

Half-Life

Studio: **Valve**

Designer(s): **The Valve Team**

Part of series: **Half-Life**

Release: November 19, 1998

Main credits: Storyline: **Marc Laidlaw**

Music: **Kelly Bailey**

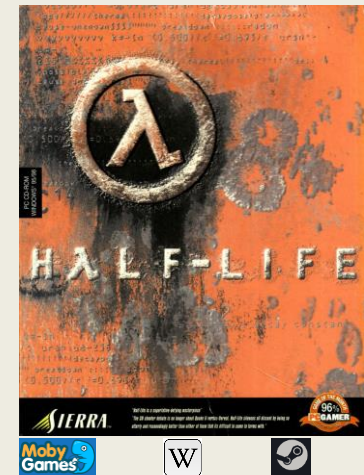
Everything else: **The Half-Life Team**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough, parts 1-7 \(7 hours 10 mins.\)](#)

Basic Overview

The sheer amount of text written about *Half-Life* in the past quarter century is probably comparable to the amount of studies written on Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky; even if you have never played a single computer game in your life, you may still have heard of Gordon Freeman and his legendary crowbar — the late 20th century equivalent of Thor's hammer and the staff of Moses. This means that just another «oh look, *Half-Life* is one of the greatest games of all time, and here's why» review is hardly necessary, given how high it usually finds itself in most cumulative ratings and how many people still play it on a regular basis (though, admittedly, now that the fan-made *Black Mesa* remake is finally complete, interest in the original has taken on a much more historically-colored flavor). But given that your humble servant has a somewhat special, slightly atypical history of relations with Valve's classic, perhaps somebody might find it curious to take a look at this personal angle, which would concentrate more on the storyline and world-building aspects of *Half-Life* than on its heavy action side.

As you can probably gather well enough by the introduction to *St. George's Games*, as well as the general selection of reviews on it, I am not exactly «Mr. Action Guy». In my early gaming days, sometime in the late Eighties, I did enjoy quite a bit of the



arcade stuff — shooters, platformers, everything from *Alley Cat* to *Digger* and the first-and-still-best *Prince Of Persia* — but my attention was very quickly whisked away toward adventure games and strategies, where you could immerse yourself in alternate realities at your own leisurely pace, without being forced to take your game as a sports activity. It might also have been a form of subconscious protest — the more people around were getting hung up on «dumb» trigger-happy gorefests or monotonously repetitive Tetris rituals, the more special you could feel when identifying with Princess Rosella, Larry Laffer, or Guybrush Threepwood instead of silly moustached plumbers or creepy blue-haired hedgehogs.

The feeling that I'd made the right choice in life grew even stronger in the days of early 3D, when the world around went crazy for *Doom* and *Quake* — games that, to me, looked utterly moronic, not to mention exceedingly ugly with their crude, blocky polygonal renders and monotonously generated backdrops. What kind of a person could even prefer the likes of *Doom* to something like *Gabriel Knight* or *Day Of The Tentacle*? Or Sid Meier's *Civilization*, for that matter? The same kind of person who'd rather watch *Die Hard* than *Goodfellas*, no doubt. I remember watching my younger brother at the height of his heavy addiction to *Quake* and thinking, "oh my God, I never expected that my explaining to him what *Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking For Love* is all about at the tender age of 8 years would eventually lead to this...".

And then, unexpectedly, it happened. Sometime around 1999, upon returning from a trip to the US, my father brought me back a boxed game as a gift. Knowing how much of a Sierra On-Line fan I was (well, we both were), and obviously knowing nothing about Sierra's very recent demise as a reliable producer of adventure games, he simply saw an appetizing package with the Sierra logo and grabbed it as a souvenir. Ironically, given that particular time window, he might as well have wasted his money on something like *King's Quest VIII*, the most abominable «adventure game» ever released by the studio. Instead, he inadvertently bought a first person shooter, and boy am I glad he did.

Naturally, I was disappointed at first — a slightly more thorough look at the package (which included both the original *Half-Life* and the *Opposing Force* expansion) clearly showed that the game was only *published* by Sierra On-Line, while the actual developer was some bizarre Valve studio I'd never even heard of; and all signs clearly showed that this was simply a shoot 'em up experience, rather than a puzzle-based point-and-click title. I do not even remember how much time it took me to even give it a try; visions of myself getting caught up in a *Doom*-like or, God forbid, *Quake*-like environment were more embarrassing than visions of taking up a job in a government office. Still, the package seemed rather expensive, and I really hated the idea of serious money going to waste, even if the money was not exactly my own, so after a while I braced myself and decided to give it a try — after all, it wouldn't exactly be like losing my virginity, since I did have some experience with shooters and all. And who knows, maybe a Sierra-published shooter would be something mildly special, after all?..

If this fairy-tale had a truly happy ending, you would now be reading my confession about how playing *Half-Life* for the first time changed my life forever, completely changing my perspective on first-person shooters, and how I have since then become the happy father of... uh, I mean, the happy *owner* of all the 5,000 *Call Of Duty* titles, let alone winning all the prestigious awards for speedrunning and such. Unfortunately, the truth is more boring: I am nowhere closer to admiring the mechanics of first-person shooting (or third-person shooting, for that matter) today than I was in 1999. I *am*, however, a major admirer of the *Half-Life* franchise, if seemingly for all the wrong reasons. And I do admit that once I sat down and loaded up the game on that fateful day, I didn't exactly get up — or, at least, didn't exactly think of much of anything else — until it was completed, together with the expansion pack.

The difference between *Half-Life* and all the first-person shooters that came before it — actually, most of the action games, period, that came before it — was clear as daylight. People usually pointed out the obvious technical breakthroughs of Valve, such as the improved 3D environments, the dazzling graphics, the integration of physical factors, the shooting mechanics, the impressively advanced AI, but none of this mattered as much to me as the emphasis that Valve placed on building up the overall universe of *Half-Life*. All of the action games I'd played up to this point, of course, had their own little fantasy or sci-fi universes as well, but they were always clearly secondary to the action. Even *Doom* actually had a plot, but you wouldn't know too much about it without reading the game manual — the guys at id Software clearly thought that the kind of game where you spend most of your time collecting ammo and gunning down demons needed its pacing interrupted by «plot events» as much as a pornographic movie.

