

New 'Call of Duty' could set entertainment record

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In this photo made Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2009, a release date is shown on an advertisement for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 sign at GameStop in Redwood City, Calif. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

(AP) -- This holiday season's biggest entertainment blockbuster likely will be a sequel to a popular franchise, with jarring depictions of war and an intricate story of good versus evil. It could easily rake in more than last year's record \$155 million opening weekend for "The Dark Knight."

But this [blockbuster](#) is not a movie.

It is "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2," a video game that Activision Blizzard Inc. is releasing Tuesday. Fans worldwide are expected to spend at least half a billion dollars on the game in the first week.

That would at least match last year's "[Grand Theft Auto IV](#)," which was the most successful video game release in history and might have been the top entertainment launch ever.

Justin Criswell, 31, plans to line up at a GameStop store in Brooklyn on Monday night so he can buy the new "Call of Duty" when it goes on sale after midnight, for \$60. It's available for PCs, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's [PlayStation 3](#).

"Ever since they announced it, me and most of the friends that I play with have been crazy excited about it," Criswell said. Once he gets a copy, he plans to stay up much of the night to play it online with friends and relatives scattered in Tennessee, California, Ohio and Florida.

"Those who have to work the next day have taken the day off," he said.

Like the previous five "Call of Duty" games, which are all rated "M" for mature (not for kids under 17), this one lets players shoot their way through a complex series of scenes. The game's developer, Infinity Ward, spent two years creating realistic graphics that are amplified in many players' homes by big-screen, high-definition TVs sets and powerful speakers. It's like stepping into a movie.

A big part of the game's appeal is in its multiplayer component - players can fight each other, whether they're at the same game console or in separate locations and connected online.

Or a player can dive in alone and get swept into the game's plot, which picks up where the last one, "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare," left off. That game ended with victory over a Russian terrorist, but he was just part of a larger conspiracy. This time, the target is an even more vicious leader of the Russian Ultranationalist movement. Settings include a snowbound Siberian base, a leafy American suburb and the burning

streets of Washington, D.C. One trailer for the game shows a glimpse of action in outer space.

While video games are increasingly marketed to men and women of all ages as mainstream entertainment, the core demographic for "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2" is mainly guys.

For David Dague, 36, who lives in Chicago, the launch of "Modern Warfare 2" is like the beginning of football season for a sports fan. Because he can play the game with other people, joining up in "clans" or fighting against them, "Call of Duty" is like "paintball in a box," he said. Better yet, paintball on a couch.

"Playing against other living, thinking players becomes a competitive pastime," said Dague, who runs a Web community for adults who play multiplayer games on the [Xbox 360](#). Dague said he plans to play "Modern Warfare 2" for about two hours at a time, two to three nights a week.

"I don't watch soap operas, I don't watch football. Multiplayer gaming is where my competitive spirit gets its outlet," he said.

Activision is working with retailers to plan more than 10,000 midnight openings in the United States, including most of the 4,300 GameStop Corp. stores around the country. It won't give numbers, but GameStop says pre-orders for "Modern Warfare 2" hit an all-time high.

In all, about 28 million "Call of Duty" games have been sold in the United States, with each installment doing better at launch than the previous one. Optimism about the latest title led Activision on Thursday to reaffirm its outlook for 2009. It expects more than \$2 billion in revenue for the current quarter - roughly half of the year's total.

Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter estimates Activision is spending as much as \$50 million to market the game, including TV spots, billboards and ads on social-networking sites. Activision won't say how much the game cost to make, but most blockbusters require tens of millions of dollars.

For Criswell and Dague's generation, video games are entertainment on par with movies, except they last many more hours and immerse players in stories in which their actions affect the outcome.

Patrick Kienbauer, an 18-year-old student in Austria, said the game's last installment, which has sad background music and a "comfortless ambiance," let him "feel the cruelty and violence of war." He's already ordered a copy of "Modern Warfare 2" so he can get it as quickly as possible.

If this sequel does its job, it will not only pick up where the last one ended but also advance the story in ways that will shock and surprise him - and keep him coming back for more.

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