Speechless Protagonists, Spatial Storytelling, and Immersive Worlds: *Half-Life* Game Narrative Review

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Overview

In a vast underground science facility in Black Mesa, New Mexico, a cutting-edge experiment in teleportation goes drastically awry. Dr. Gordon Freeman arrives late to his labs on a day like any other, except the entire computer network is oddly incapacitated. His colleagues also complain about their administrator, who has placed rigorous demands on them to continue with the experiment despite pushing scientific limits.

The limits were pushed too far, as Dr. Freeman incidentally triggers the Resonance Cascade, in which alien inhabitants of an other-dimensional world, Xen, begin porting directly into the depths of the Black Mesa Facility. Terrorized by these hostile extraterrestrials, scientists scramble to get to the surface and call for help.

Soon enough the U.S. Military's HECU soldiers arrive not to help, but to eliminate all witnesses of the incident, killing aliens and employees alike. Dr. Freeman is forced to battle with an army of highly trained soldiers, until he can regroup with his colleagues and find a way to close the inter-dimensional rift. All the while Freeman is closely watched by the G-Man, a mysterious character who appears throughout the facility keeping tabs as the events unfold.

Soon enough Dr. Freeman bands with his fellow scientists, and they send him to the alien world of Xen in order to close the dimensional rift caused by the Resonance Cascade. Freeman encounters the leader of Xen, a massive creature called Nihilanth, and kills it, thus collapsing the power of the alien intruders. In a shocking twist, G-Man - apparently an extraterrestrial himself - pulls Gordon Freeman from Xen and offers a job working with him. While floating in some kind interdimensional travel, G-Man gives

Freeman no choice but to join him, otherwise face certain death. With all the questions surrounding the Black Mesa Incident unresolved, Gordon is put into stasis indefinitely.

Characters

- **Dr. Gordon Freeman** - The primary protagonist of the entire *Half-Life* series, Gordon Freeman hails from a background in theoretical physics from MIT. He is responsible for incidentally triggering the Resonance Cascade at the Black Mesa Facility. Thanks to his powerful HEV suit, he single handedly fights the U.S. Hazardous Environment Combat Unit and Xen extraterrestrials, escaping capture until he is finally teleported to Xen by his surviving colleagues in the Lambda Complex. Once there, he battles the Xen overlord Nihilanth, and removes the alien threat for the time being. G-Man finally intervenes in Gordon's fate, recruiting him for work and placing him in indefinite stasis by the end of the game.
- **Barney Calhoun** - A good friend of Dr. Freeman's, Barney is a security guard at the Black Mesa Research facility. After the malfunction of the Anti-Mass Spectrometer that triggered the Resonance Cascade, Calhoun manages to fight his way to the surface and meet up with surviving scientists. As the science team attempts to teleport themselves out of the complex, the temporary capture of Gordon Freeman by HECU soldiers is witnessed by Barney firsthand. However, he is unable to assist and is teleported back outside the facility, where the team presumably flees to safety.
- **Dr. Isaac Kleiner** - Originally Gordon Freeman's mentor at MIT, Dr. Kleiner takes a position at Sector C Anomalous Materials at the Black Mesa Research Facility, where the primary investigations involve alien artifacts and lifeforms. Responsible for much of the research into teleportation and interdimensional travel, Dr. Kleiner utilizes this technology to collect artifacts from Xen for analysis. After the Black Mesa incident he presumably escapes with Barney Calhoun.
- **Dr. Eli Vance** - Also working in teleportation alongside Dr. Isaac Kleiner, Dr. Vance is a prominent member of the original Anomalous Materials science team. He and Dr. Kleiner both brief Gordon on the procedure of the experiment before the Resonance Cascade, and Dr. Vance presumably escapes the facility with Dr. Kleiner and Calhoun.
- **G-Man** - The most cryptic character of *Half-Life*, on the outside G-Man appears to be a typical government agent sent to the Black Mesa Research Facility on a standard protocol. However, once he begins appearing to Gordon throughout the facility after the Resonance Cascade, his purpose and intentions seem to go much deeper. He is strangely capable of appearing and disappearing at will, although he never does so in plain sight to Gordon or any other characters. He calmly observes the interdimensional chaos throughout Black Mesa, and tests Gordon's

abilities in order to determine his potential as an employee. Due to G-Man's unearthly accent, it is believed that he may not be human at all.

