

## Half-Life: Opposing Force + Blue Shift

Studio: **Gearbox / Valve**

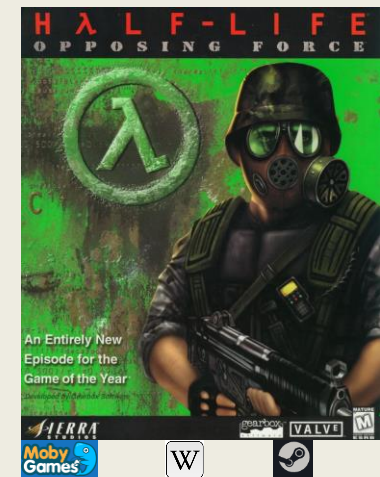
Designer(s): **Rob Heironimus**

Part of series: **Half-Life**

Release: November 18, 1999 / June 12, 2001

Main credits: Director: **Randy Pitchford**  
 Storyline: **Rob Heironimus, Randy Pitchford et al.**  
 Music: **Chris Jensen, Stephen Bahl**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough, parts 1-7](#) (6 hours 20 mins.)



### Basic Overview

In what is a fairly typical situation for the link between great ideas and great idealists, Valve certainly did not invent the very concept of the «Expansion Pack» (what is now, with the advent of the Internet era of gaming, more frequently known as DLC), but I think that many people, when pressed to remember the first ever expansion packs they had installed, will immediately nostalgize about the era of *Half-Life*. In reality, the idea had been most certainly tested out earlier, specifically for RPGs (*Diablo: Hellfire* in November 1997, *Baldur's Gate: Tales Of The Sword Coast* in May 1999, etc.); for action games, one clear example in particular is the *London 1969* expansion pack for *Grand Theft Auto*, released in April 1999. But few people give a damn about the original, pre-III, *GTA* titles any more, and the expansion pack was not that well received upon release, either.

It is reasonably safe to say that, while the two main expansion packs for *Half-Life* no more «introduced» the concept of the expansion pack than the Beatles «introduced» the concept of the three-minute pop-rock song, they did more to popularize this type of medium than any previous game studio targeted at the PC market. And even if you would like to argue with this statement as well, then how about this: Valve were the first to come up with two perfect examples, in a row, of how to make a truly meaningful and useful expansion pack (*Opposing Force*) — and how to make a completely meaningless and perfectly



useless expansion pack (*Blue Shift*). As much as I have loved the former, I have always hated the latter, despite both being essentially engineered by the same group of people. This enigma has fascinated me for almost twenty years, and while the safety and prosperity of the world around us will hardly depend on our ability to get to the bottom of it, it is at least a good pretext to make this into a comparative review of the two products (writing a separate review for *Blue Shift* would simply be too painful for me).

Curiously enough, «the same group of people» did not actually include anybody from the same Valve Team that created and produced the original *Half-Life*. Instead, the task of expanding the game with extra content was sourced out to Gearbox Software, a brand new company formed by a bunch of developers with previous work experience at 3D Realms and Bethesda, chief names being Randy Pitchford (who acted as director and producer) and Rob Heironimus (main designer); the Valve guys explained this decision by their desire to focus on future projects — such as creating multiplayer entertainment derivative of *Half-Life* (*Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike*) and, of course, planning ahead to *Half-Life 2*, development on which is said to have begun mere months after the shipping of *Half-Life*.

There may already be a small tingle of discomfort somewhere within this decision — a touch of the «corporate» approach in which, apparently, the link between the artist and the universe created by the artist is deemed less important than the link between said universe and its commercial customer. Things went sour when Leisure Suit Larry slipped out of the hands of Al Lowe, or (as arguable as this point may be to some fans) when Guybrush Threepwood was separated from his biological dad, Ron Gilbert, and became forcefully adopted by the clueless couple of Larry Ahern and Jonathan Ackley. And even if *Half-Life*, formally at least, was a first-person shooter rather than an adventure, it is still somewhat comforting at least to know that the expansion packs were centered not around Gordon Freeman, but around other characters of the *Half-Life* universe — Gordon Freeman, frozen in time until the release of *Half-Life 2*, would remain forever confined to the realm of Valve proper.

