

Game Title: Halo 3: ODST

Platform: Xbox 360

Genre: First Person Shooter

Release Date: September 22, 2009

Developer: Bungie LLC

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

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Overview

Halo 3: ODST is the fourth installment of a Halo FPS from Bungie; however, unlike the previous Halo games the player takes control an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper simply referred to as “the Rookie.” The game begins with a group of ODSTs, Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, preparing to assault a Covenant ship. As the squad begins their drop from space onto the Covenant ship, the ship enters Slipspace causing a massive EMP blast. The EMP blast causes the ODSTs’ drop prods to malfunction and the entire squad crash lands all over New Mombasa. On the way down the Rookie is knocked unconscious and awakens six hours later.

When the player assumes control of the Rookie six hours have past after the crash landing. The player is tasked with discovering what has happened due to the Covenant invasion and also reuniting with all the members of his squad. The player is free to explore the city of New Mombasa looking for clues as to his team’s and Covenant forces’ whereabouts. As the player encounters these clues the game shifts perspective to a member of his ODST squad as a flashback. At each step of the way the player unravels the mystery surrounding what has happened to his ODST squad and why the Covenant are there in the first place.

Characters

The Rookie – Appears as the “maimed Hero” looking to make it through another day. Very little is known about the Rookie, but the player does know that the Rookie has seen combat before. Immediately the player can see that the Rookie defiantly has an interesting past and may have even quite significant in the war against the Covenant, but due to some tragedy he now finds himself in this situation just going another mission. His silence is the primary factor that helps the player form these opinions about him.

Dutch – A career long military man who is now serving under Buck. Dutch is also married, college educated with an interest in religion and philosophy. Dutch is the calming and mature mind of the squad, usually acting as the mediator for arguments. Even though Dutch has seen his fair share of trauma from the war he continues to be the cool headed member of the squad. Dutch is quick to help a fellow squad member and sometimes ironically without giving full thought to a matter. He drives much of the emotional engine of the squad than any other.

Romeo – Brashly outspoken member of the squad even though ranking only as high as the Rookie. Romeo interacts aggressively or abrasively with almost every squad member, as they will tell him to show some respect, including striking the Rookie with his sniper rifle to wake him up. Romeo represents the antsy and immature nature of a person. Having survived after his home planet was “glassed” by the Covenant when he was only four years old helps to explain some of his anger.

Mickey – A risk taker and a daredevil, Mickey has the most adventurous past among any of his squad mates. He has worked several positions throughout his career in and out of the military. Mickey represents the adventurous and outgoing nature found in people who is leaving the “nest” for the first time. Though he may be reckless at times he is still considered a very valuable member of the squad if nothing other than raw talent.

Buck – Is the commanding officer of the squad that is followed throughout Halo 3: ODST. He has significant military combat experience and all the while he has seen countless of his fellow marines fall in battle. Due Buck’s intense military life he has developed a short fuse and thick skin. He is now focused more than ever to protect his squad. This mentality quickly leads to early quarrels with Dare who is leading this offensive and providing intelligence support. Dare is still a very “by the books” character, which leads to a balancing and counter force to Buck’s cavalier methods.

Dare – An experienced Captain in the UNSC navy, now in charge of the upcoming mission. From early on the player observes tension between Dare and Buck. A power struggle develops between Dare and Buck, though nothing serious. The player further learns that this minor conflict exists mainly due to a past romance. This character represents the balancing agent to the “devil” or “angle” on your shoulder. Dare is there to counter and balance decisions Buck wants to make. This allows the player to gain multiple perspectives on an issue.

Breakdown

In Halo 3: ODST the primary goal of engaging the player is achieved by exploiting the player’s innate thirst for curiosity. The primary devices the writers used to achieve this was expressing the story in a non-linear format and expressing the story from multiple perspectives. The combination of these elements maximizes the player’s desire to find answers; hence, ultimately encouraging the player to continue playing and stay involved.

The plot structure of Halo 3: ODST was quite a refreshing change from the traditional format. Since the game’s plot is revealed to the player in a non-linear format from several viewpoints, many of the traditional story telling techniques are tweaked; thus, leading to a narrative architecture that the player may not be familiar with. The unfamiliarity prevents the player from predicting “classic” plot points and allows the player to be engaged in a new way.

The non-linearity of Halo 3: ODST is experienced by the player through a series of flashbacks viewed through the eye of each member of an ODST squad. In conjunction to the flashbacks the player also experiences the present through the eyes of squad member, the Rookie. When presenting a scene to the player it is vital to understand the assumptions the player will make to progress towards the conflict resolution since by understanding this, the writers are able to surprise the player with details

they intentionally left vague. Non-linear storytelling especially takes advantage of this by allowing the player to form a misconception and then surprising the player by introducing details through flashbacks. This effectively keeps the player continually involved. A great example of this in Halo 3: ODST is the interaction between the ODST and Covenant engineers. Originally the player assumes the engineers are the enemy and is encouraged to attack them. It is only later once the player finds that the engineers were always trying to help does the player realize the true situation he has just played through. Only then does deeper feeling such as remorse emerge and thus achieve deeper player involvement.

