

Alan Wake II's Night Spring's DLC is a complicated, mesmeric and all-too-short trip through a Lynchian Twilight Zone.

2023 was a banner year for gaming. From the fantasy stylings of *Baldur's Gate 3*, the web-slinging antics of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* or the resurrection of the USG Ishimura in EA's critically-lauded *Dead Space* remake, it was a stacked year for releases. But hidden among the various remakes, sequels and fantasy epics, was the return of a cult classic.

Nearly 13 years after taking a nose dive into the depths of Cauldron Lake to save his beloved Alice, Alan Wake returned to our consoles with the weird and horrifying *Alan Wake II*.

For Remedy Entertainment, Alan's return allowed them to continue the Remedy Connected Universe (RCU). Starting with 2010's *Alan Wake* and then with 2019's *Control*, *Alan Wake II* saw a cosmic melding of the new-weird, the sci-fi and the horror. While Alan tried desperately to escape the nightmarish dark dimension he found himself in, series newcomer Saga Anderson set about trying to solve a series of ritualistic murders in the Pacific Northwest.

While the aforementioned *Baldur's Gate 3* swept up awards left, right and centre, *Alan Wake II* was the only game capable of keeping pace with Larian Studios' uncontrollable behemoth.

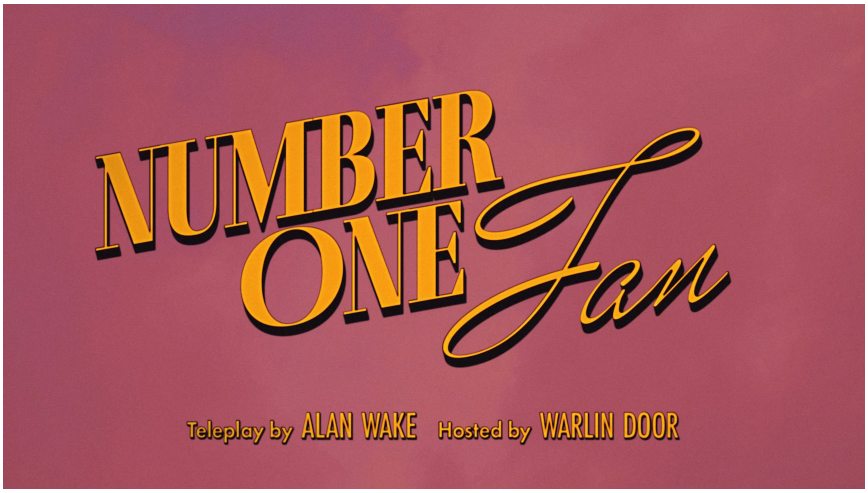
Following last night's admittedly rather boring Summer Games Festival, Remedy Creative Director Sam Lake mercifully took to the stage. In his 3-minute address, he revealed both the long-anticipated physical release of the game and its first Downloadable Content (DLC) expansion pack: *Night Springs*. For the uninitiated, *Night Springs*, is *Alan Wake*'s in-universe TV show. A bizarre, mystical anthology series that sees Remedy pay homage to *The Twilight Zone* and, more recently, the darkly prescient *Black Mirror*.

Night Springs is a 3-part expansion split into "episodes". Trapped in the depths of the murky, dystopian Dark Place, the increasingly erratic Alan Wake writes scripts for three episodes that could prove to be the desperate escape plan he's been searching for for 13 years.

Each episode is given a grainy introduction from the menacing Warlin Door, played to campy perfection by actor David Harewood. Eagle-eyed viewers will remember Door as the strangely cold and imposing host of *In Between with Mr. Door*, the TV chat show Alan constantly finds himself a guest on in his spooky Dark Place-inspired rendition of New York City.

Door presents each episode with a short monologue in much the same way as Rod Serling would introduce episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

Things get off to a somewhat shaky and forgettable start with episode 1: Number One Fan.



Episode #1: Number One Fan
Our first foray into the weird and wonderful world of *Night Springs* is to see the world through the eyes of Rose Marigold. While we know her only as the waitress of the Oh-Deer Diner, occasional volunteer at the Valhalla Nursing Home and self-professed number one fan of of Alan Wake, here she's quite different.

Rose's fanaticism for Alan has grown even deeper than we ever thought possible. Told through the pink filtered world of puppy love, Episode 1 tells the story of Rose, now immensely popular with a seemingly devoted set of patrons at the Nite Diner, battling through hoards of shadowy "haters" to save the love of her life, "The Writer".

None of the characters in the DLC are referred to by their in-universe names. Effectively, Remedy have used each character's model and given them a new name. Here, Rose is referred to only as "The Waitress.

While she serves piping hots of coffee, collects empty plates and doles out relationship advice to customers, she heads into the backroom to hear a message from "The Writer". Comically speaking to her through a Big Mouth Billy Bass fish toy, The Waitress' beau (who sounds suspiciously like Alan Wake) begs her to come and save him as she is the only one who can.

