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WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR III BETA REVIEW

The long anticipated news about the impending launch of Warhammer 40,000 - Dawn of War 3 (*DoW 3*) alternated between rumors among the members of the community and scarce announcements by the developer, Relic. Left with little to go on, fans watched in suspense for any tidbit they could gather. There were fears that the game might not capture the spirit of forlorn hope in the franchise, or might even sell out by becoming a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena). Judging from the closed beta, it turned out that those fears were unfounded. *DoW 3* stays true to the Warhammer lore and, apart from some minor criticism, serves fans another title into which they can sink their teeth.

Something Called Warhammer



In 1987, Rick Priestly designed a new tabletop game called *Warhammer 40,000*. The basic gist is that two or more players use figurines and dice to stage battles in a miniature

landscape. The gameplay and the props rely heavily on an epic myth around different races and galactic empires and set in the forty-first millennium. Eventually, the tabletop game inspired the video game, and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* came out in 2004. Five years later, *DoW 2* followed. The titles in the *Dawn of War* series incorporate the visuals of the tabletop game and the fiction, which is full of rich descriptions of leaders, military conflicts, and weapons, into a real-time strategy game. The result are grim characters, a dark atmosphere, and grand battles.

Announced Features

On April 27, Sega releases the third installment in the series. For years, the fanbase has been speculating about in which direction Relic was heading with this third part. According to various announcements, *DoW 3* will feature the largest characters in *DoW* history, so as to increase the epic feel of the battles. Pre-orders will enjoy additional skins for the elite troops, and an integrated Warpainter allows further customization of your units. This feature is a nod to the game's tabletop origins, where players paint figurines for their tabletop set-up. There will also be a return to base-building [1]. Building up your base was essential in *DoW 1*: you began with the main building, and by capturing resource points, you gathered resources in the form of power and requisition. Additional buildings offered improvements, or better troops which you recruited to face your enemy in the ensuing battle. The gameplay in the second installment, rather, focused more on units with special abilities -- in the form of special attacks. You had no bases and moved through each playthrough with squads that you could upgrade as you went. *DoW 3* is purported to be a mix of these two elements.

The closed beta I tested is very bare-bones. There are no campaigns, and you can only play in multiplayer battles or complete tutorials. Aside from that, it offers a showroom look at the elites, and a Warpainter function. The hero units consist of familiar characters, like Gabriel Angelos, Gorgutz 'Ead 'Unter, and Farseer Macha. You also have super units, like Imperial Knight Solaria, Beauty da Morkanaut, and Wraithknight, who function like spectacular beacons in the chaotic battles: they are giants with opulent special effects accompanying their actions. The earth and the battlefield tremble under their attacks, or are set completely ablaze with glaring death rays, as they walk, adorned by halos.

The particular abilities of elites have to be timed well. For example, Farseer Macha's Singing Spear has to be recalled at the right time to deal maximum damage to any enemy it encounters on the way back to its owner. Also, the voice acting for the elites is sophisticated and the whimsical touches, like voice notifications for battlefield updates, add to the experience. Due to their voices and individual abilities, the elites feel like fleshed out characters familiar from the popular book series of the franchise.

During multiplayer mode in *DoW 3*, bases must be built to access the best improvements, such as upgrades for your troop defenses, or special attacks. Since the campaign mode was still locked, I wasn't able to see how extensively base-building is incorporated there. My guess is very much so, however, since upgrades are an essential element of combat.

Graphics



Warhammer inspired an adjective: “grimdark,” which is derived from the tagline: "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war." Grimdark refers to the atmosphere of Warhammer, marked by situations where the notions of right or wrong don't apply. There is only a cold, bleak reality in which a fallible hero must make decisions. This theme influenced both the tabletop game and the novels. In DoW 1 and 2, grimdarkness had been implemented by a dark-hued color palette and rugged units covered in grime. Judging from the trailer for *DoW 3*, the developers resolve to stay on track and keep paying tribute to grimdarkness. However, advertising material promises a lot. Some commentators in the Warhammer community fear that the post-apocalyptic feel of the large-scale battles might be confined to the trailer.

On the *DoW 3* website, Relic announces colossal battles which seem to be very cinematic and full of special effects. The aim at such a style has always been a trademark of the series. Philippe Boule, Game Director of *DoW 3*, says that the planned animations create a busy, foggy atmosphere adding to the sense of chaos and epic conflict [2].

Regarding the graphic representation, as feared, multiplayer battles depart somewhat from the grimdarkness of the legend, and instead feature clean colors, well-arranged elements on the map, and general tidiness. Of course, it's difficult to translate the concept of grimdarkness into a multiplayer match, which is less about the underlying story than about capturing strategic points and vanquishing the enemy as quickly as possible.

The Warpainter doesn't incorporate grimdarkness into the customization of troops at all. While you can choose your color palette and patterns, they are still ready-made and seem clean. It feels like choosing the paint job for your car: you can paint it darker to appear

rugged and tough, but when it is all said and done, it's still a neat, new finish, fresh from the shop.

Gameplay

According to the discussion about the press release, the most important elements in *DoW 3* gameplay are the elites who support your forces and doctrines, and these elites naturally represent focal points in your military strategy. You must primarily consider the elites' influence in the attempt to claim strategic points on the map. Commentators have surmised that, because the different units have to work together, one won't be able to begin sending troops into battle early on. Instead, the player might have to gear up and then release all at once [EN: NR20 gentleman's agreement]. This build-up during the match would certainly contribute to the occurrence of epic battles later in the game.

The possible ancillary role of line units, and the importance of elites and their special abilities, are reminiscent of MOBA gameplay, and Relic might try to latch on to the current popularity of this genre. As always, there is a risk of sacrificing the authenticity of the franchise when venturing out into new genres. *DoW 3* might leave its RTS (Real-Time Strategy) roots and feel more like *DOTA 2* or *Starcraft*.



But, I can see where the speculations come from that Relic might try to move closer to the lucrative MOBA genre. MOBAs are defined by their hero characters. In *DoW 3*, having elites with special abilities elevates them above the other units in battle to the point that one recognizes them as distinct characters. Yet, after all, the base-building and line troops remain vital aspects of the gameplay. On the spectrum from RTS to MOBA, *DoW 3* is still closer to RTS. If I'd have to come up with an acronym, I'd say, MORTSWEC--Multiplayer

Online Real Time Strategy With Essential Characters. Trademarked.

Sources:

[1] <http://www.pcgamer.com/dawn-of-war-3-inside-relics-biggest-rts-yet/>

[2] https://youtu.be/ia1-Ap_0g8o

The Verdict: 7/10

Judging from the closed beta, Relic seems to want to allude to the tabletop days of the game, but with the Warpainter, their desire to harken memories of yore appears half-hearted. The developer did, however, remain faithful to the pillars of *DoW* gameplay. The base-building, elites, and doctrines combine the experience of playing video games with the fantasy of the *Warhammer* franchise. The MOBA element, which enters through a focus on hero characters, is slight and, at this point, does not interfere with the familiar game concept. The necessary interplay of elites and doctrines leads to titanic battles, especially in multiplayer mode, which finally brings to the screen what thus far so many tabletop gamers have had to visualize inside their heads.