The guys at Valve had a different idea here: taking their cue rather from those kinds of porn directors who want to not only show you people fucking, but also *why* they are fucking, they decided that it was important not only to have you shooting, but also to have you know *why* you were shooting — or, for that matter, who you are supposed to be in the first place. To that purpose, they actually hired a science fiction writer, Marc Laidlaw, to help them create an actual world with an actual story that would be integrated into the game itself, rather than read about in the accompanying documentation; and it was largely Laidlaw's achievement that, even if you do not usually find *Half-Life* formally classified as an «action adventure» game, it still feels very much like an actual adventure — one day (and what a day!) in the life of Gordon Freeman, an MIT graduate with a PhD in theoretical physics, though, as it happens, most of the relevant physics on that particular day would be strictly applied, like a crowbar to a zombie's skull, for instance. Or, rather, correction: one day in *your* life, because the game takes very good care about convincing you to feel like an unfortunate MIT graduate, caught up in the whirl of things beyond your control.

It would be futile to deny that the massive commercial success of *Half-Life* was first and foremost due to the amazing (and I do not throw *that* dirty word about too liberally) breakthroughs on the technological front. People liked shooters, and wanted their shooters to get better, and *Half-Life* took shooters to a whole new level, and people were happy as a headcrab on a theoretical scientist's head. But I do wonder what the reception, particularly the *critical* reception would have been if the game had been *just* a shooter, plunging you straightforwardly into the heat of battle with weird alien creatures the same way *Doom* did. At the very least, its legend would have been less resilient — after all, one could argue that the technical achievements of *Half-Life* have long since been surpassed by other specimens of the genre (not least of all, *Half-Life 2!*), but the universe created by Marc Laidlaw and the Valve team still retains a certain uniqueness of its own.

In other words, *Half-Life* is a classic example of a «crossover» type of success, a game that can and will be appreciated both by people who mostly just like to shoot things and those who, like myself, view videogames as a vehicle for escapism and / or for fueling their imagination. This, rather than its innovative approach to 3D imaging and physics modeling, is *Half-Life*'s chief contribution to the medium, and the only reason why I am writing this stuff in the first place.

Content evaluation

Plotline

As it often happens with videogames, Marc Laidlaw's story, written for *Half-Life*, is nothing particularly special by itself. It incorporates several well-worn tropes — a huge super-secret research base (Black Mesa), an innocent victim of circumstances destined to become a hero against his wishes (Gordon Freeman), and a ruthless alien invasion that cannot be stopped by an army, but may be stopped by one man's courage and intelligence (*Lord Of The Rings*, uh, I mean, *Xen*). Boiled down to its essentials, it is not fundamentally different from whatever one might read in the *Doom* manual and seems clearly tailored to the needs and wishes of the action fan and nobody else.



Of course, the G-man is in the details, and the details script the events of *Half-Life* as a bona fide action movie — one that has a proper exposition, a dynamic development with gradually built-up suspense and tension, and several explosively climactic moments. Before you even have a chance to pick up a weapon, you have a chance to be intrigued by the opening sequence — a long, leisurely train ride through the enormous military and research complex of Black Mesa, which could be situated in New Mexico or on Mars or in Wonderland for all we care. The train ride takes up more than four minutes in my playthrough — that is more than four minutes of unskippable passive action, during which you can move inside the train to take in the 3D sights from all directions, but can do absolutely nothing else. The script writers want you to slowly, meticulously, thoughtfully suck in the universe in which you are about to be stranded — not simply treat it as an original background for shooting action, but become overwhelmed by its immenseness and technological awesomeness: the endless tunnels, the huge open space vistas, the armies of scientists and security guards, the intricate system of overhead and underfoot railings, and, of course, the out-of-nowhere terrifyingly friendly announcement voice of the Black Mesa Transit system ("*missing a scheduled urinalysis or radiation check is grounds for immediate termination...*").

Nor is there any shooting to be done at all in the first, introductory chapter ("Anomalous Materials"), most of which will be spent running around corridors, chatting up fellow scientists, putting on your defensive HEV suit, and getting ready for that fateful experiment which will bring on "Unforeseen Consequences" and change the world, or, at least, the market of 1st person shooters, forever. In stark contrast with the imposing opening sequence (which is almost as unsettling as the atmospherically comparable ride through the totalitarian Combine Citadel in *Half-Life 2*), most of that chapter feels safe, almost homely and cozy, with not a single sign of the chaos to come — in fact, I distinctly remember that after a while, it almost made me feel like *wanting* something to happen so that I could finally kick some ass. All of this follows the same recipe as a quintessential catastrophe movie — the better and safer things seem to be at the start, the sharper contrast they will form with the moment when shit finally hits the fan. It's perfect psychological preparation.

And when shit *does* hit the fan, *Half-Life* begins to unfurl in more or less the same way as an action movie, while at the same time respecting all the classic conventions of a multi-level action game. There are several things such games are expected to have in order to be satisfactory — such as gradually more and more complex challenges, new types of obstacles, new enemies with higher defensive and offensive capacities, occasional intermediate bosses, and, of course, a final climactic boss fight. The problem is that, as a rule, a typical shooter would never explain to you where all this shit comes from and how the heck does it even function — because you were not offered a wholesome universe, you were offered a bunch of fun challenges to prove your worth at pushing buttons. This is not how *Half-Life* operates at all.

