

# Groping the Map

Book 1

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## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

Standard boxout, provides additional information on game systems or narrative structure, out of sequence or as an overview.

Lighting boxout, details specifics about the lighting techniques used in a given area.

Weapon\Abilities boxout, additional information on particular weapons or player abilities as they relate to a given area or encounter.

Audio boxout, examination of the sound effects and music specific to a particular location or event.

Architectural boxout, additional information regarding architectural concepts that inform the spatial design of a given area.

Enemy boxout, information and design notes on specific enemies.

# Nova Prospekt

Half-Life 2

## Introduction:

*Having reached the resistance base at Black Mesa East only to witness it come under attack, you escape through the horrific remains of Ravenholm and the mines beneath. Upon returning to City 17 you discovered that resistance leaders Eli Vance and Judith Mossman have been captured. Eli's daughter Alyx is planning a rescue. To join up with her you take the antlion infested route along Highway 17 to a small resistance camp in the shadow of the foreboding Combine prison compound of Nova Prospekt.*

*Now, with a force of antlions in tow, it's time for you as scientist-cum-symbol of hope Gordon Freeman, to enter the Combine controlled facility, and rendezvous with Alyx.*

Nova Prospekt is one of only a few specifically identified locations in *Half-Life 2*. Taking place across multiple chapters (from the approach at the end of 'Sandtraps', to the escape in the "slow teleport" at the conclusion of 'Entanglement') Nova Prospekt is a defining moment in *Half-Life 2*. Foreshadowed at the very beginning of the game this is the furthest Gordon Freeman ever gets from the Citadel at the heart of City 17. Nova Prospekt marks a turning point not only in his own journey, but in the narrative arc of the game as a whole. From the plot reveals regarding the motivations of Dr Mossman to the revolution triggered by your actions within the prison, after your visit to Nova Prospekt nothing will be the same again.

*Half-Life 2* occurs over the course of three days (though these days are not consecutive), and takes players on a loop from the City 17 train station, out through Black Mesa East and the abandoned town of Ravenholm, along Highway 17 to the prison of Nova Prospekt. From there a Combine teleporter sends them back to a City 17 now in the throes of revolution, they must fight through the City past the train station once more for a finale atop the towering structure of the Citadel.

Each of the three days corresponds to each of the three acts in a traditional three act structure. Occurring during the evening of Gordon Freeman's second day the infiltration of Nova Prospekt is the climax of the second act, and marks the final turning point in the plot where traitors are revealed and the characters face their darkest moment before the climactic and ultimately triumphant return to City 17 in the final act.

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Interiors of Nova Prospekt were among the first public images of *Half-Life 2* ever revealed. Though the design of the Combine forces themselves has changed, the layout of cell block B4 can still be clearly identified. The architecture of Nova Prospekt is so indelibly linked to the world of *Half-Life 2* that Valve choose to host one of their pre-release PR events on the architecturally influential prison island of Alcatraz.



*Cell block B4 as it appeared when Half-Life 2 was first announced.*

For the purposes of this analysis (as of this initial release) I will be focusing on the ‘Nova Prospekt’ chapter primarily. It offers your first sight of the prison, and serves to introduce concepts that are built upon in subsequent chapters; I will also examine the approach along the beach that forms the climax of ‘Sandtraps’.

## Analysis:

### ***Beach:***

Having obtained the antlion pheromone pod - know colloquially as Bugbait - you leave the resistance camp with an entourage composed of a pair of docile antlions; an additional pair scurries down the cave to join you as you approach the beach.

Able to influence and direct the antlions, and with an endlessly replenishing supply, you can complete your assault across the beach below Nova Prospekt without ever firing a shot; or you can use them in conjunction with your own weapons to distract and flank the Combine forces.

With the Bugbait equipped you can issue rudimentary commands to the antlions accompanying you. Squeezing the pod with the secondary fire button will emit a burst of pheromones that attracts all antlions in the vicinity to your location. In order to use them more directly, you can throw the Bugbait in a similar fashion to a grenade; you have an inexhaustible supply, much like the antlions themselves. Targeting a NPC will send the antlions swarming to the attack, while aiming at a part of the environment will send them to wait at that point. As you cannot encounter friendly NPCs while able to control the antlions you will never have to worry about them attacking something non-hostile.

Additionally, if you are able to hit one of the Combine soldiers with a hurled Bugbait pod the pheromones released will disorientate and incapacitate them for a brief period. This will still occur even if there are no antlions to attack, meaning once you have obtained the Bugbait you can use them as rudimentary stun grenades against Combine enemies - the hurled Bugbait has no effect on zombies and other creatures.

Having spent the day progressing along Highway 17, the sun has started to set by the time you leave the cave, the sky a darkening blue. The beach leading to Nova Prospekt is abutted by cliff walls that are low enough for you to see the trees on the ground above, but still too high to scale. You need to progress along the beach until you reach the cliffs beneath the high prison walls, here a path up can be found.

The conclusion to the 'Sandtraps' chapter, the attack along the beach toward Nova Prospekt is reminiscent of the similar sequence from the opening of 'The Silent Cartographer' (*Halo: Combat Evolved*). Both of these draw influences from pre-existing cultural representations of the D-Day landing, though tilted through ninety degrees to become an assault along the beach rather than up it. A change in the tactical arrangement of space, this shifting of the line of advance also serves to position the water to one side of the player, and the cliffs to the other. Confining all combat encounters to a narrow channel with clear boundaries, ensuring player movement is easier to manage

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than it would be if attacking from the water with an expanse of beach to either side.

The beach is split into three sections divided by rock formations, each section protected by at least one Combine bunker. The size of the area watched over by each bunker, and the challenge presented by each encounter, escalates quickly. After the third and final bunker you have to push forward through the claustrophobic ruins of a half collapsed human structure before reaching the foot of the cliffs below Nova Prospekt.

The foes on the beach are almost exclusively Combine soldiers; only as you make your ascent up the cliff face do you encounter a scattered few zombies and headcrabs. With specific targets standing in relatively open spaces, and with a tendency to clump together, this beach assault makes a good playground for the experimenting with the use of your Bugbait. You can sit back and watch your antlions charge into the Combine's defensive line.

*"Priority warning, perimeter restrictors disengaged."*

The first sight that greets you upon leaving the cave is a pair of large anthill-like structures. Taller than you, almost as tall as the cliff walls surrounding them, their roughly conical structure is mirrored somewhat in the Thumpers that are stationed on the beach beyond. Both are symbolic of a connection between this area and the antlions, though for different reasons.

First encountered during your trip along Highway 17, the Thumpers are used to create an area of space through which antlions are unwilling to pass. Up until this point you have been trained to find a way to turn on any Thumpers you encounter so as to give yourself some safety from antlion attacks. Now, with antlion forces at your disposal your interaction with the Thumpers is reversed. You need to find a means of disabling them to allow your antlions to accompany you.

The first Thumper is positioned where the cliff walls close in to form a natural chokepoint. Approaching it the antlions with you will slow down unsettled by the radial vibrations being generated. By forcing you to move through a constricted space the reaction of the antlions is made obvious, without another way around their only option is to hang back. If you don't initially realise the significance of the Thumpers their behaviour should indicate that something about the state of the world needs changing.

Once you climb the ladder to the Thumper's upper platform and disable it, the voice of the Combine Overwatch can be heard broadcasting across the beach; the Combine know something has happened, though for the moment there are still two more Thumpers defending the beach.

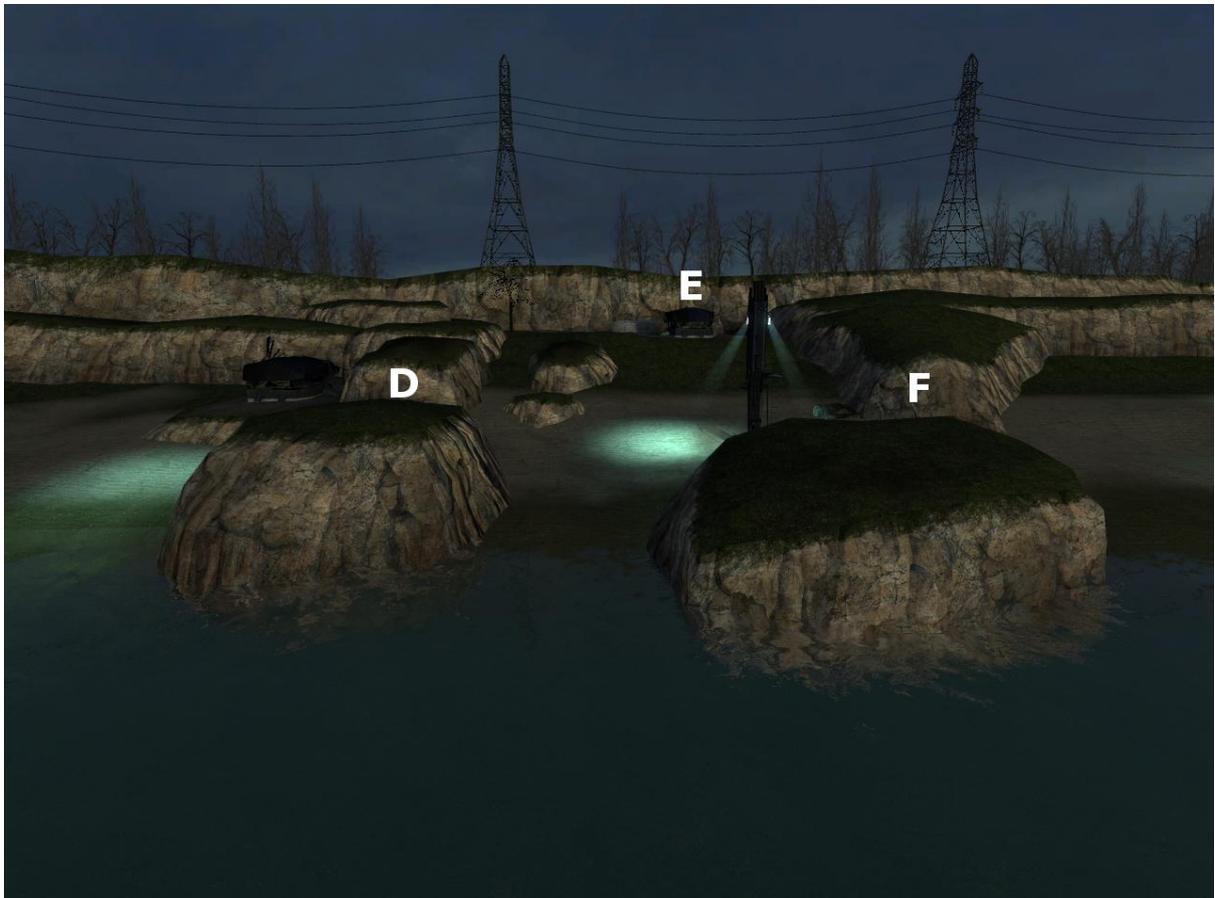
Beyond the space protected by the first Thumper the beach opens up slightly, with a second Thumper several meters further on. This too will need to be deactivated if your antlions are to provide you with

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any support. Quiet until now but for the ambient soundscape, the music will rise into the mix once you deactivate the second Thumper; the fight begins in earnest.

The first two Thumpers are standing in relatively isolated sections of beach, one directly after the other. There is a larger gap between the second and third than between the first and second, this gap is protected by the first of three Combine bunker, positioned at the top of the beach.

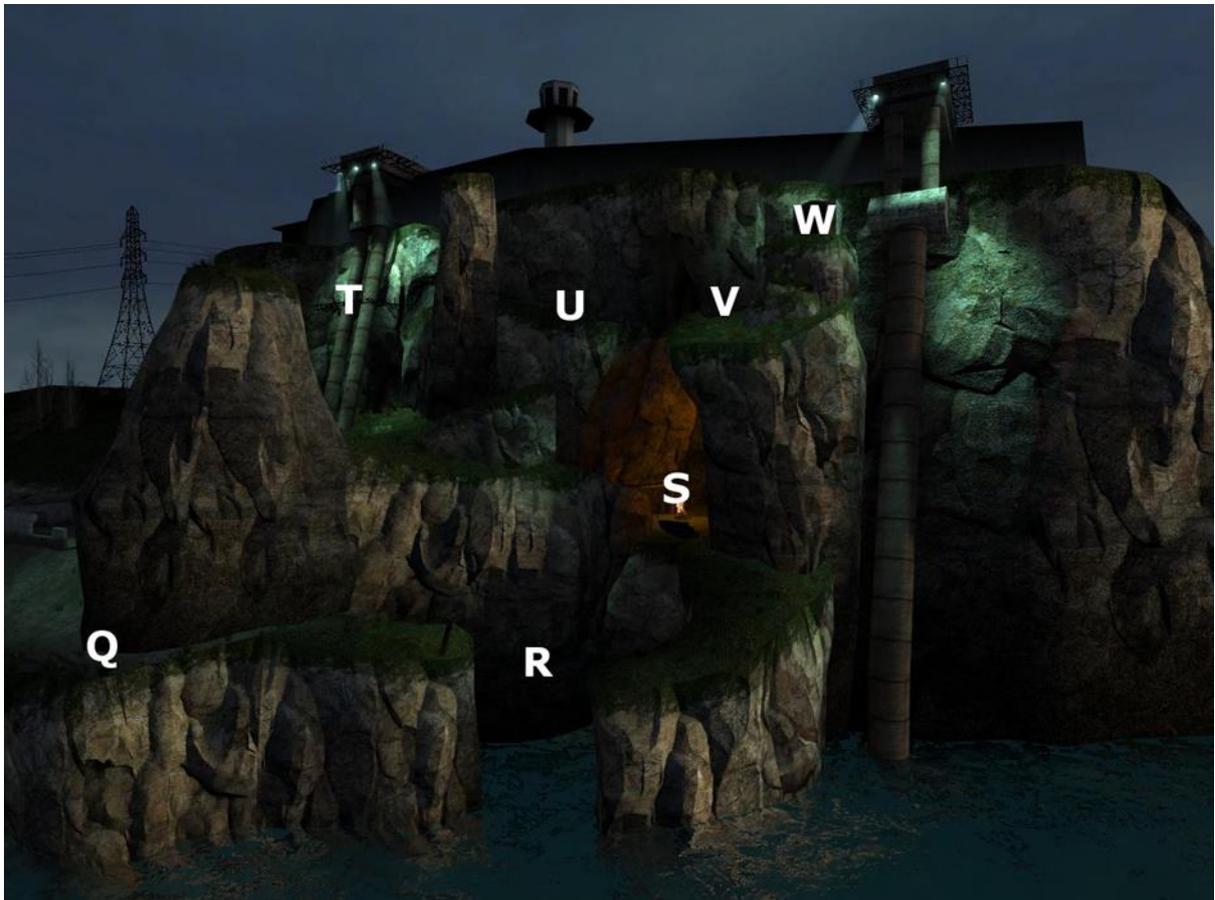
## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



# Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

After deactivating the second Combine Thumper (A), the only way to proceed is to move forward along the beach. Upon reaching the small rocks (B), two pairs of Combine soldiers will emerge from behind a large rock (C). Each pair will move away from C; one towards the rocks above B, the other across the beach toward the cover offered by the smaller rocks near the shoreline.

