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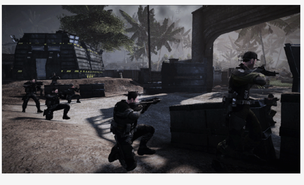
MAG Hands-On Preview

Posted by Joe Rybicki - Thursday, June 04, 2009 5:02 PM

Zipper Interactive knows how to think big. Maybe it's the fact that the company got its start designing Apache helicopter sims for the U.S. military -- it may be that any civilian game development feels like a cakewalk in comparison. But whatever the reason, the developer has been pushing forward in the online arena since they launched the PS2 network adapter with the original *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs* way back in 2002. The series started out with 16-player online play, and graduated to 32-player matches with *SOCOM 3*. 2006's *Combined Assault* added four-player co-op. These were sensible, predictable improvements.

MAG, on the other hand, is almost ridiculously ambitious.

For Zipper's latest trick (and their first PS3 game), they're filling vast maps with 256 simultaneous human players. And as if the sheer technology behind such a feat weren't enough, they're also creating a complete chain of command to give players the ability to take command of squads of eight, and platoons of 32, with a single officer in charge of the whole company. Using a simple icon system, leaders can set objectives for the troops under them, from simple waypoints to more long-term goals like defending territory. Soldiers who choose to obey their officers' commands get bonuses to experience, which in turn grants experience to the officer.



You need to earn leadership abilities, of course, but the effort to do so will be worth it. Each leadership role carries with it certain forms of tactical support: squad leaders can deploy recon drones, for example, while platoon leaders can call in strafing runs.

But understand, even though the structure is similar, this isn't a military game in the traditional sense. Since *MAG* is set 20 years in the future, its fighting forces are privately owned, and each of the three corporations in the game is constantly competing with the others for lucrative contracts in what the developers are calling the "shadow war." If players in your faction perform well enough to maintain these contracts, you get access to special gear: tricked out, state-of-the-art vehicles and weapons, for example.

I got to check out some of these advanced features and leadership abilities for myself, and using them works as well as anyone with experience in *SOCOM*'s singleplayer modes would expect: You can issue commands on the fly with the d-pad, or take a more big-picture approach by using the tactical map, a simplified, 3D, overhead view of the entire battlefield, showing the location of every friendly unit and any enemies that have been revealed by line-of-sight or other recon.

The really shocking thing is that the game runs as smoothly as it does. In the 256-player match I participated in, I noticed almost no lag or other technological issues. The environment was complex and detailed, with no visible compromises to draw distance and no noticeable slowdown even with a screen full of players. The weapons felt fast and accurate, with the exception of grenades, which are in obvious need of some tuning as they never seemed to land remotely where they should. And tactical support felt quick and powerful, making it a simple affair to take out a group of enemies with a cluster bomb. (Don't worry, you get some warning when this sort of thing is incoming…if you're paying attention).

Like any online-only game, though, *MAG* is going to stand or fall by its players and its real-world performance. Sony seems confident the game will hold up well on both counts. You'll be able to find out for yourself when it launches late this year.

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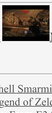
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Posted by PurpleTeletubby - Thursday, June 4, 2009 8:01 PM

I honestly have been waiting for this game since last year's E3 and I'm so happy that it worked out for the better. I really think that this game could sell some consoles for sony, if they had a price drop. I know i would purchase a PS3 if they lowered the price.

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Posted by MAspiderface - Thursday, June 4, 2009 9:05 PM

This is going to be a awesome game.

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Posted by scx84 - Friday, June 5, 2009 3:35 PM

i can hardly wait....256 players! Cool tricked out guns! I AM IN!

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Posted by g4ismediocre - Friday, June 5, 2009 6:59 PM

Although I want games to come out for Sony this year, I think I could wait a little longer for a release. There's some things I saw that I think wont have time to be fixed by the release date

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