

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Half-Life 2

**Platform:** PC

**Genre:** 1<sup>st</sup> Person Shooter

**Release Date:** November 16, 2004

**Developer:** Valve Corporation

**Publisher:** Valve Corporation

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Mark Laidlaw

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## Overview

Half-Life 2, pick up years after the end of the first game ended. The main character Gordon Freeman wakes up from a dream to discover that an alien force (known as the Combine) has invaded and taken over the earth. The Combine has renamed all of the cities and Gordon wakes up on a train heading to City 17. You are introduced to City 17 by a Dr. Breen who has taken the mantle of leader of the human face of the Combine. As Gordon journeys through the game he meets the resistance, a group of humans trying to strike back against the Combine. Old friends Barney Calhoun and Dr. Isaac Kleiner (both from the first game), and new companion Alex Vance are quickly introduced to the player. The majority of the game has Gordon and Alex working together to fight the combine forces. The end of the game culminates in an epic battle in The Citadel against combine forces.

The narrative elements of this story are very strong, in which Gordon Freeman has to overcome near-impossible odds for the sake of humanity and its future. Probably the strongest element of the narrative elements in Half-Life 2 is the main character. While Gordon Freeman has some obvious character traits (Intellectual), most of the character traits can be driven by the player. The first-person view and the silent nature of Gordon Freeman help facilitate the process of putting the player of the game into the story.

## Characters

- **Gordon Freeman** – The player avatar and Main protagonist in the game. He is a Theoretical physicist who finds himself, through the action of himself and others thrust into a battle for the survival of the human race. He is a strong mental based character that is mute to help with the suspension of disbelief for the player. The character also has a strong will that he wants to overcome the dystopian society that he sort of feels reasonable for creating it (all be it indirectly). In addition his physical appearance is that of a typical nerd, with one exemption. His Mark V suit which gives him most of his “powers”.
- **Alyx Vance** – Daughter of one of the characters you meet in the first game, she is also a main protagonist in the game. Alyx is a skilled hacker, adept at infiltrating Combine computer systems and reprogramming them. She is also a character that helps Gordon throughout the game. She

is also adept at using weaponry from firearms to the more complex weapon found through the game.

- **Wallace Breen** – Main antagonist of the story. Dr. Breen was the person that negotiated a peace treaty between the Combine (main enemy) and Earth. As a result humans are now living in a dystopian society with humanity living as slaves to the Combine. He was appointed the ruler of the Earth as puppet for the Combine to control.

## Breakdown

The nested masks and the Jungian archetypes are also quite present during the story. All four of the alchemical elements are used to great effect to advance the story, specific set pieces use different elements to help communicate the sense of a hero's journey. The way the story explores the nested masks are in a specific order going from the inner true self to the outward world mask. An example of this would be the air boat sequence, where the majority of the action takes place on the water, while containing the element fire as something that gets in your way. This is a symbol of the true self and conscience of the four nested masks. Towards the end of the game when you are in The Citadel you are fighting air ships in a tower as you go into the sky. This also matches self-image part of the four nested masks. In the final scene of the game time is frozen and you are returned to stasis. This is a nod to death or return to the earth (without actually dying). Also this matches the world mask part of the four nested masks.

## Strongest Element

What is unique about Half-Life 2 is that the story is told through an interactive medium rather than static cut scenes that increase the realism. Rather than breaking up the game to tell the player the story, the game shows you the story. In the time this game was released almost no other game used this technique of effective story telling through action and interactivity. Another great thing that enchanted the narrative is the environments in which the story is told. From City 17 to The Citadel the environments serve as a character in their own right that help the player feel a sense of depth. This is a key factor in helping the player with their suspension of disbelief. This suspension of disbelief allows the player to get emotionally involved into the story. This emotional involvement into the story also plays an important part in getting the player into the narrative elements of the story.

## Weakest Element

One of the few issues with the narrative being told in this interactive way is the pacing of the game. Sections of the game will take longer for certain players leaving dips in the narrative where the player has a lack of narrative being told and shown to them. An example of this is the sequence that takes place on land trying to cross an Antlion-infested beach about a third of the way through the story and sometimes it took players a couple hours to complete that section of the game. Very little narrative is being told to the player through this section of the game, the narrative sort of stalls. These stalls in the narrative can sort of hurt the narrative architecture and can sort of stop the suspension of disbelief.

However while this might be the weakest point in the game it is vastly better than some of the best moments in most games.

## Highlight

The Highlight of the Half-Life 2 has to be the opening sequence where the player does not have a weapon and must journey through City 17 a really get a sense of what has happened on the planet earth. As you are guided through the experience of the opening bits of the game you really feel the dirtiness and how run down people are. You also get a great sense of the enemy you are facing and how their superior technology can be use to control you. This is by far the strongest use of symbols throughout the game and really gives the player a feel for the narrative that is about to be told. It is also very strong narrative without really saying a word.

## Critical Reception

The critical reception to the title was extremely positive, with compellations scores from Metacritic at ninety-six percent and on GameRankings.com 95.43%.

IGN gave the game a 97, stating "The story unfolds in a near flawless fashion. It's weird that Gordon never speaks, but easily forgotten. You'll be hooked by the storytelling and drawn into the action naturally." PC Gamer gave the game a 98 (highest score ever given to a game) said "It raises the bar for interactive entertainment, and then uses that bar to club all other games into submission... an exhilarating entertainment that can emotionally move you one moment, kick ass the next, and keep you immersed the whole time." Lastly GamerArchive "The sheer number of moments you'll be astounded by the graphical touches, by the storyline, by the sheer polished nature of the title, and even the incredible level design is quite astounding."

## Lessons

- When using things such as the four nested masks and the alchemical elements, it makes it kind of hard to hide this fact from an educated player. Half-Life 2 does an amazing job in hiding the information so that the elements are there, but not so obvious that they are glaringly obvious.
- The main character does not have to be a general macho-man stereotype. So many games playing with the idea of a super solider conquering all, it get a bit old after a while. The main character while still having some tropes from those sorts of characters, it does not feel like he is a direct copy of every macho-man stereotype out there. This I feel is the most complex characterization of not only the main character, but that the depth of the cast of game in video game history.
- Attention to detail. Half-Life 2 does a great jump of having very small details that are accurate to the world that allows for a greater sense of emersion.

## Summation

The Narrative elements of this story remain very strong to this day, and as the years go by I believe this game will be etched in the mind of the conscience as a "classic" that will be emulated for years to come.

The story contains every element of the narrative architecture and fleshes out every bit of it, while doing what games do best, which is the suspension of disbelief.