From B the third and final Thumper is visible beyond the gap in the rocks ahead (D), though the Combine pair that moved down the beach upon your approach block any direct progress from B to D.

The Combine bunker beyond C is dark, there are no searchlights playing across the beach, the only point of differentiation is the patch of light at D created by the Thumper's spotlights.

Moving forward from the second Thumper, a large low rock stands between the shoreline and the cliffs, it blocks a direct line-of-sight to the door at the rear of the bunker. As you move forward into the space ahead of the bunker a pair of Combine emerge from either side and move to flanking positions. Fortunately, the antlions under your command mean you should be able to deal with attacks from multiple directions simultaneously; unfortunately swapping between the Bugbait and your own weapons can prove awkward in the heat of battle.

The rocks (B) offer some protection from the Combine soldiers, and can be used to provide cover while you attack indirectly with grenades and Bugbait targeted antlions. When you do decide to move forward the positioning of this rock will push you to the right, away from the cliff wall and toward the shoreline, ensuring that you have to risk exposure to progress and can't just head directly for the rear of the bunker.

On through D, once again the way ahead (G) is visible. Heading directly to the Thumper will provoke fire from the second Combine bunker (E). The safe path is to head up the beach from D towards the cliffs and approach the bunker from this direction.

With the forces around the bunker dispatched, additional Combine soldiers will appear from further up the beach (F). Two pairs of Combine spreading out along the beach before advancing up the slope toward the bunker (E).

The next Combine bunker protects the area of beach where the third and final Thumper stands. The search lights from the bunker sweeping the beach and providing an indication of where the Mounted Gun within is trained. This weapon is much more effective than the Combine soldiers themselves at killing antlions; this makes sense given they are the primary threat likely to be approaching from this direction. Although you can direct your antlions into the bunker's line of fire to keep the Combine distracted, you can't rely on them to do all the work for you this time. You will need to move forward yourself if you are to safely lead them away from the killing grounds into a position from which they

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can attack the Combine behind and within the bunker. If you keep close to the rocks on your left (**D**) there is a path up the beach to the cliff wall. Taking this route lets you guide your antlions toward the rear of the bunker without triggering an attack. Even if you do not take this path yourself it is there to enable the antlions to reach the top of the beach, they will not approach the Thumper directly until it has been deactivated.

Instead of a scripted attack by Combine soldiers to block your path or draw your attention, this encounter guides you in two complementary ways. The Thumper must be deactivated if you are to bring your antlion forces with you, but this is not possible while there are Combine still inside the bunker. In design terms this is a form of “forcing function”: you cannot complete Task A (shutdown the Thumper) until you have completed Task B (kill the Combine inside the bunker). Therefore, the game can be certain that once Task A has been completed Task B has also been completed; you are forced to complete Task B even if it is not your actual goal.

The Combine bunker has been erected abutting an older concrete structure which appears to have survived from a previous era, likely World War 2. The precise location of City 17 is never given - though architecture and signage suggest that it is somewhere in Eastern Europe - so what stretch of water these original bunkers may have guarded, and from what threats, is never explored. That City 17 exists somewhere near the Baltic would make the most sense geographically.

As you attack this Combine bunker the forces within will sound an alarm, though this can be silenced by a switch inside the damage has been done. More Combine are on their way.

Inside the bunker is a Mounted Gun that is identical to the ones you will have first encountered as you headed out of City 17 during the ‘Route Kanal’ chapter. Two pairs of Combine will attack from further up the beach, approaching through the chokepoint formed by the rocks near the shore (**F**). They will branch off to either side of the Thumper before attempting their approach, making themselves easy targets for the Mounted Gun.

With the Thumper still active the antlions will be unwilling to attack the advancing Combine until they have moved off the sand. You will need to deal with them yourself.

By being forced to clear the bunker before you can deactivate the Thumper, the game can be sure that once you leave this section of beach there are no remaining Combine soldiers behind you.

Beyond **G** is the third and final beach encounter. The only available cover from the Combine bunker (**J**) is offered by the rocks ahead of you (**H**). From this position you will come under attack from a pair of Combine soldiers further along the beach.

The only way to reach the Combine bunker is to advance across the beach to **I** and take the path up

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and around to attack it from the far side. Upon reaching **I**, three Combine soldiers will move down the path toward you. Once these have been dealt with the route to **J** is clear. The trio of Combine soldiers within the only forces left in this encounter.

Now, finally off the sand, the way ahead lies through the doorway into the darkened interior of the crumbling structure (**K**).

Once more Combine bunker protects the area ahead. This one stands atop a concrete platform, higher than the others and no longer directly accessible from the beach. Within are a trio of Mounted Guns, together able to cover a hundred and eighty degrees sweep of the beach in front of the bunker. This spatial layout forces you away from the tactics used to deal with the previous bunkers. There is no safe path for you to lead the antlions along to reach the bunker, you must move through the killing field directly ahead of it.

Moving forward, the rocks and driftwood on the shore provide isolated points of cover from the bunker to your left. Scattered Combine forces have taken up positions on the beach they will use their weapons and grenades to attempt to flush you out of hiding. Antlions can be used to deal with the Combine on the beach. You will need to be careful as the highest cover is close to the shore, and antlions cannot swim; they will in fact die when exposed to water. Fortunately, as new antlions appear to replace those lost, you can eventually win out against the Combine on the beach through sheer attrition.



The rocks at **I** are the only point of bright illumination in the distance, while the closer space around

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H is illuminated with the same colour and style. The connection between the two is logically formed: H is related to I; the path forward is through H to the distant I.

Initially there are two pairs of Combine soldiers on the beach. The first are waiting in the rocks close to the shore (H). With them in front of you, and the incoming fire from the Combine bunker to your left, it's easy to get pinned down here. Grenades can turn the tables, flushing the Combine into the open; alternately Bugbait will fix them in place and allow your antlions to deal with them. The second pair of Combine are waiting further ahead, behind cover at the far end of the beach (beyond I). This second pair serve primarily as a soft barrier and can mostly be ignored. They don't directly block your progress, but their presence serves to disincentive proceeding in that direction, especially as an alternate path is available. If this soft barrier doesn't work to push you toward the correct route, a more explicit barrier is presented by the rock wall at the end of the beach, and the multiple Combine bunkers overlooking it.

As you reach the break in the cliff walls (I), and start to make your way up the path, three Combine soldiers will rush to engage you. At least one of them is armed with a shotgun. At such close range this Combine soldier presents the greatest immediate threat.

In the original release of *Half-Life 2* you had to be mindful of the silhouette of each Combine soldier in order to differentiate them. A change was made for the release of *Half-Life 2: Episode 2* whereby differently armed Combine were given different coloured eyes.

Eyes glowing red the Combine soldiers armed with shotguns are now instantly recognisable even in darkness, allowing you to prioritise your attacks as necessary. The majority of the Combine forces in Nova Prospekt are armed with SMGs or Overwatch Pulse Rifles, and can be identified by their yellow eyes.

With these three Combine soldiers dispatched it is time to deal with the remaining forces inside the bunker. Each of the three Mounted Guns is operated by a single Combine soldier, though some may leave their position as you approach. The rear door of the bunker makes an inviting target for a thrown Bugbait pod, and in such a confined space the antlions will make short work of those inside; a grenade will have a similar effect.

Through the doorway in the rock (K) is a grid of small square rooms dotted with explosive barrels. Metal fences and collapsed walls serve to block a direct route through the space. Combine soldiers will push in from the far end as you make your way through.

Out the other side, you will be on a pathway several meters above the beach. Following the path around to the right leads to two Combine bunkers overlooking the beach below (L).

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The path curves up and to the right though the human built bunkers upon which the Combine structures have been grafted (M). As you approach two Combine soldiers will move to intercept you. A third operates the Mounted Gun within the bunker. Pushing forward around the curve in the path you take you out of this weapon's firing arc.

Built on a corner the concrete bunker (M) extends around to the left with another entrance out on to the open space at the foot of the cliffs below Nova Prospekt itself.

At the top of the beach behind the Combine bunker is a tiered circular depression. Constructed from concrete it looks like it might once have been a coastal gun emplacement - its design is similar to those seen in northern Europe during World War 2. Along the cliffs above the beach are a number of other structures that, from their design and materials, appear to be from the same era.

A darkened doorway leads into a bunker cut through the cliff (K). Its position and design suggest it once served as an ammunition depot for the nearby coastal gun. Now it stands abandoned, holes blasted in the roof, masonry littering the floor. Blocked first by a section of collapsed roof, then beyond that by a rusted metal fence, the main corridor once formed a straight line from one entrance to the other. With this route blocked, you are forced into the warren of interconnected rooms branching off to the left. The asymmetrical layout, abundance of debris, and limited light sources combine to create a confusing network of square concrete spaces with multiple exits, and no clear path to follow.

Two Manhacks will burst, buzzing, from the darkness as you round the first corner.

Small flying drones, Manhacks are propelled by a trio of centrally mounted rotor blades that also serve as their only means of attack. They can be destroyed with gunfire, though grabbing them out of the air with the Gravity Gun and smashing them against a hard surface is the more efficient way to deal with them.

While holding one with the Gravity Gun you can also use the whirling rotors to damage any enemies in melee range.

Low damage attacks combined with an unpredictable movement pattern make Manhacks a good means of harassing the player without providing a genuine threat.

With limited room to move combat here is claustrophobic and messy. The Combine soldiers throw out flares ahead of their advance, casting the graffiti cover walls in a violent red glow. Small stockpiles of explosive barrels sit against the walls where they are easily hit with stray - or intentional - bullets. Each of these clusters of barrels are so close together that the explosion of one will ignite the others.

This fight foreshadows a similar encounter during 'Entanglement' where, within the bowls of Nova Prospekt, the Combine cut the power and attack you and Alyx from the darkness; their positions

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initially only visible by their glowing eyes.

Devoid of any pre-existing light sources the subterranean structure is instead illuminated organically with flat grey light from the holes in the concrete roof, and the bright red flares dropped by the Combine. This creates an alternating colour scheme of grey and red, with the way onward signified by those areas that are illuminated by the contrasting colour.

A large hole in the roof of the exit room makes it one of the brightest spaces, causing the Combine to be silhouetted as they move through this room toward you.



All rooms eventually lead to a large interior space with one way in and one way out. Here the roof has completely fallen in leaving a pile of rubble in the middle of the floor. The exit from this bunker is through the door in the right-hand wall. Beyond, a short hallway extends to the left out onto a path clinging to the rocks above the beach.

Before reaching this final room, there is a small opening in the wall to the left. Obscured behind a barrel it is not strictly a Lambda Cache (secret stockpiles of the resistance forces from Black Mesa East, marked by a yellow lambda symbol), despite its partially hidden nature and the pair of supply crates within.

A low concrete wall runs along the right-hand side of the path, channelling you forward while preventing you falling over the edge to the beach below. Such a fall won't always be fatal, but it will take time to get back up here again.

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This wall connects to a larger concrete structure which has been augmented by a pair of Combine bunkers. Positioned at right angles to each other, they form a corner overlooking the beach. Only one of their entrances is visible from here, the Combine soldier operating the gun emplacement within will react to your approach, turning to engage you. The other bunker is empty.

Visible further along the path is a second, larger, concrete structure (**M**). The Combine soldier operating the gun emplacement here can target this stretch of path, so you'll need to close the distance to escape its field-of-fire. If you are able to kill him from a distance he will take a dramatic tumble through the window. The path itself continues further along the beach, parallel to the water, before curving up and to the right to reach the entrance to this WW2-era bunker. Two Combine soldiers will emerge to meet you, firing Pulse Rifles and throwing grenades to cover their advance. The concrete walls along the cliff edge offer cover, and are low enough that you can hurl Bugbait ahead of you to have your antlions deal with the Combine while you remain safe.

With the Combine on the path dealt with – and assuming you haven't already killed the gunner - it's possible you will hear the remaining soldier issue the radio warning: "*Outbreak! Outbreak!*" This is the signal that they are the lone surviving member of their squad, and an indication that the current combat encounter is nearly over.

Along this part of the path the WW2-era structures are at their most intact, the Combine have simply repurposed these coastal bunkers for their own use. Occupying an entire exterior corner, the bunker's windows overlook everything from the beach, to the open space at the foot of the cliffs below Nova Prospekt.

Compared to the first *Half-Life*, the manner by which the Combine forces vocalise their behaviour is a case where clarity was sacrificing for narrative. That the Combine view aberrant behaviour as a disease provides an insight into their belief system, and adds to the narrative contextualisation of the world. This comes at the expense of clarity of intent, it's difficult to translate these cryptic barks into expected behaviours. Does that voice line mean the Combine have lost sight of me, or that they know exactly where I am?

