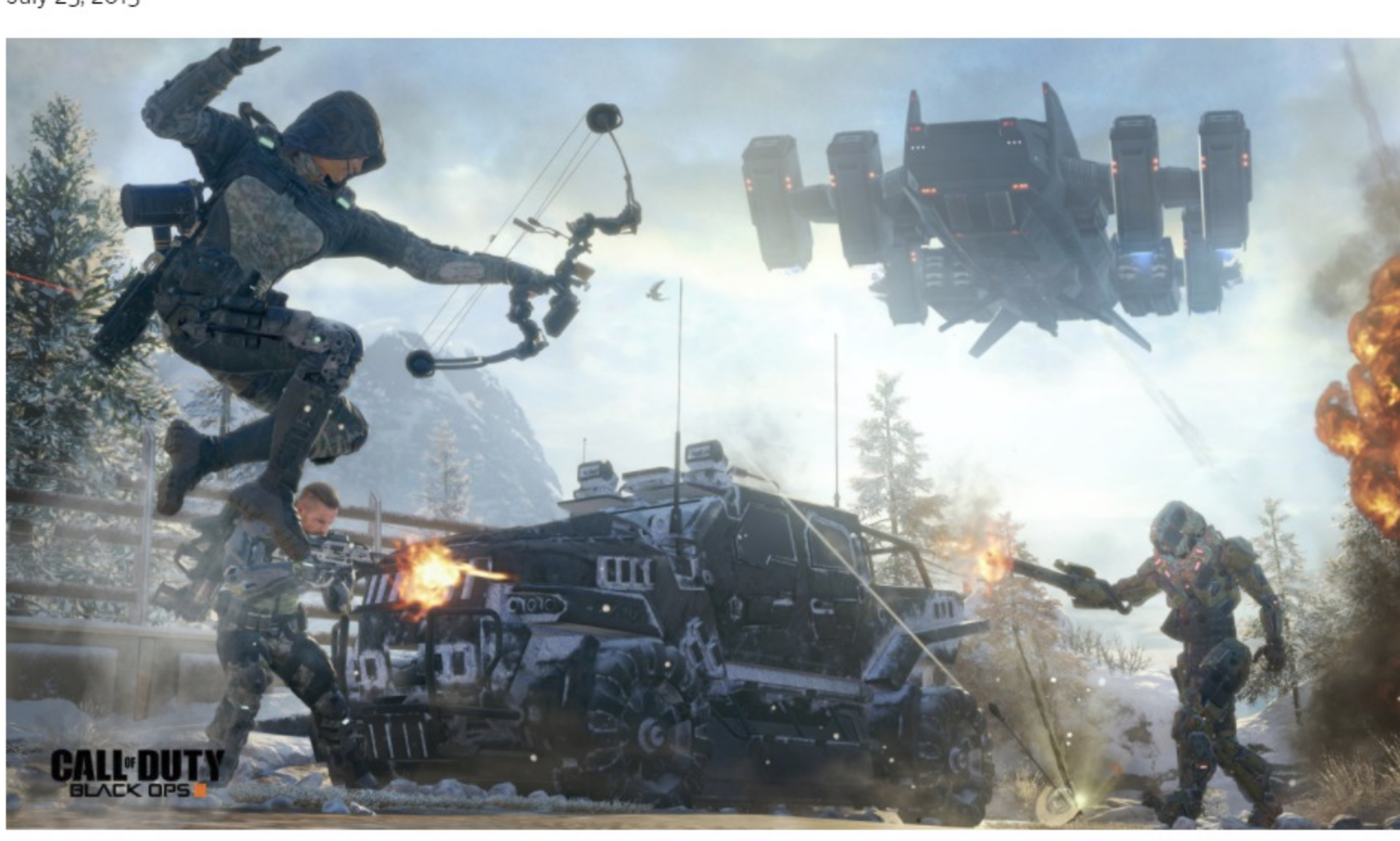


'Call of Duty: Black Ops 3' Mixed Two Worlds at Comic-Con

By Phil Hornshaw
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At San Diego Comic-Con 2015, I was a robot with a machine gun arm. I put four in the chest of a gunslinger before she could zero a headshot on me. Then I took an arrow to the knee—literally—from a woman running around the battlefield with a compound bow.

I also scored a 19,405 burlesque for clues to elaborate puzzles, in a desperate struggle to open a door and escape the zombies tearing through the building's barricaded windows.

