

Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2019
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Game Title: Halo Reach

Platform: Xbox 360

Genre: First-person shooter

Release Date: September 14th, 2010

Developer: Bungie

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Marcus Lehto

Overview

Halo: Reach takes place in the distant future of the year 2552. Technology has progressed far beyond the imaginations of the modern day, and humanity finds itself at war. United under a single banner known as the United Nations Space Command (UNSC), Humans find themselves at odds with a cult of alien races known as the Covenant. Most of humanities' interstellar colonies have fallen by the opening of the game.

Players take on the burden of Noble Six, an elite UNSC super soldier joining the special operations unit known as Noble Team. The team has been tasked with investigating a communication station that has recently gone silent on the part UNSC hub, part human colony planet known as Reach. Thrown into a surprise invasion by the Covenant, the player faces tragedy after tragedy as team members make sacrifices, lose battles, and are subjected to the bleak realities of war. Halo: Reach is not a story of heroism and triumph.

It is one of failure, defeat, and most importantly, death. From the beginning, you know the end.

Characters

- **Noble Team** – Composed of genetically enhanced UNSC super-soldiers known as “SPARTANS”, Noble Team served as the answer to UNSC’s hard questions regarding important missions. Surviving countless suicide missions, the team was tight, precise and light on their feet. This did not come without cost, as the team’s roster was constantly in flux as team members were killed in action and replaced as needed. Only two members of the original team, Carter and Kat, remained by the start of the game. Noble Team was comprised of 6 members at the start of the game, with each of them trusting, if not always fond of one another.
 - **Noble One: Carter** - Loyal and by-the-books, Carter serves as Noble Team’s leader. Carter is confident in his team, and will do whatever it takes to ensure that everyone comes home safe and the mission is completed, in that order. Despite his unflinching resolve, Carter is stubborn and limited by his inability to think outside of the box. Carter shares a bond with Kat strengthened by their time together on Noble Team. While her sporadic and radical ideas and ideals clash with Carters, he is always interested in whatever Cat has to offer. He treats the rest of Noble Team with respect, but it somewhat slow to trust, especially with Noble Six, whom he is skeptical of due to their history of lone wolf tendencies.

“We got a job to do here.” - Carter

- **Noble Two: Kat** - Inquisitive and sardonic, Kat serves as Noble Team’s tech and cryptology specialist. Her sharp mind and insatiable curiosity serves both as a boon and a bane to Noble Team, as her meddling get her into trouble as often as it gets her out of it. Kat is a creative problem solver who’s desire to get things done can sometimes cause her to come off as

rude to others. While Kat would never disobey direct orders, she is known to bend the rules from time to time in order to aid Noble Team and their current missions. Kat is fond of Carter, and respects him due to their long history together on Noble Team. This fondness does not stop her from expressing her thoughts and propositions to Carter in times of need. Kat trusts the rest of Noble Team, but can be short with them when under stress.

"Best not touch anything. You wouldn't want to ground this place." - Kat

- **Noble Three: Jun** – Laid back and taciturn, Jun serves as Noble Team's sniper support and rifleman. Jun has little emotional attachment to his objectives and has stated that he holds no contempt for the Covenant. Jun isn't one to hold his tongue if something is bothering him and won't hesitate to crack a joke from time to time. Jun is modest and gets along well with most of Noble Team, but is seemingly unaffected by the loss of his team members.

"I kill the enemy, but do not hate them" - Jun

- **Noble Four: Emile** – Brash and aggressive, Emile serves as Noble Team's assault specialist. Loud, proud and ready to fight, Emile boasts the biggest personality on Noble Team. The spartan is rarely serious and has been known to make his presence and brutality known to the enemy in combat. Emile speaks whatever is on his mind, often to the offense of others around him. Emile butts heads with Jorge often, as Emile's almost cruel personality clashes with Jorge's caring demeanor constantly. Despite this, Emile's careless personality is the kind that tends to grow on people, and his fervent presence on the battlefield is a reassuring one, as you know he will always have your back.