That said, examples of fairly successful outsourcing do occur in the gaming industry, much the same way they occasionally (though rarely) crop up in the movie world — and Gearbox turned out to be a generally reliable outlet, with enough designer, writer, and programmer talent to respect the atmosphere and mechanics of the original universe while still daring to expand on them in new and unpredictable manners, at least as far as *Opposing Force* is concerned. Although as of today, *Opposing Force* has largely been forgotten (young gamers sometimes pick up the original *Half-Life* out of respect and curiosity, but few of them probably reach the end of the game, let alone hunt for expansions), back in 1999–2000 it was quite well received by critics and fans alike — at least, those who had not yet been swayed by *Counter-Strike* and whose undying love for Black Mesa and Xen demanded that they explore everything connected with those locations.

*Blue Shift*, on the other hand, was notably colder received already when it first came out — which, admittedly, was the result of a marketing strategy gone awry; initially, *Blue Shift* was going to be just a little extra add-on to the new, graphically reworked version of *Half-Life* ported over to the trendy Dreamcast console, offering potential buyers an additional incentive to spend their cash without feeling thoroughly ripped-off. However, just as the port was almost ready for shipping, Sega discontinued the Dreamcast production line altogether — another one bites the dust — which led to Sierra canceling the Dreamcast remake and releasing *Blue Shift* on its own for PC instead. Naturally, people thought this was going to be another *Opposing Force*, and were predictably disillusioned when their expectations were shattered. Still, I am not retelling this in order to cut *Blue Shift* any slack: whatever circumstances it was nurtured in, it was supposed to be played, not merely to illustrate the awesomeness of Valve's 3D engine on a shiny new console system.

Note that there was at least one other expansion pack for the original game: *Half-Life Decay*, designed for cooperative multiplayer gameplay and released exclusively for PlayStation 2 (in November 2001) — meaning that I never played it for both of these reasons (no multiplayer experience for me and nothing but PC). As far as I can tell, it was received more or less on the same level as *Blue Shift* rather than *Opposing Force*, and the only universally appraised thing about it was the even higher graphic resolution than *Blue Shift*'s High Definition Pack. This review will focus exclusively on comparison between *Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

For the main plotline of *Opposing Force*, Gearbox writers chose the classic mechanism of perspective inversion — either to avoid accusations of predictability, or out of necessity to apologize before the US Marine Corps for making them the bad guys in the original *Half-Life*. Either way, instead of playing as Gordon Freeman, you were now to step into the heavy army boots of Corporal Adrian Shephard (that's right, with a P-H — don't you dare confuse the gentleman with Commander Shepard of *Mass Effect*!), member of one of the squads assigned to invade and mop up Black Mesa after the unlucky «accident». Just as Shephard's chopper begins the



descent to his final destination, it gets blown up by one of the alien creatures, and Shephard finds himself stranded in one of the areas of the facility, from where he is now obligated to make his own escape.

Gearbox' mission throughout the game is fairly clear: give devoted players more of the same experience — but try to make it as different from the original game as possible. The early levels start out deceptively: other than a couple of new weapons (such as a heavy wrench and a knife instead of Freeman's trusty crowbar) and a couple of new zombie types (e.g. mutated zombie soldiers in addition to zombie scientists), the game just throws more maps, corridors, and familiar alien enemies at you — all pretty novel to Corporal Shephard, admittedly, but hardly to the player. At one point in the game, you *very* briefly cross paths with Freeman himself, and even get to catch a brief glimpse of Xen, but are very quickly brought back to Black Mesa, as if the game were strictly reminiscing Corporal Shephard that *his* mission is right here, on Earth, and nowhere else.

