Video Game Review: Junk Food Appeal of 'Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag'

Submitted by **BrianTT** [1] on November 13, 2013 - 8:25pm

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CHICAGO – Edward Kenway stands upon a Nassau stronghold ledge above two guards having an idle chat. I push the X button and he drops down upon their necks with piercing steel. I hold RT and the directional stick and hop into a nearby hay bale. Save for the two bodies, it was like I was never there.

Video Game Rating: **4.0**/5.0

"Well, you must feel like a bad ass," snorted a gaming cohort. I did. I did feel like a bad ass. Actually, "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag" might as well be a bad ass simulator. Despite a rough learning curve, once you pick up what "Assassin's Creed IV" is putting down, you'll find yourself in scenario after scenario where you simply marvel at whatever trick you've been able to pull off. Whether it's dangling from a ledge and pulling a guard over it via your hidden blade, firing a swivel cannon into a cluster of enemies on a ship you're boarding, or even simple things like finally eavesdropping a conversation by hiding in trees, bushes, hay bales, and in plain sight, when this game cooks, it broils.

Which is good because its predecessor seemed more like microwavable easy-mac. Pretentious and dour, seeing the revolutionary war from the perspective of an outsider wasn't particularly compelling, and you'd go from playing Bocce to collecting floating pages on the rooftops of Boston to skinning animals for fur to text based convoy management missions to piloting a giant naval ship in thrilling combat. It was manic and unfocused.

Assassin's Creed IV
Photo credit: Ubisoft

There was so much to do in that game, and so little of it came together in any meaningful way. Compare this to side-missions in "Far Cry 3" that have you use stealth, hunting, and tracking to unlock stronger abilities and new weapons, all the while using the game's base mechanics in new and interesting ways. "Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell" did the same thing - side missions required either remaining 100 percent undetected, engaging in 'horde mode' style fights, or taking out a given number of enemies silently. These games felt tight. They didn't take you out of Sam Fisher's shoes to play a game of checkers nor did "Far Cry 3" engage you in a text adventure. "Assassin's Creed III" felt bloated and unsure of itself and engine.

It seems Ubisoft realized this, and has more or less sold out in the name of fun. Gone are historically accurate depictions of locations and events, instead presenting a more impressionistic view of the pirate life. While it feels a little strange for an "Assassin's Creed" game, the 'pirate' thing is great fun, and a bunch of drunken privateers and treasure hunters are far more interesting than huffy politicians and hands-off war generals.

Assassin's Creed IV
Photo credit: Ubisoft

For starters, the game wastes no time getting you your requisite Assassin Gear, whereas "AC III" spent the first third (or so) of the game giving you control of Haythem Kenway, then a young Connor, before you were finally an Assassin proper. By "AC IV"'s two hour mark you've already found treasure, met interesting characters, bought equipment, escaped from guards, learned to master your hidden blade, and piloted your ship against enemy forces and a raging storm.

The narrative is kind of a whirlwind, too. You're in control of Edward Kenway through all of this, who stumbles across an Assassin, kills him and takes his clothes, and through a convoluted series of circumstances ends up with his own boat, crew, and fleet. The overarching story includes a search for a mysterious observatory, Kenway's desire to become rich and send for his wife, and meta-narrative stuff that has you snooping around a modern-day game development company that is at the center of a world-wide power struggle.

Edward is a compelling enough character, seemingly having more than a bit in common with a certain Norse God who is also charismatic and filled with great hubris. But here's a game about a pirate who's good-looking, agile, strong, personable, well meaning, charismatic, understanding, seemingly faithful to his wife, and hell, racially progressive enough in the 1700s to make a black guy his first officer. He's the perfect avatar for nearly any player, almost as if a bunch of different cultures and religions came together to generate the most appealing and least controversial pirate of all time - it's impossible to hate him.

