

This is my dissertation on the various ways to look at Half-Life. It was completed in 2003 as part of my film and media degree, and I got a decent mark for it. I know it's got a few mistakes, but it's fairly complete, and, as far as I know, there's not much like this out there. Also, the conclusion seems to have gone AWOL somewhere, I'm in the process of tracking it down and I'll add it as soon as I find it.

If you want to use bits of this in any essays/whatever please put a reference in. An email would be nice too, I'm at henrywinchesterATgmailDOTcom. Thanks for reading.

The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak.ⁱ

-Susan Sontag

Computer games have always been seen as the epitome of low culture, and yet they offer so much of the pleasure Sontag propositions. The majority of games are fairly mindless; do this, shoot that. As Zoë Williams illustrates of *Grand Theft Auto III* (2000): “your core aims are to steal cars, trash them, beat prostitutes to death and then set upon the sailors who are unaccountably stalking the highways of generic America and may or may not be homosexual.”ⁱⁱ *Grand Theft Auto III* is one of the few games that has made the most of the gratuitous and visceral potential of the new form. Low culture they may be, but computer games are the entertainment form of choice amongst today's teenagers. They make more money every year than Hollywood.ⁱⁱⁱ And, if as Fredric Jameson points out, “(high and low culture) have begun to fold back into one another,”^{iv} games are just as culturally valid as any other medium.

And yet, as a games player of some fifteen years, I've seen diamonds amongst all the low-culture-computer-game coal. There have been moments in computer games that have literally taken my breath away – the sheer fun of *Sonic The Hedgehog* (1991); the terrifying visions of *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom 2* (1994); the anarchic gratification of *Grand Theft Auto* (1997); the absolute overwhelming beauty of *Rez* (2001). To someone who does not play games this probably seems like a nerdy list, but half the fun of games is the satisfaction of knowing that you – and millions like you – are enjoying a pleasure predominantly untainted by serious analysis and a fucked-up moral agenda that would *definitely* upset your parents.

And yet, in spite of their cultural importance as the first leisure texts to be produced on and for computers, computer games are currently substantially overlooked by academia. As Kurt Squire says: “The successes of such books as *Joystick Nation* and *Trigger Happy* suggest there is an

maturing generation of gamers who feels the same way: games are integral parts of our lives, yet they've largely gone unexamined.”^v There is an increasing canon of scholarly texts on the subject, in particular on websites such as *gamestudies.org* and *gamasutra.com*. But, as of yet, attempts to understand the manner in which games work and are constructed are few and far between, as Ted Friedman suggests: “the humanities have yet to [compose] any sort of coherent attempt to account for [the differences between computer games and other mediums; HW] -- a ‘computer theory’ (or perhaps ‘software theory’) to complement literary theory, film theory, and television theory.”^{vi} In its own way, this dissertation itself is a rise to Friedman’s challenge, by hybridising game and film theory to explore the way in which games are constructed.

But there is one crucial element missing from the majority of games theory. Games are primarily played by young men - stereotypically a spotty teenager who has no luck with the opposite sex and never leaves his room. Although there is a growing female audience (*The Sims* [1998] claims an astonishing 60% female audience share), the stereotype is (unfortunately) fairly true. Mike Anderiesz suggests that this is because “there are simply too few women playing games – a classic case of ‘chicken and egg’ not helped by the violent and sexist content in so many titles.”^{vii} Traditional cinematic and literary traits such as love interests and sex scenes are conspicuous in their absence from computer games; sex in general seems to be considered a taboo subject within the form. The handful of games that attempt to tackle sexual subjects head-on are usually grossly misogynistic (the aim of *Custer’s Revenge* [1983] is to rape Native Americans) and deeply terrible. Romantic subplots are also frequently bodged in computer games such as *No-One Lives Forever* (2000), in which the romantic story line was about as interesting and captivating as a dead sheep.

How, then, do the majority of computer games go about representing sexuality in gameplay? The game that revived my faith in the form, *Half-Life* (1998), was awe-inspiring the first time I played it. It seemed to have a genuinely intelligent approach to story and atmosphere, and elevated the medium to more sophisticated ground. It managed to at once reinforce and subvert the generic conventions of the first person shooter (FPS). But it struck me that there was something noticeably absent from the entire game – there were absolutely no female characters throughout. The only presence that could be described as remotely feminine were the catwoman-like leather-clad assassins, who only filled a very small role within the game. Then it occurred to me that maybe *Half-Life’s* sexual strategy is to exhibit monstrous versions of both female and male sexuality in a kind of denial strategy. Even Gabe Newell, one of *Half-Life’s* designers refers to the games set pieces as “money shots”.^{viii} If, as Helen Kennedy suggests, “the internal spaces of game worlds stand in for the mysterious and unknowable interior of the female body,”^{ix} then *Half-Life* is immediately primed for an analysis in this manner.

