on: Xbox One.
Originally posted to social media: 06/01/2020.

Mini-Review: Batman - The TellTale Series



This is one of many TT narrative adventure games I never got around to playing before.

It's half visual novel with conversations and choices that cause branching paths, a quarter investigation and point/click, and a quarter quick-time events that are forgiving as far as timing and consequences go.

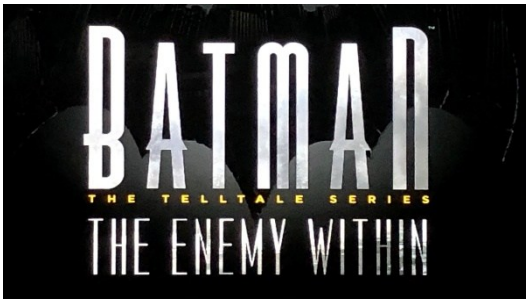
The TT engine is infamous for being glitchy, but I was surprised just how many weird display bugs there were; smoke rendering as solid white, half a character's head missing, an entire person invisible in one scene, and more.

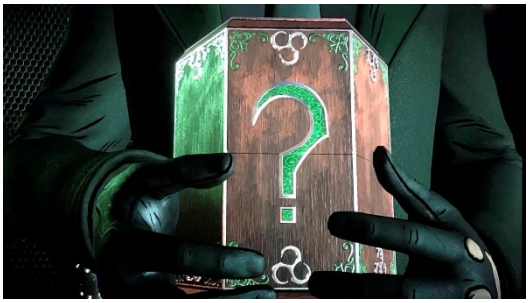
It's nothing game-breaking; just distracting at times. I play these for the story, though, not for cutting-edge animation, and that's where *Batman* shines.

Twists and turns, unexpected takes on familiar characters, a story that kept me engaged. I enjoyed it.

Played on console: PS4.
Originally posted: 09/19/2020.

Mini-Review: Batman – The Enemy Within





Much of my mini-review of the first game applies to the sequel, although these chapters were a bit longer and with far fewer graphical glitches (aside from a car interior scene where all the windows were oddly opaque).

In fact, pretty much everything was improved upon. The story and the characters in the first game were good, but *Enemy Within* brings in most of the other primary rogues gallery and gives them all time to shine.

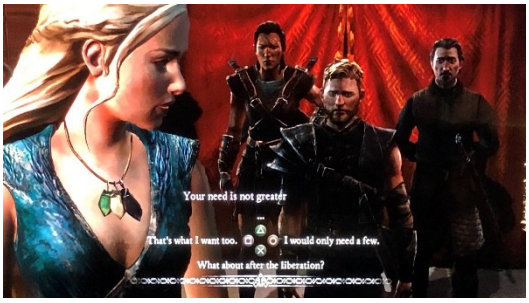
The inverted power dynamic between Joker and Harley was cool, as was the Batman/Joker plot line that drives the story.

It would have been easy to play this in a certain more hardline way, but the story offers hope and a chance to sympathize with characters or deal with them in a way you might not expect.

It was well worth the time and investment.

Played on console: PS4.
Originally posted: 09/20/2020.

Mini-Review: TellTale's Game of Thrones



A TellTale Game of Conversations (and QTE), seemingly delisted from digital stores due to... the license expiring? TellTale going under? It's available on disc if you look for it, but... maybe don't look.

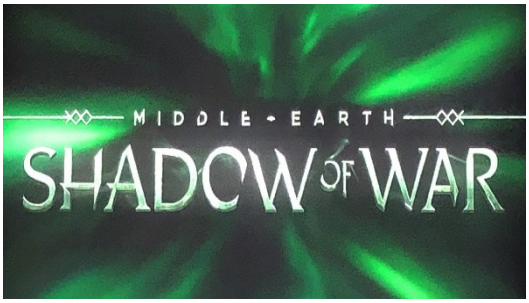
It's probably my least favorite game of this style to date. Some choices seem ignored in the next episode. Too many no-win situations where there's no good choice or doing the right thing is ultimately catastrophic. I guess that's the TellTale formula (and maybe true to the show), but it's been done much more satisfyingly with other franchises.