When it comes to combat AI, perception is important, enemies that communicate their thought processes appear intelligent. Players, in turn, will feel rewarded when they are able to use those behavioural cues to out-smart the AI.

Across a stretch of grass are the cliffs, and the looming outline of Nova Prospekt atop them. Framed initially by the long rectangular windows of the bunker, then by the doorway itself, this is what Valve's designers refer to as a "vista". A visual reward for reaching this part of the level, it also serves a similar function to an establishing shot, providing an overview of what is to come; context for the coming

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fight. The vista is arranged under the assumption that you are coming through the door looking straight ahead. This is reasonable as there is no current threat so all your attention should be focused toward the direction you are moving.

Cutting through the centre of your vision - in what is almost a straight line - the white of the low cliffs in the middle distance lead our eyes across the space to the large metal pipes rising perpendicular to the ground. Attached to the side of the cliff upon which Nova Prospekt stands, these pipes point straight up toward it. At the intersection of these two strong visual lines is a Combine Dropship. Semi-organic flying craft, these are used to deploy groups of Combine soldiers. A dynamic element associated with combat, this will serve to further draw your attention, complementing the lines in the environment. The dynamic element indicates your immediate threat, the static elements your overarching goal. Reaching the place where the Dropship has landed is your current objective, while getting to the top of the cliffs is your long-term goal.

Leaving the bunker (M) the space between you and the cliffs is initially empty. As you move forward four Combine soldiers will charge from the Combine Dropship at the foot of the cliffs (P), one will make for the Combine bunker (N) while the others move across the open area towards the trees and rocks (O).

The Combine Dropship will depart before you can reach it, leaving the area at the foot of the cliffs empty (P). The way into Nova Prospekt is to be found high above, in order to reach it you will need to take the path along the cliff edge (Q).

The remains of another concrete structure stand at the foot of the cliffs where the Combine Dropship has landed. Its roof is missing entirely, and the remaining walls give little indication what purpose it once served. Four Combine soldiers emerge through the doorway in what is left of the concrete walls. Three will spread out and advance on you. The fourth will head across your line of sight, making for the Combine bunker (N) directly in-line with the doorway through which you enter this area. If able to reach the Mounted Gun within he will present a threat. You initiate this first wave of Combine by passing through an invisible trigger, the position of which is such that if you sprint directly ahead to the bunker you can beat the Combine soldier to it.

Threats from multiple directions, and no easy way to deal with them separately, this encounter encourages you to make effective use of your antlions. During the proceeding fights you always had the option of hanging back and letting them do the fighting. Attempting that here will prove much harder. The physical separation of the two threats (the Combine in the bunker, and the Combine soldiers out in the open) mean your antlions can only deal with one at a time. You either have to split your attention, sending them in one direction while you focus on the other. Or act in unison to

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overwhelm one threat quickly before turning your attention to the other, hoping you don't take too much damage from whichever force you initially leave unopposed.

Rushing directly at the Combine bunker is risky, but the threat it presents is probably the greatest, so dealing with it first makes sense. Once you have secured it you can turn the Mounted Gun on the remaining Combine soldiers.

If you move to attack the Combine soldiers in the open, the rocks, trees, and remnants of buildings strewn across the space (**O**) will offer protection to both you and them. The size of the area, and the way the soldiers spread out, make it impossible to keep all of them within your field-of-view. You can either try to outflank them with your antlions – while hoping you don't take damage from the Combine Mounted Gun – or use the cover to your advantage, isolating and eliminating individual soldiers without exposing yourself.

The Combine Dropship is not directly deploying any of these soldiers; instead this encounter has been designed so that each of the four Combine in the initial wave will be replaced. Killing one will trigger another to run from behind the concrete walls to join the attack. Depending on how quickly you deal with the initial four Combine, this can lead to either a drawn-out trickle of reinforcements, or a staggered sequence of waves. In total, you will encounter a maximum of eight Combine here, and never more than four at once. If you run toward the Dropship's landing site until you can see through the doorway in the ruined wall, the spawning behaviour will be cancelled, and you will only have to deal with the Combine that are already present; this prevents you from witnessing them spawning in.

The Dropship itself will fly away as you approach, its landing site offering a brief moment of calm. Nova Prospekt itself is finally in sight. It's time to find a way inside.

The mouth of the large pipe at the foot of the cliff - where the twin pipes running down from above reach the ground - initially looks inviting, though the metal grate over the entrance is immovable.

Contrasting in shape and colour with both the rocks around it and the water beyond, the half collapsed wooden fence along the cliff edge stands out. This is the way forward, a path curving behind the rocks and out of sight.

Around the corner is a break in the path (**R**), here an old wooden post juts out at an angle over the gap, and you can use this to get across. Keep moving along the path and you find yourself in a sheltered niche, here a small fire smoulders next to the remains of a wooden boat (**S**).

The path continues above you. Destroying the wooden beams supporting the platform against the cliff face will cause one end to drop to the ground, creating a ramp.

Two Combine soldiers have taken position on the gantry half way up the pipes (**T**), they will open fire

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once they can see you. On the far side of the pipes a ladder leads up to this gantry, from here you will need to jump back onto the cliff path again (U).

Another gap in the path (above S) needs to be traversed before you can climb up the rock steps (V), to the open pipe above (W). As you reach the top a Fast Zombie will spring from the mouth of the pipe (W), darting right at you. Beyond him the pipe extends underneath the walls and into the prison yard.

Initially hidden from view around the corner, a break in the path requires you to use one of the remaining fence posts, now jutting from the floor at an angle, to leap across the gap. This is an explicit break in the continuity of the level so far, a one-way obstacle that reinforces that backtracking is unnecessary. In actuality you can fall back down here from a higher part of the path, but this is liable to cause substantial damage, if not be outright fatal.

This concept of the one-way obstacle that enforces forward progression while preventing backtracking, is one that will be used several more times throughout Nova Prospekt. It usually appears in a similar form; a drop from a height that is low enough to avoid injury but high enough to ensure that you can't climb back up. Another version that will be seen later, is the moment where the ceiling collapses behind you sealing off the way you came. In games with less explicit level transitions it's a good way to ensure certain portions of a map can be unloaded safely from memory, as players will be unable to ever return to areas on the other side of the "drop".

Even before you reach the break in the path, orange lighting from a fire ahead is visible; another contrasting visual element that serves to draw your attention. A natural cleft in the cliff protects the fire from the elements. The remains of a wooden boat lie next to it (S), while ahead, slumped against the cliff beneath a wooden platform, are a pair of Zombies. Initially sedate, they will stagger to their feet and attack if approached. Between them is a small red petrol can, which will explode when shot, igniting the Zombies.

Ahead, closer to the fire, are the charred remains of a human body. The backstory of what happened here is intriguing, if difficult to parse. Did three people come up here to hide only to be attacked by headcrabs, forcing them to kill and burn one of their own before they too succumbed? One of the incidental historical details of this world is that during the early years of Combine rule the oceans were drained, causing a global drop in sea levels. This spot appears to be far above the high-tide mark, but the boat may have beached here years earlier when the sea level was much higher. If that is supposed to be the case it doesn't fit with the human structures on the beach, which would have been underwater if the sea level had ever been that high. There are no answers, just questions and a creepy tableau.

To carry on you need to find a way up. The wooden platform above the Zombies is supported by a pair

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

of posts. Akin to the classic “Hanna-Barbara effect” the different colour and material of the two supports distinguishes them from the platform, marking them out as functional. In addition to this visual differentiation their placement next to a threat - the Zombies - makes it likely that stray gunfire will hit one or both of them. Their reaction when under fire is to move, splinter, and finally break. These elements in combination inform you that shooting these wooden supports will have an effect on the environment. In this case destroying them and dropping one end of the platform to the ground to create a ramp.

Up this ramp and back onto the rocks, the path rises in a curve back toward the beach. Around the corner, and you are bathed in light from powerful spotlights above. Their beams angled down toward the twin pipes climbing the cliff face ahead of you. Immediately you will begin to receiving incoming weapons fire from higher up the cliff. The natural reaction to taking damage is to try and identify where it is coming from, by positioning the two Combine soldiers on an elevated position this encourages you to look up toward them, drawing your eye to the gantry which is your next goal. To reach it you will need to use the ladder on the far side of the pipes.

A third Combine soldier on the gantry at the very top of the cliffs will shoot down at you as you reach the top of the ladder. Again, this incoming fire encourages you to look up, reinforcing this as the direction you need to be paying attention to, the way you should be heading.

In order to keep moving up you will need to double back on yourself and jump from the gantry to a new section of the path. This might seem counterintuitive, but every stage of your ascent has been built on this zig-zag pattern of working your way across and up the cliff face. Two supply crates are sitting on the rocks at the start of this section of path, further encouragement to explore in this direction.

Smaller than standard crates, and marked with a black on yellow logo, supply crates are the primary means of acquiring ammunition throughout *Half-Life 2*. With a few exceptions the content of each supply crate is dynamically determined based on the player’s current status. If they are low on ammunition the crates are more likely to contain some, while players low on health will find health kits within instead.

This algorithmic allocation of resources serves to smooth over the most dramatic difficulty spikes by providing what the player needs when they need it. It can, however, cause a flattening of the dramatic curve of an encounter and the elimination of partial-failure states. If you struggle through a fight and only succeed by using all your ammunition the next supply crate you find will always grant you some, preventing frustration at the cost of minimising the edge case scenarios that can often be the most memorable.

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Ahead is another gap in the path, this one above the campfire where you encountered the two Zombies. On the far side of this final gap the path ends. The rocks here (V) can be used as steps to reach the ledge above where an overflow pipe opens onto the cliff face.

This space could have been designed to let you simply walk a path up the cliff face to reach the pipe. Instead the need to jump gaps, deal with threats, and find a route up irregular rock steps, provides a sensation of having scaled the cliff face instead of simply following the route provided.

Just before you reach the final ledge there is a scream from the darkness of the overflow pipe, a Fast Zombie will bound out to attack you. It will have been several hours since your last encounter with a Fast Zombie, the sudden appearance of one here is disruptive, potentially causing you to stumble on the rocks, or in some cases leading you to back right off the cliff to your death. It's a classic jump scare, something *Half-Life 2* uses sparingly to disrupt the pacing of encounters.

Past the Fast Zombie the open pipe leads under the walls above and through a level transition into the overflow drains beneath the prison yard.

### ***Prison Yard:***

The confrontation here marks the close of the ‘Sandtraps’ chapter. It merges a test of everything you have learnt about controlling antlions with a climactic encounter against a pair of Combine gunships.

Commonly introduced at the start of a chapter, *Half-Life 2* presents new design concepts in isolation first, before asking players to deal with them in combination with other - previously introduced - concepts.

