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The problem with AI in Call of Duty

BY ADMIN ON DECEMBER 26, 2010 IN GAMES

A few days ago I was playing the Combat Training mode on Call of Duty: Black Ops. Basically it lets you play games of Team Deathmatch against computer controlled bots instead of real people. After playing it for a few hours it struck me how incredibly bad the AI is. I don't mean so much the difficulty of winning a game against them, on the hardest difficulty they give me quite a bit of trouble, I mean the way they go about it, it's so painfully obvious that they're not human. They tend to run around the map like headless chickens, many times I've seen a bot running in one direction for a while before suddenly stopping, then immediately turning around and going back in the direction they've come from. They always seem to keep moving, they never stay still unless they're shooting at something. This, on the face of it, is a good strategy, after all a moving target is harder to hit. But that's not how real people play. Even a bad human player knows that certain areas of the map are better to be in than others, good ones seek out the positions which give them an advantage over opposing players. Things like windows or balconies which provide an elevated view of the nearby area, controlling the high ground is as important in virtual warfare as it is in real life. Yet even on the hardest difficulty level the bots on Call of Duty won't look for these sorts of areas. In fact in my experience they seem to avoid higher areas of a map almost completely, only coming up a flight of stairs or a ladder if they know someone's up there. Occasionally they may look out of a window if their random walk around brings them up to one, but unless there's someone outside whom they can shoot immediately they'll just turn around and walk off again.

As well as they're robotic walking patterns, the bots also give themselves away in the way they aim. When you get killed you can view the "Killcam" to see exactly what your executioner saw in the few seconds leading up to your demise, and this always reveals your killer's artificial nature. The way they aim always looks pixel perfect. They'll lock on to the centre of your chest and fire their weapon in such a way that the recoil never changes where they're aiming, and neither does your movement. Even the very best human players would be unable to do that as well as the bots do, even on the easiest difficulty. What especially marks them out as "wrong" though, is the way they switch from one target to another, which I've seen when I've been killed just after a teammate. It will be almost instant, from aiming perfectly at one person to aiming perfectly at another in a split second. Real people can't do that, especially while being shot at. It's how I imagine a Terminator would play the game.

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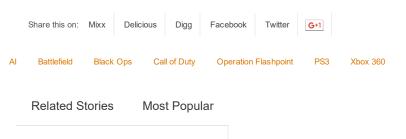Radiohead
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The fact that the bots don't seem to work as a team could actually be the most realistic thing about them, given the lone wolf nature of most players online. But, I ask, why can't they? Perhaps the programming of multiplayer bots isn't very important, but there must be some overlap with the AI of the enemies encountered in the single player. They have similar faults. Perhaps *the* most annoying thing about the single player in *all* the Call of Duty games is that you often fight alongside computer controlled allies but the enemies always focus on you, no mater where you are in relation to them. One of your allies could literally be standing right next to an enemy, but they'd rather shoot at you, even though you're hidden behind some sandbags a hundred metres away. It's not just Call of Duty that has this fault, most other first person shooters do this too. The problem developers have is "How do we make this easier or harder for different difficulty levels?". In Call of Duty the answer to this is always to make it harder by giving you less health and making all the enemies as accurate as a special forces sniper is with his (or her) rifle, except they're using a fully automatic assault rifle. They make it easier by doing the opposite. I've always felt it feels unfair to give enemies the superhuman abilities they seem to have on harder settings. The underlying tactics the enemies use will remain the same whatever difficulty you're on. OK in some places there may be more or less of them too, but they all hide behind things and occasionally stick their head out to shoot at you in the same way. This lack of intelligence in the single player enemies doesn't really get exposed too often though, as most Call of Duty levels are simply glorified corridors, where enemies are always in front of you and you have few opportunities to flank. They don't need to be clever, the developers can ensure they are in good positions when they make the level, they just need to be programmed to hide behind something and shoot at you occasionally. Which they do. Why can't they make the enemies easier or harder by changing their intelligence level? For example on easier difficulties enemies could use less cover, standing in the open more, and fire their weapons more wildly in uncontrolled bursts. On harder settings they could use cover much more, and work together, so one enemy fires at you while another moves to a better position.

I suppose what this rant is about is I'd like to see a single player game with truly intelligent enemies, ones who work as a team and have more human traits, and which doesn't fall into the trap of having corridor like levels which funnel you through them. I don't think there is any game out there right now which comes close to this, and doing it well. Call of Duty definitely doesn't. Battlefield: Bad Company and its sequel have many more open areas than CoD, but at various points you are still forced through bottlenecks which only give you one option on how to proceed, and the enemies tend to act individually. Perhaps the game that comes closest to what I want is Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising, it gives you almost total freedom to move through a level as you want, and the AI does work together to some degree, often calling in enemies to you position for example. But that game has other problems, the story's a bit rubbish and the game lacks the polish of CoD or Battlefield. I'm looking forward to the sequel. The game I want would probably be a combination of the three I've mentioned. Operation Flashpoint with the general "tightness" of CoD (how responsive the controls are and stuff like that), and the vehicles out of Battlefield, which I feel are better to control than the ones in Op. Flash. Add in a decent story, and AI which has a sense of teamwork but doesn't have robot-like aiming and movement, and you'd have a pretty good game.

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