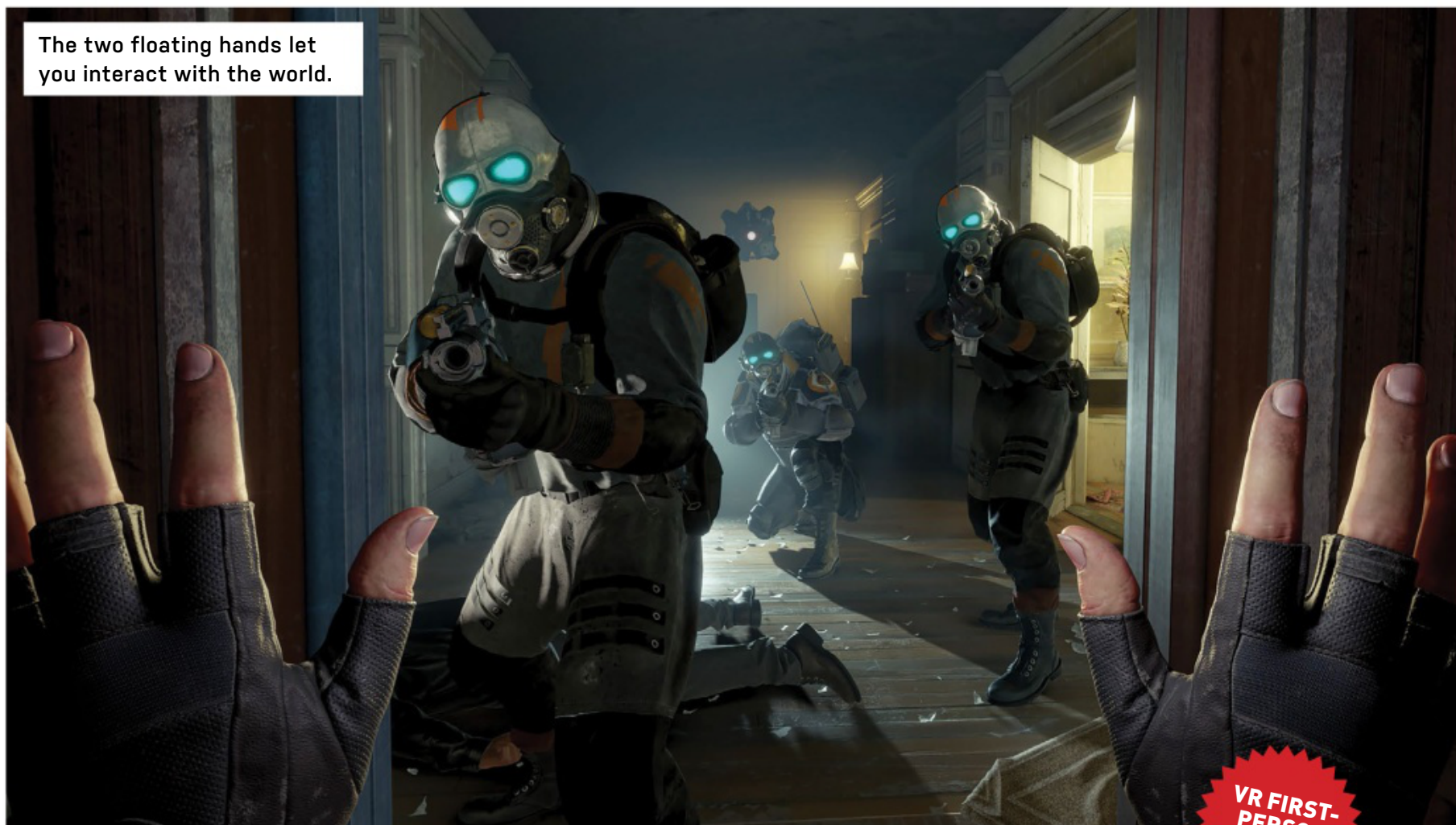




The two floating hands let you interact with the world.



VR FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

Half-Life: Alyx

Just a girl, sitting in front of a zombie

GO TO THE DUSTY CUPBOARD, the abandoned attic, the damp basement, wherever you last saw your VR helmet. Brush aside the cobwebs, blow off the ants, locate all the cables, and put the thing on for what feels like the first time in years. This is worth it. Alternatively, pay a thousand bucks for the Valve Index.

In the gap between existing games, five years before the events of *Half-Life 2* if you can remember back that far, Alyx Vance is a scrappy member of the resistance movement fighting a guerilla war against the Combine after their suspiciously easy victory over Earth's armed forces. Her father, Eli, has been taken by the occupying aliens, and so Alyx heads off to rescue him. It's not a complicated plot, but the way you go about following it is what makes the game exceptional.

All you see of her are a pair of floating hands, fitted with gloves that have a similar effect to Gordon Freeman's gravity gun, minus the hurling saw blades into zombies. The entire game hinges on those hands. You can pull just about any object towards you thanks to the gloves, and reloading your weapons is an entirely manual, three-stage process that sees you pull out the old mag before reaching over your shoulder for a new

one, before clicking it home. This process is complicated by being in the dark, which happens often, and by having headcrabs jumping at you.

While there is a new enemy to fight, it's the subtle makeover of the familiar ones that's most shocking. The poor, weak headcrabs, never much more than crowbar-fodder, are now plump and horrifying. The zombies they create turn from pathetic to lethal. Ant-lions roar and thunder. Even the converted human police seem bigger and chunkier, especially as seen from Alyx's slight viewpoint.

Movement, often a problem in VR games thanks to motion sickness, is handled well, with several different schemes available according to the preferences of your inner ear. Short teleporting hops are a good compromise—it can take away some immersion if you think about it, but *Half-Life* was never a circle-strafing blaster in the vein of *Doom*, and you're never able to use it to your advantage like *Dishonored's* Blink ability.

Just as 3D movies filmed with special cameras look better than 2D productions converted into 3D during post-production, so *Alyx* benefits from being designed for VR from the start. From writing on glass with Sharpies to the staggering scale of

a strider—made terrifying again by your inability to escape its awful noise and biomechanical, chicken-carcass-meets-seafood legs—there are moments here that feel like massive strides forward, rather than mere retreads of past glories.

If you've even the faintest flickering of interest in VR, this is the new getting-on point. The bar, hefted aloft by Gordon Freeman since 1998, has been raised once again, this time to heights unimaginable at the time of the resonance cascade. As it should be after a 13-year wait, *Alyx* is a genuine moment of cultural significance, and the more devs who pile in on this bandwagon, the better. And if you don't have a headset, a non-VR mod is already available as we type this. **—IAN EVENDEN**



Half-Life: Alyx

ALYX-CELLENT A stunning and terrifying VR ride.

ALRYTE Perhaps too much time spent in tunnels and other dark places, jump scares.

RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, Core i5-7500 / Ryzen 5 1600. RAM, 12 GB. GPU, GTX 1060 / RX 580.

\$60, half-life.com, not yet rated



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