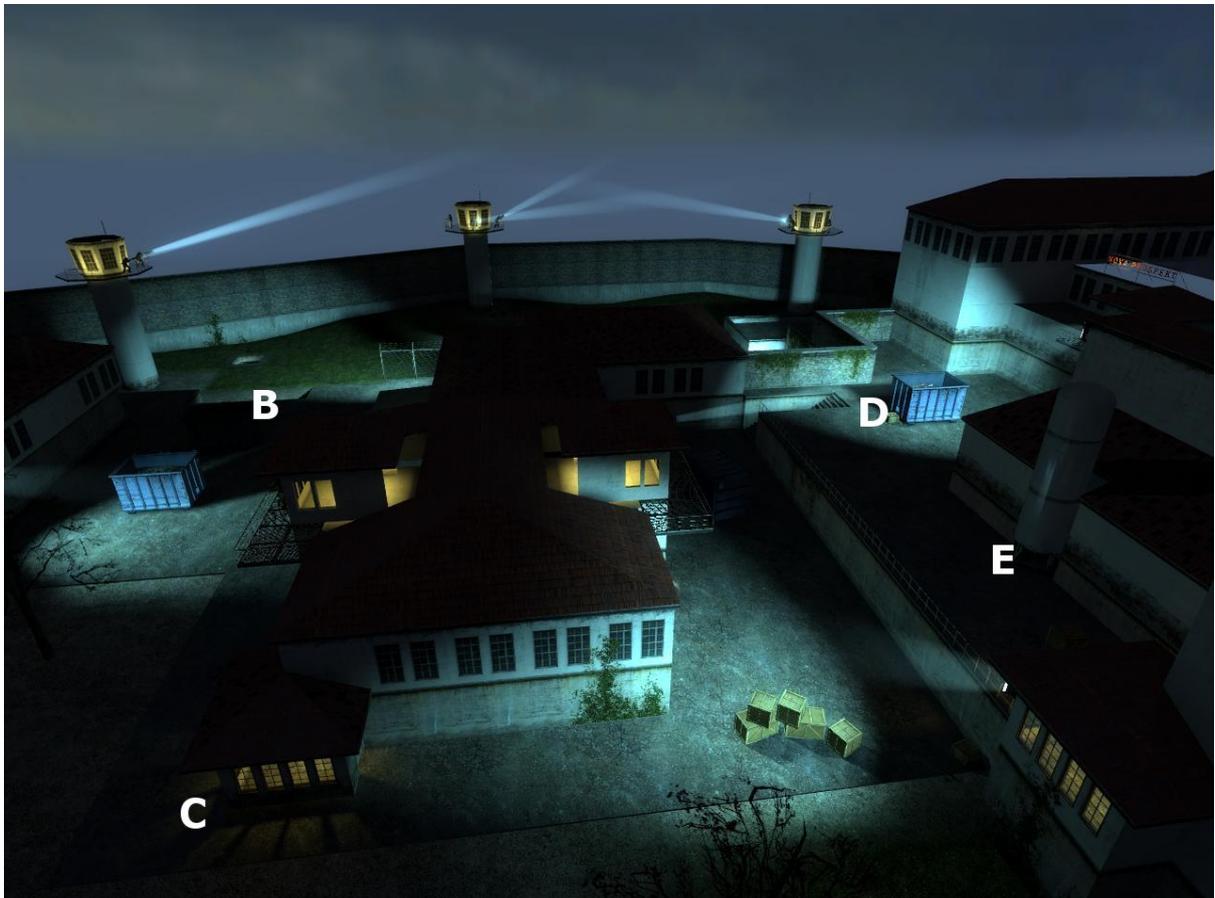
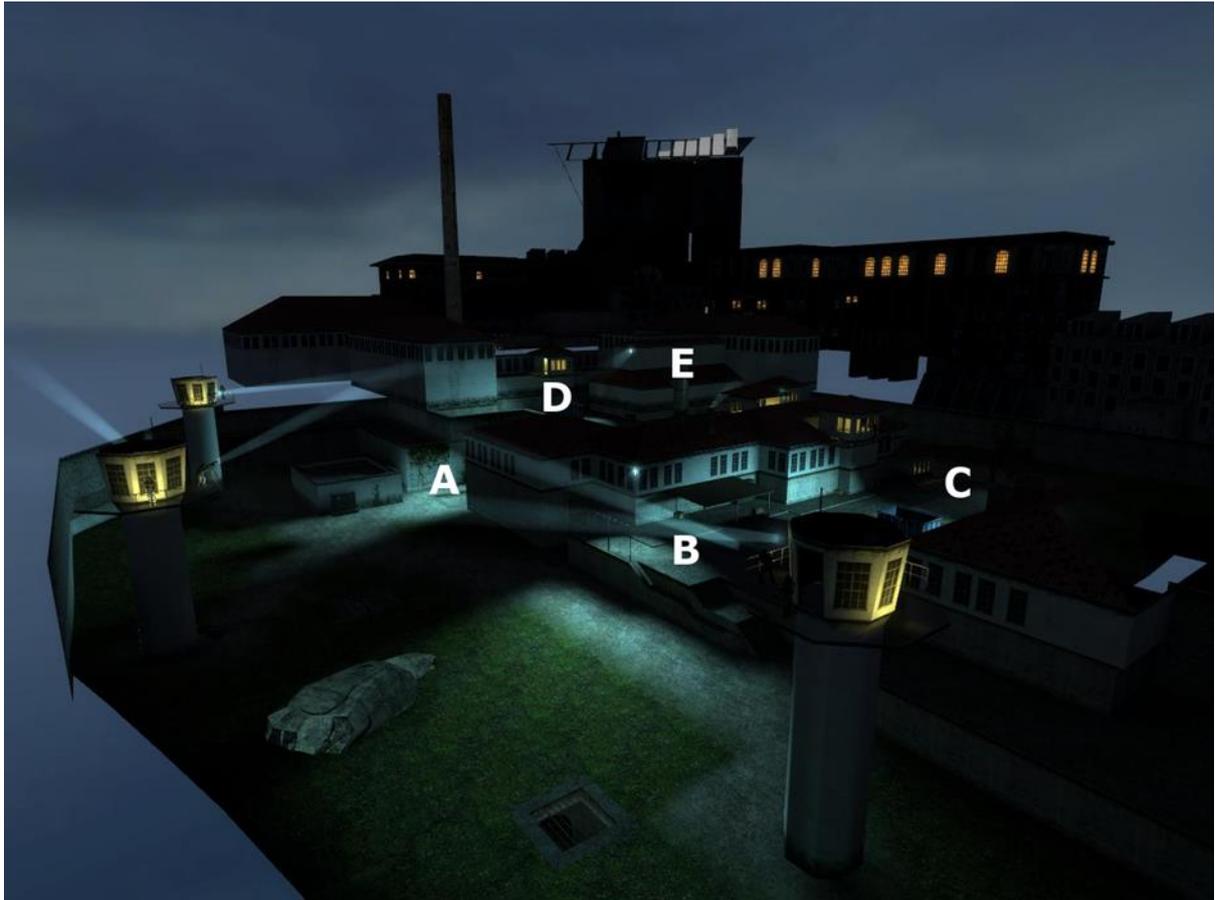
Airboat, buggy, Combine gunships, antlions, sentry guns, new concepts follows the same pattern: an introduction preceded by a series of encounters that gradually layer on additional complexities before a final climatic encounter. This creates a dramatic arc for each new concept, which can be seen clearly with the Combine gunships. Introduced first in ‘Highway 17’ along with the Resistance RPG, there are three more encounters over the course of that chapter (on the road, under the bridge, and at Lighthouse Point) then a finale within the prison yard here at the end of the following chapter, ‘Sandtraps’

Usually each new concept is introduced in the same chapter an existing one is reaching its climax, their dramatic arcs overlapping as one concept transitions to the next. Here the antlions are introduced during the same chapter that the Combine gunships arc is reaching its climax, while in the next chapter the antlions are complemented by the introduction of the Combine sentry guns.

The prison yard is one of the few encounters within *Half-Life 2* where you have to deal with two different enemy types at once. It’s not uncommon to face multiples varieties of zombie, or Combine soldier, however it is rare to deal with both soldiers and vehicles at the same time. The augmentation to your combat power provided by the antlions, and their relatively “fire-and-forget” nature, makes this area less frustrating that it might otherwise have been.

*“Overwatch confirms double boomers dispatched inbound...”*

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## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

The tunnels beneath the prison yard connect to a half-filled pool (A). From here you need to reach the stairs up to the next level (B), which means moving through the open ground beneath the prison walls. A trio of watchtowers overlook this space, three Combine soldiers on the upper platforms of each.

Your entry to Nova Prospekt is inauspicious, wading through pools of ankle-deep water in the overflow tunnels beneath the prison yard. The sun has yet to set, and though the tunnels remain dark, blue grey light from above filters through the grates at each intersection illuminating the stagnant water that has gathered below. Standing at these intersections you can look up through the grate and observe the Combine watchtowers along the outer wall of the prison compound. You can see a different watchtower from each of the two intersections and can even pick off the soldiers operating the mounted guns on their upper platforms; the crossbow is most effective for this.

Out of the tunnels and into a larger overflow pool. Moving toward the ladder up to ground level you are suddenly submerged as the floor drops away beneath you. Scrambling after you some of your antlions will drown before you can climb out. As before the antlions are an inexhaustible resource and contriving a situation where at least some will die in the water allows the game to show reinforcements flying up and over the prison walls to join you.

*Half-Life 2* is very interested in showing you things it hopes you will find visually appealing, and the antlions are one of its favourite means of doing so.

Initially appearing as a mass of limbs, their visual design and colouration is unique enough to stand out in a variety of environments. Their nature as initially hostile and later friendly mean you will always have a vested interest in knowing where they are. These two elements in combination mean you are very likely to be paying attention to - and looking for - them. Because of this the game uses them frequently to show off “cool” aspects of its design and technology, from their bursting out of the sand at the start of this chapter, to them swarming in through holes in the roof once you enter Nova Prospekt proper.

These cool moments are not simply spectacle, they can also serve to teach new concepts and behaviours. There has been little opportunity to show-off the antlion’s flying behaviour before, at least not while they have been under your control. The sight of them buzzing over the prison walls serves to indicate how they can be used to attack elevated targets; such as the Combine on the watchtowers. Witnessing antlions leaping over the walls into the prison yard also reinforces the fiction that with the thumpers on the beach disabled Nova Prospekt is no longer secure.

The prison yard is split into three sections, each connected by a short flight of stairs. You exit the overflow tunnels in one corner of the lowest section with a lot of empty space between you and the

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

stairs up to the next (B).

There are three watchtowers in total, though only one is visible as you climb the ladder out of the overflow pool. Further ahead and to your left, the second tower is the furthest from your position, and only visible once you move away from the cover provided by the walls around the overflow pool. You may have already dealt with the Combine soldiers on these first two watchtowers from the safety of the tunnels below.



*In the space between the overflow pool and the prison walls, limited cover is provided by scattered groups of rocks.*

With watchtowers on three sides it's best to deal with the one you couldn't see from below first, so that you are not under attack from behind as you move forward to deal with the others – assuming the Combine there have not already been dealt with. Locatable from its searchlight beam, this third tower is behind and to your right. If you move forward too quickly the soldiers there will be able to target you. Using the cover offered by the low rectangular structure to the right of the overflow pool, you can approach this watchtower while remaining protected from its mounted guns. From the ground you can hit the platform with Bugbait, directing your antlions to deal with the Combine for you; if they don't kill them outright the distraction will let you to finish them off yourself.

Unable to deal with the Combine here from the tunnels, you are forced to encounter this watchtower

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directly, ensuring there is at least once occupied place to show off the antlion's leaping behaviour.

However, you choose to engage the watchtowers, alarms begin to sound once you are detected. The presence of one watchtower you cannot deal with before you enter the prison yard ensures you will always be spotted, providing a pretext for the alarms.

The position of the watchtowers keeps you restricted to the grass covered lower section of prison yard until they have been dealt with. The mounted guns will tear you and your antlions to shreds should you try to rush past them to the upper sections. Despite the alarms sounding across the compound there is no immediate time pressure at this stage.

Moving up to the second section (B), a pair Combine soldiers wait under the awning.

Your view of the next section is blocked by the concrete upon which it is built, the only way up provided by a set of steps built into this foundation. Approaching these steps, and starting your ascent to the next section causes one of the two Combine soldiers standing there to launch a flare; a signal for the Combine gunship. Even if the connection between the flare and the arrival of the gunship is not clear the former is a further indicator that your presence has been noticed; the Combine are ready for you.

From the launching of the signal flare it takes between ten and fifteen seconds for the Combine gunship to arrive and begin attacking. There is some scattered RPG ammunition on this lower section, though it's unlikely to be enough to destroy even one gunship.

Having first encountered the gunships at New Little Odessa, each time they have appeared throughout 'Highway 17' and 'Sandtraps' has seen an escalation in challenge, culminating in this encounter in an enclosed arena with a pair of them. There is cover within the prison yard, but none that provides protection from all sides. With both gunships patrolling overhead nowhere will remain safe for long.

The Resistance RPG is first acquired in the 'Highway 17' chapter as the weapon of choice for dealing with Combine gunships.

The weapon fires a single rocket-propelled grenade (rocket for short) at a time, that once launched can be guided toward its target with a laser projected from beneath the launch tube. Care must be taken not to move the laser away from the target before the rocket has detonated as it will always attempt to steer toward the termination point of the laser, even if that is a wall or floor close to the player.

Combine gunships will prioritise any in-flight rockets over other targets and attempt to shoot them down. To avoid this, shots can be timed for between cannon bursts, or the rocket can be steered away from the front facing cannon to strike the gunship from the rear or flanks.

Able to only carry three rockets at a time you will need to keep moving to scavenge what ammunition

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you can find around this lower section.

The two Combine under the awning at the top of the stairs are the first of only six soldiers inside the prison yard that you can encounter directly, the rest are positioned on inaccessible catwalks and rooftops aiming down into the yard. These can be dealt with handily by your antlions, though doing so will require you to split your focus between targeting them with Bugbait and dealing with the Combine gunships.

Compared to the linear attack along the beach, the prison yard pits you against multiple enemy types spread across different vertical planes. The final combat encounter of 'Sandtraps' has been constructed to challenge your spatial awareness and resource management. It is one of the more mentally taxing encounter spaces of the game so far, with multiple threat vectors requiring counters that are non-intersecting; what works against one threat is useless or sub-optimal against the others. The open nature of this fight creates a contrast with the enclosed cell blocks and hallways inside Nova Prospekt, increasing the sense of claustrophobia once you finally gain entry to the prison.

Jutting out into the yard where it forms a corner is a small office (**C**), windows on the two external sides spilling yellow light. The position of this room prevents you hugging the wall as you move around the corner, forcing you out into the yard itself, exposing you to fire from the Combine on the rooftops and the circling gunship. A pair of Combine soldiers are waiting within this room, their Pulse Rifles able to do a lot of damage at such close range. With three distinct threats to deal with getting past this corner without taking a lot of damage can be a challenge.

The door to the office is on the far side. As well as providing limited cover from the gunship, there are health and HEV (Hazardous Environment) suit chargers inside. Because the antlions are too big to fit through the door they have a tendency to form up inside the doorway blocking your movement, and possibly leading to your death. One side-effect of their limitless supply is that you can crouch behind them, using their bodies to block the incoming gunfire.

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*The constricted nature of this room, the lack of cover during your approach, and the inability of the antlions to enter, all make this a challenging encounter for its size.*

In a dark corner against the wall - just before you reach this office room - is a supply crate. A single rocket sits atop it, within is some of the rare ammunition for the alternate fire mode of the Pulse Rifle: the powerful Energy Orb. This next room is a good place to experiment with its use. There is even a replacement on the table inside. In such a confined space the rebounding Energy Orb is almost guaranteed to hit both of the Combine, vaporizing them instantly. In the unlikely event where it doesn't the distraction is enough to finish them off with the Pulse Rifle's primary fire; or a point-blank shotgun blast.

By sending your antlions ahead you can have them draw fire from the Combine soldiers on the rooftops, using the tracers and searchlights to locate their positions before marking them for attack by the next wave of antlions.

Another flare will go up as you move past the corner room (C), calling in a second gunship. Movement of the Combine gunships is not under AI control, their paths are predefined which allows them to have more consistent movement around the level. This manual placement helps avoid the potential pathfinding issues that might arise from having dynamic AI control for such large flying creatures. As well as allowing you to be attacked from different directions, the two gunships are able to shoot down

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

rockets launched at each other, making them even harder to deal with. For the gunships any rocket in flight immediately becomes the highest priority target, so if you need to move from cover firing a rocket into the air is a good way to distract the gunships.

The area between the corner office (C) and the stairs to the next level is dotted with explosive barrels. With the Gravity Gun you can throw them to either attack the Combine on the rooftops or the gunships; though the latter strategy is extremely risky. Getting hit while holding one of the explosive barrels will cause it to detonate prematurely with potentially lethal consequences. If you are not planning to use them yourself, you will need to be careful that the incoming fire from the gunships doesn't set them off while you are nearby. An effectively strategy if you don't want to risk using them yourself, is to detonate them from a distance.

