



MAG

by Joe Rybicki

February 04, 2010 13:46 PM PT

MAG

MAG is a manifesto on the importance of working together, and when everything clicks, it's exhilarating. The difficulty is finding 127 other players who realize that the game simply cannot be won without teamwork.

GamePro Score



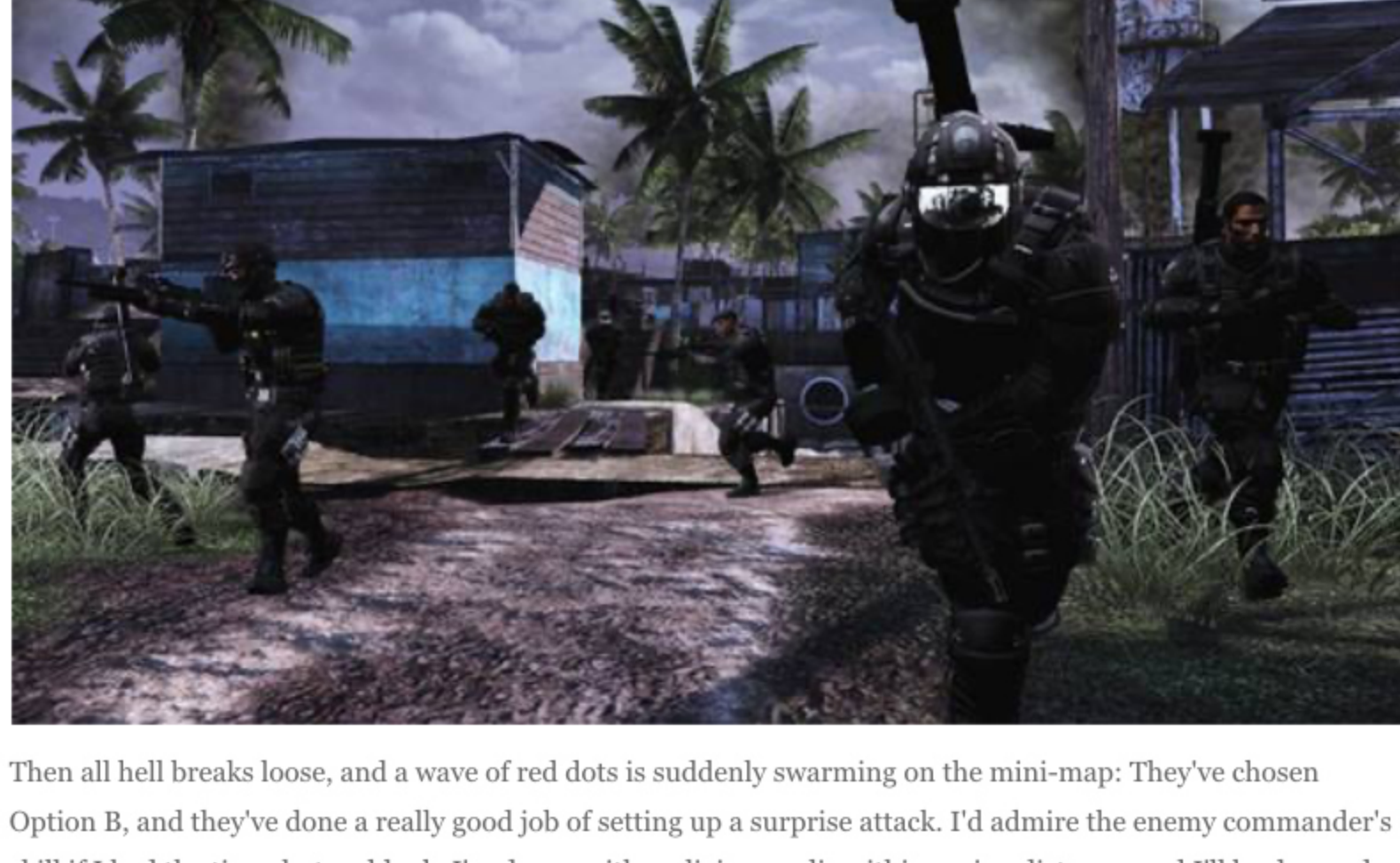
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It's suddenly very quiet. I'm lying prone in the high grass with a scoped ATAC 2000, ready to pop up and nail any enemies foolish enough to try to come and clear my charges from their AA battery. We've been lucky so far: Only a couple minutes in and we've already taken down their bunkers, forcing them to spawn all the way back in their main base. If we can successfully keep the bad guys away from the AA, our drop planes will be free to buzz the battlefield -- meaning we'll be able to parachute onto the middle of the map rather than slogging in from the distant edge.

