THE VIDEO GAME GENERATIONS NEWSLETTER

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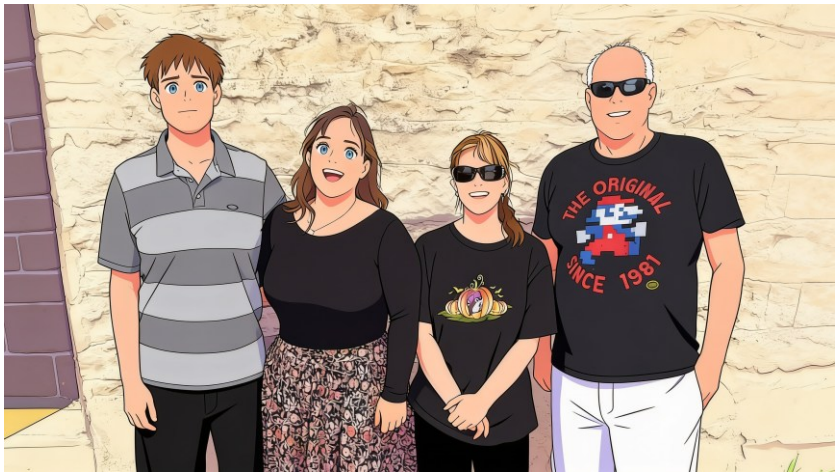
Loading Screen

Of all the records I would have been happy never to beat, we just broke the all-time record for the most 100-degree (or hotter) days in September where I live. My poor decades-old central AC can't keep up.

Apropos of nothing, my oldest daughter turned 21 last month. She was 8 when we started a podcast.

Anyway, this issue features lengthy rants, rants disguised as news, and rants worming their way into ordinary features like *Collection Inspection*. The main feature is photography in video games, although this issue's mini-reviews are unrelated.



I very nearly included the real photograph instead, but decided it would be better to turn us all into cartoons. From the left, my kids Heath (18), Adelynn (21), Hadleigh (18) and there's me, Mike (54).

Recent Events

Xbox Introduces Disc-to-Digital Licensing

Microsoft sabotaged the momentum they had with the Xbox 360 generation when they announced their strategy for Xbox One back in 2013. I wrote about how this propelled me from being an Xbox-first customer to a PlayStation-first customer back in issue #25 of the VGGN. That essay starts on page 3.

The scheme called for tying physical discs to your Xbox account. It would require daily online check-ins to maintain your license. It put restrictions on being able to transfer a game (sell the disc) to another person, and was something publishers could opt out of entirely. Sharing a game required some hoop-jumping, if it was even allowed at all. The only upside was that you could play the game wherever your account was, without having to move that disc from console to console.

They scrapped all that after the backlash and before Xbox One launched later that year, but the damage was already done. By my thinking, this was the moment everything started going downhill for Xbox.

It turns out that they *didn't* scrap it entirely. For that plan to work, each disc would need to be unique. It wouldn't be possible to link a specific disc to an Xbox account if there wasn't something distinct (an ID code in the data) about that copy of the game. This must have been too far along to reverse, and it just became a dormant aspect of every disc being printed since that generation.

Fast forward to August 2026, and an announcement from Xbox that they would soon roll out a feature that allows gamers to claim a digital entitlement for some of their Xbox One and Xbox Series X discs. I had a lot of questions at the time, but now I get it.

By making use of that unique per-copy ID, they can offer this as a stand-alone feature without all the negatives of their original plan. It's still in preview for certain Xbox users and hasn't been rolled out publicly as I write this, but those with hands-on access have found that many games work, while some don't, either because the disc *doesn't* have a code (on this, I'm not sure) or because it's from a publisher who has not opted into the feature.

By claiming the digital entitlement, the game is added to your digital library just like a digital purchase. You can install it on your other consoles, play it on PC or streaming (if supported), and you don't need to have the disc in to serve as the license. You can keep the disc, and in fact you *have to* if you want to avoid losing the license, but it's no longer a factor in your access to that particular game.

If you sell or lend the disc, they have the option to claim the digital entitlement. If and when they do, it's removed from your digital library at the same time and you lose access.

One of my biggest fears is that this feature would introduce an online license check just to play physical discs at all. If you're not online, it can't check with Microsoft's servers to find out if you're trying to use a disc that somebody else already has the digital license for. That would be a significant drawback to this, and would basically ruin physical media on Xbox consoles permanently.

As I understand it now, no such mandatory online check was added. If you *are* online, all of that can happen and you can take over the digital entitlement, but you don't *have* to be. This means somebody could have the digital version and somebody else could use the disc too, but this seems like a small enough exploit that they've deemed it a non-issue.

Source:
https://x.com/asha_shar/status/2092621209955635606

Xbox Limits Cloud Gaming in Game Pass

It's one step forward, one step back in the video game industry these days. No sooner had Xbox garnered optimism and good will with their disc-to-digital announcement, they decided to squeeze a little more money out of the small percentage of Game Pass users who make use of streaming (cloud gaming) by limiting your monthly hours.

At the Ultimate tier, it's 15 hours per month, but it goes down with each tier. Additional cloud gaming time can be purchased separately. This takes effect in November.

If there is *anybody* out there applauding the PlayStation decision to kill discs starting in 2028 (justifying it as "it doesn't matter because only 15% of gamers buy discs") *and* who happens to be an Xbox Game Pass subscriber and who *also* happens to spend dozens of hours with cloud gaming each month (which, according to Xbox, is only 4% of their subscribers), this little bit of karma is for you. Yes, even small percentages matter.

Source:
https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/xbox-is-capping-cloud-gaming-to-15-hours-and-charging-for-extra-playtime/

Double Fine Does Another Kickstarter

Free of Microsoft/Xbox and independent once more, Tim Schafer's beloved studio has once again turned to crowd funding. I backed *Double Fine Adventure* (which became the excellent point-and-click *Broken Age*) and I'll probably back this too, although I haven't yet.

At most, though, I might do the $80 tier because it also gets you a Blu-Ray disc of the Amnesia Fortnite documentary.

The Kickstarter campaign ends at or near the end of September. I think I'll have this issue out before then, so if you're reading this and want to join in, you may still have time.

At the absurd $100,000,000 stretch goal, they'll make *Brütal Legend 2*. This does beg the question, though, why wasn't it already in the works when they had Microsoft money and were seemingly set free to do anything they wanted? As I write this, they've easily hit and exceeded the $400k basic funding goal, but are only 0.51% of the way to $100 mil.

Source:
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/doublefine/amnesia-fortnight-2026-indie-reboot

Lollipop Chainsaw 2

I was (finally) watching *Dune Part 2* on HBO Max this weekend, and an ad came on (I forget what product – probably some specific brand name pharmaceutical) because I'm cheap and have the ad-supported tier, and the song playing through it seemed really familiar. I had to look it up, and it was *Riot Rhythm* from a band called Sleigh Bells. Why did it seem so familiar though?

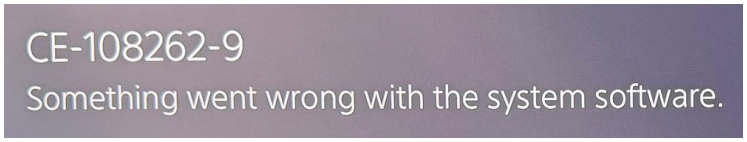
This played during the first level of one of my favorite Xbox 360 games, *Lollipop Chainsaw*. That, then, reminded me that there's a sequel or follow-up in the works, and it's due to be playable at the SEGA/ATLUS booth later this month at Tokyo Game Show. There's also a remaster of that original game, already out.

Source:
https://www.gematsu.com/2026/09/new-lollipop-chainsaw-game-playable-at-tgs-2026

PSA: PlayStation Store Error CE-108262-9

For months, the digital PlayStation store has been all but unusable for me on PS5. I tend to add to my digital library only when stuff goes on sale – and stuff is *always* on sale.

The problem was, the store would crash out, throwing me back to the dashboard after viewing details on two or three games (sometimes just one, especially after it had already happened once during that session) with an error code of CE-108262-9.



It didn't seem to matter how I filtered or sorted in the store. Getting booted out meant I had to load it back up, apply my filter and sort yet again, and try to scroll back to where I left off last time. Fully exploring those sale pages became such a headache that I've rarely bothered since earlier this year.

I realized, though, that I was also having an issue with my wish list. Games simply weren't loading when I tried to browse it. I could click into a specific game and see what it was, but even that was slow.

Being a programmer myself, and knowing a bit about how server-side APIs work with front-end clients, I started to wonder if *this* might be related to CE-108262-9.

At some point, Sony either lifted the limit (I used to have to remove games to add new ones to my wish list) or a glitch allowed me to exceed it (because I've no longer hit the limit, even after adding a lot this year). When store pages load, it has to cross-reference that list to know whether to show a solid heart icon (it's a game on my wish list) or no heart at all.

I deleted everything from my wish list, and the problem went away. Store pages even load quickly again. Still, they should fix that bug.

Sony Argues Against Digital Game Ownership

Now that I can browse PSN sales again, I have to wonder, *should I*?

They have the whole "we won't be making discs" thing that has all but killed my interest in PlayStation as an option for next gen. They just settled an unrelated class-action lawsuit for a measly $7.85 million that is unlikely to spread very far as PSN store credit, considering their customer base is over 100 million.

Now, they're battling another lawsuit over what it means to "own" a digital game.

Their argument is absurd, and it makes no distinction between owning the copyright to an intellectual property (IP) and owning a single copy of a game. They argue that nobody can own a digital game because then Sony would no longer own it. Further, they've said that "a reasonable user" knows they're only purchasing a license, not the actual game.

Sony, of course, is going to protest digital ownership in any form. Their all-digital future doesn't work like they'd want otherwise. What gets me, though, are the chuds on social media with their "...but the EULA" bad takes even when physical game discs are the topic.

It's as if they live in a different reality; one where there's a gaming gestapo that can show up at your door and demand that you give up your collection. To my knowledge, this has never happened, and with laws like the first sale doctrine (which some dummy on Threads thought was a law from back in 1854 because that's its section in the criminal resource manual), it *can't* happen. It makes mention of "licensing" but if that really negated ownership of that physical copy, used game stores would have been sued out of existence by now.