The final section of the prison yard is the highest. Built on top of the second, and accessible only by a set of steps against the back wall (D). Reaching here your path has described a circle, the overflow pool from which you entered the prison yard is on the other side of the wall.

Moving around to reach the upper yard (D) takes you past the guarded corner office (C); the two Combine soldiers inside able to attack through the windows.

Past (C) and onward (toward D) another flare is launched into the sky calling in a second Combine gunship.

Explosions caused by the destruction of the second gunship will destroy the large tank against the wall (E), opening a hole into the interior of Nova Prospekt.

A supply crate with an inexhaustible supply of RPG ammunition can be found on the highest section of the prison yard. As you can only carry three rockets at a time you will need to keep returning to here to resupply. Available cover was sparse on the lower sections, and here there is only a single large metal crate. You can sprint past the gas tank (E) to reach the room from which the Combine were shooting down at you, unfortunately the position of this room makes it an easy target for the pair of circling gunships. There's a supply crate within, though reaching it is risky.

The placement of the Combine soldiers in elevated positions and your need to take a circular path around the prison yard means that on multiple occasions you are forced to advance directly toward Combine who are firing down on you, all while trying to avoid the gunships. You need to keep moving if you want to stay alive.

There are a number of health kits dotted about the prison yard, but the limited cover forces you out into the open in order to reach them; you can take more damage in the attempt that you receive in return.

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When you destroy the second gunship its explosion will trigger the destruction on the cylindrical gas tank against the wall of the main prison building (E). Behind is a hole that you can use to access the interior of the prison, marking the end of 'Sandtraps' and the start of the 'Nova Prospekt' chapter.

Attempting to switch from the Bugbait to the RPG - or any of your other weapons - highlights the overly complicated user interface. Each type of weapon is assigned to a different bucket. You must first select the type of weapon you want then select the specific weapon within that bucket; a fiddly process in the middle of combat. The alternative is to scroll individually through all of your weapons, which can be just as time consuming.

The criteria by which weapons are grouped is unclear, it's not by effective range or relative power. Your shotgun is in the same bucket as your crossbow, despite their utility being very different. Bugbait has its own bucket, despite being thrown like grenades. In the heat of battle, you can easily end up selecting the wrong weapon and impotently facing off against the gunship with a pod of Bugbait in your hand.

Despite the flaming debris lying around the hole there's no guarantee you will have realised what has happened. The large white gas tank is not marked out in any way as important, and it's possible that during your fight with the gunships you will have moved away from this area entirely. The event that triggers the explosion is tied to the destruction of the second gunship to appear, which is not necessarily the last surviving gunship. Therefore, you can trigger it with one gunship still overhead diminishing the significance of the debris scattered across the upper section. With both gunships defeated you have the opportunity to explore the prison yard at your own pace and you will eventually find the way forward, though this is a rare example of Valve's environmental signposting falling short.

Turn the valves to shut down the flames, then proceed through the door. The building shakes as you approach the next door. The roof collapses behind you, sealing you off from the outside, and your antlions.

### ***Cell Blocks A3 to A5:***

The cell blocks of Nova Prospekt will be the longest Gordon Freeman has spent inside in the whole of *Half-Life 2*, the ninety degree turns and tiled floors recalling the Black Mesa Research Facility explored in the original *Half-Life*. These areas also see the return of familiar elements from that game: laser tripmines and automated sentry guns.

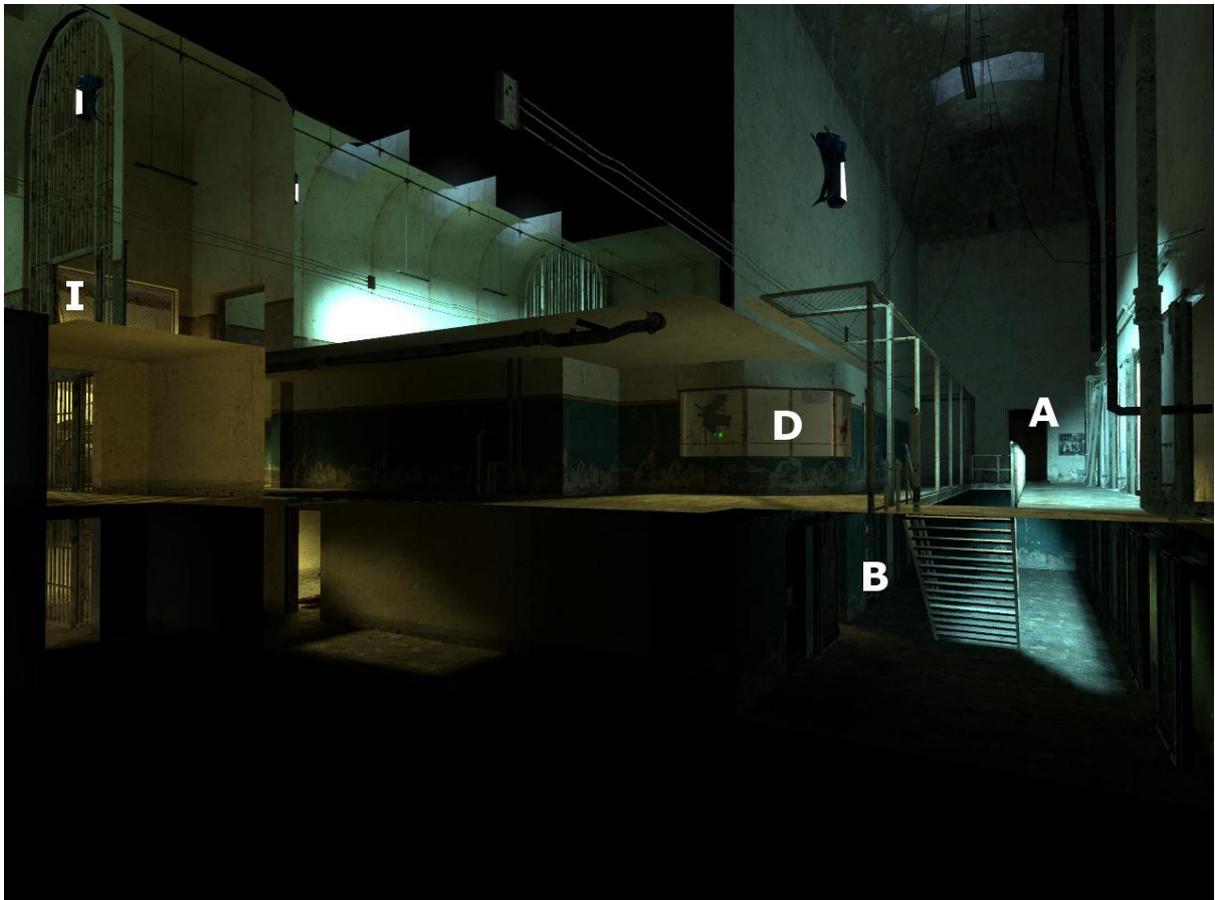
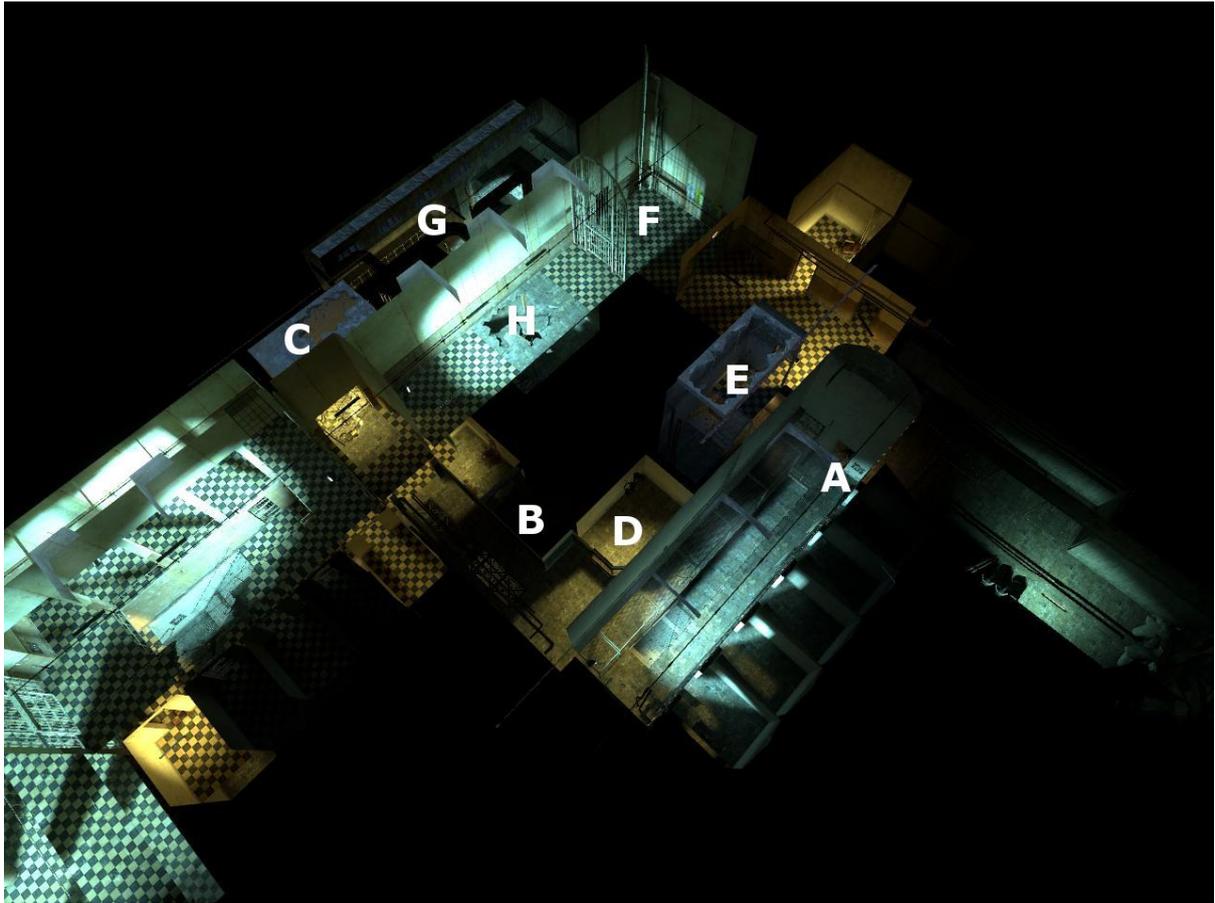
There are two styles of lighting used within Nova Prospekt: the warm yellows from human light sources (florescent tubes, bulbs); and the harsher cold white associated with the Combine - though not always emanating directly from Combine sources. Areas lit primarily by one style use the other to pick out areas of interest and highlight the way forward.

Throughout the 'Nova Prospekt' chapter the balance of lighting is approximately even, with maybe a slight bias toward the human associated warmer tones. Once you enter 'Entanglement' that balance tilts heavily in the opposite direction, harsher whites and blues become the dominate form of illumination with only small patches picked out in warmer yellows; here the Combine takeover is nearly total.

The initial areas of Nova Prospekt are largely deserted, there are scattered encounters with headcrabs and a small nest of barnacles, but your primary concern is simply finding a way deeper into the prison. Here you will get your first glimpse of the Combine's automated sentry guns. Initially seen on the other side of locked gates, they attack, and are subsequently attacked by, antlions. Witnessing these fights from a safe distance trains you in their strengths and weaknesses. Lessons that are put to the test during a confrontation with a pair of them as you leave cell block A5.

*"Incursion warning. Airwatch reports probable Anticitizen Freeman reacquired zone Nova Prospekt. Ground units deprioritize exogen containment. Hold for override codes."*

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With the roof collapsing behind you the only way on is through the door (A) into cell block A3. The entire right side of this space is cordoned off behind a fence. A set of metal steps leads down to the lower level where one of the cells is open, a hole in the back wall (B) leads through to an empty security office.

Outside the corridor runs past a locked gate – beyond which a sentry gun can be seen firing at a hole in the far wall. The corridor you are in continues to the right where a doorway opens into a stairwell (C). You come out on the far side of the fence bisecting cell block A3.

Through a door, out of the darkness, your first sight of the interior of Nova Prospekt is the flaking paint and rusting metal of cell block A3. A row of cells stands empty to your left, in addition to their barred inner doors each cell has an individual outer door of solid metal. Some of these outer doors are sealed shut - the contents of the cells to never again see the light of day - others hang from their frames or leaning impotently against the wall having come away completely.



*Small cells and solid metal doors, A3 was probably the solitary confinement, or high-security section of Nova Prospekt.*

The right side of the room is partitioned off by metal fencing, an empty security room can be seen beyond. A dull red splatter on the reinforced glass an indication that something happened here, though it's difficult to determine when.

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A corner room with a single door and three angled windows of reinforced glass. Nothing about these rooms explicitly labels them as a security office though their form speaks to their function: secured rooms from which to observe the cell blocks and corridors of Nova Prospekt.

The function of rooms within Nova Prospekt (and *Half-Life 2* as a whole) is - unless their role is otherwise specified - determined by their contents. Small rooms with desks and filing cabinets are treated as offices. Any changes from that basic assumed functionality are detailed and examined.

In the case of the security offices, Alyx does at one point in 'Entanglement' refer to them as such. The same is not true of certain other spaces within Nova Prospekt however, here I have assumed a room's functionality based on form, context, and contents.

In the centre of cell block A3, between the row of cells and the fenced partition, a flight of metal stairs descends into the gloom. The upper level overhangs the space below, casting everything to either side of the stairs in shadow.

