

cover story

# DUTY CALLS

ACTIVISION IS TURNING THE HYBRID EVENT UPSIDE DOWN AND TRANSFORMING THE WORLD'S LARGEST VIDEO GAME PROPERTY INTO A LIFE-SIZED BRAND EXPERIENCE DESIGNED JUST FOR FANS

BY KENNETH BRIODAGH



**IT'S A GLOBAL** phenomenon that just won't stop.

The booming video game industry continues to grow as the world's gaming leaders keep releasing new titles that are as addictive as they are immersive, as participatory as they are sophisticated—and as tethered to online community gameplay as they are to individual living rooms and basements.

Indeed, video game designers are the new Hollywood. But instead of projecting content onto a big screen, they're making

billions of dollars across billions of small screens, from computer monitors and HDTVs to iPads and Droids. Like Hollywood, there are always red-hot franchises. And in the world of video games, Activision's Call of Duty has emerged as the world's blockbuster series.

People from all walks of life play Call of Duty, from professional soldiers to stockbrokers, and they have made the video game franchise the best-selling game property in history. Last



**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:** Donnie Graves, Co-founder, NCompass; Donna Graves, CEO, NCompass; Sheri Timmons, Vice President, NCompass; Kae Erickson, COO, NCompass; Ryan Fitzpatrick, Vice President, NCompass; Byron Beede, Sr. Director of Marketing, Call of Duty; Aland Failde, Associate Product Manager, Call of Duty; Alex Gomez, Associate Product Manager, Call of Duty; Jason Taylor, Associate Consumer Marketing Manager, Call of Duty; Tyler Michaud, Product Manager, Call of Duty; (not pictured) Jonathan Murnane, Activision Events Director.

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month, Activision deployed one of the biggest single-title events in gaming history to thank players and bring fans of the game together to unveil the franchise's eagerly-anticipated Modern Warfare 3 title, featuring multiplayer mode and due to be released in early November.

The event was called Call of Duty: XP and it will go down as one of the biggest events of 2011, when Activision took a multi-billion dollar digital franchise and brought it into the real world using experiential marketing. With Los Angeles-based experiential marketing agency Ncompass running point, the brand took over hangars and outdoor spaces across 12 acres at the Hughes Cargo Building in Playa Vista, CA, where Howard Hughes built the H-4 Hercules (a.k.a. "Spruce Goose"), and on Sept. 2 and 3 recreated life-sized gameplay areas from the Black Ops edition, which precedes MW3. The experience included a driving course designed by brand partner Jeep, a zip line, a recreation of Burger-Town and Juggernaut Sumo (both from the game), all in addition to 7,600 Xbox gaming stations provided by Microsoft, another partner. The anchor of the event was a \$1 million tournament to be played on the new game, which no consumer had yet seen or played.

While most event marketers can't seem to stop talking about how to push a live event online, Activision did the opposite. With an inherently all-digital product, a pre-built virtual environment on Microsoft's Xbox Live and the most tech-friendly demographic, Activision could have easily created an all-digital event.

But to give credit where credit is due, the gaming giant knew that the right approach was to create an experience that allowed the digital audience to cross into the physical world, to engage them with a live event that matched the size, scale and sophistication of the actual game. Which meant there was only one event marketing mantra that would work: *Go big, or don't go.*

### THE MISSION

When it comes to the video game market, brands face the unique challenge of selling new products to a savvy, vocal and frequently critical gamer audience, all without them ever having seen the game. Because sales of new games often rely on pre-orders and early support by the gaming community, Activision knew that it had to bring MW3 to a new level.

"We wanted to do something that had never been done before," says Byron Beede, senior director of marketing for Call of Duty at Activision. "We wanted to treat our fans, take the multiplayer reveal and make it a fan experience, not just a gaming experience. Then it grew into a passion project, full of what ifs."

So the brand asked, what if we built a real-life version of the game? What if we gave the best gamers in the world a chance to play for a million dollars? And finally, what if we ask them to pay \$150 to come, and give all the proceeds to the Call of Duty endowment? All three "what-ifs" became reality and more than 7,000 gamers showed up and contributed more than \$1 million for the benefit of soldiers transitioning to civilian life.

The timing was perfect, Beede says. The brand had been tossing the idea around for several years, as it had seen its fan base grow and keep coming back to the franchise for every new release. “We obsess about how we can show appreciation to our fans and we needed an event that could show that on the correct scale,” he says. “For us it was just time to do this. We really wanted to impress our loyal fans.”

