

Half-Life 2 Afterthoughts: Putting the Crowbar Down

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The following is my personal opinion based on the Half-Life 2 single player game experience.

I've never been one to run through a game just to spout off commentary like some self-appointed connoisseur and claim "I beat the game in just a few hours." I like to feel the game, sense the game, explore the game, take in the sights and sounds, while measuring overall quality and mood. How does the game, or in this case the sequel, compare to the original? How does it rate compared to others in its genre this year? Does the game bring anything new or groundbreaking to the fold in terms of advancing innovation for the game industry?

In case you couldn't tell, I purposefully took my time playing Half-Life 2 from beginning to end. Yup, pre-ordered it and picked up my Collector's Edition first day out! Yup, didn't finish it in 4 hours...but in 4 weeks. Loved it! I will confess the original Half-Life released a week before Turkey Day in 1998 is still my favorite game of all time. I can't speak for other reviewers, but for me personally I don't use any fancy matrixes, benchmarks, or analysis to measure and evaluate games. I just ask one very compelling question: Would you play it again? Let me rephrase that: Would you WANT to play it again? Let me rephrase that one more time: Would you want to play it AGAIN and AGAIN?

What it really all boils down to is this: Was the game fun, enjoyable, and an immersive experience for the player—and does it keep drawing you back in an addictive way? Aside from the subjective nature which each individual is entitled to, I really enjoyed Half-Life 2. I believe the entire team at Valve accomplished great feats with this sequel. I greatly respect the team for their execution of ideas and vision—they genuinely cared about building a game of excellence and they definitely achieved that. But at the same time I feel disappointed about many aspects of my Half-Life 2 experience.

Keep in mind Half-Life 2 has been in development longer than any game I can remember. It also had more folks working on it, and more money poured into it than any game I know of. Enough preamble—let's take it from the top!

The Bad

As mentioned, I purchased the retail Collector's Edition. This represents a great value, as you pretty much get the whole stable of Valve's upgraded single and multiplayer games (with the promise of more to come including mods and other niceties). When you open the big box the first thing you see is the folded shirt. But the T-Shirt...is that weak or what! Come on, no Valve staffer would be wearing that. No writing on the back at all, not even the words Half-Life 2 are anywhere to be found. I love the XL size "T", but the logo is not much bigger than a silver dollar! Maybe they should have selected a yellow T-shirt instead of black for the cheese factor the shirt emanates. Did I mention there is no printed manual with the game at all? The Collector's Edition does include a bonus Prima mini-guide, but I still expected more depth from a "Collector's Edition." My take is if a consumer is willing to throw down \$80, give us some real quality and throw in the Official Strategy Guide with a decent shirt—I'll pony up a C-Note for that!

OK, let's talk about authentication. Nobody wants to see people ripping off or stealing games—that's a no brainier. But you would think Valve would have learned lessons from

the Microsoft and Turbo-Tax debacles from times past (about how not to implement this strategy). Sure, the one-time check makes sense, but I still loathe the hassle and work-around dances just to play a game (I paid for) off-line! I will not even get into how long it takes just to boot and load the game. Wasn't the original Half-Life six years ago praised for the seamless short load times from chapter to chapter? Are we going forward or backward here? I have a decent Alienware P4 3.2 system with 2 Gigs of RAM and a 9800XT, and it's painfully slow to load Half-Life 2! And what's up with the minor stuttering during game loads and saves? Are you going to tell me with a straight face with a development team the size of China nobody picked-up on this? And one last thing—when I maniacally crow bar enemies or monsters, I expect them to deteriorate more and more with each blow until possibly disintegrating...and in Half-Life 2 this does not happen. Nobody is going to argue the ending could have been fleshed out much better, G-Man or not!

The Good

I thought Earth's Administrator Dr. Wallace Breen's character dialog was spot-on and highly entertaining. Breen's role seemed authentically consistent from beginning to end. Well done! Cumulatively, the voice acting of Half-Life 2 is the best I've ever seen. Sure, some citizen's voices repeated towards later chapters, but overall you will be hard pressed to beat this voice acting and dialog. How do I become Earth's Administrator anyway? Is it the dude with the best Pecs: "Starting today everyone gets a double helping of dessert, like it or not!" I thought Farther Grigori should be nominated for best Supporting Actor. Grigori really brought charisma to this game and his dialog and actions were fabulous. This is what makes a game great! I kept playing these scenes over and over. Farther Grigori, a man of the cloth, wielding a shot gun yelling "Be Free My Child" as he blows away Zombies with one headshot is absolute classic! In Chapter 10, The Benefactory, the tour of the Citadel was stunning from the jerking of the Iron Maiden Pod when you first strap-in, to getting a sense of the enormity and power of this goliath structure. I've always loved the opening train ride of the original Half-Life into Black Mesa, and I enormously enjoyed this pod tour as well, albeit it was short. The Gravity Gun is ground-breaking as is the new physics engine (perhaps a bit overused, but fun). The sound of the environments from explosions to weapons is just superlative in Half-Life 2. It goes without saying that the visuals are amazing, but this is becoming more of a non-issue today as pretty much any AAA title in 1280 x 1024 is going to kick butt with anti-aliasing on or off.

Step Away From the Crowbar

No doubt about it, in my opinion the original Half-Life in 1998 was a great deal more "OMG this is an amazing groundbreaking experience." Half-Life 2 in 2004 is a great game and does bring innovation, great story telling, and amazing tech to the table. I didn't sense the same charisma, simplicity, creativity and intriguing journey as with the original. The Mudskipper boat and Scout Buggy were totally fun vehicles to drive, although perhaps long in the tooth. In contrast, the open Rail-Train in chapter six of the original Half-Life was groundbreaking and exciting like a scary amusement ride. Don't get me wrong, controlling Antlions with Pheropod laced bugbait is just genius and totally fun! Again, Half-Life 2 is a great game—it's just that sequels rarely surpass the original's expectations...in games or movies.