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FINISHING HALF-LIFE IS JUST THE BEGINNING!

INTERVIEW WITH ADAM FOSTER

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ABOUT

Here is the transcript of an email interview with Adam Foster, creator Minvera: Metastasis. The first part contains my questions and the second part contains questions requested by Planetphillip.com readers.

Firstly, thank you for agreeing to spend some time answering my questions and a few from my readers. Secondly, congratulations on a staggering achievement. I'm sure you are proud of your efforts, you certainly should be. Onto the nitty gritty.

I'm surprised you forced players to have Episode 1 two-thirds way through the trilogy. What prompted your decision?

HDR, loads of destroyed Combine architecture props, and in particular the zombines. The intention was always to have some sort of zombie apocalypse to finish Metastasis, but I have no idea how I was going to do it originally - plot issues kind of precluded the use of normal zombies. Fast zombies? Stalkers. Poison zombies? *Possibly* soldiers, if you don't pay too much attention. Maps with nothing but those two? Aaaaargh...

Let's just say that Valve's introduction of zombified soldiers was a great one - and the rest of Episode One's content was also extremely useful!

If anyone complains about this sudden change in requirements - how exactly can they claim to be fans of Half-Life 2 if they've missed out on Valve's latest stuff?

What's more interesting for you; telling a story through FPS mods or making a mod to tell a story? What I mean is, if you didn't make FPS mods, would you use a different medium?

I build maps primarily for the fun of building maps - and to give 'em direction, some sort of plot is necessary.

If I wasn't building maps, I'd probably still be writing short stories - with needlessly detailed architectural plans and geographical maps to back them up. I really need to scan some more of the stuff I did at school. I must have utterly infuriated my English teachers...

Has having the technical knowledge stopped you enjoying other mods?

Not really - occasionally I'll play something and think OH WHY CAN'T I IMAGINE STUFF LIKE THAT. The best stuff is that which makes me want to give up mapping.

Do you view things from a mapper's or player's perspective?

Depends. If it's good, I'll get completely immersed in the world - although with an overly keen eye for dodgy geometry, misaligned textures and other typo-analogues. I'm useless!

In fact, how much do you play?

Not enough mods, lately. I need to catch up.

What kind of other games/genres do you play?

I'm completely allergic to anything involving wizards, elves and other sub-Tolkien shite, so that fortunately closes off a wide range of games for me.

Escapism, in fascinating universes - I like the idea of first-person games, but far too many rely on nothing but endless shooting. So stuff like System Shock 2, Deus Ex and Bioshock rather appeals to me - and I'm currently slowly making my way through the ever-so-slightly radioactive exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. - brilliant!

Oh, and Homeworld 2, Psychonauts, Darwinia and Sim City 2000, just to confuse everyone.

Which other amateur mappers do your pay attention to?

Koumei Satou. He's a deranged, wonderful genius. I was overjoyed when I learned he'd been working on a mod for Half-Life 2...

Other single-player mappers? Haven't really seen many recently. Everyone's too busy working on colossal, huge-teamed extravaganzas these days - which will probably never get released.

Please, people - release maps! Don't assume you have to create something gigantic, just make a single map, polish it until it shines, and release that instead!

Do you have a particular routine for mapping? For example. music in the background, set breaks etc. Has this changed much over the years.

Beer.

Do you have any unreleased map sections sitting on your hdd, waiting for future releases. In fact, did you discard much work before settling on what you released?

From MINERVA, no unreleased map sections at the moment. No mysterious, discarded maps from *this* project!

How do you work with your beta testers? Give them strict guidelines to follow or just ask for feedback?

More just upload a test version, and they mercilessly dismantle it and send me copious feedback.

I have discovered that it's *not* a good way of testing puzzles, though - watching some Valve people play through an unfinished MINERVA was an eye-opening experience, and knowing where they got stuck (and why) helped a lot with development.

A tester might say they briefly got stuck somewhere, but when you actually see them battering at random objects with a crowbar, you know what their thought processes at the time really were.

If you could have charged a small fee for MM, would you have? What I'm getting at here is that if Valve introduced the option of modders to request payments, even shareware-style, would that have been of interest to you?

Spare cash?

Approximately how many hours development time per minute of play time did you invest? Do you even record development time?

I have seriously no idea what it all adds up to. The good news is that I don't have a television, so I'm just wasting my time another way!

Have you ever considering expanding your mapping activities to include tutorials and other types of work? (If so, I have some ideas for you!)

I wrote a couple of articles for the Valve Developer Community site, which seem to have been fairly popular - and I'm a big fan of releasing map sources for stuff I've done, in case anyone wants to see exactly how I've constructed stuff.

A lot of mappers seem far too protective of their work - assuming that people will come along and plagiarise the hell out of it. I actually released sources, and am disappointed that *nobody* has tried passing my work off as their own. Hopeless!