Things start getting really interesting about one third into the game — first, with the appearance of a new type of human enemy (the Black Ops, who are now supposed to take the place of the original grunts — because a *Half-Life* game ain't no fun if you don't get to shoot up some authentically humanoid cannon fodder), and then, even more importantly, with the arrival upon the scene of a completely new type of enemy: aliens from «Dimension X», yet another parallel universe which somehow has become caught up in the chaotic rift and whose inhabitants seem only too happy to join in the overall fun with their own troops of weirdass-looking soldiers. By the middle of the game, these «Race X» creatures have all but completely replaced their brethren from Black Mesa — and, difficulty-wise, they seem to be even smarter and deadlier than their predecessors. Naturally, it is up to Corporal Shephard to stop yet another invasion and close up yet another portal to save humanity, though, since this is only an expansion pack, Adrian will have to do it *without* leaving Black Mesa.

To say that the imagination of Gearbox writers rivaled, let alone surpassed, that of their superiors at Valve, would be one truly hot take. Much of the plot and design of *Opposing Force* simply follows the lead of *Half-Life*, repeating the original game's images and episodes. In place of the gorilla-like Alien Grunts with their bug-shooting Hivehands, you have Shock Troopers who look like a cross between beetles and orangutans and have their own Shock Roaches from which they rapidly shoot electric charges. *Half-Life's Blast Pit* chapter, in which you had to flush a deadly tentacle monster out of a silo to be able to progress, has been rather blatantly remade as *The Pit Worm's Nest*, in which you have to... flush a deadly caterpillar monster out of a silo to be able to progress. *Half-Life's Surface Tension*, a lengthy chapter in which you have to fight swarms of human *and* alien enemies out in the open, is largely mirrored by *Foxtrot Uniform...* and so on.

Nevertheless, as much as I hate the *idea* of «formula», I can have plenty of admiration for creative variations on the formula.

Importantly, by swapping Gordon Freeman's scientist persona for Shephard's military type, Gearbox have somewhat altered the game's sense of purpose. In *Half-Life*, you were the one directly (though unknowingly) responsible for the collapse — and the basic purpose of the game, for Freeman and yourself, was to somehow set things right; survival was important, but most of all, Gordon was the Man With A Mission, which gave a sort of epic flair to everything that was going around. In comparison, Adrian Shephard is simply a resourceful grunt, caught up in the middle of Hell with one single purpose — get out of it alive — and so are all of his military buddies, occasionally encountered around the facility ("*If we get outta here alive, I'll buy you all a round of beer... hell, I'll buy the whole damn bar!*") Survival against impossible odds, at any cost, is Shephard's occupation until almost the very end, when it becomes clear that he is the only one capable of defying the Big Bad Boss of Race X and plugging up his pretty pink portal. And the Gearbox guys let you feel it *hard* every once in a while, like, for instance, when Shephard misses the rescue chopper due to the G-Man's sudden interference as the latter shuts the hangar door in his face.

The pacing of *Opposing Force* is almost sublime. The early levels, with well-known enemies and fairly typical Black Mesa-style corridors, are a walk in the park for *Half-Life* veterans, but once Shephard is left stranded by the G-Man, things gradually get more and more different and difficult, starting from the unsettling mazes of blazing furnaces and giant fans which Shephard has to cross, continuing with the necessity to fight, with the aid of his small squad, against a new and ever deadlier human enemy (the Black Ops), and ending with Shephard's arrival into a completely new and totally mystifying, previously unseen, section of the Black Mesa labs, Gearbox do a great job of steering the player from the previously experienced and familiar sensations into the untried and unknown. By the end of the game, as you are forced to fight your way through swarms of brand new AI types, you will feel completely different from how you felt at the start, and not just because you have gained access to better weapons — because, well, you sort of began this while at war with Nazi Germany, and somehow ended up kicking the ass of Imperial Japan.

This deep and pleasant satisfaction with the set-up of *Opposing Force* makes its follow-up, *Blue Shift*, look like an even bigger disappointment than it actually is. Where the former took the setting of Black Mesa and found mildly creative ways to shift and expand its images and sensations, the latter simply returned us back to square one.

