The Verge reacts to Half-Life: Alyx

After 12 long years, there's finally going to be a new *Half-Life* game, and it's exclusive to VR. *Half-Life: Alyx* is due to arrive in March 2020 for a wide array of PC VR headsets, but none with traditional flat screens, mice, and keyboards. Is it the killer app VR has been waiting for and the fulfillment of *Half-Life* fans' dreams? Or is it merely a bump in the road?

Here's what a savvy selection of *The Verge*'s staff thinks about that.

Michael Moore, reviews coordinator: The question that keeps coming to mind after seeing *Half-Life: Alyx* is: can Valve save VR?

Not that VR is somehow *dying*, but the hype from a few years ago seems to have completely dissipated. We're to the point where it seems as though VR is no longer the next big thing for a lot of companies, but rather a stepping stone or stopgap on the way to AR.

In the case of the CD-ROM drive, it only took 'Myst'
But it's nothing new to introduce seemingly superfluous hardware that eventually matures to become just an expected part of gaming on computers. I remember when sound cards were a separate thing you had to buy, never mind graphics cards. But eventually, enough games took advantage of them that they became a required part of your computer build. In the case of the CD-ROM drive, it only took *Myst*.

While I don't think VR headsets are necessarily going to become ubiquitous post-*Alyx* in the same way as sound and graphics cards, they've at least reached an important maturation point where they feel less like aspirational tech. Maybe something as big as a new *Half-Life* game can keep VR

headsets from just being a footnote in the history of gaming.

Also, how great is Rhys Darby in that trailer? I'm glad he's getting more voice acting work.

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Jon Porter, international news writer: I get that this is a minor point, but I can't get over Alyx's hands in the trailer. If this is real gameplay footage (which, given Valve's history and comments made by one of its artists, there's every reason to believe that it is), we're seeing its motion-tracked hands behave in ways that no other VR game has managed to get right.

Look at the way the character seems to place a hand and steady herself on the wall at the 10-second mark or the way she pushes a bucket to one side a couple of moments later. That virtual hand seems to be reacting to its environment in a way that I've never seen a motion-tracked hand do before. Then, 58 seconds in, those same hands are pushing shelved items out of the way as they reach for individual shotgun shells.

The best VR games released so far try not to have you perform too many fiddly little actions like these. *Beat Saber* works because it has you making huge swings with your arms across the screen, while *Job Simulator*'s whole interface is big and chunky and forgiving to control.

[embedded content]

It's impossible to come to too many conclusions about Valve's new game off the back of less than two minutes of gameplay footage, but there's a fidelity of animation on display here that's entirely unlike anything I've seen in a VR game before. And it could represent a huge step forward.

Adi Robertson, senior reporter: I am *extremely* curious about those hands. Obviously, they seem built for the Index controllers, which do solid individual finger tracking. But

how different will the experience be if you have a simpler Rift or Vive controller? Are there amazing special features you'll only get on the Index controllers, based on all those specialized interactions we saw in the *Aperture Hand Lab* demo? Do you get to play rock paper scissors with the G-Man?

