

Close Playing Analysis: Split-Screen Multiplayer in Halo

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What is the most fun you have ever had playing video games? My favourite experiences are those where I can share a space and gameplay directly with friends. The excitement, energy, and direct human interaction while playing Halo: Combat Evolved are what made me fall in love with video games. For my close playing analysis, I look at the first few minutes of my gameplay experience. I argue that split-screen gaming transforms strangers into a gaming community that online multiplayer cannot replicate. Where physical presence, shared space, and visible reactions create deep social connections.

I played Halo: Combat Evolved in a tutorial with three classmates I had never met. We gathered around the small TV and started Halo's Slayer mode. The first minute was confusing as I adjusted to the original Xbox controller while trying to figure out which of the four quadrants was mine. Even my classmate was confused, asking, "Wait, which one am I?" We spent a few minutes simply learning the game, testing button inputs, and game mechanics while still trying to fulfill the game's objective. In a few minutes, the social dynamic completely changed. We started pointing at screens, reacting to game events, and even looking over to see how other players were playing the game. By the end, we were interacting as a group, learning and helping each other. These shared experiences highlighted the energy and connection that split-screen multiplayer provides.

Moreover, the strategies required to excel at a game are among the most important aspects. Even if you had never played this genre before, you could learn from the social learning alone. The game offered minimal formal strategies or techniques. While analyzing user experience in video games, Isbister writes, "Observers in a colocated social group may provide coaching and critical commentary that substantially adds to the gaming experience for those who

are playing. . .” (13). In our case, we learned from each other through demonstration and observation. When I struggled to find my character, a classmate physically pointed it out. When one player needed help with discovering how to throw grenades, another showed them. Dourish, in the analysis of embodied interaction, says “. . . utterances, gestures and symbols-in-use that collectively constitute everyday activity. . . . the body, through the interwoven senses, plays a vital role in everyday perception” (2). In person split screen gaming directly supports this type of learning system through bodily presence and gestures to other players while representing an informal but effective tutorial that is limited with online gaming.

Being physically present also adds accountability that reduces toxic behaviour seen so often in online gaming. Suler argued that anonymity provided online creates a “disinhibition” effect where players are more likely to act more intensely than they would in person. (324) Additionally, Suler writes, “They don’t have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say.” (322) This often becomes the case in online gaming, where players say whatever they want whenever they want because they can not truly see the reactions their behaviour has. The physical presence of split-screen gaming allows players to see body language and facial expressions rather than just hearing them, adding depth to social interactions that voice chats lack and reducing disinhibition.

What also sets Halo apart is its historical and cultural significance. Halo: Combat Evolved launched in 2001. Unfortunately for many co-op gaming enthusiasts, it marked the beginning of the end, as just over a year later, in 2002, Xbox Live was launched. The possibility of connecting players worldwide was too desirable and profitable. Split-screen multiplayer was a “revenue killer” (Dookeran), where one console and game could serve multiple players, but online play required multiple purchases. This de-prioritized local multiplayer, and we lost the physical presence and in-person communal aspects of gaming to the point that only 11% of top games in 2021 had local multiplayer (Dorn). The fact that this experience is available

through UTM’s archives reveals how split-screen is becoming a preserved artifact. A point where relationships were still built through video games, but through in-person interactions that fostered stronger emotions, understanding and feelings.

Halo: Combat Evolved’s split-screen multiplayer demonstrates that the most memorable gaming experiences are not always about graphics or features, but ones where players learn about each other and from each other in a shared physical space. A space like this changes gaming tutorials to demonstrations and changes online toxicity to real support and connection. My analysis showcases that by sacrificing split-screen gaming, we also sacrificed the benefits that it enabled.

Works Cited

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