

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Halo 2: Anniversary* (sold as part of *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*)

**Platform:** Xbox One

**Genre:** First Person Shooter

**Release Date:** November 11, 2014

**Developer:** Original game by Bungie, Remaster by 343 Industries

**Publisher:** Microsoft

**Game Writer:** Joseph Staten

## Overview

“There was only one ship.”

Murmurs of disbelief run up and down the crowds. A lone alien figure, clad in bright yellow armor stands before a trio of three leaders, wearing elaborate headdresses and seated in floating chairs. They are flanked on both sides by crowds of muttering aliens and guards in full ceremonial armor. The figure in the middle chair speaks up.

“One?” He pauses, the crowd falls silent. “Are you sure?”

The figure being questioned does not hesitate.

“Yes,” he holds his head high, showing his hierarchs the proper respect, even as he delivers the disastrous news of his failure. “they called it: *The Pillar of Autumn*”

And so, on November 9th, 2004, audiences were thrust into a world both strange, yet familiar. Nearly three years after the release of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, Bungie returned to the original Xbox with *Halo 2*, a direct sequel to their groundbreaking first person shooter. This time however, they would be telling a story far grander than their original tale, one that resonated with audiences so greatly, it too became one of the defining games of its era. So much so that ten years later, even after Bungie moved on from the franchise, 343 Industries saw fit to update the game for modern audiences. So a decade after the original game’s release, *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* was announced, as was *Halo 2: Anniversary*: a remaster designed to preserve the essence of the original release, while crafting a visual update that would give the game a presentation worthy of its legacy; a celebration of the franchise that would both show proper reverence for its history, and set the stage for its future.

The gameplay itself is largely unchanged, and features the first game’s protagonist, Master Chief. Having only just brushed himself off from saving the galaxy and destroying Halo Installation 04 the Chief returns to Earth, one of humanity’s last bastions in the war against The Covenant, an alien civilization that seeks to eradicate them from existence. This time around, however, The Covenant has their own problems, as disgraced Shipmaster Thel ‘Vadam, now fighting under the mantle of The Arbiter, begins to question the words of his leaders, and discovers that Halo might not be as divine as The Covenant have been led to believe. As the story progresses we switch back and forth between the Master Chief and The Arbiter as both of

them embark on a journey that leads them to a new Halo Installation, and the dark secrets that lie beneath it.

Master Chief's story begins on Cairo Station, one part of an orbiting defense grid that protects Earth. He, along with Sgt. Johnson, Cortana, and Commander Miranda Keyes, are receiving distinctions from Lord Hood, related to their actions, and the actions of Miranda's father, during the events of *Halo: Combat Evolved*. However, the celebrations are cut short when The Covenant unexpectedly attacks Earth. Master Chief and his allies work to defend the planet for some time, shooting their way through the Covenant's invasion, only to follow after a fleeing ship in an attempt to kill one of the Covenant's leaders. When they catch up, they realize that they have arrived at another Halo ring, and the fight begins again, as they attempt to assassinate the Prophet of Regret and prevent him from firing the Halo ring, thus destroying all life in the galaxy.

As we are introduced to Thel 'Vadam, we are informed that he was the leader of the fleet that Master Chief faced during *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Despite the unexpected discovery of The Flood, a parasitic race dedicated to consuming organic life and taking control of their bodies, 'Vadam is blamed for the destruction of the Halo ring, and stripped of his rank. Instead of executing him as planned, however, he is given the mantle of The Arbiter: a personal servant of the Prophets who rule over the Covenant. To reclaim his honor, he is sent on dangerous missions, with the intent that he eventually dies in combat. His first mission involves tracking down a heretic who has rebelled against the Prophets and declared their religious teachings to be lies. During these missions, the Arbiter discovers that The Flood still lives, and that the heretic has discovered and conversed with 343 Guilty Spark, the monitor of the destroyed Halo ring.