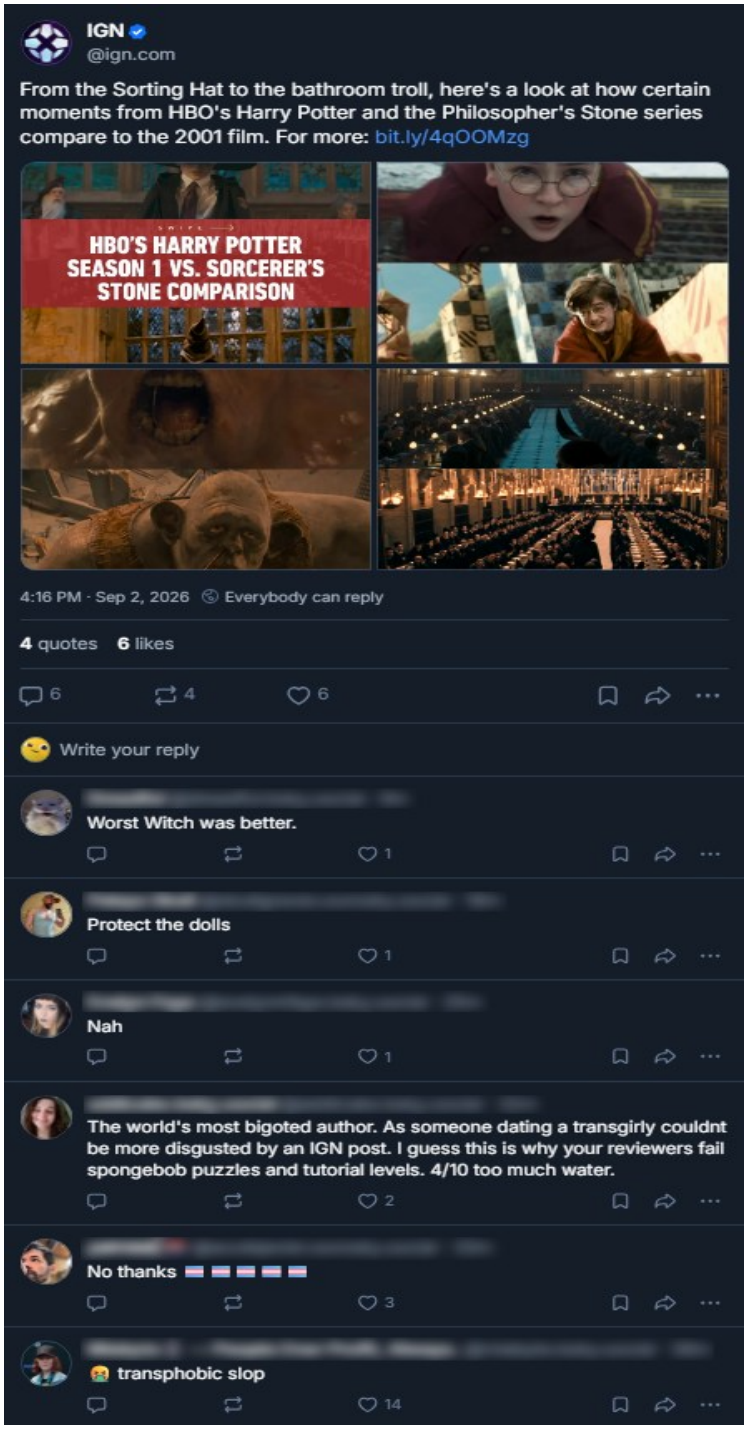
Sources:
https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2026/09/03/sony-playstation-lawsuit-settlement/91574583007/

https://fortune.com/2026/09/01/sony-playstation-dont-actually-own-digital-games-grand-theft-auto-analog-media-gen-z/

https://www.justice.gov/archives/jm/criminal-resource-manual-1854-copyright-infringement-first-sale-doctrine

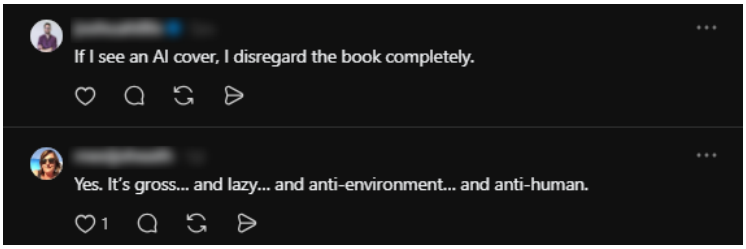
Is Everybody Just Insufferable Now?

Recently, as I browse social media (mostly Twitter, Threads, and BlueSky), I've started to notice something that has likely always been there but seems to be getting worse – if such a thing is possible. Actually, let's throw out Twitter in this discussion. It was overrun with insufferable fools as soon as it became "X", which is a shame for the few great people that still remain and interact with me there.



That's one example, taken from an IGN post on BlueSky. I agree with the backlash around JK Rowling and her very vocal anti-trans stance, and she's apparently far more involved in the upcoming HBO series than in the *Hogwarts Legacy* game that many people also railed against, but I don't know what replies like those are going to accomplish.

A new author posted to Threads that she wrote a book (not AI-assisted in the writing) but used gen-AI to help in designing the cover art, and explained the reasons. Her question was about potential backlash. A few helpful replies were overshadowed by clowns likening it to theft and saying they'd disregard the book entirely, assume that it was also *written* by generative AI, and consider it anti-human.



That one hit very close to home for me, as I've struggled with my own thoughts on AI "art" since the very first VGGN issue. Where I work, AI usage is mandatory. If I rejected it, I'd be out of a job. It's that simple. It's unlikely I'd find a job as a programmer *anywhere* without being required to use AI. Whether you generate text, images, code, or something else, it's all in a similar vein. I *have* to accept it no matter how I might personally feel.

I minimize it with the VGGN, but I've yet to find compelling evidence pointing me to who's specific art was stolen for the logo, title, and "cartoon me" on my cover pages. I've actually tried, with reverse-image lookups and such. If somebody tries to say this means my writing is AI-generated too, they can f*** right off.

Insufferable, Continued

Then, we've got the backlash to PlayStation's anti-consumer decision to stop making game discs in 2028. If PlayStation posts about anything, the replies are now predictable.

I'm a Patreon supporter of *Does it Play*. They do great work in providing a site that tests and reviews how well (if at all) the version of a game installed from disc runs without internet or updates. They're leading the charge on the *#PSBlackout* and the fight (even if it's a battle we can't win) to keep physical media as a choice for those of us who want and value it.

When PlayStation posted an image showing off environmental detail in *Wolverine*, these were the replies. Oh, and this is from X/Twitter so I guess I'm not ignoring it entirely after all.

It was funny at first, but I'm starting to see it as possibly doing more harm than good. Sony is already putting anti-harassment policies in place, seemingly as a result of the backlash (although maybe not because of these mostly harmless Twitter replies, per se).

If somebody posts about a game they like, somebody else is going to reply that it's utter garbage. If somebody posts a movie spoiler and is asked to use the convenient spoiler sparkle tag Threads added for that very reason, the spoiler-poster doubles down by insisting everybody should just mute every possible keyword they want to avoid. It becomes exhausting after a while.

What I realized through all this, though – and what kind of chills me to my bones – is that, quite possibly, *I'm insufferable too*.

Lately, I've found it hard to resist the urge to call people out on their nonsense. Maybe it's some anti-woke chud with a complaint about a game character not being sexy enough, or having to play as a woman, or being scared to death (I guess) that LGBTQ+ representation will spell doom for the gaming industry.

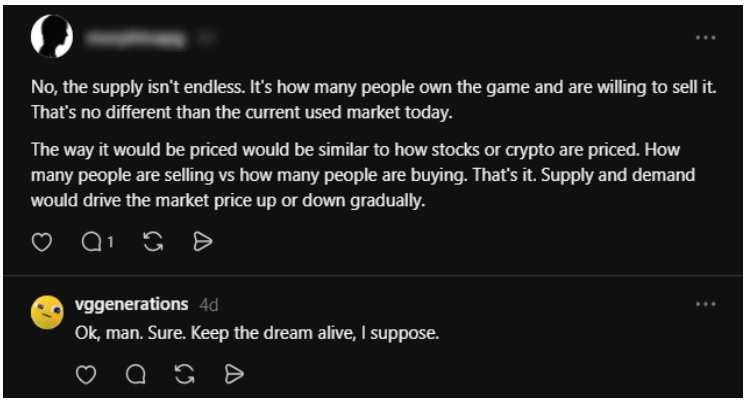
Maybe it's a flippant remark about how they've been all-digital for a decade and don't understand why losing discs is a big deal.

Maybe it's the spread of misinformation, often the result of assumptions taken as fact, about how game discs haven't held the full game in over a decade anyway; true of some, but not the majority, and those people *really* don't like being corrected with facts.

Maybe it's somebody unwilling to believe that Xbox can offer disc-to-digital because they've been putting unique identifiers on each disc since the Xbox One launch, but PlayStation hasn't and therefore *can't* offer that feature.

My replies tend to be (at worst) unkind or (at best) confrontational. I used to delete those replies pretty quickly, but lately, I've been letting them stand. Threads makes it easy to restrict, block, and even hide specific replies.

After some back-and-forth where I was arguing why PlayStation (and others) would never allow a digital used game marketplace for video games, I gave up.



I find it tough to hold back when I see a post just begging to be ripped apart, but I should.

Pictures and a Thousand Words

Photo mode is a popular feature in many modern video games; especially ones with vibrant, beautiful open worlds. It's a way to capture a scene without elements of the HUD detracting from the view, often presented with features and effects like color filters, zooming, free camera positioning, and more.

This isn't that.

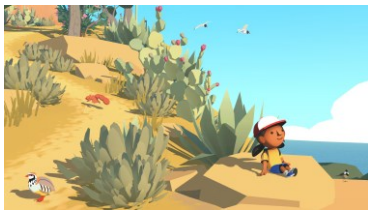
I tend to ignore photo mode in games, with the rare exception like *Ghost of Tsushima*. Far fewer games make a photographer of the main character instead. Those games put a camera in the hands of your protagonist, and you – as the player – are guiding *them* to take pictures of their own world.

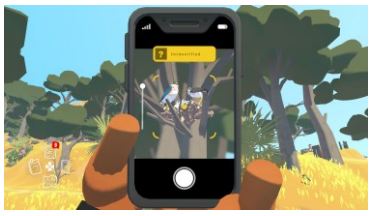
Different games implement this in different ways. I thought it might be fun to take a look at those different ways.

Does the main character gain a boost or bonus by taking photos? Does it factor into the core gameplay loop? Is it just for collectibles? Do you, as the player, get to frame your own shot or is it simply automatic?

Without further ado, here are 25 video games where the main character can carry a camera and take photos of the world they inhabit.

Alba – A Wildlife Adventure





This is one of several games on this list that I've never played. It looks cute. You go around with what appears to be a smartphone camera, snapping shots of various animals to identify and catalogue them. There's more to the gameplay, but this is a big part of it.

Pokémon Snap

While I'm on the topic of photographing wildlife, an argument could be made that *Pokémon Snap* is the grandfather of them all. It debuted on the Nintendo 64 as an inventive first-person shooter, but instead of hunting animals, you snap photos of various Pokémon as they run, bounce, and frolic in their native environments.

It's an on-rails shooter, with some Pokémon appearing only for a moment or in ways that require you to find just the right moment for the perfect picture. Photos are judged and rated based on criteria like the angle of each Pokémon, what they were doing, the size and framing of the photo, etc.

The game is infinitely replayable (although I've never played through it myself) as you try to find the best shots along the ride through each of several areas.

Beasts of Maravilla Island

Here's another I've never played, but it's reportedly inspired by *Pokémon Snap*. You play as a photographer visiting a magical island to take photos of magical wildlife.

Unlike *Pokémon Snap*, though, it isn't on rails. You can freely roam the island's three zones.

Firewatch

I forced myself to replay the first part of this game so I could get my own screenshots of the in-game camera system. As Henry, a man trying to get away and distract himself from a real-life tragedy, you can find a disposable camera in a backpack hanging from a tree partway through the second day (chapter).

