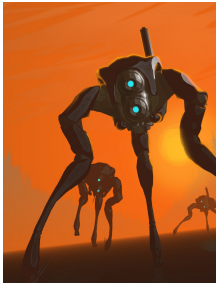


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[Half-Life 2: Episode Two](#)

Episode Three is light years away...

Valve may be a little slow when it comes to delivery dates, but when one of their games hits your PC, you are definitely going to remember it. Now some people might start wondering: is Half-Life 2 Episode 2 that good? The answer is simple. It's freaking good. They are getting better by the version and I kind of understand why they are making such short games. I don't think our neural synapses could endure so much pleasure in a larger dose than Episode 2. I have played the first Half-Life over and over again regardless of graphics or any other detriment. The game defined an entire generation of gamers and it's still doing so at present. Until the launch of Half-Life 2, the first one in the series was regarded as the best first person shooter ever made. The second part filled those shoes immediately, but everyone was really disappointed when Valve announced their intention to make any future appearances in the franchise in an episodic content. That measure was meant to shorten the development time for one long game and separate it into smaller parts, more easily to produce but also a lot more expensive in the end for the buyer. Even if I had my doubts about this method, I swallowed my pride and admitted after the fabulous Episode One that they've chosen the best path. Nonetheless, I had to wait almost sixteen excruciating months until my eyes could feast once more on the perfect figure of Alyx Vance. I can tell you right now that in the form that it has now, it surpasses most of the present shooters. **Concept** Half-Life 2 has defined the way stories are told in a game and the entire gameplay is an excuse for doing just that. This is the strong selling point of HL2 and its followers. The story is not being told by diaries or in-game cutscenes because you are it and the story is unveiling through your eyes. To make things more interesting, the main character, Gordon Freeman has not said a single word in four games, the player having to deal with a virtual voice that was never heard. Valve is sitting on a gold mine and they are perfectly aware of this aspect. They will continue to develop what many could consider a mindless shooter, with no regard to items, inventory or any other feature that would enhance the gameplay in any way. Since gamers are quite concerned, you could just give them a shiny crowbar and they will be happy. **Story** We must take into account that the original Half-Life 2 has been launched in 2004 and there could be some people left somewhere on this globe that don't know the story so I'm going to lay it out for them. I'm not going back to the beginning because it would take too much paper. So, Gordon Freeman, the mysterious physicist that saved Black Mesa from extinction a while ago, is called back to City 17 to set things straight (or so we're led to believe). There isn't too much information about City 17, only that it's located somewhere in the Eastern Europe and, as the name suggests, it's not the only one. Most importantly, the city is run by a human administrator who's serving foreign interests and I'm not talking locally, more like other dimension interests. He and his close alien friends have other plans in mind for the human race that would probably imply slavery and other forms of submission. Your actions not only have put an end (at least temporarily) to his reign of terror, but you also managed to blow the alien Citadel (in Episode One) leaving behind a huge vortex. The first Episodes end with you and your close (girl) friend Alyx in a train and on the run from a monstrous explosion. Enough said that the train didn't make it, leaving all the buyers taunted just like in a soap opera. Now you get the chance to find out what has happened in the aftermath and maybe learn something more about your role and the faith of humanity. The second Episode resumes after the shock wave from the blast has derailed the train you were escaping with. You soon find out that the Combine (the foot soldiers of the not-so-friendly aliens) is still looking for you and Alyx. The reason for that is that she intercepted a transmission that could change the course of war transforming the entire

game into a continuous chase. The player will have the opportunity and pleasure to further develop affectionate feelings for Alyx as she accompanies you through most of the way. After terrible battles, she manages to deliver the intercepted message to a base in White Forest just in time. This third part of the saga (if we count Half Life 2) has a bittersweet ending as humans manage to close the portal that threaten to transform in a doorway for a huge alien army but lose one of the most important resistance fighters in the process.