As the experiment concludes in disaster and you find yourself as one of the few survivors, all thanks to your HEV suit (and quite a bit of luck), the alien invasion begins, and it all feels quite logical. First comes a wave of headcrabs, nasty little buggers who can jump farther than cheetahs and have a bad habit of attaching themselves to the heads of your co-workers, turning them into mutated zombies. Next, in smaller waves, come far more brutal enemies — the acid-spitting «bullsquids», the ultrasound-shocking «houndeyes», and the semi-intelligent electricity-flinging Vortigaunts. As the antagonists get deadlier with each new level, you compensate for this by finding bigger and deadlier weapons — some of them manufactured right here at Black Mesa, some «borrowed» from the invading US marines, who have apparently been sent in by the government to mop up the mess and silence everybody — both the aliens *and* the scientists. (This was a rather bold move, by the way, on the part of Laidlaw and Co. — have Gordon Freeman actually mass-slaughter authentic US army personnel by the dozens; they would not dare repeat this motif when it came to *Half-Life 2*, replacing the game's human/oid/ enemies with the mutated and dehumanized Combine soldiers, so as to spare you any unwanted remorse).

The alien enemies aren't just there because they are supposed to be there; they materialize through a multitude of briefly opening and closing portals, sometimes right in your face or (what is worse) behind your back. The soldiers are carried to the base on military choppers, and behave as realistically as possible — going to cover, trying to encircle you, throwing grenades, limping and clutching their guts when they get hit, sending out radio calls to their buddies. Weapons are found on bodies of your human and alien enemies, in storage lockers, or acquired from scientists, rather than just lying around randomly. And then, of course, there is dialog — sparse, for sure, but enough to make the relatively generic sprites running around you seem a bit more like real people. While your original task may simply be to try and escape Black Mesa to safety, gradually, bit by bit, you gather extra story details from the scientists, ultimately learning that there will be no end to the catastrophe until you yourself teleport to Xen and get rid of the Big Baddie holding the rift.

The «plot» and the action actually complement each other to a tee. Events that unfurl around you rarely impede the tense pacing of the game — or, if they do, it is to provide you a few necessary minutes to catch your breath and regroup before heading into an even bigger mess (like the conversation and restocking sequence at the Lambda Complex, right before launching the Xen teleporter). At the same time, all the carnage feels as if it has a serious, significant purpose — most of the time, you really feel as if lives aplenty, let alone the salvation of humanity as a whole, are dependent on your success, to the extent that whenever I died, I felt pangs of shame, as if Gordon Freeman *really* let mankind down by missing that one last platform by an inch and plunging down to his death in a puddle of radioactive sludge. And the presence of the sinister G-man, seemingly stalking you wherever you go without revealing his identity or purpose, adds an extra element of mystery and

intrigue which, much to the writers' honor, is not at all lifted at the end of the game (though «honor» might be too strong a word — it is more likely that Laidlaw himself still has no idea of what it is that the G-man is supposed to represent, even after *Half-Life 2* and all these years of fan speculation).

Corresponding to the traditional «levels» of action games, *Half-Life* is divided into chapters, each covering a particular map segment and usually centered around one particular issue. These chapters gradually gain in length, difficulty, and intensity, each one typically introducing a new kind (or several new kinds) of enemies and weapons, being qualitatively rather than quantitatively different from each other. To keep things even closer to the feel of an action movie, there is a climactic «reboot» in the middle of the game when Freeman is captured, deprived of all his weapons, and dumped into a trash compactor — thus starting the «Residue Processing» chapter, during which you have to get back some of the weapons and engage in a lot of platform jumping (I actually hate playing that chapter, but I admit it is there for a purpose). Then the game once again speeds up and intensifies, culminating in «Surface Tension», a lengthy, detailed battle with everyone and everything possible in the open air of the Black Mesa mountains. Finally, there are the chapters that take place on Xen, the homeworld of the baddies, which many players disliked for being underdeveloped compared to the rest of the game, but I always regarded them as sort of an extended epilogue anyway — this game is all about the Black Mesa experience, if you ask me.

Almost two decades later, when fans began work on the *Black Mesa* remake of the game, they got all this ideology just right, never once underestimating the power of surrounding events and dialog — in fact, the opening chapter was drastically extended, with lots of extra funny details thrown in. But what the sprawling, expansive *Black Mesa* did for the smaller-scale *Half-Life*, that smaller scale *Half-Life* was doing in 1998 for the entire universe of action games, creating a new medium which could finally merge the values of those who preferred playing games «for the story» and those who would rather do it «for the adrenaline rush». It was a merger that worked for me, doing something that *Doom* could never do — that is, convincing me that at least *some* action games could provide an immersive effect comparable to that of classic adventure titles. Turns out, all you really have to do is provide a bit of context... well, provide it the right way, that is. And which way is the right one? Well, this is what the next few sections will be all about.

Action

Action games in the early days were usually brutal to players. Where adventure games could easily lead you to dead ends and pointless demises, forcing the players to curse their way all through the sixth or seventh replay of the same lengthy sequence, action games liked to punish you fair and square, inheriting this brutality from the era of arcade machines, whose chief

purpose was to milk the player's purse rather than stroke the player's ego. If you complained about the tremendous difficulty of something like *Mortal Kombat*, somebody around would always tell you to suck it up and practice (i.e. spend hours upon hours of your precious time to get better at something that would become obsolete in one year). Of course, some people were (and still are) naturals when it came to conquering the controller and juggling the joystick, but that made things even worse for those of us who weren't. Why bother at all, wasting hours on end trying to beat a certain game when your dorky next door neighbour (who probably hasn't read a single book in his life) can beat it in ten minutes?



And this, too, is where the design of *Half-Life* really struck me as quite amazing in its time. *Half-Life* was not exactly the simplest game to beat, featuring easily the most advanced enemy AI to date — which, admittedly, was still not *that* advanced (glitches and laughable decisions taken by the marines, such as running into their own grenades or getting stuck on corners, were fairly common), but for the first time you had the odd feeling that you were really fighting for your life with real people, made of (digital) flesh and blood. Every now and then, you had to combine strategic and tactical thinking with basic keyboard dexterity, knowing when to run and when to hide, when to blast away and when to use stealth, which weapon to use on which enemy, etc. Going all gung-ho on the alien invaders or your own compatriots was possible, but would more often result in a swift death than an adrenaline rush of Rambo-style invincibility.