I sometimes think I didn't give *Firewatch* a fair shake, or I judged it by something I *thought* it was, instead of what it *is*. It had been built up to be some kind of mystery, maybe with a supernatural twist, aliens, a monster... just *something* other than the slice-of-life narrative exploration experience it is.

Henry is a new lookout stationed at a tower in the Wyoming wilderness, with little to do but make sure nobody out there starts a fire. I probably would have enjoyed it more if I knew that *nothing happens* throughout the game.

Okay, well that's not true. Stuff happens, and you're in constant contact with Delilah, another lookout (Cissy Jones) who you only know as a voice over the radio; it's just more down-to-earth human issues and interactions, and not at all what I expected.

Honestly, yeah, I think it was a "me" problem.

Anyway, the disposable camera you can find plays no part in the game other than giving you an opportunity to snap pictures as you see fit, using the 18 remaining exposures. The twist (spoiler) is that those photos show up in the end credits.

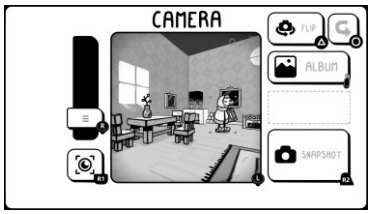
Life is Strange

My journey through this series went no further than *True Colors*, but I do eventually want to play *Double Exposure* and *Reunion*, which bring back original protagonist Max Caulfield.

In addition to her time-rewind superpower (and the – slight spoiler – later ability to time travel using a photo, a la *The Butterfly Effect*), Max is *really* into photography. In each chapter, there are specific photo spots to find that unlock achievements or trophies and serve as collectibles.

These happen only at specific interactive spots. From what I recall, you aren't framing and zooming and capturing the moment on your own. It's just an automatic event.

Toem – A Photo Adventure



When I eventually do a *black and white games* issue, Toem is likely to be one of the games featured. I kind of want to *play it first*, though.

Gameplay is from an isometric (top-down) view, but you shift to first-person when taking photos. Apparently, this is the entire point and the main mechanic of the game. Photographs help with quests and (from what I'm reading) earn stamps that allow you to ride a bus to the next chapter/area of the game.

Beyond Good & Evil

I'm overdue for a replay of this cult classic Ubisoft masterpiece, especially with the HD remaster sitting in my digital library.

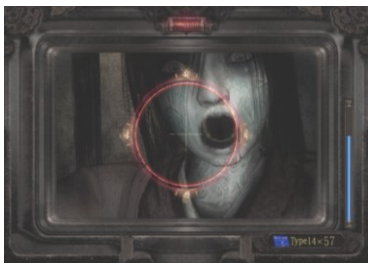
Jade uses a digital camera to photograph wildlife and earn the funds needed for various upgrades. It also works as a scanner that helps analyze the environment – although it's been a long time since I played the original on PS2 and I forget the specifics.

Mafia – The Old Country

This is the game that sparked my idea for this feature to begin with, when I played it last year. Enzo can use a clunky camera to take black & white photos of scenic landmarks around Sicily, Italy.

Photography is limited to specific spots around the map, rather than something Enzo can just do anywhere at any time. My save file has all of them completed, so I could only get screenshots of the in-game tutorial for it, but that's good enough, I suppose. It serves no purpose aside from a mini-game diversion.

Fatal Frame (series)



Few in-game uses of a camera are more iconic than the Camera Obscura in the *Fatal Frame* horror game series. This should have been one the series on my backlog when I wrote about that in last week's issue. *Maybe* I'll try to finally play through the original three in October, if I can somehow find the time.

From what I understand, taking a photo is how you fight back against ghosts. It seems like it might be clunky and frustrating to do that while your life is on the line, but I guess it works if there's a whole series of these, with the first three considered cult classics from the PS2 generation.

If you still have a PS3, these games are available to purchase digitally (or, uh, rent or license for an undetermined period of time). Grab them before Sony shuts down the store next year, along with any other PS1 and PS2 classics, if you're at all interested in them.

DreadOut and *DreadOut 2*

The developers of *DreadOut* were inspired by *Fatal Frame* and Indonesian folklore. The second game's PSN page says you can also fight back with melee weapons, which might liven up the action a bit. These games do look interesting.

The Legend of Zelda – Tears of the Kingdom

Link's camera in *Tears of the Kingdom* is a function of the Purah Pad, which itself is seemingly a modified Sheikah Slate first introduced in *Breath of the Wild*. The camera helps identify enemies, objects, and items and works as a (mostly) optional utility and activity for filling out the Hyrule Compendium.

Link can even snap selfies with it.

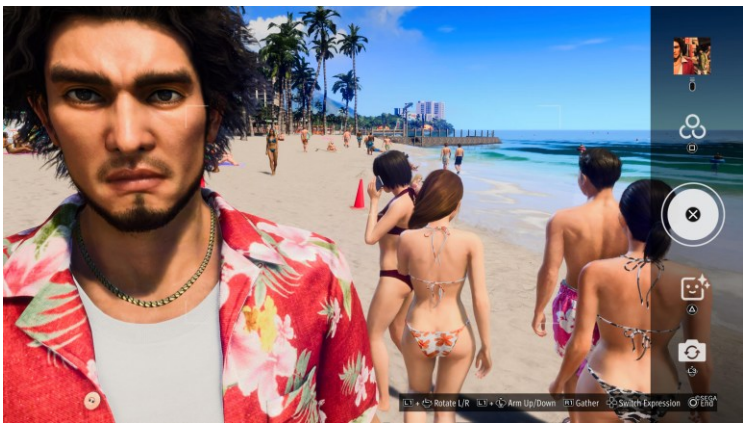
Viewfinder

One of the most unique, inventive first-person puzzle games (*Portal*-likes) I've ever played is this indie gem called *Viewfinder*. One of the core mechanics is taking photographs of the world, which effectively erases that part of the scene and puts it into a photograph that you can stamp down anywhere else in the world.

For example, if you need to reach a platform that's high up and out of reach, you can take a photo of stairs somewhere else in the level, align the photo with some ideal spot in the world, stamp it down, and voila, you now have a working set of stairs leading up to your goal.

It helps that the game also has an interesting story about environmental preservation and a seemingly dystopian future, if I recall correctly. I highly recommend *Viewfinder*.

Like a Dragon – Infinite Wealth



Ichiban Kasuga carries a digital camera and can snap photos freely in *Infinite Wealth*.

What's *really* bizarre, though, is the *Sicko Snap* mini-game (carried over into Majima's pirate side-story in 2025's *Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii*), where an on-rails bus ride tasks Ichiban with snapping photos of big burly guys (the "sickos") dressed in practically nothing as they traipse along balconies, hang from signs, and peek out from behind cars and buildings.

It's a riff on *Pokémon Snap*, and perhaps one of the most unhinged mini-games in the entire series (at least from what I've played).

Dead Rising (series)

Among my gaming shames – games I should have played by now but never have – is *Dead Rising*. The first game has a recent remaster, which I do plan to (eventually) play. It's the time limit that always turned me off about it.

As I understand, Frank West is a photographer as the zombie outbreak starts. Photos tie into the game's progression and leveling systems.

The Good Life

The guy behind *Deadly Premonition*, Hidetaka Suehiro (better known as SWERY) decided to take the basic concept of that game, but remove the horror elements and put it in a rural town in England where people turn into cats and dogs at night (maybe a spoiler).

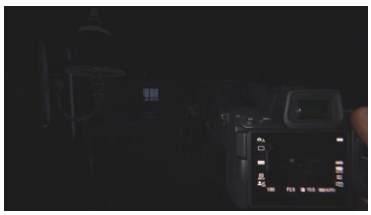
I was a backer for this on Kickstarter, and even though it wasn't *quite* what I expected, I still had a fun time when I finally played through it.

Naomi Hayward is a photographer from New York, and an important part of the game is taking unique photos of various people and places around town. The photos are posted to an in-game social media site where they earn *likes* and *followers* for Naomi, contributing to the goal of paying off her debt.

Umurangi Generation

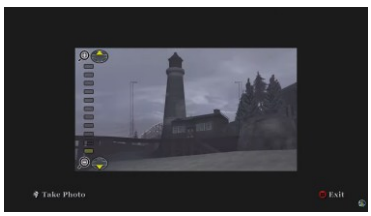
This is another one where in-game photography is its entire purpose. I haven't played it, but it's seemingly set in a dystopian near-future. Photos earn money, and it seems like there's a pretty robust system at play.

Phasmophobia



This game might have a single-player mode (I haven't played it myself), but it's meant to be a 4-player co-op experience. You play as ghost hunters on a mission to document paranormal happenings in a variety of haunted locations. Still photography isn't the only tool at your disposal, but it fits the theme.

Bully



It's been forever since I played Rockstar's *Bully*, but I have fond memories of it; just, those memories don't include the photo side missions, so I had to look up how it works.

For photography class, you have to visit specific places around town to snap photos of landmarks and buildings. Paparazzi missions require that you capture specific students doing embarrassing things on film.

The camera system seems pretty simple. A frame of green or red indicates a well-framed shot versus a poorly-framed one. Photos go into an in-game album. Jimmy gets a better camera as the game progresses.

Season – A Letter to the Future

I'm including a variety of games I've never played – like this one – because they seem to be the most perfect examples of games that feature photography.

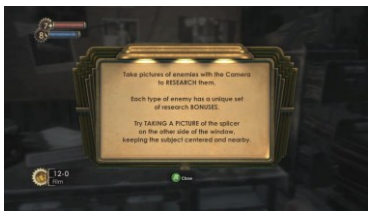
Snapping pictures to remember the world as it is – before a great flood wipes it all away – is the entire point of the game. As this seems to be the central mechanic, the camera system is highly detailed and adjustable, with haptic triggers on PS5 and other realistic features like depth-of-field, filters, and adjustable zoom – many of the things you'd expect to find in other games' photo modes.

Final Fantasy XV

The game originally launched with party member Prompto as the sole photographer, snapping pics automatically as the journey progressed. These were presented when camping at the end of each day as a fun little recap of what happened along the way.

Later, a camera feature was added for players (as main character Noctis) with the ability to snap photos on demand, whenever, wherever, and of whatever you want. I'm not entirely sure what that's for, although it seems like later patches also introduced objectives or challenges to go along with the camera.

Bioshock



The research camera in *Bioshock* is included as an in-game way of earning permanent stat bonuses by taking photos of different enemies. Film is a consumable resource.

The more pictures you take of the same enemy type (and the better the quality), the more research progress you accumulate.

On a side note, the *Bioshock* series is on my list of 123 must-play games in the last issue.

Insomniac's *Spider-Man*

It's easy to forget that all-around good guy Peter Parker, when not web-slinging through New York City in his efforts to protect the citizens and thwart the plans of super-villains, is also an aspiring photographer.

In the game, photo opportunities are limited (I think) to specific landmark sites. My save file isn't on my PS5 Pro (and I don't have PS+ to transfer/download it from the cloud), so I started up a new game intending to get far enough in to unlock the camera.

It turns out, that only happens after several story missions, so I went with Plan B and used a YouTube video to get a couple screenshots instead. Taking photos around the city helps unlock different suits, if I recall correctly.