In *Blue Shift*, you play as Barney Calhoun, a security guard at Black Mesa and (apparently) a friend of Freeman's (though this would largely become clear only in *Half-Life 2*) — the catch being that *all* the security guards at Black Mesa look exactly alike, so good luck figuring out which was Barney in the original *Half-Life* (or maybe Black Mesa just cloned all their guards on a daily basis, anyway). As Barney arrives to work on what seems to be a fairly routine day, catching a brief glance at Gordon Freeman riding a train in the opposite direction, he is directed to rescue a couple of scientists from a malfunctioning elevator;

as you can guess, this is precisely when the Resonance Cascade occurs. After getting his bearings and learning how to survive in the rapidly mutating life conditions, Barney breaks through to a small group of scientists led by the grumpy Dr. Rosenberg, helps them repair a decommissioned teleporter (which requires taking a short detour to Xen), and escapes to safety on the outskirts of Black Mesa — apparently, the only protagonist of a *Half-Life* game lucky enough to not be frozen in time by the omnipotent G-Man.

And that's pretty much *it*. *Blue Shift* does not introduce any new enemies, any new types of weapons, any radically new locations (even the rocky area of Xen visited by Barney is merely an expanded copy of the first part of *Half-Life's Interloper* chapter), or any even mildly unpredictable plot twists. Rewatching my recorded playthrough of the expansion, I struggle to remember even one tiniest detail that would make me go, «okay, *this* at least was worth slogging my way through to it». On the contrary, all it does is remind me just how boring, tedious, and thoroughly unimaginative all those levels are — more like a talentless fan-made mod than an officially endorsable project.

To give a clear example, probably the most twisted twist of *Blue Shift's* plot is how, en route to save Dr. Rosenberg from being executed by those nasty Marines, Barney keeps bumping into one after another scientist who, upon expressing their gratitude at being saved, quickly point out that they are not, in fact, Dr. Rosenberg, and that Dr. Rosenberg is in another castle, uh, I mean, somewhere up ahead. Which means you have to slog through even more of the very same corridors and stairwells, shoot up some more Marines and Alien Grunts, rinse and repeat. When you finally *do* meet Dr. Rosenberg, you will probably be so exhausted from sheer boredom, you'd much rather just shoot him on the spot and get a Game Over than follow him to his blasted teleporter. In short, what I'm trying to tell you is that, essentially, the game has NO – PLOT – WHATSOEVER. If you just want to shoot more monsters, you do that. If you are looking for new experiences and fresh suspense, this expansion pack offers nothing of the kind. It is almost astonishing that it was designed and written by the same people who did *Opposing Force* — although I do guess that maybe they were somewhat limited in their options this time by the entire business of porting *Half-Life* over to Dreamcast, with most of the budget spent on redrawing the environments, character models, and weapons of the original game rather than on coming up with new inventions.

In the light of this, it almost makes me sad that the character of Barney Calhoun actually survived long enough in the Black Mesa universe to be carried over to *Half-Life 2* (where, admittedly, he does a much more efficient job as a supporting NPC), whereas poor Corporal Shephard was seemingly lost along the way, together with his all his oddball alien «friends» of Race X; lore-wise, *Opposing Force* turned out to be a completely dead end — largely because the entire «US Marine» angle would be relegated to *Counter-Strike*, with no place left for it in the *Half-Life* universe as such.

## Action

The game mechanics of *Opposing Force* loyally matched the degree of peculiarity / originality of its main storyline. With new types of aliens, new kinds of weapons, and, most importantly, new strategies of group combat, came changes that were never staggering enough to think of it as a new game, yet were always noticeable enough to justify the expansion pack's semi-autonomous status. Most of the skills and tactics learned in *Half-Life* will stay the same, but every once in a while you will have to think differently — and if you play on the Hard level, there will be sequences pushing the difficulty significantly higher than the original game (which is, traditionally, a respectable trademark of a solid expansion pack / DLC).



