

Call of Duty: World at War

Platforms - PS3, PS2, Xbox 360, PC, Wii, Nintendo DS (Reviewed on PS3)

Review by - Nicholas Wild

Call of Duty: World at War (COD:WAW) is the predecessor to COD4, shooter made by Infinity Ward that descended from the heavens in late 2007 and re-wrote the book on what makes FPS's fun. It wasn't without its flaws, but it proved itself a mega hit with audiences and was the most played Xbox 360 online game for months in 2007 and 2008. Now we have COD:WAW, a title made by Treyarch, not the same team behind 4, and who decided it would be a great idea to take the award winning success that the modern games build on and drag the game back into World War 2 territory, which came with a collective sigh of contempt from the gaming community.

In traditional COD fashion there are 2 story lines taking place during the war, this time jumping between opposite ends of the war just to be awkward with the space time continuum. On one side you play an American storming Japan whilst being commanded by a monotone Jack Bauer, and the other a Russian ploughing his way through Germany towards the climax of the war, commanded by the kind of person who frequently brags and gallivants to other soldiers about his admiration and respect for you, like the nerdy, smelly, unpopular kid in the class that you awkwardly made small talk to once and now he thinks' your his best friend.

Gameplay-wise there are not many new or interesting developments. The inclusion of a flamethrower with destructible environments sounds good at first, but using it is unsatisfying and lacking in effect. Setting fire to grass or a tree takes half a second and is gone just as quickly, and the environment has limited destructibility which leaves you, if anything just noticing the linearity of the level design. The game tries to trick you with the illusion of free choice at one point. You get asked whether you would like to go left or right to the next area, only to end up reaching the same battle and having the linear progression return. It basically asked you which side of a short hill you walk around, which is a good excuse to introduce a multiple path journey which would have broken up the monotony I'd experienced so far into the game.

One new feature that occurs frequently in the American-Japanese campaign is Japanese guerrilla warfare style ambushes, that don't add much except to slow down the progression for a bit. And since the A.I is terribly shoddy, when the ambushers do emerge they usually arbitrarily lock on to a random member of your AI team and hunt them down, often shoving right past other members of your team like a chav who's just spotted someone with a tenner poking out their back pocket.

Other times during combat the enemy A.I get overwhelmed and end up loitering in the mist of battle. On more than one occasion a Japanese warrior was staring at an American soldier with his gun dangerously close to becoming clogged with nose hair.

And in this position he stayed until I ran past them or did the honour of ending his crudely programmed life.

Sorry for the overwhelming negativity but the locations are nothing special either. Some areas (the Japanese trench levels for example) are wrought with design flaws that got me so frustrated I had to quit, play a better game for a while to get my psyche back up, and then attempt it again. For example, a dimly lit tunnel where your view is obstructed from the people shooting you, and having cover in the middle of the tunnel that doesn't actually cover you because bullets can travel through many types of material. So in order to eliminate the enemy I had to tediously and hastily pop from in and out cover, letting off a small amount of bullets in the general direction that their bullets were coming from; an experience which after finally completing I looked at my watch and thought 'I just used up 25 minutes of my life, not having a fun time'.

Now, I played the game on hard mode as I'm pretty down with shooting games but I recommend that if you want to have fun whilst playing the game, play it on regular. Hard mode is fraught with levels whereby you charge through first time and get pretty far, and every subsequent time you try you will not succeed until you've played it so much you know exactly where each soldier will enter from, run, shoot, hide and so forth; elementary stop and start gameplay that you'd think game designers would have progressed from.

The developers billed COD5 as a more intense and grittier game than it's predecessors but all they end up doing is showing you a few lacklustre gore scenes and through the course of the game having you're A.I. team slaughter the other A.I. team in front of you, often having your commander pressure you into joining in with the bloody massacre. I'm the type of person that didn't join in with the mindless killings, and I liken the game's approach to the devil and angel on your shoulders analogy; one prodding you into joining in the bloodshed, and on the other very quietly and telepathically insisting you don't, with no reward if you unload a clip into the Nazi scum or not, leaving it as an ultimately void experience which doesn't add any depth or meaning to the events at all; you could say it's been intentionally designed like that to show the mindlessness of the war, but that argument seems more like a copout. It's easier to convey no meaning than to actually do some work to create some, but it's likely the average COD player doesn't consider elements such as this when playing.

Speaking of bloodshed, there's so much more they could have done to make the war seem more authentic. From small things to having dust and dirt strike the screen when an explosion occurs nearby, to having NPC's lying around, writhing around clutching the wrist that their hand just got blown off from, covered in blood and maybe other NPC's trying to help him. I think if I saw something like that it would give me a better impression of what a bloody, violent waste the war, or any war, is. There are moments similar to that in the game, such as the very final moments of the game which finally made me think more about the death and destruction than just 'Kill anything that moves!', at least for a few seconds before my commander

started bellowing at me again. (Before you say 'but children play these games too', there's already a filter in the options menu to disable the more graphic blood and gore and videos that play during the loading screens, and also the fact that kids probably shouldn't be playing these games anyway, but that's a whole other topic.)

And mentioning the loading screens, they have this post-modern, fast paced, out of place art style to them that somewhat undermines the serious war footage that plays around it. Footage of distressed soldiers, corpses, and of course firing squad victims, which is quite brutal I might add. I'm sure what I saw was kids or pre-teens tied up, blindfolded and shot from behind in the chest. And not even tactfully cutting away when the bullets hit the body, you see the kids hit the floor and die. The gravity of these very striking and powerful images is removed somewhat with the flashy, spiny artwork in between clips. It might just be me, but it felt a bit tacky and pandering to the teenage audience who constantly need fast, jumpy action going on all the time or else they get bored and go outside, god forbid.

The inclusion of vehicles in the game is totally unnecessary and appears to be included only to add more frustration, especially when playing in hard mode. There are tanks hidden by the environment that take you an age to spot and whilst your gazing at the unimpressive hills and foliage; and when you do finally spot where the missiles are spanking you from, the enemy has already blown your tank down to its underpants and you have to start the whole bloody confusion again; and by the 7th round you feel like waving the white flag and just letting the Germans win this one.

One of the more fun features of the game is the 'Nazi Zombies' mode unlocked after finishing the game. The premise is you're stuck in a house with zombified Nazi's arriving in growing waves to your establishment and insist on tearing down your barricaded windows rather than using the doorbell like gentlemen (typical Nazis). The atmosphere changes from tense waiting sessions as you scramble around, finding ammo and repairing entry points, to yelping when you turn around and see a dozen zombies mindlessly making their way towards you and remembering you're out of ammo. It's a simple setup and is a lot of fun with friends, with the only criticism being you go down a bit too quickly.

Online matches are adequate; similar to COD4 but with some of the fun extracted due to the primitive weapons and uninspired map designs. As it's the Call of Duty 4 engine it's basically the same experience with aesthetic changes, but most of the people I've talked to would rather go back and play COD4 online than this iteration.

In the end I don't think they went far enough with the new grittier look. Perhaps because they were hesitant to do so with such a popular series, and the solution to that is to publish it under a new name, no shoehorning of dual story lines, add some good writers to the team and have a more mature theme that has greater depth and character. But until then we'll have to deal with a slightly above average WW2 shooter.