

REVIEW

Sailing under the Jolly Roger

'Assassin's Creed IV' launches a new chapter and brings in many gameplay improvements to the popular series

BY GOPAL SATHE
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Assassin's Creed IV: *Black Flag* is without a doubt, an impressive game. It does a lot of things right, and despite the tremendous scope of the game, seems to have no major bugs, which is an accomplishment in, and of, itself. And yet, there's a nagging feeling in the back of my head that this is not an *Assassin's Creed* game.

When Ubisoft made *Assassin's Creed* in 2007, it was a very unusual game, with elements of stealth and adventure games, set during the Third Crusade, in cities like Jerusalem and Damascus. You controlled an assassin named Altair, and had to carry out several executions in the Holy Land, eventually uncovering an ancient conspiracy. There was a lot of fun to be had with the game, but there wasn't too much to actually do, and difficult controls further marred the game. Despite these flaws, *Assassin's Creed* was a unique experience that was well received by gamers and reviewers.

The 2009 sequel, *Assassin's Creed II*, took a look at all the complaints people had about the series, and set about fixing each one. The new setting of Renaissance Italy was beautifully designed and recognizable. The new protagonist Ezio was also far more personable, and improvements to the controls and mission design made this one of the best games of its era. This was

followed up by two sequels, *Brotherhood*, which was essentially more of the same, and *Revelations*, which was still excellent as a game, but really muddled the story.

Last year, *Assassin's Creed III* was released, set in colonial era America leading up to the Revolutionary War. It was a far drabber, flatter world than before. Also, while there were mechanical improvements to the gameplay, some of the new game elements felt imperfectly tacked on.

After three games which starred the likeable and funny Ezio, we again had a new protagonist, and Connor simply wasn't as much fun. His story is darker, and his personality reflects the harder life he's had, but frankly, as a follow-up to Ezio, it felt disappointing. It didn't help that the game starts by having you play as a different character, without telling you that your entire first act has you playing out the actions of one of the Knights Templar, the villains of *Assassin's Creed's* rather convoluted story, who is also Connor's father. That would be fine, except that Haytham Kenway, the British Templar you're playing as, is just a lot more fun to be than Connor.

Black Flag is a prequel to *Assassin's Creed III*, and follows the actions of Edward Kenway, Connor's grandfather. Edward is a pirate and assassin, and the father of Haytham Kenway. There's a lot of really interesting backstory out there which develops over the course of the game, but in typical *Assassin's Creed* fashion, there's a lot of confusion in the narrative, and it takes a while to start piecing everything together.

Since Edward is a pirate, the game also gets to focus on one of the more exciting parts of last year's game—naval battles. You can sail around the world in your ship, the *Jackdaw*, find other ships to prey on, or harpoon whales. Controlling the



Jackdaw is incredible fun and it's easy to see why that facet of *Assassin's Creed III* gets so much focus in this game, but it means that you drift further and further away from the core of the series.

Assassin's Creed IV really isn't a game about assassins and Templars, about sneaking into mansions, blending into crowds, making that perfect kill and disappearing again. Instead, it's a big, flashy game about pirates, and that's not a bad thing, but the series' identity is steadily eroding.

The game isn't just about adventure on the high seas though; there are several huge cities to explore and many adventures to be had. In fact, it switches nearly halfway between

pirate adventures and land-based assassination missions. The ground controls have been tightened compared to earlier entries in the series. The game plays much better now, and you can spend a lot of time exploring and killing people.

There's a lot to do in the game as well; aside from the missions, exploration is great fun, and hunting animals can provide some of the most exciting sequences in the game. Also, in *Assassin's Creed III*, hunting didn't have a purpose, but like *Far Cry 3*, *Assassin's Creed IV* also uses a crafting system and gives you tangible rewards for going on these optional side missions.

It's still not a great stealth game, and if anything, it feels

more driven by spectacle instead of sneaky behaviour. It's also almost tangential to the war between the Templars and Assassins, which makes it feel like a lavish pirate adventure and not *Assassin's Creed IV*.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, because after *Assassin's Creed III*, the series was in need of an overhaul. The new features, such as crafting, your time on the *Jackdaw*, and even the assassination missions you get to carry out are great, and the game is very enjoyable. The game just feels out of place somehow, and might well have benefited from being a standalone title instead of being a part of such a well-defined series.