In order to back up my argument that sex is represented subtly within the computer game I am drawing on another essentially male-driven medium in the form of science fiction cinema. Vivian Sobchack notes that science

fiction is equally prominent in its lack of sexual concerns, stating that “human sexuality and women return to the science fiction narrative in condensed forms.”^x Indeed, both computer games and science fiction cinema seem share to be sharing more and more characteristics and traits. As McKenzie Wark points out of *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991):

[...]the main point is that the movie itself was already structured like a video game. The music mimicked the heart-starting rhythms of video game soundtracks, and the plot took the form of a series of 'levels', each of increasing difficulty. Some looked like the scrolling genre of game, like the chase through the storm water channels. Some looked like the platform genre, such as the final shoot out in the factory.^{xi}

My Approach is - perhaps idiosyncratically – to divide this dissertation into three separate aspects of *Half-Life*. Firstly, I will look at *Half-Life* in relation to current game theory in order to establish how the fundamental ideas behind the game work, and how it “fits” into the discourse. Secondly, I will look at *Half-Life*'s science-fiction components and how it adopts and adapts traits of the genre in order to conceive a recognisable world. Thirdly, I will apply ideas pertaining to sex and psychoanalysis to examine *Half-Life*'s relationship with its target audience. As games are comparatively such a new medium, I believe it is of vital importance to establish what *Half-Life* is and how it works, thus this dissertation is more discursive than argumentative. And, if nothing else, it will hopefully highlight some of the frustrations of studying such a innovative and amorphous form. As one of *Half-Life*'s scientists utters during the events of the game, “I believe this will make for a notable paper, don't you?”^{xii}

Half-Life as a computer game

Obviously, *Half-Life* is a computer game. But, as discussed briefly in the introduction, what does it mean for a text to be a computer game? How do they fit into the contemporary popular culture landscape? How do they differ from existing texts? In order to give my dissertation credence I have chosen to apply contemporary game theory to *Half-Life*. This should, in turn, allow a non-games-playing reader to understand why it is important to study games and how they have been studied so far. It should also create a base on which to build the other parts of my dissertation.

There is an underlying problem with studying games in that they are *massive* in every sense of the word. The average modern game takes at least twenty hours to complete; there are millions of games on release with more and more being created every second. Games are also far more fluid than any other medium – they are not subject to the same rigid conventions of narrative or realism as cinema or television. Ted Friedman points out that

[t]he rules and expectations for computer games are not yet set in stone. Each new game must rethink how it should engage the player, and the best games succeed by discovering new structures of interaction, inventing new genres. What would be avant-garde in film or literature - breaking with familiar forms of representation, developing new modes of address - is standard operating procedure in the world of computer games.^{xiii}

The medium has yet to find its feet and is still very much in the process of fruition. Even the term “computer game” takes into account everything from *Windows Solitaire* (1981-99) to *Doom* (1993) to *Pong* (1972) to *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) – all of which have disparate settings, actions and goals. It can be argued that games are like films in their narratives and stylisations; like music in their rhythm, crescendos and linearity; like drugs in their habituation and psychedelia; like art in their aesthetics and Expressionism; even like dreams in their surreal and psychological components. For the majority of this dissertation I have chosen to look at games’ cinematic components, as this is easily the most striking feature of *Half-Life*.

Computer games have been lambasted with media frenzies relating to epilepsy and violent content; McKenzie Wark points out that “[they meet] with a certain subliminal fear and loathing in the west, where new media are treated ambivalently as harmless fun, fit only for children, and as lethal brain-smack for impressionable young minds.”^{xiv} However, Wark goes on to suggest that this is an entirely western philosophy, because in Japan “technology appears as a territory to inhabit rather than an evil force to fear,”^{xv} hence their more inclusive acceptance into Japanese popular culture. Here in the UK computer games have been burdened with the same kind of scare mongering previously laid on rock’n’roll or punk music or films such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). Looking back, however, it is hard to see where the

worry that these texts would destroy society came from. It is inevitable that the same will be true of computer games in twenty years time, which are all ready fast becoming accepted by mainstream culture (national newspapers include games reviews at some point in the week) and will undoubtedly continue to gain cultural capital as younger generations grow up with them. As Zoë Williams rationally assesses: “If nothing else, think of all the spiders which aren't having their legs pulled off while seven-year-olds are busy killing pixilated prostitutes.”^{xvi}

Ted Friedman extends the more positive, constructive logic of looking at computer games as popular culture by stating that they are seen by some theorists as the “new Hollywood”; “The difference between the New Hollywood and the Old, according to this analogy, is that computer games are ‘interactive cinema,’ in which the game player takes the role of the protagonist.”^{xvii} This is especially true of *Half-Life*, which being a first-person-shooter, (the game is seen through the eyes of the protagonist) means that we, as the player, actually inhabit the body of the central character. In fact, the first-person-shooter has more in common with cinema than any previous computer game genre in that we are able to “call the shots” in both senses of the phrase – we, as the player, inhabit and control the camera and also pull the trigger of our weapon.

Friedman also points out the comparative difficulty in looking at an action game such as *Half-Life* alongside more meditative games such as *Sim City* (in which the player must build and control a complete city): “there seems to be a limited amount of textual analysis that can be done on arcade-style games so completely dependent on reflex skills rather than more contemplative forms of interaction.”^{xviii} However, Friedman’s essay was written ten years ago and the medium has evolved at an incredible rate since then. Although *Half-Life* can be considered an “arcade-style game”, it clearly has a certain level of sophistication and there are some moments that deliberately invite contemplation – in the fifteen minutes before the action actually starts we are free to look around our surroundings and familiarise ourselves with them – it gives the designers a chance to show off all their new lighting and animation effects and exquisitely sets the scene. It is highly unusual for any contemporary popular media text to invest this much faith in the audience’s patience – but it works. Steve Brown states that the “slow-building intro was a brave work of genius.”^{xix}

