Now We Are All Sons of Bitches

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“Wake up, Mr. Freeman. Wake up and smell the ashes,” the enigmatic G-Man murmurs as he leers into the camera, finishing an eerie opening monologue—and so begins *Half-Life 2*, Valve Corporation’s flagship game. The last time we saw Gordon Freeman, the protagonist, the same rigid and mysterious (though more poorly animated, since the prequel was released six years earlier) G-Man was handing him a job offer after witnessing the former scientist transform into a warrior, bent on escaping from the besieged Black Mesa Research Facility alive. Now, suddenly, Freeman finds himself on a train. No context.1 Is it a prison train? The three other individuals on it wear uniforms like those the inmates wore in *Cool Hand Luke*. The train soon stops at its destination, and we realize that it is a prison train, in a way—Freeman has arrived at the Orwellian “City 17,” where the ironically named Civil Protection abuses and oppresses, where antagonist Dr. Breen preaches poet-ic propaganda from large monitors hung high above the town. In the years since scientists at the facility accidentally opened a gateway between dimensions and allowed a bevy of grotesque creatures to spill into our universe, Earth has been taken over by the Combine, an alien multiplanetary empire. Breen is merely Earth’s administrator—and we realize that the ashes the G-Man spoke of were the ashes of the prelapsarian world. It’s classic dystopia, complete with a Resistance, of which Freeman soon finds himself the “messianic” leader (*HL2*). The saga spans four separate games (*Half-Life, Half-Life 2, Half-Life 2: Episode One*, and *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*), and although the faces of the enemies change, the types of enemies stay the same: Freeman

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1 Having a disoriented character is also a clever technique to orient the player behind the character, especially one who is new to video games, as I was: basic tasks, like walking and jumping and picking things up, are introduced. Fingers on the WASD keys to move, press E to grab that object—most of all, the player must become accustomed to the first-person shooter style of both the *Half-Life and Portal series*, to seeing through the eyes of a different person, to only being able to view the weapon your character is toting around poking out from the bottom of the screen.
fights both a gaggle of hideous monsters and a regiment of uniformed gun-toting soldiers. Blood and guts fly.

Valve has created one other narrative-based series, consisting of Portal and Portal 2. These games are quieter compared to the Half-Life series—and to most video games in general. There is very little combat. There’s only one other character in the first story: GLaDOS, a rogue supercomputer, who for most of the game is present only as a disembodied voice. Ellen McClain’s voice acting is almost musical, reminiscent of tinkling chimes—which makes it all the more disturbing when GLaDOS slowly becomes unhinged, maintaining her computerized semi-monotone musicality but suppressing a sociopathic murderousness. Throughout the series, the protagonist, Chell, tries to escape from the Aperture Science test chambers, navigating test after test and evading GLaDOS’s wrath. Both Portal and Half-Life can be classified as horror, but in contrasting ways. Half-Life exemplifies a more classic sense of horror, manifested in its hideous and myriad monsters. In Portal, the horror is psychological, born of a claustrophobic cat-and-mouse game, though it incorporates the established rebellious-robot trope of dystopia. It seems almost paradoxical at first that such contrasting types of horror could come out of the same studio. But common elements of the campy and the uncanny underlie the horror in both games.

Although Valve draws on campy horror films for inspiration, it would cheapen Valve’s accomplishments to equate their games with fast-tracked formulaic Hollywood horror movies—the latter often use more terror than horror. Studios shoot for jump-in-your-seat scares, misshapen faces roaring and popping up out of nowhere. This terror takes no skill to engineer. The sense of suspense comes not from dread of the creature but from fear of sensory overload. Horror, in contrast, is a psychological feat that, to work, must pervade the human psyche. It is why The Exorcist is a memorable film and My Bloody Valentine 3D is not. While Portal incorporates only horror, the Half-Life series presents both horror and terror—in part because terror is written into the plot and game design architecture, but also because of the overlap with campy slasher or science fiction films.

In her essay “Notes On Camp,” Susan Sontag says that “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.” Video games are

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2 An analogy: sitting on a cold toilet seat versus sitting on a warm one. The cold seat provides merely an unpleasant surprise. The warm seat has much more horrifying implications.
playful by nature, even when they take on what horrifies us—what evokes the serious, the psychological disturbance that distinguishes horror from terror. Because Valve inhabits this tension of horror and play, they will always be tied to Camp in some way. That Valve embraces elements of Camp has a lot to do with the tastes of its team members—writer Marc Laidlaw, for instance, is an author of horror novels and has expressed his love for “pulps” (qtd. in Yan).

