

***Wasteland 2* (2014) Review**
inXile Entertainment
Written by Scott Sherman

Wasteland 2 is a post-apocalyptic RPG developed by inXile Entertainment, which seeks to reestablish forgotten RPG traits and mechanics abandoned long ago by a rapidly developing game genre. Whereas modern RPGs take pride in the vast quantity of decisions, player impact, avatar development and so on, *Wasteland 2* dares modern gamers to ease their foot onto the brake pedal. Its focused on a renaissance of slow, thoughtful gameplay. Decisions come attached with meaningful emotional baggage, combat can require a meticulous use of positioning and resource consumption, and exploring often rewards the players with tangible necessities such as ammo, health packs, and skill upgrades rather than out of game achievements. While *Wasteland 2* does suffer from a handful of technical issues, gameplay misfires, and a main story line that doesn't hit as hard as it should when compared to some of the side quests, Brian Fargo and inXile have done more than just develop a successful old fashioned RPG in the modern era. Instead, they've shown such titles can compete with and remind contemporary RPGs that not all abandoned design concepts are antiquated.

Given that *Wasteland 2* is so inherently tied to predecessors like *Fallout 1* simply through its existence as well as a multitude of in game call backs, the expectation is there for a main story that rivals Fargo's previous work. Without a doubt, *Wasteland 2* captures the feel of the destitute open world post-apocalyptic games that gamers have fallen in love with. The player's journey through the southwest United States is at no point boring, and many of the stops along the way produce satisfying, compelling and rich tales. One of the first decisions the player is presented is between saving a town that produces clean water, and a science station that's working towards providing a sustainable form of food. Regardless of what the player chooses, he or she is forced to listen to the downfall of the other location through their radio. Aided by both the writing and the voice acting, the transmissions put a palpable taste of failure in the player's mouth. As if that wasn't enough, a later mission asks you to visit the location you abandoned and face the results of your previous decision. These types of moments are present throughout *Wasteland 2*'s main plot, including many of the various side missions.

However, with such exceptional moments in the game's story line, it seems underwhelming when the overarching plot and themes don't come together in the same way. While inXile doesn't make any wild efforts to disguise the path of the narrative, it is ultimately predictable. I didn't care about or hate the game's main antagonist nearly as much as I did a villainous mercenary leader exploiting settlers through vicious taxation and bullying. The reason being is because I was able to experience the latter as I walked through the aftermath of said mercenary companies actions. I was presented with moments like a man shooting himself into the same grave in which he had buried his wife. The story's antagonist simply isn't present in the game until much later, and when he finally does receive more of a spotlight it's not enough time to properly develop his personality or motives beyond the basic surface level. As a result, the main plot doesn't have the impact that it could or should, especially when juxtaposed with earlier characters and missions.

Characters and their respective dialogue is without a doubt where *Wasteland 2* draws the majority of its strength from. From beginning to end, the game has no shortage of engrossing characters and factions. Perhaps the best example is a society found later in the game, called the Mannerites, who pride themselves on the proper use of manner, etiquette and hygiene. So much so, in fact, that being rude or unclean often results in execution by law enforcement. Such a representation really highlights the success of *Wasteland 2*'s writing and dialogue. A trait well established by the *Fallout* series, *Wasteland 2* is able to engage the player through a level of surface humor and playfulness, while simultaneously using those attributes to reveal the underlying nature of post-apocalyptic humanity. The comedy and vileness of the game's societies and characters are so well juxtaposed, that the two feed into and strengthen each other. The contrast between such polar opposites highlights both, and ultimately adds to *Wasteland 2*'s personality, and its effectiveness in presenting, building and evolving the world's various personas.

Yet, the result of such careful and excellent character development reveals the somewhat limited personality of the player's own squad. Obviously there's no one protagonist to the game, as the player

controls and is referred to as a squad throughout the story, yet it still feels like there was a missed opportunity to develop inner squad characteristics and relationships. *Wasteland 2* begins off suggesting it might during character creation, as you're allowed to pick a religion, cigarette preference and write your own back story for your squad members. Still, it's entirely reliant on the player to immerse themselves and project any personality onto the squad. NPC squad members you can adopt throughout the story are vastly more interesting, such as a half man half android who speaks in both colloquial phrases and dictionary synonyms. These characters unfortunately make your squad feel pale and lesser in terms of depth. While it doesn't detract from the plethora of wildly engaging characters and personalities within the world of *Wasteland 2*, it does feel like an oversight.

Wasteland 2's gameplay and combat may not be the most in depth portion of the game, but it is far from being simply adequate. The combat in *Wasteland 2* functions on a turn based, isometric model in which the player cause use action points to take any action, be it attacking, moving, reloading, healing and so on. While the core gameplay is simplistic, a large amount of strategy and depth can be extracted from various interactions, such as armor versus different weapons types, squad positioning, and which members are specialized in various skills. My initial strategy, and one I assume many other players had when developing their team was to cover all possible attributes. In other words, everyone in my squad used a different weapon type, I had one field medic who was also my surgeon (a skill used to revive downed teammates), one character who specialized in lock picking, and so on and so forth. However, I quickly learned that every squad composition has flaws. Many weapons overlap in the ammo types they use, losing your medic or surgeon mid fight can be devastating if you only have one, and melee character can cause targeting issues for ranged characters. This leads to the player needing to meticulously construct their squad, and to carefully orchestrate fights in which each squad member needs to be give a position or chance to excel given their specific build. *Wasteland 2*'s combat is constantly engaging, as it asks you to consistently come up with new ways and strategies to approach each different and unique fight based on what's available to your squad.

There are, however, hiccups within the combat system that do detract from the overall effectiveness of *Wasteland 2*'s gameplay. Perhaps the one most obviously in the forefront is the game's readability, or, can the game accurately present the player with the information they need to approach a certain encounter. A strong, and often annoying example of this is what *Wasteland 2* considers cover. I'd sometimes run into scenarios in which I'd position my squad behind rock clusters, only to be hit by what felt like attacks going straight through my cover. My squad members would react to such terrain as though it was cover (kneeling down with their backs to it), yet it seemed trivial in when it would actually apply the cover bonuses or not. It wasn't an overwhelmingly common issue, but it was consistently intrusive when it did arise.

Another issue that occurred much more often was how my squad positioned itself when entering combat. Speaking bluntly, *Wasteland 2* is in dire need of a squad formation system. Many times I would enter combat, and my squad would spread out to respective squares on the isometric grid. This would create headaches in terms of friendly fire, shot paths being blocked and so on. Even if I attempted to preemptively position my squad prior to combat, any enemy patrolling into range of me would disrupt my formation if I hadn't finished moving my squad exactly where I wanted them to be. While this issue can be quickly remedied within the first few moves on many encounters, it felt like an unfair way to be put at a disadvantage by enemies who had a higher speed stat, and could take their turn in combat first.

While *Wasteland 2* is not the masterpiece it will ultimately be compared to in *Fallout 1*, it represents an achievement in adapting classic game components into a modern market. Like many older titles, inXile's game impresses through creativity and involving dialogue and characters rather than a flashy sense of presentation and or set pieces. The combat is more than serviceable, and neither that, character interaction, or story progression left me bored and wishing I could get past them and on to another portion of the game. While there are hangups in smaller design decisions and a handful of distracting bugs, *Wasteland 2*'s limited issues don't detract from the lovingly crafted and designed world inXile have made. *Wasteland 2* succeeds where it aims, and is a welcome addition to the RPG genre.

Score: 8.7