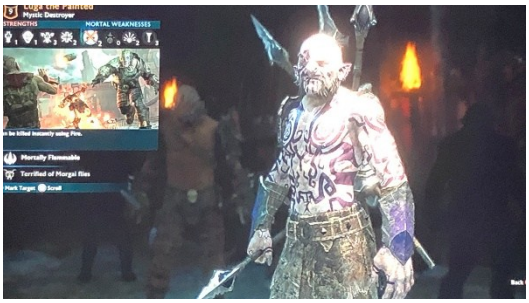
***G**ame of Thrones* ends depressingly (at least it did for me). It's set in the middle of the HBO series, centered around new characters with some familiar faces in the periphery.

Since there won't ever be a follow-up, this story is what you get, as-is. It sort of works as a tragedy, but I had hoped for more.

Played on console: PS4.
Originally posted: 02/06/2021.

Mini-Rev: Middle Earth - Shadow of War





This 2017 follow-up to 2014's *Shadow of Mordor* offers more location variety but complicates things with overly complex combat and army management systems.

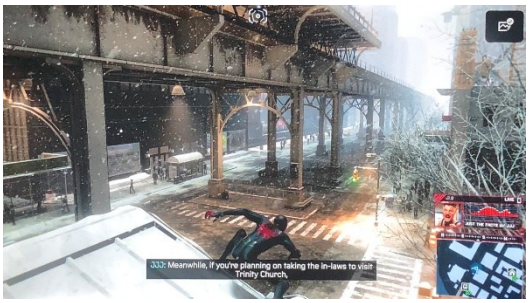
It plays like *Batman Arkham* and older *Assassins Creed* (climbing) but falls short of both. Movement and climbing never felt quite right. Combat didn't seem as smooth as *Arkham*, or even *Shadow of Mordor*. The "nemesis system" is cool, but it's used as the foundation for the less enjoyable part of the game - fort take-overs and defense.

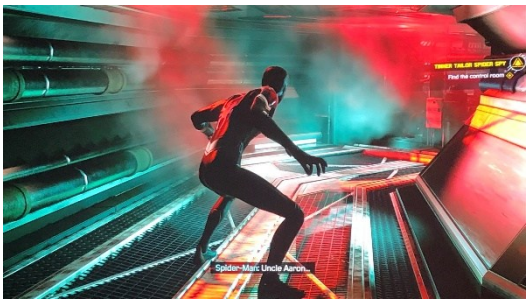
The random orcs themselves are awesome. The story goes places, but the epilogue (defend forts from invasion) could have just been its own separate mode. It's grindy and a bit frustrating. Luckily they cut it way down since release, so it was bearable.

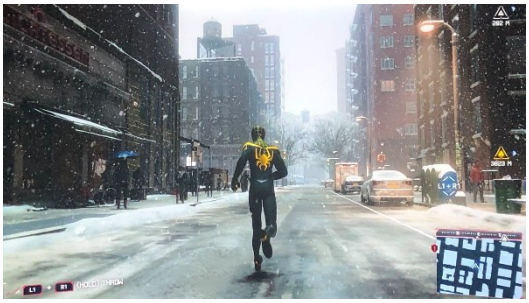
Main chapter missions were great and fun. The loot store is also shut down. It's meant to offer an ongoing challenge. Always new nemesis missions, async online missions, orc recruitment, etc. if you want that, it's great for that. If you want a start-to-finish adventure, that's here too, but you'll have to put up with those parts you don't like as much.

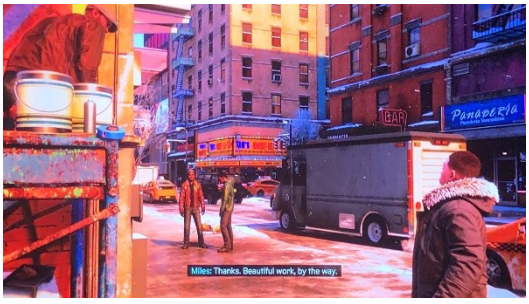
Played on console: PS4.
Originally posted: 08/20/2019.