Breakdown

The story of *Half-Life* begins with a jolt, as the Black Mesa Research Facility incidentally launches the "Resonance Cascade" with their experimental teleportation technology. Strange extraterrestrial lifeforms assault the labyrinthine complex, and the player takes on the role of Dr. Gordon Freeman, the scientist who - incidentally - started it all. Like a classic Crichtonian techno-thriller, the player is plunged into a megalithic conspiracy behind this science experiment-gone-awry, all while being forced to navigate a massive underground laboratory with a single mission: get to the surface alive.

The *Half-Life* narrative is unique in that it constantly functions as a form of environmental exposition, which serves the game's pulse-pounding fictional style very well. The overarching narrative is divided up by architectural space, giving the player a sense of individual "chapters" despite the experience being a constantly flowing narrative.   In this way, the environment itself is the primary means for divulging exposition and weaving a complex interconnected plot. Each new chapter actually has a heading within the game that flashes before the player's eyes, such as *Anomalous Materials*, or *Unforeseen Consequences*, giving the sense that the player is actually playing out a novel.

The game narrative never stops; you are always Gordon Freeman, and your experience as him is never broken by cutscenes, explanations of meta elements, or fourth-wall forays. As you explore, solve, and battle your way from chapter to chapter, the Black Mesa Facility only looms larger and larger. From laboratories to sewers, and offices to reactor cores, the sense of continuity is at once overwhelming and completely natural. Everything about the game - and how you experience the story - is telling you that you are living through this experience yourself.

The primary protagonists of the *Half-Life* saga are separated by the vastness of the Black Mesa Facility, and only influence each other indirectly. Sergeant Shepherd hunts Dr. Freeman vigilantly as a soldier of the Hazardous Environment Combat Unit, but always remains one step behind. Barney Calhoun, a BMRF security guard, encounters Freeman intermittently throughout the story, and witnesses the events from a different set of eyes. Dr. Colette Green and Dr. Gina Cross assist other protagonists in Freeman's primary storyline, such as helping Dr. Rosenberg contact the U.S. Military for help and evacuation, eventually leading to the raid of the hostile HECU soldiers on a mission to cover up the incident and eliminate everyone involved. The central agonist of the *Half-Life* story is the mysteries G-Man, who is intermittently seen monitoring the player from inaccessible parts of the facility. Quiet and unusually businesslike, G-Man is an unnerving presence in the midst of the constant chaos.

Strongest Element

     Half-Life - and its subsequent expansions *Opposing Force*, *Blue Shift*, and *Decay* - was one of the first games to do away with in-game cutscenes as a method of developing plot. Instead, the game's constant flow was speckled with numerous scripted micro-narratives, in which the player could only serve as a witness to the action - or plight - of other characters in the story. I call these scenes "scripted micro-narratives" as opposed to "scripted sequences" because "sequences" can be anything within the game that is scripted beforehand, whereas "micro-narratives" are specifically intertwined with the story. With scripted micro-narratives, everything about the narrative experience becomes about making the player feel as if she is actually living the story.

     In the first chapter of the game, Dr. Freeman's colleagues dialogue about the initial experiment and give the player explicit directions, all within a real-time scene that is contained only by its architectural boundaries. Not only does this provide interesting exposition, but serves the double purpose of directing the player to a goal within the game. In another instance, the player witnesses G-Man for the first time arguing with a scientist in an inaccessible laboratory. This micro-narrative is physically separated from the player by the simplest panopticonic device an institution can offer: a bullet-proof pane of glass.

     Scripted micro-narratives also reveal a shocking twists in the plot. For instance, when HECU soldiers start killing scientists in cold blood, the player realizes the military is not here to help, but to murder. In the immediate aftermath of the failed experiment, the Resonance Cascade, the player is confronted with heart-pounding scenes of chaos: a security guard helplessly performing CPR on a dead employee; an elevator full of people dropping hundreds of feet down a shaft; a desperate scientist throwing a shelf onto an alien headcrab, only to get his face latched onto by the creature's death grip.   Not only do these in-game scripted moments provide the player with riveting narrative and a sense of foreboding, but they also teach the player elements of the gameplay - what headcrab does, for instance.

Unsuccessful Element

     The fact that Dr. Gordon Freeman never speaks or visibly reacts within the game has been a point of contention amongst narratologists and fans of the game, and it is very clear why: he tends to feel completely devoid of character. It is understood that Valve wanted you to feel like you were Gordon Freeman as much as possible, and giving him his own voice in every scene would have undoubtedly detracted from the player's experience of character embodiment.