The games are darkly funny, too. *Portal* and its sequel are two of the rare games that generate frequent laugh-out-loud moments, and Freeman’s witty companion Alyx delivers chuckle-inducing quips—even when a mortal battle rages in the foreground. Sontag claims that “Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. . . . If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.” Valve deftly demonstrates proficiency in the use of black comedy, mixing paradoxical elements of darkness and whimsy, so it’s hardly shocking to say that Valve has also been able to combine hyperinvolvement and underinvolvement. The studio has one foot in Camp and one foot in the serious, and it catches the player off guard. We know what we’re supposed to feel—or rather, not feel—when viewing the Camp, the zombies that remind us of *Evil Dead*, the sinister machine that reminds us of *I, Robot*. We’re meant to laugh at the cheap scares. And so when the games turn out to deliver horror, not just terror, it’s a shock—not a sensory shock, but a psychological one.

Horror in Valve’s games is most apparent in their monsters, which are monstrous because they are “uncanny”—too strange, too unfamiliar, to be accepted as fact. Sigmund Freud, in his essay “The Uncanny,” postulates that the quality from which the essay derives its title is “undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror.” But the game world takes this concept further, building on robotics professor Masahiro Mori’s concept of the “Uncanny Valley,” which takes Freud as its foundation. It’s a cruel trick of the industry: designers want to create as lifelike an animation as they can, since up to a point we sympathize more with characters who look more human-like—but make the animation too lifelike, and the minor differences between the animation and real life become repulsive—the animation has fallen into the Uncanny Valley. It appears that Valve hasn’t run into that problem yet, though they’ve capitalized on the idea: no doubt acutely aware

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3 Gamers who know the ins and outs of programming and animation have found ways to install “skins” onto characters and objects, changing the way they appear within the game—and the availability of skins for some of the female characters that squeeze all literal meaning out of the word “skins” goes to show that Valve has struck a nice balance between characters lifelike enough for us to believe them as people, and far away enough from the Uncanny Valley that gamers can actually fantasize about them.
of the Uncanny Valley, they take advantage of it when designing monsters to arouse dread and horror. “Zombie” is placed at the lowest point in the Uncanny Valley in Figure 1, and zombies are among the most common enemies in the *Half-Life* series; Freud observes that “many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.”

![Uncanny Valley diagram](image)

**Fig. 1.** Uncanny Valley diagram from Mori Masahiro, “The Uncanny Valley.”

Combine soldiers, masked men with two pinpricks of blue light where their eyes should be, also teeter dangerously close to the edge of the Valley. Most notably, the G-Man looks human, wears a suit and tie, and speaks English. But his skin is pallid, his head slightly squarish, his eyes far too alive for his corpse-like body. His speech, though, is the most unsettling aspect—disjointed, semi-robotic dialect, with dips and rises in all the wrong places.

![Del Toro Notebook](image)

**Fig. 2.** Del Toro Notebook, from Angela Burton, “Guillermo del Toro’s Nightmare Notebook.”
These monsters in the *Half-Life* series are like the creations of Guillermo del Toro in Figure 2, grotesque because of a Picasso-esque reamalgamation of body parts—eyes are placed on hands, mouths on stomachs, extra arms on torsos. And though the parts look almost real, almost human, the new wholes they form don’t look human at all.

The village of Ravenholm in *Half-Life 2* is likewise “uncanny” because of a similar combination of what we recognize and what we don’t. It can be described as a collection of haunted houses, recalling both the Camp of carnivals and Disney rides and Freud’s observation that “some languages . . . can only render the German expression ‘an unheimlich house’ by ‘a haunted house.”’ Delving into the etymology of the subject, Freud demonstrates that although “the German word ‘unheimlich’ [uncanny] is obviously the opposite of ‘heimlich’ (‘homely’), ‘heimisch’ (‘native’) the opposite of what is familiar,” we must resist the temptation to merely conclude that “what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar.” The uncanny exists somewhere in the middle, and is something both foreign and familiar—for instance, the Pale Man’s humanoid figure combined with unnaturally saggy skin and optical palms.

