

Video Game Review: ‘Borderlands 2’ Has Nearly Limitless Ability to Entertain

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 1, 2012 - 12:38pm

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CHICAGO – I played the first “Borderlands” with my roommate two summers ago, marathoning nightly 6-hour sessions in a haze of not-just-hookah smoke, delighting at the acid-trip aesthetic of the proceedings. Midgets, monsters, vehicles, rocket-launching sniper-rifles, giant angry dragon things — it felt like we were Alice and we made a wrong turn on our way through the Rabbit Hole. Our shiny loot gathering that was only interrupted by a vacation he took to Italy, where we promised the game would remain untouched until his return. (Eat your heart out, “The Notebook”).



The social experience of playing Borderlands this way was one of the best gaming moments of my life, and naturally, I assumed it could be replicated with new friends via the much improved “Borderlands 2.” Instead, I got nothin’. Nothing. Zilch. People made excuses to not play this game with me. At first I thought maybe it was a problem with me, I spend a lot of time in doors and could be a bit musty. But, with my sister being a professional cosmetologist, I’m probably one of the nicer smelling people in the area. So it wasn’t that.

Eventually a friend, Tim, explained that as someone who played the entirety of the first “Borderlands,” he didn’t want to play, like, two hours of it with me, then only get to play it when he and I had similar schedules. He was so sure that “Borderlands 2” was incredible, that he would rather not have it in his life at all, then to only have it on someone else’s terms. The strange romance of that statement aside, the fact is Tim was right. “Borderlands 2” is absolutely incredible, and the thought of having it torn away from me is one I wouldn’t want to entertain, either. Gearbox Software has delivered an absolutely massive game that improves upon its predecessor in every facet of the experience.



Borderlands 2
Photo credit: 2K Games

It’s five years following the events in the first “Borderlands,” and after fighting what appeared to be the giant vagina monster from Alan Moore’s “Watchmen,” the protagonists from that game disappeared into Pandora’s wild yonder, probably as disappointed with the anti-climatic nature of that battle as gamers were. However, now a fancy new substance referred to as Eridium is appearing all over the land, and a new mastermind, Handsome Jack, is on the scene and causing chaos. It’s up to you (and friends!) to stop him.



Borderlands 2
Photo credit: 2K Games

The much-improved world of Pandora and its inhabitants deserves special mention. The best way to describe it would be to imagine that the Ringling Brothers Circus vomited all over “Fallout 3”’s wasteland. Giant elephant bones stick out of the ground, arrows that point the way look like they belong at a carnival, and the dungeons go from something out of “The Goonies” to something out of a far better version of “The Postman” and a bunch of exciting places in between. The cel-shaded aesthetic of the first game returns in full force, and gives everything a deliberately ugly feel. Psychos are more gruesome, blood is almost fluorescent red, characters set aflame burn and twirl as if they were in some twisted Warner Brothers cartoon, and it’s all an incredible, wretched delight.

Equally as wretched (and delightful) are the characters ranging from mentally unbalanced mechanics to lairs, sex fiends, people impersonating doctors, and my favorite, a smart mouthed robot that usurps R2-D2 for first place in the longstanding “coolest robot that looks like a trashcan” competition. You’ll laugh out loud throughout the game’s campaign and side quests - often times in guilty pleasure. In fact during one mission, “Assassinate the Assassins” I’m pretty sure I heard Handsome Jack humorously berate his minions for their sub-par sexual assaulting tactics. There is some really gruesome stuff here that’s ultimately played for big laughs, so it’s sort of a bummer that you may miss some of it if you play online.



Borderlands 2
Photo credit: 2K Games

Gearbox still hasn’t quite figured out a way to tell a compelling story in a co-op multiplayer environment. I’m not saying the story of “Borderlands 2” is bad. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s not, but when playing online with three other cohorts, cut-scenes are choppy, folks bounce around the screen, and people are accepting and turning quests in at a breakneck pace, thus following the story and dialog becomes the equivalent of trying to watch a Lars Von Trier film with antzy toddlers in the audience. If you’re playing with random people online, and expect to experience “BL2”’s much-improved narrative, you’ll be sadly disappointed. However, when you take the game offline and play with a friend, or find someone on a forum who won’t skip cut scenes, you can actually settle yourself into a pretty entertaining story.

There are four new classes to play as this time around, including a spy who can turn invisible, a ‘Gunzerker’ who can equip any two guns at a time - which is awesome by the way, a ‘Siren’ who has the ability to freeze an enemy in their tracks with ‘phase lock’, and a Commando, who sets up turrets. Any class can equip any weapon, but obviously some classes are more prone to specific weapons than others - I somehow doubt that a Gunzerker with two sniper-rifles would be all that effective, for example. Each of these classes can be heavily specialized by modding and putting skill points into specific areas. So if you’re a spy you can specialize in pistols, sniper rifles, invisible melee damage, and so on. New this year is ‘bad ass’ rank, which rewards your metagame accomplishments (kill 20 people with a sniper rifle, for example) with permanent stat bonuses, making your character even more unique. You also now have the ability to change your character’s appearance, and you’ll discover all sorts of new goodies along the way that can spruce up your digs.



Borderlands 2

Photo credit: 2K Games

The gameplay of "Borderlands 2" is essentially identical to "Borderlands" the first, but with more of it. There's more guns, more land of cover, more memorable characters and enemies, and more things to upgrade and tinker with. A somewhat minor bummer is the fact that you're starting from scratch again. The first few hours feel sorta slow, as you pick up mediocre weapons and items, waiting for things to "get good" as they say. But players are here for one reason: Loot. And once the game does pick up, the guns in this game are plentiful and varied. There's nothing quite like beating a boss or sub-boss, and coming across a treasure chest filled with delicious goodies. It is in these moments of reward that "Borderlands 2" comes together. Agonizing over which gun to equip and which to drop mid-way through a particularly brutal dungeon run is the most enjoyable sort of quandry. An added element of strategy involves elemental damage - so if you're shooting a gun that lights a creature on fire at an enemy that's fire based, you better have a back up or you're going to be in for a long night. Think Pokemon, but instead of adorable creatures, it's bullets, and instead of cute animations, there's violence and screaming and horrible, terrible pain.

Leveling up, completing quests, and bettering your character are all incredibly addictive mechanics in their own right. Sadly, these mechanics are almost always found in derivative fantasy games and MMOs involving necromancers and swamp rats and hobbits (oh my!). Part of "Borderlands" appeal has always been that it takes these fantasy RPG elements and inserts them into a sci-fi high-octane shooter with more personality than "WoW," "Guild Wars," and "LOTR: Online"...combined. When you find a cohort to play with, as I eventually did after scouring forums for someone who wasn't going to play like a coked-up helper monkey, I truly became addicted. Going through the game, accepting sidequests, beating bosses, and trading items, is an exciting time in its own right. When you toss in the glorious setting that is Pandora and its mentally unbalanced inhabitants, "Borderlands 2"'s ability to entertain is nearly limitless.

"Borderlands 2" was developed by Gearbox Software and release by 2K Games on September 18, 2012. It was reviewed for the Xbox 360 but it was also released for the PS3.

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