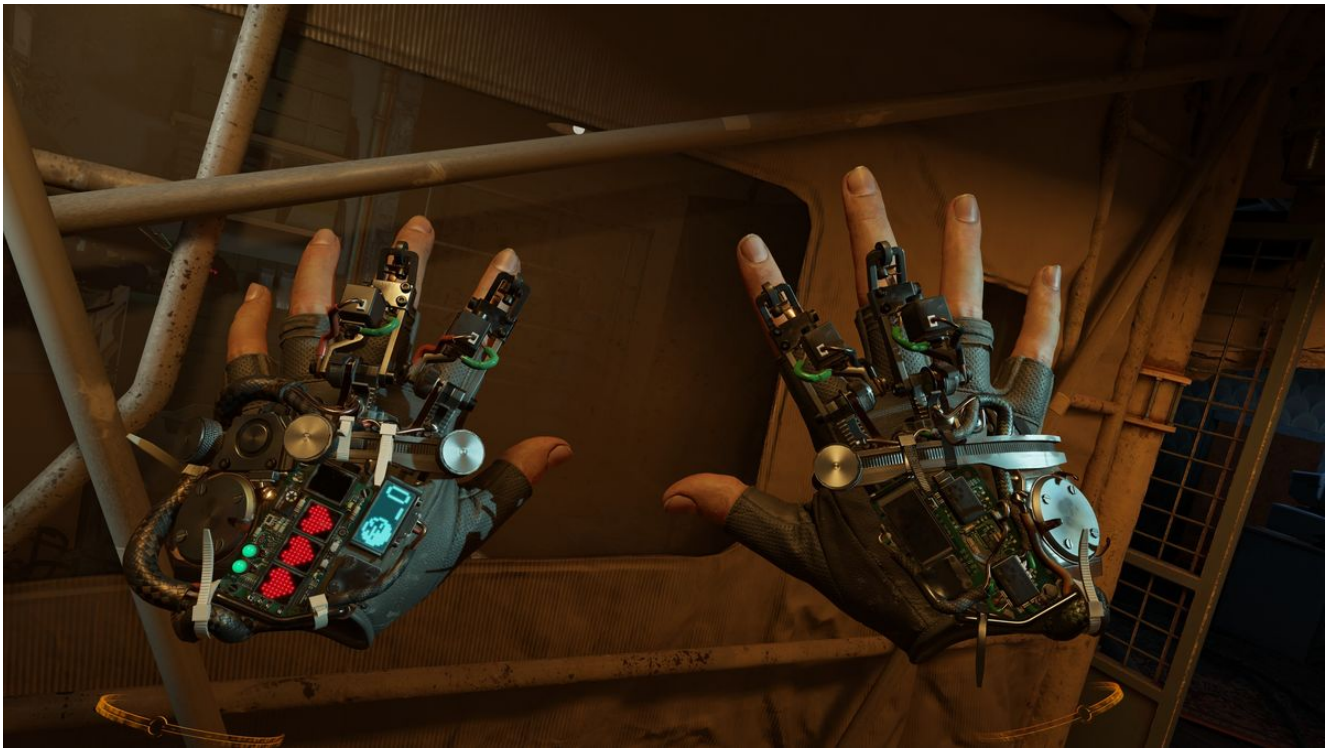


Image: Valve

I'm not sure this is the most sophisticated hand motion tracking I've seen — at least based on this trailer. You can do some very precise manipulation in adventure games like *I Expect You to Die*, for instance, but it does seem like Valve wants to give motion controls the kind of love it gave physics in *Half-Life 2*, which is cool.

I'm really just fighting through a hard wave of nostalgia right now, though. Like, *oh my god, guys, it's vortigaunts! And headcrabs! And the little flatline sound you hear when you kill a Combine soldier! And then the G-Man shows up and* — and then *The Verge* fires me because I've turned into an 11-year-old breathlessly narrating an action movie on their way out of a multiplex.

Jay Peters, news writer: The trailer for *Half-Life: Alyx* was definitely a mood. There's just a way that *Half-Life* games

look, feel, and move, and I really feel like Valve nailed it with what we've seen of *Half-Life: Alyx* so far. March is really far away.

Tom Warren, senior editor: I'm super excited that *Half-Life* is returning to our screens. It's a game I played on the many PCs I built during my teenage years, and any type of return to the Black Mesa Research Facility will interest me.

Valve has picked the wrong platform for the return of 'Half-Life'

This is no *Half-Life 3*, though. Instead of loading this onto my console or gaming PC, I'll need to load it onto my face through the VR headset that I just packed away into my cupboard because it was gathering dust. Valve has picked the wrong platform for the return of *Half-Life*, and I worry the game is being used as a way to push SteamVR instead of pushing the *Half-Life* narrative forward.

It's poorly timed just as VR is struggling, and if I'm being forced to play this through VR, then I really hope the control scheme is perfect. I've played a bunch of VR shooters and wasted a lot of money and hours on them, and most of them suck. I just hope, for *Half-Life*'s sake, that this doesn't flop and actually does something for VR. But realistically, I think it's going to be a misstep in the history of *Half-Life*. I really hope I'm wrong.



Image: Valve

Grayson Blackmon, senior motion designer: I love VR. I've worked on two titles myself for three different platforms, and I have four VR headsets right now at home: the Vive, Quest, Gear, and Go. I used to have a Rift as well.

I've also been playing computer games since the late '90s, and *Half-Life*, the side-quels, and *Half-Life 2* are some of my favorites of all time. All of this is to say a full-length, AAA, *Half-Life* VR title is *extremely my jam*.

On launch day, I'll be so excited to get home, jack-in, and play exactly 20 minutes of this before I never touch it again, just like every other VR game I own (except *Echo Arena*).

Sam Byford, Asia editor: Even though *Half-Life* is one of my favorite games of all time, I never really got on with the sequel, and so *Half-Life 3* memes were mostly lost on me. *Half-Life: Alyx*, though, I am all about. It looks like it'll have everything I did like about *Half-Life 2* (physics puzzles, atmosphere), while it presumably won't include everything that I didn't (underwhelming FPS action that outstayed its welcome, hoverboats).