Mini-Review: Spider-Man - Miles Morales









It's really fun. That's the whole review.

You probably know what this is already: a third person action adventure featuring newer web-slinger Miles Morales.

Combat complexity grows as you unlock skills and abilities, which can be put to good use on higher difficulties. The main story is shorter than the first game from a couple years ago but follows from it as a sort-of sequel.

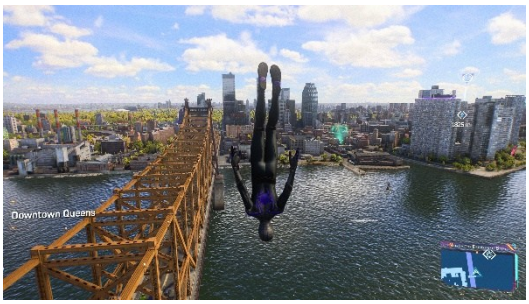
There's still plenty to do if you pursue collectibles, side missions, and trophies. I was a bit rusty on the controls but soon enough I was back in the *swing* of things. Traversing NYC as Spider-Man is a blast.

Although it's shorter, the main story is good. Stealth (mostly optional) is also fun, due in part to Miles' new abilities.

I had a great time and plan to do a quick NG+ to get the Platinum.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/28/2020.

Mini-Review: Maruel's Spider-Man 2



Miles and Peter return to take on new threats and once again save New York City and the world.

When you play *Spider-Man 2*, you know exactly what you'll get; a super-polished game (well, some NPC clipping and a weird become-a-small-cube bug) with a great story, boss battles, the open world of NYC, really fun traversal (improved by the addition of a new wingsuit), lots of costumes, gadgets and abilities, and great combat.

Almost every moment is fun, or at least interesting, and "side quests" have a pay-off in the form of getting more... well, I won't spoil it, but it's cool.

So, with so much to praise about *Spider-Man 2*, why do I feel like it would be low on my 2023 top 10, or not even make it? It's a great game, but I guess some of my favorites this year haven't been the safe bets like this.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 11/06/2023.

Mini-Review: Terminator - Resistance

Note:
This is a mini-review of the game's enhanced edition.

My son, now 15*, after watching the first two *Terminator* movies, remarked that he wished they focused more on what happens to the survivors in the future.

Poland-based developer Teyon adheres to the canon of those films (while likely not being canon itself) with *Terminator: Resistance*, a game set thirty years after *Judgment Day* that provides one possible answer.

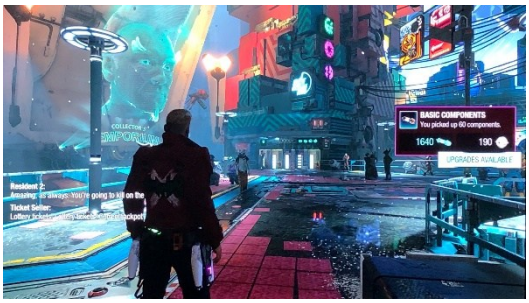
You may remember Teyon as the makers of another excellent licensed game, last year's *RoboCop: Rogue City*. *Resistance* has a similar structure; a series of open levels, side missions, first-person shooting, big action set pieces, a between-mission hub area, NPCs to get to know, great gameplay and lots of loot. There's even some surface-level romance options.

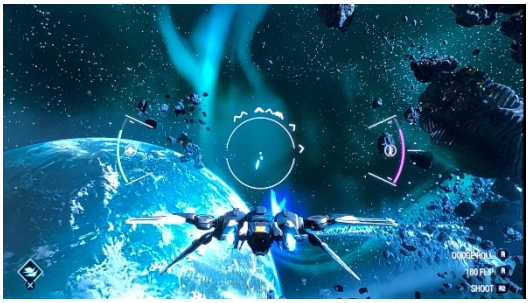
I had a great time with this and recommend it easily. It's very good.

*The son I mentioned is now 17.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 01/14/2024.