After these early missions, the stories of the Master Chief and the Arbiter begin to converge. As the Arbiter witnesses another alien race, the Brutes, take over positions of power once held by his people, he begins to question the Prophet's decisions. While recovering the key that will allow Halo to fire, he is betrayed by Tartarus, the leader of the Brutes, who reveals that the Prophets ordered him to kill the Arbiter. Meanwhile, the Master Chief successfully assassinates the Prophet of Regret, but is nearly killed by an attack from a Covenant ship. Both survive, however, only to awake in the arms of the Gravemind, a horrific manifestation of the Flood's sentience, which tells them that the Prophet's intend to activate Halo, and it is in all their interests that they stop them. Now, with unified purpose, Master Chief is sent to the Covenant capital, and the Arbiter is sent to Halo's control room to stop the firing of the rings. Both of them set out to stop the Prophet of Truth and Tartarus before Covenant infighting and the Flood's ceaseless expansion threatens everyone in the galaxy.

*Halo 2: Anniversary*, however, adds some new material to the original title. The game is book-ended by two new cutscenes, featuring the Arbiter and a new character, Spartan Locke, set

sometime in the future. Locke claims to be hunting down Master Chief, who has gone AWOL, and the rest of the game is implied to be the Arbiter recounting or remembering the story of how he and the Master Chief came to be allies. There are also new collectibles in the game, with each significant level holding a short video that expands on the backstory of certain characters and the world at large. These videos feature reports on Thel 'Vadam's military record written by Locke, recountings of discussions between the heretic leader and 343 Guilty Spark, and reports of actions taken by past Arbiters during the Covenant's history.

Both *Halo 2* and *Halo 2: Anniversary* take around ten hours to complete on heroic, which is considered the intended experience. The exact time requirement however depends highly on difficulty selected, whether the player is searching for collectibles, and if they have prior experience with the gameplay. With a bevy of optional modes, playstyles, and modifiers, including cooperative play and the ability to switch seamlessly between the original and remastered visuals, *Halo 2: Anniversary* offers an epic sci-fi story and compelling gameplay set in a beautifully realized version of Bungie's original universe.

## Characters

*Halo 2*, both in the original game and the remastered *Halo 2: Anniversary*, features a little over a dozen characters, all of which play at least a small role in the plot of the game. *Halo 2: Anniversary*, via the addition of two new cutscenes, as well as thirteen collectible video logs, introduces new material and characters on top of those that serve to recontextualize some of the game's events and introduce new content that leads into *Halo 5: Guardians*, which had not yet been launched when *Halo 2: Anniversary* was released. This list includes all named characters who appear in at least one cutscene.

**The UNSC** – Humanity's military, and the only thing standing between Earth and the Covenant. The acronym stands for United Nations Space Command, and the organization represents all of humanity, including people of all races and nations in their defense against outside threats. Every human character in the game is in some way working as part of the UNSC.

- **Master Chief (John 117)** – The main playable character of the game. John is one of the last of his kind, a SPARTAN II, a biologically enhanced soldier with a full set of power armor that makes him one of, if not *the* most capable soldier humanity has ever had. He towers above other humans at 7ft, and his green, full body armor removes most traces of individual appearance. Mostly going by his rank, Master Chief is focused, determined, and respectful of authority, but with a deadpan sense of humor that humanizes his

expressionless appearance. With several galactic threats on the horizon, he is willing to do whatever is necessary to protect humanity and his close companions.