Traditionally we are immersed into the story since we relate with the main character and follow him in his journey. In Halo 3: ODST the game begins with the player in control of the Rookie however each time the player encounters a “clue” in the game the player assumes control of a member from the original ODST squad in a flashback. At each flashback the player gains further insight as to the state of New Mombasa as well exploring the full dimension of that squad member. As the player experiences more of the game the player grows attached to the ODST squad rather than just one character. Each individual character acts as a cog in the whole machine that drives the Hero’s Journey. It is not just a character here undergoing a transformation, but instead it is the squad seen as a single entity that is changed. It is not until close to the end of the game where the whole squad is reunited does this effect become fully clear, however once it has been made clear, the player can appreciate all the puzzle pieces more in the grand scheme.

The combination of non-linear storytelling from different perspectives is quite an effective method of maintaining player involvement. These techniques allows the player to develop misconceptions in a calculated manner that ultimately result in more complex emotions that otherwise would not be possible due to some predictable nature of games. Telling a story from different

perspectives allows writers to present several characters as a single entity. This element may be crucial to a story that aims for a strong team, squad or group theme such as Halo 3: ODST.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in Halo 3: ODST was by far the use of non-linear storytelling to continually inject new details to change the understanding of the present scene. This technique is used to change the perspective of the player's view of the Covenant engineers from enemies to allies and changing the direction of the Rookie's search due to the discovery that certain squad members may be alive. Using these storytelling devices the writers are consistently able to surprise the player which keeps the player involved.

Unsuccessful Element

Halo 3: ODST presents different parts of the plot from many different perspectives and while playing as that character the player gains an understanding of who the character is. Unfortunately, the brevity at which the Rookie was explored compared to the other characters leaves the player with the feeling of incompleteness. The writers were able to successfully project a particular character trait from the ODST squad as an entity onto an individual character in such detail that when the Rookie's character was left vague and unexplored the contrast exacerbated the incompleteness. As the story was approaching the end the player has become accustomed to the format and detail at which each character was explored. The only character not given this treatment was the Rookie. The player's attention is distracted from the central story and hinged on the payout of the Rookie's moment, which unfortunately never arrives.

Highlight

Once the squad is reunited except for Dare, Buck, in order to ensure the safety of the rest of his squad orders Mickey to fly their ship back to the mother ship. In the process Buck realizes why Dare may have attempted to redirect the drop pods and tell Mickey to instead direct their ship to a power facility. Reaching the facility the squad finds Dare along with a Covenant engineer. The player sees the relief on Buck's face to know that Dare is safe. Dare in return realizes that Buck still cares for her. The squad at this point realizes why the Covenant are here and now must ensure this Covenant engineer is brought back safely in order to fully understand the Covenants' plans. This moment is the critical scene that binds the squad together. The player can now see each member of the squad working together in harmony. As the squad fights their way out and back to the mother ship, the player has a chance to see the full unity of the squad. This triumphant moment shows exactly why this squad is exceptional unique.

Critical Reception

In general Halo 3: ODST received good reviews, not great ones. Following up to Halo 1, Halo 2 and Halo 3 is a tall order and given the expectations the game was rated well. As one reviewer put it "The gameplay ideas don't match up to the narrative fullness" signifying the fact that the story telling was great and the only downside was the fact that this was a Halo game with well known and defined game mechanics. Both gamerankings.com and metacritic.com lists the game at a 84%. Considering most game score in the 50% to 60% range, overall it can be said that the game was well received.

Lessons

- Using a new format to deliver a story such as non-linear timing is quite effective at preventing the player from predicting potential upcoming scenes; however, if a particular mold is followed too closely then diverging from it after the player is accustomed can cause the player to lose his focus entirely.
- Telling a story from multiple perspectives is very effective at binding those characters into a single entity, but without balance and symmetry the entity as a whole may seem like a muddled character instead of an entity with flaws and strengths.

Conclusion

Halo 3: ODST is a great example of how multiple characters can be used to give an abstract idea such as a squad so many dimensions. Halo 3: ODST also breaks the mold of linear story telling in games by presenting the story in flashback snippets. These two elements worked hand in hand to develop an atmosphere that was foreign to the player yet engaging. As critics have mentioned without this new unique narrative architecture Halo 3: ODST would be nothing more than a watered down copy of another Halo game. Instead Halo 3: ODST engages the player in new ways gives game developers encouragement to reach out and explore new methods of storytelling.