All games have to have a problem to solve; it is how the game is won. In football, the problem is the other team, the goal is, well, the goal. In the majority of games the problem is taken for granted, or explained using cut-scenes or text. For example, in *Sonic The Hedgehog* there is no back-story, we are simply given control of a blue hedgehog. We learn the concept of the game through trial and error – running into robotic enemies causes us to lose our rings, and, if we have no rings and run into an enemy we die. Jumping on enemies destroys them, freeing a trapped animal within. The concept is immediately understandable – the animals have been trapped within this technology by an evil force (revealed later as a mad doctor). We take for granted that there is no backstory and accept that this is the situation we are

thrown into. There is no narrative development in Sonic, merely the repetition of actions and enemies in levels themed around grassy hills, fiery volcanoes and technological junk, until a final showdown with a big boss. In Half-Life, on the other hand, problems are created before our very eyes. The environment in Half-Life is as much of an enemy as the monsters themselves – it is alive, continuously falling apart or exploding around us and interacting with (destroying) parts of the landscape allows us to proceed. Half-Life has no “levels” as such, it is told in an entirely linear fashion, broken down into 17 chapters. The minimal backstory is told via text at the start of the game, which tells us who we are and what we do. As the game proceeds, we receive packets of information. Traditionally games like Half-Life rely on cutscenes in order to tell the story – pre-animated sequences that are non-interactive and the protagonist talks. Half-Life, however, fuses the cutscenes into the gameplay. If, for example, two scientists are talking about what must be done in order to proceed, we can walk up and shoot one of them. The other will panic and run away. Although, as the next chapter will prove, Half-Life’s narrative is nothing new, this was absolutely revolutionary at the time, creating a convincing game environment without ever have to “break out” of the first-person-perspective.

Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire suggest that games are, in their own way, an art form - the art of contested spaces. They “draw inspiration from sports and board games; [and] they also tap literary and cinematic genres that climatise with spatial contests.”^{xx} And this is certainly true of every game, and is a step towards the “software theory” Friedman proposes. In Half-Life, the contested space is continuously set up for us by characters telling us what we have to do in order to defeat an enemy. Friedman and Squire also point out that 3D games “seek stronger depth cues, allowing players to move through space in any direction from foreground to background.”^{xxi} Half-Life’s strategy in this area of design is to incrementally introduce the player to larger and larger scenarios and landscapes, frequently with human figures before them in order to give a sense of scale. In the first few minutes of the game we are presented with a range of tunnels carved deep into the desert rock, occasional glimpses of sandy vistas, and scientists dwarfed by immense benign machines. Despite the limitations of the form, Half-Life achieved a sense of immense scale in its creation of the nuclear facility in which we work. We always get the sense that we are simply seeing the “tip of the iceberg”, we are aware that the facility is huge because it includes sleeping quarters and trains are the main form of transportation. We constantly feel as if we are witnessing a tiny part of a much bigger picture, accentuated by vast backdrops and massive scenery.

In her essay “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyber Bimbo”, Helen Kennedy considers the representation of Lara Croft, the protagonist of the immensely successful *Tomb Raider* (1996) game series. Kennedy mentions that:

“‘active’ or ‘strong’ female characters signify a potential threat to the masculine order. This is a...complex argument, dependent as it is on a psychoanalytic reading of unconscious processes. Within this narrative

the female body is a castrated body and as such it represents the threat of castration itself. This threat, it is argued, is disavowed or rendered safe by the phallicization of the female body.^{xxii}

Although *Tomb Raider* and *Half-Life* are games of very different styles and settings, Kennedy's comments are still extremely useful as both games had large budgets and were popular amongst largely male audiences. More considerable in many respects is the fact that both games attempted to render the female form in a different light to previous computer games, as Kennedy points out "the hero is traditionally male with females largely cast in a supporting role"^{xxiii}. *Tomb Raider* subverted this by giving us a female protagonist and *Half-Life* by giving us monstrous versions of the female form. Both relate highly to the computer game as a product made for and consumed by a male audience, Kennedy highlights that attempts to alter this component in the late-eighties to early nineties were seen as potential intimidations the target audience^{xxiv}. However, as *The Sims* has proved, a female audience can be tapped by centring a game not on violence but social interaction.

In terms of character, Steven Poole's *Character Forming* is an exemplary essay on the nature of character in computer games. Poole states that "character design is, of course, potentially a very deep and difficult art: it is the art of designing people, or at least beings, into whose shoes we can enjoy stepping."^{xxv} The first-person-shooter, as a genre, is less reliant on the appearance of a character as it is through his or her eyes that we see the entire game. However, *Half-Life* rewrote the rulebook for creating FPS characters. Traditionally, in games such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*, the hero is hypermasculine, with a massive jaw and improbably pumped-up physique - usually a marine thrown into an escalating and improbable situation (*Doom* featured demons on Mars). *Half-Life*, however, put the nerd in charge. His name is Gordon Freeman, he wears glasses, has a small beard and a PhD in Theoretical Physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In terms of character, there is no character here - Gordon never says a word and the only interaction he has is with allies telling him what to do. And yet, part of *Half-Life*'s genius is that we, the player, become Gordon and Gordon becomes us. On numerous occasions I have found myself (worryingly, maybe) speaking Gordon's lines for him - usually expletive ridden tirades or gasps at the sheer "wow"-ness of it all.^{xxvi} Poole terms this process "psychological projection" - game characters have to be relatively vague so that we can ascribe our own traits upon them, and Gordon Freeman is no exception. In fact (and this is probably worthy of investigation in its own right), Gordon could be seen as a kind of film star of the future - in that he breaks down all lingual and cultural boundaries to present us with someone who is us.