Thus, although almost all the specific Race X enemies are straightforward correlates of their distantly related Xen brothers, each is also given a slightly different tactic to throw you off balance — for instance, the multi-limbed Shock Trooper shoots his Roach Gun just like the Alien Grunt from Xen uses his Hivehand; *unlike* the Grunt, the Trooper rarely engages in melee combat, preferring to keep his distance and pelt you with organic grenades against. (Also, the Roach Gun has a nasty habit of functioning on its own after its master dies, and jumping in your face for minor damage). The only completely different type of enemy is the Voltigore, a giant spider with (usually) an instant-kill electric discharge; no regular enemy in *Half-Life* proper was as seriously overpowered as this guy, and having to clear out an entire nest of them in the darkness of Black Mesa's sewers is a real nasty task — not to mention probably the closest *Half-Life* ever gets to the genre of survival horror. (I remember *really* dreading that part back when I played that in 1999/2000, and I sure as hell wasn't a little boy any more).

Likewise, the new weaponry presents curious twists as well. There is, for instance, a special new teleporter gun that fires the same teleporting balls that Freeman used to move through in *Half-Life* proper — or saw the Nihilanth fling at him, for that matter; in *Opposing Force*, you use your radioactive ammo to generate these balls to blow your enemies away, or, at a huge ammo cost, to fire them at yourself for brief pit stops at mini-areas in Xen to recuperate and pick up extra ammo. Although this is essentially a *Wunderwaffe*, ammo for which is very limited (I like to conserve most of it for that blasted Voltigore pit), handling it still makes the game fun in ways that were unimaginable in the main game. The Roach Gun, which you pick up

from your first downed Shock Trooper, is like the Hivehand, but more direct and deadly; and there are additional weirdass types of alien guns, like the iguana-like organic grenade launcher that (literally) feeds on spores, and the Barnacle Gun, which turns one of the game's nastier enemies into a surprising ally — and offers a vast field of opportunity for experimenting on any sort of organic matter, your friends and foes included.

The most important work was, however, done by Gearbox on the mechanics of squad combat. In the original game, Freeman could recruit one or more security guards to accompany him and provide firepower support (he could also recruit scientists, but those were no good in times of danger); however, the guards' firepower was generally pathetic, and their functions limited to opening password-protected doors. *Opposing Force* introduced a more complex system, in which you could be protected by several different types of soldiers — regular combat grunts (often armed with powerful weaponry), engineers (to open doors), and medics (to give injections while merrily whistling the Rolling Stones' 'Sister Morphine'... okay, I just invented that last one out of boredom).

Unfortunately, the soldiers' AI was not all that great — it is safe to say that on Hard level, they never last long against the Black Ops or even a pack of Vortigaunts, let alone Shock Troopers — but once I got used to the idea that it is not so much their function to protect me against enemies as *my* function to protect *them*, things got a whole lot more fun, as you have the option to invent and test out various tricky strategies to keep yourself and all those other guys alive while fighting against seemingly impossible odds. Despite the fact that your soldier buddies are usually encountered in small packs of 2 to 3 guys, their AI does not allow them to work as a team; however, they can take cover, run away when wounded, use assistance from the medic, and make snappy commentary on their kills ("I'm a natural born alien killer!"), all of which combined makes scenes like the big battle with a huge Black Ops squad in the *Friendly Fire* chapter into messy, chaotic fun (you can take the whole thing extra slow, step-by-step, or just rush into battle blindly and see how many of your guys manage to avoid the slaughter — although, like I said, on harder difficulties enemy AI is much more advanced).

