

'Halo: Reach' aims to grab gamers again

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This video game image released by Bungie Studios shows a scene from "Halo Reach." (AP Photo/Bungie Studios) NO SALES

(AP) -- Since fans lined up at midnight nearly three years ago for the release of the last "Halo" video game, a recession struck the economy, President Barack Obama took office and "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2" became the best-selling shooter game of all time. When the prequel "Halo: Reach" debuts Sept. 14, it will land on a very different world.

"Halo" achieved status as a cultural phenomenon in 2007 with Master Chief, the armored hero of the original trilogy, adorning french fry wrappers, soda cans and a race car. The sci-fi shoot-'em-up saga became a cash cow for Microsoft Corp., spawning novels, toys and apparel, and boosting sales of Xboxes, the only consoles where "Halo" can be found.

"It's among the elite video game franchises," said NPD gaming industry

analyst Anita Frazier. "It's among the Top 20 of all [video game](#) properties with relatively few releases compared to some of the other franchises. 'Halo 2' and 'Halo 3' are both among the Top 20 games ranked on total unit sales, and the original 'Halo' is among the Top 50 games."

However, in the three years since Master Chief was put to bed by Bungie Studios, much has changed along the gaming landscape, especially in the popular shooter genre. "Call of Duty," the aging war simulator from Activision Blizzard Inc., reclaimed hardcore gamers' attention with the contemporary "Modern Warfare" series from developers Infinity Ward.

"The game that's going to suffer from fatigue the most is 'Call of Duty' because everybody played that a year ago," said Wedbush Morgan gaming industry analyst Michael Pachter. "They haven't seen a brand new 'Halo' game in three years. I think three years between iterations is actually just enough time to get people excited about playing 'Halo' again."

It probably won't be enough to gun down the latest chapter in the recharged "Call of Duty" franchise though. Pachter anticipates that over 6 million copies of "Reach" will be sold this year, on par with the 2007 sales of "Halo 3," while he predicts that over 12 million copies of developer Treyarch's "Call of Duty: Black Ops" will be sold by year's end.

"This is the first time we've ever had a 'Halo' game with any real competition," he added.

"Reach" is slated to be the last "Halo" entry developed by Bungie Studios, which signed an exclusive 10-year deal earlier this year with Activision to publish and distribute a series of games for various platforms. The deal marks Bungie Studios' first partnership since

breaking off in 2007 from Microsoft, who retains the rights to the "Halo" universe.

"It could've been a game we phoned in," said Marcus Lehto, creative director at Bungie Studios. "It could've been our last game, and we just said, 'OK! This is our last "Halo." Goodbye!' We didn't want to do that. You'd think we're crazy, because we went back and decided that the 'Halo 3' engine wasn't capable of accommodating the vision we had for 'Reach.'"

Lehto and his team have slipped into a different, more personalized direction with "Reach." Instead of personifying genetically enhanced Spartan super-soldier Master Chief, players become Noble Six, a mysterious new member of the Noble Team, a group of hardened Spartans tasked with deterring The Covenant alien force from obliterating the planet Reach.

"One of the things we wanted to do with 'Reach' is to allow players to truly invest themselves in their Spartan character, and make their own unique Spartan," said Lehto. "When you first put in the disc to play 'Reach,' you will be prompted to begin that customization process and continue to customize your character as you continue to play."

Noble Six can be a man or a woman and outfitted with hundreds of different armor, color and emblem combinations, as well as grab special gadgets like jet packs, invisible camouflage and holograms along the way. Lehto hopes that more chances for players to fashion their character means this "Halo" game will reach beyond just young male shooter fans.

The intergalactic protagonist also has a past as a pilot, providing players with the opportunity to take to the skies - and beyond - for the first time in a "Halo" game. Lehto said the team at Bungie Studios packed as many

such dramatic moments into the single-player campaign and amped up the multiplayer mode knowing that this would be their last "Halo."

"We really never anticipated it becoming this big," said Lehto. "There was so much responsibility on our shoulders to make sure that 'Reach' is the best of all the 'Halo' games. We put every bit of effort we could into this game. While we're happy that it's done, and we're proud of what we created, we're really sad to say goodbye to the 'Halo' universe."

More information: <http://halo.xbox.com>

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