Mass Effect 2 review – Blake Mathews

It has been a long two years, two months and six days for fans of “Mass Effect,” the groundbreaking sci-fi video game from Bioware and Electronic Arts. That was what thousands of Xbox 360 owners were thinking midnight Tuesday, Jan. 26, when “Mass Effect 2” finally went on sale.

Mass Effect 2 puts players back into the combat boots of Commander Shepard, an elite human soldier famous for his exploits as the first human Specter. Specters, the galactic Citadel Council they serve and humanity’s emerging role in the 22nd century Milky Way would each take entire articles to explain; all you need to know about Shepard is that he prevented an ancient race of god-machines called the Reapers from invading our galaxy and killing more or less everything. At the end of the first game, Shepard is a hero and the galaxy is united against the Reaper threat.

In the first five minutes of Mass Effect 2, all of that gets undone. If you are anything like me or my roommate, you will find yourself screaming at your TV.

A lot of what made Mass Effect a standout game, for better or worse, is undone in its sequel. The skill distribution and leveling system has been completely overhauled, with customization taking a bit of a hit. If you complained about the cookie-cutter side missions and crawling up mountains in the Mako rover, the designers at Bioware heard you. Each side mission is unique and richly detailed, and the Mako, well, it doesn’t make it past the first five minutes of the game.

Probably the biggest difference is the new ammo system. In addition to hordes of armed aliens, attack robots and galactic politicians, players now have to worry about running out of bullets. This goes against some of the fundamental science in the Mass Effect universe, but Bioware knows its audience, and a lot of its audience has been playing Modern Warfare 2 for the past few months. So, the game’s novel shooter-RPG style mixes in a few more spoonfuls of shooter this time around.

Mass Effect 2 feels, looks and even explodes differently than its predecessor, but the core themes that endeared so many to Shepard and his adventures are back, if not improved. Exploring the Milky Way is still engrossing; never leaving the main story to wander the stars is a terrible way to play this game. The roster of recruitable characters is bigger, and though some of your allies from the first game won’t rejoin you, none of the new guys are obvious replacements. Each one brings something fresh to Shepard’s crew, and in order to gain their loyalty for a potentially suicidal mission, you’re going to have to work.

But the Mass Effect series is known best for one thing: its moral dilemmas. Shepard will end up saving the day, somehow, but whether he does it as a compassionate paragon or a belligerent renegade is completely up to the player. In a conversation, you can choose Shepard’s every line, and certain conversations utilize the new “interrupt” option, which gives the player a choice to physically intervene and gain either paragon or renegade points. The paragon may comfort a grieving mother, while the renegade tends to push people out of windows or shoot them in the knees.

If I were one for rating systems, I’d give Mass Effect 2 for the Xbox 360 nine stars out of ten. But I’m not, so you’ll have to settle for an earnest recommendation: this game is worth the money, the homework you weren’t doing anyway and the emotional duress you’ll find yourself under as you lead your Shepard on an impossible quest to protect humanity from a seemingly untouchable danger.