

Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix Review— Feelings in 1080p

By Todd Harper | January 13, 2015



There are very few game genres more polarizing than the Japanese role-playing game, and inside that field *Kingdom Hearts* stands out as particularly so. It feels as if there's very little middle ground when it comes to the adventures of Sora and company. In the interest of full disclosure, I'm a longtime fan of the series who sometimes gets a little anxious when he sees the internet's latest volley against the series' supposedly incomprehensible story or derisive sneer at just the *word* "zipper," as if invoking it is all that's necessary to mock the sensibilities of series character designer Tetsuya Nomura. For whatever reason, there's a way in which disliking *Kingdom Hearts* accelerates past mere dislike.

I don't bring this up to start a fight; I bring it up because discussing *Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix* in review terms would be terribly brief if all I cared about were mechanics and changes. And there are some! During the era in which the original *KH* games were released, Square Enix had a notorious and infuriating policy of releasing a "final" version of their big ticket releases in Japan with the English voice acting of the localized version intact and additional content not found in the US/EU releases. Those "final" versions never made it to the US (officially anyway) until very recently; both *Kingdom Hearts 2.5* and its predecessor, *Kingdom Hearts 1.5*, include these "Final Mix" versions of *Kingdom Hearts*, *Kingdom Hearts 2* and *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*.

This means that KH 2.5 does include some new content. Both of the playable games on the disc—Kingdom Hearts 2 and the PSP game Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep—have new cut-scenes, items, abilities and challenges to enjoy compared to the originals. There are also gameplay tweaks, but they are often so subtle that unless your recall of the first go around is exceptional, they will probably go unnoticed even by a longtime series fan (like yours truly). If you're the type who finds the plot of *Kingdom Hearts 2* in particular difficult to understand, many of the new cut-scenes should help to explain the nitty gritty of the game's admittedly twisty plot. The new scenes tend to focus on the story of Roxas, the "Nobody" of series main character Sora around whom many of the story's finer details revolve, as well as Organization XIII, the black-coated bad guys of the game.

As with the previous HD re-release in the series, *KH 2.5* includes a "movie version" of one of the *Kingdom Hearts* games designed for a handheld: the DS game *Kingdom Hearts re:Coded*. This is, in fact, an improvement over *KH 1.5*'s similar treatment of the other DS title, *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*; there is less unvoiced reading, with Mickey Mouse narrating most of the filler content that replaces the actual gameplay. It's an interesting diversion if you're interested in the series and never had the chance to play *KH re:Coded*.

The problem with all this description, though, is that I'm sure those among you who've never played a *Kingdom Hearts* game—if they're reading this at all—are probably hovering somewhere between confused ("what the hell is a capital-n Nobody?") and bored ("so... it's all re-releases?"). As is the nature of HD remakes, if you didn't have interest in the first games, then it's difficult to say whether or not the re-releases will suit you or not. They seem tailor made for those who either loved and miss these games, or who *wanted* to play them and never could. To those people, I can heartily recommend this game that they probably already own.



I'm here to talk to the rest of you: those who clicked out of interest, who aren't series fans. Those who are possibly just curious. Maybe even some of the haters who decided they wanted to see what was going on with this re-release. I'm here to tell you what this series is about:

Feelings.

Yes, in terms of gameplay, the *KH* games are action-JRPGs, and reasonably well crafted ones. As Sora (or, in *Birth by Sleep*, as Ventus, Terra or Aqua) you bash and spellcast and occasionally platform jump your way through various worlds. It says something, though, that *KH*'s core gameplay—particularly in *Kingdom Hearts 2* and beyond, where they really perfected it—is usually so smooth that it entirely fades into the background as part of the experience.

What keeps drawing me to *KH* games, though, is the continual swing between heart-warming reunion and the tragedy of parting. The game's dialogue writing, drawing as it does on the heart-on-your-sleeve aesthetic of both anime and manga as well as fairy tales and Disney films, isn't going to win any awards. But the characters and the situations they find themselves in

always find a way to pull at my heart. And indeed, “heart” is the word at the center of the *Kingdom Hearts* series in more ways than one. The idea of the heart as the center of our being, where our soul resides, is at the core of the *Kingdom Hearts* mythology. In particular, the idea of who we are being constructed out of our memories and feelings towards others, our bonds and connections with them, is very salient. And often, very sad.

I’m going to slightly spoil both of the games on the *KH 2.5* disc for you right now, to make that point. *Kingdom Hearts 2* is in many ways the story of people trying to put right the mistakes they’ve made, dealing with their regret and pain. At the end of *Birth by Sleep*, one of the main characters has had their body possessed by the game’s villain (and as this is a prequel, will go on to do great evil over the course of the series), another is in a coma-like sleep, and another is fated to wander a purgatory-like world of darkness for a *decade*. Yet what both games offer is the promise of reunion; the idea that as long as those we love live in our hearts, we will always be reunited no matter what separates us.

I can’t promise that you will have the same affective response to these games that I do. It may be that as someone who moved around a lot as a kid, this theme of parting and reuniting is just very salient for me. But if you want my opinion on what *Kingdom Hearts 2.5* is like, the answer is: I am happily reunited with a friend I haven’t seen in a long while.