Red Dead Redemption 2

I'm not a history buff, so I wouldn't have guessed that portable consumer-grade cameras existed in 1899, but I guess I would have been wrong. *RDR2* is nothing if not realistic (in a sense).

It's that realism, though, that really soured me on this game. I *loved* the first *Red Dead Redemption* (and even the smaller-scoped PS2 precursor, *Red Dead Revolver*), but *RDR2* just didn't do it for me. I recognize it's one of the best games ever made and I played it to completion, but it doesn't rank anywhere close to some of my favorites of all time.

Protagonist Arthur Morgan can take photos of the people and places he encounters, but as best I can remember, it's just an optional side activity with no in-game rewards.

Metal Gear Solid 2 – Sons of Liberty

In the story's Tanker chapter, you're tasked with taking pictures of Metal Gear RAY to progress the story. From what I can recall (and it's been a very long time since I played this), it can be used in other places as well, to grab shots of easter eggs or just whatever.

Along with *Pokémon Snap* and *Fatal Frame*, this might be one of the earliest examples of a camera/photo mechanic in a video game.

As with *Beyond Good & Evil*, I'm overdue for a replay of *MGS2* – one of my favorites in the series. Most people give the nod to *MGS3*, but for me, I was most enamored by *Sons of Liberty* instead.

Michigan – Report From Hell

I never knew this PS2 game existed, because it wasn't released in North America. It's also a blatant cheat for the purposes of this list, because there's no still photography involved at all. However, I *had* to include it because I struggled to find a 25th game otherwise (and I wanted that nice round number) and because it sounds so bizarre that it deserves a look.

As the cameraman for a fictional news network, you use a video camera to direct the action rather than participate in it yourself.

Seriously, though, look this up or check out one of the videos I found on YouTube by clicking the images above. It seems entirely written and voiced in English, so why did it skip a North American release? I'd add this to my library if it wasn't region-locked, although it seems pretty rare and pricey, so maybe not.

What Did I Miss?

Did I miss anything? If you're a fan of another game featuring an in-game photographer, let me know on Threads, Twitter, BlueSky, or in email.

Collection Inspection

It's back! While I do still want to think of my game collection as a library (not just plastic bricks on shelves gathering dust from disuse), calling it *A Library Look* just didn't have the same ring to it. So, *Collection Inspection* it is.

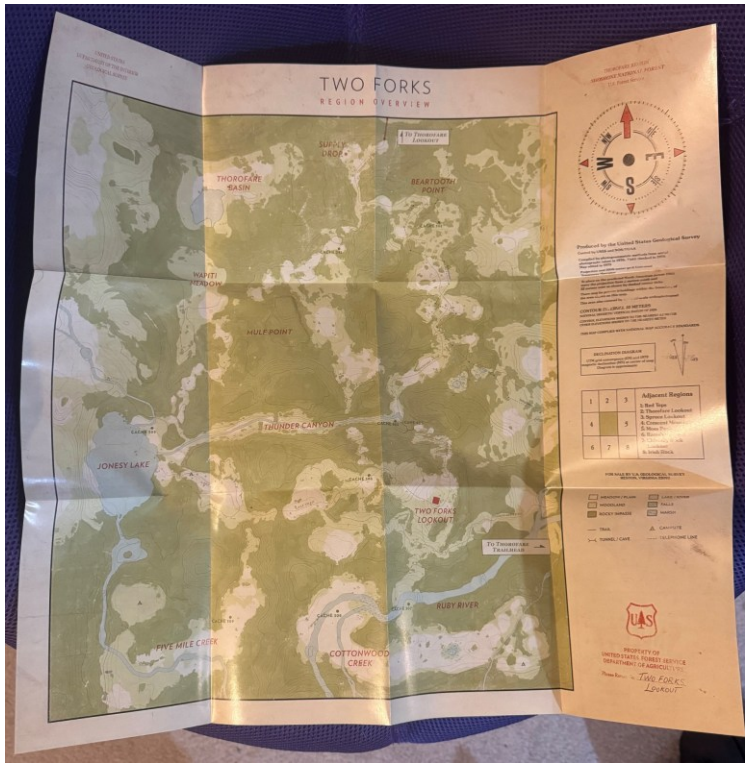
Firewatch

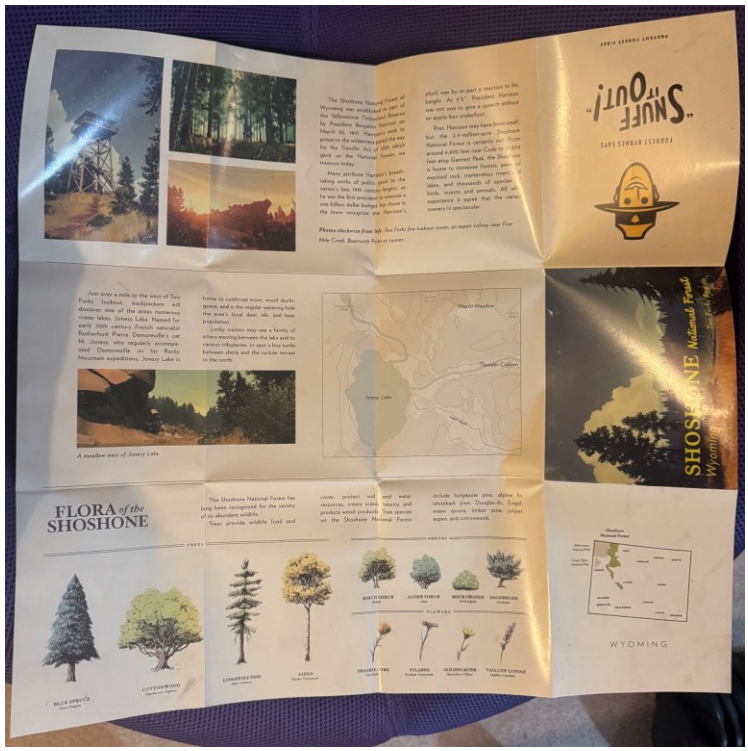
Platform: PS4 / **Edition:** Limited Run Games #32
Comments: Even though I wasn't this game's biggest fan, I couldn't pass up owning the Limited Run print (only 7,500 copies made) back when I was still obsessively buying every LRG release they put out. This was considerably bigger than most of their runs, though, which were typically 1,000 to 2,500 copies.

This is one of two copies I bought. The other is still factory sealed, although the "factory seal" for most copies of *Firewatch* was generic shrink-wrap instead of the Y-fold most other games are known for.

It also pre-dates the ESRB mandate that the age rating must be included on all game boxes.

Rather than a manual, the game came with a double-sided poster with a map of the game on one side.



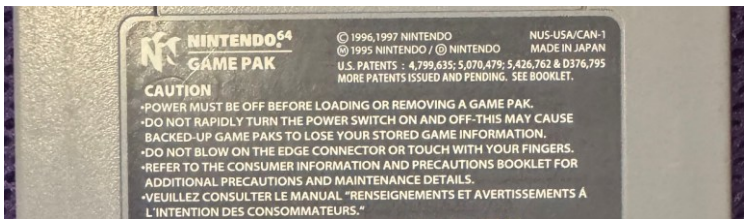


The Good Life

Platform: PlayStation 4 / **Edition:** Kickstarter/LRG
Comments: That plastic you see is a protective sheet (taped to itself) to help protect the game. I also keep it in a perfectly-sized plastic box from Limited Run Games specifically for their collector's editions of this size. I got this as a Kickstarter backer reward, but the physical edition for that was provided through LRG.

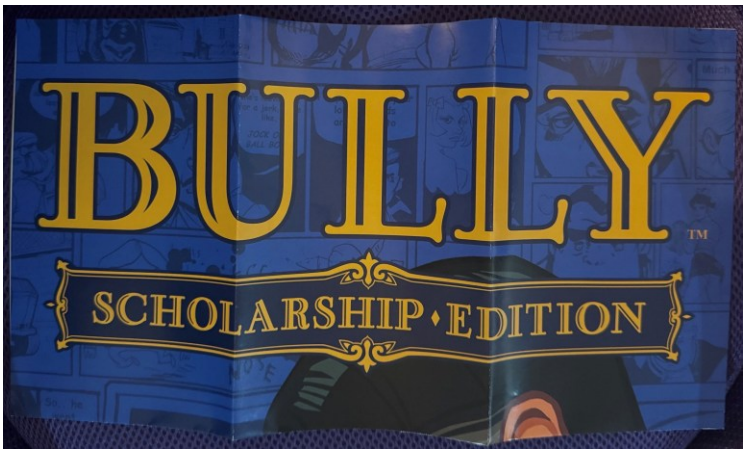
Pokémon Snap

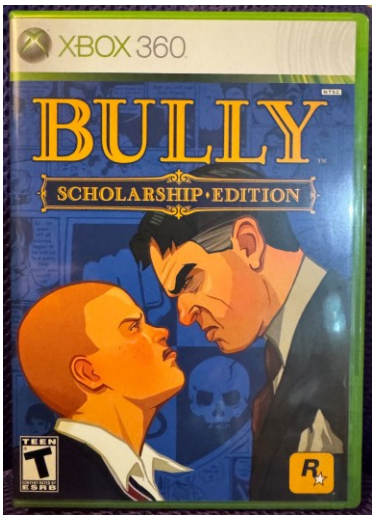
Platform: Nintendo 64 / **Edition:** Standard / Cart Only
Comments: You can't see it in that lighting, but the production number is embossed on the back label, and the board is authentic. I don't know if this is one of the games bootleggers like to mass produce, but I made sure to check my recent N64 games, and all of them were thankfully the real deal.

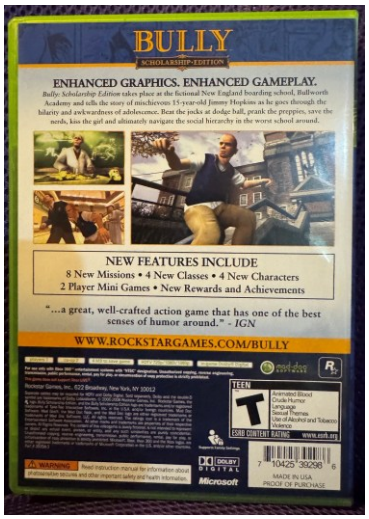


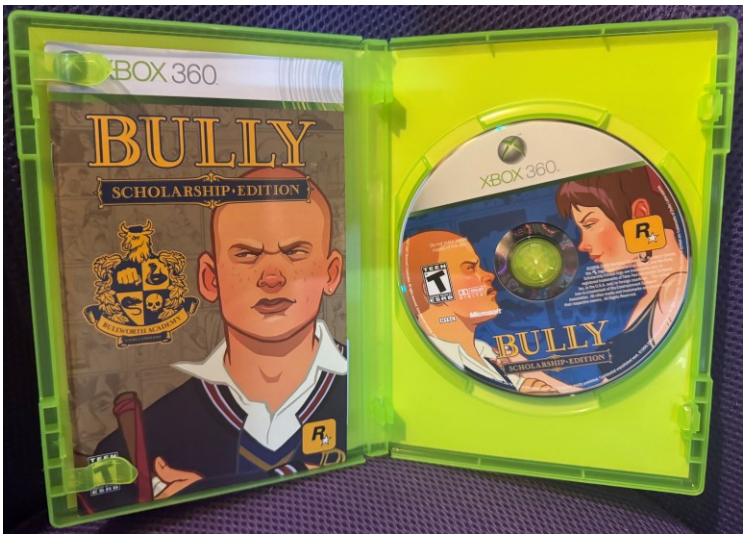
Bully – Scholarship Edition

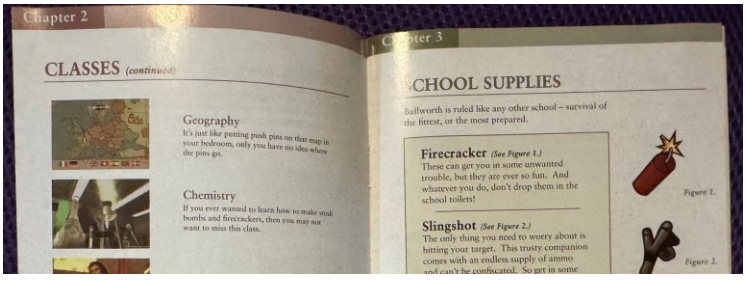
Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Standard
Comments: It's a shame there was never a sequel to *Bully*, but at least we got an enhanced version during the Xbox 360 generation. My Wii copy is later, too.