In terms of non-combat related puzzles, *Opposing Force* does not do all that much — in fact, I'd say that generally its non-combat puzzles tend to be more tedious than those of *Half-Life* (there is, for instance, one really long sequence in which you have to cut a path through several locked doors and blocked corridors by endlessly lugging a metal crate in different directions so you can stand on it when necessary; this is probably *the* single least enjoyable sequence in any *Half-Life* game for me). The final boss fight also feels a bit more tedious than the Nihilanth encounter due to its implementing the «rinse and repeat» principle too many times (it is also not very intuitive; much more likely, you will be spending more time figuring out what to do than actually doing it) — but at least there *is* a final boss fight, and it is sufficiently different from the Nihilanth fight to be



judged as «influenced by» rather than «ripping off». This is the basic premise of *Opposing Force* — they base most of their challenges on correlating *Half-Life* situations, but make each one just different enough to keep you interested; the perfect application of the variation-on-a-formula principle that still lets you show off some nice bits of imagination.

As for *Blue Shift*, there is not much you could say of its action sequences. There are no new enemies (not even anybody from Race X; it is as if *Opposing Force* never existed), no new weapons, no new buddies — just more running through the familiar corridors and sewers of Black Mesa (the maps are new, but the feeling is old), a small Xen section where I seem to remember you had to do more platform jumping than fighting or puzzle-solving, and *maybe* just a couple of really, really tense fights with the Marines which try to pass themselves off as more challenging than in the base game (in the middle section, when you have to rescue a bunch of poor scientists from a whole swarm of those guys). Non-combat puzzles are equally boring (e.g. having to line up some overhanging crates and cages with a crane in order to jump across the other side of a gap), and over all of this hangs the inescapable nagging question — what in the hell makes «Barney Calhoun» so much different from the *other* security guards that all of them are cannon fodder and *he* is such a tremendous badass? He doesn't even get to wear Freeman's Hazard Suit! Makes no sense whatsoever, as does most of this expansion pack.

### Atmosphere

One really rewarding feature of *Opposing Force* is that it gets to cram so much new content into just a few hours of content. Were its levels as numerous and lengthy as the ones in *Half-Life*, you would have no choice but to eventually settle into the routine of things — but with things as they are, *Opposing Force* manages to keep you emotionally occupied and uplifted for most of its duration, in different and distinct ways.

The feeling that you might not have wasted your money on the expansion starts right from the tutorial... and, if you still have not played the game and want to try it out, FOR CHRISAKE DO NOT SKIP THE TUTORIAL! The training course for the original *Half-Life*, in which you were guided by an emotionless hologram, was really nothing more than just a tutorial, but the tutorial for *Opposing Force* is a «Boot Camp» which takes its inspiration straight from Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, with the drill sergeant even reprising some of Lee Ermeys classic lines ("WHAT'S YOUR MAJOR MALFUNCTION DIRTBAG?"). Short as it is (and,



needless to say, only borrowing the humorous part rather than the terrifying and tragic part of Kubrick's mood), the training course does a great job of putting you in the mood and making you feel like an actual soldier, not just explaining what you have to do and how to do it.

The atmospheric connection between the tutorial and the rest of the game proper feels about as disjointed as *Full Metal Jacket* itself, where most of the humor is largely gone by the time we get hauled off to Vietnam — but just like in the movie, you *will* feel this very contrast between the harshness, yet relative safety of the training camp and the ever-present danger of being out in the field as the defining element of the game. Unlike *Half-Life*, here you are flung directly into the heart of the storm, with no safe and cuddly opening chapters; even so, Corporal Shephard's first promenades along Black Mesa's corridors shall feel reasonably quiet, with only an occasional zombie or headcrab spoiling the impression. Once the shit really hits the fan and Shephard finds himself stranded among the wreckage, with only a few similarly unhappy souls to keep him occasional company, the atmosphere quickly gets darker — no more so than during Shephard's perilous journey through a set of blazing furnaces, deadly fan blades, and cleverly concealed bloody meat-throwing zombies right after all the regular escape routes have been cut off.

