You are nameless, soulless and undead. The only thing you know for sure is that you are cursed… again. Hearing legends about a land of repentance where curse could be traded for humanity, you transit to the dreadful world of Drangelic. Once a prosperous kingdom, it is now inhabited monsters, demons and once-were heroes that decayed to the state of hollows.

If Dark Souls 2 were its first iteration’s brother, it would be his eldest fallen one. Reputation has a lot to account for when you look at a game like Dark Souls 2. The Dark series are best known for bringing back spitefulness as a video game genre. While some of the youngest games in gaming’s history can be considered as undeniably tough, there is no doubt that this trait was deliberately tailored by Dark Souls 2 creators.

Like its predecessors, you puts you against some of the toughest challenges that you will have encountered in your gaming career. As you progress from bone fire to bone fire, (checkpoints where you respawn after dying) you will understand the level of cruelty of the game: it will ambush and instantly kill you without ever giving you guidance of how to make it better. The controls will be the only explicit instructions that you will be given. And while these are somewhat simple, their mastery are essential to the unfolding of more complex manoeuvers that you may find fitting to some challenges.

That being said, challenges are still presented gradually difficulty wise. The particularity of the game is that it does not show you how to play but how to learn to; the world of Drangelic is so dicey and unpredictable that you cannot learn an impassible way of behaving toward threat, but you can develop how to adapt. Even though the game is of great length, this is how it will keep you on your toes from the first to the last minute.

On various occasions, I have been wondering what to do next as I hit a hard encounter. Knowing that I walked by a path that I then ignored, I decided to go back explore this way, temporarily putting aide my current progression. There is a lot of flexibility on how you can discover and advance in Dark Souls 2. In this way, the game gives a lot of freedom like there it is so rarely given in video games. Probing your opportunities is as enjoyable as vanquishing a mythic warrior is.

The hazards of the world presented in Dark Souls 2 is nothing near enough to keep adventurous female characters from setting off on exploration. On various occasions, you will come by intriguing female character that will tell you about their ventures through the land of offer you some of their goods to sell. Just like the male characters, they recognize the risks of leaving safe grounds but you can just as well expect them to cross your paths. It feels very genuine that the representation of a world marked by survival and death does not hurt itself against the hurdles of traditional gender roles viewpoints.

Moreover, several important characters are women characters: keepers of the flame all are sisters that once had important roles in the equilibrium of the world. You also meet a mysterious women who will set you on the path of the collection of great souls, stepping forward toward the realization of the prophecy that predicts the advent of a hero that will one day pull the world out of its curse. All are great images of meaningful female characters that we ought to see more in video games.

It is a drag that the graphics do not live up to the game’s gameplay quality. Unfortunately, while the visuals do not really qualify themselves as ugly, and can sometimes be enjoyable, they can look a bit outdated. It would have been a great plus to have the game make a big leap forward in graphics compared to its predecessors, which encountered the same set back.

Multiplayer is an contradictory aspect of the game: players can be both your enemies and your friends. At any time, players can randomly invade your world to accelerate your passage to death. Winning a fight over an invader has probably been one of my greatest pride. But your kins are not all of merciless origins: on various occasions, you can summon generous souls that left divine marks on the ground for you to touch.

Death has its toll in the Dark Souls 2. Dying many times will always bring you back you corpse but this one will slowly become weaker and weaker, reducing your maximum health points as a result of the hollowing of your soul. This adds a tension the possible risks that you may want to take, sometimes tinting your decisions with regret. So what will you do? Live by your fallen undead fellows or try to keep your humanity through your journey?

Pros

Flexibility in exploration gives a lot of freedom

Precise combat system

Difficulty induces pride in every little victories

Rich world told in an unconventional way

Cons

Very hard without any way to reduce difficulty

May look a bit outdated graphically

Dark Souls 2 is a game of learning. You will remember every sword swing you made as they all kept you away from your imminent death. The fact that your life is so fragile in this game makes it a great teacher at playing it. Unconventional it is indeed. As it could be seen as a downside, the difficulty of the game is its greatest charm. Every step forward will reward you with pride, which is almost all that the game has to offer you. Precarious situation it is indeed. This is why players will remember playing this game after several years: their achievements will have been made in the hardest situations and will remember Dark Souls 2’s way of teaching through death.