"Are you havin' fun yet?" - Emile

- **Noble Five: Jorge** – Sensitive and emotional, Jorge serves as Noble Team’s heavy weapon’s specialist. Comforting and personable, Jorge is the teddy bear of Noble Team, being on good terms with almost every other member. Jorge extends his caring nature towards civilians he encounters on his missions with Noble Team, a trait not shared by any of the other members of the team. Born on the planet Reach, Jorge has a strong desire to protect his home and the people on it. Jorge is inspiring and grounding, and often serves as Noble Team’s moral compass. Ultimately, he believes that it is his duty to ensure the safety of as many people as possible, even at the cost of his own life.

"It's all right, we're not going to hurt you." - Jorge

- **Noble Six:** – Reclusive and quiet, Noble Six serves both as Noble Team’s new recruit and the player character’s avatar. With a background mostly shrouded in mystery, Noble Six is a bit of a blank slate upon which the player can project themselves while playing. Carter comments on Six’s history near the beginning of the game, noting a tendency to break away from teams and a lone-wolf nature. Six rarely ever speaks in cutscenes, and often plays the role of the silent observer, occasionally reaffirming comments from the other members of Noble Team. Six is slow to bond with other members of Noble Team due to their distaste for small talk. Despite this, Jorge still manages to form a bond with Six over the course of their time together.

"I aim to please." - Noble Six

- **Catherine Halsey** – Cold and calculating, Dr. Catherine Halsey was a UNSC scientist working on a secret AI during the Covenant attack on Reach. Dr. Halsey’s research is paramount to the survival of the human race, and will stop at nothing to ensure that her work is utilized. She has had a history with Jorge, and served as a mother figure for him during his early SPARTAN training days.

Despite this, she is brief with him and the rest of Noble Team, warning them not to interfere with her work.

"Yes, well, as they say...news of my death has been greatly exaggerated." -

Dr. Halsey

- **The Covenant** – Comprised of multiple alien species, the Covenant is a massive religious hegemony hellbent on waging a genocidal war against humanity. Often seen as the boogeyman by most of humanity, the mere mention of them provokes fear in the hearts of men. Their attack on Reach is calculated, efficient, and merciless.

"WORT, WORT, WORT!" - Covenant Elite

Breakdown

Previous *Halo* games had always focused on the story of Master Chief, an unstoppable one man army tasked with saving the galaxy. He would face dangerous enemies and insurmountable odds and was constantly pushed to his brink, yet he prevailed every time. This was the standard for many action games at the time, and why shouldn't it be? Games releasing around this time, like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, and *Assassin's Creed II* told stories of heroism and power, where the good guys always won. *Halo Reach* subverted that expectation masterfully, and took risks in its narrative. The game isn't centered around a single hero, their path isn't lined with victory, and they don't get a happy ending. Instead, the story brings you in with a diverse crew of characters, each with their own personalities, specialties, and opinions. *Halo Reach* focuses not on the thrill of the adventure, but the horrors of war, the cruelty of hatred, and the drama of death. Catharsis is achieved through the pain of loss and the feeling of defeat. Characters are built up and developed until the players feel attached to them and are brutally killed in satisfying, yet agonizing pay offs. *Halo Reach* is a tragedy that doesn't pull any punches.

"From the beginning, you know the end." - *Halo Reach*'s tagline

The game opens with an introduction to the faces of Noble Team. Players control Noble Six as both Six and the player meet the rest of Noble for the first time. Your welcome isn't a warm one, as most of the team seems not to trust you, citing your mysterious past. Despite this, the team acknowledges your skill set and recognizes you as a teammate. The team is tasked with looking into a downed communication relay for the planet and sets off to investigate. The team discovers the scene of an attack, where dozens of civilians have been massacred. After further investigation, Noble Team makes contact with Covenant forces and engages them in a firefight. Despite handily winning the fight, the team is shaken at the realization that the Covenant are on Reach. Noble fights through the rest of the Covenant forces and restores the relay point, conveying the bad news to the UNSC in the process. This mission is the first of ten levels in the campaign, and serves as an introduction to the story. The grim tone is established through the fear of the Covenant and the death they bring about. No one was gung-ho about this mission, and things can only get worse from here.

