

War Games: “Modern Warfare 3” and “Battlefield 3”

Written by Grant Williams

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Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

In its first 24 hours of release, *Modern Warfare 3* – the eighth *Call of Duty*-branded video game – sold \$400 million worth of copies, the highest-grossing launch of an entertainment product ever. It is also the most vicious and morally ugly game I have ever played.

It is perhaps not a great fall from the militarism and glorification of war found in previous *Call of Duty*

games to the revelry in violence of this installment, but it is a fall. The first *Modern Warfare*

struggled to find heroics in a war largely devoid of them, but it tried.

Modern Warfare 3

pays lip service to the grim realities of war but is finally just sadistic.

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Modern Warfare 3 is really two games built on a shared first-person-shooter (FPS) foundation: a multi-player game and a single-player campaign. The multi-player game follows the model set by the first *Modern Warfare* in 2007 and copied with little change for every *Call of Duty* since. Like most FPS games, players compete in small arenas to kill each other and achieve objectives.



Call of Duty games add two major elements to the standard multi-player FPS template, both of which detract from the game. First, they add an experience system whereby points from matches persist and “level up” players, giving them access to more powerful weapons and options for all future matches. Second, *Call of Duty* games feature gameplay rewards for killing multiple opponents without dying, working up to helicopter attacks and bombing runs against opponents.

The results of these mechanics are that early or frequent players have material advantages, and those doing well in a match are highly likely to prevail. It’s like a basketball game in which the hoop starts bigger for experienced players and gets bigger for those who score several times consecutively. Instead of a game of equal competition, in which more experienced players usually win but are sometimes upset by people who perform better, the game is skewed toward blowouts. For talented players who have been playing long enough to receive plenty of advantages, success can feel unearned. The rest of us typically lose even when we play better than the other side.

While I found the multi-player frustrating, *Modern Warfare 3*’s single-player campaign genuinely disgusted me. It consists of a series of highly scripted action set pieces intercut with non-interactive sequences depicting a military-thriller plot of disowned commandos, Russian terrorists, and an invasion of the United States. The gameplay is competent and reliably entertaining on a basic level, though similarly unchanged from its predecessors and hostile to the idea of player free will. The player is positioned not as a hero but as a sidekick; much of the time “FOLLOW” literally appears in large letters over another character’s head. Player characters only do interesting things when the player isn’t in control.

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Despite its lack of agency, I appreciated the first *Modern Warfare*'s single-player campaign for its attempt to be a military-themed FPS that tempered the inevitable mining of war for pleasure and fun with a somber tone that acknowledged the horror of its source material. Melancholy quotes from famous soldiers and politicians accompanied failure. In its most memorable sequence, the player experienced the slow death of a protagonist after a futile rescue mission.

Modern Warfare 3's single-player, on the other hand, resembles a Michael Bay movie, sprinting from one massive, ludicrous, heavily choreographed action sequence to another. I can enjoy games that make warfare ridiculous – I still routinely play Valve's preposterous multi-player FPS *Team Fortress 2* – but *Modern Warfare 3* also continues the use of serious quotes and, increasingly as the game continues, appropriates and trivializes controversial subject matter.

At first I interpreted this as evidence of a gaping tonal dissonance between the high-octane absurdity of the plot and action sequences and the occasional intrusions of “seriousness.” Early on, the player is in an African country torn apart by civil war and genocide. The man the player is instructed to “FOLLOW” says they can't intervene to save the civilians being executed – a moment that seems to be striving for defeatist pragmatism but, in the context of the impossible feats the player has previously accomplished, instead comes across as appalling indifference.

The game follows up its trivialization of African strife with, among other things, a mission that blows up the Eiffel Tower in a rush of patriotic fervor and epic music, and one that gleefully murders a child in slow motion. The game warns beforehand that the latter sequence might be “offensive” and can be skipped, but it's hard to escape the feeling that it's not so much a warning as excited foreshadowing: Pay attention, because the good stuff is coming.

After all of this, I could only conclude that *Modern Warfare 3* is not tonally schizophrenic; it is simply a game of bloodlust, delighting in death and destruction. It is not interested, however haphazardly, in “seriousness,” or even in entertainment through absurdity, but in how controversially violent it can get without compromising its sales figures.

Ultimately it has more in common with the *Saw* films than the lightweight spectacles made by Bay. Its protagonists don't care about saving the world – in “heroics,” however trite that term is in the context of video games – but about hunting down a man to torture him to death. That's hate, not duty.

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Battlefield 3

Battlefield 3 is EA's answer to *Modern Warfare 3*; its slogan, after all, is “Above and Beyond the Call.” Like *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield 3* consists of two almost entirely separate multi- and single-player portions. (The PC version of the game requires EA's new Origin service, currently a mostly inferior version of Valve's Steam game manager/store and, according to various reports, spyware that reports data unrelated to your games back to the company. The console versions lack any integration with Origin.)

Battlefield 3's single-player campaign plays like an off-brand, low-quality imitation of a *Call of Duty* game – which is exactly what it is. “FOLLOW” again appears over the head of your escort, but *Battlefield*'s scripting is much more arbitrary and opaque. In *Modern Warfare 3*, at least I always felt like I knew what I was supposed to be doing.

The single-player also frequently uses “quick-time events,” largely non-interactive sequences in which the player is occasionally prompted to hit an arbitrary key, with failure usually resulting in death. It's like watching a film and being told you have a half-second to push a button on the remote control to make the film continue, or else the film resets to five minutes earlier.

The single-player campaign is not offensive like *Modern Warfare 3*, although its central plot of Iranian nuclear terrorists and a U.S. invasion of Iran struck me as a little close for comfort. Ironically, it's the relative lack of excess that feels out-of-place. *Modern Warfare 3* is grotesque but full of energy;

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Battlefield 3

feels not just clumsy but rote. Every gameplay sequence and line of dialogue is familiar to the point of staleness; even those sequences with solid execution feel like the result of a focus group. It’s hard to get involved with a game that has no identity of its own.



Battlefield 3's copying extends to direct appropriations. It borrows the device of the player switching among multiple characters between missions – as well as occasionally killing off those characters – from *Call of Duty* games. It mimics the flashback narrative structure of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*

It also shares a Russian ex-Spetsnaz player character and a massive, destructive set piece in Paris with *Modern Warfare 3*, though the games' near-concurrent releases make it difficult to determine if one game “inspired” the other or if those are simply eerie coincidences.

Battlefield 3's multi-player game is the one aspect of either of these games I appreciate. It bolts on *Call of Duty*'s persistent experience system, but this is less egregious in *Battlefield* due to the nature of the game. While it features traditional team FPS modes, the heart of *Battlefield*

has always been its “Conquest” mode, which takes place on vast outdoor maps with up to 64 players and features controllable trucks, tanks, helicopters, fighter jets, and even warships. Theoretically, “Conquest” can be played as a tense strategic battle between two teams – the members of each coordinating toward common objectives – and the game provides tactical options such as “squads” that are meant to aid in organizing such a battle.

In practice, people jump in a truck and drive full-throttle through weak walls and launch themselves off hills, trampling anyone who gets in their way. They grab a jet and scream through the sky, occasionally dropping bombs on hapless players below. They get into a sniper duel with another player halfway across the map, both sides hunkering down and peeping out infrequently to take shots. It is an entirely non-strategic experience.

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The significant entertainment of *Battlefield 3*'s multi-player game comes from its glorious stupidity. It's a game not about hate, or even duty, but fun.

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