

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

SYSTEM: PC • PS3 • 360 • WII
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION

DEVELOPER: TREYARCH
GENRE: FPS

ESRB RATING: M
REVIEW BY: JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

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Single Player

Every iteration of the *Call of Duty* series is designed from the ground up to be a best seller, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* is no exception. With the most robust multiplayer experience put in to a shooter to date and a remarkable single player campaign it's not surprising that *Black Ops* is this year's must-have for most gamers.

Unlike most *Call of Duty* games the single player campaign for *Black Ops* takes a less straight-forward approach to storytelling. Part Tarantino, part Fincher, and part Nolan the narrative finds players in the role of Mason, a seriously messed up operative under interrogation to decode a string of numbers that could cause a global crisis.

Players relive Mason's covert missions through a series of flashbacks that take place across some of American history's most violent conflicts. Through the jungles of the Vietnam, to a Castro assassination attempt during the Bay of Pigs invasion *Black Ops'* non-sequitor storyline shows a wider breadth of confrontations than other historically based shooters.

What makes all of it work so well though is that through the experience players really begin to adopt the persona of Mason as they experience his life as a soldier. This is aided greatly by *Call of Duty's* signature interactive in-game cutscenes that put the player at the center of the action, no matter how explosive or intimate. It's hard not to feel personally invested in Mason as a character because the game does such a good job of making sure at all times you experience everything he does.

All of this comes to a boiling point when, despite all we've seen through Mason's eyes a plot twist makes us question everything about him and about our role as protagonist. While not on the same scale of *Bioshock's* 'Would You Kindly?', it's one of those rare moments exclusive to video games that carries added impact because of the player's role in fulfilling the story.

Of course, players don't come to *Call of Duty* for introspective philosophical quandaries. Like its predecessors, *Black Ops* is as predictably spectacular as it is spectacularly predictable. Every level is infused with all

the high-energy action players have come to expect from the series and doesn't skip a tonal beat from *Modern Warfare 2*.

As expected, *Black Ops* is no slouch in the graphics department. From the lifelike character models to the remarkably detailed guns and immersive environments the game attempts photorealism and comes very close at times. There are moments where some things look a little too shiny or plastic, but apart from that the visuals are phenomenal.

Some of the natural effects in particular look especially good; Pools of blood listlessly floating and spreading from a sinking corpse, clouds of smoke rolling off an explosion, or even the way dust kicks up beneath a lowering helicopter. This attention to detail creates a much more immersive experience, which is what these sorts of games are all about.

Audio design is also incredibly well done with the soundtrack and the ambient noises blending incredibly well. There are a few moments where the game uses licensed tracks to highlight certain moments and it's done to great effect. There's something pleasantly self-aware about a segment where you tear through a Vietnamese village with unstoppable American force while The Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* plays as loudly as the missiles you launch.

While most people getting *Call of Duty: Black Ops* this holiday will be doing so for the multiplayer, it's clear that the single player campaign is no tacked-on experience. Treyarch has put more love and care in to the experience and *Black Ops'* campaign not only outdoes the last *Call of Duty* game but from a narrative stance, it outdoes every *Call of Duty* game.

Multiplayer

Call of Duty: Black Ops has some big shoes to fill. With *Modern Warfare 2* owning the online multiplayer community in every



sense of the word its successor has a lot to live up to.

Everything players expected is in the box. The custom class system, perks and killstreaks, and lots of unlockables have all made their way over from the last game. *Black Ops* carries so much of the previous game over that on first play, you might not notice a whole lot different. It's in the small additions though that make this year's *Call of Duty* worth playing.

In addition to traditional experience points the game now lets players earn in-game cash that can be used to buy their new equipment. With almost everything unlocked from the get-go, this brand new unlocking system eschews the barriers that were previously only broken through extensive play making the game far more accessible to newcomers.

The new wager matches are easily the highlight of the experience for those looking for a break from the usual deathmatch, or objective based modes. Through these players get to enjoy some new community-requested gametypes like *One in the Chamber* where players only have a single bullet, or *Gun Game* where players need to rack kills on a variety of weapons. Tension increases because players also have to put their in-game cash on the line to win big or lose it all, which just like real gambling can create an incredibly addictive feedback loop.



Zombies are back from their appearance in *World at War* but with a sadly stifled map set. Though one of the levels (unlocked by beating the campaign) includes some pretty hilarious characters, with only 2 traditional maps to play with the mode feels bare. It's more than likely that more maps will be available shortly for purchase, but it would have been nice to see more included on the disc.

For those who enjoy their *Call of Duty* without gimmicks, all the expected modes are still there and things are as balanced as ever. The game still constantly rewards players with experience points at every step, but that's part of the fun. *Black Ops* captured everything right about *Modern Warfare 2* and enhanced it, if only a little to make an overall superior experience.

There are enough maps to keep a majority

of players satisfied and most are generally well balanced. There are far fewer large open maps to reduce camping and sniping and some maps like *Nuketown* and *Firing Range* really capitalize on that closeness. With 14 maps in total there's enough content that things won't feel stale for a long while to come, and with the breadth of new gametypes it's easy to shake things up when they do.

Call of Duty: Black Ops may not revolutionize the online multiplayer space the way it's predecessor did, but the game is a logical evolution that's superior in many ways. Between the improved upgrade system and the addition of wager matches, players can feel confident in shelving their lovingly worn-out *Modern Warfare 2* discs and replacing them with *Black Ops*. This will be the multiplayer game the online community clings to, at least until next year.