     However, much like the gamebook style of *Choose Your Own Adventure*, the character of *Half-Life* - You, essentially - is undeniably shallow. First-Person Shooters have since discovered new ways of making up for this shortcoming. In *Mass Effect* and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, the player is given a list of potential phrases that his

character can say in response to in-game dialogue. This way, the player is still able to fully embody the character, because the player is choosing for himself what his character says. Not only is there no loss of narrative immersion, but non-player-characters no longer seem to be talking to themselves whenever the player's character is directly involved in a dialogue scene.

This style is much like a role-playing game, in which the player is not necessarily trying to feel like he himself is the character, but in a sense is choosing to portray a character within a story and make that character part of himself. No one was ever trying to convince you that you are actually Gordon Freeman, as Gordon clearly was a character within a story that is separate from you. However, in an attempt to immerse the player as much as possible, Valve overlooked potential solutions for making their primary protagonist a little less empty of character.

Highlight

The highlight of *Half-Life*'s narrative is in the immediate aftermath of the Resonance Cascade. This is the most drastic altercation in the plot, and the player immediately observes the drastic contrast from the once peaceful and secure Black Mesa Research Facility to the chaotic wreck it has become. The player, as Gordon Freeman, realizes that this is something he has directly caused, and between waves of unconsciousness, finally awakes to see a nightmare unfolding before him.

Critical Reception

Half-Life's reception was incredibly positive, eventually garnering over 50 Game of the Year awards. The game received a Metascore of 96 on Metacritic.[1] IGN's Jason Bates praised the game, saying "the sheer number of hand-scripted events and little scenes keeps the action moving, giving you a reason to keep playing, if only to see what could possibly happen next. I haven't had so much fun playing a game in years."[2]

Gamespot placed *Half-Life* into their "Greatest Games of All Time" list. Ron Dulin, in Gamespot's original review of the game, added a curious point about the story: "Suffice it to say that *Half-Life* isn't a great game because of its story; it's a great game because of how it presents that story... There are scripted events in the game. There are opening and closing scenes. But they all occur naturally within the game environment. It may sound simple, but it goes a long way toward helping create a believable world."[3] In other words, a large part of the game's success was not just its narrative, but in the

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[1] http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/half-life/critic-reviews

[2] http://uk.pc.ign.com/articles/153/153107p1.html

[3] http://uk.gamespot.com/half-life/reviews/half-life-review-2537398/

immersive sense in which that narrative was presented to the player through environmental exposition and scripted sequences.

Lessons

1) **Let the player piece it together through environmental exposition**. Instead of shoving the storyline into players faces through cutscenes, *Half-Life* subtly disperses the narrative throughout the game's environment, allowing the player to put things together herself. Rather than show a cutscene of G-Man having a mysterious discussion with an angry scientist, the two characters are merely blended into the atmosphere of the game, allowing the player to take notice on his own, and draw his own conclusions. This type of storytelling is what Henry Jenkins refers to as *narrative architecture*[4], also called environmental exposition or spatial storytelling.

2) **Make all game mechanics have a logical real-world purpose for existing**. Much of the praise for *Half-Life* was in its believable world. It revolutionized first-person shooters by eliminating the era of floating health packs and glowing weapon upgrades. Everything within *Half-Life* has a logical real-world purpose. The HEV suit requires battery charge, thus wall chargers that upgrade your armor are logically placed throughout the facilities. Ammo is taken from dead security guards, soldiers, or ammo lockers within the facility. Health kits are found in cabinets and lockers. Nothing about the gameplay breaks the world's realistic continuity.

3) **Allow the player to play a character, not just a game.** Gordon Freeman is undeniably shallow as a character. While this does allow for a certain immersion in the world by not distracting the player with a voice from his own character, it ignores more modern solutions that incorporate a role-playing element with player-selected dialogue. Until the day comes when the player's words can actually be responded to by intelligent NPCs in real-time, these solutions - silence or selected dialogue - will have to suffice for building the player's own character while maintaining suspension of disbelief within the world.

Summation

     Half-Life not only provides a riveting narrative on par with the stories of Crichton and King, but revolutionized the methods in which such narrative is explored in the first-person shooter. Never before had a game so immersed players into it's world. Every mechanic had a realistic purpose, every scene occurred naturally within the player's

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[4] http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html

space, and every plot point was revealed through the environment and atmosphere. The narrative design of *Half-Life* wasn't just about watching a story or playing a story, but about living a story.