"May God help us all." - UNSC Colonel

The next few levels send Noble Team on a wild goose chase trying to stop the Covenant invasion of Reach. As the team uncovers details of the invasion, they make numerous attempts to slow down the unrelenting alien force. All of these attempts are short lived, false victories, or outright defeats. Along their journey, they are met with by a UNSC scientist named Dr. Catherine Halsey, whom Jorge has personal attachment to. Dr. Halsey believes the Covenant are looking for something on Reach, and cites a specific Covenant Elite that got away from Noble Team as a potential data thief. There is a tense scene between Carter and Dr. Halsey as Halsey berates Noble Team for potentially letting valuable data into enemy hands. Carter counters, stating that Noble Team's mission at the time was not to pursue. The tension between the two is palpable, and serves as an important scene of character development for Carter. Carter is shown to be somewhat stubborn and narrow minded. Despite this, he vouches for his team's actions and states that they did what they were ordered. Unfortunately, this sub plot is put on hold for the invasion plot, which mostly focuses on the action of the invasion plot line. These few levels are some of the weaker one in the narrative, as they do little to advance the plot.

Missions are given to Noble Team off screen, and expectations are unclear. The cause and effect of the actions is obvious, but the why behind them is often swept under the rug. Themes of false victory and insurmountable odds are reinforced throughout, but important character moments are few and far between.

“Your primary objective? Commander, are you a puppet or a Spartan?” - Dr. Halsey

The sixth level of the campaign, known as *“The Long Night of Solace”* opens with Noble Team deliberating in a cave. An enormous Covenant capital warship has revealed itself, and poses a threat the UNSC might not be able to handle. Kat begins to propose an idea to Carter, while Jorge and Jun take bets on who is going to win the inevitable argument. Kat concocts a plan to take an expensive warp drive normally used to power ships and using it as a powerful bomb to take down the warship. Kat cites previous off screen missions that Noble Team was a part of where similar events occurred. She also notes a secret facility that could get the team into space. Carter counters saying that the UNSC won't ever approve it. Despite this, Carter acknowledges her plan, and requests the UNSC for approval, which they surprisingly grant them. The team fights their way to the facility and enters orbit. Noble Six and Jorge break their way into the warship with the makeshift bomb. There, a fight breaks out between the onboard Covenant and the two Noble members, causing damage to the bomb. Jorge begrudgingly informs Six that the bomb has to be manually detonated, and that there was only one way to do that. Jorge throws Six off the ship back to the planet, and detonates the bomb with himself aboard. Six witnesses the result of Jorge's sacrifice as they watch the Covenant warship tear apart and explode. As Six falls back to orbit in the wake of the destroyed warship, a massive Covenant fleet suddenly appears in orbit, massively dwarfing the destroyed warship. Six returns to the ground finding the entire planet in a fight for survival, Jorge's dog-tags in hand.

*“Listen, Reach has been good to me, time's come to return the favor. **Don't deny me this.**” - Jorge*

The Long Night of Solace is one of the most emotionally impactful levels in the entire campaign. The beginning of the level gives us insight into each of the members on Noble

Team and their interpersonal dynamics as we watch members take bets on who will win an argument. Kat and Carter's relationship is developed as we learn about their past and get to see the way they treat each other in the present. A sense of familiarity is conveyed between the two, and the argument feels genuine. Neither Kat nor Carter want to prove that they are right or that the other is wrong, but rather are trying to convince the other of what the team should do moving forward. This argument is somewhat stressful to watch, but in the end the two come to an agreement and their bond is strengthened by it. Watching the characters interact and challenge each other is satisfying to watch, and gives us a better understanding of who they are as people. The pacing between the narrative moments and the action is superb, as the narrative sets the stage for the action, which gives it weight. Kat forms a plan that has an element of mystery to it, so the action supports this by giving the player the satisfaction of carrying out that plan and learning more about the mystery of the secret facility. The pay off from this occurs when the player gets to actually get in a spaceship and have dogfights in space. The narrative set the expectation and the action followed through. In the second half, we get to see Jorge, a character who has been shown to be kind to Six and civilians alike, sacrifice himself to save his home. It is sad to see him go, but his death feels validated in this victory over the Covenant. In a dramatic reversal, everything Noble Team did and Jorge's sacrifice becomes pointless as the Covenant fleet arrives. The experience is soul crushing and discouraging, yet not frustrating. The player is given an expectation for what their actions will accomplish, and gets to act out on those expectations in gameplay. It would be frustrating to not be able to act out the plan and lose because of it. The emotional tone of the game dramatically shifts from this point. What was once an action-centric game about defeating an alien army has now become a losing battle against a truly unstoppable force.

