

Review: Choices lift latest 'Call of Duty'

November 13 2012, by Ryan Pearson



This video game image released by Activision shows a scene from "Call of Duty: Black Ops II." When the latest installment in the wildly popular "Call of Duty" video game franchise is released Tuesday, Nov. 13, 2012, it will transport fans to a completely new place: the future. Setting half of "Call of Duty: Black Ops II" in the year 2025 could be the riskiest gambit yet for the successful shoot-'em-up series known for its relentless past-and-present realism. (AP Photo/Activision)

You've always had to play the good soldier in "Call of Duty" games: The only path to the end was to follow orders, from defending a key position to killing off certain enemies.

The restricted approach meant that while the military shooter franchise

skyrocketed to massive popularity through immersive graphics and innovative online multiplayer battles, its single-player campaigns got rightly knocked as linear and forgettable.

By adding the element of choice, "Call of Duty: Black Ops II" (Activision, for the [Xbox 360](#), [PlayStation 3](#), [Wii U](#), PC, \$59.99) has revitalized the brand to become the best "CoD" since 2007's "[Modern Warfare](#)."

The game leaps back and forth from CIA and U.S. military missions in the 1980s to an international crisis in 2025. Your moral decisions and successes or failures in both settings determine your ending—and whether some of the main characters live long enough to see it.

The narrative is framed by conversations between elderly Frank Woods and David Mason, son of his former partner Alex Mason. The younger Mason is out to stop supervillain Raul Menendez, with missions in under-siege Los Angeles, flooded Lahore, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Woods recounts his own history with Menendez in flashbacks to Nicaragua, Panama and an exhilarating Afghanistan level where you fire RPGs on horseback.

The branching narrative is complemented by two more wrinkles. "Strike force" missions add in optional real-time strategy and can end in success or failure, leading to different outcomes in the endgame. And for the first time in "CoD," players get to choose their weapons before each mission, including unique perks inspired by the series' stellar multiplayer options.

What-ifs abound. What if I had disobeyed that "shoot" command? What if I had started that level with a sniper rifle instead of a pistol? What if I'd let invaders blow up that base?

These are the types of questions that elevated the lauded "Mass Effect" trilogy, one of many sources of inspiration for "Black Ops II" creators. There are sticky "frog" gloves as seen in the fourth "Mission: Impossible" film, flying wingsuits from the third "Transformers" and a superrare element called celerium that reminded me of the unobtainium in "Avatar." There's even a feisty computer whiz named Chloe, a la "24."

So sure, not everything is fresh here. Gameplay is still mostly of the run and shoot-everything-that-moves variety. Artificial barriers keep you moving in the right direction despite the illusion of open space. Your allies sometimes still wait for you to kill the last in a wave of enemies, just because.



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But after completing the campaign in around seven hours at a review event, I spoke with a fellow reviewer and was deeply impressed by how different our experiences had been. I had—spoiler alert—saved the USS Barack Obama aircraft carrier while she'd seen it destroyed. Likewise, our endings had almost no overlap: She'd let certain characters die that I had spared or rescued. It'll be quite difficult to reconcile the separate threads for a potential "Black Ops III."

So for the first time, there's some replayability in single-player to match the addictive and polished multiplayer, which is where I traditionally spend most of my "CoD" time. "Black Ops II" adds choice there, too.

You still have to level up to unlock weapons, but the perk and modifications are more customizable than ever. With lead developer Treyarch's "Pick 10" class system, you can decide not to carry a secondary weapon, for example, and instead layer on extra abilities like "extreme conditioning," or overload your primary weapon with three attachments. In several hours of multiplayer action, I hadn't yet picked a favorite combination.

Beyond futuristic rewards like flying minidrones with mounted guns, other multiplayer tweaks include a new "league play" system designed to match you with players of similar skill, three-team battles and live match streaming on YouTube.

Treyarch also added a player-versus-player option to its unforgiving zombies mode, which features cooperative gameplay and its own separate storyline and mythology. Teams can't attack each other but use barriers and bait to sic zombies on opponents.

Despite outselling every other game in recent years, "Call of Duty"

publisher Activision isn't simply resting on its pile of money. "Black Ops II" delivers smart multiplayer modifications and an unexpectedly personal story with weighty choice and consequence. It's the first must-have "CoD" in five years. Three and a half stars out of four.

More information: www.callofduty.com/blackops2

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