

# Activision bets on online play for 'Call of Duty'

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In this screen shot provided by Activision, “Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3,” the upcoming installment of the popular shooter series, is shown. Activision is launching “Call of Duty: Elite,” an online platform for the game, later this year. (AP Photo/Activision)

(AP) -- Activision knows it's more fun to blast on-screen enemies into oblivion with friends, so this fall it's launching an online service for its "Call of Duty" games that's part Facebook, part player matchmaker and part organized sports.

It's the logical next step for Activision Blizzard Inc., whose "Call of Duty" franchise has enjoyed unprecedented success. The latest title, "Black Ops," has sold 22 million copies worldwide since its November launch. More than 7 million people play every day online.

The service officially launches on Nov. 8 with the next "Call of Duty"

installment, Activision said Tuesday. A test version will be available before that, but Activision isn't saying when.

Two years in the making by a specially-created [game studio](#) called Beachhead, the service, "Call of Duty: Elite," lets players form groups, compete by skill level or interest, share statistics like baseball fans, and create video clips of their best "Call of Duty" moments, among other things.

"Elite" will be accessible from [game consoles](#), computers and smartphones. It's as if "social networks and organized sports had a baby and they gave that baby a flamethrower," as Activision puts it.

Eric Hirshberg, CEO of Activision Publishing, calls it a response to the rise of [social networking](#).

"A way to think about this - the NFL used to be something you could only interact with on Sunday. Then, things like fantasy football and [ESPN](#) started surrounding it," Hirshberg said.

Online services are also the next step for the broader [video game industry](#), which must figure out how to offer players experiences that go beyond the \$60 video game discs that, "Call of Duty" aside, have seen bumpy sales as people flock to cheaper games from "Angry Birds" to "FarmVille."

Activision is not saying what it plans to charge for access to "Elite," though it's likely to be in the form of monthly or yearly subscriptions possibly combined with the sale of virtual items and extra content for the games. Hirshberg stressed that the company won't start charging for anything currently available to "Call of Duty" players for free, such as the ability to play multiplayer games.

[Activision](#), whose Blizzard arm publishes the "World of Warcraft" online game series, is betting that the future of video games lies beyond discs in so-called "digital content." That includes everything from downloadable chapters (called "map packs") in "Call of Duty" to monthly "World of Warcraft" subscriptions, along with games on Facebook and mobile devices. While sales of physical video games are on the decline save the biggest blockbusters, more people than ever are playing games in some form, especially online and on mobile devices.

"Call of Duty" has a single-player component, but that pales in comparison with the enjoyment gamers like Dave Strand, 28, get out of playing the game's multiplayer feature, which can extend the playtime of "Call of Duty" by days, weeks or even months. More than 30 million people play "Call of Duty" online, proof that video games are no longer a solitary pastime.

"It's always better to play with someone you know, have one friendly voice." said Strand, who works for a telecommunications company in Chicago. "As opposed to random kids who when they die they just scream in profanity."

Strand said he plays a couple of days a week, with a group of like-minded gamers, found through an online [video game](#) forum, who like to practice "good sportsmanship, win or lose."

As for a digital platform for "Call of Duty," Strand said if it was "like a buck or two a month, I'd think about it." He already pays for the Xbox Live online service which now costs \$60 a year, and shells out \$15 for each new "Call of Duty" map pack.

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