One of these things happened in a video game and one happened in real life (sort of). Both were part of publisher Activision's hype-building Comic-Con offerings surrounding *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*: the first showed off some serious alterations to the franchise's ever-popular competitive multiplayer mode. The second was a live-action game that worked to get potential players excited about the new version of developer Treyarch's long-running *Call of Duty* "Zombies" mode. And both accomplished their goal: I feel confident that *Black Ops III* might really be something to look forward to this fall.

NOT YOUR SAME OLD 'CALL OF DUTY'



Black Ops III's multiplayer mode sports the biggest changes the franchise has seen since players first stormed Normandy in *Call of Duty 2* in 2005. It's clear publisher Activision and developer Treyarch have been listening to the sustained complaints from players that each annual installment of the first-person shooter series is just a warmed-over rehash of the same gameplay from previous years.

There have been a few big changes in the last few editions of CoD, but *Black Ops III* pushes the envelope even further, and fans who were willing to wait in line in the San Diego sun saw the most major change yet to CoD's online competitive deathmatches: characters.

Instead of soldiers who are more or less faceless and interchangeable, *Black Ops III* opts to give you a persona to inhabit. You start each match by choosing a particular "specialist" to be, and each comes with different capabilities that'll influence the way you play.

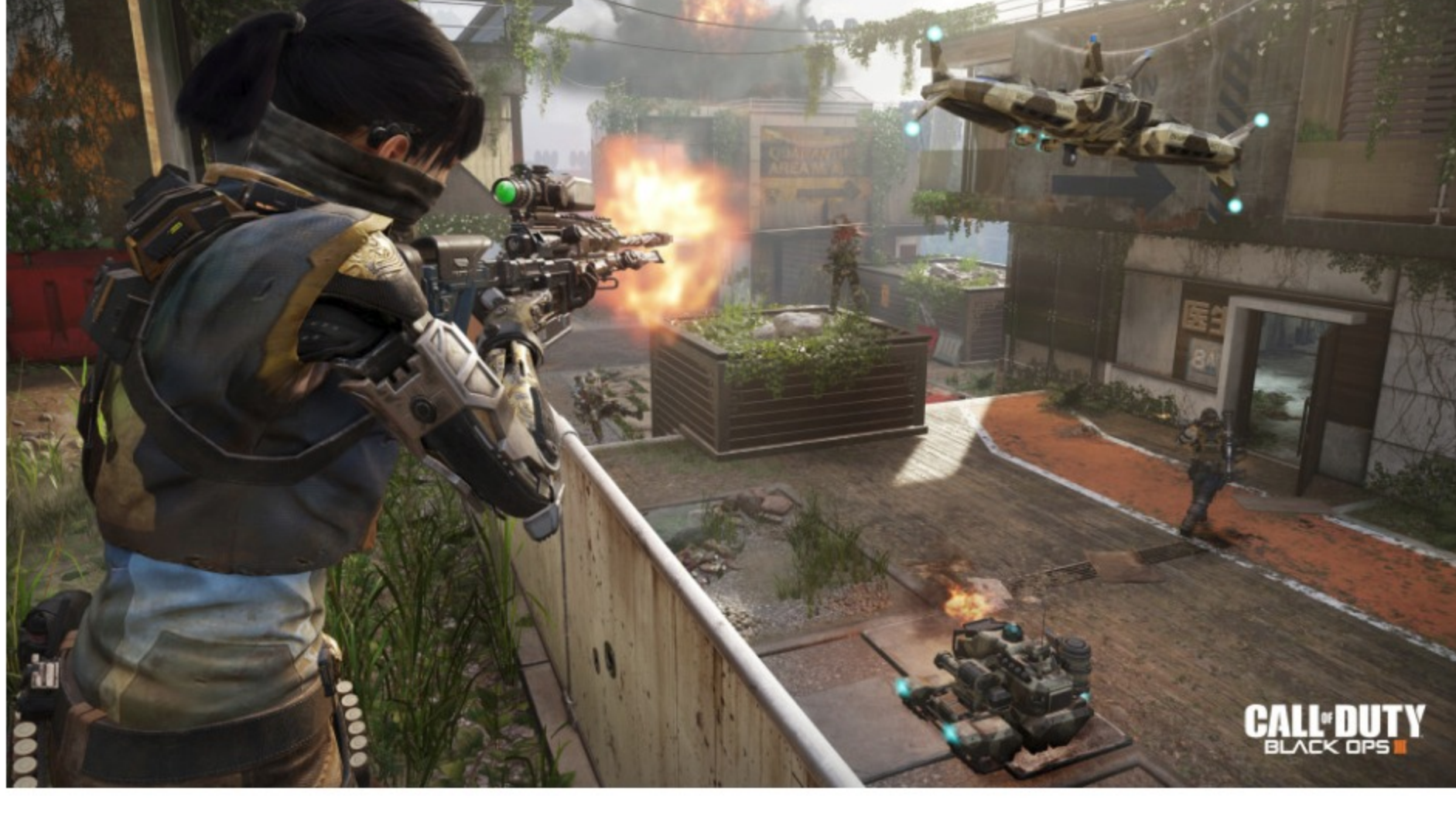
Black Ops III will have nine specialists to choose from when the game hits store shelves, but the demo at Comic-Con included four of them. Each packed a particular special weapon, like a bow or a robot machine gun hand or something called "gravity spikes," and special abilities, and each was upgradeable and customizable.