Mini-Review: Guardians of the Galaxy





On just about every podcast I listen to, when talking about this game, there are vague complaints about the game's combat mechanics. I guess they see something I didn't, because I thought it was great. I played on Hard mode and had an absolute blast.

The game is so, so, *soooo* good. It's just incredibly fun, and the story is great.

This version of the *Guardians* kind of supersedes the MCU in my mind, at least for now.

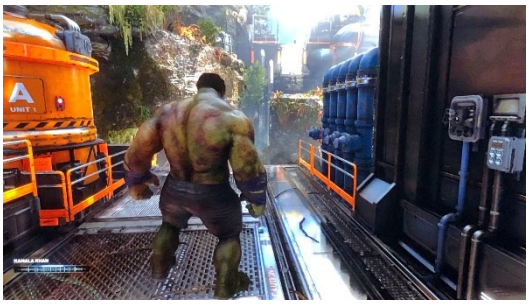
The only problem I had was with a few odd progression glitches, but a checkpoint restart always cleared it up.

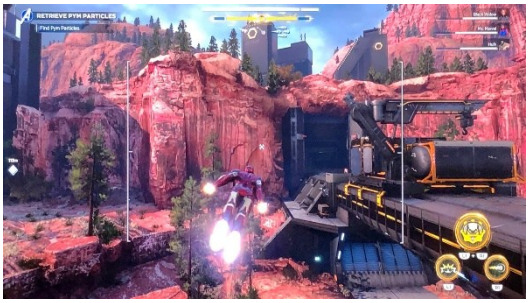
The characters are great; well, Rocket is kind of annoying for a while, but Drax and Peter and especially Mantis when she shows up are great.

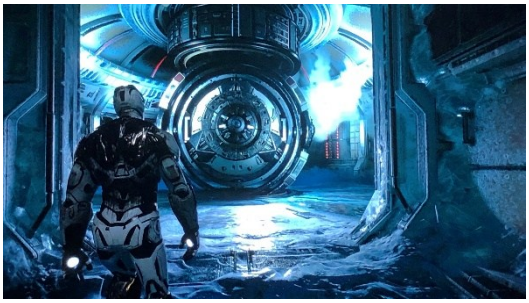
It's funny, witty, charming, action-packed, epic, and (thankfully) a single-player linear adventure. I loved it!

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 10/31/2021.

Mini-Review: Maruel's Avengers







It's a lot of fun!

I played through single-player, which has the framework of a squad-based co-op game (a la *Destiny*, etc.). Your squad gets AI Avengers which is fine, but all the multiplayer trimmings remain: loading into missions, lots of seemingly ad-hoc side missions that reuse the same few areas and objectives, faction objectives, time-limited challenges, etc.

It's built to keep you playing, upgrading, and working towards trophies and in-game goals, well after the story ends, if that's what you want. And yeah, these Avengers look like the MCU actors' stunt doubles, but that didn't bother me for long.

It's a fun story with great combat-focused gameplay that varies between each Avenger. Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) is a great leading lady for this story. So yeah, it's really fun!

Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/07/2020.

Mini-Review: Maruel's Midnight Suns

Firaxis Games combined three very different game genres to make *Midnight Suns*. Foremost is the card/strategy combat that provides a good amount of variety, tactics, and playing different heroes' skills off each other.

Between each main or side combat mission (you do one each in-game day, and side missions are mostly random), you hang out with other heroes. (By the way, you're "The Hunter", a hero you create for yourself at the start.)

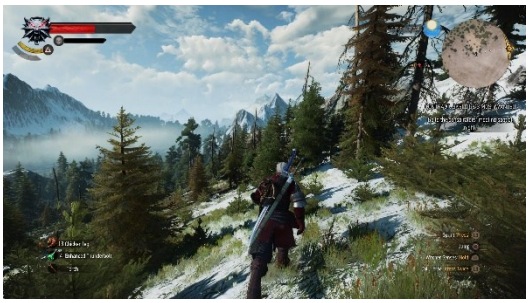
Hanging out means one-on-one events with a *Persona*-style friendship system, gift-giving, short chats, group/club events and more. That's also when you upgrade the base and improve each hero's deck.