- **Cortana** – An artificial intelligence designed by humanity. Capable of interfacing with all sorts of technology, including Master Chief’s suit, she is a vital ally on missions, both as a tech expert and driven, if snarky, companion. When appearing via hologram, she takes the appearance of a blue woman with lines running up and down her body.
- **Miranda Keyes** – Commander Miranda Keyes is the daughter of Captain Jacob Keyes, who perished during the events of *Halo: Combat Evolved*. She is a hard-nosed leader who commands the UNSC spaceship *In Amber Clad*. She wears a white officer’s uniform, and has black hair kept at about shoulder length. Despite her position as a commander, she is not afraid to get personally involved if the situation requires.
- **Sgt. Johnson** – One of the few survivors of the original Halo ring encounter, Johnson is tough, enthusiastic, and not one to back down from a fight. He wears a standard military uniform and is often seen smoking a cigar.
- **Lord Hood** – Intelligent, strategic, and willing to make tough decisions, Lord Hood is one of the UNSC’s highest ranking officers, and has the age and experience to justify it. He technically has authority over the Master Chief and his companions, but trusts their instincts often enough to give them the green light on whatever they plan. He stays on Cairo station to lead the defense of Earth.
- **Spartan Locke** – Little is explained about Locke in *Halo 2: Anniversary* other than the fact that he works for the UNSC and is currently searching for the Master Chief. Collectible video logs indicate he once worked as an intelligence operative during the war with the Covenant. He is focused and duty-driven, determined to complete his mission in the face of any odds.

**The Covenant** – An alien civilization composed of numerous different species. In *Halo 2*, some of those species include the Grunts (Unggoy), Jackals (Kig-Yar), Elites (Sangheili), Brutes (Jiralhanae), Hunters (Lekgolo/Mgalekgolo) and the Prophets (San’Shyuum). The Covenant is led by three Prophets, Truth, Regret, and Mercy, and their word is law. Their religious teachings see them worship Forerunner technology, and they believe that activating the Halo rings will begin their ascension into a higher state of being, which they refer to as “The Great Journey.” They are bent on destroying all of humanity, who they believe to be blasphemous to their religion.

- **The Arbiter (Thel’ Vadam)** – The game’s second playable character. Thel ‘Vadam is an alien commander who was tasked with protecting the Halo ring that was destroyed in *Halo: Combat Evolved*. As a Sangheili (aka “Elite”), he has a distinct appearance, being around 7ft tall, with knees that bend the opposite direction of a human’s, and four protruding mandibles. For his failure, he is stripped of his rank, branded with a mark of

shame, and sentenced to death. However, the Prophets instead decide to offer him the mantle of The Arbiter, allowing him to engage in dangerous missions until he dies, thus providing a chance for an honorable death. Driven by a desire to reclaim his honor, Thel 'Vadam sets out to do the Prophet's bidding, but soon finds himself questioning the very foundations of his loyalty.

- **Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum (aka Half-Jaw)** – A military leader who commands a small force of Elites. He wears armor similar to other Elites, but white, and is missing part of his left mandibles, hence his nickname, Half-Jaw. Initially disdainful of the Arbiter, he is eventually won over by 'Vadam's honorable nature, and becomes a loyal ally in his fight.
- **The Heretic (Sesa 'Refumee)** – A former member of the Covenant, 'Refumee was an Elite leader working to recover a mining platform over a gas planet. After finding 343 Guilty Spark, and learning of the truth of Halo, 'Refumee turned his back on the Prophets and began to broadcast his discovery, which the Prophets considered to be heresy. His story is expanded on in collectible video logs added for *Halo 2: Anniversary*.
- **The Prophet of Truth** – One of the leaders of the Covenant, The Prophet of Truth shares control with the Prophets of Regret and Mercy. A shrewd politician, The Prophet of Truth is a skilled manipulator, building careful political alliances in order to maintain control and consolidate his power. Unlike Regret and Mercy, Truth is loyal only to himself, and willing to take any opportunity to advance his own interests, even if it means betraying loyal allies. His willingness to destroy whoever stands in his way makes him a dangerous foe, both to humanity, and those who discover his deceptions.
- **The Prophet of Regret** – One of the leaders of the Covenant, The Prophet of Regret tends to be more involved in military actions. It is his fleet that discovers Earth and flees to the second Halo Ring. Eventually it is revealed that the discovery of Earth was in fact an accident, and this mistake becomes a convenient cover for Truth to betray him.
- **The Prophet of Mercy** – Another Covenant Leader, The Prophet of Mercy is intensely religious, and seems to genuinely believe in their religious proclamations. He is older than the other Prophets, and weaker, which makes him easy for Truth to betray when the Flood attacks.
- **Tartarus** – Chieftain of the Brutes, one of The Covenant's alien races. Like the rest of his people, Tartarus is a huge, hairy creature that surpasses most of the Elites in both strength and brutality. He carries a distinctive hammer with gravity manipulation powers and has the loyalty of his fellow Brutes. He mostly serves the Prophet of Truth, who prefers his species due to their fierce loyalty, as opposed to the Elites, who are more likely to question his proclamations. Tartarus, like his fellows, views the other races of the Covenant as weaker and less deserving, and carries a more intense hatred for the Elites, who they view as direct competitors. All of this makes him and the Brutes the perfect candidates for replacing the Elites, by force, if necessary.

