

Half-Life Narrative Review

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Game Title: Half-Life

Platform: PC

Genre: First Person Shooter

Release Date: November 19th 1998

Developer: Valve

Publisher: Sierra Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Marc Laidlaw

Author of this review: Tyler Buser

Overview

Half-Life follows the events of Dr. Gordon Freeman, a newly employed theoretical physicist, at the Black Mesa Research Facility in New Mexico circa early 2000s. The plot commences with the day to day duties of Freeman, such as analyzing experimental and unknown alien artifacts, until one such alien artifact is analyzed and triggers the creation of a dimensional rift within Black Mesa bridging it with an alternate alien universe. This bridge between universes allows aliens, sophisticated and feral, to swarm the Black Mesa facility resulting in the death of most of its personnel. Attempts to close the dimensional bridge are unsuccessful and a government contingency plan is enacted, which sends waves of specialist U.S. Marines to Black Mesa to eliminate everyone; hostiles, scientists, and any other survivors. Safely escaping from the test chamber where Freeman accidentally caused the dimensional bridge, he fights through the massive Black Mesa complex through many detours where he encounters many types of alien hostiles and meets several scientists on the way. The remnant science team concludes the only way to stop the invasion is to send Freeman through the dimensional rift to the alien world of Xen. There, on Xen, Freeman fights through many bizarre environments and creatures and eventually destroys the alien overlord. Impressed by Freeman's utility the G-Man, a mysterious figure seen only in passing throughout the game, seeks to employ Freeman for future such events. Freeman, faced by death or employment, chooses employment and is put in a time stasis for later use.

Characters

Dr. Gordon Freeman – Gordon Freeman is the player's character, the silent protagonist and a theoretical physicist who is forced to defend himself and ultimately the human race against an onslaught of alien aggression due to a dimensional rift he inadvertently initiated in a botched experiment. Freeman is Caucasian, 27 years of age, has no dependents, is a graduate of MIT in theoretical physics, and becomes a near mythical resistance hero and ultimately drives the alien aggression back.

Barney Calhoun – Barney Calhoun is a Black Mesa security officer who often assists Gordon Freeman and other characters throughout the game. His duties include guarding designated Black Mesa facilities, performing general maintenance, and assisting the Science Team as required.

Dr. Eli Vance – Eli Vance is a physicist and researcher, who is an African-American in his late 50s, at the Black Mesa facility. He encounters Gordon Freeman only a few times where he foreshadows the events to unfold with concerns, to tell Freeman to go to the surface to seek help, and to facilitate Freeman on his long journey to expel the invasion.

The G-Man – The G-Man is a silent character who is seen often throughout the events of *Half-Life* and the incident at Black Mesa. With a few exceptions, he is only seen from a distance and out of reach of the player. Several times the player may see the G-Man arguing with certain scientists or quietly observing Gordon Freeman. Little is known of the G-Man except for his eerie movements, government standard suit, and always apparent briefcase. By the end of the game, the G-Man appears to Gordon Freeman on the alien world Xen and, in an unnatural voice, offers Freeman employment.

Breakdown

Half-Life's plot drives the action of the game, prodding the player to unravel more of the events and ultimate resolution of the game. The attention to detail and thorough development of characters and stories can be seen further through Easter-egg like pieces of information that are peppered through the game world in overheard conversation, seemingly inconsequential documents, dismembered bodies, and even the elaborate tram ride in to Black Mesa.

The story exists in a larger saga only partially known to the player that may or may not become obvious to the player, where the “botched experiment” was a deliberate act by the G-Man, whose motives are unclear and his history even less. In addition, where the player believes the aliens as enemy hostiles invading Earth, they are actually other-dimensional refugees fleeing from a galactic empire known as the Combine.

The player gleans most of the immediate plot and narrative through the people he encounters and interacts with while making it from the deep underground test chambers of the Black Mesa facility to the surface and ultimately to Xen. Often, as Freeman, the player will come upon a group of scientists hindered from doing X, Y, or Z and request that Freeman kill X, activate rocket Y, or reach stage Z. All dialogue is delivered to the player in a way that assumes his co-operation because the player, as Freeman, never ever speaks. In fact, the player is immersed even further as Freeman through minor devices that might seem an afterthought, such as the fact that the player never ever sees himself as Freeman, which gives him or her the impression that they actually are Freeman and that when characters speak they speak *to* the player rather than to Freeman.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game narrative is its consistent well-developed plot and provided dialogue that compound the immersion of the player. The manner in which the narrative was constructed proved that a First-Person shooter could tell a narrative and tell it well. Conscious decisions such as eliminating all player dialogue, preventing the player from seeing himself, presenting information and objects *to* the player and by reinforcing dialogue with visual hints and concrete cues created a supporting life like world that the player could not only appreciate but immerse themselves.

Unsuccessful Element

Half-Life was unsuccessful in conveying all its plot points to the casual gamer who didn't search every inch of every room to grasp the underling meaning of certain events in the game. Understandably, the creators did not want to bludgeon the player with depth and detail at the risk of harming pace and gameplay, there still was room for expansion and explanation, which resulted in its two expansion games.

Highlight

The most pinnacle point of the game is rather early in the narrative. The player has road in on the Black Mesa tram system for ten minutes and is exposed to all sorts of "public announcements" and warnings that pertain to personnel at Black Mesa, which provides a sense of future consequences for the player and foreshadows what is to come. Therefore, the highlight of *Half-Life* is the actual experiment where the player, as Freeman, inadvertently causes the dimensional rift that results in the rest of the game's narrative. It sets the stage for the resulting narrative where the player feels they are rectifying their mistake early in the game, cleaning up the mess they unleashed on Black Mesa.

Critical Reception

GamePro gave *Half-Life* a 100, declare that the game works to well because "rather than be pulled out of the game's world to get an update on your universal translator or what have you, others in that world give you information and instructions. You overhear things. You witness some incredible and horrifying atrocities." IGN gave it a 95, commenting on Freeman that, "you could make a case that giving him a personality could actually detract from your ability to identify with the character. And certainly, the use of cut scenes or any of the other crude crutches of computer game storytelling would have detracted from the relentless pace of the game and the freedom and control you have over your character." Game Revolution gave it a 100, making comparisons to similar games, "unlike other first person shooters, the story is not abandoned in the middle of the game for bigger weapons and constant mayhem (a la *Unreal*). From start to finish, with the exception of *Thief*, *Half-Life* provides the best single player experience on the first person market."

Lessons

Half-Life makes it clear that a game does not need cut scenes, quest logs, or a something personal computer-avatar to guide the player through the world. It also drives home the idea that levels need not be mere "levels" where each dungeon is successively harder than

the one before it, but instead can ebb and flow like the plots that we are used to; in fact, much of *Half-Life* exists outside of the Black Mesas facility.

- Use in game characters to communicate *to* the player
- Support dialogue in game with artifacts in the game world
- Keep the player interested and invested in the unfolding plot
- Levels can drive narrative if not scene as just compounding their successive difficulty

Summation

Half-Life was a genre changing game that proved that a great narrative could be delivered through a first person shooter. Prior to it the genre was stagnant with plots such as Quake or Unreal that, if there was a plot, was almost forgotten a quarter of the way in. *Half-Life*'s success is a result of that fact because outside of its narrative and immersion *Half-Life* is not all that different that then it is peers at the time; you run, jump, shoot, and maybe solve a puzzle here and there. Narrative aside, *Half-Life*'s parts are not significantly different from the other FPS at the time to warrant any praise; it is the conscious decisions and the sum of its parts that make it unique and successful.