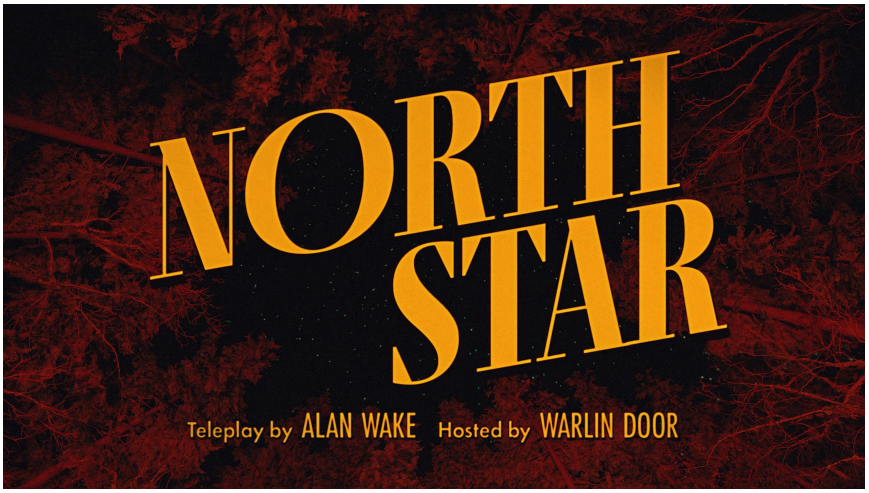
The Waitress then hilariously arms herself to the teeth with a shotgun, hunting rifle and propane flask from an armoury that would leave James Bond's mouth agape.

From there though, the episode begins to drag a lot.

There is little, if any, variety in what you'll do here, beyond chasing the trail of The Writer's "slightly less handsome" twin brother through the woods. From here, The Waitress can spray buckshot over and over again, spreading hapless "haters" all over the gorgeous woodland area. Ammo is, like in all episodes, plentiful. In fact, it is so plentiful, that it becomes a genuine struggle to see how on earth anyone could possibly ever run out of bullets.

Remedy seem less intent on providing a nuanced survival-horror experience in *Night Springs*, and more of a *Resident Evil*-with-the-unlimited-ammunition-cheats-turned-on experience.

The story reaches a fairly boring conclusion as The Waitress and The Writer are finally reunited in his mansion. Its an episode that lacks some of the Remedy punch they are famous for and seems to be a fairly lacklustre and uninspired excuse to watch Rose absolutely cook anyone who dare comes near her, which, I will admit, is immensely funny to watch, if nothing else.



Episode #2: North Star
While Episode 1 lacks much of a narrative hook, Episode 2 looks to improve. This time, we're in the shoes of *Control*'s Jesse Faden (or The Sibling, as she's known here). While the episode cannot be considered canon to the Remedy Connected Universe, it does, nevertheless, seem to be set before the events of *Control*, as Jesse is still searching for her brother and is still accompanied by the mysterious Polaris entity that was set free at the end of *Control*.

Taking place in the fan-favourite level of Coffee World from the main game, The Sibling is looking for the whereabouts of her brother and the mysterious government agency that took him from her.

Be it Jesse or The Sibling, whichever one you identify with, she still seems to be the one character that Remedy just don't seem able to nail at this point. Her backstory is certainly interesting and the performance of actress, Courtney Hope, is as excellent as ever, but the near-constant expository dialogue she exudes at every turn doesn't quite have the same hook as Matthew Poretta's Alan does. The Sibling will converse with Polaris and narrate the episode's events as the player moves through the level, but, like *Control* before it, the dialogue feels neither necessary or welcome and detracts from what is, overall, a top-tier survival horror experience.

Its Coffee World as we, the player, remember it, but lit with the same dim and dingy street lamps that lit the strangely beautiful world of New York City in the Dark Place as well as with the same omni-present red and green hues. Lamentably, the Service Weapon that formed the backbone of the combat in *Control* is not present here, instead its the FBI service weapon favoured by Saga Anderson, upgraded to hell and with enough ammo to take on a small country.

Along with the gun, The Sibling wields a torch, capable of removing darkness shields from enemies before you pump them full of lead.

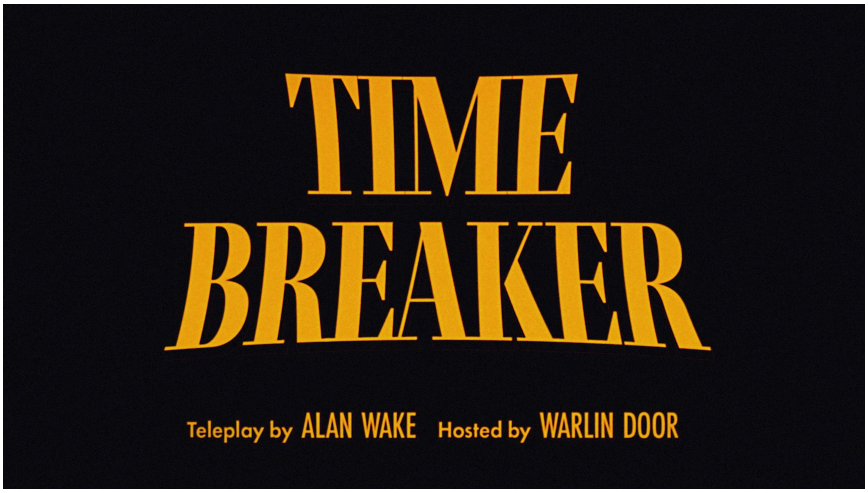
Here, The Sibling stumbles across a government conspiracy to control (pun unintended) the town-populace with laced coffee. It's a pretty campy and well-executed plot line with just a touch more back and forth across the maze-like game map of Coffee World than is strictly necessary.