**The Flood** – A parasitic race of aliens bent on consuming all organic life within its reach. Using “combat forms” built from twisted bodies of its victims and smaller “infection forms” that build new combat forms from dead bodies, it is a threatening foe that only gets more dangerous the more it kills. The Flood operate as a hivemind, and have access to the memories and knowledge of every being it has ever consumed. Once its population hits a critical mass it composes a large manifestation of itself that operates as a control center and commands all instances of the Flood. Though it is made up of thousands of “bodies,” the Flood is really only one consciousness that commands every form.

- **The Gravemind** – The Flood eventually grows to a point where it forms a unique, singular consciousness. This consciousness builds up into a large, monstrous figure constructed of organic matter which is capable of advanced thought, speech, and has access to all the information known by the beings it has consumed. This being is known as a Gravemind, and its primary goal is to consume all life in the galaxy. Personality wise, it seems to view itself as being above the petty issues of other beings, and has developed strange personality quirks, such as speaking in iambic and trochaic heptameter, presumably for its own amusement. Its motivations are inscrutable and it is dangerously intelligent. Although it also wishes to prevent the Halo rings from firing, it clearly has its own agenda, and any organic life in its vicinity is in serious danger.

**Monitors** – Essentially AIs in small robotic orbs, Monitors are responsible for maintaining their respective installations. Each one has a number and a name, and a compulsive urge to follow proper protocol, even if that means firing their Halo ring and exterminating all life in the galaxy.

- **343 Guilty Spark** – The AI monitor of Halo Installation 04. After the destruction of his Halo ring, Guilty Spark was left to wander through space, until he was discovered by a nearby mining platform led by a group of Covenant soldiers. Always willing to provide information, Guilty Spark is happy to inform anyone who asks about the true purpose of the Halo Rings, and has an almost slavish devotion to protocol and proper procedure. As a floating metal ball with one large blue ‘eye,’ he tends to float around aimlessly, humming to himself and investigating whatever he finds interesting. In general he is unperturbed by the fact that he is constantly kidnapped by various factions, being at worst, slightly irked by the Covenant’s insistence on spreading false info about the Halo Rings.
- **2401 Penitent Tangent** – The Monitor of Halo Installation 05. Penitent Tangent has lost control of his Halo Ring to the Flood long ago. He is excited by the presence of humans who can activate Halo, and is annoyed at the Covenant’s disrespect for protocol, but having been captured by the Gravemind, he can offer little practical help.

# Breakdown

Due to the inclusion of additional narrative elements as well as updated sound and visuals, *Halo 2: Anniversary* has a slightly different delivery of its story compared to the original version of *Halo 2*. This breakdown will be focusing on the elements that were added or remastered in the updated version of the game, and how they compare to the original version.

## Visuals and Sound Design (In-Engine)

*Halo 2: Anniversary* features fully remastered visuals and sound in the updated version of the game. Every element of the game, from the Master Chief, to the Covenant races, to the various environments and music tracks have been updated to fit the standards of the time, and with the inclusion of the ability to swap between the original and remastered versions with the press of a button, the difference is striking. While the original game features impressive level design and distinct, creative setpieces, the remastered visuals bring a level of detail and color that the original simply cannot match. Forest areas are bursting with greenery, weapons are carefully recreated with minute detail, backgrounds and skyboxes are beautifully crafted, and enemies, especially the Flood, are more horrific than ever with all of the grotesque detail that the original game could only imply. Narratively, this goes a long way towards keeping the player immersed in the world, giving them all sorts of interesting details to latch on to, while distracting from some simple geometry and flat textures that stood out in the older version.