Yet this was precisely why *Half-Life* offered a friendly hand to all those players who viewed action games with wary caution. Yes, it is a game that cannot be beat without quite a lot of shooting; but even the most intense, fire-heavy sequences could be carried off slowly, carefully, thoughtfully. Instead of rushing the enemies with everything you got, you could creep up on them from behind the corner, taking them out with a grenade or explosive satchel when they least expected it. Or you could *lure* them around that corner, setting up an easy advantage where they could be quickly headshot without putting up much of a resistance — or even setting up a trip mine to achieve an even more clean victory. The game's 3D structure could be used to tremendous advantage as long as you were careful enough to choose the right angle. Out of serious ammo, with a couple powerful automatic turrets blocking your way? Creep up on them from the correct direction and pistol the shit out of their

tripod legs. An enormous alien grunt policing the corridor? Wait until he turns his back to you and put a crossbow bolt in that huge hive-hand of his. Above all, simply use your head. *Half-Life* is a game that has very, very few dead ends.

If you are *really* desperate, the game features several difficulty levels, ranging from «easy» to «hard», but not including anything like «nightmare» or «deathmatch» — simply because, due to the very nature of the game, such levels would not have made much sense, because they usually require superb dexterity with the controls, whereas *Half-Life* is so much more about strategic thinking than dexterity. Most of the times I played the game, I did it on «hard» precisely because this setting forced me to think creatively — on «easy», you could simply smash through the enemy, but on «hard», where the same approach would lead to extra damage and premature demise, you ended up thinking more about the environment, such as taking note of the position of each and every explosive barrel that could take your enemy out quicker than any of your guns. In the end, I got so good that I could complete the game without taking any damage at all — not a single hitpoint! — although that was also a bit of an extreme, since such an approach required way too much stealth, bordering on tediousness.

Although most of the physics-related breakthroughs for Valve would come later, with the arrival of *Half-Life 2*, the original game was already capable of giving you a feeling of being a real person in a real, gravity-ruled universe, and not only when you were plummeting down from a rocky height with a convincing *crrrrunch!* at the bottom. Quite a bit of the game's challenges are based on platform-jumping, something that I typically hate, but, once again, this was usually a matter of careful planning and calculation rather than nimbleness of fingers (which, should I add, rather beneficially distinguishes *Half-Life* from *Black Mesa*, which did pander to more modern standards of action games and introduced a few breakneck tempo sequences that pissed the hell out of me). Like in real life, where you would rarely take 3–4 jumps across gaps in a row without taking a break and carefully lining yourself up, you can always take your time in *Half-Life* as well. And if you did fall to your death — the game would simply give you a chance to try again, from the very same spot, no need to reload or anything (besides, the quick-saving mechanism was super-easy to use).

In other words, *Half-Life* was simply *the* perfect action game for action game haters — luring you in both with its involving storyline and with its merciful attitude towards those who were into it for the fun, rather than the tough challenge. Even the final boss battle with the Nihilanth, the annoying overgrown foetus in control of the alien invasion, was more of a flashy spectacle than a true challenge — if you got too nervous or overworked, you could always hide behind one of those pointed spikes and have yourself a relaxed cigarette break, while all of the bad guy's projectiles would just break up against the spike. Which does not mean that defeating the Nihilanth was not a challenge, far from it: it was simply a challenge that you could accept on your own terms. *You* decide how you want to run this game, not vice versa.

Atmosphere

Yes indeed. From the opening shots of the game, as your train emerges out of complete darkness to the friendly-chilly sounds of "good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system", *Half-Life* prides itself on its atmospheric qualities. For sure, elaborate multi-level objects were nothing new to computer gaming by 1998, but arguably nothing up to that point could look as monumentally impressive as the Black Mesa Complex. It rolled out before your eyes in a huge, uninterrupted, scrolling 3D sequence, with its lengthy corridors, huge halls, odd devices, robots, conveyers, and sinister green-glowing radioactive sludge — to be experienced, revered, overwhelmed by on its own, not just as a setting for some upcoming heavy action. In a way, it is the Black Mesa Complex itself, rather than the invading aliens or the mopping-up soldiers, that functions as your chief enemy: a giant, depressing, dangerous mechanical monster which is as much of a threat to your opponents as to yourself (remember all those poor headcrabs, drowned in sludge or squished between blades and pistons?).



Escaping this suffocating monstrosity clearly becomes a priority, and the game designers were certainly aware of that, using this desire to their own advantage. The very first time you actually get to see some blue skies is in the "*We've Got Hostiles*" chapter, where, after a few battles with the newly arrived marines, you finally emerge into an open space — only to see it, to your utmost despair, choking with soldiers and helicopters, leaving you no choice but to quickly dash across the landing pad and dive back into the bowels of Black Mesa. I still remember that desperate feeling (*oh no, not the vents again!*) quite vividly, as well as the "*Surface Tension*" chapter, which really went out of its way to prove to you just how much safer it could be below ground than above it. Eventually you have little choice but to adapt, or, at least, make some psychological distinction between the «seedy» areas of the complex (vents, sewers, machinery compartments) and the «clean» ones (office departments and laboratories), even if in terms of actual danger there is no clear preference between the two.

While, obviously, nothing like Black Mesa exists in real life (the Large Hadron Collider and Los Alamos National Laboratory are about the scope of your school chemistry lab next to Black Mesa), the facility looks so vivid that it can easily awaken all

your hidden technophobe feelings — or, pending that, set you on the philosophical train of thought about the complicated relations between man and machines, man and science, or, at the very least, taxpayers and government research grants ("*well, there goes our grant money!*" some of the horrified gentlemen in lab coats are heard saying after the catastrophe). Later, *Half-Life 2* would try to repeat this mix of awe and terror with its depiction of the Combine Citadel, but that would be an imaginary alien construction — Black Mesa, for all of its absurd hyperbole, looks like a fully human creation, simply blown up in scope, and this makes for a very special feel of disgust.