But it's now unpleasantly quiet around here, meaning either the enemy hasn't noticed that the icon for their AA is suddenly flashing blue and red -- which is, let's face it, unlikely -- or they're preparing a stealthy and/or well-coordinated attack to clear those charges... or at the very least, repair the damage once they go off. And possibly take back their bunkers as well. This would be bad.



Then all hell breaks loose, and a wave of red dots is suddenly swarming on the mini-map: They've chosen Option B, and they've done a really good job of setting up a surprise attack. I'd admire the enemy commander's skill if I had the time, but suddenly I'm down, with no living medic within saving distance, and I'll be damned: They managed to get to the charges *just* in time. This does not bode well for the rest of the match.

This kind of thing happens a lot in MAG, though. Not the too-quiet part -- battlefields of 64, 128, or 256 players tend to generate a fair amount of noise. I mean the all-hell-breaking-loose part, the tide-turning part, the part where a large team, working well together and staying in constant communication, demolishes a less organized opposition. Being a part of that (hell, even seeing it from the other side, sometimes) is exciting. Actually orchestrating such a thing is exhilarating. It's clear that this is the kind of experience MAG was designed for: these moments where leadership, teamwork, and skill come together as an unstoppable force.

Too bad it rarely happens.

That's not for MAG's lack of trying. The game does a fantastic job of making the tools of leadership and communication simple, accessible, and manageable. Commanders can easily hop into a wonderfully detailed overhead map to designate targets, call in tactical strikes, and keep an eye on the position of any enemy within sight of teammates or recon vehicles. A leader can select any feature on the map and the game will immediately send out orders to everyone in the squad, dropping a nice, big, flashing icon on everyone's heads-up display. (If you're more of a hands-on leader, you can do the same thing on the ground just by aiming at a target and fiddling with the d-pad.) As motivation for following orders, your squad earns double experience while within range of your target, points which players use to upgrade weapons, unlock new abilities, and level up toward a command of their own. The game also awards generous XP for team-based support roles like healing, reviving, and repairing; in fact, you earn twice as many points for resurrecting a teammate as you do for executing an opponent.



So the game is actually quite elegantly set up to encourage teamwork, to reward both leaders and grunts for working toward mission objectives, and draw teams together in mutually beneficial relationships. But here's the unfortunate truth about MAG: Plenty of players simply *do not care*. They're happy to run around, beef up their kill counts, die in a blaze of glory, and do it again.

That wouldn't be a problem, except for this: More than any other team-based game I've ever played, the quality of any one player's experience is tightly and directly related to the commitment of his or her teammates. End up with a clueless, inexperienced, or just completely apathetic squad leader and you'll be miserable, vainly trying to hold your own in a field of hundreds while an organized enemy mows through your ranks. (It certainly doesn't help that the game offers almost nothing in the way of training for commanding officers.)

Get stuck with teammates who don't follow the squad leader's guidance and it's the same story: a handful of experienced players trying to do the right thing, while everyone else runs around in circles or -- more commonly -- hangs within a foot of their starting location and tries to snipe the enemy. And if you think it's bad being on a team with a bunch of run-and-gun lone wolves, try being their commander. I have had more frustrating game experiences than I had watching my squad wander around aimlessly, blatantly ignoring my orders as squad leader but not many.



Let me be clear: Matches simply cannot be won except by teams who are willing to work together, follow orders, and communicate. The maps are too large, the objectives too many. Lone-wolf players may rack up more kills, but a team of loners will lose the big matches every time. As a result, playing alongside such players can prove enormously frustrating.

This means the game experience can be seriously uneven, and aside from playing exclusively with teammates you know you can trust, you never know what kind of experience you're going to get. This uncertainty isn't helped by the fact that MAG offers very limited choices in game type (you get four options, ranging from basic deathmatch up to the massive, half-hour Domination games) and no choice of map whatsoever once you've picked your game type. Furthermore, the auto-matching procedure -- the only way to join a game aside from partying up with friends or clan members -- seems astonishingly random, lumping together players of vastly different skills with no apparent reason.