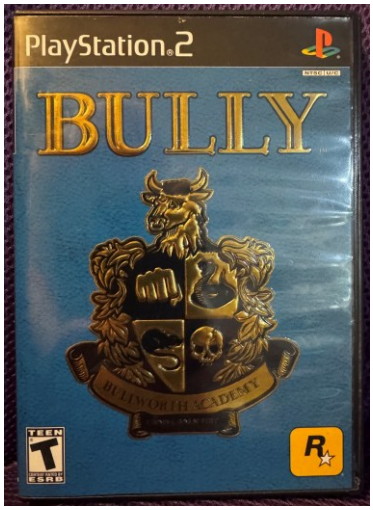


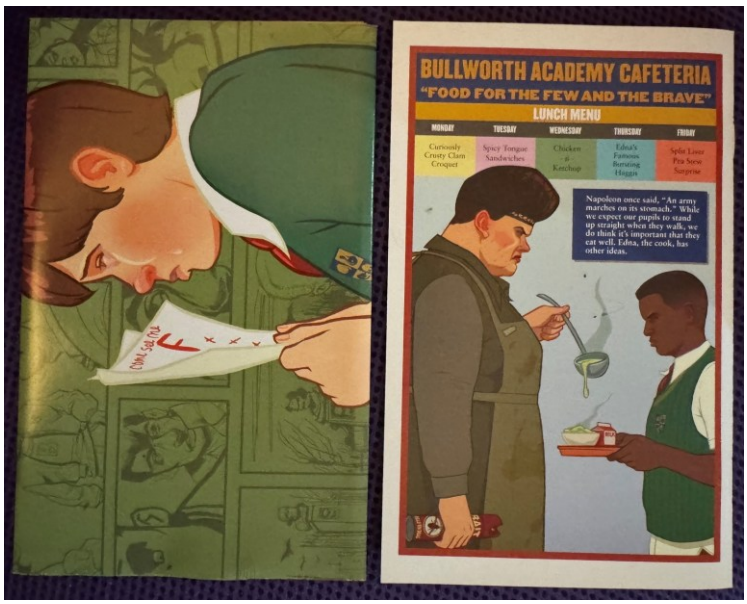


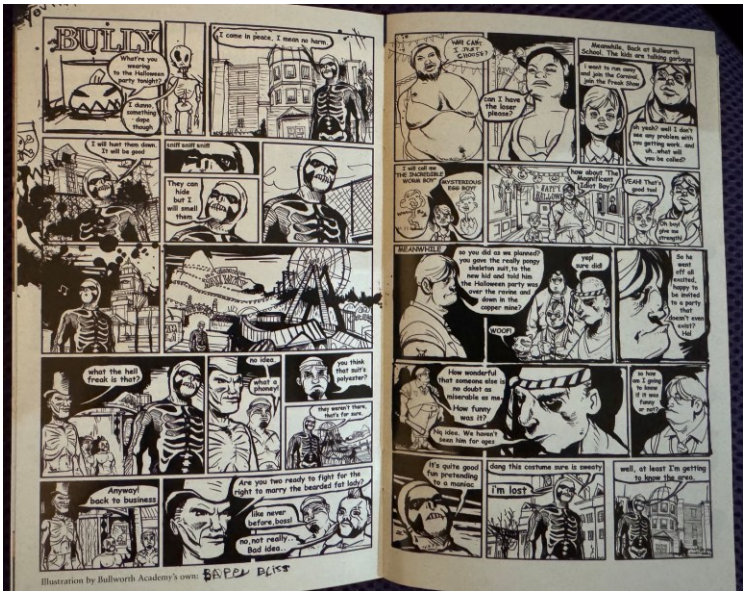
Bully

Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: Rockstar Games used to give us manuals and posters with a map on the back. Now, they won't even give us the game on a disc. This is what far too many people are happily willing to lose, all for the sake of immediacy and convenience.



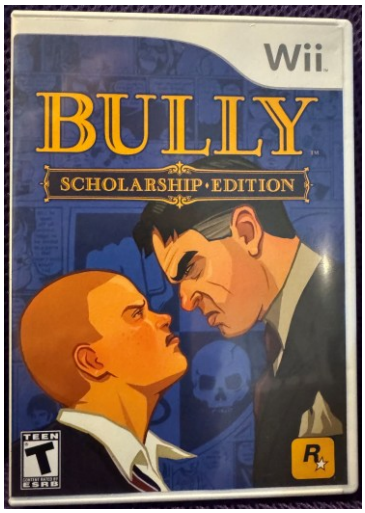


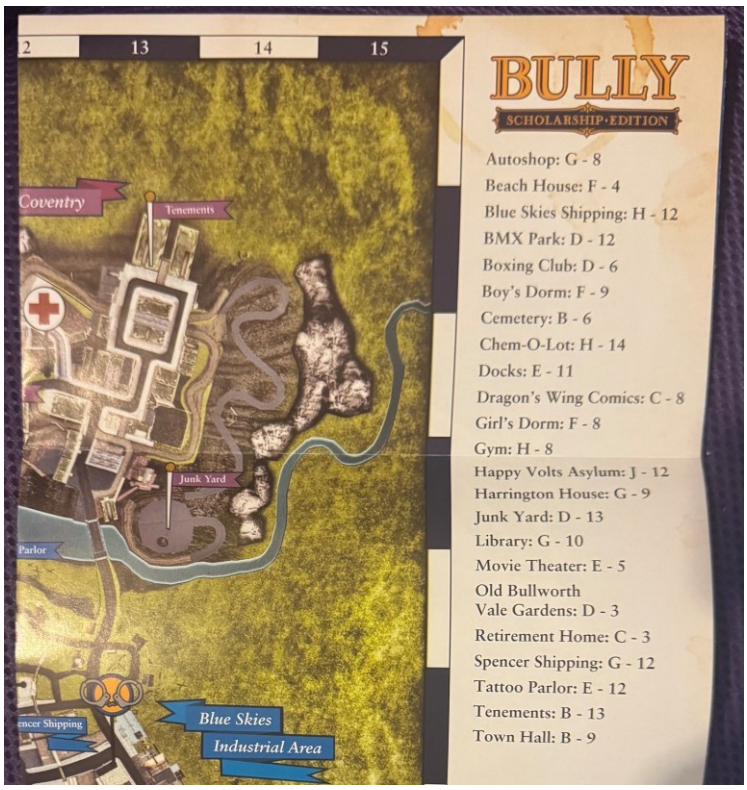


Bully – Scholarship Edition

Platform: Wii / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: Now with motion control gimmicks.

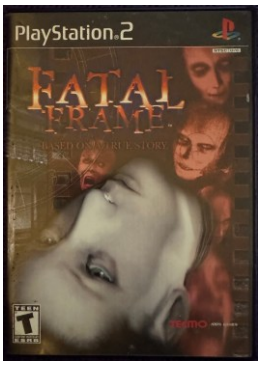


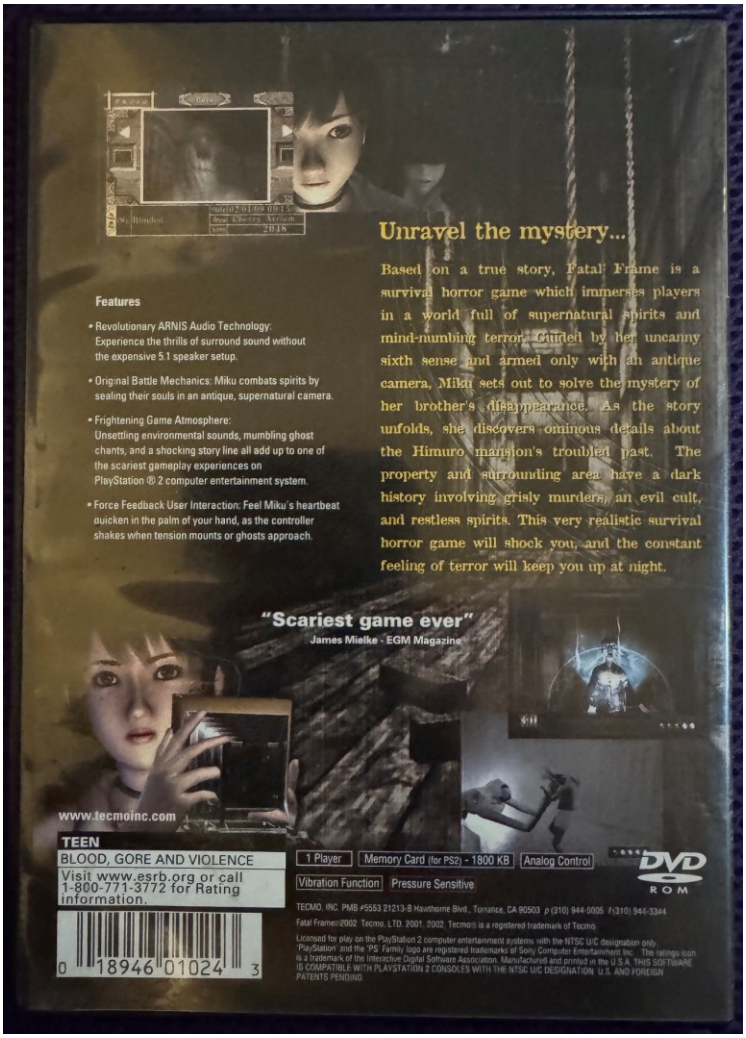


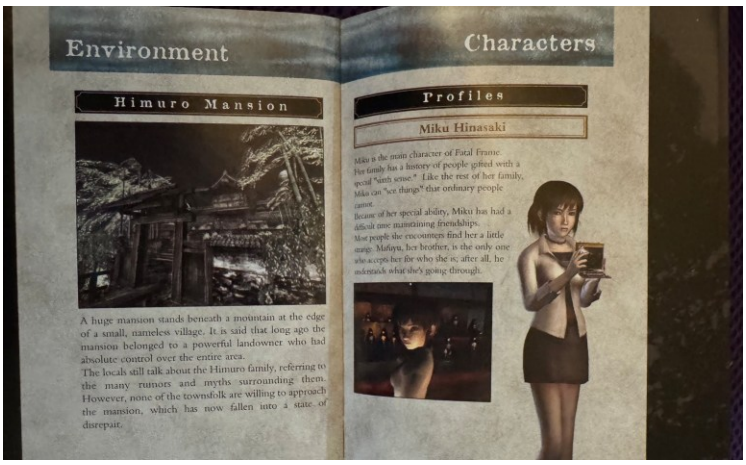
Fatal Frame

Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: The game that started the series.

