

ASSASSIN'S CREED

THE EZIO TRILOGY





ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Review
by
Stephen Totilo

THE ADVENTURE EVOLVED

It may be an odd point to start on, before mentioning how this game looks or even how it plays, but the best achievement of Assassin's Creed 2 may be how it flows. This is a game with a specific story to tell about Ezio, the son of Italian nobility. He is a man whose family and life is demolished before the player's eyes as events force him to become an assassin who scours Italy for conspiracy clues and rightful victims of his vengeance. It's an adventure that is told through a weave of exposition and gameplay that defies the usual frayed conventions of story taking turns with interactivity.

In Assassin's Creed 2 you are most definitely playing the story, the mechanics of the first game and those introduced in the new, propelling an adventure that is full of changes and surprises. For example: The game's fifth chapter contains nine missions, which introduce Ezio and friend Leonardo Da Vinci to Venice in a walking tour, leading to a mission that involves rushing a wounded new character from corrupt guards, indoctrinating ones' self into the wounded persons' guild of thieves through a series of trials, learning new moves, and then returning to the scene of the wounding to assassinate a corrupt official. It's all story. It's almost all played.

HISTORY MADE VIRTUALLY REAL

For those of us who can't recall when the Covenant first invaded, why Gannon keeps getting angry or any of gaming's other major made-up narratives, Assassin's Creed 2 offers the hooks of real historical places and people. I've been to Florence but not climbed the magnificent Duomo until Assassin's Creed. I've heard of Da Vinci and read about Lorenzo De'Medici but not met them until Assassin's Creed. The ability to both encounter historical figures and, for those of us who stayed awake in history class, predict who might appear next, adds both intrigue to the series and the excitement of being able to trace and guess where this adventure will wind up. Let World War II no longer be the beginning and end of gaming's exploration of historical fiction.

THE STRUCTURE:

Assassin's Creed creative director Patrice Desilets has already admitted that the first game in his series was too conventional, that it introduced a gameplay formula that it never tweaked. He promised to play with it in AC2 and his team of over 200 developers has delivered. The main flow of the game consists of the aforementioned memory chapters, covering different years of Ezio's life and divided into mandatory mis-

sions that are activated from within the game's open environments and advance the story. They seldom follow formula, as one rooftop assault on archers feels nothing like the participation required in a carnival or the visiting of a prisoner that are the subjects of other objectives. Off the critical path, there is a bevy of diversions: Optional assassination missions, optional free-running races, hundreds of collectibles to gather, classic art to buy and more. Even those side-challenges that do repeat themselves do so with flair, such as the handful of "beat -up" missions that always wind up having the player punch a cheating husband. And best of all, are the tombs, mostly optional missions heavy on platforming and relevant to the series in a way I can't bring myself to ruin here.

OVERALL

Assassin's Creed 2 looks great, plays great and avoids all of the pitfalls of its predecessor, which might be enough praise for some. But its finest achievement is to present one of gaming's most mature adventures, a game that can be played and tell a story at the same time, a game that assumes its players are educated and curious, and willing to be teased and willing to test its limits.



Ezio fighting along side the brotherhood

IDEAL PLAYER

Let's see... 1) people who like the idea of being a building-climbing, sword-swinging assassin, 2) gamers who enjoy being treated intelligently and would like to dig into a lengthy story full of references to 500 years of real history, 3) anyone who couldn't get into Assassin's Creed because of its poor combat system (they fixed it), 4) and those hungering for a game that can, if desired, be played as a zero-tolerance, hide-the-bodies stealth adventure like the old Splinter Cells. One more: 5) anyone who wants to pretend they're in beautiful Renaissance Rome where the Colosseum is waiting to be scaled.

ISN'T IT TOO SOON FOR ANOTHER ASSASSIN'S CREED?

Fans who have soured over the many annual reheatings of Tony Hawk or Lara Croft rightly wonder if Brotherhood comes too soon and, because it's more Ezio in the Renaissance, isn't different enough. Brotherhood is neither brief nor dull and harnesses much of the familiar core technology used to previously render Ezio's Florence and Venice in Assassin's Creed II to render a distinctive Rome full of fresh faces and fascinating locations. Both the game's main and side missions are generally more interesting than those of Assassin's Creed II and the slightly shorter primary campaign keeps the setting from wearing out its welcome.

Some of the multiplayer characters to choose from in the game's fun on-line competitive assassination mode, which does not involve our heroes Ezio or Desmond.

IS THAT MULTIPLAYER ANY GOOD?