Half-Life as a science-fiction text

Orson Scott Card suggests “great computer artworks will only come about when we stop judging computer games by standards developed for other media.”^{xxvii} In spite of the negativity towards studying games in this way, there is much to be learnt from studying *Half-Life* in comparison to science fiction cinema, because it is constructed in much the same way as that medium.

In *Big and Loud*, Larry Gross concisely identifies the four main characteristics of the blockbuster action movie: “[firstly] elaborately and expensively produced elevation of b-movie plots; [secondly] a reduction of narrative complexity; [thirdly] the cinematic, the image and technology dominate the narrative experience; [and fourthly] self-deprecating humour.”^{xxviii} All of these elements are present in *Half-Life* - essentially an action movie played out as a computer game.

Like a number of recent science-fiction action texts such as *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997) or *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Half-Life* is indisputably a construct of many science-fiction sub-generic conventions – a disaster scenario, action movie set pieces and horror film monsters. In order to expose the science fiction generic conventions present in *Half-Life* I will look at critical writings upon thematically and stylistically similar films.

Susan Sontag states that all science-fiction films are, by nature, disaster movies:

Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art...[t]hus, the science fiction film...is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess.^{xxix}

And these “peculiar beauties” are found throughout *Half-Life*. Some of *Half-Life*'s most gratifying moments come about as a result of setting traps to destroy enemies in particularly gratuitous ways. *Half-Life*'s destruction, though, is a paradoxical one because we need to destroy in order to proceed. In one level, we must destroy a monster that is preventing us from entering a blastpit in order to reach the next level. Ideas pertaining to destruction in order to proceed permeate many science fiction films. In *Independence Day*, for example, there is a binary opposition in the destructive scenarios – the destruction of the White House is seen as bad whereas the destruction of the alien spaceships in the final act is seen as good.

This disaster-scenario strain of science fiction was at its most conspicuous the forties and fifties, an age that, as J. P. Telotte points out has come to be identified with its unleashing of the atom and the great power associated with that development. American science fiction films, as well as those of Japan and England, repeatedly play out for us ‘what-if’ scenarios, fantasies of the consequences of that unleashing – few of them re-assuring.^{xxx}

Half-Life can be viewed as another of these “what-if” scenarios; its plot is sheer b-movie fodder: a scientist accidentally opens a portal to another world, allowing aliens to wreak havoc in an underground government facility known as Black Mesa. It even goes so far as to explicitly reference fifties science-fiction films in the retro design of certain levels – the textures themselves are named “fifties wall” and “fifties door”. The facility itself is filled with nuclear materials, even the title *Half-Life* refers to the “time taken for the radioactivity of an isotope to fall half its original value.”^{xxxix} *Half-Life* evidently references previous (particularly b-movie) science fiction texts in order to achieve not only a recognisable sense of environment, but also to suggest that it can be considered one of the genre, despite the fact that it is a computer game. It cannot, however, be considered a parody (like Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks!* [1996], which covered much the same ground) because it remains straight-faced throughout.

Where *Half-Life* differs from fifties science fiction is in the independent characterisation of its protagonist, Gordon Freeman (the surname being indicative of the character). Brian Murphy notes that fifties science fiction plots typically consisted of: “A team of U.S. military-scientific types discover, precisely, a ‘thing’ and must use all of their military and scientific knowledge corporately to destroy the monster.”^{xxxix} Although Freeman must use a combination of his scientific knowledge and military brawn (or an improbable arsenal of weapons) to defeat the enemy, he is completely alone in his task. He gets help from scientists and security guards every now and then, but for the majority of the game he is unaided. When the military step in it becomes apparent that they are not there to save the personnel of Black Mesa, but to wipe out all knowledge of the incident and ultimately destroy the facility. So not only is Freeman up against an entourage of aliens, he has to single-handedly take on an army^{xxxix}. The desert setting, costume of the troops and up-to-date weapons perhaps intentionally recall the televisual coverage of the Gulf War (plus aliens), in which American troops could have similarly been seen as an unwelcome, invading force. What, then, does Freeman represent amongst all this? The most we ever seen of Freeman during gameplay are his hands, wrapped tenaciously around a gun. A friend pointed out that Freeman could be seen as, essentially, the second amendment personified - a man who uses everything at his disposal to fight for freedom and American values. These characters dominate American cinema – everyone from John Wayne in John Ford’s westerns to Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* (John McTieran, 1987) to Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). Conversely, it could also be said that Freeman is fighting for the integrity of the academic and scientific community amongst the uneducated and violent majority - at one point, we overhear a soldier saying, “I killed 12 dumbass scientists and not one of them fought back! This mission sucks!”^{xxxix} Both readings are ultimately subject to the nature of the computer game – being a single-player game; one feels a great amount of esteem at the thought that we were able to complete the game alone, that we were able to beat the computer literally at its own game.