Lastly, there's a big exploration aspect with collectibles and quests, but I completed it all in Act 1. Not perfect, but addictive and fun.

I loved it.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 06/06/2023.

Mini-Review: Witcher 3 - Hearts of Stone



I forgot how great *TW3* is, made even better with 60FPS and much-improved loading times on PS5. After seven years, I also forgot how to play it, so my imported post-game save difficulty level had to be bumped down a couple notches from the hardest mode.

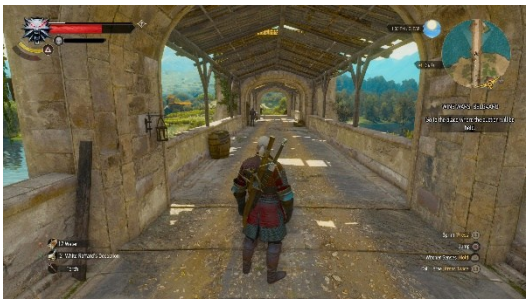
I'd always meant to play the two big critically-lauded expansions, so this recent next-gen update finally lit a fire under me to do it.

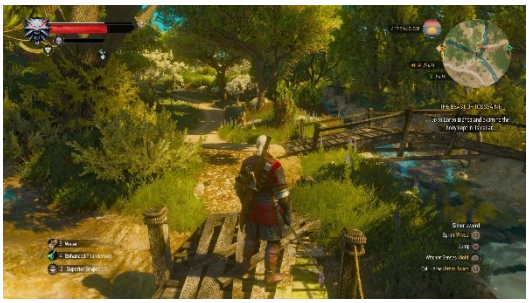
The expansions fit right into the game, so that's also an excuse to scout out undiscovered locations, do more hunts and quests, and enjoy the epic world. *Hearts of Stone* itself was fantastic, comprised of diverse quests and an interesting story. I loved every second of my return to Geralt's world.

I've heard that the second expansion is even better, so I'm diving right into that next.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/19/2022.

Mini-Review: Witcher 3 - Blood and Wine





The first of the two big DLC expansions was great, but *Blood and Wine* goes all-out with tons more quests and contracts, new Witcher gear, a whole new addition to the abilities upgrade system and a bigger story, all staged in a brand-new region of the map that comes close to rivaling some of the big areas of the main game.

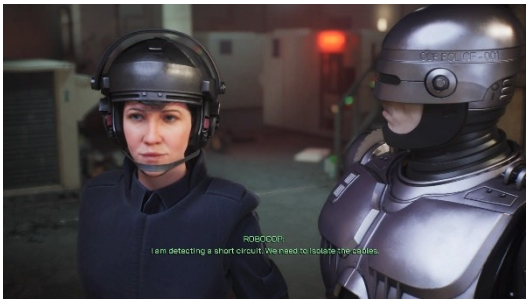
This too fits into the game as a whole, but feels more self-contained, like a 20-to-30-hour game all on its own (more, if you explore and do everything).

It even has a branching point or two in the story, leading to different late-game main quests and endings. This does mean that it's possible to miss the expansion's most interesting and inventive area/quest entirely, but I went back to a prior save to do it and got the better ending

This is a great expansion to a top-notch RPG.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/24/2022.

Mini-Review: Robocop - Rogue City



I don't know how this game got made, but I'm glad it did. This Unreal Engine AA game shines brighter than you'd expect, with environments that are sometimes near photorealistic and a story that could have been straight out of the late 80s/early 90s movie trilogy it's based on.

Set between *RoboCop 2* and *3*, there's a new big bad guy for RoboCop and his fully human cop buddies to deal with in a dystopian Detroit that's more miserable and crime-ridden than Batman's Gotham.

It's ostensibly a first-person shooter, but there's more to *Rogue City* than meets the eye. An upgrade system lets you spec into abilities that support some immersive sim aspects. I only wish it went even harder in that direction.

With side missions, cop work, and a vibe that's distinctly RoboCop, I loved it.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 11/11/2023.

