

# Hands-on with Halo: Reach: Multiplayer

By **kombo** - May 4, 2012



For some, few things elicit more excitement and sweet remembrance than the sizzle of a glowing blue plasma grenade or the distinctive, smoky trail of a sniper round betraying the location of a distant fellow player. Plenty of gamers made the jump to the Xbox generation of consoles without many expectations, having only recently begun to grow tired of shooting the crap out of one another in *Goldeneye 007* and *Perfect Dark* on the N64.

It was *Halo*, of course, that single handedly ushered in the current generation of console shooters, and it did this in no little part thanks to its unique and sexy multiplayer and co-op modes. At an exclusive *Halo: Reach* event in San Francisco last week, I discovered that *Reach* does justice to this legacy, and more.

Between the fleshed out Firefight Mode and the expansive Forge World, there are enough new multiplayer options to keep even the most hardened of *Halo* players entertained. Thankfully, though, there are also more options for good old versus multiplayer, and four player online co-op, introduced in *Halo 3*, is more fun than ever thanks to all the improvements brought to the campaign.

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Everything gamers have come to expect from *Halo* multiplayer is here in spades, and like the rest of *Reach*, everything's been built upon and practically perfected. Game modes like Capture the Flag (CTF), Slayer, and Slayer Classic (in which armor abilities are removed) are as fun as ever, while new modes like Invasion, Invasion Slayer and Headhunter are excellent additions.

While Slayer Classic can make one realize how boring it feels to run around without any abilities, all forms of deathmatch benefit greatly from *Reach*'s new weapons and vehicles. No longer does the battle rifle dominate any medium or large map, mostly because it no longer exists. What a gift Bungie has given players by removing that titan of headshots!

The Designated Marksman Rifle (DMR) fits much more snugly into *Reach*'s overall arsenal, and suddenly other weapons – like the magnum, plasma repeater and needler – are once again viable choices. During large-scale battles on the map Hemorrhage, *Reach*'s remake of the original *Halo*'s iconic Blood Gulch map, the varying tactics of those in attendance included everything from high-flying, jet pack-fueled sniping to simply spamming Scorpion tank shells everywhere. Just like the good old days.

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The map design tool, Forge, once again puts balance in the hands of us players, though as always, with great power comes great responsibility. For example, allowing one team in a game of four-team, 16-player Slayer on Hemorrhage to spawn within spitting distance of the Scorpion makes the match pretty unfair for the other three teams. Thankfully, any problems that arise are easily rectified by a quick trip into the Forge.

Lots of fans are curious as to why Bungie chose to remake *Halo 2*'s Ivory Tower, of all maps, and how the damn thing actually plays. At the event, Bungie employees confessed to me that they simply like the way it plays in *Reach*, and I have to agree. A late night game of 3-player Infection on the multi-tiered, Oriental themed Reflection was surprisingly exhilarating. The infected player crept around corners and utilized different abilities (like active camo and evade) to try to infect the humans, while the two remaining uninfected players cowered in fear, often accidentally killing one another in bouts of pure panic.

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Headhunter is a new gametype in *Reach*, and it's definitely the most chaotic of all the modes played at the event. When a player dies, he (or she- female Spartan models are more easily discerned in *Reach*) drops a skull, which can then be picked up by anybody. Unlike in other modes like Oddball, skulls don't affect players' abilities to do battle at all. Players battle to accumulate skulls and drop them off at specific points, which change location every few minutes.

The real chaos comes from the fact that players can choose to drop off their skulls – thus accumulating an equivalent number of points – whenever they want, while the floating numbers above other players' heads (which indicate how many skulls they're carrying) offer

a constant temptation to veer off course and get just one more kill, and thus, more skulls. Players lugging around eight skulls have a pretty big target on their backs, and when the rest of the players converge on them, there's no telling who'll come out on top.

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Headhunter is great, but during the multiplayer beta last spring, most fans agreed that Invasion, the mode rolled out just a few days before the beta's close, was the best thing to happen to *Halo* since, well, ever. Everything about Invasion perfectly captures what makes *Halo* special: the battle between Elites and Spartans, now slightly different in physical ability; the varying objectives and environments, which become more complex and urgent as matches progress; even the gradually evolving weapons, vehicles and loadouts, which become more badass as Invasion matches hurtle toward their thrilling conclusions.

While Invasion pits Elites against Spartans in objective based, multi-part matches over gradually expanding maps, Invasion Slayer takes the concept of progressively unlocking more weapons, vehicles and abilities, and applies it to standard deathmatches. Both teams (again, Elites v. Spartans) begin with basic weapon loadouts with little variety, and as certain score milestones are achieved, they become more advanced and varied. Furthermore, players have the option to compete over minor drop points that can net them powerful weapons and vehicles, which are also better later in the game.

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My new favorite Invasion map, The Spire, is taken straight from the Tip of the Spear level of *Reach*'s campaign. Like other Invasion matches, those on The Spire begin slow and steady, with one team trying to tactically capture strategic points that will open up the rest of the map.

At a match's peak, The Spire becomes an enormous environment, both horizontally and especially vertically, that consists mainly of an enormous pylon so big that a full jet pack thruster will only get players about halfway up. There are gravity lifts to get you the rest of the way, and the package that one team needs to capture is, naturally, nestled snugly up there in the clouds.

16-player Invasion matches on The Spire are *pure Halo*. Sure, it's chaotic, but when players choose to team up, domination is achieved. During one game, two teammates and I chose to commandeer a Falcon, the sleeker, cooler version of *Halo 3's* Hornet, and we flew circles around the top of the Spire laying waste to anyone who dared step foot outside its tippy top. We still lost, but at least I managed to rack up around 40 kills from the Falcon's right gunner seat.

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Even campaign co-op has been massively streamlined. More vehicles than ever allow for multiple riders, including new civilian cars and trucks. No matter how many players are present at the beginning of a co-op session, any of them can drop out at any point without ending the game for everyone playing.

Add to that the fact that Bungie's finally included matchmaking for co-op and Firefight in addition to versus matches, *plus* the insane amount of customization (everything from Spartans' knee guards to what sounds and visual effects play when their heads get blown off can be customized), and you've got one fully-featured, incredibly addictive package on your hands.

*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!*

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