Game Narrative Review

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Overview

Set in an alternate history of the world, *Half-Life 2* begins as Gordon Freeman, the protagonist and player character from *Half-Life* is woken up by a mysterious figure known as the G-man. The intro sequence lets the player know that they are required to change the course of what is happening in the game world in some manner ("G-man: Let's just say your hour has come again. The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world."). An alien empire known as the Combine, which spreads across dimensions and universes to enslave different species of aliens, has taken over the Earth and is harvesting humans, while suppressing their breeding so that the species will slowly die off.

However, the player arrives in City 17 right at the moment where the human resistance movement is beginning to take its final stand, and aids them in fighting the Combine forces. The player ultimately destroys Dr. Breen, a traitor to the human race who negotiated Earth's surrender so that he may live in a high ruling position, along with the citadel at the center of City 17, which is made out to be a key link between the Combine Empire and Earth. In the final explosion, time is stopped as the G-man arrives again and teleports Gordon into an empty blackness, ending the game without giving explanation as to what happened back in City 17.

Characters

- Dr. Gordon Freeman:
    - The one free man in a world of slaves, Freeman serves as the player character and main protagonist of the game. As an MIT graduate and former research scientist, Gordon is known more for his intellect than his physical strength or constitution; he gains the ability to fight and perform

extraordinary physical tasks through the help of the technologically advanced Mark V HEV suit (a sort of super suit that enhances his physical ability and gives some utility like a small underwater oxygen supply and a flashlight). Gordon's motives are primarily to save the enslaved human by helping complete whatever tasks are given to him by the resistance movement.

- Dr. Eli Vance:
    o Once a fellow researcher of Freeman's, Eli Vance is the founder and leader of the City 17 resistance movement.
- Dr. Isaac Kleiner:
    o Dr. Kleiner, former mentor of Freeman, is one of the intellectual heads of the resistance science team, working to develop technology to help defeat the Combine. His research mainly focuses on inter-dimensional travel and teleportation.
- Dr. Judith Mossman:
    o Dr. Mossman works with Eli and Dr. Kleiner at the resistance headquarters. She becomes integral in the later parts of the story as the player finds out she has been working as a double agent with the Combine, but she defends herself saying that it was the only way to protect Eli and the others. Near the end, Mossman turns against the Combine and aids the resistance.
- Dr. Wallace Breen:
    o The main antagonist of the game, Dr. Breen betrayed the human race for his own gain by negotiating Earth's surrender at the end of the Seven Hour War. Believing that there is no chance of survival for the race, he promotes that cooperation with their captives is the best possible solution, and helps control the humans in City 17 and beyond from the Citadel.
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- Alyx Vance:
    o Daughter of Eli, and one of the only named non-doctors in the game, Alyx represents the energy of the resistance. She aids Gordon throughout his missions, and seems to have something of a romantic attraction towards him.
- The G-man:
    o The G-man is a mysterious being able to control time and move throughout vast expanses of space at will. He constantly supervises Dr. Freeman, and can be seen in obscure places throughout the game checking in on the player's progress. The G-man seems to have a great deal of knowledge about the events of the past and future, although he implies that these events can be changed. To make things even more interesting, it is implied in the ending sequence that the G-man works with other persons like himself and he seems to be in control of when and where you go. ("I've received some interesting offers for your services... Rather than offer you the illusion of free choice, I will take the liberty of choosing for you.").