In the aftermath of the Resonance Cascade, Black Mesa becomes a place of attraction for all sorts of living beings — aliens prowling its corridors, scientists running around in confusion and horror, security guards shooting their way out, US marines killing everyone and everything in sight — and all of them are pictured essentially as hostages of the complex. The aliens are confused by the vastness of the place, roaming all over it without any clear strategy of purpose, killing every human in their path more as a precaution for their own safety than anything else. The scientists are utterly helpless, though some of them can actually help *you* out in return for protection (or you can just kill them yourself, pretending to be crazy or something — yet another example of Video Game Cruelty that would be cut out of *Half-Life 2*). The security guards can offer their services as cannon fodder (but I remember feeling especially proud each time I was able to guide a small bunch of guards safe and sound to the end of one or another particular level). All of these NPCs are extremely limited in terms of what they can do, but these limited functions are so well distributed between different types of sprites that it really makes you glad whenever you come across a generic friendly face. Some of those security guards, encountered after long periods of loneliness, made me want to cuddle them, let alone risk my life protecting them (when it's actually supposed to be vice versa).

One of the most controversial aspects of the game have always been the final chapters — which Freeman spends on Xen, teleported there in order to fight his way, one-man army-style, through to the Nihilanth and close the goddamn rift. The section has been described as woefully underdeveloped and unsatisfactory; obviously it is extremely short, when compared to the lengthy traverse of Black Mesa, and features way too much platform jumping and too much Alien Controller shooting to allow us to fully appreciate the weird alien wonders of a parallel universe. To rectify that mistake, the creators of the *Black Mesa* remake even took out several years to create a much larger, much more diverse and challenging world of Xen — which I am not sure was entirely the right thing to do. Perhaps the relatively short length of the original sequences was due to budget and time limitations more than anything else, but also, it must be remembered that Gordon Freeman's mission to Xen was a purely pragmatic one — not to admire the unimaginable, transcendently dangerous beauty of the place, but to put an end to an imminent threat as soon as possible: get in, assassinate, get out.

Even so, I could never claim that proper attention was not paid to constructing a special kind of atmosphere for Xen. In stark contrast with the claustrophobic Black Mesa, most of the action there takes place in the open air — which is so full to the brim of life-threatening situations that you soon wish you were back in the relative comfort and safety of the research complex, where it was at least almost always possible to snuck into some remote corridor or empty lab for a moment of respite. Xen is a place full of predatory forms of life — bullsquids chasing after headcrabs, big green tentacles mopping up the ground, Alien Controllers supervising the slave labor of Alien Grunts (Vortigaunts) — and making any progress in that environment feels like an even more impossible, more surrealistic task than surviving in Black Mesa. And while the game never truly descends into the conventions of the classic horror genre (that element would not be added to Valve games until the Ravenholm level in *Half-Life 2*), advancing into the bowels of Xen, past the Shelob-inspired arachno-monstrosity of Gonarch, the Big Mama Headcrab, and the pitch-dark tunnels of the Nihilanth fortress with Alien Controllers swooping out at you from nowhere, does require a certain element of courage.

Speaking of courage, perhaps the single finest atmospheric find of the game is the multi-limbed Tentacle Monster mini-boss in the «*Blast Pit*» chapter. The sequence where you have to sneak past this green beaky thing through several levels of a giant silo is not just nerve-wrecking, it also makes great use of 3D mechanics — you don't even need any VR equipment to literally feel the breath of the thing over your head as you crawl along the ledges, knowing full well that one wrong move may earn you a peck-of-death from the unseen above. Even when replaying the game for the fifth time or so, I still catch myself dreading the moment when I have to brave that silo — not because the enemy is particularly ugly (what's so ugly about a huge sprout of asparagus with a hornbill beak on one end?), or because the death sequence is particularly gruesome (hey, so your skull just landed in front of you, what's the big deal?), but because, when you screw up, you do not even see your doom coming — you *sense* it coming, you *know* it coming, and you don't even have time to say your prayers. It also briefly turns *Half-Life* into a stealth game, just as the «Residue Processing» chapter turns it into a platform-jumper — just another reminder of all the incredible diversity of in-game experience.

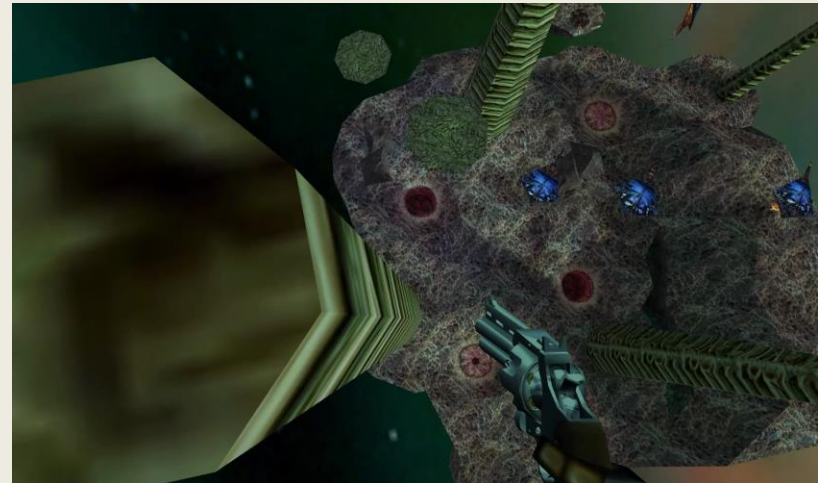
Technical features

Graphics

Every time I encounter yet another generic assessment of *Half-Life* along the lines of "yeah, still a good game after all these years, but the graphics, unfortunately, have not held up", it makes me feel a little sad. As I already mentioned, *Half-Life* was the first ever 3D game I saw that made me acknowledge the potential of those engines — the first ever 3D game which looked,

if not exactly «beautiful», then at least «realistic». However, several years later *Half-Life 2* would set a new, much higher standard — and with that new standard, graphic quality of the original *Half-Life* would be officially demoted to the status of the Rickenbacker Frying Pan. But does this really mean that, while the original *Half-Life* still remains a «recommendable» experience, its graphics today can only be «tolerated», rather than continue to be enjoyed for aesthetic purposes?

