



MORE OF THE SAME

But that's not a bad thing

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When *Shadow of Mordor* launched, everyone expected it to be one of those bad spin-off video games of a popular franchise. But everyone, including myself, was pleasantly surprised as it turned out to be one of the best games of 2014. Middle Earth: *Shadow of War* seeks to improve upon the original by introducing a myriad of new features, but it ends up feeling almost the same.

Starting off with the premise, *Shadow of War* picks up where its prequel left off. Talion and Celebrimbor craft a new ring of power which does not answer to the Dark Lord, Sauron. The fruit of their labour is short-lived, however, as Shelob the Spider steals the ring from them. After a series of events, they do eventually get the ring back at the end of Act 1 and thus begins the duo's quest to create an army that can rival the Dark Lord's forces. The cast of characters is diverse this time around but they suffer from the pitfall of being easily forgettable. Except for Shelob, who is given far less screen time than she deserves, none of the characters managed to make a lasting impression on me.

This might be due to the fact that the real stars of the game are the orcs you will encounter throughout the game. The Nemesis System is back in all its glory, bringing you even more unique encounters. This time around, the personality of orcs on display range from terrifying to downright hilarious. I found an orc captain in my game who only spoke in

rhymes. I will always remember his squeaky voice shouting "Your fate just went from bad to worse. You face an orc that speaks in verse." Needless to say, I *had* to recruit him to my army.

Speaking of armies, new to *Shadow of War* is the ability to conduct fortress assaults on various strongholds dotted across the vast region of Mordor. These assaults must be carefully planned out before being put to execution.

You have to go through the caveats of figuring out the weaknesses and strengths of the warchiefs of the fortresses. Afterwards, you must mix and match your army to capitalise on those warchiefs' weaknesses. Each assault is an amalgamation of all the gameplay elements that *Shadow of War* presents to the player. You must systematically dismantle each layer of the fortress in order to proceed to the warchief's lair. This is done through a domination-esque mode where you capture points in the fortress. Through each stage of the fight, the warchief's captains will pose unique challenges for you. The beauty of *Shadow of War* is that you have the freedom to tackle these challenges however you want. Do you

want to let your army wreak havoc while you stealthily dispatch key targets? Or do you lead the charge and use your Elven Rage to make short work of the Uruks? How about razing everything with a drake? You will always be spoiled for choices, and the creative player will have a field day with this aspect of *Shadow of War*.

The graphics in *Shadow of War* have been updated to look fantastic. The environments in the first game sometimes looked rather bland. That was probably attributable to the fact that *Shadow of Mordor* came out on last-gen consoles as well. This time, the team at Monolith Productions have outdone themselves with incredibly detailed environments, dazzling particles, and well-crafted character models.

The combat in the game largely remains the same except for a few additions which do not shake up the formula too drastically. It still follows the *Batman Arkham* series' style of combat of pressing one button to attack and another button to counter with other functions only unlocking after a

certain number of hit-streaks have been achieved.

Now it's time to address the elephant in the room: the microtransactions. One new feature in *Shadow of War* is that orcs and your gear are now ranked according to rarity — similar to most MMORPGs. While this might seem to add a new level of depth to the game, their other purpose to incentivise the purchase of lootboxes that contain orcs and gear. Of course, just like mobile games, these lootboxes are graded in tiers, with the lowest tier purchasable by the use of currency that you earn in game. If you want higher-tier lootboxes, you have to dish out real cash. The practice of putting lootboxes in AAA titles is something that publishers have picked up from mobile gaming. But it has no place in a full-priced SINGLE PLAYER title. Regardless, you can fully skip buying the lootboxes and still get a large number of legendary orcs and gear. Honestly, I don't even understand why anyone would even purchase these lootboxes in the first place. They do not add anything significant to your repertoire anyway.

Although the game might feel all-too-familiar to veterans of the series, *Shadow of War* still makes enough improvements to warrant its place amongst one of the better open-world titles in recent memory.

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