Gameplay As I was saying, it's more than a simple shooter. Sure you could try to simplify it and there is more than one argument for that, but you would commit a serious mistake. Even with its simple controls and gameplay mechanics, Half Life 2 Episode 2 remains one of the most intense and profound shooters on the market. I find it hard to believe that there is still someone that hasn't played Half Life so I'll get past all the basics and even go as far as saying that, with one or two exceptions, nothing has changed from the original recipe. All the weapons are present and there is a great car ride included as usual. You will get a nice looking bomb at the end and meet up for a cup of tea with a new opponent called Hunter. They are practically smaller versions of a strider that shoots some kind of projectiles that not only have impact damage but they also stick and explode in a couple of seconds. They are tough as hell and there is no experience like being trapped in a claustrophobic basement with two or three of them. Valve has made sure that gamers have a complete treatment and have used all the tricks in the book to provide the best experience possible. Episode 2 features an entire new level called White Forest and the engine is doing a great job at rendering trees and other natural objects and, for the first time, I saw something Valve hasn't done at this scale: for a moment I thought I saw an in-game movie constructed only through the engine but they have managed somehow to blend it completely into the level. I think it's safe to say they have the reputation still intact because they've never used movies and cinematics to fill the gaps of certain areas of the story. The one thing I'll certainly remember from Episode 2 is the fierce and quite difficult fights I've seen in the franchise. I don't think I have to repeat that the AI in Half Life is probably the most advanced one I've ever seen, but they've gone over the top with the Hunter units. Not only are they extremely tough, but they are also very intelligent and know when to ram, hide and duck just in time to avoid the impact with a fast moving vehicle driven by Gordon. And to top everything off, they don't chase you like stupid animals, so they can shoot their weapons from one foot away, just like we see in other games. They are perfectly aware (so to say) that their main weapons are long range so they don't actually bother to get too close. On the hard level, it will take more than the promised 6 hours, so take your time with the game and listen to all the conversations around you and investigate everything you can. It's a shame to have waited so long just so you can quickly go online to proudly announce you've finished it in a record time. **Graphics** Not too many people know that Half Life was built on a heavily modified Quake 2 engine that eventually got his own name, GoldSrc. Its predecessor has spawned controversy unlike any other engine, because it was one of the first to place in direct conflict the biggest video card producers, Nvidia and ATI. After a significant delay caused by source code theft and some problems with programming shaders on Nvidia, the game was a beauty and the engine entitled Source was a complete success. In Episode One we saw a much better version of the original engine with HDR in most levels and much better texture resolutions. Valve has always tried to keep its engine up-to-date, and considering the original version was launched in 2004, the present one can hold its own against any other. Episode Two couldn't have come without a major facelift so they have also implemented a bloom option and tons of other smaller effects like a full screen haze in some situations, much bigger blood splashes, a more beautiful fire effect and much nicer explosions. All in all, it's the best one so far and it's one of the most optimized games on the market. I always knew that Valve's team has scalability as a top priority, but this is ridiculous. It will run almost flawlessly even on a middleware-built computer. **Sound** The acting voice has always been the strong selling point for Valve's games, but the most interesting feature is not to be found in the human voices, but rather in the sounds they've

used for some of the unearthly characters like Hunters and Striders. They are absolutely stunning and everyone will remember those semi-organic dying sounds. The developers have also managed to squeeze a lot more dynamic music, compared to the one we've been used to. The original Half Life had almost no music, but the current one is filled with electronic music that adds a lot more to those terrible Hunter fight sequences.**Multiplayer** The only multiplayer you're going to find on Steam is Counter Strike Source and Half Life 2 Deathmatch and frankly, that's more than enough for me. The single player experience is way too intense to spoil it with a couple of maps in the White Forest.**Conclusion** There were times when I thought that such a short campaign was nothing more than a ploy to extort more money from addicted gamers like you and me. After playing the game, I had a strange feeling of accomplishment and I've reached the conclusion that it was just the right length. Simply put, it's the best one so far and I've started my own countdown to the final one. First person shooters just can't get any better than this.