

## “Mass Effect 2”: Your Own Epic Sci-Fi Story

Written by Luke Hamilton

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Game developer Bioware, recognized for renowned role-playing games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, has become the go-to team for great RPG experiences. 2007's *Mass Effect* and 2009's *Dragon Age: Origins* continued to show its impressive ability to create compelling interactive game worlds with expansive histories and stories. Released in late January, *Mass Effect 2* boasts a great new innovation in the genre while delivering the same magnificent player-based storytelling the developer has perfected.

The year is 2183, and the human race is relatively young on the intergalactic scene. Players enter the shoes of Commander Shepard, soldier extraordinaire and the first human member of the universal police force The Spectres, hot on the trail of the Reapers, a race of biological machines seeking the elimination of organic life. Shortly after the game begins, Shepard's ship is attacked by an unknown enemy. After saving as many crew members as he can, Shepard is caught in the crossfire and goes down with the ship. He awakens two years later, resurrected to form the most elite team the universe has ever known and save humanity from a threat the rest of the galaxy has turned a blind eye to.

A new feature that hooked me in *Mass Effect 2* is the ability to transfer your story from the first game to the sequel. People in the universe will mention the merciful or harsh means your version of Shepard used in the original, and several story elements change based on the decisions you made in the first game: your fame/infamy, the balance of the galactic senate, and which teammates survived the ordeal.

While you can start fresh with a preset backstory, importing your previous data delivers a whole

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new level of immersion I haven't experienced in a game before. Things I didn't think would matter come back. Saving a common soldier, for example, might pay dividends in the form of a now-superior officer willing to help you, or a shunned reporter might have smeared your reputation during your time away from the living. You begin to understand how much everything could change based on your actions in the previous game, and more importantly that everything you do now can affect the story in the planned third part of the trilogy. If so desired, you can kill Shepard at the end and entirely remove the main character from the upcoming *Mass Effect 3*. It literally becomes your story.



A third-person-shooter style is used during combat, along with many style variations on how Shepard fights. My style was "soldier," which used all forms of weapons and a sense ability that slowed down everything around me for five seconds of pinpoint shooting, which was helpful in hectic situations. Other styles have their own specialties, such as "vanguard" with a charging ram attack or an "engineer" ability to control nearby robots. The "soldier" style worked well in combat, but it can occasionally feel flawed in your favor when you know you missed a shot and it lands anyway. (I know I'm good, but I also know this isn't *Wanted*; I can't curve bullets around walls.)

The game is exploration- and dialogue-heavy, but it does both in interesting ways. You're free to travel the universe in search of extra missions and mineral resources for weapon development, and initiating conversation with other characters brings up a dialogue wheel, offering several options that can change your reputation based on whether you help people in need. The dialogue also includes occasional interrupt options, allowing you to take radical actions such as shooting a distracted enemy or shoving a bystander out of the line of fire.

The presentation of this game is so impressive that it's staggering. It's not on the level of *Uncharted 2*,

but it comes pretty close. Staring at the stars can become habit as you travel the universe, and the character detail blows everything away when you're in conversation. The extra emphasis on facial expressions and voice acting pays off; you can really read the characters' emotions in these interactions, and begin to grow emotionally invested in their stories.

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While I'm not a big fan of sci-fi epics, *Mass Effect 2* hits all the right notes. I find the series similar to the original *Star Wars* trilogy: The first title spent a lot of time building the history and story for the trilogy; the second part reinforces the history while bringing in bigger action and leading up to an ending that leaves you craving the finale. The year has only just begun, and I've already found a strong candidate for game of the year.

*Mass Effect 2 is now available on Xbox 360 for \$59.95 and PC for \$49.95. For this review, the author completed the game on "veteran" difficulty.*

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