The goals were to reveal MW3 multi-player in the most spectacular way imaginable, show the gamer community how much the brand loves ’em, make their jaws drop and foster the competition that the community feeds on.

When it came to money matters, the brand knew there was a fine balance to be struck. Though Activision wouldn’t discuss the numbers, Beede says they knew the fans deserved to be impressed and to do that, they had to spend. “We made sure the experience was spectacular in every facet,” he says. “We invested the right amount of money to achieve our objectives. We had to do it right. Or don’t do it.”

To meet those lofty goals, the brand designed a three-stroke strategy that linked the on-site, live immersion with the competitive online and live tournament and online broadcast elements. Part one: thank and impress loyal gamers, and inspire them to talk about the game. Part two: drive global buzz through the worldwide tournament qualifiers and live broadcast. Part three: produce a gaming event so spectacular that fans would feel like it was worthy of the beloved COD franchise. The big idea designed to get it all done? Take the digital out of the machines and bring it into the real world.

### THE TERRAIN

Activision set out to make the massive event space exude the feeling of a military installation. The concept was to make the place look and feel as though the government had come in and set up a field base of forward operations, especially from the outside. Inside, the traditional military look and imagery gave some room up to the idealized video game look, but kept the COD feel. “For Call of Duty, it’s always about trying to do something awe inspiring,” says Beede.

The event space was broken up into four distinct activity areas—Game Play, Scrapyard, the Pit and Jeep Ops—in addition to the main stage where the brand staged the opening keynote



**FOR THE FANS:** Call of Duty XP’s military-inspired 12-acre campus gave gamers and fans a taste of what the online gaming experience might look and feel like in the real world.

and tournament final.

Gaming took over most of the main 130,000-square-foot hangar, with gauntlets for head-to-head play in both MW3 and Black Ops, and qualification on-site for the big tournament, in addition to free play stations and of course, the tournament play areas. Because every fan has his or her own favorite mode, there were also stations for the mini games like king of the hill, a new MW3 Special Ops cooperative survival mode and Black Ops zombie mode, a survival game where the goal is to kill as many zombies as possible before getting eaten.

In the Elite gaming area, the attendees got a chance to check out some of the features and benefits of joining the new Call of Duty Elite, an advanced membership that costs \$50 per year and gives the Xbox live multi-player gamers a chance at exclusive gaming, prizes and tournaments. The brand gave each attendee a free trial membership for coming to XP, but Activision wants them to continue with the paid service, so they made it easy to love with lots of in-game equipment and game play bonuses.

The Scrapyard is a much-beloved arena from COD: Black Ops and is one of the most heavily played in the online multi-player game. But no one had ever played it live, until now. The brand equipped 20-man squads with paintball guns and set them loose on one another in the faithful-down-to-the-detail recreation of the area from the game. The teams were given a backstory to add some character fun to the role-playing and help immerse them in the capture-the-flag style challenge. Each match was about 10 minutes long and the line never got short. It was simple: two teams go in, only one comes out (figuratively speaking, of course).

The Pit training sequence is the first thing every “noob” (that’s a new, inexperienced player, for all you gaming neophytes) encounters when they first pick up a controller and load up COD. So Activision decided to see if the gamers could do it in real life. Hard-core players compete in-game against themselves and online to score the fastest times through the course and at XP the brand gave them a chance to see if they really have

what it takes to conquer the Pit. To give them a slightly better chance and to refresh anyone who hasn't played the Pit in a while, there were game stations nearby for trial runs, but eventually the attendees had to toe the line and run the infamous obstacle course in real life.

Both the Scrapyard and Pit offered up prizes and swag, both in and out of game, but the real prize was the bragging rights for the winners. Other activities included the Juggernaut Sumo, which put attendees in an oversized sumo suit, a massive zip line across the entire compound and the BurgerTown snack bar, which comes straight out of the game, too.

In a brand partnership effort, Jeep, which designs custom vehicles for the in-game world and COD-themed real-life Jeep special editions, took the XP idea way off-road. The automaker brought 10 specially-outfitted COD editions with full armor and four-wheeling capabilities and took over a five-acre portion of the site to thrill, terrify and blow the minds of the attendees brave and awesome enough to get in line. Three-member squads jumped into a Jeep with the professional driver for a mission through enemy territory. First, they passed through a short on-road portion pushing the Jeep up to a quick sprint on the way to the first checkpoint, where the squad got its mission: take out an insurgent force two clicks up the road and make it back to base. The preliminaries out of the way, the driver proceeded to take the Jeep and its passengers through a strenuous course, surrounded by gunfire, explosions, smoke bombs and enemy assaults, before getting back to the start about 10 minutes later. (You don't know, man. You weren't there.)