Yes, though hard to judge without a few weeks of it being live for regular

their radar, spot their prey and stab them. As with Call of Duty, players gain experience points which help unlock passive and active abilities, like death-streak perks or the opportunity to temporarily don a disguise. It was solid and full of characters and unlocks, but too early to judge whether this has staying power, fun as it was leading into release.

ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD

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people to play. The core mode sends up to eight players into a crowd of computer-controlled characters. Each player is ordered to assassinate another, requiring the gamer to try to both blend in with the crowds so as not to be spotted but also to follow

GAME OF THE YEAR?

Could be. This review has kept a lot about Brotherhood still hidden, but everything from the game's writing to the soundtrack is top-flight. Mis-



Ezio on a horse overlooking Rome, Italy

sion design is wonderful, with highlights including unusual sequences set at the Colosseum, the Pantheon, a boatyard and at an underground party. In another series first, all missions can be replayed and each has a difficulty modifier (trail your target but don't ever touch the ground, for example). Ubisoft has made it hard to stop playing this game. Assassin's Creed Brotherhood In Action

This clip shows many of the new combat moves, though check the Visual Guide lower in the review for an even clearer look at the chaining combat system as seen in the game's new virtual reality mode:

THE BOTTOM LINE

The game that comes to mind while playing Assassin's Creed Brotherhood, is Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. Not since Rockstar's potent crime drama has a game so massive, so polished, so impressively improved from its predecessor been released just a year after the prior installment. But people won't remember how long Brotherhood took to make. They are likely to remember its quality. Ezio's new adventure may be less personal than his previous one, but it is as interesting and as mischievously manipulative of real history as the series has ever been. Nearly bloated with fun things to do Brotherhood is Assassin's Creed in peak form.



Ezio and Yusuf taking the leap of faith

OVERALL

Assassin's Creed: Revelations is a bifurcated game, half multiplayer, half campaign. Its multiplayer is an expansion of the format introduced in last year's Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. As before, it is built mostly around the idea of players hunting for each other on maps that are crowded with computer-controlled characters. Those characters can look like the players' array of char-

acters, creating levels full of clones, only one of each controlled by a real, hunt-able person. That multiplayer is expanded in Revelations and an indisputable improvement over last year's effort.

A MORE AMBIGUOUS SUCCESS.

It is sold, through the game's subtitle, as the "answers" chapter of the Assassin's Creed saga. It is the final part of a belatedly-defined trilogy of annual AC games that primarily let the gamer play as late-15th and early 16th-century Italian assassin Ezio Auditore. The so-called trilogy didn't start with the first Assassin's Creed. No, this trilogy started late, which is part of what aroused suspicions that Revelations is more cash-in than instant classic. The new game follows

2009's Assassin's Creed II and last year's Brotherhood. It is, surprisingly, no lightweight game. It is equal to Brotherhood in the generous density of its content and is the sum of the many gameplay ideas introduced in those games, plus a bunch of new ones.

FALTERS

Soak yourself into the game's campaign for 19 hours, complete 80% of it and you still won't have a satisfying explanation for the events at the end of Brotherhood. You still won't know Ezio's fate; that's delivered in an animated movie that the game's publisher just released. You will, however, learn a lot more about Desmond's life story and you will probably care much more about Altair and the people close to him, thanks to

ASSASSIN'S CREED REVELATION

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Ezio on a horse overlooking Constantinople

marvelously succinct storytelling in his handful of moments in the game.

THESE ARE ALL THE DIFFERENCES A YEAR MAKES, SOME BIG, SOME SMALL.

But are they what makes a game excellent or what should be held against a game?

In terms of story, Revelations is not an improvement and is perhaps a bait-and-switch. In terms of graphics and in terms of gameplay, it is

another hop ahead, not the two-year leap that separated the good Assassin's Creed from the great Assassin's Creed II. It is the second one-year hop we've seen in the series.

No game in 2011 allows its player to do so many things as Assassin's Creed: Revelations does. That they could so so many of those things in 2010 will ward away some Revelations players. Should they stay away they will miss the series' best and most interesting playground yet. They will miss the game that best

counter-balances some of the linear blockbusters of the season by proving, for the third year in a row, that we can have beauty, drama and dynamic action in a video game. We can have a game that lets us make one split-second choice after another, with blade, with bold steps, with a brotherhood and now, most impressively yet, with bombs. That is the revelation.

CONTINUE THE STORY WITH



Assassin's Creed III



Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag



Assassin's Creed: Unity



Assassin's Creed: Syndicate