However, not all of the visual updates are a strict improvement. One of *Halo 2: Anniversary*'s more noticeable changes is a new lighting system that significantly expands the range of lights and darks visible in the game. In many situations, particularly open environments, the lighting has been set to match the original as closely as possible, but some smaller areas and locations have significantly different lighting as a result. The biggest change in this regard is that many enclosed environments are much darker than they once were, to the point that it becomes difficult to see. As a result, some gameplay sections are more difficult than they originally were, as it is harder to point out enemies and see where attacks are coming from. In an amusing turn of events, this makes Master Chief's flashlight more useful than it ever was in the original game, elevating the mechanic from a neat gimmick to an essential navigation tool.

While most of the game tries to match the new visuals to the original game as closely as possible, there are still situations where a disconnect exists between the original gameplay and the new visuals. Most of the time this manifests in strange geometry where you cannot shoot an enemy despite being able to see them, or an enemy can see you through a wall or corner. Another quirk is the active camouflage used by the Covenant, which once made enemies slightly harder to track, but now makes them almost completely invisible, making them far more intimidating



than they once were. These differences can be circumvented by switching to the original graphics, but doing so does harm the game's ability to immerse the player.

Of particular note is the updated sound design. Every music track and sound effect has been remastered. Voices are clearer, weapons sound booming and explosive, vehicles are louder, and the music has been re-written while maintaining the overall tone and feeling of the original tracks. In general, audio mixing is also greatly improved, everything sounds richer with more depth, and there is a lot more range between the loudest sounds and quietest ones. This goes a long way to making the world feel more alive, and makes easier to follow along with the in-game dialogue that progresses the story. There are a few missteps; areas where in-game dialogue is too quiet, or the occasional sound effect, like the scorpion cannon, that doesn't sound as powerful as it should. Master Chief's floaty jumps also stand out more than ever when everything else sounds so weighty and grounded, but overall the game is a great evolution on the original sound design.

### **Visuals and Sound Design (Pre-Rendered Cutscenes)**

*Halo 2: Anniversary* features brand new cutscenes, developed by Blur Studio. They are essentially conveying the same story, with new cinematography, but in cinema quality CGI. They depict the same characters, in the same locations, with the same plot, but go into much greater detail: fleshing out locations, adding detail to characters, and making changes that expand on the original scenes, while keeping the same mood and intent.

One of the best examples is the opening level, *The Heretic*, which begins with the trial of Thel 'Vadam. In the original version, it is strangely quiet, and seems to be an almost intimate affair, with only a handful of people watching in the rafters. The remastered cutscene adds dozens more figures observing the trial and reacting to what is discussed, muttering in indignation and shock at appropriate times. It also makes the location of the trial feel much more significant, with 'Vadam placed in harsh spotlights, and cinematography that does a better job conveying the grand importance of the moment. The improved character models and animations also make it much easier to take seriously, removing distracting issues like strange eye movements and mouths that don't move logically. However, it also gives a different feel to the characters, with the original version depicting 'Vadam as more arrogant and brash, holding his head high and rebuking the guards who are ordered to carry him away. By contrast, the remaster paints him as more reverent of the Prophets, confident in his answers, but resigned to whatever they decree.

The increased level of detail also allows the alien races to express themselves with more subtle facial movements, as opposed to relying entirely on their mouths and posture. When the Arbiter is betrayed by Tartarus, his surprise, once just a simple head movement, is now conveyed entirely through his face and eyes, creating a heavier emotional impact by allowing an alien figure to express itself in a more human manner.