<div class="sbe2">READER QUESTIONS</div>

What was your inspiration for some of the puzzles? Say like the one toward the end where you have to blow up some valves to destroy a floor…

I have no idea - and things usually aren't as well-imagined as you think.

That collapsing walkway, originally seen at the beginning of the third map? It was supposed to be a corridor. But I discovered the player was heading in the wrong direction (most of the lower sections of the map were already built), and I urgently needed to turn them round. So, a lower platform, with a lift connecting the two. I then realized that the top one could be hinged...

Besides the Zombines, what other Episode 1 content did you use?

Try playing the latest MINERVA with the old Half-Life 2 as a base, and you'll see. And hear. Loads of props, textures, sounds, you name it - I'm currently looking at what Episode Two has to offer...

How come you didn't make any new models or weapons?

There *are* some new models - and recompiled versions of Valve originals, to get around various scripting problems! The lack of new weapons is partly because I don't play FPS games for the guns. Plus, it would take a lot of effort (and new code) to add new weapons, and it's pretty much pointless unless there's some interesting new gameplay idea that can be exposed.

Valve made Episodes One and Two with no new weapons, and their resources are vastly greater than mine.

Did you use any special effects to make the level seem larger than life, as big as they look?

The island is actually pretty tiny. FPS architecture has to be terribly 'broken' to look good on the screen - small things are larger than they should be, and vice versa. Is that counted as 'special effects'?

How did you intend to insert Parallax in Minerva's timeline?

More the other way round - Parallax was supposed to be a mod looking at the events at Black Mesa from a different perspective. One character I created for it proved great fun to write for, and got placed in the one-map Someplace Else - and then got resurrected again when I started mapping for Half-Life 2. It seemed like a good idea at the time...

How do you define a "bad" map, as a mapper yourself? - How do you define a "good" map, as a mapper yourself?

Good map features (lack thereof implies a bad map):

Direction! The player must know what they're aiming for - even if it's something as abstract as 'go down' or 'escape'.

Also, a good sense of 'place'. I don't want to be in a game, I want to be exploring an interesting, well-imagined world. If there's no real connection between different rooms, then that sense of location just fades away...

What do you feel lacks in a majority of released projects (singleplayer-sided)

What's really lacking are released projects.

What do you feel lacks in your own projects? How would you improve them if you chose to?

Too much find-the-buttons, not enough decent puzzles - I tried hard with the last lot of MINERVA maps, but good puzzles can be remarkably difficult to design. They're either too easy, or too hard - and rarely just right.

Also, I'm still not completely happy with Minerva's dialogue. She's probably typing too much - I need an excuse for her to speak less, and say more...

All time favourite map & mod and personal project? And why? (of course)

Not mine: the Small Pile of Gibs single-player map for Quake 2. Haven't played it for years - need to find it again...

I first played this when it was just part 1. Since then I have waited with baited breath for each new episode. You didn't disappoint Adam! I absolutely love the attention to detail and balanced gameplay, top marks to you. So good it would be worthy as a commercial release!

[It's 'bated breath', unless you're planning on catching things...]

Anyway my question is this: What are you going to do next to top that?

MINERVA: Out of Time!

What's your favorite map/mod for Half Life 1/2?

Poke646, probably - utterly fantastic design.

Why did you decide to use Episode One content and how difficult was it to make that decision?

Initially, it was the only way of getting HDR support without unpleasant hacks involving Lost Coast - and I discovered all the new props and entities, and worked from there.

It was less of a decision, and more of an obvious step to make.

Why do you work alone? Do you get any outside help?

I'd grown a bit tired on working on a huge, many-person project which was never released, and decided to release a couple of quick maps of my own for a change.

My own project grew a bit. They usually do. But it's still mine - any help is either music (a fortuitous, unexpected addition) or verbal (I have been known to ramble on at length regarding the MINERVA plotline...)

Do you plan on including Episode 2 content in your next release?

Hunters. In the snow. Next question!

What do you hear, and what would you like to hear more of from your fans?

Lots of amazingly favourable feedback, and not enough random insults and name-calling.

Have you ever been tempted to go back and make major revisions to your work, because of new technologies available?"

Erm... How about the first two MINERVA maps, in HDR? I suppose that may count...

How has modding and the immense popularity of the MINERVA series affected your life or lifestyle, if at all?

I still keep thinking I need to buy a proper gaming computer, but that's about it. Apart from the chance to meet interesting people elsewhere!

What's your favourite Chapter from MINERVA: Metastasis and why?

Possibly the first map - I'm really pleased with how the outdoors stuff turned out. It was my first attempt at building a map in the Source engine, too!