There are areas in the game which have clearly been designed by the Gearbox guys to be scarier and spookier than anything Freeman might have encountered on his own journey — alien enemies now love more than ever before to hide and jump out at you from dark corners; there is one brief sequence where you have to brace yourself and swim up a vent right past two hungry Ichthyosaurs (something which was almost always avoidable in *Half-Life*); and have I yet mentioned the Voltigore nest in the sewers? oh, right, I have, twice already. None of it is *super* creepy, but it sure gets on your nerves more than *Half-Life* regular, and makes you all the more relieved when, right after surviving one or another of these challenges, you finally emerge into the warm embraces of several squad members waiting for you on top.

Arguably the most atmospheric part of the game is the mid-section, right after you catch a glimpse of Freeman teleporting off to Xen (the *Crush Depth* and *Vicarious Reality* chapters) — this is where Race X makes its proper entrance, and you get to experience one surprise after another coming at you from the super-secret part of Black Mesa's laboratories where, so it seems, those pesky scientists have been literally constructing their own zoo, populated with Xen's various lifeforms. These chapters are relatively short, but packed with content — unusual maps, lots of previously unseen details, novel uses of the teleportation devices, and a genuine sense of amazement that might be awoken even in those who have already learned all there is to learn about *Half-Life* by heart. These two chapters are like a crash course in all sorts of alien weirdness — there is not even all that much combat in them — and it is only once you have made your way past them that everything you have just

learned will be necessary to put into practice, in some of the deadliest fights with aliens and humans alike you have so far experienced (*Foxtrot Uniform*, this expansion's equivalent of the base game's *Surface Tension*).

In short, *Opposing Force* does an excellent job of both keeping you on your toes all the time *and* throwing you fresh, juicy sensations to experience — you really get to live the worst (but most unforgettable) day in the life of this poor soldier, thrown into the least predictable mess of his life and having to quickly think out of the box just so he can live another day. NOT SO with *Blue Shift*, which — you guessed it — has nothing whatsoever to add to the most generic parts of the atmosphere of the original *Half-Life*. Somehow, they left that expansion so devoid of genuine thrills, playing it is the closest equivalent to just sitting there and watching paint dry in the entire *Half-Life* universe. No, seriously: there is *nothing*. Not even an interesting boss fight to spruce up your day. Run, jump, kill, push button, pull lever, run, jump, kill. Even the ending, where you just teleport next to a bunch of scientists waiting for you, is about as exciting as rejoining your family for a trip back home in the SUV outside the gates of your local amusement park. Even the G-Man hardly sees fit to check in on Barney Calhoun, because who the fuck needs Barney Calhoun in his life? Poor Barney.

## Technical features

### Graphics

Since both expansion packs use the same engine and the same basic textures as *Half-Life*, there is not much to add here; however, even in this regard *Opposing Force* manages to introduce a subtly fresh touch, by surreptitiously swaying the basic color palette in the direction of... *green*. At first, it's obviously just army green — lots of khaki uniforms in the boot camp, along with more grassy terrain you ever saw in Black Mesa, but there's also the addition of night vision, coloring everything around you into even more sickly green, as opposed to the yellow-tinged flashlight of *Half-Life*. Later, it'll be the expansive greenhouses of the Black Mesa laboratories, the regular green flashes of your teleporter, the green iguana from which you shoot green spores collected from patches of green alien verdure... even the final boss is greener than the heart of a dedicated ecologist. It's even reflected in the packaging — green all over, making for a nice contrast with *Half-Life*'s orange.



I have no idea if all that greenery was supposed to be symbolic, or if Gearbox just wanted to make an extra contrast with Valve, putting on a more individual face and sharply delimiting the «orange Freeman» from the «green Shepard». Whatever it was, they clearly wanted to repeat a similar idea with *Blue Shift*, capitalizing on the title and emphasizing the *blue* packaging, the *blue* of the security guards' uniforms, and... and... and that's about it, because the blue in *Blue Shift* never goes anywhere further than the uniforms (and the color of onscreen indicators). In theory, they could have at least introduced some water-related themes (make Barney a skilled swimmer and prepare him for underwater fights?), but absolutely nothing of the kind was implemented (and the majority of the water you have to deal with is dirty-green sewer stuff, anyway).