Breakdown

Most of the time spent playing *Half-Life 2* in the beginning sections isn't spent progressing the story in a clear cut way; rather, it is spent pushing through many long linear sequences lined with puzzles. The puzzles, while being a great gameplay element, do little to nothing to advance the actual narrative of the game. While Valve's use of their new Source Engine was praised for the types of physics puzzles it provided, these puzzles often did little more than give the player a way to continue along the linear path to their destination, leaving their objectives and understanding of the game world unchanged. The airboat sequence and the antlion infested beach section both are evidence to this. However, while the puzzles do little to progress the story, the level design throughout these sequences accomplishes a lot in informing you about the world and how it came to reach its current situation. The environmental storytelling employed make great use of indexes, which are the traces that previous events have left on the space that can then be interpreted to understand what event left those traces (like tracing a set of footsteps to see what happened to the creator of those footsteps).[1] Indexical storytelling is used thoroughly to give you a feel of how all of Earth's forces could have been destroyed in 7 hours, and how you, a lone scientist with a cool suit and a few guns, could possibly stand up against the mighty Combine Empire. As you run through abandoned buildings lining the outskirts of City 17 to open various gates, you will notice lambdas, the symbols of the resistance, spray painted across various areas. City 17 has a rich history of rebellions rising and being squashed, of resistors hiding, but sometimes being flushed out by head-crab artillery or a searching gunship. All of these elements can be found in the indexes left by the designers. For example, a section of crates may be completely impassable, stopping your progress to the main resistance base at Black Mesa East, except for that one crate is opened up to reveal a radio and a chair with the symbol – a small resistance hideout. Or, notice when running past areas of zombies becomes more than a firefight when you see the head crab artillery canister that landed next to a set-up of a few resistance beds – imagine the group trying to fight off the head-crabs before they were mutated into the zombies you now kill. When you realize how often this happens in your journey from point A to point B, you realize that you are far from taking on the whole Combine army by yourself. You would be hindered beyond completion of your tasks dozens of times if it weren't for the help of the resistance. This make the player realize that they truly have arrived at just the perfect moment to be able to help.

This design of narrative through indexical storytelling in the first half of the game serves to introduce you into how the world came to be in its current state. The second half of the game is the final stand against the Combine that the resistance has been fighting for for the past 15-20 years. The first half of the game sets you up to realize the moment you are in, and how imperative it is towards the future of the entire human race. But then, you reach Nova Prospekt, the Combine prison. After fighting your way through the level in the same fashion as before, but in a slightly less linear level, you discover with Alyx that Dr. Mossman has been working with Breen, and she teleports herself and Eli to the

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[1] Fernandez-Vara, Clara. "Game Spaces Speak Volumes: Indexical Storytelling." (2011). Web. 4 May 2012. <http://mit.academia.edu/ClaraFernandezVara/Papers/1082468/Game_Spaces_Speak_Volumes_Indexical_Storytelling >.

Citadel, rather than back to Black Mesa East. This is the climax of the story, after this point, you are no longer progressing in order to learn about the world or get to a location after a misplaced teleport. The storytelling objectives of the missions shift from "get from point A to point B so that you can learn about X and Y there", to "now that you know what you need to know, you need to apply it". You go from learning about the world to actually taking actions to affect it. Now, you have a solidified goal to infiltrate the Citadel and rescue Eli, while stopping Breen and Mossman.

The following section of the game narrative is still filled with indexes hinting at the world's creation, but now gives more focus towards player actions actually progressing the narrative. The puzzles become less about getting a vehicle over a certain wall, as in the beginning of the game, and more about stopping combine transmission, or opening up a path for the resistance to enter through. The second half of *Half Life 2* presents the falling action of the narrative, as you actually take the actions necessary to help the human race fight back against becoming completely enslaved. After your teleport, which was a "slow teleport" and actually took a week long, you arrive in Black Mesa East. After Nova Prospekt was destroyed, and with the resistance aware of your presence, they had begun their final uprising against the Combine Overwatch, and war has broken out among the streets of City 17. You spend the next few chapters pushing through the streets of City 17, leading resistance citizens in their fight against the Combine police force as you push towards the Citadel. Your objectives change to leading resistance fighters to victory in their assault against their oppressors, which gives the player a feeling of interaction and importance in the game narrative. The destruction of Overwatch barriers and headquarters begins to have a noticeable effect on the power of the Combine, as the player begins to see more resistance squads successfully overwhelm the Combine police forces, and the Combine even begin to resort to retreating, leaving mines behind, and hastily semi-fortifying positions to try and fight back the rebels. The player also feels connection to the NPCs they are responsible for, since those NPCs will die if they are squandered or the player acts without considering their safety. It becomes less world building now, and more player interaction, as Gordon fights through the streets trying to help the rebellion. After reaching the Citadel, Gordon and Alyx infiltrate, and Gordon has his weapons stripped in an energy field. This makes sense, since the Combine don't have ammunition lying around in the Citadel (why would they? They never expected to fight there.). This process also enhances the gravity gun however, so the level is still able to have combat in it, as the Combine throws the best they have at you. As Gordon begins squaring off with whole squads of Combine Elite, the player knows that the Combine are desperately throwing everything they have at him/her. This empowers the player, giving them confidence and motivation to make the final push and conclude the falling action of the narrative. Reaching the top of the tower where Eli, Mossman, and Breen are with Alyx, the player witnesses Mossman's change back to helping the resistance, and Breen attempts to flee. Gordon destroys the dark energy reactor fueling the Combine inter-dimensional teleporter, and as the explosion kills Breen and before it would presumably kill both Freeman and Alyx, the G-man stops time and transports Gordon back to the dark space the game begins in, presumably to wait until he is needed again. The fates of Alyx and the rest of the resistance are left unknown, and the resolution of the story leaves many questions about the future. However, it is presumed through the G-man's final speech and the impact the player was making since the climax

