

• Shoot the prisoner...or spare his life? Don't think too hard—the story plays out the same either way.

SPLINTER CELL DOUBLE AGENT

...and double the system requirements!

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Stealth-Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box (v1.02 patch)**

REVIEW

Y Got a tricked-out rig with plenty of RAM and a cutting-edge processor? If not, don't bother: *Double Agent*—the fourth Tom Clancy-branded stealth technothriller in as many years to bear the *Splinter Cell* name—chugs on anything less. And even if you are packing high-end components, don't expect a return visit to the stealth-action paradise that 2005's *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* showed us.

Cynical series protagonist Sam Fisher (voiced once again by Michael "Splinter Cell Is My Career" Ironside) echoes my frustrations during *Double Agent*'s opening moments, sardonically remarking that he ought to retire...and considering the game's cut-and-paste disposition, I don't blame him. The single-player story makes some big hoopla about

moral choices as Fisher goes undercover, ingratiating himself with a sinister terrorist group. The "tough" dilemmas you're faced with—kill/don't kill the hostage; blow up the ship/avert the explosion; and so on—influence a Trust meter that waxes and wanes between the NSA boys back home and the terrorist cell, but the gameplay consequences are nowhere near as critical as the back of the box implies. Don't kid yourself: *Double Agent*'s just another gauntlet of (mostly) linear missions.

OLD HABITS

That dim appraisal might still elicit an enthusiastic thumbs-up...if not for the advances that the aforementioned *Chaos Theory* made. At this point, we've already seen everything that this game offers—and *Double Agent* occasionally even backpedals with a handful of "failure = reload" predicaments, a bad *Splinter Cell* habit that *Chaos Theory* wisely kicked.

In all fairness, *Double Agent* doesn't really flub the stealth stuff. The missions that your criminal pals send you on (which take you from Mexico to Russia...and everywhere in between) excel at maintaining the series' trademark tension and instilling a sense of accomplishment when you successfully evade a sentry or exercise the Fifth Freedom with a few well-placed bullets. But without any clever new innovations on par with what came in the last two games—and with a lot of graphical stuttering (and the occasional crash)—the structure eventually starts feeling routine in a "yearly sequelitis" sort of way.

SPY GAMES

Conversely, I've heard from Xbox 360 owners that the spies-versus-mercs multiplayer mode (now in its third iteration) breaks plenty of routines, though you wouldn't know it from playing *Double Agent* on a PC. At the time of this writing, the multiplayer client remains effectively inoperable; attempting to join an online game simply returns an error message, and a cursory glance at Ubisoft's official forums reveals widespread problems.

And according to those forums, multiplayer's led a troubled existence even prior to the latest busted patch: Random midgame disconnections spoil the fun, and bonus gadgets earned during missions don't unlock properly. Perhaps the most vexing point of all, though, is the lack of a lobby or chat area. Then again, given the multiplayer client's rocky history (*Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*'s multiplayer initially didn't function correctly without the aid of a fan-made patch), it's not exactly a huge shock. • Ryan Scott

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VERDICT

- ❑ The stealth gameplay's still incredibly tense.
- ❑ Trust system underused; some stability issues; multiplayer has severe problems; beefy system requirements.

5/10

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