Most impressive is the remastered cutscene that takes place before the level *Gravemind*. The Gravemind in the original game is both lacking in detail and animated awkwardly. It is hard

to understand how it works as a creature both anatomically and in the space depicted. Its movements don't sync up with its dialogue and it can be seen clipping into itself at several points in the scene. In the updated cutscene however the Gravemind is given a design that fully realizes its gruesome concept. What was once an awkward, almost plant-like creature is now unmistakably a huge mass of organic tissue, wet and bloody, teeming with strange tentacle-like appendages and sporting a huge mouth full of teeth jagged teeth. It moves and swings its subjects around carefully, inspecting them like a curious child. The body and head reacts to what is said, turning naturally to face whoever it is speaking too, and when the firing of Halo is discussed, it shudders with what is unmistakably contempt and disgust. A scene that was already impactful narratively becomes unforgettable with visuals that fully realize the original concept and create a visceral reaction in the player that matches the intended mood.

## **Gameplay**

In terms of gameplay, the game is point for point identical to the original, right down to the ability to switch to the original graphics if the player chooses. As the player progresses through the game they will come across a wide variety of enemies and battle with both human and alien weaponry and vehicles. Different weapons are better against different enemies; for example, plasma based weaponry, like the plasma rifle, will take out enemy shields faster than projectile weapons like the battle rifle. Similarly, precision weapons are capable of headshots, which will do extra damage and in many cases, kill an enemy outright. Power weapons, like the energy sword, or sniper rifle, are very useful for certain encounters, but are hard to find ammo for, and difficult to use outside of specific situations. Overall the weapons both make sense in universe, and keep the combat interesting and varied.

Vehicle combat is also featured in several levels, and blends seamlessly with on foot sections. At any point a vehicle is present, the player can choose to enter, switching to a third person view that better accommodates movement. Certain levels have scripted vehicle sections, where a vehicle is provided and called out to the player, and the areas ahead are built to accommodate that specific vehicle. However, the player is never required to use them and, in some cases, companion characters will even have incidental dialogue if the vehicle is refused, usually commenting that it will be quite a walk without transportation. Each vehicle, both UNSC and Covenant, has its own unique style and purpose, with the exception of the Warthog and Seraph, which fulfill the same function in the same way. Vehicle sections mostly serve to vary up the gameplay while keeping within the game's theme.

A feature introduced in *Halo 2* that was not present in the first game is the inclusion of boss fights. Both Master Chief and the Arbiter face off against boss characters during their story arcs. Master Chief fights The Prophet of Regret, while the Arbiter fights both the heretic leader and Tartarus. Each of these fights involves gameplay mechanics that are unique to each boss without radically changing the core gameplay loop. The Prophet of Regret is attacked by jumping onto his chair and punching him while avoiding attacks from him and his guards, the

heretic leader creates holograms of himself and the player must figure out which one is real, and Tartarus has a personal shield that can only be disrupted by a nearby NPC with a beam rifle weapon. All of these fights are suitably climactic moments that make sense within the narrative and give each significant character an appropriate sense of gravitas. Unfortunately, the mechanics of these fights are not particularly well explained. The Prophet of Regret gives no indication that his chair can be boarded until you are within melee range, and Tartarus in particular is dependent on the player realizing that he can only be hurt when his shield is down, and then realizing that they have to wait for Sgt. Johnson to take the shield down for them. This can make these boss fights feel like a frustrating chore, especially Tartarus, who leaves the player dependent on the AI of both Tartarus and Sgt. Johnson in order to make progress, which can harm the impact of these moments on a narrative level.

### **New Narrative Elements (Video Logs and Cutscenes)**

New to *Halo 2: Anniversary* are two new cutscenes featuring Spartan Locke and the Arbiter. Set sometime in the indeterminate future, Locke explains he is hunting the Master Chief, and the Arbiter replies that the story of how they came to be allies is complicated. Then the game begins, suggesting that these scenes are a framing device as the Arbiter recounts, or at least recalls, his past with the Master Chief. The scene that takes place at the end of the game is of little consequence in comparison, as Locke and the Arbiter reach their destination and prepare for action. The Arbiter suggests that if Master Chief has gone AWOL he has his reasons, and Locke responds that he wants to know what those reasons are. It seems mainly to be a teaser for *Halo 5: Guardians*, which, when *Halo 2: Anniversary* was released, was being marketed heavily as a hunt for the Master Chief.