of the narrative that Gordon's actions have been significant enough to change the course of events, and it is implied that the resistance will stand a much better chance at actually retaking the entirety of Earth. The engrossing story and increase in visible player impact on the game world is immersive and creates a motivation and personal connect between the player and the game narrative.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in *Half Life 2* is the use of indexes populating the world space, which allows the game world to feel immersive and rich, while at the same time explaining how the world came to be in its current state, and how it stands to be in the future should nothing happen. Fighting through the streets of City 17, the player can see empty playground sets, reminding him/her of the fact that the combine suppression field prevents any children from being born, so that this resistance is the only chance the humans have against the Combine, and if it fails non-combined humans will undoubtedly die off. The small resistance hideouts interplayed throughout the world in nearly uninhabitable places remind the player of how desperately the resistance is trying to hold on, and how weak their grip is becoming. G-man's appearances in unplugged TV's and across large distances express how other powers are watching the player's progress, and even care enough to constantly check up on him/her. Head-crab canisters littering the doomed town of Ravenholm express the limitations of even the Combine in controlling the inter-species warfare they invoke upon their victims, and how the Overwatch care very little about the safety or survival of the humans. Even in the Citadel, the assembly line of deploying gunships and prisoner pods demonstrate the scale at which the Combine can wage war, reminding the player that they are an efficient slave driven Empire, and if they get the chance to fully mobilize to Earth, there is no hope for the future of the human race. These indexes serve to build the atmosphere of the world, as well as drive the motivation of the player character, which is good since the official objectives Dr. Freeman receives are often bland and unmotivated (get through Ravenholm, reach Nova Prospekt, reach Black Mesa East, etc.).

Unsuccessful Element

From a narrative standpoint, the most unsuccessful element in the game is the puzzle design. Very few to no puzzles actually serve to advance the plot in any meaningful way. It is an interesting point, since the puzzles in *Half Life 2* have usually been greatly praised for their ingenuity in their physics based nature. For example, one puzzle involves using a plank of wood on a barrel as a makeshift seesaw, and loading weight on the opposite end as the airboat to raise it up above a barrier. However, while the physics based puzzles are new and interesting from a gameplay standpoint, they take a step away from other puzzles which have elements that can be allegorical or symbolic of the narrative or characters in it, so that the puzzles no longer create an adequate sub-narrative that advances the players understanding of the world or narrative. Good narrative puzzles could have involved metaphorical objects that reflect the characters or state in the game world, or objectives in the puzzle that advance the narrative through their completion -- like if discovering incriminating evidence against Mossman in Nova Prospekt was a puzzle. Rather, the puzzles in *Half Life 2* teach very little to the player

after the first couple of levels when they figure out the way physics works in the game (which isn't hard to do since the physics in the game closely model how one would expect physics to work in real life). The "A-ha!" moment that comes with figuring out how to tweak the physics in the world reveals no "A-ha!" about the game world or its characters.