If this unpredictability were MAG's only flaw, though, it would be easily dismissed; the positive experiences would more than make up for the negative ones. Unfortunately, the game suffers from some poorly thought-out design choices elsewhere. For example, the three different factions offer fairly different game experiences due to the fact that each map is set up for a specific faction to take a specific role. With the maps being so huge, starting at one end can lead to a dramatically different game than starting at the other. But the only ways to switch factions once you've created your character are to either reach level 60 and sacrifice your purchased gear to start over in another faction, or delete your character entirely. This seems like an enormous waste of two-thirds of the game.

The game also makes some odd choices when it comes to upgrading your gear. It is possible, for instance, to waste your precious skill points (you get exactly one for each level-up) buying gear you can't equip -- a fact the game neglects to tell you before your purchase. Details of upgrades ought to be much more clear. Fortunately, the game allows periodic "respecs" in which you can essentially trade back all your gear and try a new upgrade path. But these are rare, and without better explanations of the different gear it's entirely possible you'll make even *more* mistakes the next time around.



The maps also have their share of unpleasant design choices, most especially the abundance of invisible walls that always seem to block off the very best sniper roosts. Some of the maps also have frustratingly complex layouts, which is a bit of a disappointment given the sensible and organic level design of the SOCOM series that put MAG developer Zipper on the map. And it's clear that some prettiness was sacrificed for the sake of the massive scale; building interiors in particular look surprisingly barren of detail.

But of course, *pretty* isn't what MAG is about. It's about warfare on a huge scale, with a sensible chain of command in place to manage that scale. To this end, the fundamentals are solid: responsive weapons, user-friendly controls, a sensible objective structure, and powerful servers that keep lag to a minimum (a delightful change from the launch of SOCOM: Confrontation).

So when everything clicks just right, that click is deafening; a good match here is very, very good, and good matches show up just often enough at this early stage to make the rest worthwhile. Given that the game's been out barely a week as of this writing, I'm confident that the currently uneven experience will stabilize, as players find their individual roles, commanders grow more comfortable with their abilities, and the obnoxious one-man-army types return to their more traditional shooters. At the moment, MAG requires patience, a willingness to go in and get your ass handed to you while you and your teammates all figure out this whole large-scale war thing. But as the dust settles and more players begin to realize that this *isn't* just Modern Warfare with more bodies, those moments where everything comes together should become more common. When that happens, you'll see the game MAG is meant to be.

PROS: An elegant command structure, user-friendly command system, and XP rewards for following orders provide real motivation to work together. Doing so successfully can provide a thrilling feeling of beating impossible odds.
CONS: Barebones matchmaking and game-selection make each match a crapshoot; until more players learn the importance of teamwork, the game experience will continue to be uneven and unpredictable.

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PigBowl
Aug 31 2010 at 04:27:30 PM PST

Good:
Graphics
Up to 250 people in one room
Big maps
Money system; what you buy, you have.

Bad:
Laggy game play
Very Few Guns
Even Less Attachments for your guns
Games are sometimes difficult to get into.
Not many different games to play

I wish I rented this game, this game that I thought was gonna be soo good... BUT!! I MUST say that the type of gameplay the game offered due to so many people playing was new, thus not soo bad

PS3burritoman
Feb 20 2010 at 09:50:19 AM PST

Reason why he says the players are awful run-and-gunners? **He played as Raven.** He mentioned him laying prone with a Raven weapon, the ATAC 2000. I'm sorry, but I have an alternate PSN ID to try out Raven on, and the players are just awful. Worst I've ever seen. They always bleed out within 5 seconds, never heal each other, rarely follow orders. It's just atrocious. On the other hand, SVBR and Valor, while not perfect, are much more enjoyable experiences. Teamwork is far more common, everyone who can heal each other, everyone goes for the objectives. It's so much better. Only other problems I see is that some Raven vets are joining the ranks of SVBR and Valor, and diminishing their enjoyment of this amazing game, and that Valor isn't giving up on their nade-spamming tactics.

iamdad38
Feb 15 2010 at 12:01:26 PM PST

i like the game at least i can get a break from the same ole same ole call of duty franchise yeah it has its problems but like the review says if you get good team mates then u can enjoy the full potential of the game

jdavison
Feb 05 2010 at 09:25:23 PM PST

It's a bug we're working on fixing, Pukadon

Pukadon
Feb 05 2010 at 07:38:03 AM PST

This is a nice review. It's often so hard to find online games where teamwork goes well that I just don't bother trying. I wonder if the solution is to get he opposite direction as MAG, focusing on smaller groups. My best experiences with random matching have happened in Demon's Souls, where you play with one or two other players.

p.s. The process of signing up for an account to post on this site deleted my original comment, which is a good reminder that GamePro doesn't always provide a better user experience than the developers they criticize. It's not easy to do things perfectly - but the good news is that developers and websites both make improvements through updates.

