

Microsoft gambles big on Hollywood-esque 'Starfield' video game

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Gamers have been waiting years for 'Starfield', which boasts 1,000 planets to explore.

"Starfield", one of the most-anticipated video games in years, launches worldwide on Wednesday with the hype—and production standards—of a Hollywood blockbuster.

And Microsoft has billions riding on its success.

The ever-evolving game is the tech giant's bid to lock players into its Xbox subscription service after some eye-poppingly enormous investments in the gaming sector, which is worth \$200 billion globally.

A universe-spanning role-playing sci-fi game, "Starfield" is made by US studio Bethesda, which Microsoft bought as part of a \$7.5 billion deal in 2020 to boost Xbox's appeal over Sony's PlayStation.

Microsoft is currently trying to get a \$75-billion purchase of another studio, Activision Blizzard—the makers of "Call of Duty"—past regulators wary of rapid concentration in the sector.

The excitement for "Starfield" has been driven by a high rating of 87 out of 100 on review-aggregator Metacritic, based on early play-throughs by critics as well as strongly positive videos by gamers on YouTube.

Scale of 'Star Wars'

Reviews praise its epic scale, multitude of interactive stories, engrossing first-person combat and the way it conjured ersatz interactive versions of movie franchises "Star Trek", "Star Wars" and "Blade Runner".

Its appeal underscores growing fascination with games that have become increasingly cinematic, complete with nuanced acting, storytelling involving moral dilemmas and big-budget, multi-year evolving storylines.

Those qualities mean they are essentially "interactive movies", said Simon Little, head of Video Games Europe, an umbrella organisation representing European games developers.

Other titles this year boasting those same Hollywood-esque qualities include "Hogwarts Legacy", which taps into the Harry Potter universe and is made by Avalanche Software, a game developer owned by Warner Bros.



Video games are increasingly like 'interactive movies'

Another is "Baldur's Gate 3", a role-playing game made by Belgium-based Larian Studios that ranks a near-perfect 96 on Metacritic after coming out last month for PCs. Its PlayStation version goes on sale on Wednesday, the same day "Starfield" is released for the Xbox.

While "Hogwarts Legacy" surpassed \$1 billion in sales within a couple of months of release, Microsoft is primarily using "Starfield" to lock players into its Xbox console.

The game will be available under the Xbox games library subscription service Game Pass, which costs \$11 a month—substantially less than the \$70 price to buy the base version outright.

The strategy is to keep players paying monthly for massive online games such as "Starfield", which can be constantly added to, with new storylines injected into them for years or decades to come.

Decades of gameplay

"Unlike a book or a film, where it's written, it's finished and that's it, a big online game from a development point of view is never really finished," said Little, of Video Games Europe.

"It's always being enhanced, it's being tweaked, it's being extended, just to keep players engaged and interested, and playing and enjoying the game."

Bethesda, for instance, made the still hugely popular sword-and-sorcery adventure game "Skyrim", part of the "Elder Scrolls" franchise, 12 years ago. That game is in many ways a template and point of comparison for "Starfield".

"If you go and look at our player numbers on 'Skyrim' and how many millions of people played 'Skyrim' like last month, you realize that this is not a game that gets measured in hours," Bethesda vice president Peter Hines said last month at Gamescom, a German video games trade fair.

The studio said it expects "Starfield", which boasts 1,000 planets to

explore, will be played for decades to come as new narratives are bolted on to it, expanding the current story that already takes more than 100 hours to complete.

Video game observers say the prospect of such generational games is all the more likely given advances in artificial intelligence which can make in-game characters respond in life-like fashion to players' actions and dialog.

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