IGN.com Battlefield: Bad Company Review

Nate Ahearn, Sunday 22 June 2008 - 00:00:00

[newpage=Page 1]**June 20, 2008** - The rules of first-person shooters are changing. Videogames that engage the player in acts of war have always promised one thing; cover. During times of extreme duress the player has always had the option of retreating behind a wall or group of immovable sandbags in order to escape their assailants. Battlefield: Bad Company, the latest from the Sweden-based Digital Illusions CE (DICE), changes all that.

No longer is the inside of a house a safe haven for fleeing soldiers. Walls, sandbags, fences, and other formerly indestructible objects can now be torn down with a blast from a grenade or rocket launcher. Bad Company, while not perfect by any means, changes the formulaic gameplay of war-based first-person shooters enough to warrant the attention of the many fans of the genre.

The Battlefield series has always been a PC-oriented franchise. Battlefield 2: Modern Combat was the first to make the jump to consoles during the twilight of the Xbox and the infancy of the 360. While it was enjoyed by some, the immense praise that the series was accustomed to was missing. Bad Company not only represents the first story-based game in the series, but it's also the first product to utilize the all-new Frostbite engine which is responsible for all of the luscious destruction that I just mentioned.

Bad Company follows one Private Preston Marlow, a new recruit to a division of the army known simply as Bad Company, or B-Company for short. It's a group of misfit soldiers -- complementing Marlow are Sarge, Haggard and the love struck Sweetwater -- each with his own personality and quippy dialogue. Though the missions in the campaign begin innocently enough with standard seek and destroy objectives, the team's motivations quickly take a turn once the promise of personal wealth enters the equation.

It's interesting to see how DICE dances around the politically charged climate of present day. Especially when you consider that your group of soldiers is essentially abandoned by United States military command fairly early on. DICE could have taken a more politically slanted approach but Bad Company does a good job of keeping things light-hearted and fun throughout the action.

Sadly it's that same light-hearted appeal that hurts the action in BF: BC a bit. War is intense yet the characters in Bad Company are constantly joking around and making fun of one another during battle. The comedy bit just doesn't quite fit in with the incredible level of action on screen.

That having been said, it's clear that Battlefield: Bad Company isn't necessarily trying to be as hard-edged as the drama-charged Call of Duty 4. This is evidenced -- beyond the over-the-top personas -- by both the health and respawn systems. When Marlow begins his adventure he is immediately introduced to his trusty health injector. Players can whip that sucker out, slam it into Preston's chest and his health is instantly restored. While you'll need to wait a handful of seconds before repeating the process, there are moments when you'll feel like all you're doing is running around and sticking yourself with that precious needle. Not exactly something you'd see on CNN war footage.

[newpage=Page 2]Next up is the respawn system which will remind many of the cryo chambers found in BioShock. When you die in

most single-player games the world resets to the point of your last saved checkpoint. Not so in Bad Company. Instead you'll essentially respawn back onto the field of battle with any damage that you may have caused in your previous life still intact and any downed enemies still deader than a doornail. I can't help but feel like that system detracts from the strategy and overall intensity of the battles. Each life carried very little significance for me as I could charge in, take out a few blokes and trust that they'd still be gone when Preston returned to the living.

Where the gameplay of Bad Company positively separates itself from the throng of other war-based releases is the destructibility. At this point it sounds almost clich Ã © but the Frostbite engine does indeed change the way you play. Hiding behind walls is no longer safe for you or your enemies. I can't tell you how many times my dwindling health sent me retreating into a house, only to have the walls shredded by an onslaught of tank shells.

There's no doubt that the destruction wouldn't have such a profound impact if it didn't look and sound so damn good. Bad Company isn't a graphical masterpiece by any means, but launching a grenade into the side of a wall and watching the debris and smoke spew out of the formerly whole structure is a sight to see. DICE also did a good job of placing plenty of explosive barrels, crates and gasoline tanks around the environment so there's never of shortage of things that go boom.

However, the visuals are not without issues. The lack of vertical sync shows its ugly face fairly often, particularly in the first level. There's also an odd film grain that, while I found it endearing to the overall style, might be lamented by some. There are also moments of wonky physics and other oddities, but nothing that overly hurts the experience.