I would not agree with such an assessment. The one area where time has really taken its merciless toll on *Half-Life* are the outside areas. In 1998, even the Valve wizards still lacked the graphic technologies to produce convincing 3D renders of natural environments. The rocky crags around Black Mesa share the same textures as slabs of raw beef hung inside the facility's meat lockers; the sandy dunes look like dirty wrinkled bathroom curtains; water surface is not transparent and gives the impression of dried mud rather than liquid. (It all works somewhat better when you are in Xen — which is, after all, an alien world, so theoretically it could look any way you would imagine it to look, polygons and all; the totally harmless blood-red soup that passes for its underwater pools, for instance, is an extremely impressive concept). These are the textures that underwent the greatest changes from the first game to the second — which is why, unsurprisingly, *Half-Life 2* could allow you the privilege of spending most of the game on the outside rather than the inside. But this is also why in the original game you *have* to spend most of the time inside — and it is fairly likely that, had graphic technologies been more evolved in 1998 than they were, we would never have experienced Black Mesa in all its somber glory at all.



Half-Life's GoldSrc engine, developed by Valve, was in fact a heavily modified version of id Software's *Quake* engine, and you can certainly see a lot in common between the two games — but mainly in mechanic terms. Unlike the interiors of *Quake*, the interiors of Black Mesa do not *feel* assembled from a limited number of polygonal building blocks, even if, in fact, they are: instead of the generic brick layers, the corridors and tunnels of Black Mesa consist of smoothly integrated panels whose blurriness, as you zoom in and out with the camera, never seems as off-putting as in previous 3D games. This is all the more important considering that, unlike *Doom* and *Quake*, *Half-Life* is not a game that is naturally intended for speedrunning — if you simply zip through Black Mesa's empty spaces as fast as possible, you are going to miss out on interesting details, unique

examples of objects and graffiti, occasional conversations, Easter eggs, and such. And moving around slowly, taking in the environment, rarely results in visual disgust (unless you find yourself in the open air).

When it comes to character models, I have probably been spoiled by the *Half-Life High Definition Pack* upgrade, which came out in 2001 together with the *Blue Shift* expansion pack and introduced drastic changes to a lot of the NPCs — not only increasing the number of polygons per character, but also changing their looks (thus, the security guards no longer look like they never had a moment of sleep since signing their Black Mesa contracts, and the zombieified scientists now have extra tendrils and gaping maws in their stomachs). However, even back in 1998, as long as you did not pay too much attention to shapes of fingers, the NPCs looked remarkably alive — what the Valve magicians could not achieve with blocky polygons, they at least compensated for by giving their characters funny facial features and hilarious gesticulation to draw your attention away from the deficiencies. The alien models came in amazing detail, making you stop in your tracks to wonder at things like a headcrab's toothy underbelly, or at the Grunt's odd extra limb protruding from his abdomen, or at the contrast between the huge head and the tiny hands of an Alien Controller. The visual effects — lightning flashing out of a Vortigaunt's limbs, sound waves radiating around the Houndeye, stinging insects flying out of the Grunt's hivehand — were realistic and incredibly diverse, as were the enemies themselves, designed in far more imaginative ways than the traditional goblins and demons of *Doom*-style hostile universes; in fact, one could argue that the body shapes, movement mechanics, and predatory strategies of *Half-Life*'s aliens were among the most imaginative in sci-fi history (in this respect, *Half-Life* unquestionably beats *Half-Life 2*, where you spent most of the time battling humanoid enemies, and most of the rest of the time battling the same aliens, e.g. headcrabs and zombies, that you faced in *Half-Life*).

In short, my answer to the graphics criticism would be that *Half-Life*'s visuals today are only as dated as you yourself would want to regard them — in the sense that, although one look at them is sufficient to clearly place the game in the late 1990s, you have no obligation to make the same concessions as you would have to for the likes of *Doom*. Whenever I compare the visuals of the game with the lovingly and respectfully crafted modern graphics of the *Black Mesa* remake, I never once catch myself subconsciously wishing «how nice would it be if all the original textures and models were replaced by these new shiny ones!»; I am simply content to have both sit side by side and be able to go back to either depending on whether, at any particular moment, I have more of a craving for complex and dazzling perfection or for simple and immediate dangerous beauty, the same way I do not have to choose one and only one when choosing between some Fifties' rock and roll classic and its polished remake by some Sixties' or Seventies' rock band. And it is actually an open question — whether in 50 years' time, when the graphics of *Black Mesa* shall look every bit as dated, people will be more frequently returning to it or to the original game.

Sound

I have to confess a crime here: most of the time I played *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2*, I did so with the music (but not the overall sound) turned off — so I do not have a deeply ingrained memory of Kelly Bailey's acclaimed electronic score for the game. The main reason for this was not aesthetic, but circumstantial: the game is, after all, a shooter, and loud music tracks can be *very* distracting when the surrounding ambient sounds actually serve to indicate to you your enemies' positions. Additionally, too many of those soundtrack elements were aggressively fast and dynamic, almost spurring you on to move as quickly as possible through your current location, whereas I always preferred to take it slow and cautious. (This, by the way, is one advantage that the original game, in my opinion, holds over the *Black Mesa* remake — the latter re-crafts way too many sequences so that you have to act really fast or die, particularly in the Xen area, whereas the original almost always let you set your own pace).