With one exception the cells here appear untouched, their inner doors shut tight and their outer doors either firmly secured or slid aside to reveal the empty cells. Behind and to your left as you descend the stairs – beneath the fencing above - one of the cell doors is wide open, warm orange light spilling from within. A ragged hole has been made in the thick concrete rear wall of the cell. Blasted or carved through several feet of stone, it opens onto an abandoned security office. A lone headcrab crawls around inside the hole. Liable to pounce as you approach, this sudden scare serves to indicate that despite appearances there is still some hostile life in this section of Nova Prospekt.

Dull red smears of blood streak the walls and floor of the security office, the bodies of two Combine soldiers lie within. Out of the security office, to your immediate left a faded stencil on the wall proclaims this area as cell block A5. To the left the corridor dead ends. Overhead, grating in the ceiling forms the floor of the corridor above.

Metal gates to the cells of block A5 are sealed shut. On the other side a lone sentry gun stands watch over a hole in the far wall, firing sporadically at the antlions that emerge from its depths. If you wait here you can observe their behaviour, though a better example can be seen on the floor above.

This is the first time you will have seen the Combine sentry guns. Their look and functionality is similarly to those placed throughout the Black Mesa complex by the military during the events of *Half-Life*. Where those were static and triggered by visible laser tripwires these sentry guns are physics objects, and operate via motion sensors.

Past the gates an exit sign points toward a dimly lit stairwell. The floors of cell block A5 are visible from the stairs but fenced off, the landings between each flight offset from the floors of the cell block so

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that even without the fencing there would be no way to move between them. Despite being labelled as an 'exit' the stairs lead nowhere. The fencing is buckled and broken on the second landing, creating a small gap that offers a way out onto the floor above.

Another sealed gate to your right obstructs entry to the cells of block A5. On the other side a pair of sentry guns stand overlooking the multi-level space, allowing you to study their behaviour. If you keep watching antlions will eventually swarm them, knocking them over and causing them to deactivate. Without putting you in direct confrontation with them, these brief glimpses of the sentry guns at work serve to highlight key aspects of their behaviour: they are motion sensitive; they will fire on threats ahead of them; they can be disabled by being knocked over. Knowledge of these aspects of sentry gun behaviour will prove useful both within this chapter, where they are a direct threat, and in the subsequent chapter where you will have the opportunity to deploy them yourself.

Along with providing a teaching opportunity, being able to witness the sentry guns in action serves to make the world seem larger. You helped the antlions breach the perimeter and these are just some of the consequences, the things you are doing have an impact on the world beyond what immediately affects you.

Moving back towards cell block A3 a security office (D) overlooks the corner. Now on the other side of the fence from where you started a door in the back corner of the room leads to a further stairwell (E).

Continuing past this gate you walk over the grating the formed the ceiling of the corridor you were in below. Ahead is the fence partitioning off one side of cell block A3, you have completed a loop and are now next to the security office first seen when you entered this area (D).

Inside the security office you can see that the stain on the window was caused by the dead Combine soldier within. Opposite their slumped corpse a security monitor hanging from the ceiling is still active, using it you can observe scenes from nearby parts of the prison complex: antlions attacking Combine soldiers and sentry guns; a hidden cache of supplies somewhere behind a door; Combine soldiers in a losing battle with an antlion guard (this last sequence only visible if you cycle through all available views and spend more than a few seconds watching events unfold). All these scenes are of locations you will visit over the course of the next few minutes, foreshadowing threats and secrets to come.

To the left of the monitor are a pair of charging stations for health and HEV suit energy.

Back out into cell block A3, warm yellow light highlights the doorway near the rear wall, beyond is another dimly lit stairwell ascending to a wide deserted hallway.

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*Now on the far side of the security fencing, the radiators attached to the walls here mark this hallway as somewhere for staff not inmates.*

Opposite the stairwell are two small rooms. The door directly ahead has come off its hinges and now leans against the frame; you can push it aside and enter the darkened room to find a supply crate. The adjacent room is open, an empty chair stands within, it looks like some manner of dentist's chair though its use is likely far less curative.

Turning left as you exit the stairwell (E) two sentry guns stand at the corner (F) watching over the corridor, and the hole in the floor (H). Behind them a door leads into the partially flooded utility space (G).

Down the ladder into the water, barnacles hang from the roof, their tongues blocking your way into the room beneath the hole (H). Climbing the rubble back into the corridor, the sentry guns (F) will open fire if they are still active. Now on the far side of the gate you can continue forward through the double doors and into the upper level of cell block A5 (I).

At the end of this hallway stand a pair of sentry guns. Facing away from you, they are guarding a locked gate and the short stretch of hallway beyond. There's a hole in the floor on the far side of the gate, though nothing has emerged, yet. You can walk behind these sentry guns and through a door in the wall beyond. A safer option is to use explosives or physics objects – like the radiators in the hallway -

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to knock them over and deactivate them. Your first direct encounter with sentry guns, their position is such that they don't yet pose a threat, you have the opportunity to deactivate them before continuing forward.

Through the door beyond you enter a utility space (G). Full of pipes and storage tanks the room is now partially-flooded; boxes and other detritus floating above the floor in murky chest high water. Entering this space near the ceiling metal stairs lead down to a dry upper level, where a ladder descends into the water.



*Traversing the partially flooded utility space (G) is necessary to bypass the locked gates preventing access to cell block A5.*

With the room lit primarily by the cold blue grey of a Combine light in the corner, the ceiling remains in shadow, partially concealing the barnacles latched onto it. There are three of the creatures in this room nestled between the pipes and ventilation ducts. Only one can be seen - and shot – from the safety of the upper level, the others are only visible once you've entered the water and are able to move further into the room.

There are steps against the far wall, a raised walkway clings to the corner of the room before looping back, forming a bridge over the water. The final two barnacles are hanging over the stairs up to this walkway, and the middle of the bridge itself. The doorway at the far end leads to a small square space

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

into which the ceiling has collapsed, this is the hole you saw in the hallway above (H).

Barnacles first appeared in *Half-Life*. Static creatures, they attach themselves to ceilings in darkened areas letting their long tongues extend down to hang several feet above the ground. Anything that touches the tongue is grabbed and pulled up into the jaws of the barnacle above. Unable to discriminate between organic and inorganic material, they can be tricked into grabbing explosive barrels or other physics objects.

Hanging silently from the ceiling, only their thin tongues visible, barnacles make perfect traps. If spotted they can quickly be killed, and even if grabbed you can usually inflict enough damage to kill them before their maw closes around you. But where there is one there are others. Spotting a tongue, or the body of a barnacle itself, is a sign to be slow down and careful.

If the sentry guns are still standing they will attack as you climb up the rubble and through the hole. This incoming fire from behind encourages you to move forward toward the double doors at the end of the short hallway. Even if the sentry guns have been disabled, moving toward the doors will cause masonry and glass to fall from the roof, four fast headcrabs smashing through the skylight and down onto you.

You can make a run for it through the double doors, shutting them behind you and leaving the headcrabs on the other side, potentially to be gunned down by the sentry guns if they are still active.

Through the double doors (I) you can look down into the lower levels of cell block A5.

Though the gate on this floor is locked part of the walkway has collapsed (J), you can drop down to the floor below and exit the cell block through the open gates (K).

On the other side is a large space with an empty security office in the right corner and stairs to the left. Ascending the stairs to the upper floor (L), you will take fire from the sentry guns above (N).

The door here (M) is closed, though the adjacent window is boarded over and a Lambda Cache can be found on the far side. Continuing up the stairs, the way on is at the end of the hallway to your right (O).

The double doors open onto the top floor of cell block A5, an observation area built above the cells below; a hole in the centre of the floor allows you to look down into the main cell block. To your left beyond the buckled fencing is the “stairwell to nowhere” (C) that you explored earlier.

Ahead, rusting metal bars extend from the floor to the arched ceiling; the gate built into them sealed shut. On the other side you can see a large room, a pair of sentry guns occupy an elevated position against the far wall, monitoring the area between them and the exit from cell block A5.

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*The cells in this block have the bared interior doors seen before but lack the heavy, solid metal outer doors of those in cell block A3.*

Against the left wall a portion of the floor has collapsed (J). Drop down here and you'll find yourself where two sentry guns once stood, in front of the sealed gates to cell block A3. A set of metal stairs descend to the ground floor where the lone sentry gun was first seen pointing at the breach in the wall, one of many through which antlions have now begun to swarm.

Ahead the gate further into Nova Prospekt is open.

Through the open gate out of cell block A5 (K), you enter a space littered with physics objects: barrels strewn across the floor, and radiators attached to walls. Cylindrical columns support the roof, casting long shadows at slanted angles across the checkerboard tiles. The floor above overhangs, providing cover from the sentry guns underneath the windows on the top floor.

While pillars and columns can be used to partition space, their shape serves to modulate the sense of permeability that separation has. Square pillars create rigid lines that divides one space from another. Columns lack the perpendicular edges necessary to create a clear spatial divide and serve more to break up a space than to divide it into discrete sub-spaces.

Metal stairs to the left lead upward, but ascending will bring you into range of those sentry guns.

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If you stay on the lower floor you can use the overhanging roof, columns, and security office for protection while you deal with the sentry guns. The scattered physics objects can be used either as hurled weapons or mobile cover. From head-on the rudder like spine of the sentry guns gives them a very narrow hitbox, if you want to deal with them your best option is to knock them over with explosives or thrown objects.

You could make a run for it, past the sealed gate to cell block A5 and up the stairs on the far side to the top level. If you are fast enough the sentry guns can be bypassed completely, the way ahead does not require you to approach them. Though upon reaching the top floor it can be unclear which direction you need to go. So far throughout this level your route has been describing a series of circles, here however instead of continuing along the top level to the left to - completing the circle - you need to instead turn sharply to the right down a darkened corridor toward the warmly lit office at the end. Just before the final flight of stairs to the top level are a pair of double doors, the corridor beyond collapsed. The windows to the side have been replaced with wooden planks, the spray-painted symbol indicating the presence of a Lambda Cache behind.

Your path through this initial portion of Nova Prospekt describes a series of circles. You work your way from the door into cell block A3, through the cells, corridors, and stairwells below to a doorway directly to the right of where you started. This navigational motif is repeated as you are side-tracked from the main path into the flooded utility spaces, and again as you ascend the final room avoiding the sentry guns to. An effective use of limited space, continuously being forced from the direct path serves to disorientate and confuse. By the time you reach the shower block it can already feel like Nova Prospekt is a vast and complicated structure simply because of the effort required to traverse what is a relatively short distance.

***Cell Block A7:***

Moving deeper into the vast prison complex, you must confront an antlion guard in a deserted shower block; with the Thumpers deactivated Nova Prospekt is unprotected against even the largest of the antlion colony. Once defeated the stronger scent of the antlion guard no longer overpowers your own Bugbait, and the antlions will once again response to your commands.

The Combine soldiers protecting this part of the facility are easily dispatched by the swarming antlions, though now the sentry guns that you saw in the proceeding area are actively turned against you. The security office that unlocks the way forward is protected with laser tripmines, a familiar sight from *Half-Life* they are used sparingly throughout the rest of the game.

*“Attention Nova Prospekt internal containment team. De-service all political conscripts in block A7.  
Prohibit external contact.”*

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Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



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From the office (A) the doorway to the left is blocked by a trio of large crates. The corridor beyond leads along the side of the shower block, dead-ending at the far wall (B). Here you can drop into the shower block itself, causing the antlion guard to smash through the doors to your right (C).

Straight ahead you can duck into the darkened room (D), from there a right turn leads into the main part of the shower block.

Once the antlion guard is dead you have the freedom to dismantle the barricade against the doors (E).

Walking down the short corridor away from the 'A' cell blocks will trigger a map transition. The disused office space at the end is lit from within by a florescent light on the wall beside the door.

Throughout Nova Prospekt rooms are predominately lit either from fixtures within the room - of human or Combine construction - or from indirect lighting from outside through windows, skylights and holes in the structure. In actuality, the fixtures placed on walls and ceilings and the sources of light within each room need not be the same thing - there is no requirement in the Source engine that fixture models emit light or that light sources are attached to fixtures. It is an aesthetic choice which for the sake of brevity I will assume to be the norm. I will reserve specific commentary about the sources of light for those instances where it is not explicitly attached to some fixture or other identifiable in-world light source.

This room forms a corner between two corridors, large boxes block the exit. Just ahead of this barricade stands a desk with a supply crate on it. A lone headcrab has concealed itself amidst the boxes and will attack as you move through the room.

The corridor beyond the barricade forms a raised walkway running the length of the shower block. Split into three sections separated by doorways you need to traverse the full length of the corridor before you can drop down into the shower block.

Nova Prospekt was built as a prison, the spaces within divided between those areas accessible to prisoners - such as the shower block and the cells themselves - and those accessible only to the guards. This logical conceit of prison architecture is used to control movement through the level, creating situations where players are granted the opportunity to observe the areas ahead before initiating the transition between guard and prisoner spaces.

A further architectural manifestation of this division of space can be seen in the way it allows for vertical variation within a single room. Guard spaces formed from raised walkways and balconies overlooking the prisoner spaces below. Here this division of space is shown by the shower block, and the raised corridor that looks out across it.

Landing on the tiled floor of the shower block, there's a noise to your right. A glimpse of motion

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beyond the double doors, before they and the wall around them collapse inward. An antlion guard crashing through to charge you.

Three rockets will kill this larger antlion outright, though it can be difficult to remember you have the Resistance RPG. Until now it has been used primarily as an anti-vehicle weapon, the role it was explicitly introduced to fill.

Open and poorly lit, this portion of the shower block offers limited cover and few physics objects to throw at the charging creature. To stand a chance you need to either get past the antlion guard and through the smashed doorway to your right, or use the hole in the wall opposite. Two metal barrels block the far side of the hole. A Gravity Gun blast or a well-timed explosive will knock them aside, allowing you to duck through the breach. The area beyond is dark, limited illumination visible through a second hole in the wall to the right. Though you need to crouch to get through the antlion guard will simply smash into the wall, creating much larger holes which you can use from now on.

