Half-Life: Multi-d Narrative or 3d Ludology?

Half-Life, produced by Valve, is an instance of a first person shooter (FPS) the follows the actions of the protagonist and theoretical physicist, Gordan Freeman, who inadvertently triggers a cataclysmic laboratory incident that results in an alien invasion. The game progresses through levels ranging from alien worlds to the military and alien infested laboratory while being attacked by a host of human and alien entities. Each level consists of foes to be defeated, puzzles to solves, and weapons to collect in order to progress through the game. After you 'save the scientists, save the world', the game ends with Gordan and several scientists gallivanting off into the sunset in their acquired SUV.

Just as the former brief overview of Half-Life was a small narrative, the game has many of the mechanics of a narrative; the focalization is Gordan Freeman, there exists a diegetic universe, there is a story told through discourse, and the player/audience is interpreting the discourse. When given the Half-Life story as a whole (all the games, stories, merchandise, etc) there are even prominent prolepses and analepses. With the addition of interactivity with the player, the story and discourse are modified by the actions of the player (although the degree to which player actions have an affect on the resultant narrative is low). Conflict is is present a couple of levels: player against invading forces and the player against the environment.

As a result of the game mechanics and design, the player is encouraged to empathize and identify with the protagonist, Gordan Freeman. The player is literally the protagonist. Every movement, every jump, and every weapon fired, and every injury suffered are actions the player takes in a Gordan guise. Why would the player avoid falling down a bottomless pit or walking through a large puddle of radioactive waste? Part of the answer is surely the game rules but another interesting part of the answer is the empathy and identification the players feels with the character, Gordan. If the agency the player experiences is not seriously hampered or damage, the player will transform as a masquerade as Gordan for the duration of the time they play the game.

This transformation aids and is aided by player immersion. Half-Life is structured to be conducive to immersion: the player participating via an avatar, the interaction conventions are of a standard FPS game, and the player participating in the game is as a visit to the game world. When sitting down to play this game, I was easily immersed in the game for hours at a time. Due to this being my first time playing through Half-Life, I would like to play it again to explore how the immersion and transformation I would experience would change in order to explore the interrelated behavior between agency and transformation.

As is the case with most FPS style games, agency is aided by the balance between material affordances and formal constraints. The material affordances of progressing through the game without being killed and killing as much as possible balances well with the actions a player is able to perform. You see something that will kill you, you shoot it. It shoots at you, you move out of the way.
Half-Life has narrative and has interaction, however, it has them separately. The game tells a narrative revolving around Gordan Freeman via discourse consisting one-sided conversations with NPCs, encounters with enemies, and solving puzzles to affect changes in the world. The events that make up the story are very linear and the player can do very little to affect the outcome. The choices the player can make are either to participate by watching NPCs talk, solve the puzzle, or kill the enemies or to not participate and either let Gordan die or to do nothing at all and not progress in the game. Additionally, the world is large and visually detailed but is highly non-interactive. The set of verbs available to the player as game actions (shoot, jump, move, activate) is small and do not affect a vast portion of the game world. Between being forced to capitulate to progress and only being able to see and not interact with most of the game environment, both the agency of the player and the narrative being told are significantly weakened.

The freedom to explore a 3d world both promotes the sense of narrative in Half-Life. Becoming familiar with the inside of a particle physics lab, crawling through airducts and pipes, finding caches of supply stored by marines and scientists all while being attacked by an alien force promotes the narrative directly by a sequenced, authorially tuned set of encounters and indirectly by setting helping to coalesce the environment of the game universe. One of the more potent examples of exploration aiding narrative is when you first gain control of Gordan Freeman and are sent to find your department in the physics laboratory. Along the way, you are free to explore the various rooms and listen to the conversation of the local denizens from the scientists to the military personnel that comprise the lab's security force. As you progress, the environment becomes more riddled with artifacts of science fantasy complete with large security bulkheads, walls filled with banks of blinking lights, and scientists muttering about their work. This journey serves the purposes of establishing the basics of the diegetic universe and begins the sequence of narrative discourse.

All is not good with exploring and narrative. While it is true that there exists a rich environment to explore, the ludological conventions of the game world work against the sense of narrative that exploration instills. Since Half-Life uses the standard FPS controls of move, jump, and shoot and many of the npc are off limits to the shooting action in the game world, the player is like a ghost with regards to the environment; things can sensed but not interacted with. The narrative could easily be interrupted, setback, or destroyed in a player's mind depending how sensitive they are to the lack of interaction with the game environment. Even while Half-Life is a crafted game experience, some of the crafted choices break with the story and allow the player to have fun with the game ludology. Given that the narrative of the game is trying to place the player in tense, life-or-death situations, this break to explore ludology is very harmful to the narrative. A reoccurring instance of this is seen in the large amounts of breakable boxes constantly presented to the player. While using the crowbar to bust apart boxes may be a visceral experience, it contributes little to the players ability to empathize with the plight of Gordon Freeman.

I believe that Half-Life is capable of delivering a narrative experience with a high degree of agency. The factors that make the game 'capable' but not actual in every case is the disjunction between FPS ludology and interface with telling a story. Additionally damaging is the lack of interactivity with the world and player being forced to either fail or to comply with the crafted story.
Half-Life is a narrative that can only be accepted by those willing to look aside from the linearity and situations of low agency and willing to immerse themselves in the experience at hand.