

Computer And Video Games Battlefield 2 Interview

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C&VG: This is the third major release in the Battlefield series, could you put it in some context for anyone new to the series and describe the major advances for this third instalment?

Jamil Dawsari: So if you think about Battlefield being a franchise, it started back in 1999 and its precursor was Codename Eagle which was done by members of DICE and Fraction Games and they back as far as 97 or so.

What everyone recognised about Battlefield 1942 was that gameplay was premier. Graphically perhaps it wasn't equal to the games of the time, but its gameplay was like nothing that people had faced before and that became our key area. Sure, let's maintain that core gameplay but now we're going to add the graphics that everyone else expects to see.

So Battlefield 2 had to be designed in terms of the rendering engine. We've had to tweak and re-design the physics engine because it's a modern era and that requires some tweaks you wouldn't normally have to worry about. Sound, that was one area where the Battlefield series could really use some improvements, really good sound. So, when you play this with EAX and Dolby it is going to be an intense, intense experience.

Maintain the core gameplay, but add to it, give a bit more so people feel that this is a game which is the next step. Part of that is to expand the features like modern weapons, guided missiles, you've got the commander mode, squad mode, you've got a persistent system so people can feel "this game is something I've enjoyed for years and I get rewarded for playing it."

But at heart what we can't do is ignore those people who just want to get on and play. So for those people, you don't have to use any of those systems. If you simply want to go in for an hour or forty five minutes each day - just got for it! We did some research and on the number of hours people play and the average came out as around 60 hours a month. Amazing! So we had to build a game which could support that.

C&VG: One of the most intriguing things we've seen today is the new squad and command systems, could you tell us a little more about how they work?

Jamil Dawsari: So you've got your basic what we call lone wolf, which is how you play Battlefield now - you're a lone wolf and you go do what you can. It's a great experience and we've added things like being able to see your buddies in the other games. What we're doing with squads is formalising that, now you can come together and it gives us a really neat vehicle to add voice over IP. You don't want to hear everybody talking, especially in a 64 player game - holy cow, way too much. But if it's only seven people, you're talking together in your squad, it's your mates from Hungary, Germany, the States, the UK, it brings a level of immersion into the game that's really kind of cool.

What we had to build on top of that is that squad's are cool, but how would it feel of we played with an uber squad leader, the commander? We've experimented with a lot of it and come up with a system that again allows a commander to have a lot of fun. He's got to feel that he's having an impact on the game, but at the same time he can't be so unbalanced, that if one side has a commander

and the other doesn't, they have a real advantage.

Again Battlefield has always been about balance: Rock, Paper, Scissors, what happens and how do you balance out all these different features in gameplay? So it has sort of worked out naturally that you have a commander who has a top down view and he can impact the environment and he can reward people. He can't really punish them, the only punishment he can hand out is to withhold services, that's it. The one key thing is that the commander does get a score, but it's only as good as his team does, so it's in his best interests to aid them. If your team doesn't do well, you're not going to do well and so you want to help them, you want to facilitate.

There are different people who like different types of games and the Commander mode is really going to appeal to those strategy level, macro type of people. I'm actually interested to see if any of the modders take that Commander mode and make an RTS out of it.

C&VG: The idea of rewards and rankings for B2 players is obviously going to be a big draw, how will that work in practice?

Jamil Dawsari: This is the whole persistence system, this is something that we've been toying with since Battlefield began, but we really haven't had the opportunity or the ability to focus on it entirely. With Battlefield 2 we started from the ground up, that we'd have a persistent system where people would be able to increase in their rank based on their gameplay. So we had to re-work the scoring system so that it rewarded not just people who were good at killing opponents and capturing CPs, but everybody, the team players.

In fact, what's happened is scoring now really emphasises team play over the individual. So you can do well individually but if you do well individually and support your team, you'll do even better. As you progress, we have unlocks which reward you: so you have different weapons that you can unlock in the game. Then we have the awards, which at-a-glance you can see your character and see "wow this guy or gal's got a lot in this game, they really know what they're doing." You'll be able to see they've got all the badges for the tanks, all these medals based on tanks, this person is a tanker. Therefore, when they say, "We're forming a clan and we need a tank player" they want that tank player in their clan.

C&VG: You've also introduced some new kits into the game, could you tell us more on how those will work?

Jamil Dawsari: So for Spec Ops [the new special forces kit], one of the new things we've introduced is re-designing the kit so that they all balance each other out and compliment each other. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. The Spec Ops are very fast, but lightly armoured, with a medium ranged weapon, but he's got C4, he can sneak in, plant C4 and sneak out again. However if he runs up against a support or assault guy, he's toast.

