

Eurogamer.net Battlefield: Bad Company Review

Kristan Reed, Thursday 26 June 2008 - 14:31:09

[newpage=Page 1]Placed in this no-win situation in DICE's latest console-oriented take on the Battlefield series, you find yourself filling the role of the improbably named Preston Marlow (no doubt inspired by DICE's two favourite English branches of Little Chef). This unassuming, down-to-earth rookie is joined on his adventures by three rather clueless but usefully invincible Bad Company squadmates: Sarge, Sweetwater and Haggard. Afforded precious little respect by your superiors, when things don't quite go to plan, you and your knuckle-headed trio decide to chase a trail of mercenary gold in the misguided belief that they'll be able to bag all this tasty loot for themselves.

Set across seven sprawling campaign missions, the single player portion of Bad Company is an unexpected treat. Building on the sense of open-ended freedom we've come to expect from the Battlefield series for years, DICE has finally managed to distill all the good ideas of its multiplayer-focused titles to often breathtaking effect. The key weapon in distinguishing Bad Company from the legion of samey first person shooters is evidently its beautiful and versatile Frostbite engine. By offering the level designers immense scope in so many areas, it's the first shooter to emerge in a long time that demonstrates a significant evolution of the genre.

'Battlefield: Bad Company' Screenshot 1

For a start, the pre-release boast about "90 per cent destructibility" isn't that far from the truth. Not having paid an awful lot of attention to the hype, it was quite a shock to discover that you can't simply duck behind walls, trees and other cover points and expect to be able to hide from an incoming missile like you've been able to do in pretty much every FPS ever. In Bad Company, the chances are that the tree you were hiding behind will fall on top of you, or building you ducked into will be reduced to a hollow shell, while you peer ruefully through an enormous cloud of brick dust and smoke to get your bearings and find your next tenuous cover point. This, of course, has major implications when you're on the offensive, too. Finally, you can flush out enemies from their sneaky camping positions, knowing full well that a well-placed grenade or rocket will cause pandemonium. Gone are the days of ridiculously impregnable sandbags, fences and thin brick walls, replaced by a much more physical environment that you can blow the crap out of.

Just as significant is the Frostbite engine's ability to render vast, sprawling, vivid environments that boast arguably the most detailed, convincing outdoor scenes on a console title to date. Significantly, that famed Battlefield freedom has finally been translated into a coherent single player campaign, where your choice of route can have a distinct bearing on your chances of success. Governed by a linear succession of objectives, the route you take to get there can often be genuinely up to you. Be it stealthily on foot, sniping everything from afar or storming the gates in a tank, you simply use whatever hardware's at your disposal and set about taking down everyone in your way, in whichever way you can. With gunships and motorboats occasionally upping the ante further still, the moments when Bad Company is firing on all cylinders are thrillingly epic.

[newpage=Page 2]Wisely, Bad Company never takes itself too seriously, either, avoiding the inevitable 'So Macho' territory of four super-serious steroid-pumped leathernecked marine jocks Hooyah-ing their way through another appallingly scripted journey into cliché-ridden tedium. Full of surprisingly warm humour, you're never left in any doubt that this lot are in the Bad Company ranks for a very good reason, though at no stage does the storyline descend into parody, either. It's a fine line that DICE successfully negotiates.

It's a fool's (gold) errand where the fun comes from seeing what ludicrous scenario they can stumble upon next rather than yet another eye-rolling save-the-world trudge into sterility.

With so much experience of crafting Battlefield titles down the years, it's no surprise that everything feels exceptionally polished. Whether you're steaming along in an APC, piloting a helicopter or dodging tank shells in a speedboat, the handling is always intuitive and satisfying. Likewise, the multitude of weapons feel (and sound) absolutely spot-on. In a genre so saturated of late, it's the little things that often jar, but in practically every sense, Bad Company feels like the product of a developer inspired to make something that pushes things forward.

That said, in the process of making bold decisions, there are a few controversial choices that DICE has made which might not gain universal acclaim. The most obvious is the curious, bold decision to spawn players back into the single player game, as if you've got infinite lives. Evidently a legacy of its multiplayer roots, there's an inescapable sense that you're cheating your way through the game. Safe in the knowledge that you'll simply respawn a few paces back, you'll continually chalk off a few enemies, get blown up and run back to continue the battle - except on a few time-sensitive, mission-critical occasions when the game deems it necessary to enforce checkpoints if you fail.