One of its other science fiction traits is *Half-Life's* setting: an underground research facility in the fictional Black Mesa, New Mexico. It achieves a sense of environment so competently that I even listed Black Mesa as one of my "favourite places" on my *MSN Messenger* profile. Vivian Sobchack points out that desert and sea settings are distinct (American) science fiction characteristics, whether they are standing in for alien planets or portraying our own earth. Sobchack suggests that this is because

seeing the unshadowed and limitless stretches of desert punctuated by the stiff and inhuman form of the occasional cactus or the frantic scurrying of some tiny and vulnerable rodent, the spectator is forced to a recognition, however unconscious it may remain, of Man's precarious and puny stability, his vulnerability to the void "right here" as well as "out there," his total isolation, the fragile quality of his body and his works, the terrifying blankness in the eyes of what he thought was mother nature.^{xxxv}

Sobchack goes on to note that in science fiction "[o]ur civilisation and its technological apparatus is at best a small town set on the edge of an abyss."^{xxxvi} *Half-Life's* underground facility is highly indicative of Sobchack's supposition; from the start we are aware that it is carved deep into the sandstone. *Half-Life's* juxtaposition of the interior, sterile and industrial spaces of Black Mesa to the exterior, organic desert canyons and cliffsides functions as a means to destabilise our sense of environment; to continually remind us of our vulnerability and remoteness. It also serves to show the comparative weaknesses of machinery against the savage and amnesiac desert, the clean interiors juxtaposed with rusted, worn-away exteriors. In addition, the sense of these spaces is consistently reinforced through the placing of allies and enemies – we only ever meet scientists in interior, hi-tech locales, emphasising their symbiotic relationship with technology; whereas marines are placed in industrial and dramatic landscapes, accentuating their ties with capitalism and masculinity.

Another science-fiction characteristic present in *Half-Life* is the design of its aliens. Although the limitations (and perhaps advantages) of the form mean there are no men in rubber suits jumping out of darkened spaces, *Half-Life* achieves a great sense of the other and unknown through the design of its aliens. There are some aliens, such as the alien slave, that were purposefully constructed – much like the shape shifting liquid metal robot in *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) - in order to showcase the games startling new effects. The alien slave attacks us with bolts of electricity, an effect known as a "resonance cascade".^{xxxvii} In order to achieve a sense of other-ness, science fiction bases the designs of its aliens on earthly creatures. Telotte points out that

"[t]he alien-encounter narrative can, of course, take many forms, each predicated on a different sense of the other. The invasion narrative, often reflecting a conservative ideology – a suspicion and even fear of the other – suggests one line of development. Exemplified by films like *The War of the Worlds* (1953), the various versions of Invasion of the

Body Snatchers (1956, 1978, 1993) and Starship Troopers (1997), with their aliens variously depicted as squidlike, vegetable and insect, respectively, this line conventionally visualises the other as pointedly nonhuman, often as something from which we naturally recoil.^{xxxviii}

In line with Telotte's observations, *Half-Life's* aliens are aquatic in their design; the headcrabs and barnacles are eponymous of this. It is an interesting choice, one previously realised in fifties science fiction films *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *The She-Creature* (Edward L Cahn, 1956). Both films posit the depths of the ocean as a place of primal instincts and primordial beings – after all, in Darwinian terms the ocean is the place from which we all emerged.

In many ways, *Half-Life* is a lot like *Star Wars* in that it grabs at many differing, previously isolated texts, a film described by Andrew Gordon as “a compendium of American pop and pulp culture, carefully crafted out of many unabashed borrowings.”^{xxxix} *Half-Life's* approach is similar – the difference being that it takes elements that will fit the limitations of the medium – there can be no vast “sets” because of the graphical restrictions of the computer. What it does instead is to take the elements that “fit” the form. Aki Järvinen suggests recent X-Box first-person-shooter *Halo*

is to the First Person Shooter what *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* was to the special effects action movie. *Halo*, like *T2*, does everything a little bit better than its predecessors. It makes every explosion a bit more convincing, each combat more engaging, hitting the FPS genre with a “new high”.^{xl}

If this is the case, then *Half-Life* is the medium's *Die Hard* – a comparatively minimalist but perfectly formed text that adequately understands the rules of construction and convention in both science fiction and computer games, and is able to bend them just enough to make it feel unique and fresh.

Half-Life as a psychoanalytical text

In her essay *The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film*, Vivian Sobchack points out that “biological sexuality and women are often absent from science fiction film narratives, and when they do turn up they tend to be disaffiliated from each other [...] it surrounds a purposeful – if unconscious – repression.”^{xli} Sobchack goes on to note that psychoanalysis allows us to look at texts for what is missing and hidden, as opposed to what is “present and represented”.^{xlii} If, as Sobchack suggests, “human heterosexual relations in the science fiction film are tepid – more obligatory than steamy,”^{xliii} exactly the same thing - perhaps more so - can be said of computer games. Even a game such as *Deus Ex* (2000) - an intricate and culturally and sociologically lubricated text - stumbles when it comes to representing females as anything other than dominatrices or victims. *Half-Life*, on the other hand, seems to have a deeper understanding of the nature of male sexual repression, and Sobchack’s notions can be applied to it.