That said, *Blue Shift* did implement one major graphics-related feature — the High Definition Pack, which upgraded most of the character sprites and weapons to higher-resolution models. It was a good addition, contributing to even more realism in playing and correcting some of the uglier polygonal renders of the original games; but since it was retroactively implemented for the entire game, updating the textures of the original *Half-Life* and *Opposing Force* as well, today it is impossible to judge it as a specific advantage of *Blue Shift*, since the HD pack is, by default, used everywhere these days. Honestly, even back in those days it seems like many people just got *Blue Shift* in order to lay their hands on the HD pack and replay the original game rather than bother with the fate of Barney Calhoun.

## Sound

While I have little to say about the musical soundtrack to either *Opposing Force* or *Blue Shift* (I am not a big fan of the *Half-Life* electronic soundtrack in general, and mostly played those two with the music off just as well), sound-wise, on the whole, *Opposing Force* has quite a bit to add to the *Half-Life* universe. The new sound effects, particularly the ones associated with Race X, are terrific (the funny insect-like chit-chat of the Shock Troopers; the creepy pig grunts of the Voltigores; the banshee scream of the Pit Worm, etc.), and the rough and rowdy banter of our Marine buddies goes a long way toward humanizing the army grunts, who essentially behaved like robotic killing machines in the first game.

Top prize, however, goes to voice actor Jon St. John (usually recognized as the voice of Duke Nukem) for his performance as Drill Instructor Sgt. Barnes, in which he absolutely nails the character of Sgt. Hartman from *Full Metal Jacket*, albeit trying hard to only preserve the humorous aspects of the man's character, rather than the psychopathic ones (by the way, if you get *really* annoyed at the guy, you actually *can* let yourself turn into Gomer Pyle and mow the bastard down — you won't be able to finish the training course, though). Jon St. John also appears in *Blue Shift*, where he voices Dr. Rosenberg, and, predictably, it is a rather boring performance in comparison.

## Interface

As bona fide expansion packs, neither *Opposing Force* nor *Blue Shift* add all that much to the game interface of *Half-Life*. Freeman's Hazard Suit is replaced by a protective vest in *Opposing Force* and a security guard's regular armor in *Blue Shift*, all of which are then charged up the same way as the Hazard Suit; also, Corporal Shephard has night vision goggles instead of a flashlight, which color everything in a nasty green light, but they *do* have more range than the flashlight, at least. Other than that, I wouldn't even know what to say, except that, just like the original game, both expansions share the same smoothness and ease of action — which still does not save *Blue Shift* from sucking blue donkey balls, if you pardon my Vortigese.

**Verdict:** *A textbook example of what separates inspired hard work from pointless hard work in the gaming industry.*

I have heard and read some people defend *Blue Shift* in terms of «it doesn't really do anything bad, per se», and I can see their point — in fact, if all you really require from an expansion to a video game is to give you more of the same, like just a few extra maps of enemies to clear, *Blue Shift* obviously does the job. But even if an expansion pack or piece of DLC should hardly be held to the same standard as an actual new game, I still think that the point of a good expansion is to provide a nice variation on the theme, which is exactly what *Opposing Force* does: more of the same, but under a differently colored (green!) sauce. Otherwise, it is not even clear how the DLC in question differs from one of the myriad fan-made mods.

Anyway, like I already said, I find it *really* confusing how such two products of such different quality could have been designed and produced by the exact same team of people over such a short period of time — and how Valve let such an inferior product as *Blue Shift* actually appear on the market (pretty much the *only* Valve product I know to have caused me a comparable amount of disappointment was *Half-Life 2 Episode 1*, and even that one still had several redeeming aspects). I guess it's just one more of those good old God's ways of reminding us that nothing is perfect, or, to state it differently, that God giveth *Opposing Force* and taketh away *Blue Force*.