The other significant story addition comes in the form of collectible video logs. Each playable level of the game has a hidden video log somewhere which the player can walk up to and interact with in order to view its content. When they do, the game will automatically load up the video in the Xbox's 'Halo Channel.' Each level has one video log, and there are three main story arcs to them. One is about the Arbiter's record as a military commander as presented by Spartan Locke, another is about the history of the Covenant, and the third is recounting the conversations between the heretic leader and 343 Guilty Spark. These video logs appear to be an attempt to both expand on some of the lore mentioned in the game, and also include some more explanation for events and characters that aren't fully fleshed out in the original story. The heretic leader stands out in particular, as getting a more complete arc, compared to his original appearance as a fairly one-note character with only a few scenes.

## **Strongest Element**

The strongest element of *Halo 2: Anniversary*'s narrative is undoubtedly the audiovisual updates that both recreate and enhance the original experience in almost every way. By polishing both the in-game visuals and sound, as well as recreating the original cutscenes from scratch, the game captures the spirit of the original while fixing the dated presentation that often held back the original vision. By building the game again with painstakingly detailed visuals, carefully remastered sound design, and updated cinematography in cutscenes, *Halo 2: Anniversary* is the best way to experience Bungie's original story, without the technical issues and dated presentation that held back an otherwise highly compelling narrative.

## Unsuccessful Element

*Halo 2: Anniversary*'s least successful element comes in the form of its new narrative additions. Both the new cutscenes added to the beginning and end, as well as the collectible video logs are awkwardly implemented, and it is clear that they were not part of the game's original narrative.

When the player first begins *Halo 2: Anniversary*, they encounter an opening cutscene that is completely new, featuring Spartan Locke and the Arbiter. Not only is this cutscene not a part of the original game, it is also somewhat lackluster, taking place in an unclear location, featuring fairly rudimentary dialogue, with Locke in particular giving a strange and uneven voice performance. The ending cutscene also adds little context, with the characters preparing to encounter some unknown situation that cuts off before anything is shown. In theory, these cutscenes are a framing device for the story of the game, with the Arbiter remember or recounting his history with the Master Chief. However, this framing device is never acknowledged within the game, and doesn't make logical sense, as the story features quite a bit of information that would not be relevant to Locke, and quite a few scenes that the Arbiter would have no knowledge of. Overall these scenes come across as little more than an advertisement for *Halo 5: Guardians*. They detract from the overall experience of the narrative, and it would have been better if 343 Industries had either fully committed to the framing device, interjecting more cutscenes and expanding on the arc of Locke and the Arbiter, or left these scenes out entirely.

The other narrative additions, in the form of video logs, also fall flat in a few regards. The first issue is that, as collectibles, there is no guarantee that the player will ever find or watch them. This also means that a player could easily find one late in the game, but not have the context of the previous videos to help understand their significance. Most of these videos only offer minor insights into the world or background details, even in the best case scenario, there is very little impact on the actual plot or how we view the characters. In some cases however, these videos actually raise more questions, or touch on plot issues, but fail to address them. The

Arbiter's military record includes instances of him showing respect to humanity that is remarked on as uncommon among the Covenant, however, this is not evident in his interactions with other characters during the game. His military record also shows many instances of him destroying entire planets occupied by innocent humans, which only really serves to highlight the fact that the character has never been confronted or expressed regret over these actions at any point. Similarly, one commonly remarked on plot hole in the original game, is how the heretic leader seems to want to convince the Arbiter of his righteousness, only to turn around and attack him first. One of the video logs addresses specifically whether or not the Arbiter can be convinced to turn against the Prophets, but the heretic leader comes across as so indecisive on the topic it fails to fix the issue and only draws more attention to the plot hole. If these video logs were to be included, it would have been more engaging for them to either be more niche, focusing on a story we haven't seen much of, like something during the Covenant Schism, or at least take a harder stance on the things it does address, like the heretic leader's resolve to attack the Arbiter, or the Arbiter reckoning with his violent past.

