

Half-Life: Alyx: What we know about Valve's upcoming full-length VR game

Enlarge / Yep, it's real—and here's what we know so far.

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For a certain class of video game fan, no news could be bigger than today's: *Half-Life* is back. In VR. As an entirely new game from the series' creators at Valve.

We're here to connect the dots between what has been announced, what has been rumored, and what we've heard from well-placed sources. Rise and shine, *Half-Life* fans. We have a lot for you today.

Months of rumors, then a TGA leak

We should probably begin with the game's name, as revealed in a leaked Game Awards 2019 presentation and confirmed hours later by an official post from Valve. *Half-Life: Alyx* is a brand-new game in the *Half-Life* universe designed exclusively for PC virtual reality systems (Valve Index, Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, Windows Mixed Reality).

This is, in fact, the oft-teased "VR game" mentioned by Valve over the past few years and the one we had been told to expect by the end of 2019. Today's leak includes a revised release

window of March 2020, which our sources indicate is likely—but also subject to change due to the phenomenon that fans call “Valve Time.”

Today’s announcement has confirmed a hard truth: Valve’s game development teams still cannot count to three. In *HLA*’s case, it’s because this is a prequel, not a sequel. And it’s a full single-player campaign of brand-new VR content, though our sources can’t confirm how long the game will actually take to beat.

The game’s name confirms what has been loudly rumored for months: that you will play this game from the perspective of Alyx Vance, a character introduced in 2004’s *Half-Life 2*. Instead of stepping forward in time, *HLA* will rewind to the period between the first two mainline *Half-Life* games.

For those who have lost track of the series’ timeline, the original 1998 game saw the Black Mesa research institute loose an alien race (the Combine) onto our planet. The sequel picked up an uncertain number of years later, with a network of researchers and resistance fighters working to take out the Combine’s invasion and domination of Earth, in spite of a human-fronted organization that capitulated to the Combine’s control.

Both of those games starred Gordon Freeman as a silent protagonist. This new VR game mixes things up by putting you in Alyx’s shoes, years before the events of *HL2* and before Freeman’s return to the series’ universe. (This won’t be the first time an official *HL* game wrested control from Freeman; the 2001 expansion pack *Half-Life: Blue Shift* starred the first game’s beloved security guard Barney.) We’ve gotten an indication that the game’s testing period hasn’t shown any parts of Alyx’s body in place of your own, beyond a pair of hands. But that could very well change.

Grabbity Gloves?

Half-Life 2 was arguably the gaming world's first major "physics adventure," since it revolved around a clever Gravity Gun system that let you pull and toss all manner of items big and small. We've gotten some indication that *Half-Life: Alyx* follows suit.

A data leak from Valve's Source 2 game engine, as uncovered in September by Valve News Network, pointed to a new control system labeled as the "Grabbity Gloves" in its code base. Multiple sources have confirmed that this is indeed a major control system in *HLA*.

How do they work? We've gotten hints that they might more accurately be described as "Magnet Gloves," in that they let players magically point to and attract distant items to your hands. Instead of having to walk all the way to an object in VR or bend over to grab something from the floor, *HLA* players will have a handy point-and-snap system. And we're told that these are spiritual successors to *HL2*'s Gravity Gun, in terms of revolving around realistic physics. Maybe that means we can, or cannot, grab certain items due to real-life physics systems or obstacles.

However this system works, it seems to both favor the newer Valve Index controllers (which strap to users' knuckles and leave fingers free to move around) and offer concessions to older controllers like the HTC Vive wands. Valve has already announced plans to support all major VR PC systems for its next VR game, and these new gloves seem like the right system to scale to whatever controllers you bring into VR.

But we also get the sense that *HLA* is a serious showcase for Valve Index's "Knuckles" controllers. We hear that most every object in the game's world has been designed to be touched and manipulated by hands, both in terms of realistic physics and how real hands move through virtual objects. The best public

information we have to this end is a recent DigiPen presentation from a Valve developer. Ever wondered how doors are constructed in VR? Valve developer Kerry Davis went on for over 30 minutes on the subject, and our sources indicate that this scrutiny went into every single hand-manipulation system within *HLA*.

Our sources have told us not to expect one iconic weapon in *HLA*, however. Each of these sources mentioned that a virtual crowbar was tested at one point in the game's multi-year development but was eventually scrapped. To be clear: we don't have conclusive evidence that the crowbar won't eventually appear in the game in one way or another. (If Valve plans to upgrade the game with a physical crowbar purchase, my sources sure haven't heard of it.)

Intentionally vague confidence...

After getting over my initial shock that a new *Half-Life* game exists, I've come to be astounded by another likely outcome: that this new game will be a masterclass example of how to build an adventure game around the unique features of virtual reality hardware.

Valve's VR game design teams share the same frustrations with been-there-VR'ed-that quests.

I have played quite a few VR quest and adventure games since home VR headsets began launching in 2016. Some have employed compelling mechanics but have run out of fresh ideas all too quickly. Others have slapped familiar combat and puzzles into a VR headset in ways that would have worked just as well on a flat TV screen. And still others have made VR users sit or stand around waiting for dialogue or long, boring walks to transpire.

What I know about *HLA*, at this point, has me convinced that Valve's VR game design teams share the same frustrations with

been-there-VR'ed-that quests and that *HLA* won't repeat their mistakes. The little bit I know about hand manipulation in the game has me *tingling* with excitement.

Plus, as Valve's first game built from the ground up to tap into the company's long-in-development Source 2 engine, I'm hopeful that we're in for a whole new caliber of facial animations and world details in a VR game—much like how *Half-Life 2*'s use of the first Source engine blew gamers away in 2004.

Whether we're in for a game that earns the *Half-Life* namesake, on the other hand, remains to be seen. Will it actually be long enough in terms of a satisfying single-player campaign? Will its plot's mysteries, as staged between two major games in the series, be sold in compelling sequences seen from a VR perspective? Will we get a VR robot dog as a pet?

I'd love to assure readers that we won't have long to wait to learn the answers to these questions and more, but, you know, Valve Time is a thing. We'll temper our excitement as much as we can with zero assurances of a true release date until the game is in both our literal and virtual hands, and we at Ars will keep you posted as soon as Valve lets us fake like Alyx for the sake of an *HLA* preview.

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