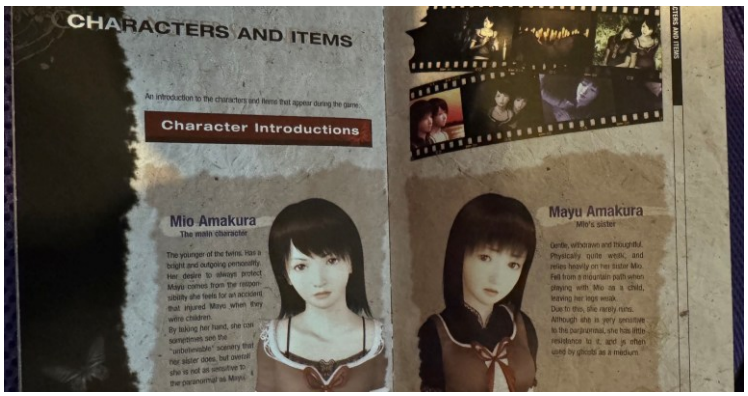






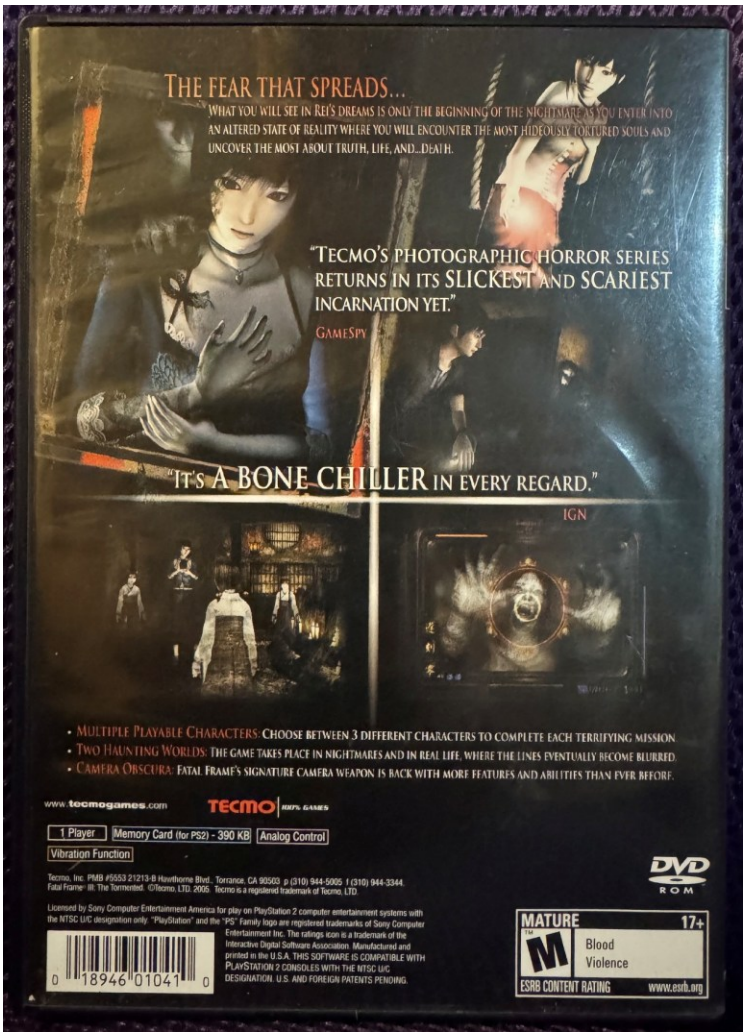
Fatal Frame II – Crimson Butterfly

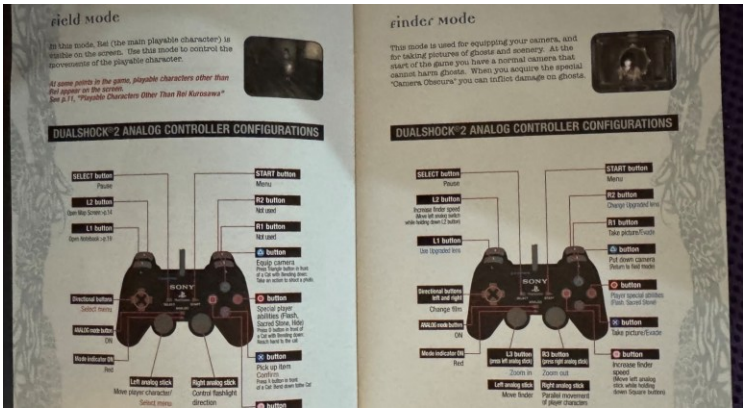
Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard
Comments: It's remarkably difficult to take photos of a black plastic case without it acting like a mirror.



Fatal Frame III – The Tormented

Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard
Comments: Somehow, I have two copies of each game in this trilogy. The other 3 are factory sealed.

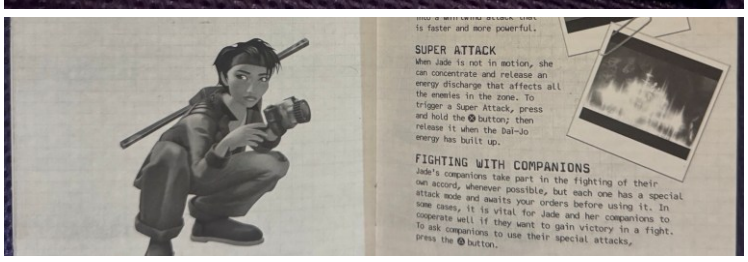




Beyond Good & Evil

Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard

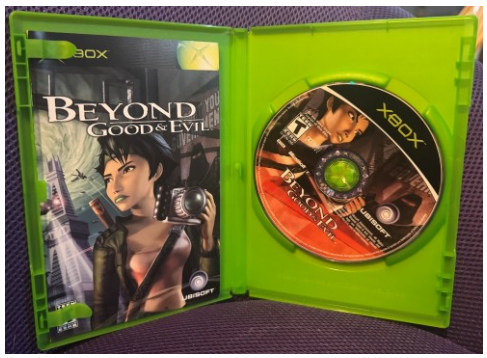
Comments: I would have sworn I had the GameCube version of *BG&E* too, but I don't. Somehow, I had it in my head that that's the version I played, but no. This one is in mint condition, or very near so. It doesn't even have that disc tray pressure indentation on the back, like so many PS2 games suffer from when they're crammed too tightly together on a shelf.

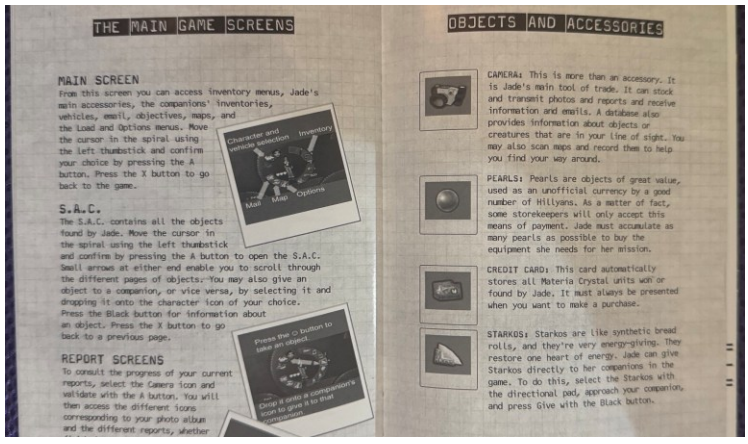


Beyond Good & Evil

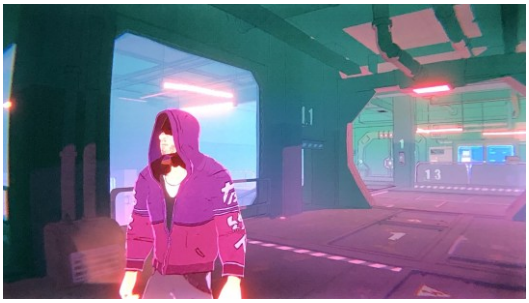
Platform: Original Xbox / **Edition:** Standard

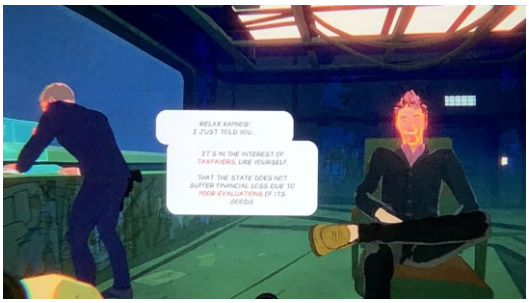
Comments: This one's in perfect condition, too. Most likely, it was never played at all – definitely not by me.

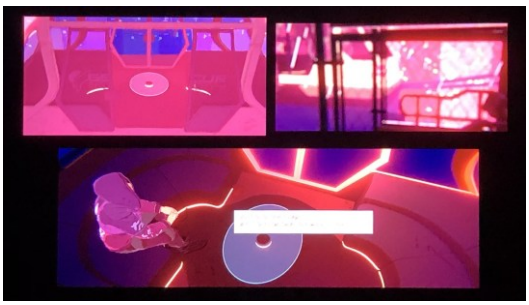




Mini-Review: Foreclosed







Of the twenty-five games featured in this week's photography feature, I played more than half, but of those, they either pre-date my mini-reviews or I already included them in a prior issue. So, with a little outside-the-box thinking, I decided to include some of my older mini-reviews, from a time when I was simply aiming my phone's camera at the TV to snap a photo, rather than using the console's built-in screenshot feature. How's that for tying it back into the topic? Just bear in mind that these games probably look way better than the images here make them appear.

A recently-released budget-priced cyberpunk-themed third person shooter (or action-adventure; take your pick) made by a small team.

Stylized graphics go for a comic book look and feel, not just in its art style, but in the way certain scenes play out across multiple panels. The bulk of the action, though, is one full screen, so the gimmick never feels overused.

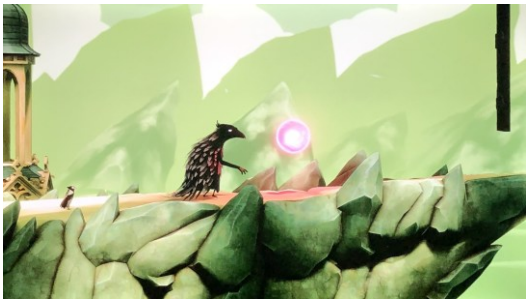
There are some tricky, borderline frustrating stealth sections and a camera that tends to clip through walls if you swing in too close, but aside from small gripes like those, it's pretty solid.