Though the event was primarily all about consumers there were important b-to-b elements, too. Before the gamers arrived on Saturday, Activision spent two days treating members of the industry press to exclusive previews of the gaming and experiential elements at the XP complex. They got a chance to check out the game play, picked up the paintball guns in the Scrapyard and even ran the Pit. Thanks to this, the brand exceeded its goals in both print and online media attention.

### THE TOURNAMENT

The tourney began online, synced with the reveal of the Call of Duty Elite society. The first tourney available was a series of qualifiers that led up to the COD: XP 2011 \$1 million event. Gamers from all over the world competed

online on Black Ops, narrowing the field down to 28 teams, who were invited to XP to play for the big prize.

To round out the 32 needed slots, teams entered and played on-site during day one to win one of the last four spots. The on-site qualifications were in the multiplayer gauntlets, which pitted 16 teams of four players against each other in a series of frenetic, stressful, 10-minute single-elimination rounds. Only one team emerged from each gauntlet's frag-fest to compete for the big prize. The tournament play stations were reminiscent of an alien flagship, with the green lighting glowing from the octagonal pods where the teams of gamers sat at the Xbox consoles to go head to head.

Once all 32 teams were ready to go, the big game began on day two. In single-elimination brackets, the teams faced-off in a series of best-of-five matches, testing ability in all aspects of game play. The twist? They were competing in the new MW: COD3 multi-player, so none of them had played any of the arenas before and there was no advantage for any team. Non-players could watch the action on huge flat screens placed all over the arena as team after team was eliminated.

Finally, the two squads who had clawed and fragged their way to the top of the pile were ready to play for their shares of the prize. Activision set up a live broadcast of the finals through LiveStream so people all over the world could get a first-hand glimpse of the new gameplay through the eyes of the best players in the world. And they did. The online live stream was the second largest in the provider's history with more than a million live unique viewers, only exceeded by the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton.





“We wanted to get about 400,000 viewers online. We were staggered at the response,” Beede says. “For us, it was, ‘How awesome would it be if the thousands of fans at home could experience the game?’ So we delivered the experience in real time as part of the reveal.”

### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Activision set out to thank the gamers, first and foremost. The thousands of gamers who put the money down, flew out to L.A. and dove into Activision’s huge, immersive, all-COD world that was XP will remember it forever as a seminal experience and the hours of game play they’ll get on their exclusive “Hardened Edition” of the game will keep the brand and the love front of mind. Check.

“We spent so much time thinking about the gamers. ‘Would they be impressed? Would they have fun?’ That was our filter,” Beede says. “Our hope was that if we did that well, then the delight we inspired in our fan base will engage them to bring their friends into the franchise and drive new customers.”

The partnerships with Jeep, Microsoft and Mountain Dew (which provided refreshments) were a key part of the event’s success, Beede says. “You realize how valuable your partners are in a situation like this. You can’t do something like this by yourself; that was a huge lesson for me.”

Because the game itself isn’t publicly available until Nov. 8, there is no way to tell if the sales goals have been achieved, but

**READY FOR ACTION:** More than 7,000 fans paid \$150 each to get access to Call of Duty XP, a sprawling live event that spanned 12 acres and included activities ranging from ziplines, sumo wrestling and a Jeep off-road experience to serious live game play and tournament-style challenges.

anticipation is at fever pitch in the gaming community. The plan to drive global excitement for the multi-player COD3 and convert that excitement to pre-orders of the game hinged largely on creating social media and industry buzz through the tournament and LiveStream of the event. Consider that box checked, too.

The data coming out of XP indicates that the brand’s intention to shock and awe the existing fan base was a resounding success. In addition to the surprise success of the live stream of the tournament final, the event achieved social media buzz on Twitter as a global top 10 trend, and the brand picked up 138,000 Twitter followers in the five days surrounding the event. On Facebook, the brand’s event page earned more than 215,000 likes and 175 million impressions. In terms of online and traditional media buzz, both industry and mainstream, the event drew in more than 300 media outlets from 20 countries, garnering more than 1,000 press clippings.

The real telling metric came from the traffic on the COD: MW3 pre-order page, which got a 673 percent bump in page views and is far exceeding the pre-orders of Black Ops during the same time period before its launch.

“We’ve never seen anything like this in the industry before,” Beede says. “Only Activision could own something like this.”

Game on. **EM**