The first *Alyx* trailer doesn't do much to convince me that this is a watershed title for VR or even something that's solved any of the format's typical issues. If there's any way to move more than a few feet, for example, Valve isn't showing it yet. At the very least, though, I expect *Alyx* to be an ambitious and inventive game, and I'm much more excited for it than I would be for *Half-Life 3*.



Image: Valve

Sean Hollister, senior news editor: I'm going to admit something that may surprise you: I don't own a VR headset. Even though I've covered VR admiringly for years and my gaming PC is capable, I've never had quite enough reason to *actually buy* a damn Oculus, Vive, Gear VR, Daydream, or WMR. At first, I justified it because, yeah, I could borrow them for work. Then when I had to send them back (we don't get to keep gadgets!) I justified it because there wasn't enough to play, and better headsets were always right around the corner.

Don't get me wrong, I loved playing through *Superhot*, *Lone Echo,* and *Thumper*, but I probably spent less than a week's worth of game time on all three. The only VR titles that ever truly kept me coming back were *Firewall: Zero Hour*, *Space*

Pirate Trainer, and *Fallout 4 VR* — and two of those were exclusive to *competing* VR platforms.

'Alyx' hits me right in the adolescence
Now here comes a game that not only promises to be the kind of killer app VR has needed since day one, but it personally hits me right in the adolescence: the *Half-Life* series were the games I bonded with my best friends over, the ones we spent hours upon hours debating, joking about, and battling with one another in deathmatch and an array of amazing mods (*Desert Crisis*, *The Specialists, Natural Selection, Dystopia, The Hidden, Trouble in Terrorist Town* via *Garry's Mod*, and many more).

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I've seen first-hand in Valve's The Lab (a demo showcase for the HTC Vive) that this company can bring the same incredible level of detail and polish that made those games so good to VR, and I'm jazzed that the community will be able to build their own levels on top of *Alyx,* too. It makes me wonder if perhaps this could be the spark that not only ignites VR, but inflames the passions of a modding community yet again — that a community that's hungry for more to play on these headsets might just *go ahead and build something* on top of what Valve does here. And that if Valve was telling the truth about developing one full-length game, it might be telling the truth about the other two as well.

I'm no longer asking myself whether I should buy a VR headset, but *which* headset. If *Alyx* delivers, my killer app for VR will have finally arrived.

Chaim Gartenberg, news editor: I am not the biggest *Half-Life* fan, nor the biggest VR fan, so I'm probably not the best audience for *Half-Life: Alyx*. That said, I *am* intrigued, which sort of speaks to the instant level of hype here. And the VR gameplay does look pretty neat, assuming the game plays

anything like the trailer.

Mostly, I'm just wondering why Valve isn't going all in here and making this a true *Half-Life 3*. It's already said that the game is equal in length and scope as the other mainline *Half-Life* games. Why make a prequel after all this time when you can finally move the story forward? I get that the phrase "Half-Life 3" has some… hefty baggage it's acquired over the years, but if Valve is serious about bringing back the brand (and VR), don't just dip a toe into the water with a prequel spinoff. Dive all the way in.

TC Sottek, Level 3 Research Assistant, Black Mesa Science Team: About five years after I watched the credits roll on the cliffhanger of *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*, I gave up hope that we'd see more of Valve's iconic story. Then I sort of forgot about it completely.

The past decade has been filled with so many incredible worlds and rich storylines in video games that the distant echoes of Black Mesa and City 17 started to seem quaint and unimportant. I've built empires in *Minecraft*, traversed the wondrous galaxy of *Mass Effect*, pieced together ancient mysteries in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, and gone on dozens of other grand adventures. *We've been rather busy in your absence, Mr. Freeman.*

We've been rather busy in your absence, Mr. Freeman
So without any sense of urgency, *Half-Life* became more of an artifact of software history for me than a story I wanted to continue exploring. After all, how could Valve possibly make something that would live up to the richness of our collective imaginations through 12 years of silence? Nonetheless, I'll admit that the trailer for *Half-Life: Alyx* gave me chills, if only because it was like having my senses filled by hearing an important song from years ago. The skittering of headcrabs. The garbled radio chatter of Combine soldiers. The haunting klaxons of The Citadel. Yes, I might like to return to this place.

But not quite yet. I’m excited that Valve says this is just the beginning of its return to *Half-Life* because there’s no way I’m spending hundreds of dollars on virtual reality equipment just to play this game. I’ll probably watch it on Twitch, and wait for a new *Half-Life* story that doesn’t require a research budget and a degree in theoretical physics to play.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/22/20977938/half-life-alyx-vr-reactions-opinions-verge-staff