

'Infinity' creators have faith in 'Force Awakens' edition

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It probably would have been easier to break into the Death Star.

For the video game makers working on "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" content in the forthcoming installment of the "Disney Infinity" toys-to-life franchise, getting their hands on the top-secret script involved high-security protocols rivaling the Galactic Empire.

"We had to go through biometric scanning, and there were codenames for everything," said John Vignocchi, vice president of production at Disney Interactive Studios and emperor of the "Infinity" franchise. "It was without a doubt the most complicated thing we've ever worked on in the five years I've been here."

That's probably not hyperbole considering the ambitious "Infinity" has featured a wide variety of characters from across Disney's alliance of intellectual properties. Everyone from Iron Man of Marvel's "The Avengers" to Elsa of Disney Animation's "Frozen" has appeared as playable characters that can uncharacteristically play together.

Similar to Activision's "Skylanders" series, "Infinity" requires users to place a physical toy figure on a reader to virtually portray that character on screen, either in franchise-specific "playsets" or in the open-ended "toy box" mode, which allows users to design their own levels with an array of Disney characters, vehicles and props.

The brand-busting introduction of "Infinity" in 2013 helped push

Disney's interactive division to become profitable for the first time in six years, though Disney reported in its Aug. 4 earnings call that "Infinity" sales have recently slipped. They are expected to strike back Aug. 30 when a "Star Wars"-centric third installment is unleashed.

"Disney Infinity 3.0" will feature a collection of characters from across George Lucas' sprawling sci-fi universe, such as Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader from the original trilogy, Yoda and Anakin Skywalker from the prequels and "Clone Wars" animated series, as well as all-new recruits from filmmaker J.J. Abrams' "The Force Awakens."

During a presentation at the fan-filled D23 Expo on Sunday, actors John Boyega and Daisy Ridley were to unveil the figures of their "Force Awakens" protagonists, soldier Finn and scavenger Rey. The pair will be featured in a playset that will serve as the only way for fans to interactively experience the plot from the hugely anticipated new film.

"It's been a lot of work," said Vignocchi earlier this week during a break from the Toy Box Summit, an annual gathering of top "Infinity" players. "It's an honor but also a huge responsibility because we're the only game in town with 'Episode VII' content on consoles. We have to deliver a video game experience that's just as great as the film."

When "Infinity" launched in 2013, Disney dubbed it a platform—not just a game—and promised it would be a new way to give consumers interactive content based on films and TV shows, instead of typical stand-alone titles. That's never been more apparent than in the company's decision not to release a separate "Force Awakens" game.

John Blackburn, general manager at lead "Infinity" developer Avalanche Software, said creating "Episode VII" content for "Infinity" proved challenging since the team secretly working on it had to be kept small and testing the game before "Force Awakens" footage was released

meant employing codenames for characters and locations.

"We don't want to show too much because you need to first see the film," said Blackburn. "The first time you see these characters should not be in our game. That's just a baseline belief because we're taking it and putting it through a different lens. The palette we had to choose from was basically of things that people had already seen."

It's uncharted territory for "Infinity." Unlike most well-known Disney, Marvel and Lucasfilm characters, these "Force Awakens" newbies aren't arriving with fan clubs or backstories. Heck, Finn and Rey's last names are still a mystery. (Blackburn, however, knows them. Despite the clandestineness, he read the film script over a year ago.)

"There is an awareness challenge because people aren't as familiar with these characters, but there are other [characters](#) from the 'Star Wars' universe that are in the film and other playsets," said Matt Fillbrandt, executive producer of franchise management at Lucasfilm. "There's connective tissue that I think will pique fans' interest."

Regardless of the rise of "Star Wars" in "Infinity," it won't totally choke the toy-game series.

Disney Interactive announced at D23 that caveboy Spot from Pixar's "The Good Dinosaur," as well as rabbit police officer Judy Hopps and popsicle-wielding fox Nick Wilde from Disney Animation's "Zootopia" are also coming to "Infinity," while the Marvel superheroes will receive a rock-'em-sock-'em four-player multiplayer expansion called "Battlegrounds."

"We have a plan for what's next, and it's not predicated on a huge franchise release," said Blackburn. "Opportunistically, are we going to use those things? Yeah, definitely, but we're hard at work on the next

content. When you look at it as a whole, we've launched everything, and now it's like we're going into sustainment mode."

More information: infinity.disney.com

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