Mini-Review: Avatar - Frontiers of Pandora

Yes, *AFP* is built on the bones of *Far Cry* and features a huge open world with lots of side quests, collectibles and enemy outposts and yes, it's a first-person action/adventure with guns and bows and a map you gradually de-fog to reveal points of interest.

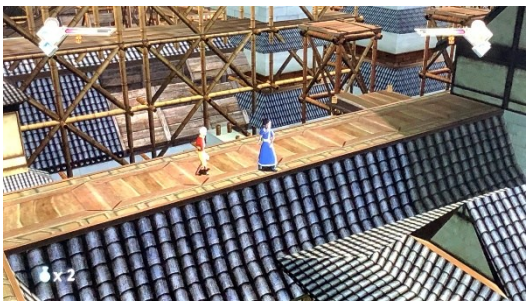
It's different in many important ways, not least of which is the setting; the alien world of Pandora, as seen in the James Cameron movies. As a stand-alone story, it can be enjoyed even with a cursory understanding (or even none at all) of the Na'vi (tall blue catlike aliens) and the RDA (human invaders, aka "sky people").

The main thing is that you at least like the *Far Cry* style of open world games; maybe hunting and crafting as well, which is a core tenant here. If so, I highly recommend *AFP*.

Big, beautiful, and fun.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/24/2023.

Mini-Rev: Avatar TLA - The Burning Earth



Full title:
Avatar: The Last Airbender - The Burning Earth

After finishing the Nic series (which was great) I wanted to play one of the games based on it (which was kind of "meh"). It's not bad. It's not good. It just exists.

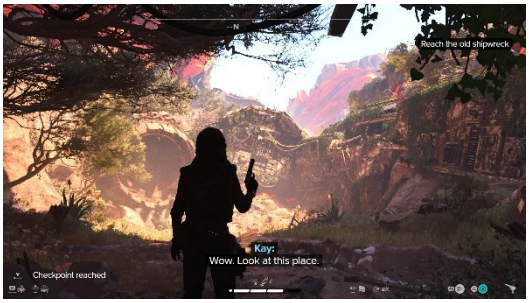
It's a third-person action adventure that follows the story of season 2 (Earth), with a few creative liberties taken (ex: the siege of Ba Sing Se plays out differently). They may have gotten the show's voice talent (sounded authentic anyway), but everything else was just lazy; ex: their mouths don't move when talking.

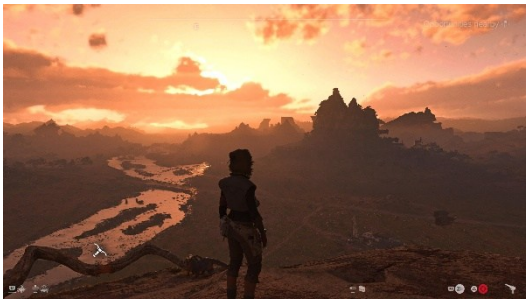
The game was seemingly up-rezzed to 360 from PS2/GameCube, which may explain some of it.

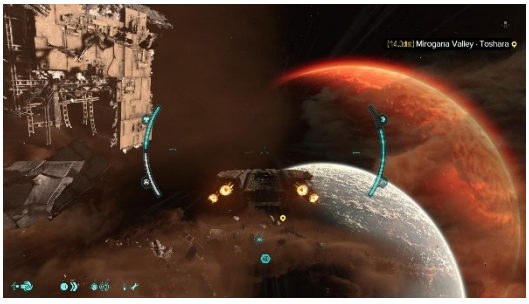
Even the achievements were lazy; five 200-pointers you can unlock in the prologue by spamming B as a combo. It plays fine. Fairly easy. It's for kids, I guess. It's a very forgettable 4 or 5 hours.

Played on console: Xbox 360.
Originally posted: 08/18/2020.

Mini-Review: Star Wars - Outlaws







Ubisoft games get a bad rap these days. I've got my own complaints (they're releasing incomplete discs) and there are legit concerns (*SWO* launched, apparently, with frustrating stealth and noticeable bugs) but the most ridiculous complaint by far has to be that main character Kay Vess isn't pretty enough. I mean, really? That's why some guys out there skipped on this game?