And yet Mori’s Uncanny Valley theory, in light of Freud’s theories and some of the game’s other monsters, seems to be missing something. There seems to be a reverse-Uncanny Valley, one that would appear on the far left side of the graph in Figure 1, which describes almost completely non-human beings with just one or two human-like features. A creature with only a few subtle differences from humanity creates a sense of unease, but a creature with only a few subtle similarities to humans elicits comparable discomfort. Valve, by exploiting this property, seems to have uncovered a new way to induce unease. GLaDOS is simply a disembodied voice: there’s no latex skin or fiberglass eyeballs—indeed, you hardly see her at all. And yet, her omnipresent voice, feminine yet robotic through-and-through, has that life-like music to it. When you finally see her mainframe, the twisted setup of metal and wires is eerily similar to the silhouette of a woman, bound and gagged. And in *Portal 2*, we discover that GLaDOS was constructed based on a now-dead person—that she’s a zombie for the digital age. She still doesn’t resemble a human, but she does have tiny unsettling similarities. In the same vein, one *Half-Life* monster is the barnacle, a sea anemone-like creature with a long, stringy tongue, trapping and eating its prey. When a barnacle is killed, it retches up the partially digested food: first a jawbone, then a skull, and then
a hunk of meat which we know must be human from the preceding bits but cannot connect to a living being at all. This loaf of human inspires a sort of comic repulsion4 because of how little it reminds us of the former being. It’s the tiny similarities that scare us, as well as the tiny differences.

Which isn’t to say that only monsters can be uncanny—the settings in both games are dystopian. Valve shows admirable restraint in dealing with post-apocalypt, like Cormac McCarthy exhibits in The Road: there’s nothing sexy about the end of the world. Everything is kept alarmingly simple. Houses. Simple houses, a frequent location in both works, provide another sense of the uncanny, a perversion of the familiar more effective than if the action took place in an airport or supermall. While playing Half-Life 2 as Freeman, looking for supplies, I stumbled across a house in the middle of nowhere. I can’t remember what I found: a medical kit, perhaps, shotgun shells, or nothing. What I do remember is the body, a shriveled corpse rigidly placed on a bed as stripped down as the body on top of it, and its stark contrast with the wallpaper. There was something distinctly homey about the baby blue wallpaper with the tiny red flower pattern running vertically down it, an artifact of the world that was, like the can of Coca-Cola in The Road, eerily familiar and quotidian. These objects, integrally associated with a mundane existence but surrounded by post-apocalyptic destruction, by dust and blood and debris, generate a sense of the uncanny—these homey things have become both foreign and familiar.

Dystopia itself becomes a wide-scale version of the uncanny, where things previously part of the known universe have changed ever so slightly and turned alien in our own world. Both games’ dystopias have the same premise: scientists overstep their bounds, the unforeseen consequences of which have fatal ramifications. (“Unforeseen consequences” is both the name of a chapter in Half-Life and an oft-repeated phrase in Episode Two). The basic premise is reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus. A scientist or scientists build something they cannot contain, and their creation gives way to destruction. In fact, in all cases, a foreign life is introduced: the Frankenstein monster, Half-Life’s creatures of the alternate

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4 Usually manifested as a half-groan, half-laugh, possibly followed by an expletive. A similar device is used to this effect in Breaking Bad, when a partially dissolved gangster falls through the ceiling due to a mishandling of hydrochloric acid. We can recognize the bone fragments, but the lump of meat that goes splat on the ground evokes an anatomical curiosity: what part of the body is that? The stomach? It would make the most sense, except the stomach is supposed to have space in it, right? The upper torso, maybe, except the upper torso wouldn’t look that homogenous. We don’t know what part of the body it is, and so the only link to humans is cerebral, not visual.
dimension Xen, and Portal’s computers GLaDOS and Wheatley, all of which resemble humans in some way. But Valve does not judge science; rather than something to be feared, science is viewed as a tool. The primary weapons of both protagonists light up with an otherworldly glow and are prototypes developed by scientists, unheard of even in their own worlds. “Modern Prometheus” indeed. Fire, brought by Prometheus, is a tool to be respected, but errant use will end in destruction—in ashes. Since both the nightmarish antagonists and the heroic protagonists are so closely associated with science, however, the line between what is human and what is almost human is blurred further, and the two sides are drawn closer together.

Valve underscores this conceptual closeness of opposites by engineering environments where players and their enemies are physically close, trapping them in the same space together and cultivating an atmosphere of isolation and claustrophobia. You are on your own for most of the game; you do not often fight as part of a team. Just when this aloneness becomes nearly unbearable, the game grants you a companion and a guide: Alyx in Half-Life 2 and the computer Wheatley in Portal 2. And yet, what Valve giveth, it taketh away; as soon as you become accustomed to your respective guides, they depart, leaving you with a greater sense of claustrophobia and isolation than before.5

In addition, the games offer no cutscenes. Often, a video game will break for a bit of scripted story and turn cinematic, allowing you to view the scene and your character from a third-person perspective, and providing you a chance to breathe and stretch your fingers. Valve’s games have scripted sections, but the player remains in control of the character throughout. It’s still a break, but not a sit-down so much as a jogging-in-place, because players are not released from the claustrophobia of the test chambers or the isolation of the desert6—there are moments in both series in which the walls literally close in.

