



ISSUE 257

# RADAR

NEWS,  
PREVIEWS, AND  
SPICY OPINION,  
EVERY MONTH



# BLACK MESA: SOURCE

*Half-Life* remake heads back to the lab with modder moxie





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BASE GAME: **Half-Life 2** DEVELOPER: **Black Mesa: Source** GENRE: **Shooter** WEBSITE: [www.blackmesasource.com](http://www.blackmesasource.com) RELEASE DATE: **When it's done**

## THE INSIDE STORY

WITH WETTER WATER AND, WELL, NOT MUCH else new, *Half-Life: Source* was more rerelease than remake. A true top-to-bottom retooling of Valve's convention-changing 1998 sci-fi classic would have to come from the grass roots, a community project that was "not only possible," as Valve cofounder Gabe Newell had it, "but inevitable."

Instantly, and as if to answer the company's de facto challenge, two DIY modder groups marshaled forces to make it so. Leakfree formed in September 2004; the Half-Life: Source Overhaul Project materialized a month later. Both groups' goal: to rethink and reinvent the original *Half-Life* from the ground up. The race was on, although neither runner knew of the other's existence until Leakfree's project director, Jon Dominski, unknowingly began publicizing in the other outfit's HalfLife2.net forums. "Soon, I was talking to their project lead, Denzil," Dominski says, "and it seemed we shared the same goals, the same professionalism, and the same set of plans." The two teams agreed to reorganize and partner resources.

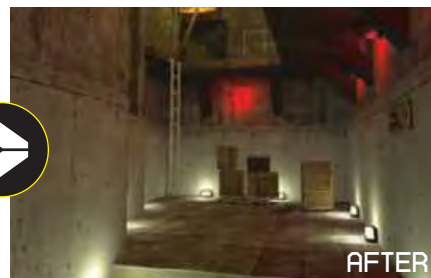
Now with 13 members and known as Black Mesa: Source, the guys got to work, ignoring an increasing number of online naysayers. "They said we were fated to fail, that the mod wouldn't last more than a few months," Dominski says. "But we knew we weren't making the thing to please particular people; we wanted to breathe new life into a game that we thought deserved it, but didn't get that with *Half-Life: Source*. And, as it turned out, all the outside negativity allowed us to function; once the distracting e-mails and the attention dried up, we got the groundwork done, we got the grunt work done. We hit our first milestone, had something to show for ourselves, and when folks saw the time and effort that went into it all, they realized that we weren't going to get up and walk away."

"S\*\*\*, they're actually gonna do this," commented one former critic.

When the criticism became constructive, the team turned to the community to spot mistakes it might otherwise miss. "We started copying every comment we could find and pasting them in our private forums. For example, gun nuts (pardon the term) said that the M4 wasn't right, so we started a second stage of research and reworked that. But it works internally, too. One of the first things we ask Black Mesa: Source applicants is,



## THEN AND NOW



"WHILE WE AREN'T IN IT FOR THE FAME AND FORTUNE, IT WOULD BE AN HONOR IF VALVE SOFTWARE NOTICED US AND ANNOUNCED *BLACK MESA* IN ONE OF ITS STEAM UPDATES."

—PROJECT DIRECTOR JON DOMINSKI



►“Can you take constructive criticism well?” We tell people straight up, “We’re going to nitpick, we’re going to tear apart your level, model, sound, code, or texture. It’s nothing personal, though. It’s all in the name of quality and professionalism.”

Not tied to any one office, the nonprofit project is composed of Americans, Brits, Canadians, Aussies, Norwegians, Germans, and Slovaks between the ages of 13 and 33. (“The love of *Half-Life* has no borders,” as Dominski has it.) No two team members have ever met face to face—according to Dominski, conceptual artist Brian Dale came close to meeting one of the modelers while shooting research photos in the Nevada desert—and yet, tied together by forum talk and powwows on Internet telephone service Skype, they’re all inseparable.

**HELLO AGAIN, MR. FREEMAN**

“In *Half-Life*, characters could repeat themselves endlessly, and it was this sort of comical thing,” mused Valve writer/director Marc Laidlaw in CGW’s October issue. “You know, you’d leave Barney in one room, and there he’d be in the next. We’re in a different world now.”

*Black Mesa: Source*’s modders got the message. Rerecording dialogue and producing two to three dozen different scientists and security guards, they’ve relegated the can-do rent-a-cop to the role he played in the in-his-own-eyes *Blue Shift* expansion. “That means that you’ll now see Barney fighting on security monitors at some points,” says Dominski, “as he never worked with [*Half-Life* hero] Gordon Freeman in *BS*. However, none of the fans will let us forget that every ‘Barney’ in *Half-Life* said, ‘Catch me later, I’ll buy you a beer,’ so we’re leaving a note in Gordon’s locker about the brew that Barney owes him.”

See it as a sort of *Star Wars* trilogy tinkering, Lucas shuffling scenes post-prequel, adding something here, removing a snippet there, except here the editors and directors are *Half-Life*’s fans. Tellingly, story matters as much as light and magic. “Realizing that Dr. Breen was the facility administrator—as opposed to the G-man—cleared a lot of things up for us,” Dominski says. “We won’t mention his name directly, but we’ll insert references to the administrator switching the test sample to the highly pure Xen crystal that caused all the commotion. Also, with [*Half-Life 2* heroine] Alyx now in the picture, we’re bringing that bit into



▲ “Watch out when gargantuas get near large objects like trucks,” says Dominski.



▲ The Black Mesa compound...from concept art to near-complete in-game graphics.



► SEE IT AS A SORT OF *STAR WARS* TRILOGY TINKERING. LUCAS SHUFFLING SCENES POST-PREQUEL, EXCEPT HERE THE EDITORS AND DIRECTORS ARE *HALF-LIFE*’S FANS.

play by giving [her father] Eli this sense of urgency that he has to help save his family.”

Other embellishments include new brainteasers and better enemy behavior. “While we aren’t adding the gravity gun—it wasn’t a weapon in *Half-Life*, and it won’t appear in *Black Mesa*,” Dominski says, “physics certainly give us the power to generate more ‘Source-ified’ puzzles. Remember the part right after you escape the trash compactor, where you break into the hound-eye cages and beat ‘em back with your crowbar? Now, instead of making you shoot an electrical box to open the path, we’ve placed physics objects for you to stack and climb over. Only then can you get to the generator and unlock the gate.”

As for the guys who are out to get you, Dominski says the *Black Mesa* crew is working from *HL2*’s Combine code: “The big change is that Marines will create barricades and improvised cover—they’ll leap from ledges, try to outmaneuver and trap you.” He also admits that his A.I. programmers have yet to achieve these aspirations, but if it happens, they’ll have more corks to pop. “We have ‘The Plan’: On the night of *Black Mesa: Source*’s release, we’re getting together—all 35 of us—and going on a drunken spree through the streets of Las Vegas.” Perhaps they’ll treat the team’s underage members to Excalibur’s Tournament of Kings. / **Shawn Elliott**