



• *Episode Two* integrates all information organically and in-game, maps included.



EPISODE TWO WAGS A FINGER AT FPSES WITH PAC-MAN MENTALITY.



• *Half-Life 2: Episode Two's* cast acts on stage, not in cutscenes.



• If one (and only one) scene stalls, it's the antlion Alamo shown here.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

Magnificent

PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW



Whether in magazines or on message boards, "cinematic" is the game critics' weasel word. Sometimes we say it when we aren't sure what we want to say. Usually, I understand it to mean specific moments when games aren't gamelike—when they stop showing, so to speak, and start telling, and when actors turn into audience. Why the word isn't pejorative when used this way probably involves movie envy and mistaken goose-and-gander assumptions about standard practice in one medium suiting the next. Nonetheless, videogames learn lots from other media, and by imitating the everyday function of film techniques instead of their exact form, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* becomes movielike, but isn't a game that wants to be what it's not.

"Episodic" is a punchline to an inside joke, meaningful in that it pertains to Valve's ability to produce series segments at annual intervals rather than the periods of five or more years between its proper sequels. And *Half-Life 2* episodes aren't as long as retail games; give them that. The original analogy between short serial games and familiar formats invoked TV seasons in all the ways you'd expect. That comparison, too, is as apt as it isn't, because games—with their obligation to deliver playtime in double-digit hours—already resemble *Lost*'s sleepest midseason weeks. In that respect, Valve's three-parter is akin to feature films where the question is "So can we sacrifice that to the cutting room?" and not "How can we stretch this with the season finale so far off?"

FLUFF-FREE

Filler-free to an even greater extent than *One*, *Episode Two* wags a finger at FPSes with *Pac-Man* mentality—the maze and its color changes, but the "dot eating" doesn't—at backtracking and at levels revealingly named "Once more, with feeling" (see: *Halo 2*). I'll address the exception now: Early on, one overly long tussle iterates on the *HL2* sequence that pit players and automated turrets against charging Combine in Nova Prospekt prison. Here, first-timers will see the challenge intensify in itsy-bitsy increments. I saw through it. That's it, though. Each and every 20 minutes thereafter, tone and tension vary, simmering and boiling and smoldering again across linked story beats very much like those in a movie.

Supersized physical puzzles—seesaw a broken and teetering bridge span so that you can boost your car up and over a chasm—give way to scenes from the zombie apocalypse, which grade into the laugh-

EDITOR'S NOTE

The requisite playtime for our reviews of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* and *Portal* took place at Valve Software's Seattle, WA-based headquarters over a period of three consecutive days. Valve representatives sequestered our reviewer in an office, obligingly honoring requests for no disturbances, as he played both games—in their entirety—on a typical PC, custom-built to our very specific requests. We imagine most readers don't give a hoot about such circumstances, but we're laying it out here in the interest of full disclosure.

out-loud dialogue of grunts debating who's had the harder time: those in City 17 or its White Forest fringe. *Episode Two*'s transitions dovetail invisibly. They embarrass FPSes that bounce players between firefights jury-rigged with the duct tape and bailing wire of rude cut-scenes. As a result, water cooler chitchat orbits moments, not missions; reference any scene and, as with movies, people recognize both it and its place in the bigger picture.

"Yeah, you improvise a human trebuchet from a grenade and an iron grate?" Char marks subtly suggest the solution to a brainteaser that other studios wouldn't dare ship without the confidence of an explanatory device. "Antlion soldiers and acid-vomiting workers fight zombies who also fight you and the Vortigaunt!" Valve frees *Half-Life*'s swelling menagerie in unruly three-way chicken fights. "I swear Alyx winked at me when I looked over. Later, her dad, Eli Vance, kidded us about the world's baby deficit before the self-important Dr. Magnusson stormed in." Because characters develop gradually, the problem isn't our indifference to the cast...but rather the risk that we'll expect to learn more about every incidental figure, such as Mag's charming lab-coated alien acolyte, in future episodes.

I've selected these examples at near-random to avoid spoiling truly standout showpieces. *Episode Two*'s entire five-hour experience—vivid, emotionally engaging, and virtually unsurpassed—is full of them. •Shawn Elliott

VERDICT

✦ Exhilarating pacing; thoroughly enjoyable.

✦ A single overly long action sequence; loading pauses.

10/10

EXCELLENT

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• Enemy mine: *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* excavates an antlion lair.

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