Ranger069
Feb 05 2010 at 06:34:49 AM PST

This game is all about teamwork and teamwork is what i do when i play this game. i always look for squad members that have mics and talk about objectives that need to be done. my psn Ranger069 on Raven add me for someone who talks and works as a team and no lone wolf .

dotkeykong57
Feb 04 2010 at 09:10:06 PM PST

I had a similar experience when I was taking part in the beta.

During my first match, I asked the squad leader about the icons and objectives. I wanted to understand everything and be able to do my part. Then I realized that not everyone wanted to play like that. I noticed a lot of people treating it as a regular team deathmatch. I guess it'll take time for the user-base to be on the same level.

Forrest
Feb 04 2010 at 08:15:08 PM PST

Brings back memories of 4 on 4 games of Warcraft 3 where 1-2 allies refuse to even acknowledge the team dynamic or game going on around them. Still, you have to applaud MAG's concept.

Indeed, in this instance, one should hate the player, not the game.

wisegamero
Feb 04 2010 at 05:09:11 PM PST

This seems to be the best and fairest review I've read thus far, good job gamepro. I think there is market for this game, I'm not really sure if it's the PS3 just yet, I'm on the sideline about buying it, I grow a bit tired of COD's lone wolf, camp, snipe fest.

madeup6
Feb 04 2010 at 04:23:36 PM PST

It is a little over-exaggerated. Sometimes you will find some pretty bad matches that get a little annoying because nobody is doing what they should. But the fact of the matter is, most people buy this game for the team work so most are going to be doing so. I love my purchase and have never played a better online shooter.

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Game Info

MAG | PS3



Release Date: Jan. 26, 2010
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Zipper Interactive
Platform(s): PS3
Genre: Action

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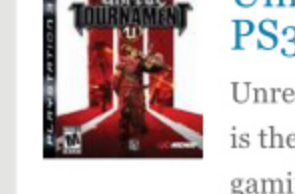


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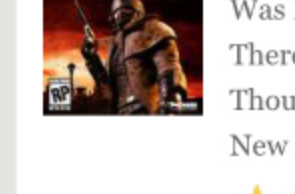
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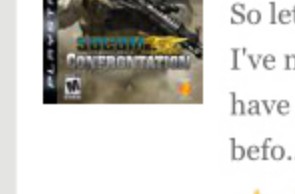
Unreal Tournament 3 - PS3

Unreal Tournament 3 is in my opinion the greatest PC to console port in gaming history. It's the game that ...



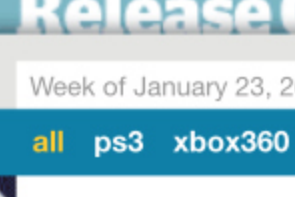
Fallout: New Vegas - PS3

Was Really Buzzed About Hearing There Was A New Fallout Game Even Though I'd Just Bought F3 And All The New Fe...



SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Confrontation - PS3

So lets start this review off by saying I've never been a SOCOM fan, and have never played any SOCOM game befo...



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all ps3 xbox360 wii ps psp ds

Dead Space

Release Date: January 25, 2011
Platforms: pad, iphone

Dead Space 2

Release Date: January 25, 2011
Platforms: xbox 360, ps3, pc

Lord of Arcana

Release Date: January 25, 2011
Platforms: psp

Two Worlds 2

Release Date: January 25, 2011
Platforms: xbox 360

Dead Space: Extraction

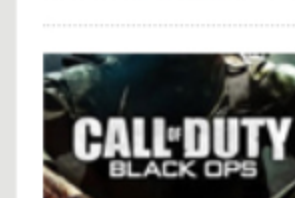
Release Date: January 25, 2011
Platforms: ps3

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