Specialists marry two major schools of shooter multiplayer into one interesting hybrid. *Call of Duty* is classically a game in which all player characters start the same, and the differences between them are all based on "loadout," the gear they choose to bring with them, and "perks," an array of bonuses players can choose from that convey special abilities or attributes. You might be a person who brings claymores to a fight instead of frag grenades; you might pick the "Last Stand" perk that gives you a chance to kill an assailant in your last gasp before death, or the "Lightweight" perk that lets you run a little faster around the battlefield.

The other multiplayer school takes on a more arcade feel, like what players might see in titles such as *Team Fortress 2* or Blizzard's upcoming *Overwatch*. These games have players choose from characters or classes, and each not only fulfills a specific role on a team, they also handle differently in comparison to one another. The gameplay experience with a TF2 sniper is altogether different from playing as a scout.

Black Ops 3 seems to be mixing both styles for something that might wind up being totally unique.

CALL OF TEAM FORTRESS OPS III



You'll still choose things like your loadout when you pick your specialist at the beginning of a match, and in the early goings of any given game, every character pretty much handles the same—much like *Call of Duty* titles of old. But as the match progresses and players start to unlock their characters' abilities, each specialist will behave a little differently, adding some variety. You'll see opponents teleporting around and whipping out big, ridiculous guns (and bows and arrows) just seconds after tactically rounding a corner and clearing a room with a few quick shots to an enemy's center mass.

Specialists aren't the only additions, either. *Black Ops III* is continuing to carry along the changes to how players move through the game that popped up last year in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, like the ability to double-jump in the air, to run along walls and slide into battle. They're not exactly new ideas on the shooter landscape, with roots back in the old-school days of shooters like *Quake* and having seen new use in CoD competitors such as *Titanfall*. But mixed with CoD standards, and *Black Ops III* becomes something that's new and a bit weird—an experience that's faster-paced and more active than previous entries in the series, and yet true to its predecessors and to what its audience has come to expect.

Call of Duty multiplayer has been polished to a blinding sheen over the years, but the slow addition of new elements seems to be playing with the old ones in an unexpectedly cool way. At least from multiplayer demos so far, *Black Ops III* looks to be hitting a sweet spot between iteration and familiarity that's injecting some fresh blood into the series.

ZOMBIES IN REAL LIFE. KIND OF.



The multiplayer demo wasn't the only thing Activision had on offer at SDCC this year. Piggybacking off new details announced for *Black Ops 3*'s Zombies mode, the publisher created an "escape room" experience that played off the well-loved multiplayer mode's ideas and its new film noir atmosphere.

It didn't allow for any actual shooting of undead monsters, but the "Escape Room Challenge" did marry the Zombies mode's puzzle-solving with some real-life teamwork. Groups of con-goers were shuttled into one of two rooms—one a burlesque, the other a magician's parlor, and both modeled after locations in the game's *Morg City*, the center of the zombie infestation.

The Escape Room Challenge started with instructions doled out by a disembodied voice over a public address system, but quickly escalated as a counter ticked down and shambling corpses (well, actors, but hey, suspend some disbelief) started bashing their way through boarded windows. Participants had to split their attention between repairing the barricades and solving the (admittedly easy) riddles, doing things like lining up wine bottles in order of their vintage to discover a code for a safe, then locating that safe, then using the object inside to open another container, and a handful of other steps.