And yet, if this sense of being trapped with the uncanny is so frightening, why do we willingly submerge ourselves in it? In video games, at least, it’s perhaps because, although frightening, the enemy creature is always killable. The game empowers us to take action and destroy the thing we fear or hate. We can kill the repulsive monster. We can fix the broken civilization.

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5 In Portal 2, Valve twists the knife—Wheatley’s final departure is when he turns on Chell, turning into a bumbling British version of GLaDOS, making you wonder if your guide was less of a St. Christopher and more of a Charon.

6 The Black Mesa Research Facility is set in New Mexico, in the middle of nowhere. The isolation and hazy heat can obscure good judgment, making deserts perfect for ill-advised science projects like those in Half-Life and Breaking Bad, and that’s probably why the Devil thought his best shot at tempting Jesus was in one.
Video games are an exercise in control. They grant us abilities that we do not have. They’re also an exercise in potential: game designer Frank Lanz believes that games give certain gifts to players: “all kinds of opportunities to improve yourself—through study and self-discipline” (qtd. in Anderson). Other games give players an improved status, but that status is godlike—and where we get into trouble. The media has a history of errantly blaming youth violence on video games (Grand Theft Auto 3 was often made a scapegoat); it is sensationalist reporting, and the number of incidents blamed on video games is way above the mark, but game-inspired violence does occur. It is not simply because, as Lee Malvo’s (the “DC sniper”) attorney suggested, teens desensitize themselves by shooting human forms (Kutner and Olson 6). That level of realism would require mass-produced video games that have skipped over the Uncanny Valley. More likely, in an era where many (especially young) people feel they are losing control, video game companies find audiences by imbuing them with limitless control. If this sense of power spills over into real life and becomes a god complex, the consequences can be tragic, and angry adolescents can discover themselves to be no more gods than Dr. Frankenstein.

Valve does not make their players into gods. Rather, the studio places us in the shoes of extremely skilled, intelligent, imperfect characters. We learn a little about ourselves—and we can improve ourselves much more effectively—by role-playing. Chell and Freeman are both nonspeaking characters, reminiscent of the man-of-few-words-type heroes that pepper the silver screen, such as Charles Bronson’s unnamed gunslinger in Once Upon a Time in the West, or Ryan Gosling’s Driver from Drive. These heroes’ characteristic silence emphasizes, through contrast, the words of the characters around them. It’s easier to discern the dripping venom in GLaDOS’s ramblings or the way Breen plays with words because Chell and Freeman are silent. But other contrasts between the characters who speak and the ones who don’t are also emphasized. In Drive, for example, Driver listens, stone-faced, as the gangster Nino glosses over a slick car: “Now this . . . that is one motherfuck- ing, fine-ass pussy-mobile, motha-fucka! Damn!” Later, he drowns Nino in the Pacific. All business, no unnecessary chatter. But when we play a video

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7 He also describes them as "pure self-destruction" (Anderson). We’ll get to that.

8 The Occupy Wall Street movement is certainly indicative of a culture affected by a feeling of perpetual powerlessness. Sam Anderson mentions that “game-studies scholars . . . point out that games tend to reflect the societies in which they are created and played. Monopoly, for instance, makes perfect sense as a product of the 1930s—it allowed anyone, in the middle of the Depression, to play at being a tycoon.”
game, we actually become this determined, seemingly emotionless character; even though Freeman is perceived as godlike by his fellow characters, we know that he feels scared and happy at times—because he is us, and we feel scared and happy at times, too. Alyx, the woman who prevents us from being overwhelmed early in Half Life 2, is first introduced when she saves Freeman, thus inverting the classic Super Mario Bros mission of Mario saving the princess. Even the most stoic hero is vulnerable. By assuming this character and living through his trials and tribulations, we become more aware of our heroic potential and how far we must go to fulfill it.