Here's the truth. It's a big, sprawling *Star Wars* epic with plenty of quests and some action sequences worthy of the movies.

The generated contracts get repetitive (they're mostly optional), but this isn't a game with 1000 map icons or towers to climb.

My playthrough was smooth (most bugs ironed out, it seems) and the stealth was fun.

Where *Avatar* (also great) was sort-of *Far Cry*, this is sort-of *Assassin's Creed*.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/08/2024.

Mini-Rev: Indiana Jones + The Great Circle

I've been a casual *Indy* fan since I was a kid, and while the movies are great and games like *The Fate of Atlantis* were great at the time, this is probably my favorite use of the property ever.

It's not all positive, with some lingering glitches (including collectible tracking issues late-game) and a few design shortcuts (many of the exact same enemy models, for example), but even so, wow, this is an epic adventure worth taking.

It's a little like *Tomb Raider* or *Uncharted* of course, being a globetrotting archaeological adventure but with emphasis on stealth (which is a bit bare bones, I suppose).

It's a bit like *Dishonored*, although if it had gone full immersive sim, I'd be even happier.

It's slow in the first few hours, but ramps up later.

A must-play.

Played on Xbox Series X with GamePass. Posted: 12/27/2024.

The Final Stage

Would it be in poor taste to introduce a new "Clown of the Week" segment? I guess it would be, but I'm certainly tempted.

Nothing seems to whip a certain type of gamer on social media into a frothing frenzy more than saying something positive about a game they've been convinced is garbage. It often doesn't even need to be positive; just the mere mention of a game is usually enough to get the chuds crawling out of their holes to crack asinine jokes and add their clownery to the ever-present social media noise.

A big failing of mine is that I sometimes lack the willpower to just ignore those fools. In a way, I bring it on myself by engaging with that nonsense too often when I see it.

Case in point, I stumbled upon this bit of foolishness from a "verified" Twitter account that goes by "One Hundred" before later realizing he was an Xbox fanboy with a track record of bias against PlayStation exclusives.

> "PlayStation Community What the hell happened to Lost Soul Aside Should have been called Lost Soul Put This Game Aside The game is not even in there Top 10 games sold"

I responded:

> "Kinda doesn't matter though. The game is excellent. Super fun, a lot of attention to detail, great combat, interesting story. Definitely a top 10 game for me this year, if not top 5. It's really good."

It devolved from there. Rather than reply, he thought it necessary to quote-tweet me and double down with this:

> "I plays Indies all the time and there are Indies that look and plays better than a 9 year old game. If you like the game fine But it want stop me from stating my opinion That's FACTS !!!!"

There's a bit more, but the back-and-forth insults fizzled out after a couple more posts.

In another example, I came across a post from somebody with a good-sized following who mentioned that they were playing and enjoying *Forspoken*, and felt it was a lot better of a game than most people gave it credit for.

The replies were the same kind of pile-on clowning that I've railed against before. I had planned to include some of it here, but the original author deleted his original post, and I must have deleted all my clap-backs (which I tend to do once I realize I'm adding to the noise), so that whole ordeal is now lost in the ether. It's probably for the best, though.

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I need a "time travel" feature here, like D and I used to do on our podcast, where I revisit earlier topics and make corrections or additions. This week, it's another very weird game I forgot all about when ranking them in issue #14. *Daydreamer: Awakened Edition* should have had a spot on that list. Check out this trailer.

I also just finished *Lost Soul Aside*, which was a great game that's being roasted by the usual social media mob. It features a sidekick named Arena that would have been a good pick for my "little guy" companions list in issue #16, if this game had been out then.

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For next week, I'm tentatively considering an article about point-and-click adventures. I wanted to play the newest *Monkey Island* game first, and the rest of the *Syberia* series (I only played the first two), and an indie game I bought on Steam a few months ago called *Neon Hearts City* (cyberpunk-themed), but maybe "games I want to play but haven't yet" can be part of the feature. I'm still workshopping the idea.

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End Credits

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