Sobchack continues to point out that the male heroes who dominate science fiction are

More corporate than corporeal. Indeed it is there interchangeable blandness, their programmed cheerfulness, their lack of imagination, their very banality that makes them heroes, that gives them that aura of mechanical and robotic competence which insists that nothing can go wrong, that everything is A-OK.^{xliv}

In many ways, *Half-Life* and games of its ilk posit us, the player, in much the same position whether we like it or not. Success in the game depends upon our competence, our ability to reserve ammo and keep our heads when the world around us is literally falling apart, to not gasp at the astonishing set pieces. Indeed, nothing *can* go wrong in *Half-Life*, in spite of the disaster-upon-disaster narrative, the game is set up in such a way that it is impossible to lose. We die occasionally, but only to be reborn at the last point we saved the game.

Sobchack goes on to suggest that:

Women pose a particular narrative threat to science fiction heroes and their engagement with technology...[t]hey represent the Mother and the Other whose very presence points to the puny and imitative quality of male endeavour, of technological creation and its inanimate products.^{xlv}

Half-Life’s female threat is a literally monstrous re-interpretation of the feminine form. In line with Sobchack’s views, the monsters that invade *Half-Life*’s world pose a direct threat to the masculinity of the mediums. The game encourages a fight-or-flight reaction – more often the former as we blast enemies into denial with an MP5 sub-machinegun’s built-in grenade launcher.

The first enemy we meet is highly indicative of the rest of *Half-Life*’s content. It is called a headcrab, and looks a bit like an inflated sinister

hamster. The headcrab's disposition is to transform its victims into zombies. It accomplishes this by wrapping a gaping, vaginal mouth tucked between its legs around its victim's head, and controlling their central nervous system. This is a highly sexual allegory, reminiscent of Freud's dream of Irma's injection. As Joan Copjec describes the dream:

[Freud] stalks his party guest, Irma, and struggling against her resistances, peers curiously down her throat, only to make his truly horrible discovery. What he witnesses is the very 'origin of the world,' the equivalent of the female genitals. It is clear that the uncanny appearance of what ought to have remained hidden is a sickening, noxious sight..."a large white spot...curled structures...white-gray scabs."^{xlvi}

It is apparent that - in the form of the headcrab - *Half-Life* is embracing this Freudian psychoanalytic discourse. Again the male is the "victim", but rather than the male peering curiously down the throat, the throat itself is literally forced onto the male, and - unlike Freud - he is never given the chance to look away. The male is smothered to death, only to be reborn as the zombie.

The zombie is again a highly sexually coded being. The victim's ghostly visage, stripped of flesh, is visible through the attached headcrab's translucent skin, and a huge, yawning serrated gash pulsates menacingly in the centre of the victim's torso. The zombie is a walking *vagina dentata*. As "The Myth of the Vagina Dentata" articulates:

the myth of the...vagina with teeth derives from primitive masculine dreads of the "mysteries" of women and sexual union. It evokes castration anxiety, whereby the man fears loss of the penis during intercourse, and more generally it relates to fears of weakness, impotence, or annihilation by incorporation."^{xlvii}

This myth has been a staple of horror and science fiction films since their inception, the *Alien* movies being a prime example, as Laura Miller points out "The alien's mouths have long been the quintessential vagina dentata – complete with a bonus phallus dentata that shoots out at will."^{xlviii} Barbara Creed - who analysed representations of the female in *Alien* (1979) - goes on to suggest that the aliens in the film represent an "horrific, monstrous version of the mother, and thus the cultural threat posed by the powerful female...the alien ship filled with about to hatch eggs, the...scene in which an incubated alien bursts from a human's chest."^{xlix} However, in *Half-Life* neither the headcrab nor the zombie are seen as reproductive beings - they merely want to feed. They are, then, feminising parasites, spreaders of a contagious disease.

In *Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk*, Margrit Shildrick discusses the normative human reaction to being presented with "abnormal" bodies – in particular preserved babies with congenital deformities and people with physical disabilities. She says of *Still Life*, Karl Grimes's photographic exhibition of deformed late foetal and neonatal infant bodies, that

[they] put us, the viewers, at risk, as though they were contagious...The encounter with the others who define our own boundaries of normality must inevitably disturb for they are both irreducibly strange and disconcertingly familiar, both opaque and reflective. They enable us to recognise ourselves; they are our own abject.ⁱ

Indeed, in *Half-Life*, as in photographic exhibition Shildrick is writing about, we are given a chance to examine our foes before we interact with them. When we see the first headcrab we are unarmed – naked - and it is trapped in a glass tube. We are free to examine it from every angle and we are at once both repelled and fascinated by this monstrosity. Furthermore, it is the moribund–human qualities of the zombie that make it so intriguing and repulsive. In both cases it is not advised to get too close to the monsters, the headcrab leaps at us and the zombie swipes at us with spidery talons.

Shildrick goes on to observe that “in the western imagination, the female body is just as monstrous [as non-normative bodies], the necessary locus of worship and disgust whose corporeality threatens to overflow boundaries and engulf things which should remain separate.”ⁱⁱ Shildrick is again drawing our attention to the representation of the female form in relation to the grotesque. Quoting Liz Grosz, Shildrick goes on to point out that the female’s “inherent leakiness” is in direct conflict with the male’s phallic self-containment, which is in line with Sobchack’s views on the male’s role of independence and confidence in science fiction.