## Highlight

The highlight of the game is easily the opening cutscenes and the first moments of *Cairo Station*. Right after the admittedly rocky start with the new cutscene, the game hits its audience with a beautifully shot, lovingly crafted recreation of one of the original game's most iconic cutscenes. As the game cuts back and forth between the Arbiter and Master Chief's introduction, we are given a little taste of everything that the original game did best, and a sample of what this remaster is going to offer. The political intrigue of the Covenant's inner workings, the playful banter of the main characters, the intense science fiction combat and life or death scenarios are all rolled together in a nostalgic blockbuster opening that is engaging for both long time fans and new players. It is the moment where the game is forced to lay all its cards on the table and it becomes obvious that this remastered narrative is going to be everything that *Halo 2* was and more.

## Critical Reception

(It should be noted that *Halo 2: Anniversary* was released as part of *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*. Therefore, IGN and Polygon's review scores represent the score for the entire collection, and not *Halo 2: Anniversary* as an individual product.)

Ray Smith of TeamBeyond.Net gave *Halo 2: Anniversary*'s campaign a 9.5/10. He praises the updated visuals in game and the remastered cutscenes, calling them “the best part of [the] Halo 2: Anniversary campaign.” Though he also mentions that the updated lighting makes some areas difficult to navigate.

Ryan McCaffrey of IGN gave the entire collection a 9/10, remarking that the remastered cutscenes “breathe new life into the plot.” He notes the Gravemind scene as particularly benefitting: “What was an unintentionally hilarious conversation with a featureless brown worm is now a dramatic confrontation with the hideous amalgamation of all Flood parasites, rendered here in disgusting detail.”

Arthur Gies of Polygon gives the whole collection a 9.5/10. He praises the visuals and cutscenes, calling the latter “jaw-dropping” and remarking that though the in-game visuals aren't quite cutting edge, they are impressively updated. Gies also credits the original game, noting that “the new coat of paint only works because of how well the underlying structure holds up.”

## Lessons

One lesson we can learn from *Halo 2: Anniversary* is quite simple, and that is that **if it ain't broke, don't fix it**. Almost every element of the narrative that worked in the original game is translated faithfully into the remaster, and it works even with a new layer of polish, because the underlying story and characters were already solid. The parts of the game that don't work are almost exclusively the elements that were tacked on after the fact. The original game didn't need a new framing device, and without a strong motivation for putting one in, it comes across as awkward at best, cynical at worst.

Another useful lesson from the game is that **a strong opening is a powerful thing**. The original *Halo 2* has an incredibly strong hook in its first few cutscenes, and the remaster only suffers for its inclusion of a new, weaker introduction. With any story, it is vital to hook your audience within the first few moments, because that investment will help carry them through the rest of the experience, even during the weaker moments, such as difficult gameplay sections or long stretches without much narrative.

Finally the remaster shows us that, in terms of narrative, **presentation is key to engagement**. Despite the fact that the narratives of both the original game and the remaster are nearly identical, the remaster is significantly more compelling and engaging. This is due to the fact the the remaster takes the time to clean up all the little issues with presentation that held the original game back. Small things like changing up the confusing cinematography in the first cutscene, cleaning up the audio on in-game dialogue, making the music clearer, and improving

the sound mixing go a huge way to making the game instantly more gripping, because there are fewer things holding the audience back from getting immersed.

## Summation

*Halo 2: Anniversary* is not just a worthy way to revisit a classic game, it is a masterclass on how to remaster a title while smoothing over the edges that may have kept people from engaging with it. It not only faithfully recreates the original narrative, gameplay, and experience, it enhances it in pretty much every way. Though it makes some missteps in its attempts to add new elements to the original narrative, it is overall a fantastic experience that adds new depth to its story, characters, and universe. *Halo 2: Anniversary* is proof positive that a remaster can not only revive a narrative for a modern audience, but lift it up to reach even greater heights than the original.

## Citations

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