Assassin's Creed IV
Photo credit: Ubisoft

The cut scenes are well acted and well animated, but lack a cohesion. You'll be dealing with one group of pirates, then be working with Blackbeard or Kidd because the story just happened to throw them in there. Eventually one pirate betrays the other pirates, and you're unsure which pirates were working with him and which weren't. Worse, a mid-game event strands you on an island, and following a mission on said island, writes off your daring escape and capture of a schooner with two lines of dialogue. As a result, "Assassin's Creed IV" feels a lot like a 'selected scenes from…' when it comes to crafting a memorable story. You get vignettes of characters you *think* you'd like, but never get a chance to really know, because they come and go so quickly. It's all perfectly serviceable, but missing the kind of soul that makes a story instantly compelling. Thankfully a lot of the warring faction stuff has moved to the background, so lame turns about someone secretly being a Templar are few and far between.

Gameplay wise, this shift in focus turns "Assassins Creed IV" into something resembling what "Wind Waker" would have been had gamers gotten their wish for a "mature" Zelda. You have a vast open world with literally hundreds of things to do and see, and harrowing naval combat experience that would feel right at home in a "Star Trek" tactical battle game. You can also upgrade and customize the ship - the Jackclaw, with better weapons, armor, and equipment. There are also cosmetic changes available. Certain sails aren't "faster" for example, nor do different figureheads give different bonuses, save the ram you can equip your ship with, but are fun to play with. Wheeling your ship into

position to launch an attack at a hulking frigate feels great, and using that ram to strike a final blow at an enemy Man O' War is exciting and its own reward.

Which helps because "Assassin's Creed IV"'s relationship with tangible rewards is as tenuous as ever. Take for example the in-depth "Templar Hunt" quest chain that has you helping out a variety of assassins across the game map. These multi-party missions are great fun in and of themselves, requiring stealth, combat expertise, and even a little tower defence on occasion. The reward for completing each chain is a key you use to unlock a cage at another location containing Templar armor. You unlock it and…it's just a skin with a defense boost. Worse, when wearing this outfit your neck seems to animate weirdly, as if you glued the the collar to the bottom of Kenway's chin. Assassination Contracts reward you with roughly 1000 bucks, which isn't really a lot. There's also seemingly dozens of mayan puzzles to solve, but I avoided finishing the chain because the reward was probably a fancy hat, or something.


Assassin's Creed IV
Photo credit: Ubisoft

Similarly, the loot is sorta weak for a pirate game. In a console generation that brought us "Borderlands 2", where every chest held the potential to burst forth with money, guns, explosives, armor, and customization options, the idea of kicking open a chest to get 500 dinero and a 'ring' that's worth 75 dinero feels incredibly underwhelming. Toss in a weak (but improved) crafting system, and the compulsion to check every nook and cranny isn't quite there.

It's also worth noting that there's something kind of disappointing in the way this franchise uses incredible graphics, hundreds of employees, and tens of millions of development budget dollars to make the slitting of throats in ye olden times fun. I guess it has a combination of the "Jurassic Park" problem, where fantastic technology is used to tell a mostly familiar story, and the "Bioshock Infinite" problem, where you're somehow supposed to believe that the people doing all the murdering and killing and slaying and maiming in the name of 'freedom' are the good guys. As the kind of guy who strives to see what a game is trying to communicate, a champion of them as an artform - the core of "Assassin's Creed IV" rings hollow, and that makes me feel a bad person for liking it as much as I do.

Thus, "Assassin's Creed IV" is gourmet junk food. And there's nothing with junk food. I like junk food quite a lot. But when you get into a situation where the candy bar is covered in truffles and held within gilded platinum wrapping, and is tucked inside in a diamond encrusted candy box hand delivered to you by a Sherpa, you sort of start to wonder if what's inside should be a little more nourishing.

"Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag" was released for PS3, Xbox 360, and PC on October 29, 2013. It will be released for the PS4 and Xbox One. The version reviewed was for the Xbox 360. It was developed and released by Ubisoft.
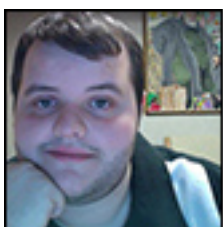
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