"Oh, this can't be happening!" - UNSC radio chatter

After Six falls back to the planet below, they are temporarily separated from Noble Team and must fight their way back through the futuristic city of New Alexandria. Six experiences the horrors of war as the Covenant make relentless attacks against civilians and escaping civilian transport vehicles. While the rest of Noble Team is absent to bounce dialogue off of, the gameplay here establishes stakes in the form of civilians needing

rescue. These civilian NPCs can be saved by the player, but any civilian not protected will be killed off by the Covenant. As a result, this segment's narrative and gameplay are closely linked, providing for a more engaging and satisfying experience. It's one thing to take out hoards of aliens, it's another thing entirely to do it while saving innocent lives. Despite this, the level is overflowing with civilians desperately trying to evacuate in the middle of a war zone. The battle is bloody, and there is little the player can do to stop most of it. The feeling of hopelessness is constant in this level, joining the rest of the game's grim collection of themes throughout the campaign.

"I've got six hundred souls on board, Sergeant Major! I can't wait any longer!" -

Civilian Evac Pilot

The next level is in stark contrast to the previous two levels, as its narrative beats and cohesion with gameplay feel weak by comparison. Noble Six is tasked with joining up with Kat to deal with Covenant Jamming devices. The player must fly around the cities skyline and aid UNSC troops against the ongoing Covenant invasion. While the level does take place in a city skyline, the feeling of society being taken down by the ongoing war is far less prevalent. Players are fighting alongside other soldiers instead of protecting civilians, and are doing so from the safety of aerial assault vehicles instead of on the ground. The gameplay is fun, but has far less narrative weight. At the end of the mission, Noble Team is holed up in an abandoned sky scraper. Noble Team wishes a morose welcome back to Six and laments over Jorge's death. While trying to reach the UNSC, they are hit by what seems to be an EMP jamming explosion, forcing them to leave their position. Noble Team is unexpectedly ambushed by a Covenant ship during their escape, where a single round from a mid-level Covenant weapon hits Kat in the skull, killing her instantly. The rest of Noble quickly responds by returning small arms fire, but the ship flies off unaffected. Kat's death is quick and unexpected, and feels far less impactful than Jorge's death. Noble Team reacts to Jorge's death and acknowledges his loss when he is gone. There is dialogue that reminds the player of Jorge's death and gives his absence meaning. After Kat dies, she is only mentioned twice again in offhanded comments about the mission. Spartans are shown to have survived falls from orbit in cutscenes, take on waves of enemies in gameplay, and be killed only by the

toughest enemies in combat. Jorge's death is believable, and is the result of an explosion that takes down an entire warship. There is meaning to his death, and it was caused by his own character action. The tragedy of his death comes from the events following it that overshadow the sacrifice. By comparison, Kat's death is unrealistic in the game's universe. Both the player and Noble Team have fought against waves of enemies using the exact same weapon that killed Kat in the cutscene without issue. Players may often die due to being overrun or by being killed by more deadly weapons, but almost never to a single enemy with a single bullet. Kat died not because she was being foolhardy or due to any other character action, but simply in a freak encounter with a previously unknown enemy. Her death feels forced by the story and not caused by character action. As a result, while this scene continues to build upon the themes of hopelessness and tragedy, it feels strangely out of place.