Near-instant respawning is a design decision which certainly cuts down on re-loading time (and a fair amount of frustration), but it does smack of an idea based on fixing a lack of balancing than anything. The truth is, if the game didn't respawn you, it would be mercilessly difficult and almost certainly very frustrating, so it's hard not to consider it a controversial decision. Equally questionable is your ability to endlessly heal yourself by doing nothing more than injecting yourself with some sort of magic potion. Fair enough, recharging health and endless medipacks are an equally ludicrous game mechanic, but it does feel faintly bizarre to have to constantly press L1/LB followed by the right trigger/R2 in the heat of battle. Frankly, given the option of a cheating health restoring fudge, recharging health does the exact same job without constantly requiring the player to juggle equipment when you'd rather have your weapon to hand.

There's also a sense that the enemy AI isn't especially dynamic or adaptive - just irritatingly accurate. Having completed the game on the hard difficulty setting, it's especially noticeable, with enemies capable of picking you off with unerring accuracy the split second you move into their line of sight from improbable distances (interestingly, the problem is still apparent on Medium). Somewhat disappointingly, there's never any evidence of teamwork on their part, with no big chases ensuing, or surprise flanking - just a continual procession of entrenched enemy to pick off one by one. Squad AI, too, is often noticeably inert, with frequent instances of your team mates failing to take the initiative in glaringly obvious situations. Worse still, despite your squaddies being specialists in different areas, there are a number of occasions when the game still forces you to deal with situations that they would have logically dealt with. The sum total of this inherent lack of flexibility is that the further you progress, the more predictable and transparent the whole experience becomes.

[newpage=Page 3]Bad Company is still very entertaining if you take it at face value. It has a huge amount going for it if you try not to think about it too hard, but you sense that the shackles still restrict it from being a true single player representation of the mighty Battlefield experience. The most obvious restriction is the way the game binds enemy behaviour to a tiny local zone, when the scale and scope of these sprawling maps suggests the potential was so much greater. For now, though, we must be content with the freedom offered by the immense destructibility, the removal of arbitrary 'corridors' funneling you through the game world, the choice of

weapons and how you get to your eventual destination, rather than how convincingly the game reacts to your actions.

Needless to say, the game's multiplayer component removes many of these issues at a stroke, allowing you to get stuck into a truly rampaging 24-player Gold Rush match. As detailed at considerable length by Dan during the beta, the premise of defending or attacking crates of gold is riotously entertaining, extremely lag tolerant and a huge amount of fun - largely as a consequence of the sheer destructibility of the environment. Having dipped into a test server last week, and engaged in some 'real-world' online action today, basically everything Dan observed in the beta still holds true, so there's no need to go over old ground here. In summary, the savage fury of the experience will either be very much a Good Thing, or something to send you scurrying for something a little less chaotic. Personally, I had a lot of fun, but you can expect to die a lot in the process of learning the ropes.

As is always the case with Battlefield games, the bewildering degree of choice available to you in terms of vehicles, loadout and routes available to you presents an almost vertical learning curve to the unwary, but comes into its own once you figure out a strategy and can rely on like-minded team to figure out a strategy. Initial sessions are absolutely insane, and it's quite likely that it'll remain that way for at least the first few weeks until a community builds up and begins to figure things out. Later, remember, the Conquest will be downloadable for free, so there's plenty to extend the lifespan of the game long after you're done with the Story mode and have had your fill of the eight maps available in Gold Rush mode.

Once you've experienced the various highs and lows that Bad Company has to offer, it feels like an immensely polished, ambitious effort that will build up a strong following for all the right reasons. The single player portion, while never less than hugely entertaining, stops short of true greatness thanks to a few fundamental design shortcuts which offer easy health restoring concepts seemingly at the expense of balanced AI. Some of this is irrelevant in the online mode, and the profound implications of a massively destructible environment make it a unique proposition in online gaming right now - albeit a riotous chaotic one. Riccitiello needn't have worried.

Courtesy of [Eurogamer](#)