Highlight

Fighting through the streets of City 17, the resistance is faced with a deployment of one of the fiercest ground combat units the Combine can deploy, the strider. This massive alien tripod unit has a powerful armored shell impervious to anything but multiple rocket attacks, knife like feet with which it can impale its enemies, and a powerful plasma cannon that can quickly disintegrate entire squads of rebels and the player. Venturing past a destroyed city building, the player suddenly hears the terrified yells from rebels up ahead, and the distinctive electronic alien shriek of multiple striders. Since the game limits the amount of rocket ammo carried to an amount that is only enough to kill one strider, the player knows they must rush to find cover inside the wreckage of the nearby building. They must traverse between the floors of the building, fighting hard to keep the resistance members below alive by distracting and killing the striders before a large portion of rebels is wiped out. If the player is paying close attention, they will notice that the ammunition locations laid out around the building and other indexes give a detailed and grizzly story of the fate of another group of rebels trying to fight off a patrol of striders and possibly a gunship. The culmination of the intense gameplay advancing the narrative of destroying the Combine and saving the resistance, along with the subtle hints of the war-torn landscape giving the history of the world and the importance of every battle Gordon fights, creates one of the truest examples of player motivation to the goal of the game in *Half Life 2*.

Critical Reception

Half Life 2 was received with almost universal critical acclaim, and it stands today still as the highest rated single game on Metacritic (considering user score to break ties among critic's scores). The game, "From its opening moments to its spectacular closing sequences, Half-Life 2 assaults you with a variety of gameplay styles and memorable moments, all executed with amazing precision". (GameSpy, Sal Accardo, 5/5). IGN reports, "While the writing and plot points will act as fly paper to your attention, the real winner here is the way the story is presented… Public service announcements, private conversations, and the actions of characters around you, whether part of the Combine or simply waylaid citizens, create a stifling and threatening feeling that City 17 has become some sort of elaborate prison preaching the chance for freedom and opportunity without choice or desire." (IGN, Dan Adams, 9.7/10).

Lessons

(What can be learned about game writing, characterization, story, narrative design, or other related elements from this game? What lessons – positive or negative – can be extracted and then applied to future game development? List as many as needed. Each lesson should be supported by examples from within the game.)

- **Details, details, details:**
  - Taking the time to populate the world with detailed indexes -- traces of events that left a mark on the game world which can be used by the player to determine, in reverse, what event left such a trace -- can create constant, engrossing atmosphere, and serve as a way of teaching the player about the game world. Such indexical storytelling can be used in place of lengthy cut scenes explicitly stating the nature of the game world, which do little to immerse the player into the world and connect them to the narrative and player character.
- **The player's motivation can be tied to the player character's motivation:**
  - Designers can create a world that the player can develop personal interest in, and the player can be motivated to have the same goals of the player character. This immerses the player in the drama of the narrative since they have a personal connection to it beyond just the desire to beat the game.
- **The player doesn't need to have a huge impact on the world with *everything* they do:**
  - Large sections of the game can be implemented such that the player character has little impact upon the game world, but rather, is exploring it, as long as the game space is engrossing. This works well in giving the later parts where the player character's actions actually *do* have significant effects much more gravity and tension.
- **Narratives don't need multiple twists and turns to stay interesting:**
  - A narrative does not need numerous substantial twists to keep the player interested. *Half Life 2* expresses how player involvement and interest can keep the narrative interesting and fun, even if an intelligent observer could probably guess the sequence of events that will occur next in the story.

Summation

Roughly the first half of *Half Life 2* provides entertaining gameplay that simultaneously sets up the rising action of the narrative through discovery of the world and how it came to be in its current state through indexical storytelling and detailed world design. This builds up appropriate apprehension and understanding in the player, so they feel the tension in the world, which is satisfyingly brought to a crescendo in the games climax. The player then gets to interact and have a serious effect on the game world, made all the more satisfying by how immersed in the game narrative they have become up until that point. They are motivated to complete the objectives Gordon Freeman has by the connection to the game world and its characters that has been established. Following an empowering and invigorating rebellion that continues to remind the player why he/she fights through indexical storytelling, the player reaches a conclusion which provides adequate change to the world, but stays open ended enough to keep the player guessing and wanting more. The narrative sticks with the player, and is successful for these reasons. Even after many years of playing many genres of games, *Half Life 2* remains one of the most engrossing narratives and best examples of world building and storytelling through indexical storytelling I have played. It deserves a serious look by any narrative designer for the depth of the world it creates, and how it succeeds in expressing

this depth while at the same time providing serious motivation for the player to complete the goals of the player character.