Partitioned into distinct spaces by pillars and low walls, the shower block forms an arena for your fight with the antlion guard. The floor here is littered with physics objects: carts, crates and barrels - including explosive ones. There are also dead Combine soldiers sprawled on the floor and blood all around. Exit from this space is through a pair of double doors in the far wall, junk has been piled in front of them suggesting the Combine who died here did so while attempting to prevent the antlion guard from gaining access to the rest of the prison. There's no time to dismantle or blast the piled physics objects out of the way while being chased. You'll need to defeat the antlion guard before you can clear the barricade.

Larger, with an armoured carapace protecting their head, the antlion guards lack the limited flight capabilities of their brethren. Charging to the attack they wield their armoured heads like a cudgel, knocking aside anything in their path and launching debris as projectiles. Best dealt with at range, it's advisable to put an obstacle between you to forestall its charge.

Alongside the tension of being chased through an enclosed space by an antlion guard there's a layer of subtext to this encounter beyond the overt threat. You are being chased around a prison shower block by a creature who tries to smash you with its phallic head. This implied sexual threat is something Valve have toyed with before, one of the never used enemy concepts for the original *Half-Life* was a creature dubbed "Mr Friendly". In one of its designs this creature had a visible penis and would attempt to mount the player. The intent being to play on the potentially homophobic fears of the presumed predominately teenage male audience. Given the years between the two games one of the considerations during the development of *Half-Life 2* was the notion of eliciting a "post-Mr Friendly" response from the now older player base.

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If you don't use your RPG the antlion guard can be brought down through a combination of thrown objects and gunfire. It lets out a mournful moan upon death and slumps onto its side. Once dead a lone antlion will enter the shower block, either through a window or one of the holes in the ceiling. With the stronger source of pheromones gone they once more look to you to guide them.

Past the doors to the shower block (E), the corridor makes a ninety-degree turn. Around the corner the Combine are waiting (F) with support from sentry guns flanking the locked gate at the far end of the room (K).

To open these gates requires reaching the security office overlooking this room(J).

During your fight with the Combine, the gate to cell block A7 (G) will open, a wave of Manhacks presaging the arrival of further Combine soldiers.

Through the doors and into a wide low hallway, which after a sharp turn to the left terminates in an open area. Smaller than the shower block, with a higher ceiling, a trio of Combine soldiers are waiting in ambush here (F). Stacked boxes obscure the view ahead while fencing means you can't cut the corner, you're forced directly into the field-of-fire of the waiting soldiers.

Roughly square in aspect this larger space has a locked gate directly opposite flanked by sentry guns, and another immediately to the left of the entry hallway. A security office extends from the floor above, the overhang and its supports creating a covered space opposite the windows along the right-hand wall. A fourth Combine soldier stands on the raised walkway running beneath these windows.

Barrels and other physics objects can be found in the fenced off portion to the left of the entry hallway, as well as beneath the security office. These soldiers can launch Manhacks which will buzz in to harass as you enter combat. Both the scattered physics objects and the Manhacks encourage use of the Gravity Gun; as with many encounters in this part of Nova Prospekt it's possible to succeed using only the Gravity Gun and Bugbait.

The two sentry guns at the far end of the room flank a locked gate, the red light above serving both to indicate its secured status and suggest that it can eventually be unlocked (permanently locked doors don't have lights indicating their status, as this would just serve to draw attention to them). In order to progress you need to reach the security office above and unlock this gate. The same pattern will be used later in cell block B4, though there neither the locked gate nor the security office will be visible from your starting position.

Continuing through the now open gates (G) into cell block A7, access to the stairwell is locked. The door to the security office on this floor blocked from the inside. A Combine Force field covers the entrance to the adjacent room (H). Explosives or your Gravity Gun can be used to detach the power

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cable from the wall socket shutting down the Force field and allowing you to move through into the security office. Here you can unlock the gate to the stairwell (I), and carry on up to the main security office on the floor above (J).

Through the gate to the left (G) is cell block A7. Once the Combine in this first space have been defeated the gate will unlock. Supported by Manhacks from above, a squad of Combine will emerge from the stairwell and security office, moving right to left across the floor ahead of you. Armed with a mixture of sub-machine guns and shotguns, they will attempt to draw you into a killing zone as you move through the chokepoint created by the gate. A walkway circles the cell block on the floor above, a further pair of Combine will deploy here to fire down at you through the railings.

If you decide not to proceed into cell block A7 the Combine will use grenades to try and force you to move, either driving you away from the gate so they can charge forward, or pushing you further forward into their kill zone. Fortunately, you have an inexhaustible supply of antlions who can soak up the damage while you hang back.

Rushing straight through the gate and confronting aggression with aggression is also effective. In such close quarters the Combine will not be able to rely on their grenades, while your Antlions are at their most effective.

On the ground floor of cell block A7 is another security office; just ahead a locked gate blocks access to the stairs to the upper floor. A red light shines above this gate, through the reinforced glass window of the security office a matching red light can be seen on a wall mounted switch. You saw a similarly locked gate earlier, here the existence of a matching switch completes the pattern. This lock and switch setup will be used in later parts of this level. Here both the gate and the switch can be seen at once. If you didn't realise the significance of the red light above the gate earlier (K), this moment should help to clarify what your objective is: find a switch to unlock that gate. This relationship between a switch found in a security office and a locked gate will be reinforced once more before you leave this area.

With the security office door obstructed from the inside, you will need to find another way to reach the switch. Behind the security office - between it and the back wall of cell block A7 - a combine Force field seals off a square room. Small, though larger than a cell, a Vortigant lies within strapped to a chair as two beams of electricity arc into its body. Linked to the same plug that is powering the Force field, once it has been knocked out - either with a hurled physics objects or explosives – both will shut down. Unfortunately, it's too late for the Vortigant. Two Combine wait within this room (H), they will attack as you approach the Force field, able to move back and forth through it at will unlike you or your antlions.

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A doorway connects to the security office where the door back into cell block A7 is blocked by a tipped filing cabinet. Operating the switch on the wall can cause a jolt that knocks the filing cabinet to the floor. It's difficult to determine if this is intention or a quirk of the physics system, either way it will allow you to open the door and move directly into the corridor, saving a few seconds.

Through the now open gate, stairs lead to the upper floor (I). Hidden inside the large crates stacked under the stairs is an Energy Orb, alternate fire ammunition for the Overwatch Pulse Rifle.

Three Combine soldiers wait inside the control room, (J).

With them defeated you can use the button under the window to unlock the gates (K). Once open Combine reinforcements will charge through, heading toward your position.

You can either descend the stairs (I), or move out into cell block A7 and jump the railings.

A single tripmine has been attached to the wall near the top of the stairs, breaking the red laser beam will cause it to detonate. Ahead, the corridor ends in a doorway to the upper level walkway of cell block A7. Supplies can be found both on the walkway itself, and in a Lambda Cache inside one of the cells – you will have to shove the door aside with your Gravity Gun to access it. To the left is another security office, where a trio of three Combine await. A reinforced glass window in the wall grants a view of what awaits, providing an opportunity to plan your approach before initiating combat.

The gate below (K) can be unlocked by pressing the button on the far side of the security office, beneath the windows overlooking the gate itself. When pressed you can see the light above this gate switch from red to green. This is a final reinforcement of the association between illuminated buttons\switches and locked gates.

Now unlocked, the gate slides open allowing a trio of Combine through. These soldiers - one armed with a shotgun - will head directly for your current position. You are free to face them here, confront them as they make their way up the stairs, or move to flank them. The latter can be achieved either from the upper walkway of cell block A7, or by vaulting the railing and attacking them from behind as they reach the stairs. With antlions under your control you even have the option of adopting more than one approach at once.

Beyond the gate (K) a sentry gun stands behind a desk (L). Around the corner to the left a Force field blocks the corridor, two more sentry guns are positioned on the far side (M) supported by a group of Combine soldiers.

Blocked by a section of fencing is a grate in the wall (N) that leads to an air vent. Through a room bisected by a large rotating fan (O) the vent emerges back into the corridor (P) on the other side of the Force field.

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Here a single Combine soldier guards the power cable for the Force field (**M**). Disconnecting this means your antlions can join you. Around the corner and through a level transition, stairs lead up to cell block B4 (**Q**).

A sentry gun (**L**) stands against the wall opposite the now open gate. Erected behind a desk it is even more difficult to knock over from head-on than usual. The desk can also serve to prop the sentry gun up should it be hit, preventing it from falling over completely and deactivating. Explosives are your best option, that or approaching to within shotgun range and attacking it from the side. This latter approach though is complicated by the two sentry guns standing at the end of the corridor to your left (**M**).

Across the width of the corridor, protecting a further pair of sentry guns, stands a Combine Force field. If you can avoid their incoming fire, a grenade can knock the sentry guns over. As with other encounters you can also use your antlion swarm as a literal meat shield to soak up the incoming damage.

This right side of this corridor is partitioned off by a series of pillars, each was once connected to the next by sections of chain-link fencing. Now what remains is either broken and left leaning against the wall, or has buckled inward creating an obstruction.

Next to the first sentry gun, an air vent (**N**) is partially obscured behind one of these bent sections of fencing. Entering the vent can be risky while under fire, though doing so provides a means of bypassing the Force field.

After a sharp turn to the left, the vent opens into a cramped space dominated by a large rotating fan that bisects the room; another vent can be seen on the far side. Physics objects litter the floor and can be used to obstruct the fan. Ducking through while it is stalled is possible but risky, though if you are able to strain it far enough the motor will short out, stopping the fan completely. The vent on the other side leads back to the main corridor on the far side of the force field, beyond the sentry guns. If not already alerted a lone Combine soldier waits here. Removing the power cable from its socket will deactivate the Force field clearing the way for your antlions to close to melee range with the sentry guns. Alternately you can deal with them yourself, from this position you are safely outside their field-of-view.

Continuing to the right the corridor ends in a T junction. The gate to your left into cell block B2 is closed, through the bars you can see Combine soldiers being attacked, and eventually overwhelmed, by antlions. To the right the corridor extends through a map transition, into cell block B4.

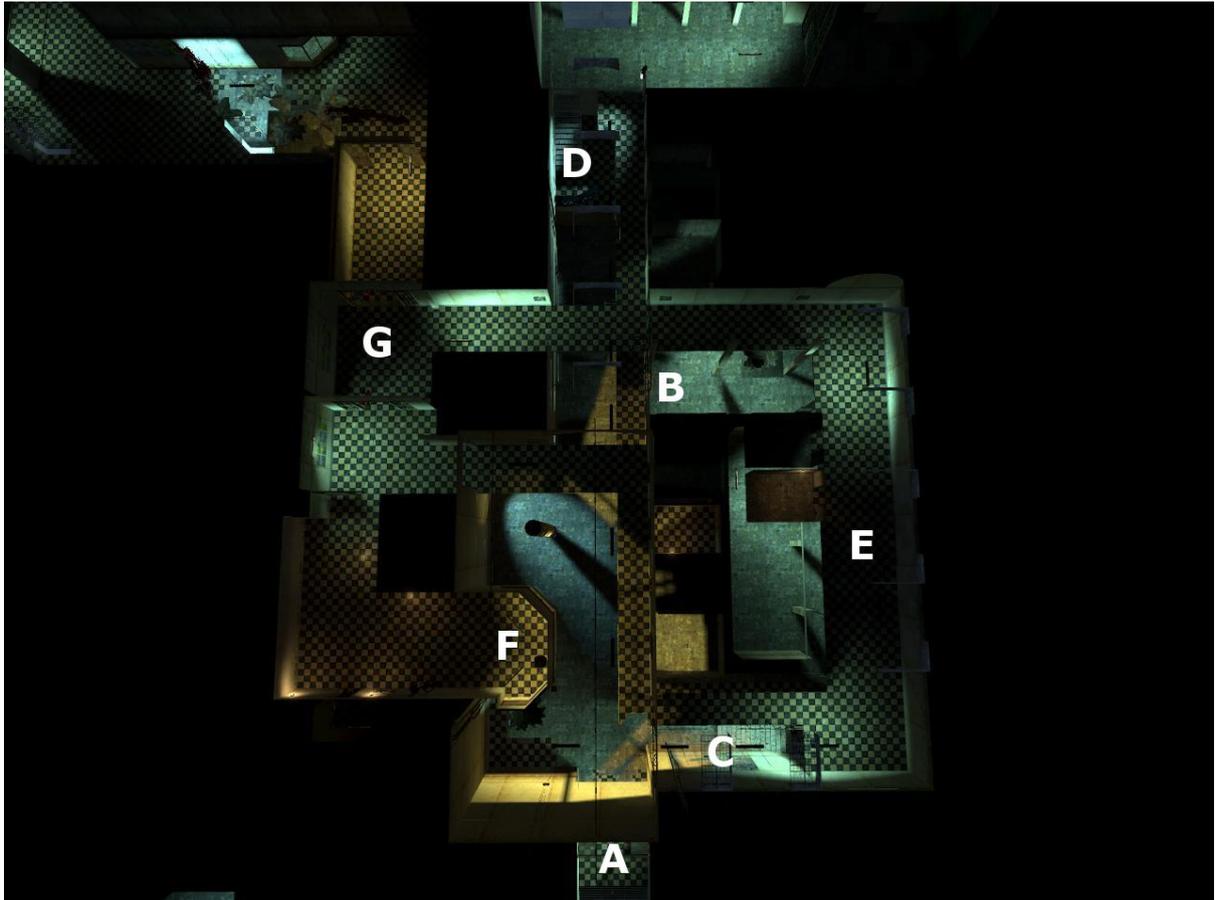
***Cell Block B4:***

One of the first areas of *Half-Life 2* publicly revealed, cell block B4 has changed relatively little from those initial images. Entering from below ground level you must keep heading up, traversing the cell block in a rough spiral to reach the security office. Only from here can you unlock the gates blocking the exit.

