

GAME REVIEW

XCOM 2

“WELCOME BACK, COMMANDER”

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XCOM 2 is the very definition of a flawed masterpiece.

Firaxis' second offering in its reboot of the venerable X-COM franchise doubles down on all the strengths of the previous games while removing many of its stranger habits. In the first game you were The Commander helming an elite, international task force purposed to defend Earth from alien invasion. That this translated to flying around with six soldiers in a single dropship, while having to research and purchase every weapon individually, was an odd dissonance between plot and gameplay. Come 2016 and Firaxis have devised a setting that not only fits seamlessly within these constraints, but outright demands them.

It starts 20 years after the first invasion, and Earth has finally fallen to the aliens. A global fascist state called ADVENT is in cahoots with E.T. and the shattered remnants of the XCOM project must strike from the shadows to liberate Earth, while uncovering the aliens' true plans. The new XCOM base is a repurposed alien ship that you clear out and make facilities in, and the ship must fly to missions across the Geoscape – no longer are you even in theory an elite army with global support, instead a single group of desperate fighters. Fly around the world on your ship-base, contacting and growing the Resistance and countering ADVENT's frequent and best attempts at stopping you in your tracks – to say nothing of the Avatar Project that's slowly reaching completion. You don't know what'll happen when it does, but it's certainly The End for humanity.

The shift to guerrilla warfare not only justifies the small squad sizes but allows for an entirely new stealth mechanic called concealment. Missions will normally start with your squad concealed, allowing you to move about the map at your leisure provided you stay out of detection. This allows XCOM to start the fight on its own

terms for a change, and setting up the perfect Overwatch ambush by firing a grenade out of concealment is a marvellous feeling.

As with *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, XCOM 2 lets you rank up your rookies into four distinct classes. The classes are vastly more satisfying to play than their *Enemy Unknown* equivalents, and they each have two branches along their skill tree that allow for very different gameplay. The Ranger can choose to invest in stealthy, slippery combat that capitalizes on critical hits from flanking shotgun blasts, or go HAM with their sword skills. The Support class is replaced with the Specialist, who is the most versatile and offers strong healing and hacking capabilities delivered through their pet GREMLIN drone, as well as accurate fire support from their assault rifles. The Sniper is incorporated into the Sharpshooter class and is even better at the old stationary fire platform stuff of old, but is only an alternative to the new Gunslinger skill branch that offers stylish pistol play. Last but definitely not least the Grenadier is an improved version of *Enemy Unknown*'s Heavy class, with the Support's grenades focus thrown in. All four classes and the eight broad playstyles they represent are strong options and the successful Commander will have one of everything in their roster. (That said no one does more damage than the Gunslinger; don't let the previous game make you underestimate the pistol.) A fifth class can be unlocked through research and investment: the Psi Operative will quickly dominate the fight and if you find that the going gets tough it's wise to get a couple out ASAP.

The aliens and ADVENT are all either new units or modified versions of their *Enemy Unknown* brethren. Gone are the dinky little Sectoids, replaced with a lanky monster that has Mind Control right out of the gate. The Viper can grab and bind your operatives, and you don't want to swipe a Muton with your Ranger's sword. The

delights of the Andromedon and the Gatekeeper wait until the very end game, but they will rock your world. Every new alien type that crops up has clear strengths and behaviours and it's never simply a matter of this or that having more health or doing more damage. You have to keep your tactics fluid in order to thrive, and if you have a Specialist with good hacking and a strong Psi Operative you can turn the aliens' strongest weapons against them.

Your soldier's inherent skills offer a wealth of solutions to get the job done, and the diverse list of weapons, armours and utility items you can build provide a variety of squad loadouts to deal with each mission. To the point where by the end game you will complain of power creep as you casually clean up challenges that would have had you cowering in fear at the start of the campaign. The absence of jetpacks and the robotic SHIV units are also conspicuous. The greatest missed opportunity is perhaps the absence of propaganda in the gameplay; a guerrilla resistance game ought to force you to win the hearts and minds of the people, but XCOM 2 barely touches on this aspect. This is big on my wish list for the inevitable expansion, though the game's closing sequences make it unlikely to appear.

As much as I have enjoyed this game I would recommend holding off on purchasing it as there are some very mysterious performance issues and bugs that affect everyone differently with no as yet discernible pattern. Articles on PC Gamer and Rock, Paper, Shotgun detail work-arounds to these performance problems and Firaxis have committed to solving the issue, but as of the time of writing (20th Feb) no real ground has been broken. I myself wish my game ran smoother but I'm having a blast nevertheless.

(A Season Pass can be purchased which will unlock customization DLC, some extra missions, and eventually a new class of soldier – possibly cyborgs. All coming this summer.)