In all this, we haven't discussed the modern-day setting

Assassin's Creed IV: The protagonist Edward Kenway is a pirate and the game really shines in its naval battle sequences where you plunder ships for treasure.

of the games. Like the earlier entries, the conceit is that you're a modern-day person strapped into a machine that can extract the memories of your ancestor's lives, which are coded into your genes. The sequences are as inane as ever. That's one area where *Assassin's Creed* is consistently silly, for six years now.

We reviewed *Assassin's Creed* on the PlayStation 3. The game is available in India on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 for ₹2,999, at retail shops and online.

Q&A | SHREE NAYAR

The big picture

A DIY digital camera launched this month in India teaches children how cameras work

BY VIJAYSHREE VENKATRAMAN

Learning through building is a fun way to expose children to new concepts. By putting together a device, children can see how the parts fit. As they get the device to function, they gain an understanding of the science behind it.

This is the idea behind Bigshot, a do-it-yourself (DIY) digital camera developed by Shree Nayar, a professor of computer science at Columbia University in New York, US. This project is distinct from his cutting-edge research in computer vision.

The Bigshot is designed as a kit with parts that children (aged 8 and above) can assemble to build a camera. The website (www.bigshotcamera.com) includes an interactive textbook, with video demonstrations of the science and engineering concepts behind the camera. The product, priced at \$89 (around ₹5,610), launched this August in the US; it is now

available in India through Croma stores, for ₹6,500.

Nayar plans to use a portion of the royalties from these sales to donate cameras to children in highly underserved communities. This comes from viewing the Oscar-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels*, which reaffirmed Nayar's belief that the camera is unique in its ability to inspire creativity. When children in a red-light district in Kolkata were given cameras, they got a chance to view their surroundings with a fresh pair of eyes and some broke free of their circumstances—a happy ending.

We spoke to Nayar about the project. Edited excerpts:

What is the inspiration behind this pared-down digital camera?

The real inspiration for Bigshot was my father, an engineer with an uncanny understanding of all things inanimate. Growing up in India, I don't remember going to a repair shop—if any-

thing broke it got fixed at home. As a boy, I was his sidekick, handing him tools and pointing the flashlight in the right places. Looking back, I have to say that those hours I spent with my father had a greater impact on my thinking than any formal course I took. It made me a believer in learning by building. Bigshot is meant to be such an experience.

And how will Bigshot create this experience?

Bigshot is a do-it-yourself camera kit. Once you're done putting it together, you have a fully functioning digital camera with some unusual features. Say, you are out on a shoot and the battery runs out of charge. You can crank the generator a few times and continue shooting pictures. By rotating a lens wheel you can switch between regular, panoramic and 3D photos. There is this Swiss knife quality to it.

The camera was designed to draw the user's attention to many scientific concepts—mechanics, optics, electronics and even image processing.

Essentially then, Bigshot is a science kit for schoolchildren?

It is hopefully much more than that. You begin by building this device with everyday utility. With it, you walk into the world of



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An eye on education: Shree Nayar, and his Bigshot camera, which will help children learn about optics and technology.

photography and storytelling. That is the art component of the experience. Finally, you express yourself by sharing your photos. When kids from diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds share photos, I believe that it broadens their view of the world.

Bigshot comes in a box that says ages 8-108 years. A young child can do this project with a parent. Camera enthusiasts may enjoy looking at the insides of a digital camera and putting it together.

What was your first camera as a child? When I was growing up, kids did not have cameras. My father had a Leica film camera but I was not allowed to play with it. It's hard to believe today, but back then the camera was a luxury item.

During the process of field-testing Bigshot in four countries (India, the US, Japan and Vietnam), we saw that boys and girls from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds were all excited by the idea of building and using the camera. The imaging market has exploded in the last decade making photography so much more affordable. There will come a day when every kid will have a camera.

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