Anyway, no complaints about the musical soundtrack as such — its shifts through distinct electronic sub-styles, from New Age to industrial to trance to IDM are all in perfect agreement with the environment, and the programming of the music follows a cool pattern as well: lengthy sequences of relative quiet are usually followed by musical outbreaks at critical moments in the game, e.g. when you are suddenly ambushed by a pack of marines, or encounter a major boss, or get teleported away to a completely new and dazzling environment, etc. I do not know if *Half-Life* innovated this strategy or simply perfected it, but I do not know of any other 20th century games, anyway, which would use it so effectively.

But even without the music, the way *Half-Life* handled sound was marvelous. Not only was there an immense number of sound effects implemented — the ways they came up with all those weird alien vocalizations could probably fill a book — but they worked hard on the surround effect, meaning that the sounds grew louder upon approach to the source and could be panned from speaker to speaker depending on your camera angle. This is something that is quite naturally expected of all modern games, of course, and, again, was hardly invented by *Half-Life*, but was not implemented in such a flawless manner in any previous game I know. It was the sound, in fact, that was responsible for the majority of the game's atmosphere — before turning each new corner, you would stop, hold your breath and listen. Is there something like a soft pigeon-like purring ahead

of you? Get out the crowbar and prepare to whack a headcrab. Is that a bunch of gruff radio chatter I hear? Must be one or two grunts patrolling that corridor. A big, booming footfall? Better ready the grenade launcher, alien grunts have just landed. And, of course, don't get me started on the Green Tentacle Monsters, whose manner of softly pecking their terrible beaks against the metallic floor of the silo (on the inside) or the sand dunes (on the outside) is even more unnerving than their constant demonic moanings and groanings.

In addition to music and general sound effects, *Half-Life* also had a small voice cast, although it was largely unremarkable even when compared to *Half-Life 2* — that game would go to great lengths enriching your experience with memorable and colorful characters, from Alyx Vance to the mad Father Grigori, whereas the original *Half-Life* is largely just populated with nameless scientists, security guards, and marines, who diligently deliver their lines in accordance with stereotypes (scientists are mostly scared shitless; security guards are friendly, but not too bright pals who'd like to hold your beer; and all the marines probably come from Texas or something). One major exception, of course, is the famously mysterious G-Man, who appears at the end of the game to deliver a short, but legendary speech — he is voiced by otherwise not particularly well known Mike Shapiro (although it sort of amuses me to learn that he had previously voiced the title character in Al Lowe's fairy tale *Torin's Passage*; believe me, it's a looooooong way from Torin to G-Man). Here, again, the Valve principle of «let's do it like everybody else does, but let's be a little different in everything we do» paid off pretty well — the G-Man's unique pattern of speech, suggesting everything from alien origins to cybernetics to some extraordinary affliction, has long since passed into voice acting legend.

Only one truly important character in the game has not been provided with a voice actor — in fact, his absolute silence has since then become one of his defining characteristics. This is, of course, *you*, as Gordon Freeman, saviour of the universe as we know it, who is not only inaudible but also largely invisible, apart from his crowbar-wielding, rocket-launching, or snark-petting hands. (Unless you cheat your way into playing from a third-person perspective, which is not something I would recommend: not only is this mode super-glitchy, but Gordon Freeman looks ridiculously pathetic as a superhero when you actually detach your spirit from his body). It is, in a way, ironic how this «Freeman silence» ultimately became the source of all sorts of Internet jokes and memes when Valve was doing absolutely nothing here other than following well established conventions — people do not talk in first-person shooters, they're too busy shooting.

This is, of course, precisely due to the fact that *Half-Life* is so much more than just a first person shooter — it is a story, and *you* are supposed to be an active part of that story. At least in the introductory chapter, when Gordon makes his way to the test chamber and communicates with all sorts of people along the way, one would expect to hear him react — but note that the

dialog is always constructed in such a way that Freeman does not really *need* to say anything. He might be mute, as some have speculated, or he might simply be a "*man of few words*" (as Alyx Vance would refer to him in the sequel), but ultimately he is just a victim of videogame trope circumstance and the Valve team's sense of sly and mystifying humor. Leave it to these guys to have created easily the most memorable invisible videogame character of all time — but what can you do? Sometimes a crowbar in a man's hands does so much more to define a man than anything else...

Interface

And once again, God bless Valve for making a shooter game that hardly even feels like a shooter game because of all the minimalism. In most action games up until that time, you would usually have some sort of status bar — with indicators of health, number of wasted / remaining lives, ammo status, and whatever else the game designers thought to include as extra parameters. Valve took a different path — it included *NOTHING*. Well, *almost* nothing. After you get into your HEV suit, it gives you a tiny display of your vital statistics in the bottom left corner (one number for health, one for armor) and an equally tiny one of the ammo status of your currently wielded weapon in the bottom right corner. There is also a small flashlight icon in the top right corner, usually inactive but indicating the charge status of the flashlight when it's on (I actually think this one was pretty expendable). That's it. Nothing else to clutter the screen. Just you against the world.

One of the many reasons why I typically avoid modern shooters is the confusing clutter you often see on the screen — status bars, health bars, enemy health bars, damage indicators, all sorts of superfluous parameters that take your fun and transform it into annoying sports metrics. *Half-Life* shows that in order to have a fully immersive, exciting, adrenaline-filled experience you need none of those bells and whistles. The opening tutorial, in which you have to complete a training course under the guidance of a helpful hologram, can be completed in ten minutes — five if you're really pressed for time — and is a textbook demonstration of the supremacy of minimalism. You learn to move, sprint, jump, crouch, shoot your weapons, recharge your health and ammo, and recruit security guards and scientists for assistance. Out of this minimal arsenal of actions in reality springs out an impressive number of actions, all of which shall be gradually introduced by means of intelligent level progression and provide you with just as much fun as the most complicated of the modern day shooters, if not more.