Throw in some of the best audio effects I've ever heard in a videogame and Bad Company becomes more a treat for the ears than the eyes. The High Dynamic Range Audio (HDR Audio) creates different audio effects for gunfire, explosions and pretty much every other sound effect you can imagine. Want a real audio treat? Stand inside a house and blow out one of the walls with Preston's grenade launcher then stop and listen to the sound reverberate as the debris comes raining down. Other impressive auditory delights include the sound of a tank shell whizzing by your head and launching a fleet of missiles from an airborne helicopter. While the dialogue from the characters might be a bit too cheeseball for some, the sound effects, classic Battlefield theme music and overall audio design more than pick up the slack.

The story that's told through in-game and in-engine cutscenes is serviceable but nothing award-winning. The dialogue is slightly cheesy and over-the-top and none of the characters are all that inspiring. Marlow is sort of a shell of a hero and is more "along for the ride" than anything else. The main villain, the one who's keeping the quartet of militants from their riches, looks mean but never really comes across as the frightening hard ass as intended.

[newpage=Page 3]A big problem that most will have with Bad Company's campaign is that it can't be played cooperatively. With four soldiers built in to the storyline one would think that the developers would have implemented four-player co-op, yet there's none to be found. In this day and age it's pretty much inexcusable to not have cooperative play when it makes so much sense with the core game design.

Thankfully, where the single-player stumbles, the multiplayer shines. The Battlefield franchise is known more for its online matches than its solo play and Bad Company is no different. Twenty-four players can join up in ranked or unranked matches across eight maps,

each with different vehicle placements and strategies needed to be successful. Players choose from five well-balanced classes, each containing its own set of armaments and tools. Though the single-player introduces you to tools like the laser guided missile and the remote mortar strike, it's while playing multiplayer that you'll need to make use of every weapon the game has to offer.

Unlike playing alone where you'll find collectible guns scattered throughout the battlefield, the multiplayer in Bad Company features a progressive unlock system that has you tallying experience points while still ascending up the standard ranks. The health injector, an item that Marlow begins the game with and carries throughout, needs to be unlocked in multi. The same can be said for the mortar and missile strike as well as a host of other death dealers. There are also awards that will pop up for things like marksmanship, double kills and other accomplishments, but at the end of the day they feel a bit inconsequential when compared to the other multiplayer trinkets.

Vehicles are another staple of the Battlefield franchise that makes a triumphant return in Bad Company. Hummers, boats, buggies, helicopters, light and heavy tanks, and other modes of transport can be used both in single-player and while playing with others. The vehicles work fantastically well when battling with people online, but using them when playing solo can leave a bit to be desired. The AI of your mates isn't fantastic and occasionally you'll wish that it was a living person manning the turret on the back of your boat.

The computer-controlled players follow a similar path with regard to their intelligence. There are moments when they'll be oblivious to your presence despite the fact that you're aiming at their head from five feet away, and others when they'll form solid attack groups and use their surroundings to their advantage. It's a bit of a mixed bag.

Luckily doing battle with the AI-controlled soldiers is never frustrating because of poorly designed controls. DICE made an interesting decision with regard to how players navigate their short list of weapons (you can carry four at one time). Essentially your weapons are tethered to both shoulder buttons. The right shoulder button is for your primary and secondary weapon -- typically a grenade launcher -- and the left shoulder button is used for tools, one of which is always your health injector while playing the campaign. Rotating between weapons is quick and easy once you get the hang of it and it's much more conducive to quick gameplay than the traditional radial menu or d-pad selection.

Closing Comments

Battlefield: Bad Company is a great addition to the long-running series, despite the fact that it leaves the comfy confines of the PC world. The added storyline gives newfound depth to the formerly shallow single-player mode, despite the fact that the dramatization pales in comparison to what we've seen from Call of Duty 4. Where Bad Company truly shines is in its multiplayer and the technology that drives the game forward. Both raise the bar in their own right and give the competition something to strive for. In this summer relatively devoid of solid first-person shooters, Bad Company does enough to earn your hard-earned dough.

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