

Review: Master Chief returns in stellar 'Halo 4'

November 8 2012, by John Kosik



This video game image released by Microsoft shows a scene from "Halo 4." (AP Photo/Microsoft)

Microsoft's wildly successful foray into console gaming begins with two words: Halo and Bungie.

"Halo: Combat Evolved" and its sequels have been selling Xboxes since the original machine launched in 2001. But developer Bungie has moved on, leaving the franchise in the hands of Microsoft and in-house studio 343 Industries.

Fans have been nervous about the prospect of a Bungie-less "Halo." But surprises abound in the gaming world, and 343 has taken Bungie's blueprint and given us a title that reinvigorates the franchise.

Legendary supersoldier Master Chief and his AI companion Cortana make a stellar return in "Halo 4" (for [Xbox 360](#), \$59.95), an excellent opening installment in what 343 calls "The Reclaimer Trilogy." Boasting arguably the finest art design, graphics and soundscapes of this generation, "Halo 4" should make anyone remember why they fell in love with this series in the first place.

Picking up several years after the events of 2007's "[Halo 3](#)," we find Master Chief in cryogenic sleep, drifting through space aboard the damaged military freighter Forward Unto Dawn toward an unknown world. You'll do battle with a Covenant horde once again and contend with a challenging new enemy in the Prometheans.

The plot is somewhat complex—incorporating a few elements from the larger Halo universe of novels and comics—and has plenty of surprises, so I won't spoil too much of the roughly 12-hour campaign. But you will see Master Chief and Cortana in a whole new way through several scenarios that humanize them more than ever.

The pacing of the action is the game's greatest strength. Mixing epic first-person battles with vehicular combat can get tricky, but 343 has managed to find a perfect balance. Just when you've blazed your way through a first-person onslaught and feel the need for a change, there's a Scorpion tank waiting for you. After a trek through battlegrounds that may leave you desperate for ammunition, you get to pilot a Pelican dropship and wreak havoc from above.

The gunplay is some of the best the series has ever seen. Among the available arsenal are human and alien weapons, each with its own unique

feel and plenty of options to fit your playstyle. You can charge in with heavy weaponry or hang back and snipe away. The wealth of weapons and vehicles—you'll flip when you see the Mammoth—is staggering.

The enemy AI is reactive and challenging, even on the lower difficulty settings, and the mechanics are close to perfect. Moving Master Chief around is a very smooth experience, whether on foot or flying around with a jet pack. The old warrior can also take advantage of shield upgrades, "active camouflage" cloaking and infrared vision.

There's a versatile collection of competitive multiplayer modes with 10 built-in maps, as well as a separate "Spartan Ops" cooperative campaign. The revamped Forge provides plenty of great tools to manipulate physics when building your maps. With the franchise's strong history of multiplayer-driven content, rest assured you'll be battling it out on Xbox Live for quite some time.

The "Gears of War" trilogy over the last few years seemed to supplant "Halo" as the console exclusive that made the Xbox a must-own, but "[Halo](#) 4" returns Master Chief to his throne. Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

More information: www.halowaypoint.com/halo4

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