To extend Sobchack’s views, the entirety of *Half-Life* could be said to stand in for the virginal male’s understanding of the sexual experience. It is, as Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire convey, “an intricately designed, interactive...world of metallic surfaces, nuclear waste, expansive hallways and cramped ventilation ducts.”ⁱⁱⁱ The first two acts of the game are earth-bound, set in the aforementioned Black Mesa nuclear research facility. The final act - and the most overtly sexual one - is set in Xen, an outer space world that is home to the invading aliens. The first time we enter Xen it is a great contrast to the tight, technological and realist confines of Black Mesa – Xen has a surprisingly surreal aesthetic and the low gravity means we can literally “fly” - even the name suggests pseudo-religious connotations. Here, we encounter two aliens we have not come across before, Gonarch and Nihilanth.

Gonarch is a huge crab-like entity. Interestingly, it is frequently referred to as a she,ⁱⁱⁱⁱ but it has multiple masculine qualities. A huge, testicular sac hangs between its’ legs and it ejaculates a biohazardous, white fluid from the top of its toadstool-like shell. It also produces translucent baby headcrabs, and this is where the maternal connotations come about. If Gonarch is the “money shot” of the game, Nihilanth is the result of the impregnation. Like Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Half-Life* concludes with the image of a baby. A monstrous baby indeed, but still a baby. Nihilanth floats in a womb-like chamber, showering the player with cosmic balls of light,

we have to destroy it by literally getting inside its head and annihilating its brain.

Both Gonarch and Nihilanth could be said to be monstrous re-appropriations of the primal scene. In *Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed defines the primal scene in Freudian terms as the idea that “every child either watches its parents in the act of sexual intercourse or has fantasies about that act – fantasies which relate to the problem of origins.”^{liv} In Creed’s terms, the Gonarch and Nihilanth sequences in *Half-Life* could be said recall “Freud’s reference to an extreme primal scene fantasy where the subject imagines travelling back inside the womb to watch her/his parents having sexual intercourse, perhaps to watch her/himself being conceived.”^{lv} There is, however, one crucial difference between *Half-Life* and the *Alien* films. Creed points out that the *Alien* films, and the majority of science fiction films feature a moment in which a “smaller craft or bodies are ejected from the mother-ship into outer space.”^{lvi} There is, however, no such escape in *Half-Life*. At the end of the game the player is given two choices by a shadowy, grey government agent – either work for him or remain in Xen. Even if we choose to work for the agent there is no narrative closure, no return to a normal world. It is almost as if we are trapped forever within this primal scene, doomed to exist in this hideous imagined place. *Half-Life*’s ultimate message could be – ironically – get out more.

There is another critical element present in the *Alien* films that is absent in *Half-Life*. Creed suggests that, in the final scenes of *Alien* (in which Ripley [Sigourney Weaver] strips off to confront the alien): “[c]ompared to the horrific sight of the alien as fetish object of the monstrous-feminine, Ripley’s body is pleasurable and reassuring to look at. She signifies the ‘acceptable’ form and shape of woman.”^{lvii} The “pleasurable and reassuring” form to juxtapose the horrific monsters of *Half-Life* is its’ guns. If *Half-Life*’s monsters represent male anxieties relating to the female form, its guns represent the security found in the phallus. They are always there, in the middle of the screen, framing the action and distancing us from our enemies. Even the gameplay revolves around being able to “shoot your load” at the right time and in the right place. From my (masculine) point of view guns have never looked – or sounded – sexier. It is interesting to note that the most erotically played out scene in James Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986) is when Corporal Hicks shows Ripley how to use his gun, and the same eroticisation is ubiquitous in *Half-Life*. Helen Kennedy notes that in *Tomb Raider* “Lara’s [the protagonists; HW] femininity [is] disavowed through the heavy layering of fetishistic signifiers such as her glasses, her guns, the holster/garter belts, her long swinging hair.”^{lviii} Likewise in *Half-Life*, the gun is the symbol of disavowal. When confronted with *Half-Life*’s monstrosities our natural reaction is to hold down the mouse button and pump them full of lead – if the game is all about monstrous, untamed versions of female sexuality, then its guns are symbolic of denial, of a bury-your-head-in-the-sand virginal approach to sexual intercourse.

Can, then, the notion of *Half-Life* standing in for the male sexual experience be applied to all computer games? The majority of action games

are about building rhythm and tempo until a final, rousing crescendo in which the player faces off with the ultimate boss (this is also true of action movies). These games also choose to locate their ultimate bosses within a formidable and seemingly impenetrable fortress. The majority of games also feature some concept of exploring an unknown territory; Shigeru Miyamoto, who created *Super Mario Brothers* states that:

When I was a child, I went hiking and found a lake. It was quite a surprise for me to stumble upon it. When I travelled around the country without a map, trying to find my way, stumbling on amazing things as I went, I realized how it felt to go on an adventure like this. The spirit, the state of mind of a kid when he enters a cave alone must be realized in the game...Sometimes he loses his way.^{lix}

Miyamoto's statement is indicative of the approach of all games, much of the addiction to the form comes about as simply wanting to see what mysteries and monsters lurk on the next level. Moreover, ideas pertaining to exploration of unmapped territory relate overtly to a traditionally masculine role, and perhaps this relates to the young male audience. Indeed, in Norman Reider's psychoanalytic reading of chess he states that: "It may even be argued that the fact that women in general find no fascination in chess is explained in the psychological event that they have no need for father-murder."^{ix} Themes relating to patricide are visibly referenced throughout computer games; in *Sonic The Hedgehog*, for example, our hyperactive radioactive blue hedgehog can only exist because of his nemeses (the evil Dr Robotnik) technological experiments. Whether these themes are placed in games intentionally or not, *Half-Life* reiterates them in a way that comes across as far more premeditated and conscious, it embraces the discourse to make what was previously invisible visible.