The support guy, he carries a heavy machine gun, a Squad Automatic Weapon or SAW. He's not very good at sprinting forward and spraying because his fire deviation will be quite large. But if he's prone or crouched, he can support an assault by hosing down sections and then he can re-supply his team. There's no stationary re-supply points in the game anymore, so the support guy becomes very important and he can get big scores for re-supplying his team mates.

C&VG: Battlefield is obviously a series which has a huge fan base. How difficult has it been to meet their expectations and have they supplied any ideas which have been included in the game?

Jamil Dawsari: Oh definitely. The community, since 1942 has been one of the most important things we've done. They went ahead and created their own toolkits to modify Battlefield 42 and that was something we hadn't even considered doing, because we didn't realise the interest was there.

When we realised these guys were going out and making tools so they could modify it, we realised that we'd given them a game that was so easy to mod, that we'd better support this and that's what we've been doing since about three months after Battlefield shipped. We provided them with a mod tool kit and Battlefield 2 is going to ship with a Battlefield Editor, which is what the actual developers use when we design Battlefield levels, effects, vehicles, maps...

C&VG: Will you need quite a high tech level to be able to use the editor or will anyone be able to play with it?

Jamil Dawsari: Oh that's one of the things. People with high tech skills will be able to get the most out of it, but it's pretty easy, I mean if I can understand it, then anyone can. I don't know what that says about me [laughs]. But the whole idea being it's actually sort of the Battlefield philosophy 'easy to pick up, hard to master'. Those who master it will be able to do things like an RTS version of Battlefield if they can tweak it. We're not sure if that will happen but I have been amazed. They actually did that for Battlefield 42, a mod called Empires, which tried to do an RTS version of 42 and it was just amazing.

C&VG: How difficult has the balancing in Battlefield 2 actually been to achieve? Do you use a lot of playtesting to refine it?

Jamil Dawsari: Oh yes, we've got 50+ testers who playtest all the levels, give us feedback and play balancing is key. Battlefield is all about the balance. We had an issue with Battlefield Vietnam where one kit sort of slipped through and was overwhelming.

Part of it was we didn't play it the way the community played it, but we fell into the trap of having blinkers on and we've learned from that. So we're going to get this game out to a lot of people, let them play it, see a lot of different play styles and we've got an actual tool which will ship with the game called Fraggler and it lets us see which kits are most popular, which have the most kills, the same for vehicles. On the map it shows the major points of contact, so at a glance we can see everyone's taking the assault kit and getting a lot of kills with it. We have to consider what's going on and whether the balance is right.

C&VG: What have been the major challenges in moving to modern warfare scenario? The world is obviously a different place than it was a few years ago, has any of that impacted on the game?

Jamil Dawsari: Not really, that always comes up and for us it's always been about the game. We are sensitive to what people might find objectionable and will address that by not bringing it into the game. But for us it's always been about the gameplay and the experience, this is entertainment, it's not a history lesson and it's not Poly-Sci, we're not trying to tell people what state policy should be. Just go out with a bunch of mates and have fun.

C&VG: Obviously there's been a lot more modern military technology for you guys to play with though?

Jamil Dawsari: That's been a lot of fun, how to balance that. Part of that has obviously dictated the fiction of Battlefield 2, we have the US forces in there because they have a lot of fun toys to play with and so we have to provide them with opponents who are worthy. So it has to be balanced again.

It has been an interesting road because the Battlefield fan enjoys realism in terms of the vehicles and kit. They don't care about the story that you wrap around it, but that M1 tank has to look like an M1 tank and we have to be aware of that and address it. You can't imagine, "That gun in that screen shot, is not correct," - these guys love the History Discovery channels, that's their bread and butter. But they grant us that we're not making a simulation and they'll accept the fact that for gameplay purposes, we'll tweak the realism. We'll make it look real as possible, but it's not going to play as real as possible. But the modders will take it there.

C&VG: Splendid, okay so one final question, what's been the most challenging and the most fun aspects of working on Battlefield 2?

Jamil Dawsari: I think the most challenging has been taking it to the next level. There's so many ideas that we had. Again we have over 70 people working on it, everyone contributes in terms of the design and so you start with this huge breadth of where you could take it and the challenge is 'well we only have a short amount of time to develop it, so we have to narrow it down to what we think is

core'. So the real challenge has been to let go of those really cool features which we'd have loved to include in the game. You might eventually see in free content, you never know.

The best part of it has really been working with the team. The folks at Digital Illusions up in Sweden are some of the most talented and capable people I've ever worked with and the pride and enthusiasm that they bring to it is really refreshing. They're very proud of the game, but very modest about it and part of that might be part of the Swedish character, but I can't speak highly enough of them.

Courtesy of Computer And Video Games