It should probably be mentioned that, outside of an occasional glitch or two, *Half-Life* has always, from the very beginning, been of the smoothest running action games I'd ever played. Although adjacent maps can (inevitably) take a bit of time to load, running through each one at breakneck speed with a pack of enemies at your heels never led to any freezes or drops in framerates — and unlike so many games from that epoch which take a whole arsenal of tricks to get running on modern PCs,

Half-Life has been simple and stable on any of the machines and operational systems I've owned through the years (although, granted, this may have been due to Valve diligently updating the code; they even made a separate port of the game to their brand new Source engine for *Half-Life 2*, though I really only played that once and it wasn't too hot — I think they removed the option to dismember your buddies with the crowbar, and that left my cruel ass feeling sad and disappointed).

Furthermore, the «you're following a story» here ideology was enhanced by the clever handling of life-and-death situations. Saving and restoring could be done momentarily with a quick save / quick load button at just about any point in the game, no «checkpoints» or anything; even if you forgot to do that, there was a nice system of background auto-saving which never slowed the game down or distracted your attention. When you actually died, your auto-saves, at worst, rolled you back just a few minutes ago, rather than having to restart the level from scratch. All of that just brought back the point that you were not (at least, not necessarily) playing *Half-Life* as a game to Prove Yourself and Build Character; you were playing it so that you could feel yourself in the shoes of a protagonist in a big sci-fi action movie — and have fun with it.

In fact, I was probably so spoiled with the ease and naturalness of *Half-Life*'s controls that I have since judged pretty much *every* other action game, or, in fact, any game containing elements of action (such as RPGs) by the benchmark of *Half-Life*... and very few have really held up. If, for instance, combat in the game features a health bar over your enemy and there is no way to remove it, I count this as a deficiency — of course, it is always nice to know the fighting condition of the opponent and approximately how many more hours you have to chip away at his stamina, but it is even nicer to be able to shut that off, since in real life you would hardly encounter a glowing red indicator over the bad guy's head. (Actually, *Half-Life* has certain special ways to show you that you have made progress with some of the enemies — for instance, the Vortigaunts, when seriously hurt, lose the capacity of discharging their electric bolts and run away in fear, while the marines utter curses, cling on to their wounded guts, and limp away to regroup. No signs of battle fatigue from the Alien Grunts, though, *ever* — these guys are obviously much more badass than their human counterparts).

I won't even mention all the limitless possibilities that open up when you learn to properly handle the game's console, and / or make use of the hundreds of mods engineered by the community in order to prolong and diversify your fun in the *Half-Life* universe — again, *Half-Life* was hardly the first game that allowed to do this (*Doom* and *Quake* had already set the bar pretty high in that respect), but as far as I know, it still remains a favorite for all sorts of speedrunners, glitchploitators, and people who like digital magic tricks in general. That is not my kind of thing at all (I always prefer returning to the original universe in order to re-experience it and sniff out more subtleties to content mods and fan fiction), but all I can say is that any game that still has people modifying it and finding new ways of having fun with it more than 20 years after the original release has

certainly contributed to the destruction of the myth about videogames being inherently devoid of lasting value. And much of this has to do with the ease and openness of Valve's original interface.

Verdict: *As the Bee Gees would say, "more than a shooter, more than a shooter to me".*

Just as music is so commonly separated into «music for the mind» and «music for the body», yet there are outstanding specimens of that form of art that manage to combine both, so is *Half-Life* that rare type of game which was able to bridge the gap between videogames «for the fingers» and «for the soul». Rare? Well, maybe not *that* rare anymore, given the rise of all sorts of action-adventure titles in the past quarter century, but where would all those titles be without *Half-Life*? Before that game, genre-melding largely took the form of initiatives like «okay, let's make them find this secret panel and guess the code in between shooting everything that moves» (for action games) or «okay, let's insert this pointless bit of combat in between all the puzzle-solving» (for adventure games). To come up with an experience that could goad a seasoned adventurer into learning to shoot 'em up, *or* a seasoned action gamer to actually get involved with and worry about an actual storyline plot did not require actual «genius» as much as it required lots and lots of hard designer work. How do we make the use of this weapon intuitively obvious? How do we make this boss enemy a creature of unique mythological properties, rather than just a generic bullet sponge? How do we insert this plot-advancing detail without making the shooter fan lose interest? How do we inject elements of mystery that will hold the adventure fan glued to the action until the end of the game? How do we keep the difficulty curve of each level smooth and even without becoming too predictable?..



In regard to all these questions and more, *Half-Life* is like a proverbial textbook — a game that should be the natural source of learning and inspiration for all future designers, although it already has a major advantage over all of them by having been there first. The biggest mistake anybody could make would be to interpret this lesson in an «I want to make another game just like *Half-Life*!» fashion, because if the Valve team thought *that* way, well, they'd simply come up with a *Doom* clone. Instead, what they thought was: «We want to make a game like *Doom*, only we shall have everything better than everything else in every possible way we can think of». Take a quick look back at the different sections of this review — each single one will

mention one or more innovative elements, and each single one of these elements was integrated into *Half-Life* not just because it had to be «different» for the sake of difference, but because the team was committed to not only making the best of contemporary improvements in hardware and software technologies, but also making the best of that one technology we are all endowed with, but often neglect — Common Sense.

This is why, even if most of *Half-Life*'s technological achievements have long since been overshadowed by further technical progress, the game remains a more satisfying experience than so many later ones — replaying it over and over again is like reliving a particularly exuberant triumph of the benevolently creative human mind. No other action game I've played or seen played comes truly close to replicating that feeling for me — well, maybe with the exception of *Half-Life 2*, which was one of the major violations of the «lightning never strikes twice» principle in the history of human civilization. And this is coming from somebody who is still afraid that he might have been loving this game for all the «wrong» reasons, at least next to its regular army of speed-running, mod-crafting, Counter-Striking fans.