● This space for rent: Rather than write parody ads, Midway uses omnipresent billboard space to repeatedly name-check itself.

BLACKSITE: AREA 51

The man behind the barrel

REVIEW

BLACKSITE THE NARRATIVE AND BLACKSITE THE GAME NEVER MEET IN THE MIDDLE.

Call of Duty 4's move from World War II to modern theaters is daring—or so reviewers wrote. On the one hand, you'd hear them argue that too much Axis-versus-Allies material risks diminishing returns (since publisher Activision already released seven COD-branded shooters). This logic seems to suggest that the series had nothing to lose. On the other hand, they had to have forgotten that the *Battlefield* games went from M1s to M16s; that *SOCOM* and *Conflict: Desert Storm* and *Close Combat: First to Fight* and *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* and *Soldier of Fortune* and *Ghost Recon* and god knows how many others proved that 1990-to-present-day and the Middle East are as profitable whens and wheres as 1944 Normandy. Most of these—*COD4* included—are wishy-washy with place names. Some make up Middle Eastern– or Central Asian–sounding states. *BlackSite: Area 51* is blunt from the beginning: We're now entering Iraq.

Given the ongoing war, this decision *is* daring. It's insensitive, too—but in ways that movies and comic books made while America was at war in the 1940s weren't: We're not just watching *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* or reading *Captain America*—we're the ones shooting. And *BlackSite*—which borrows its name from CIA secret detention centers—is subversive; an antiwar war game that not only puts its thumb precisely on the operations map, but that also portrays U.S. soldiers as victims subjected to experimentation and the scheming of politicians who one character calls "chickens***." *BlackSite* writers Harvey Smith (*Deus Ex*) and Susan O'Connor (*Gears of War, BioShock*) want us to think about the ways that America arms and trains its future foes. At the same time, the game's developers absolutely rely on their audience's desire to blow up idiots who hide

behind powder kegs. That's weird. Weirder than any attempts to tie Roswell, New Mexico, to Gitmo and Abu Ghraib.

BlackSite the narrative and *BlackSite* the game never meet in the middle. The story is what it is, and the part you play is made up of the most unsophisticated shooting money can buy. So while we're supposed to react to cynical episodes called "Stay the Course" and "The Surge," we aren't expected to open doors without the direction of icons we interact with in order to call over squadmates, who then open the doors. The circularity is comical. Touching a turret unleashes an endless torrent of opposing forces that walk into its line of fire. An ally yells to "close that tunnel with C4! That'll stop them." Clicking the icon causes you to command the very same ally who commanded you to close the tunnel to come over and close the tunnel. Confused yet? I was, too...and I wonder whether *BlackSite* might've made a great light-gun game—like the original *Area 51*—and gone to taverns and pool halls across middle America. Now *that's* daring. ● **Shawn Elliott**
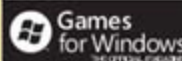

● Black Friday, *Area 51*: Strip mall sets abound.

VERDICT

⊞ Suggestive story.

⊟ Frequent stuttering; invisible walls; unsophisticated shooting.

4 \10

BAD

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