ⁱ Sontag, Susan; *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell/Laureal, 1969) pp. 242-3

ⁱⁱ Williams, Zoë; *Unfair Play* (*The Guardian*, 31 December 2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ Arthur, Charles; *Good times, bad times: crisis behind the video games boom* (*The Independent*, 13 March 2003) p. 17

^{iv} Jameson, Fredric; *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1993) p. 152

^v Squire, Kurt; *Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games* gamestudies.org [online] Available from: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/> [accessed 22 May 2003]

^{vi} Friedman, Ted; *Making Sense of Software* [online] Available from: <http://eserver.org/cyber/friedman/> [Accessed 14 March 2003]

^{vii} Anderiesz, Mike; *Bad Taste* (*PC Gamer*, June 2003) p. 58

^{viii} Brown, Steve; *Half-Life 2: Dream Exclusive* (*PC Gamer*, June 2003) p. 69

^{ix} Kennedy, Helen; *Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?* gamestudies.org [online] Available from: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/> [Accessed 14 March 2003]

^x Sobchack, Vivian; *The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film* in Kuhn, Annette; ed., *Alien Zone* (London: Verso, 1990) p. 104. Quoted from Telotte, J. P.; *Science Fiction Film: Genres in American Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 46

^{xi} Wark, McKenzie; *The Video Game as Emerging Media Form* [online] Available from: <http://www.dmc.mq.edu.au/mwark/warchive/Mia/mia-video-games.html> [Accessed 14 March 2003]

^{xii} Laidlaw, Mark; *Half-Life* in-game dialogue (Sierra/Valve, 1998)

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- ^{xiii} Friedman, Ted; *Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space* [online] Available from: <http://www.duke.edu/~tlove/civ.htm> [Accessed 14 March 2003]
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- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} Williams, Zoë; *Unfair Play* (*The Guardian*, 31 December 2002)
- ^{xvii} Friedman, Ted (1993), *Making Sense of Software* [online] Available from: <http://eserver.org/cyber/friedman/> [Accessed 14 March 2003]
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Brown, Steve; *Half-Life 2: Dream Exclusive* (*PC Gamer*, June 2003) p. 67
- ^{xx} Jenkins, Henry and Squire, Kurt; *The Art of Contested Spaces* in King, Lucien (ed) *Game On: The History and Culture of Videogames*, (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002) p. 65
- ^{xxi} Ibid., p. 69
- ^{xxii} Kennedy, Helen (2002) *Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?* *gamestudies.org* [online] Available from: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/> [accessed 14 March 2003]
- ^{xxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxv} Poole, Steven; Character Forming in King, Lucien (ed) *Game On: The History and Culture of Videogames*, (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002) p. 85
- ^{xxvii} Card, Orson Scott; quoted from Friedman, Ted; *Making Sense of Software* [online] Available from: <http://eserver.org/cyber/friedman/> [Accessed 14 March 2003] (Original source unavailable)
- ^{xxviii} Gross, L. (2000) *Big and Loud* in Arroyo, J. (ed.) *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Bfi Publishing, pp. 7-8
- ^{xxix} Sontag, Susan; *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell/Laureal, 1969) p. 213
- ^{xxx} Telotte, J. P.; *Science Fiction Film: Genres in American Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 99
- ^{xxxi} Brown, Steve; *Half-Life 2: Dream Exclusive* (*PC Gamer*, June 2003) p. 62
- ^{xxxii} Murphy, Brian; *Monster Movies: They Came from Beneath the Fifties* *The Journal of Popular Film* 1 (Winter 1972) p. 35. Quoted from Telotte, J. P.; *Science Fiction Film: Genres in American Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 45
- ^{xxxiii} *Half-Life's* sequel, *Opposing Force* (1999) posits the player as Corporal Adrian Shepherd, one of the invading army's members.
- ^{xxxiv} Laidlaw, Mark; *Half-Life* in-game dialogue (Sierra/Valve, 1998)
- ^{xxxv} Sobchack, Vivian; *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001) p. 112
- ^{xxxvi} Ibid., p. 113
- ^{xxxvii} Brown, Steve; *Half-Life 2: Dream Exclusive* (*PC Gamer*, June 2003) p. 67
- ^{xxxviii} Telotte, J. P.; *Science Fiction Film: Genres in American Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 148
- ^{xxxix} Gordon, Andrew; *Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time* (*Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, No. 4; 1978) p. 319
- ^{xi} Järvinen, Aki; *Halo and the Anatomy of the FPS* [online] Available from: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/jarvinen/> [Accessed 22 May 2003]
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- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xliii} Ibid. p. 104
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- ^{liii} Hammer, *Half-Life's* level editor refers to Gonarch as "monster_bigmomma" and countless *Half-Life* walkthroughs call it a "she".
- ^{liv} Creed, Barbara; *Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine* in Kuhn, Annette (ed.) *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Film* (London/New York: Verso, 2000) p. 128
- ^{lv} *Ibid.*, p. 130
- ^{lvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{lvii} *Ibid.* p. 140
- ^{lviii} Kennedy, Helen (2002) *Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?* [gamestudies.org](http://www.gamestudies.org) [online] Available from: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/> [accessed 14 March 2003]
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