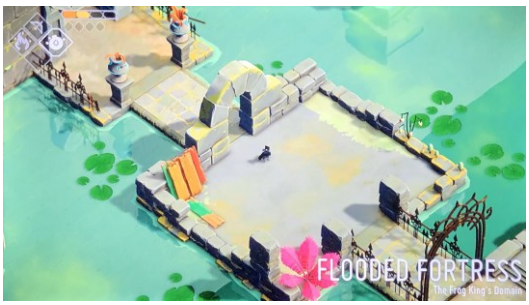
It's just a few hours long; a good weekend game. The tech abilities you unlock are fun to use. Being on the shorter side, the story and world-building don't get to grow much, but I still enjoyed it.

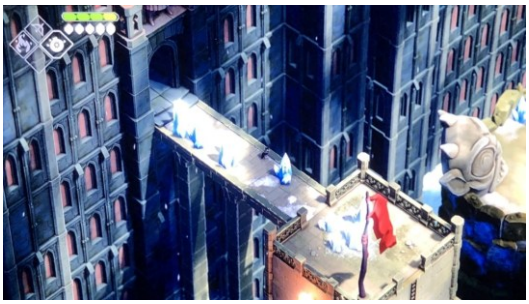
It has a few tough encounters, but it's fun.

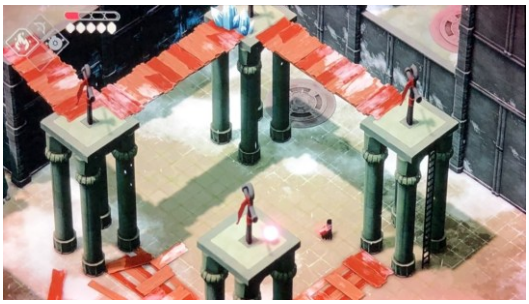
Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 08/23/2021.

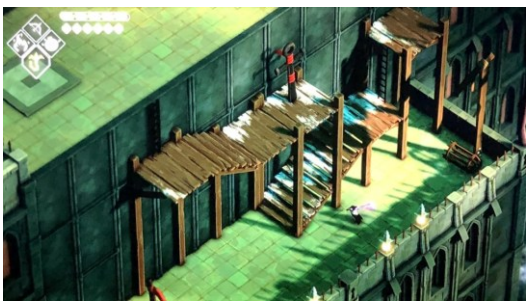
Mini-Review: Death's Door











I get the *Zelda* comparisons when it comes to this game, but not really the *Dark Souls* comparisons. It's played from an isometric overhead view, with gameplay focused on combat, exploration, and puzzles. New abilities help you reach new areas or find secrets and collectibles; very Zelda-like in that regard.

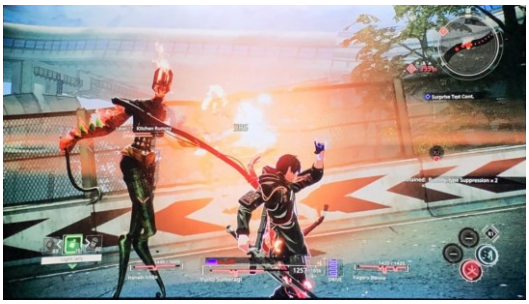
Each area has its own music, which ranges from great to excellent. One particular section has moving platforms that rise and fall exactly on the beat. It's great.

It's challenging in parts, but never felt unfair or overwhelming. There are a few bosses and several mini-bosses, and they're built around patterns and behaviors that are fun to figure out.

I wouldn't go so far as to say it's a GOTY contender like some do, but it *is* very good. Highly recommend. It's a fun adventure.

Played on: Xbox Series X.
Originally posted: 07/31/2021.

Mini-Review: Scarlet Nexus



An anime-styled action game with a few plot holes in its weird, confusing story; but really fun.

Needs two play-throughs (as Yuito and Kasane) to get all trophies and story bits, although the parts that differ between the two characters may not be enough to justify it for some.

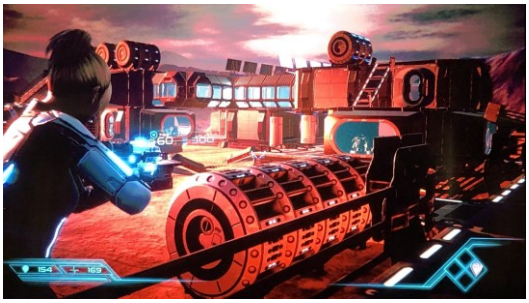
Gameplay felt balanced on Hard, until boss fights. I eventually switched to Normal, which felt kind of easy (with normal-feeling boss fights, if that makes sense).

Your combat abilities and move set grows as the story progresses, leading to fights that are fun and frantic; your character zipping around to damage, dodge and counter. In between, there's a social aspect where you build bonds with teammates via one-on-one story events and gift-giving.

I enjoyed it a lot, and wouldn't be surprised if it gets a sequel.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 07/08/2021.

Mini-Review: EverReach – Project Eden



I'd need way more than 3 tweets to list everything wrong with this game: lackluster combat, frustrating hoverbike sections, scenery pop-in, camera sensitivity setting that doesn't save between sessions, bad map interface, tiny font on readable tablets, awkward character animations in cut-scenes, horrible checkpointing, etc.

Yet through all its flaws, I found a paradoxically enjoyable, ambitious low-budget mini-*Mass Effect* with simple RPG systems that's just the type of underdog indie I can get behind.

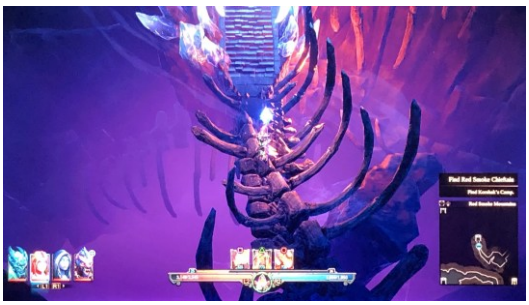
The story (if predictable), the music, and watching Nora run (she looks a lot like Samus Aran) are high points.

I got it for around $6 on sale; well worth it for me, even if it's not a game I can really recommend.

Judging by the credits, the tiny dev team is just a few people.

PS4 game played on base PS5.
Originally posted: 06/07/2021.

Mini-Review: Shadows - Awakening



I've played this game off and on for months, until finally finishing tonight. It wasn't that it's a super long game (it's not; it's maybe 30 hours) or that I didn't like it (I did; in fact, I liked it a lot). It's more that the premise and gameplay, while fun in the moment, never pulled me away from other games I wanted to play more.

This meant that I kind of lost the plot along the way. It's a fantasy action RPG, multiple characters, loot, overhead view, and a "save the world" story.

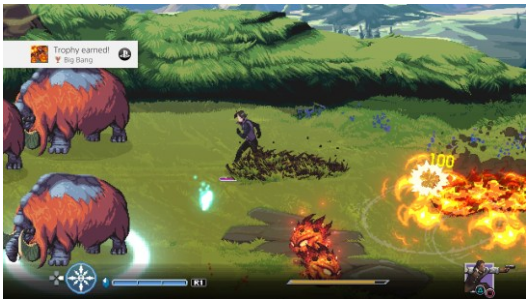
From the start it was easy to get into. The systems are simple and intuitive, with a dual-world mechanic and really nice visuals. I played half on Hard, but had a much better time after switching to Normal.

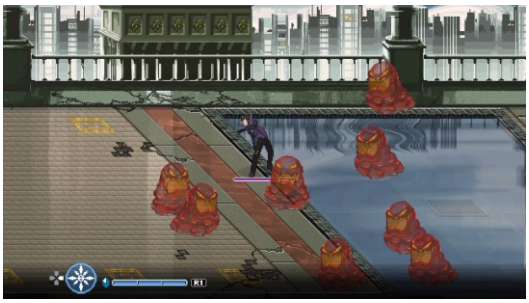
It did seem to crash out a lot (on PS5, anyway) but otherwise no complaints.

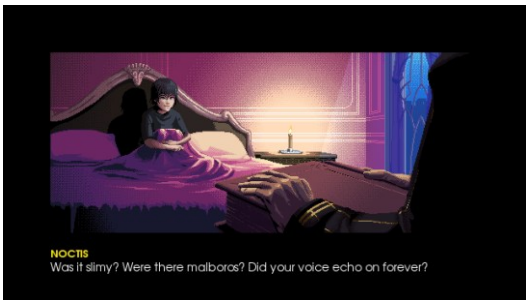
Good game.

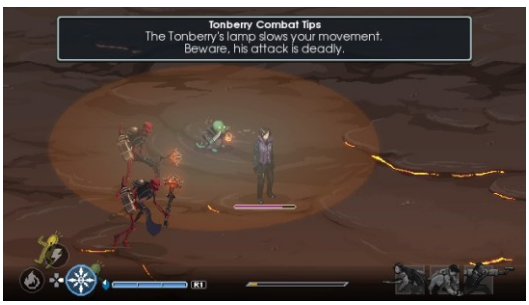
PS4 game played on base PS5.
Originally posted: 11/30/2021.

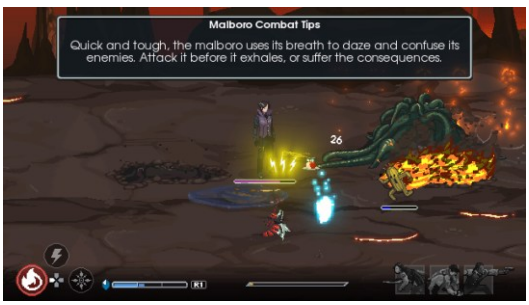
Mini-Rev: A King's Tale - Final Fantasy XV











Surprisingly, this one *does* use actual screenshots instead of blurry photos of my TV screen. I'm not sure how I managed that back when all my other mini-reviews didn't, but I guess just consider this a bonus.

Side-scrolling beat-'em-ups (or brawlers) aren't my usual go-to when it comes to picking a game. Maybe I'm just bad at them, but I've never found my footing in classics like *Double Dragon* or *Final Fight*. It always feels like hit detection requires perfect alignment, and the combat is more button-mashy than strategic.

This free *FFXV* spin-off brawler, on the other hand, feels a lot better to me. Different enemies require different tactics, so you mix up combos of fast, heavy, shield bash, dodge, ranged magic (of three types), and partner summons to weave through the flow of each battle.

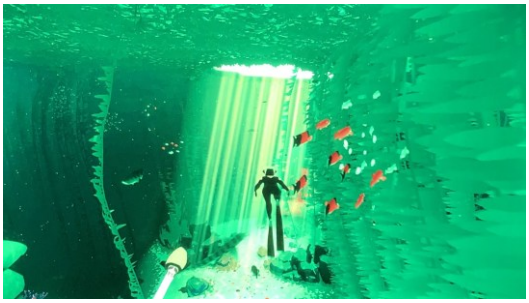
It's a fun story, where King Regis tells a bedtime story to young prince Noctis.