"I know we're losing! I want to know if we've lost." - Kat

The next level sends the remaining members of Noble Team back to ONI: Sword Base, a previously visited location in the game. Their orders are to destroy the base. Noble Team fights their way to the base, where they find the scene of a massive firefight. The base is mostly empty, much to the team's confusion. Unexpectedly, a mysterious AI redirects them down a secret corridor leading them deeper into the base. There, they are hailed by Dr. Halsey, who informs them of their real mission. Noble Team is tasked with recovering this mysterious AI in the hopes that humanity will utilize it to defeat the Covenant. The lab in which Dr. Halsey and this AI are hiding is under attack by the Covenant, and needs protection. Players who have played previous *Halo* titles may begin to put the pieces together, and might correctly assume that this AI is actually Cortana, Master Chief's companion AI in previous titles. Those who make this assumption might prescribe more narrative weight to their gameplay, as they will be fighting for a well-known companion of theirs. Players who don't make this connection may find themselves following orders someone off screen gave them once again. With all the secrecy and mystery revolving the AI, it is hard to establish stakes as a player. This is somewhat mitigated by Halsey stating that all of Noble Team's sacrifices had been made for this AI, but still doesn't establish

why the AI is so important. The mission shifts the focus of the plot back to the data the Covenant wanted and sheds some light onto what exactly that data was.

“Commander, you've been wondering what your Spartans died for? They died for this.” -

Dr. Halsey

Once Noble Team reaches Halsey, it is shown that the AI is in fact Cortana. While the implications of this are not explained, players who recognize her will receive the pay off of finding her. Halsey states that the AI chose Six to deliver it, handing the AI off to them in preparation for Noble Team's departure. Jun is tasked with seeing Dr. Halsey to safety and joins her in evacuating the planet. Carter takes Emile and Six onto a transport dropship headed for a UNSC space-fairing vehicle to deliver the AI. Off-screen, the dropship becomes heavily damaged, with a blood covered Carter sustaining near fatal injuries. Carter commands Six and Emile to evac out of the ship while Carter gave them air support. Emile informs Carter that it has been an honor working with him, and Carter agrees. Six and Emile drop down and push forward through enemy forces to get to the UNSC ship. Most of the gameplay during this segment is escaping from Covenant forces in small vehicles, skirting around major Covenant assault vehicles. After dismounting, Emile and Six's path becomes blocked by one of the Covenant assault vehicles the two escaped from earlier. Carter tells the two of them that they can't get around the assault vehicle and that he will handle it. Emile comments that the dropship Carter is in doesn't have the firepower, but Carter responds that it has the mass. Carter says his final goodbyes before ramming the dropship into the Covenant assault vehicle, destroying both in the process.

“You're on your own, Noble... Carter out.” - Carter

While not as compelling as Jorge's death, Carter's death isn't as narratively out of place as Kat's. The expectation for Carter's death is established early on in the level through both dialogue between him and Emile, and the state of the dropship and Carter's injuries. His death has purpose, even if a minor one. There is still a disconnect between the narrative and the gameplay, as the player had just previously gotten around the Covenant

assault vehicles earlier in the level, but are informed that they cannot get around it in a cutscene, thus justifying Carter's death.

"We can get past it, sir!" - Emile

After Carter's sacrifice, Emile and Six move up through Covenant forces to the UNSC ship. The two find themselves at a landing bay swarming with the Covenant. Six clears a path on the ground while Emile mans an anti-aircraft gun to clear the skies. After creating an opening for the UNSC ship to land, Six delivers the AI. As they are preparing to board the ship, another Covenant dropship arrives, dropping off a team of powerful Covenant Elites, who team up to attack Emile. Emile kills one of them before being stabbed through the chest with an energy sword. Ever the fighter, Emile turns and stabs the Elite in the neck before taking both himself and the Elite off of a cliff. Six tells the UNSC ship to leave and that they will provide the opening they need from the anti-aircraft gun. Emile's death is fitting both to his character and to the state of the narrative. Emile dies to a high level enemy with an especially lethal weapon, making his death work from a gameplay perspective. Even in his final moments, Emile was able to be expressive and ferocious. His death was not a sacrifice, but the result of a conscious choice of Emile as a character. Emile knew that it would be more dangerous for himself if he split up from Six, but he did so regardless in order to ensure Six's safety. Emile's death is memorable as it fits who he was as a character and made sense from both a story telling and gameplay perspective.