I'm very happy with the less-linear nature, and how it includes the whole island - there are no arbitrary invisible walls blocking off places you'd possibly want to go to. It also seems a great introduction to MINERVA - the helicopter ride in, then the immediate action and simultaneous introduction to the character of Minerva herself. It worked out far better than a typical, slow, weaponless game introductory sequence...

What inspired, if anything, the writing style found in Minerva's dialogue? (IE The text messages.)

Minerva's character originally started off as a cheeky copy of the Cortana Letters publicity for Halo - long before anyone ever heard of the Xbox, or a Microsoft buyout. But she's gone off on a completely different route since then, with an entirely different backstory, motivations, etc...

Iain M. Banks' stuff has been a bit of an inspiration too.

What is your outlook on episodic gaming?

Commercially - undecided. Yes, we've played more Half-Life already, but while highly polished and well designed, the Episodes haven't been as drastically new and exciting as Half-Life 2 was compared with the original game. But then, Half-Life 3 probably would have been stuck in development hell until 2050 or thereabouts, so we can't complain...

Smaller, lower-cost games could be an interesting route forwards for a company like Valve. Portal is a fantastic example of this.

Non-commercially - BRILLIANT. Single-player modders - you're complete twits if you don't adopt this strategy.

What is your outlook on Valve Software and the Half-Life series?

Great.

What is your outlook on the rest of the modding community?

STOP FARTING AROUND PRETENDING TO BE GAMES DEVELOPERS AND ACTUALLY MAKE SOMETHING PLAYABLE!

... Ahem.

There are some seriously talented people out there, but for some reason far too many people are stuck in a rut where project sizes just balloon way out of control, and invariably die a lonely death some years later when everyone has lost interest.

Build with the intention of releasing something. Think small, and know that even something 'simple' like a couple of new maps with barely no custom content can still take a massive amount of work to complete. So, make shortcuts - like going episodic, or building things up in stages.

Have you more pride in your mapping achievements from Half-Life and the GoldSrc engine, or Half-Life 2 and the Source engine?

I'm still really proud of Someplace Else - the gameplay is a bit find-the-buttons, but I still really like what I managed with the visuals and atmosphere. But I'll also look at MINERVA and think SHITTING HELL I BUILT THAT. And that makes me happy too.

From out of the thousands of people who have plugged this thing to death with positive thoughts, there have been a select few people who have stated major negatives about MINERVA: Metastasis or have even said that the latest instalment didn't live up to their expectations. (Although obviously everything is not to everyone's taste.) Do you agree with them? What is your outlook on these particular individuals? Have you taken their criticisms to heart?

Oddly, the particularly vehement criticism is never posted somewhere I'd read it - I usually find it through following referrer links which turn up in my web-logs. (I see all!)

There was one long forum post I saw where the person who'd played MINERVA basically loathed it. And, helpfully, provided recommendations as to how it *should* have been built.

Unfortunately, his idea of a 'perfect game' was so drastically different from what I enjoy playing that I just had to ignore completely all his thoughts on what I should be doing. I freely accept that not everyone will like MINERVA, and I'm not changing it into something *I* won't like in order to please such people. Ner-ner-ne-ner-ner!

However, I'd far rather read some incisive criticism of my work than some overly frothing fan-mail. I know there are faults, and I'm working on avoiding them in future...

Your latest instalment requires that players have HL2: Episode 1. What are your thoughts on this, and the impact on those who may feel 'cheated'? Do you think you could have successfully executed your original vision for the last two chapters with just HL2's content? (And perhaps a little custom content?)

Episode One is five quid!

After completing the MINERVA: Metastais project are you considering using the Source Engine tools & HL2 Episodes for future projects in single-player modding?

MINERVA: Out of Time!

What was your Test computer machine for creating MINERVA:Metastatis

Initially, a first-generation MacBook Pro - which developed an annoying crashing problem late in development. Then, a 20in aluminium iMac.

You may notice a theme here.

With all the positive feedback from the Fans & The Modding Community & The Forums Do you feel Honored & Proud of your Creative & Imagitive skills

In Future Mod releases would you consider creating your own custom textures set for level design & possibly re-skinning or re-modeling the current HL2 Weapons or creating a whole new ones?

New textures and props - definitely.

New weapons - unlikely.

Would you Use Portal tech for future releases?

Probably not - I absolutely love Portal, but the portal mechanic could very easily break a game completely. Building a game around it works - tacking it on afterwards could probably fail horribly.

Plus, I have no idea what Valve's plans are regarding Portal's code - if not released, it may not even be possible to get the portal systems working in a 'full' game mod with custom code...

I'd love to know what books (if any) inspired the tone of the Minerva story.

Anything by Iain M. Banks, and, erm... His Masters Voice, by Stanislaw Lem. (And somebody seriously, seriously needs to create a game inspired by the Cyberiad...)