

Alan Wake II review
A beautiful nightmare
November 2023
[Header image]

It's been 13 years since we joined Alan Wake on his journey through the night in his eponymous adventure (11 if you count the not-sequel *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*). As a self-proclaimed fan of both the series and developer Remedy Entertainment, I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the new game, which released in October this year.

The Cliffs Notes for those who haven't played the first game: in 2010, troubled writer Alan Wake and his wife Alice travel to Bright Falls, Washington for a holiday, and to try and restore some spark to Alan's writer's-blocked imagination. The pair soon run afoul of a dark presence lurking under the scenic Cauldron Lake, which kidnaps Alice and plans to use Alan's writing to make its evil designs come true. Alan must traverse various locations in and around Bright Falls, fighting off townsfolk taken by the evil presence and using pieces of a manuscript he doesn't remember writing to defeat the darkness. The first game ended (spoiler alert) with Alan choosing to exchange Alice's captivity in the Dark Place beneath the lake with his own, freeing her and resulting in a cryptic uttering that left fans hanging for 13 years: "It's not a lake, it's an ocean."

[image-01]

Alan Wake II doesn't dip us smoothly into that ocean — instead it throws the player in head first. We return to Bright Falls 13 years after Alan's unsolved disappearance, this time in control of Saga Anderson, a headstrong FBI agent sent to investigate a series of ritualistic murders occurring in the quaint town. From the word go, the world is thick with references and allusions to other Remedy games. The Federal Bureau of Control from *Control* have a finger in the crime mystery pie, and the town's Sheriff Tim Breaker looks remarkably like Jack Joyce from Remedy-developed, Microsoft-owned *Quantum Break*. Saga Anderson's partner is the world-weary Alex Casey, who wears the real-life face of Remedy's Creative Director Sam Lake... who also provided the original face for Max Payne, arguably Remedy's best known hero. *This* Alex Casey isn't to be confused with the Alex Casey written by Alan Wake in his series of bestselling crime novels... who is played by an in-world actor called Aleksi Kesä... who is also played by Sam Lake... Yeah. And that's only scratching the surface. Not a lake but an ocean, indeed.

At its core, the game is divided into two distinct narratives: Saga's, and Alan's. Saga's sections are set in and around Bright Falls, investigating the murders, finding out information about the mysterious Cult of the Tree that appears to be behind them, learning more about what transpired in 2010, and battling townsfolk who have turned into Taken. On Alan's side, the troubled writer is still working away at trying to escape the Dark Place, running the risk of slowly losing his mind in the process. Both sections handle pretty similarly — the chosen protagonist is aimed with a flashlight to destroy the shadowy defences of enemies before taking them down for good with a firearm. Items like flashbang grenades and flares help with crowd control, and streetlights or illuminated buildings provide respite from the dangerous dark as you move through the various locations of the game. Players of the original game will be pleased that 13 years in the Dark Place finally allowed Alan to get some cardio in, as there is no longer a limited stamina bar. The main difference in the combat between Saga and Alan is that Alan's world is full of enemies that come in the form of ethereal shadows, meaning that not all of them are instantly hostile. Quite often you can manage to sneak past them entirely if you keep your movements quiet and your flashlight beam low. The combat of the game isn't as varied as 2019's *Control*, because even as reality-bending Alan you're still limited to very human abilities. But it can be tense and engaging, especially if you start to run low on supplies and suddenly every bullet matters a lot more. Each character also has their own way of interpreting the mysteries of the world around them. Saga can retreat into her Mind Place to investigate clues and profile suspects, while Alan can shift plot elements around on a chalkboard to change locations and make new spaces accessible. These are cool mechanics that help the

characters feel more than just player stand-ins. Watching Alan's writing actively change the Dark Place is particularly neat.

[image-02]

Perhaps more than any of their other titles, *Alan Wake II* is all about the story and the atmosphere. And what an atmosphere it is. Sound design is at its peak here, from the spine-tingling crunch of foliage in the eerie, moonlit Cauldron Lake area, to the haunting whispers of agonised shadows in the Dark Place, to the muted hum of a lawnmower in the background of Bright Falls. Music plays a huge part in setting mood as well. Like in *Alan Wake*, each chapter of the game ends with a song. But this time each tune has been specifically written for the game, and the lyrics reference character motivations and events that have just happened. Remedy have also teamed up once again with Finnish rock group Poets of the Fall, appearing in-game as The Old Gods of Asgard, to provide some real bangers. One particular sequence (easily found on YouTube) reminded me of Remedy's exceptional skill at pairing music with action set pieces. Overall, the sound design is an impressive labour of love.

Remedy's excellent art direction is also on display in *Alan Wake II*. The use of lurid red and deep ocean green punctuates a broader palette of foggy grey for the sleepy town of Watery, mystical blues at Cauldron Lake, and rich yellows deepening to burnt oranges as Bright Falls passes from daylight to sunset. The Dark Place echoes the pulp noir of its alternate-New York illusion, filled with moody blacks and splashes of white graffiti. You're going to want to upgrade your graphics card for this one because the result is nothing short of stunning. And one of my favourite Remedy tropes, live-action video, makes a stylish return. Saga Anderson and Alex Casey are delightfully portrayed, the latter particularly impressive given that Sam Lake is not a trained actor. And I think anyone would be hard pressed to argue that Alan's duo of face and body actor Ilkka Villi and voice actor Matthew Porretta haven't knocked it out of the park, working simultaneously to deliver multiple performances with emotional range and intensity more usually seen in art house cinema than gaming.

[image-03]

The story of *Alan Wake II* has a lot of ground to cover, and for the most part it does that well. New characters like the Koskela twins — canny entrepreneur Ilmo and his shy but obliging brother Jaako — are particularly standout. It's impressive to see how the Remedy Connected Universe, now comprising of at least six standalone titles, has begun to reveal the extent to which its intricate ties are woven. Some character connections are so serendipitous that I found myself wondering if they really were the result of plot seeds sown 13 years ago finally coming to fruition, or possibly instead just some damn good luck. Maybe it's both. That said, towards the end the tangled web began to get a little too knotty for me. With so much going on narrative-wise, it felt like there were moments that should be been major revelations, but weren't given the space to breathe and hit the player as hard as they could have. Remedy branded the original *Alan Wake* as a psychological thriller, and have stated that *Alan Wake II* is their first foray into survival horror. Arguably a more subtle type of horror is on display here than the genre 'survival horror' might bring to mind, though the primary antagonist is given their due time to shine. There is also a liberal quantity of jumpscare but unfortunately I felt that by the endgame they were overused and at times a little cheap. That said, I still jumped every time, so maybe that's just me being defensive.

It's hard to give a game like this a review score. On the one hand, the twisting meta-narrative at times overly complicates itself, running circles around both the characters and the players, until you're left dizzy from the spiral. Players looking for an experience closer to the original *Alan Wake* will surely be disappointed. But conversely, the look and sound of the game create a feeling that is so distinctly Remedy, unabashedly weird and experimental, and refreshingly different from any other games out there. Your level of enjoyment might come down to how willing you are to experience more of a cinematic journey interspersed with action scenes than a strictly traditional video game.

Score out of 10 (no half scores): 9 out of 10

Our verdict:

Alan Wake II is not the easiest entry into the Remedyverse for the uninitiated. But for those familiar with the studio's mind-bending plots and highly cinematic style, and those who have been waiting 13 years to see Alan Wake back in his own standalone title, it's an ocean worth diving into.