I genuinely found myself on the edge of my seat as I crept through the abandoned Coffee World amusement park, listening out for the tell-tale signs of enemies looking to attack. Sheriff Tim

Breaker makes a cameo appearance, trying to steer The Sibling right in their quest to find her brother.

The episode ends with a darkly funny twist, revealing Alan to be The Sibling's brother (not *Control*'s Dylan) and to be behind the dark coffee plot.

Fans who are looking for for a repeat of some *Alan Wake II*'s most suspenseful and tense encounters will find a home here in Episode 2.



Episode #3: Time Breaker
Now we get to the weirdest (and arguably best) episode of them all. However meta you thought Remedy were capable of being, Episode 3 assures you they can go further.

Here we play as Shawn Ashmore. No, really. Or rather, it's Shawn Ashmore, playing Shawn Ashmore, who is auditioning for a role to play Tim Breaker. Just to add to the levels of metafiction at play here, Remedy's Creative Director Sam Lake appears as himself, working for Poison Pill Entertainment.

Oh, it goes further.

Shawn is auditioning to play a character in a video game, an inter-dimensional agent capable of transcending alternate dimensions to fight "The Man Between Worlds". Think *Dr. Who* meets *Time Bandits* or just play Remedy's equally excellent *Quantum Break* and you should have a reasonable hold on things.

After retreating to his dingy dressing room, Ashmore (known here as "The Agent"), finds himself slumped against a wall dead, shot in the head. As The Agent picks up the Time Breaker Solidifier (basically Alan Wake's Angel Lamp) and a revolver, he is greeted by The Red-Haired Woman (Jesse Faden), but before he can get a handle on things, the two are separated across dimensions and The Agent finds himself in the middle of the woods (and looking remarkably like Kurt Russell in *The Thing*) and needs to get back to his own reality.

Things stray into the realm of the sci-fi here and sees a series of loving homages to Remedy's (or in this case, Poison Pill's) various cultural touchpoints from *Max Payne* to *Quantum Break* to *Alan Wake*.

As I played through Episode 3, I also found myself making a few cultural connections of my own. While Episodes 1 & 2 are certainly in the world of David Lynch, it is clear just how much Episode 3 owes to the mercurial surrealist.

Certainly, Lynch and Mark Frost's landmark *Twin Peaks: The Return* is on full display here, including mysterious scratching noises in a black and white rendition of the looping corridors of the Oceanview Hotel.

But Remedy's homages go beyond just *Twin Peaks* and Stephen King! There are comic book references (specifically DC Comics and Marvel) and even the world of gaming.

I recently had the immense pleasure of playing 11 Bit Studios' *INDIKA*. A delightful and thought-provoking experience in which the lines of meta-fiction are blurred between AAA gloss and graphics and 8-bit style arcade stylings. Here, Episode 3 does the same thing, sending The Agent through an arcade world, a comic-book strip and, finally, a late '80s strategy game in which the player's decisions ultimately bring them back to the same conclusion: Alan Wake in his writer's room, masterminding it all.



Night Springs is certainly an intriguing experience. Clocking in at just under 3 hours, its difficult to feel a little let down. Dataminig had shown the potential for 2 further episodes, potentially expanding on the conspicuous-by-his-absence Barry Wheeler, Alan Wake's loyal and bumbling agent and one or two others. Whether it was budget or time constraints or the untimely passing of actor James McCaffery that prevented Remedy from realising these episodes further, or whether a surprise drop is awaiting us or not, it still feels like a fairly lean expansion, one that could do with a bit more meat on the bones.

While the episodes are self-contained narratives that exist purely to show just how expansive Alan's imagination really is, its still tough to feel like anyone who hasn't played is really missing too much.

Episodes 2 & 3 are delightful "what-if scenarios" that certainly add a dash of colour to an already inky canvas, but Episode 1 falls a little flat. A 66% batting average isn't too bad, but it still feels a noticeable misstep and ill-timed recovery from a studio capable of so much more.

Night Springs also brings with it the long-anticipated Photo Mode, allowing players to take stunning in-game snaps of the sweeping forest vistas and the noir-inspired streets of New York City.

Overall, *Night Springs* feels a little flat. Not a bad expansion, but a fairly forgettable one. As fun as it is to dive back into the combat of *Alan Wake II* and the new-weird and esoteric story-telling capabilities of the Remedy team, it's also pretty clear why these attempts didn't see Alan re-united with his darling muse Alice in the end.