


Hands-on with Halo: Reach: Nightfall

By **kombo** - May 4, 2012

 *Warning: if you don't like spoilers, why the hell are you reading a preview?*

Inching along a midnight-dark ridge, my Spartan brother beside me, I think to myself, "I've done this before." The thought makes me giddy, and memory sets in to make me fall in love with yet another *Halo* game.

Nightfall is the fourth mission in *Halo: Reach*, and the spiritual successor to one of *Halo: Combat Evolved's* most expertly designed missions, Truth and Reconciliation. In the original *Halo*, that mission saw the Master Chief, one of the few remaining Spartan II super soldiers, infiltrating Covenant held territory under cover of night to board an enormous cruiser and rescue Captain Keyes. Now, instead of a contingent of marines, Spartan Noble 6 is accompanied by Jun, a fellow Spartan with a penchant for sniping.

Watching the Grunts stir slightly in their sleep and the Elites confer quietly as they passed one another on their patrols in the original only made the bizarre collection of hostile aliens that much more mysterious. Now, with *Reach's* Nightfall, Bungie has managed to recreate the sense of foreboding that permeated Truth and Reconciliation ten years ago.

For one thing, the redesigned enemies seem more immediately threatening. As I approach the first group of sleeping Grunts, a birdlike Jackal rounds the corner of a stone outcropping, shrieking wildly just before I silence it forever. The Grunts are awakened, but for once their cries are as alien as those of the Jackals; no longer do they serve as mere comic relief, crying out in panic about the "ædemon" (after all, the Master Chief is nowhere in sight). Their beady eyes stare intensely from underneath unfamiliar helmets and armor as they trade warnings in their own alien tongue and open fire.

Â



As I happen upon an Elite, my Spartan teammate, Jun, instructs me to take it out – "quietly." With its back to me, the proud elite is practically begging to be the victim of one of the new, brutal assassinations. At the press of a button, the camera snaps back to third person view as Noble 6 leaps onto its back, covers its mouth and drives a vicious knife into the top of its head.

By this point, players have already been instructed to activate their night vision, which replaces the flashlight from previous games and is usable in any mission. The trusty sniper rifle, one of the few weapons that has remained virtually unchanged throughout the series, is complimented by the magnum, the weapon that's probably seen the *most* change since the original *Halo*. Thankfully, it's once again the weapon of choice for headshotting Grunts and Jackals, having regained its 2X zoom and been stripped of its completely overbearing power. It's perfect.

Though Noble 6 begins the level with the Sprint armor ability, a reusable feature that replaces the clunky equipment from *Halo 3*, players soon happen upon a collection of glowing, floating icons that allow them to swap this power out in favor of Active Camo, Armor Lock, or the new-since-the-beta Hologram, which creates a doppelganger that runs forward to distract enemies as players flank them or recover their shields.

Choose either, or simply keep Sprint; All are useful in different situations. In co-op, Armor Lock can give teammates an extra few seconds to rescue one another from otherwise fatal firefights. Active Camo will help stealthy players remain unseen, while Sprint is best for those who prefer to go in guns blazing. All are viable, and each will drastically change the way Nightfall's challenges are undertaken.

Â



After a lengthy battle with numerous Covenant forces, including the new Jackal-like Skirmishers, who leap from building to building and fight with more aggression and intelligence than their shieldbearing brethren, Noble 6 and Jun round a corner and catch a glimpse of a pair of enormous, unfamiliar creatures laying waste to a group of Grunts. They stand over twice as tall as the Spartans, with hooked claws the size of elephant tusks, and they're obviously not part of the Covenant.

It turns out they're called "Gãta," and they're members of Reach's indigenous wildlife, which players will encounter throughout the game in various forms. They're just one of the aspects that give players the sense that they're on a living, breathing planet, more so than in past games.

Soon, sounds of gunfire reach the Spartans, and Jun surmises they're originating from local militias who have yet to evacuate the area. After assisting the militia in fending off several

drop ships full of enemies, the Spartans and militia traverse a dry riverbed, littered with gnarled trees, and encounter a Covenant force defending a mysterious "pylon."

It's possible that the two militia soldiers from earlier will still be alive at this point. They won't be for much longer, however, as the motley group is soon set upon by a pair of Hunters and camouflaged Elites. Their sacrifice is not in vain, however, as Jun's able to set the charges that will later destroy the pylon, which is apparently the source of the "dark zone" that the Spartans are about to discover.

Â



On the other side of a large gate, a phantom rears up from below a ridge. Another Hologram ability and a sniper rifle await behind the nearest cover, though, and the following section has Noble 6 traversing a multi-tiered canyon filled with horizontal pathways and focus rifle-equipped Covenant. The "face melter," as the focus rifle is sometimes called, is a souped up version of previous games' sentinel beam with a lengthy zoom, and its specialty is â€" you guessed it â€" melting faces. It's pretty good at it, too.

Finally they reach their goal: at the center of the dark zone is the brunt of the Covenant invasion force, and they realize that the Covenant are on Reach in far greater numbers than anyone could have predicted. The shit is about to hit the fan, and it's not going to end well.

Though Nightfall is most definitely a tribute to that earlier level from the original *Halo*, all of *Reach*'s improvements â€" from armor abilities to more dynamic AI, multiple approaches to almost any situation, improved weapon balance, and downright better storytelling â€" make it one of the most versatile levels in all of *Reach*. It's a fitting throwback and an excellent level in its own right.

Halo: Reach comes out September 14, and Bungie was kind enough to invite us out to sunny San Francisco to spend two full days exploring every aspect of the game. Keep an eye out for the rest of our coverage!

[Click here to go back to the index!](#)