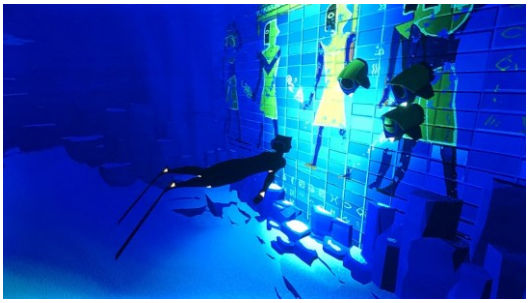
It's not a long game, but "dream battle" mode afterwards offers a lot of replay and challenge.

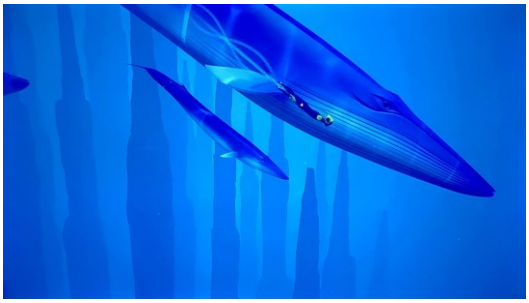
And it's free!

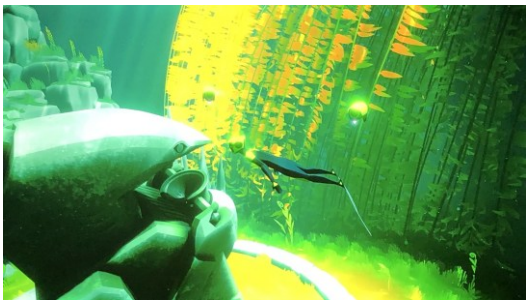
Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 11/01/2020.

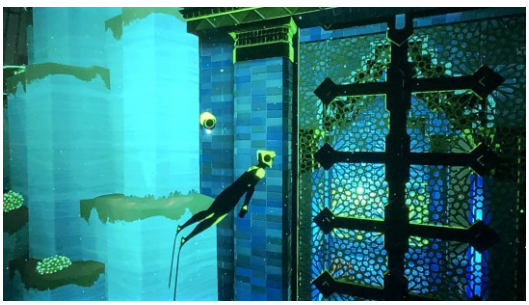
Mini-Review: ABZU











This game has a lot in common with fan favorite *Journey* – and not just because of the great orchestral soundtrack by Austin Wintory. It's like *Journey* without the multiplayer component, but you're a mysterious diver on an underwater adventure through a series of locations that are beautiful, sometimes eerie, and always flush with sea life.

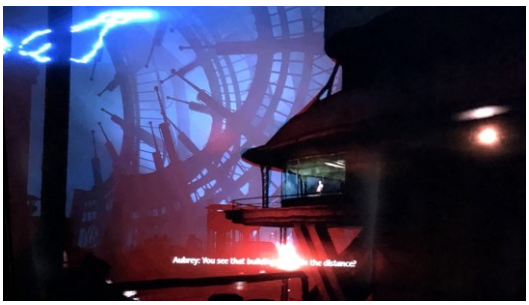
I always thought this game was just a glorified screen saver, but in looking for something short before this fall's big games, I gave it a shot. It was a great choice.

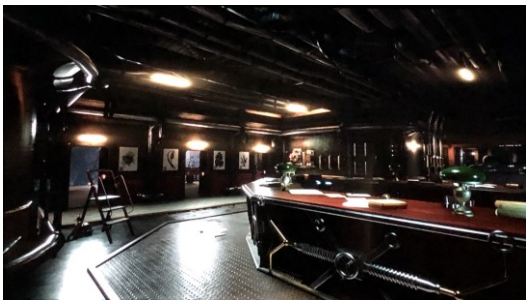
Despite the lack of dialogue or an overtly-explained story, there *is* a story, much the way there is in Journey. It's a short game; a couple hours; maybe 3-4 if you explore for collectibles and get trophies.

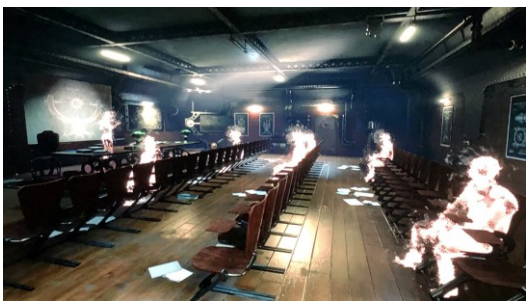
My only minor complaint is having to hold R2 to swim. Otherwise, a fantastic adventure.

Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 10/29/2020.

Mini-Review: Close to the Sun







In my head, I imagine a conversation at Rome-based developer Storm in a Teacup starting out like this:

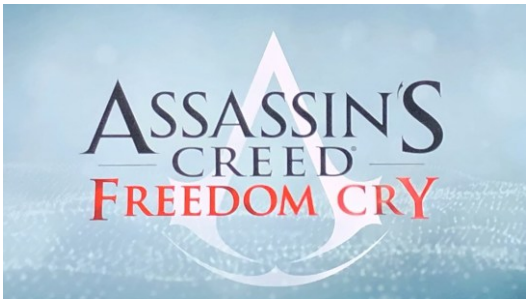
> "Okay, what if we took *Bioshock*, but we... and hear me out, guys... removed all the combat? It's *Bioshock* meets *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*."

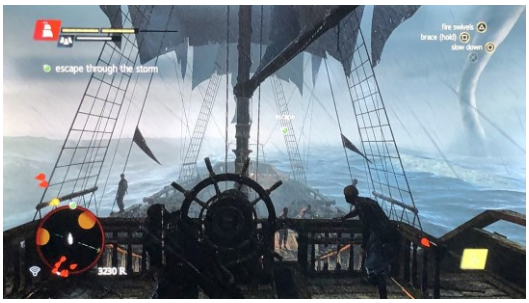
Whatever the impetus, I'm glad they followed through. Without speeding through, it's a six or seven hour first-person adventure with some light puzzle solving, horror elements, and just-run-away chase scenes set in an alternate history where Nikola Tesla is basically Andrew Ryan.

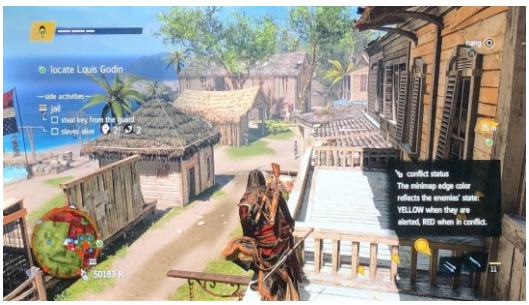
There are collectibles and notes to find, voices over the radio to guide you, many atmospheric locations aboard the huge scientific research ship, and an interesting story. I really enjoyed it. Some very minor frame rate drop (esp. in chapter 8) but hardly a problem. Recommended!

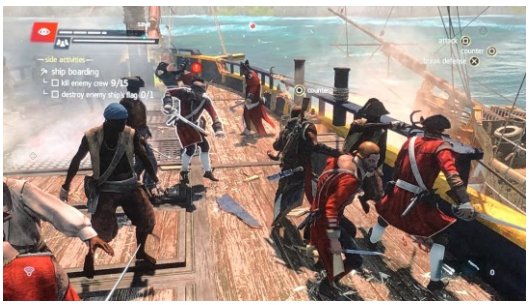
Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/10/2020.

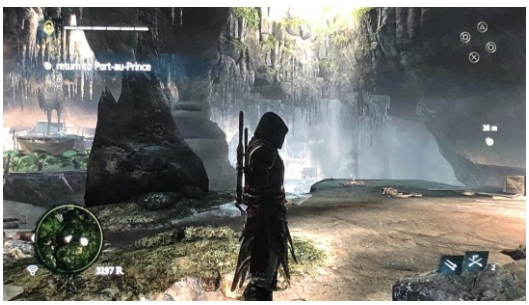
Mini-Rev: Assassin's Creed – Freedom Cry

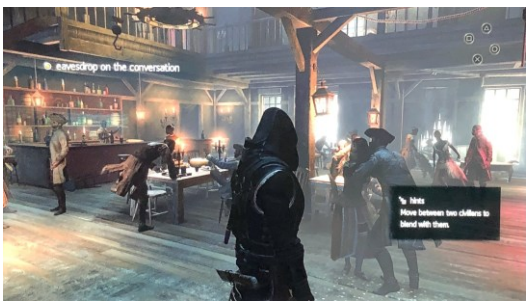












This was originally DLC for *AC4: Black Flag*, but was later released as a stand-alone game that leverages the *AC4* and *AC: Rogue* gameplay in a more condensed experience, playable in just a few hours; a good weekend game.

The story is pretty good too, although it doesn't do much to further the overarching plot. The Assassin/Templar conflict gets only a cursory nod or two, and the present-day aspect is absent altogether.

Still, if you ask me, you can never have too much *Assassin's Creed*, especially of this style.

There is no platinum trophy, but it makes a nice sandbox that can be played beyond the relatively short main story.

The open world side content never ends but would probably get stale after a while. It feels very much like *AC4/Rogue*, but Adéwalé's story keeps it from being JUST a re-skin.

Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/27/2020.

The Final Stage

An Addendum to Issue #45

When I wrote last time about the games I'm embarrassed to say I haven't played (with community responses), I meant to include the list Bill provided when suggesting the topic.

So, as an addendum, here's his list:

- Minecraft
- The Legend of Zelda series
- Grand Theft Auto series
- Final Fantasy series
- Persona series
- Resident Evil 4 and later (I played the first three originals)

With the exception of *Minecraft* (which I've never played either), those are indeed some pretty significant omissions.

An Addendum to Issue #30

In issue #30, I wrote about solo game developers and their solo-developed games. This primarily included just the more well-known and popular examples, but there are thousands more talented developers going it alone and hoping their passion projects reach a few more players.

I got this email from Jeromy of Pixel Games:

> "I found VGGN through the issue about solo developers. I'm the solo developer behind *Fantasy Online 2*, an old-school 2D MMORPG that's live on Steam and Android.
>
> It's been in development for years and now has 568 quests, 32 released zones, manual combat with no autoplay, crafting, trading, bosses, guilds, rare loot, and one shared world across Steam, Android, and browser."

It appears to be in early access with a list price on Steam of $9.99. I don't see a price on the Android app store, but I don't have an Android device, so I can't check directly.

MMO's aren't really my thing, but I'm sharing it here for anybody who might be interested in giving it a look.

Android: https://play.google.com/store/apps/...
Steam: https://store.steampowered.com/app/...
Website: https://fantasyonline2.com/

Next Issue

It could be the *black & white games* issue I've been thinking about (although I'd like to play a few more before then).

Maybe the *bad games that are better than people say* issue, which is similar to a topic my friend Bill suggested, *games you feel are unjustly maligned* (although, again, I'd like to play a few more, since this topic requires more hands-on experience than some of my other topics).

I could write about *my favorite games in the stealth genre* (or games with really good stealth sections/levels), but I should probably do my *Splinter Cell* series playthrough before I tackle that topic. I also need to get back to *Styx*.

Maybe it'll be something completely different and random. Check back next time to find out.

End Credits

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Images of the physical games in the *Collection Inspection* feature are photos I took of games in my own collection and weren't sourced from the internet. Apologies for reflections and bad framing. I'm not a pro.

Screenshots used in my video game mini-reviews and some screenshots used in other articles or features that weren't already attributed to a different source were captured by me in-game and are used here in what I believe is "fair use".

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