"I'm ready! How 'bout you?!" - Emile

With Six being the final Noble Team member on Reach, they fight off Covenant forces to get to the anti-aircraft gun to ensure the AI is delivered safely. The gameplay in this segment is eerily quiet, as Six has no remaining teammates to communicate with during combat. The gameplay meshes well with the narrative here, as the mood is morose and bitter. The only thing Six has left is their mission, and they are hell bent on completing it. Six makes their way to the gun, and ensures that the UNSC vehicle escapes. The AI, now explicitly referred to as Cortana, is asked if she thinks they lost the Covenant. She snarkily responds *"I think we **both** know the answer to that."* The credits roll, and one

final mission plays before the campaign completes. Noble Six finds themselves on Reach as the planet is being destroyed. The name of the mission in game is “There’ll be Another Time”, and the player’s current objective is “Survive”. Six fights off wave after wave of enemy with no end in sight. As they keep on fighting, their visor become more and more cracked, until finally, they take off their helmet to continue the fight. They are shown getting overwhelmed, but fight on despite their injuries until finally they are taken down. The game ends on a shot of Six’s helmet in a grassy field, where Halsey speaks directly to both the player and to Six. She commends them on their bravery, and thanks them for everything, stating that their sacrifice has given humanity a chance to survive. The fit between the gameplay and the narrative has never been stronger until this moment. Noble Six, with nothing left but the planet of Reach, fights to the bitter end to protect it. The player is given an objective they cannot complete and failure is inevitable. Just like every other mission Noble has been tasked with. The level is the perfect send off to the campaign of tragedy, and concludes Six’s journey elegantly. Before they met Noble Team, Noble Six began the journey alone. After the fall of Reach, Noble Six ended their journey alone.

“It didn't take long for Reach to fall. Our enemy was ruthless. Efficient. But they weren't nearly fast enough. For you had already passed the torch. And because of you, we found Halo, unlocked its secrets, shattered our enemy's resolve. Our victory - your victory - was so close... I wish you could have lived to see it. But you belong to Reach. Your body, your armor - all burned and turned to glass. Everything...except your courage. That, you gave to us. And with it, we can rebuild.”

- Dr. Catherine Halsey

Strongest Element

Halo Reach’s most compelling trait is that every element, from the storytelling, to the gameplay, to the music, all has an underlying, focused theme of tragedy. The game’s tone is consistent and effective, and creates a emotionally compelling experience without following the conventions of its time.

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, some of the character deaths felt lack luster and unsatisfying, partially due to the lack of time invested in ensuring that their deaths felt meaningful to the story. The story occasionally meanders for the sake of pursuing an invasion plot where the motivation behind the player's actions are often "because the game told me to".

Highlight

The final fight of Noble Six serves as the culmination of everything the campaign had been building towards. Six has lost their entire team, failed their mission, and lost their only way off the planet that they couldn't save. They have nothing left but their stubborn will to press on. Throughout the campaign, the Covenant did everything in their power to overrun humanity and crush their spirits. Every time Noble Team thought they had gained the upper hand, the Covenant came back twice as strong. Despite this, Noble Team never let up. In the face of death, defeat, adversity, and failure, Noble Six never surrendered, and fought on until their dying breath. The player and Six experience a similar fate in the final level. They are both tasked with a goal they cannot complete and an enemy they cannot defeat. They both take on the challenge, and die trying.

Critical Reception

Halo Reach received critical acclaim upon its 2010 release, with a score of 91 on Metacritic¹.

Many critics praised *Halo Reach*'s campaign mode, citing its beautiful visuals and compelling narrative. Most notably, critics were a fan of the inclusion of a cast of characters, rather than the single unit that was Master Chief. Chris Watters from GameSpot, who gave the game a 9.5/10, comments on how Noble Team's personalities "Help set the tone, and... go a long way toward keeping you emotionally invested in the action."² Critics of the game also enjoyed the pacing and reveals the campaign had to offer, giving further insight into the world of *Halo* for longtime fans, and delivering a succinct and polished story to fans new to the series. Erik Brudvig from IGN, who gave