It’s natural, when assuming the role of a hero, for us to believe it is also our role to subdue the chaos within Valve’s universes. We’ve been conditioned by other games to believe in this responsibility. But Portal 2 ends with only one enemy defeated, and the Half-Life series has not yet progressed far enough to see a fully happy ending—although even if Freeman expels the Combine from our world, they will still oppress other planets. We can only treat the chaos. We cannot fully fix it. But we can subvert it. In his article “God Mode,” Luke Mitchell describes how players can plug in cheats or alter the actual code of the game, even in Valve’s games, removing gravity or conjuring unlimited ammunition. “The most powerful cheat is called god mode,” he says, and it’s exactly what it sounds like. It makes you invincible, able to mow down any living thing in your path. In an essay otherwise dealing with the ethics of force-feeding,9 Mitchell refers to the cheat “as a contemporary example of a longstanding opposition in the American psyche between liberty and death.” There are those who do not want to be heroes fighting for freedom, to escape the isolation and claustrophobia and horror. They want to be gods, already free. And many other games do not require cheats to show players fully happy endings or fulfill their fantasies of complete control—these endings and empowerments are the point of some games and the subversion of others.

The video game market that gives players only what they want stands in stark contrast to Valve’s games, and thus this market is an enemy, both in the business world and within the Portal and Half-Life series. In Sam Anderson’s article “Just One More Game,” he labels Tétris a “stupid game,” saying that “it is bureaucracy in pure form, busywork with no aim or end, impossible to avoid or escape. And the game’s final insult is that it annihilates free will.” It

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9 Force-feeding in response to hunger strikes, that is. The latter is another form of attempting to seize control in an unorthodox manner when one feels powerless—like Occupy Wall Street, Walter White from Breaking Bad, and gamers who opt to play in god mode.
is also literally a description of GLaDOS’s form of entertainment in *Portal*, wherein she makes Chell jump through hoops and complete test after test, where both their lives are possessed for an arbitrary game. In *Portal 2*, the more transparent Wheatley adopts the same pastime, and exhibits a near orgasmic reaction the first few times Chell successfully navigates an obstacle course. It wears off quickly. And even though Wheatley doesn’t find the mindless task fun anymore, he persists. Despite his loss of interest, despite the fact that he’s getting nothing out of it, Wheatley keeps playing his game, dimly satisfied, as though he were playing Tetris. In *Half-Life 2*, the antagonists are sadistic policemen serving those whose lust for power spans dimensions. The monsters in Valve’s games resemble the gamers who love violence and control, the ones who love arbitrary exercises.

And yet, Valve’s games walk that tightrope of ultimate control, because although they give us just a taste of godlike control, the mere love of that taste is something we have in common with the enemy. For the monsters to be uncanny, they must resemble us, and they do—in character as much as in appearance. We want to destroy them because they are repulsive, but they are repulsive because they remind us of us, and we want to eliminate the reminder that we can be repulsive. That drive lies both within the game’s plot, where we blame our woes on the Men in Uniform—even though Gordon works with the men in lab coats and Chell wears an Aperture Science-issued jumpsuit—and within the game’s meta-commentary on the industry, where Valve assigns in-game enemies the traits of those unpleasant gamers who enjoy Tetris.

That fine line that games walk by commenting on the hazards of the medium is even more thoroughly explored in *Braid*, Jonathan Blow’s surreal pastiche of the Mario games. In it, Tim (a surreal pastiche of Mario the character) searches after the elusive princess, seeking to rescue her using powers of time-warping, which aid him in solving puzzles and clearing levels. At the end of the game, the princess wriggles out of the grasp of the evil knight, and Tim must rush to save her, traversing many an obstacle while being chased by a wall of flame. And yet, once Tim finally reaches her, time plays in reverse, showing the previous sequence in the proper order: the princess is actually running away from Tim, throwing obstacles in his way in an attempt to stop him. She does not escape from the knight’s grasp—she jumps into it. The wall of fire and destruction was not chasing Tim; it was blazing forward in front of him. In the epilogue, which is “even by non-game standards . . . extraordinarily esoteric,” we are presented with a series of enigmatic shreds of text, and “*Braid*, savvy players suddenly realize, is an allegory of the development of the
The atomic bomb (Clark 2). The major tipoff? One of the lines is, “Now we are all sons of bitches,” a sentence first uttered in 1945 by Kenneth Bainbridge, the director of the Trinity test, to J. Robert Oppenheimer, only moments after the test had spectacularly succeeded. It was the beginning of the Atomic Age, the epiphany in the desert, when American scientists first realized they might have overstepped their bounds. It was where we realized that the line between destroying our enemies and destroying ourselves might not be as clear as we believed. We are all Men in Uniform. We are all lovers of power. We are all “sons of bitches.” The age of video games has the potential to show us many aspects of ourselves; Valve, for its part, has chosen to show us our awful proximity to what we oppose, that aspect of ourselves that we share with our enemies. It is the most uncanny—and the most horrifying—aspect yet.

10 The deserts of New Mexico, of course.

WORKS CITED