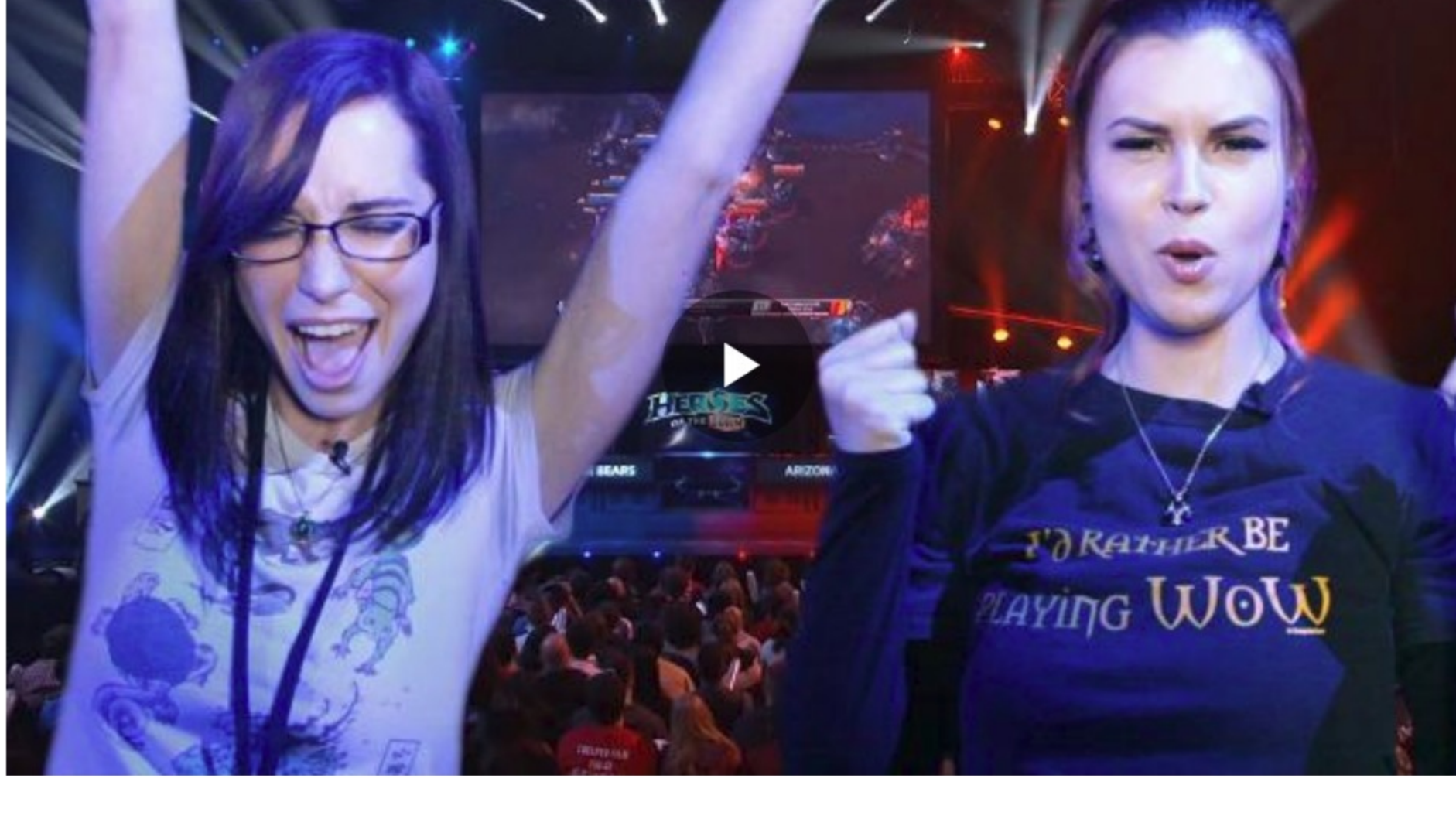
All the way, the voice leading participants over the PA called out insults in between instructions, reminding everyone playing how terrible we were. It was not unlike actually trying to play *Call of Duty* online, in fact.

Truth be told, Treyarch's *Call of Duty* titles are consistently the best, weirdest and most interesting entries into the franchise. Activision's stint at Comic-Con fits right in with what we've come to expect from *Black Ops* titles—tweaks to the existing formula coupled with zombies craziness. Hopefully those impressions will be borne out when the game hits shelves in November.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of "So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel" and "The Space Hero's Guide to Glory." He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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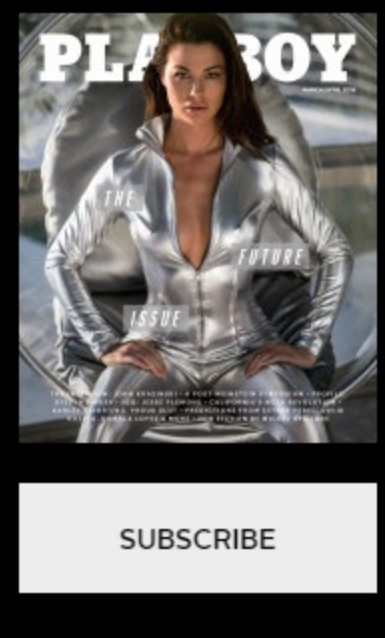
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