

## Video Game Review: 'The Bureau: XCOM Declassified' Has Soiled Briefs

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 3, 2013 - 12:06pm

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CHICAGO – During a 4th grade sleepover party for a kid I knew named David, I waddled downstairs looking for the potty, and set eyes on a most fascinating game being played by David's older brother on a computer. I'd never seen anything like it. There was a 3D globe, customizable characters, a haunting soundtrack and atmosphere, aliens, urban environments, and at the time, it was the most awesome thing I'd ever seen. I didn't know computers could do that. For what seemed like hours I stood behind David's brother, asking too many questions and relishing every single detail I could get. Eventually a parental unit harangued me, ushering me back to the rest of the party. I had no idea I was watching one of the best videogames of all time being played. I did know I needed to play it for myself. The problem was, there was no internet in those days, I didn't know the title, words like tactical strategy simulation had yet to enter my vocabulary, and attempting to describe it to my non-game playing parents, or local Blockbuster employee resulted in blank stares.



It wouldn't be until my junior year of high school seven years later that I would get my hands on it properly, courtesy of a co-worker with a CD burner and benevolence to spare. That game was "XCOM: UFO Defense", and it was worth every single one of the 67 thousand hours I spent waiting to get my hands on it. It was almost spiritual. I was not alone. "XCOM" became a cult classic, with thousands of fans having experiences profound as my own.

So, in 2010, when 2K games officially announced that a new "XCOM" was in development, and that it was a first-person shooter, set in the 1950s, because no one played strategy games anymore, it was like drawing over the Qu'ran with a magic marker. Thankfully, one gaming community Jihad later, 2K reneged and announced a proper "XCOM" game, developed by the current kings of strategy gaming, Firaxis - and all seemed right with the world.

But what became of that "XCOM" first person shooter? Well, to make a long story short, developer 2K Marin turned it into yet another cover-based, squad-focused, sci-fi, 3rd person shooter, along the lines of "Gears of War", "Mass Effect 2", "The Last Of Us", "Fuse", and about two dozen or so other games that really should be cutting Cliffy B. a big fat check.



The Bureau: XCOM Declassified  
Photo credit: 2K Games

And...it's not bad. Kind of like how you can see the same kinds of buddy cop movies and enjoy them as long as some of the moving parts are



executed in different ways, "The Bureau: XCOM Declassified" obscures its derivative nature, at least for a time, by adding a 1960's flair, along with dialog options and various "XCOM" tropes to a familiar game formula.

From the start, "The Bureau" presents players a unique atmosphere, several narrative threads, and clear goals for protagonist William Carter. The gameplay is solid too, and popping aliens with pistols, shotguns, and other weapons of the era is fun if not familiar. The emphasis on tactics is welcome, and you'll be spending quite a bit of time positioning your squadmates in advantageous positions. Upon completion of the first mission and introduction to the sprawling XCOM base, its decently interesting cast of characters, the ability to customize fellow soldiers, and read detailed FBI files of others, you'll be sold hook, line, and sinker like I was.



The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

*Photo credit: 2K Games*

But then the shine comes off the apple. The first indication of which is a really strange side-mission which has you guessing a frequency for a radio operator. Both Carter and the operator stand there, blandly, as you rattle off a frequency and she tries them without moving an inch. No interstitial animation, no fade out, just "Okay, let me try that...nope," as she stares blankly into space. You'll also notice your squadmates have powers that don't \*quite\* fit in with the narrative structure, including one who can lay down a fancy space-age turret, and Agent Carter's ability to magically lift enemies in the air for easy shooting - much like a couple of "Borderlands" and "Mass Effect" characters we know. Perhaps sacrifices made in the name of keeping the gameplay entertaining, but it made me ask questions the game wasn't quite prepared to answer.

Mission structure is...strange too, and while it's a treat to blast through aliens on a 1960s college campus or farm or suburb, missions tend to drag on a bit too long and locations become bland sci-fi corridors too quickly. A good rule of thumb is that if you think a mission is almost over, expect 5 to 6 more encounters and a mini-boss or two. The gameplay is perfectly serviceable, offering up a "Mass Effect 2" style shootouts, including enemies that will buff weaker enemies with shields, explosive barrels, and mid-mission resupply stations. But been-there-done-that tactical gameplay and quality aesthetics only gets you so far, and the magic of the era is quickly lost once you've reloaded the game for the 6th time following a squadmate getting his head blown off for the 5th time.



The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

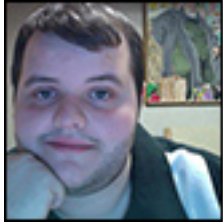
*Photo credit: 2K Games*

Then there's the plot, which is the biggest bummer. While "The Bureau" generates excellent atmosphere, taking itself at least somewhat seriously, seemingly every major story beat strips away its appeal in favor of heavier sci-fi elements that bring into question why'd you set the game in the 1960s in the first place. For a game like this to work well, ideally you want to keep characters grounded in reality at least a bit. Sure, getting newer-looking weapons and upgrades is great, and I like how some of them are very of the time period and look like back-mounted vacuum cleaners with blinking lights, but the game goes on to include an interdimensional world wide web, space travel, alien possession, not-quite alien possession, nuclear blasts, mind control, inter-species mind-melding, and a cover up so gigantic and ill defined that 9/11 truthers may just make this thing their game of the year.

Don't get me wrong, I love space travel and alien possession as much as the next guy, but that doesn't mean they belong in a game that takes place 7 years before we put a guy on the moon. Everything becomes \*so\* far fetched and \*so\* convoluted, you kind of forget the nuances that made the game feel maybe just a bit special. The personal stories simply matter less. It turns into sci-fi schlock that raises more logical questions than it answers. They nuked the proverbial fridge.

Thus it turns out the best thing "The Bureau: XCOM Declassified" has going for it is the gameplay you've seen dozens of times before. Considering how long fans of the series of have waited for more quality "XCOM" and the hell this game went through getting made, and the fact a new proper "XCOM" game came out last year (that was awesome), I'm just happy "The Bureau" wasn't a complete disaster. However, there's many points on the dial between complete disaster and good game, and despite solid gameplay and cool visuals, and that dial is right around the middle. If you're a diehard "XCOM" fan or simply can't get enough 3rd person shooter action, you'll probably get a kick out of it, especially if you can find it on sale. Otherwise, I'd wait for the next one - which for the first time in a long time, is a near and joyful certainty.

*"The Bureau: XCOM Declassified" was released for the Xbox 360, PS3, and PC on August 20, 2013. The version reviewed was played on the Xbox 360.*



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