

## Video Game Review: ‘Call of Duty: Black Ops’ Shatters Shooter Expectations

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CHICAGO – It could still fall prone to some of the multiplayer glitches and failures that marred the experience with “Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2,” but as of November 2010, “Call of Duty: Black Ops” is an amazing success and stands as one of the best games of its kind ever released. With the strongest campaign yet produced for a “COD” game along with an insanely-deep multi-player experience, the “Avatar” of gaming franchises continues to reign supreme.



The “Call of Duty” games have been so successful that it has been theorized that the amount of major titles being released in November has diminished so as not to compete with Activision’s juggernaut. Last year, “Bioshock 2” and “God of War III” dodged the game by moving to first quarter of this year and one wonders if kids wouldn’t be opening copies of “Dead Space 2” and “Killzone 3” on Christmas if “COD” hadn’t created such a wave that everything had to get out of its wake. But is the giant wave justified? Does the game live up to the expectations and hype? Absolutely.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2  
Photo credit: Activision

Most people buy “Call of Duty” games for the multiplayer experience; the thrill of repeatedly executing the occasional friend but mostly complete strangers around the world. “Black Ops” sets a new bar for multiplayer with incredibly well-designed maps, an amazing variety of game types, smooth gameplay, and a ridiculous degree of player customization. It sounds incredibly cheesy, but the “Black Ops” multiplayer experience really does provide something for everyone. It may take you some time to find your favorite games, weapons, and other variable



elements but that moment when you do is gaming bliss. By the time you've tricked out your customizable character to the point that you're even proud of the graphics on your individual player card, you'll find it nearly impossible to leave this multiplayer world.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

*Photo credit: Activision*

Where do we begin? Unlike "Modern Warfare 2," the 14 maps of "Black Ops" are simply spectacular. Whether you're navigating the wonderfully-designed cover of Firing Range or choosing between high or low ground in the Jungle or running through the bombed-out buildings of Grid or Array, this is arguably the best map collection ever produced for a shooter game. To this player, nothing is more important than map design. Most multi-player shooter games feature uninspired arenas that are typically too-small for strategy or too big for combat. Striking the right balance is key and almost every map in "Call of Duty: Black Ops" strikes that balance. Most people will spend dozens of hours on the same map — it better be well-designed.

As for what you'll play during those dozens of hours, the variety of game types in "Black Ops" is stunning. There's the standard Team Deathmatch and Free-For-All, which are as straightforward as they sound, but there are also more strategy-based experiences like Domination and Headquarters. And new game types are constantly opening up as you rank up your player, making for an experience that's always fresh. If you get tired of a game type, not only are there other choices but there are probably some brand new ones open to you.

If the game types alone didn't provide enough variety, the game also includes a series of challenges and contracts to add their own variety. The latter are a revolving series of tasks for you to complete in multiplayer. For example, you can "buy" a contract for 25 points (the currency you earn in-game not unlike XP) that dictates that you must reach a kill streak of 3 in the next game. If you do so, you win 100 points. If you don't, you lose your 25. The contracts can be a blast, but I do worry about the day that I'm in a team game like Domination and everyone's trying to fulfill some asinine contract like using a Tomahawk five times instead of doing what they need to do as my teammate.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

*Photo credit: Activision*

What about the weaponry? Like every element of the title, it's incredibly deep with a variety of primary and secondary weapons, all of which can be customized and enhanced by using the aforementioned points. Most multiplayer games present straightforward upgrade tracks on which every player rides: Get X amount of points, upgrade to X weapon. There has never been a game with the degree of customization as "Black Ops." With the variety of choices to be made in how you spend your points, you may have a game of ten players that are at level 25 but they all have turned out a little bit differently.

Multiplayer also features something called Wager Matches in which you can use your well-earned currency as gambling stakes in various combat scenarios. It's not just your pride but your progression in the game on the line. The ability to capture your greatest battles and share them via Theater Mode allows the title to compete in terms of one of the most interesting recent gaming trends — trying to merge them with the "look what I did" aspects of social media.

Clearly, the key to the success of "Call of Duty: Black Ops" is in its variety and depth. There has never been a deeper multiplayer experience. Even your choice of rewards when it comes to killstreaks are customizable. You can design your own insignias, pick your own weapon upgrades, find your favorite game types, and be confident that YOUR "Black Ops" experience isn't exactly the same as the guy yelling at you through your headset. Finding that kind of depth in something that often feels incredibly shallow makes "Black Ops" one of the most notable multiplayer gaming experiences of the year.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2  
Photo credit: Activision

Over 1,000 words in and I haven't even mentioned the campaign. Or the zombies. First, the campaign. Most "COD" players (or those that have played the numerous games inspired by the success of this franchise) know that the campaign often feels like an afterthought. Such is not the case with "Black Ops." With an intense storyline enhanced by the best graphics of the series to date, this is easily the best "Call of Duty" campaign so far. It does have a few difficulty peaks that seem irrational, a few lapses in believability, and some cliched dialogue, but it's the kind of campaign that builds as it progresses, eventually getting to the point where you don't just want to shoot your way to the next level but you actually want to know what happens next in the story.

As for what that story contains, "Black Ops" centers around an interrogation of your primary character, Mason. As numbers that you know are important but can't quite discern why float back and forth from your conscious to your subconscious, an unseen interrogator barks your history at you, allowing the game to flashback to the key moments that got you to this place. It turns out that you've been through some intense shit and your twisting and turning story takes the game to Russia, Germany, Vietnam, and around the globe. It's an over-the-top story fueled by conspiracy theories and threats of world annihilation but it feels like thought was put into the story instead of merely connecting a series of levels to populate with waves of faceless enemies.

And I do mean waves. "Black Ops" is TOUGH. If you're thinking that the underground nature of the title implies that you'll be doing mostly sniper missions or precise operations, think again. From the very beginning, this "Call of Duty" is about chaos. Almost as if they were going for a per-level record in terms of carnage and explosions, "Call of Duty: Black Ops" rarely catches its breath from first mission to last. It's not for the casual shooter game player. Be prepared.

To be completely fair, you should also be prepared for some sometimes-sketchy enemy A.I. There were moments when the waves of enemies didn't really seem to be that smart and times when they seemed downright telepathic in the way they knew my location despite being well-hidden behind cover. If there's anything these games need to work on it's smarter enemy A.I. in the campaigns but it's been a problem with every "COD" and isn't any more noticeable here than in the past, which means the improvements — graphics, story, pace, variety — make the continued negative easier to overlook.

The insanely-deep multiplayer experience of "Call of Duty: Black Ops" will be the foundation of the title for most buyers and what fans come back to for hours and days on end through the holiday season and well into 2011. The fact that it's enhanced by a very-engaging campaign and even a zombie mode only serve to take the game from the category of very good to one of the best of the year.

No wonder other developers are scared enough of "Call of Duty: Black Ops" to move their A-list titles weeks away from its release. They should be scared.

*'Call of Duty: Black Ops' was released by Activision and developed by Treyarch. It is rated M (Mature). The version reviewed was for the Xbox 360, but the title is also available for the PS3, DS, Nintendo Wii, and PC. It was released on November 9th, 2010.*



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