the game a 9.5/10, praised the campaign and pacing of its tension and excitement as the game progresses. *“The tale starts out simple enough, but it quickly escalates to stunning set pieces before pulling out all the stops. The last third of the game is just one big thrill ride... The ending in particular left a huge impression on me.”*³ Despite this, some critics found the members of Noble Team to be entertaining, but one dimensional. Some claimed that the increased size of the cast lead to difficulty when sharing the spotlight in terms of character development. Gus Mastrapa from WIRED was particularly fond of Kat. *“Kat, Noble 6's intelligence officer and estrogen-powered ass-kicker, is the most entertaining of your compatriots. But she and all the characters in Halo: Reach are one-note Johnnies, all swagger and no depth.”*⁴ Kevin Lynch from Mirror, who gave the game 5/5 stars, remarked that *“While Bungie still haven't really nailed how to weave a perfect narrative, it does expertly set up bombastic scene after scene.”*⁵ *Halo Reach* made \$200 million in first day sales, setting the record for the fastest selling title in the franchise at the time of release.

Lessons

- **Kill your heroes** – Stories need drama and tension for them to work. A lot of the times, this tension comes from some sort of antagonistic character or force. Often times, the characters who face these antagonists have almost everything at stake, except for death. Most people assume the main character in an action movie won't die simply because they're the hero. *Halo Reach* shows that stories can and should be told where the risk of death is a serious threat for our heroes. Jorge's death in the story showed that Noble Team were mortals at the end of the day and could die if things went south. This gave the story emotional stakes, as most players were probably very fond of the charming and kind Spartan. It is easier to become invested in something if there's a fear of losing it.
- **Follow your own rules** – It's hard for players to remain invested in something when the rules keep changing. No one liked the kid on the playground who would suddenly make up rules that only applied to themselves when playing pretend. Players need narratives to be internally consistent in order to maintain a sense of

tension and cause and effect. Things need to happen for a reason in narratives, and well established rules should not be broken under most circumstances. Kat's death felt cheap and out of the blue because it broke the rules of how tough Spartans are supposed to be. Both Noble Team and the player have fought dozens of enemies without dying at this point, and yet Kat is somehow killed in a single shot.

- **Your objectives need to matter** – For several levels in the campaign, Noble Team is tasked with taking down a Covenant outpost, or scouting out an area without given a concrete reason as to why. Obviously, they are there to disrupt the Covenant, but there is often little attention given as to why these are the actions being taken to take on the Covenant. As a result, the gameplay feels somewhat railroaded, where players are doing things because the game told them to. Later on in the game, particularly in New Alexandria, the player's objectives are logical and often the ones the player would want to take on their own. "Get back to your team", "Protect the civilians", etc. Noble Six is doing these actions because they are both the right thing to do and the logical next step, which makes doing them as a player feel like they're actually contributing and making meaningful changes.
- **If a character is feeling something, the player should too** – Characters are much easier to bond with and form attachment to if players can feel empathy for them. A player is going to feel a lot more for a character who just lost their friend if that player was also invested in that friend. Players feel for Noble Team after Jorge's death because they understand their pain. The people of Noble Team miss Jorge and the player probably does too. This extends into gameplay as well. In the end, Noble Six is faced with impossible odds. The planet is being destroyed, their only hope of getting out of there left hours ago, and there's no one left to save them. They are faced with an impossible task. The player is given the simple objective "Survive". In this moment, both the player and Noble Six are in the same hopeless position, which allows players to relate to Six.

- **Remember the fallen** – Death is an awful thing. It affects people, and it doesn't go away. When people lose someone they care about, they don't ever stop missing them, they just get used to it. If you decide to kill a character in game, the remaining cast had better miss them a lot, otherwise they probably didn't know the deceased at all. It can feel jarring for a player to go through the grief of witnessing a character they care about get killed off while the rest of the characters in the game seem to move on as if nothing has changed. Death is a serious matter, and should be given the emotional weight it deserves.

Summation

From the vicious cycle of loss after loss to the crushing feelings of hopelessness, the story is gripping and emotional from the beginning to very end. By circumventing expectations through means other than denial, the narrative tells a story where the player fails without making it the player's fault. *Halo Reach* proves that a story doesn't have to be a happy one to be compelling.

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