

Half-Life 2:  
The Story of an MIT Physicist and His Crowbar

From the darkness you hear cryptic words from a familiar voice. “Rise and shine, Mr. Freeman. Rise and shine.” Your eyes slowly come into focus on your surroundings. In a half dream like state you realize you are aboard a train. It slowly pulls to a stop. “The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. So, wake up, Mr. Freeman. Wake up and smell the ashes.” You step off the train and begin your journey into City 17, one of the last remaining cities on Earth.

If “Half-Life 2” were to have one sole purpose, it would be to show us how far the first person shooter, FPS, has come, and how far behind it has left its peers. Walking in the shadows of Valve’s revolutionary “Half-Life,” this sequel undoubtedly faced a difficult challenge of paying homage to its predecessor. Utilizing cutting-edge graphics, an immersive style of game-play and an impressive physics engine, “Half-Life 2” has once again set the bar for the gaming industry. [This is a good opening. Dramatizing the plot while referring to its familiarity (as a sequel), then declaring the game as a new leader: not the most original approach to starting a review, but a very effective one, which sets up lots of good possibilities for the analysis to follow.]

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The game-play is typical of most games in the FPS genre. The first half of the game is spent on introducing Gordon Freeman, a MIT physicist and hero of our story, into his new surroundings. A foe referred to only as “the combine” has invaded Earth and enslaved all

humans. Gordon Freeman, with the aid of his dedicated followers, must escape from City 17 to one of the last remaining safe-houses for rebels like himself. From there, he must venture into the headquarters of “the combine” and put an end to the human enslavement. [While it is probably important to recount this plot for readers, especially as it makes clear the goals of the game, it would be stronger if the plot summary were better contextualized within the review. Starting your next paragraph with a discussion of the “feature set” kind of orphans this current paragraph, making it feel merely obligatory rather than leading.]

“Half-Life 2” is one of the first games to utilize the newest feature set of the DirectX 9 libraries. The game designers took full advantage of the innovative lighting and texture mapping technologies to produce breathtakingly realistic environments. Many times I found myself in awe of my surroundings, half believing that I was viewing a photograph rather than a rendered landscape. Moreover, every wall, every brick has been given such individual care that no graphical flaw could pull you away from the story. [The switch to first person here feels somewhat unmotivated. It isn’t a bad thing to do a review in the first person, but it is wise to make this a conscious and deliberate choice rather than just a stylistic accident.]

One of the most striking features of the game is the facial animation of the characters. The lips and eye movements have been perfectly orchestrated with the dialogue. As well, developers chose to design the character models after the voice actors themselves, taking careful note of their slightest nuances. One can almost feel the emotions of the in-game characters, adding a level of attachment unrivaled by any peers of “Half-Life 2.” [nice]

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Although the games developers spent a large [?] time creating a realistic physics engine, it has a foundation built upon Havok’s dynamic object environment system. Almost every object in the game can be interacted with. [This is an interesting remark, not typical of most gaming

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environments. Do you drop it here, or do you consider this issue further?] As well, when enemies die, their bodies fall in a ragdoll like manner. This level of detail creates a canvas on which “Half-Life 2” may tell its story.

The greatest draw to “Half-Life 2” is perhaps the immersive game-play it provides. From the moment you step off the train and enter City 17, to the final scene, you are Gordon Freeman. “Half-Life 2” offers the gamer a unique experience viewing the world of “Half-Life 2” through his eyes. There are no cut scenes or perspective changes to extract you from the current moment. Every plot turn, every story development is interwoven into Freeman’s surroundings. The engine’s advanced scripting engine allows intricate events to happen around Freeman as the story progresses. In this way, the gamer plays out each and every critical event in the story.

[interesting]

One of the greatest challenges that all first-person shooters face is how to present the story to the gamer. If there are too many cut scenes, the game begins to feel like watching a movie. If no plot is shown to the gamer, he may become lost and detached from his environment. Most of “Half-Life 2” forces the gamer along a preset path of vengeance and destruction. There is very little room for choice or improvisation for that matter. However, perhaps one of the saving qualities of this game is the ability of the player to take as much or as little as they want from the game’s plot. The casual player might run through each level destroying as many enemies as possible, paying little attention to their surroundings. However, the more thoughtful player is rewarded with the many newspaper clippings strewn about or the story told by the environment.

Perhaps one of the greater truths that “Half-Life 2” shows us is that people play video games to somehow escape from their reality. A good game will seamlessly transport the gamer

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into its realm. It is therefore the developer's responsibility to create a believable and immersive environment for the gamer. However "Half-Life 2," as well as almost all first person shooters, has the albatross of a linear plot; the limits of technology simply do not allow the gamer to choose whatever plot he wishes to pursue. "Half-Life 2" tries to provide one solution to this problem, but simply fails. It is not a fault of "Half-Life 2" as it is of the gaming industry itself. Although "Half-Life 2" uses many risky and unconventional techniques to provide the gamer a

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unique experience, because its premise is built upon the tried-and-true first-person shooter, the genre may never move past this barrier. [Is this a problem of convention, enforced by the gaming industry, or is it a technical problem, driven by the limits of computing power and design possibilities?]

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"Half-Life 2" is no doubt a game that has changed the gaming industry for the better. It boasts a technologically advanced set of features, from its beautiful visuals to its life-like facial expressions and character movements. Yet, what has set this game apart from the rest is its ability to fully immerse the gamer. With a total game-play time of 17-20 hours (depending on just how much of the story the gamer wishes to absorb), the gamer will strain to remember every breathtaking landscape or action-packed moment. At the end of it all, the game will leave the player wanting more, the calling card of a truly great storyteller.

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Dear Student,

Your review emphasizes the immersive nature of Half-Life 2, describing its many features (visual elements, plot elements, graphics engine, and more) in terms relating to this immersion. You do a very good job of relaying your own sense of immersion, and I found myself wishing that I could play this game (I never have), hoping to experience the same sense of wonder and self-loss that you seemed to feel. Though your review includes occasional moments when transitions are unmotivated, you mostly manage to keep things coherent and focused by centering on your primary claim.

My one criticism of this review is that, despite the overall unity of your central theme, the account of the game feels somewhat disjointed. Each paragraph deals with another aspect of the game, and they don't build off of each other progressively, instead coming across as a list of "things one should include in a game review." This isn't a wholly bad method of reviewing, but it does keep the review from rising above many of the conventions of the genre. You might have avoided this sort of linearity had you allowed yourself to explore some of your more interesting insights in greater depth. You offer as a kind of token flaw the invariability of the plot, and you note that this is pretty much universal in FPS games, but you don't begin to ask why it is universal or what it might mean to overcome it. You note that the graphics/physics engine is borrowed from Havok, but you don't begin to consider what it means to make more than one game out of the same engine; these are pretty different games, so this might have been an interesting opportunity to consider the meaning of a graphics engine. My point is not that these particular questions should have been answered, only that it might have been a more pointed and original review had you pursued some such line of inquiry.

In any case, you have demonstrated throughout the semester extraordinarily sharp thinking and a willingness to stretch creatively to discover the most interesting ideas that you can. Keep challenging yourself to arrive at unique insights, and continue to write them down, as your prose abilities are more than up to the task. Send me some examples down the road.

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