Bigger battles and better graphics bring *Halo 3* full circle

*game*review

Halo 3
Available Now
Developed by Bungie Studios
Published by Microsoft Games

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The *Halo* games have been called the *Star Wars* of our generation; following the adventures of the Master Chief, a super-soldier fighting to save humanity from a genocidal alien civilization known as the Covenant, the story in this game is naturally the continuation and conclusion of the *Halo* Trilogy. It's somewhat unforgiving to newcomers; there's no "Last time, in *Halo 2* ... " to help the beginners to comprehend what exactly is going on. But again, chances are this isn't your first foray into the *Halo* universe.

Most gamers have already made up their minds about the *Halo* series: there are those who love it and those who hate it. With that in mind it's best to avoid the obvious points, and focus on the changes and tweaks made in to this particular installment of the series.

Halo 3 isn't the most gorgeous game to appear on the Xbox 360, but it might be the most fluid: it runs at an extremely smooth 60 frames-per-second, with virtually no slow-down—a boast few games can make. The textures and effects are nice to look at, if flat in some areas, but where the game really shines is the lighting. The use of high dynamic range lighting gives the lights a sense of reality, with the sun's position in the game actually creating the light and shadows for the levels you play in.

Audio is by far one of the *Halo 3*'s strongest points. With a soundtrack that is rivaled only by the *Final Fantasy* series, composer Marty O'Donnell has put his heart into the third game, and it truly is a masterpiece. From the brilliant piano scores to the haunting gothic chants, the soundtrack gives the game a very epic feel; if you closed your eyes, you would think you were listening to something as grandiose as *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*.

All of these are nice; but what truly matters in the making of a great game is how it plays, and, in that category, *Halo 3* kicks ass. If you've played either of its predecessors, you will be back in familiar territory. There are new weapons and vehicles that help to keep the game fresh, but it's really the same old game you've played before—and that's a good thing.

The new features that truly make this game stand out, however, are the Forge and Theatre modes. With the Theatre mode, you can go back and review your last 25 excursions from either single or multi-player modes, and capture screenshots and video clips to share with friends.

The mode that will really keep this game alive for another four years, however, is Forge, *Halo 3*'s built-in level editor. You can't edit the geometry, but you can mix up item, weapon, and vehicle placement, as well as spawn-points. This allows you to create a multitude of crazy shit—a giant explosive tower that detonates every 30 seconds, for example. Your friends can also help you build, which gets pretty ridiculous with 16 people.

If you've played through the previous games, you will thoroughly enjoy this conclusion to the *Halo* Trilogy. A word of advice, too: keep watching after the credits roll.