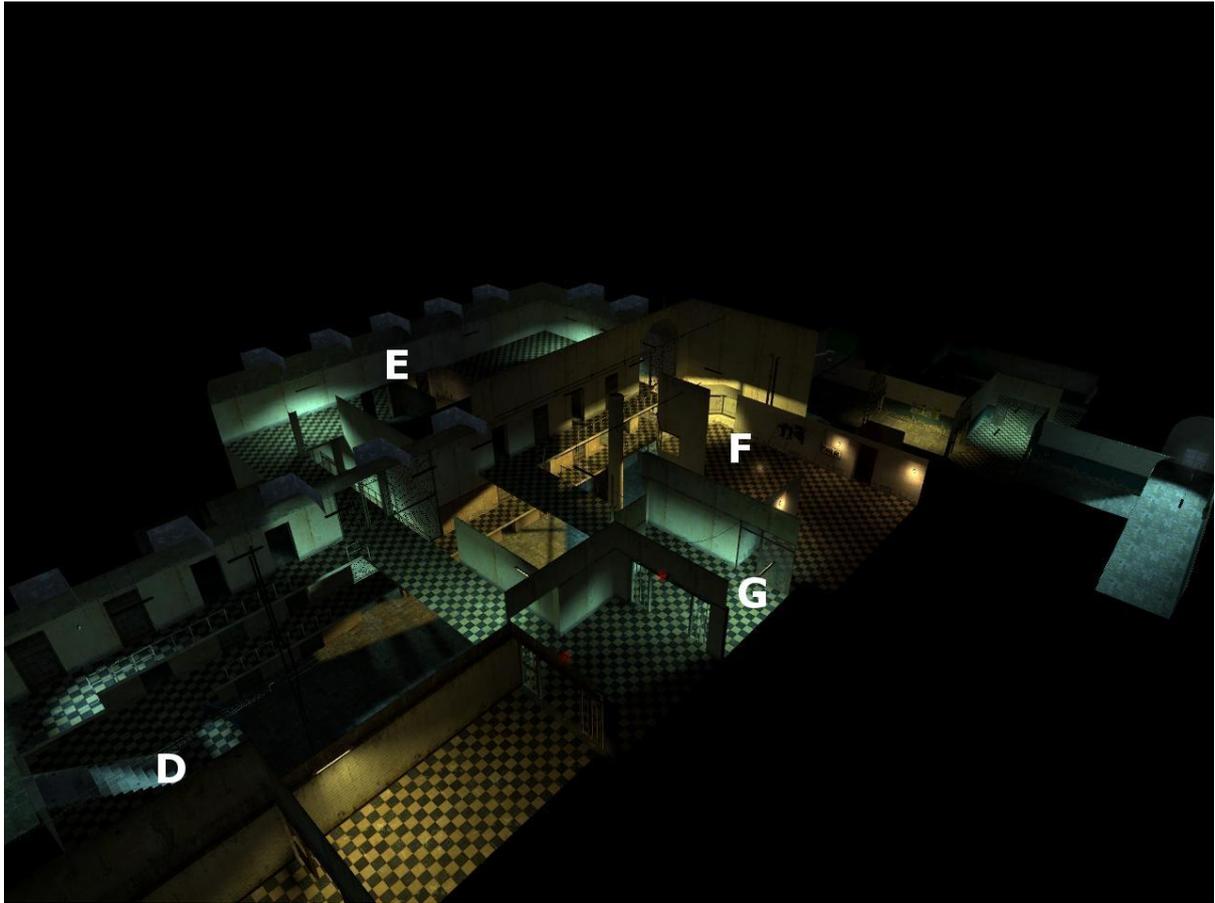
From this point on the Combine know you are coming, and ambushes will be a more common occurrence.

*“How could one man have slipped through your force's fingers time and time again? How is it possible? This is not some agent provocateur or highly trained assassin we are discussing.”*

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The foot of the stairs ahead is in shadow. Two flights separated by a short landing, you can make out little of the cell block beyond the doorway at the top. A hole in the roof above the landing offers weak illumination from the slate grey sky outside. Placement of this hole guarantees you will begin this section of Nova Prospekt with a full complement of antlions; one of several locations on this floor from which reinforcements can arrive to replenish any losses.

Ascending the stairs your goal is not clear. Above is the security office (F) though there's no way from here to see the locked doors (G) that block your progress deeper into the prison.

Laser tripmines have been deployed across the floor. At the far end a low wall rises to the next floor where an Emplacement gun has been erected (D).

Beyond a chain-linked fence to your right are a set of metal stairs (C) up to the next floor. To get to them you will need to reach the hallway part way along this floor (B) which connects to another running parallel to the main cell block. A pair of sentry guns have been erected in this area, just ahead of the stairs.

The single laser tripmine protecting the security office in the previous area was your introduction, here three of them deployed across the floor. The first is the most dangerous as the Combine soldiers moving within the cell block can draw your eye from what's immediately in front of you. Sending your antlions ahead can cause them to trigger the tripmines, which can be a blessing or curse depending on how closely you are following.

Rectangular spaces exhibit an inherent directionality, they promote movement parallel to their long axis. Entering a rectangular space from one end, the natural instinct is to keep moving toward the other. This can be used to encourage player movement in a direction even with no explicit goal in sight.

Compare cell block B4 to the previous area, A7: a square space with multiple entry points. Squares have four equal sides and provide no inherent directionality. The tendency when entering a new square space is to pause until a direction can be determined, to loiter.

Therefore, when players enter a square room it's beneficial to clearly indicate the intended direction of travel, such as with a large doorway. If this obvious way forward is then blocked players will search for a means to unblock it.

In cell block B4 such an immediate goal is unnecessary as the space itself encourages movement in the desired direction, at least initially. Once players have started moving, other elements such as lighting and enemy placement come into play to override the underlying directionality, leading players away from the main path.

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The entrance doorway is recessed into the wall creating an overhang that initially blocks the upper floors from sight. At the same height as the ceiling of this entranceway - where you can see it as you enter the cell block - is the walkway on the floor above. Here a Combine soldier stands on the edge firing down at you. The closest of the five Combine in this area, and armed with an SMG he is dangerous, but as retreating down the stairs will rapidly block his line-of-sight, he doesn't present the greatest threat.

Though their limbs will frequently clip through each other and the world geometry, antlions will still block your way should you attempt to walk through them. As their default non-combat behaviour is to cluster around you, it's common to get stuck when traversing narrow spaces. Antlions ahead can prevent you moving forward to initiate combat, while retreat is forestalled by antlions that you can't see behind you.

With its combination of narrow walkways, high ceilings, and long wide corridors, cell block B4 shows off both the best and worst of antlion behaviour and collision handling.

An open rectangular space across multiple floors, cell block B4 exhibits a verticality not seen before within Nova Prospekt. Though you will be facing threats from different elevations, your progress is guided in such a way as to prevent you having to deal with enemies more than one floor above or below you, while the antlion swarm under your control gives you a way of deal with multiple threats at once.

Though not accessible from the ground floor, the security office juts out into the main area of the cell block, creating a pair of recesses in front and behind it. The first is immediately to your left as you reach the top of the stairs. Already damaged the floor here will erupt from beneath as antlions burrow their way up to join you.

Past the security office a single column stands at the entrance of this recess, in line with the security office and the wall that extends to the back of the cell block. This creates the sense of a continuous line between the security office and the far wall, while also clearly not being a solid boundary. Unlike the pillars that have been used elsewhere in Nova Prospekt to partition space, this column lacks the rigid directionality, its presence more likely to draw the eye than to divide space. This sense of pulling player attention to the left is supported by the placement of a Combine light on the far side of the column. With the cell block lit warmly from above, this cool blue Combine light spills around either side of the column falling across the floor to create a blue-black-blue pattern of light and shadow.

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*The cells in this block are arranged along the wall to your right. There are four on this floor with only the first and last accessible.*

These details of architecture and lighting serve to draw your eye to the left even before the obvious motion of the Combine soldiers does the same. One pair move across the cell block from the left, while another come from the opposite side, crossing ahead of you from right to left.

Throughout the opening minutes of this level Dr Wallace Breen can be heard over the public address system. The administrator of City 17 is berating the forces of the Combine Overwatch for their failure to subdue Gordon Freeman. His recorded words follow you through the cell block as he passive aggressively - and occasionally outright aggressively - berates the transhuman forces of the Combine Overwatch for their inability to capture “a theoretical physicist who had hardly earned the distinction of his Ph.D.” In the background, the female voice of the Overwatch can still be heard occasionally, broadcasting your position to the remaining Combine.

As you advance toward the end of the cell block, a Combine soldier will descend the stairs behind the Emplacement gun overlooking the ground floor (D). If you are lucky and fast enough - or know where to aim - it's possible to kill him before he reaches it. Once he has, he will be protected from direct attack by the static energy shield, though antlions can still attack him from above.

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Somewhere on the walkways above a Combine light casts the shadow of the railings across the wall to your left. The angle of this light causing the grid patterned shadow to form a solid line along the wall from eye level to the base of the Combine emplacement gun.

There's no way up to the next floor from this end of the cell block, you need to double back and reach the metal stairs you saw to your right when you entered. With a chain-linked fencing blocking the direct path these are only accessible from the hallway that runs behind the cells on this floor. Dotted with physics objects - including explosive barrels – this hallway is watched over by a pair of sentry guns.



*The door frame that connects this hall with the cross-corridor is fitted with reinforced glass. You can take cover from the sentry guns which still being able to observe the hall beyond.*

Another antlion hole will be created in the cross-corridor **(B)** that connects this hallway with the main cell block. With reinforcements able to spawn this close you can easily send continuous waves of antlions down the corridor to face the sentry guns. They won't run out of ammunition, but you can keep their attention focused on the swarm while you deal with them at range.

Approaching the stairs **(C)** triggers an attack by a pair of Manhacks. Up the stairs is a doorway in the fencing, and a Combine soldier. Past him, you are now on the walkway above the entrance to cell block B4 **(A)**. The way forward is along the walkway toward the Combine emplacement gun **(D)**.

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The stairs behind **D** lead up to the top floor.

A pair of Manhacks are unleashed as you reach the foot of the stairs. Previously observed being thrown into the air by Combine soldiers, their appearance serves as an indicator that there are still more Combine present in cell block B4.

To block your way, a lone Combine soldier steps into view ahead of you. Framed by the doorway in the chain-link fence he makes an inviting target.

As you move towards the far end of the space another soldier will emerge from one of the cells, and further forces will descend the stairs from the top floor. The narrow walkways don't offer much room to manoeuvre making the Combine nearly impossible to miss. Reaching the top floor should only present a challenge if the Emplacement gun is still operational, or you are already low on health.

At the top of the stairs you need to double back on yourself once more, along the walkway to the 'T' junction high above the floor. The exit (**G**) is beyond a locked gate to your right. Another small cell block is located to your left (**E**), this is the way onward.

Two Combine soldiers are waiting at the far end, another will move into the hallway from one of the cells. Through here and you are now above the stairs (**C**), and will again need to pass through a doorway in the chain-linked fence.

Directly opposite is the security office (**F**).

Up the stairs behind the Emplacement gun and you've reached the top floor. A pair of Combine are waiting in ambush around the corner to your right. The space here opens into a small rectangular area giving you more room to fight, making it easier to avoid getting stuck on your antlions. Even at such close range these Combine shouldn't present too much of a challenge.

Against the wall opposite the stairs another walkway runs back the way you came, terminating in a 'T' junction after several meters. Three Combine soldiers will spread out across the perpendicular walkway; moving to attack as you or your antlions approach the junction.

A now familiar pattern, the movement of the Combine from right to left draws your attention to the right; the way deeper into the prison is in this direction (**G**). Currently metal gates block your path, glowing red lights above indicate that they can eventually be unlocked. For the moment, you need to take the other branch from the junction, down a short cross-corridor protected by a laser tripmine; like the ones on the ground floor it is easy for this to be detonated by your antlions if you aren't careful.

In a layout that roughly matches the ground floor, this corridor connects to another space that runs parallel to the main hall. Dark, littered with overturned tables, and with cells opening onto it, this space constitutes a distinct area designated cell block B7.

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

There are three Combine in B7, two are taking cover amidst the physics objects at the far end. The third will emerge from one of the cells as you approach; another ambush. The overturned tables and other physics objects littering the floor provide cover while still being low enough for you to hurl grenades, or Bugbait, over the top. This prevalence of cover, along with the distance between you and the Combine, makes this a good space to rely on your antlions. An action that might come with an added degree of catharsis if they had indeed caused you injury earlier by detonating the laser tripmine.

Through cell block B7, you will find yourself once more in the fenced off section adjacent to the entrance, only now above the stairs (C). Another doorway in the fence, the security office is now opposite you across the main hall. Against the wall a walkway leads back towards the stair up to the top floor. After another block of four cells a connecting walkway bridges the width of cell block B4, merging with the corridor that leads to the security office.

Inside the security office (F) a switch on the wall will unlock the security gates, opening the route to the exit.

Once you have unlocked the doors Combine forces will mount a counter attack, closing on your position from both the exit and cell block B7.

The exit from this area is found beyond the now unlocked security gates (G).

Another laser tripmine protects the corridor to the security office. A lone sentry gun has been erected in an alcove directly facing the door, creating a killing zone as you try to enter.

A switch on the wall will unlock and open the gates to the next area. Operating this, or moving toward the window of the security office, will trigger a counter attack by a trio of Combine forces from the direction of cell block B7. These will be joined by additional forces approaching from the exit (G) once the gates have been unlocked. If you are careful you can ensure you only have to fight one group of Combine at a time.

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



*Both health and HEV suit energy chargers can be found in the corner of the security office.*

With a single entrance to defend and waves of antlions at your command, you should be able to hold out against these attacks fairly easily. The greatest threat comes from the grenades thrown through the door by the approaching Combine soldiers. Alternatively, with the security gates now unlocked, you can just make a break for it into the next area.

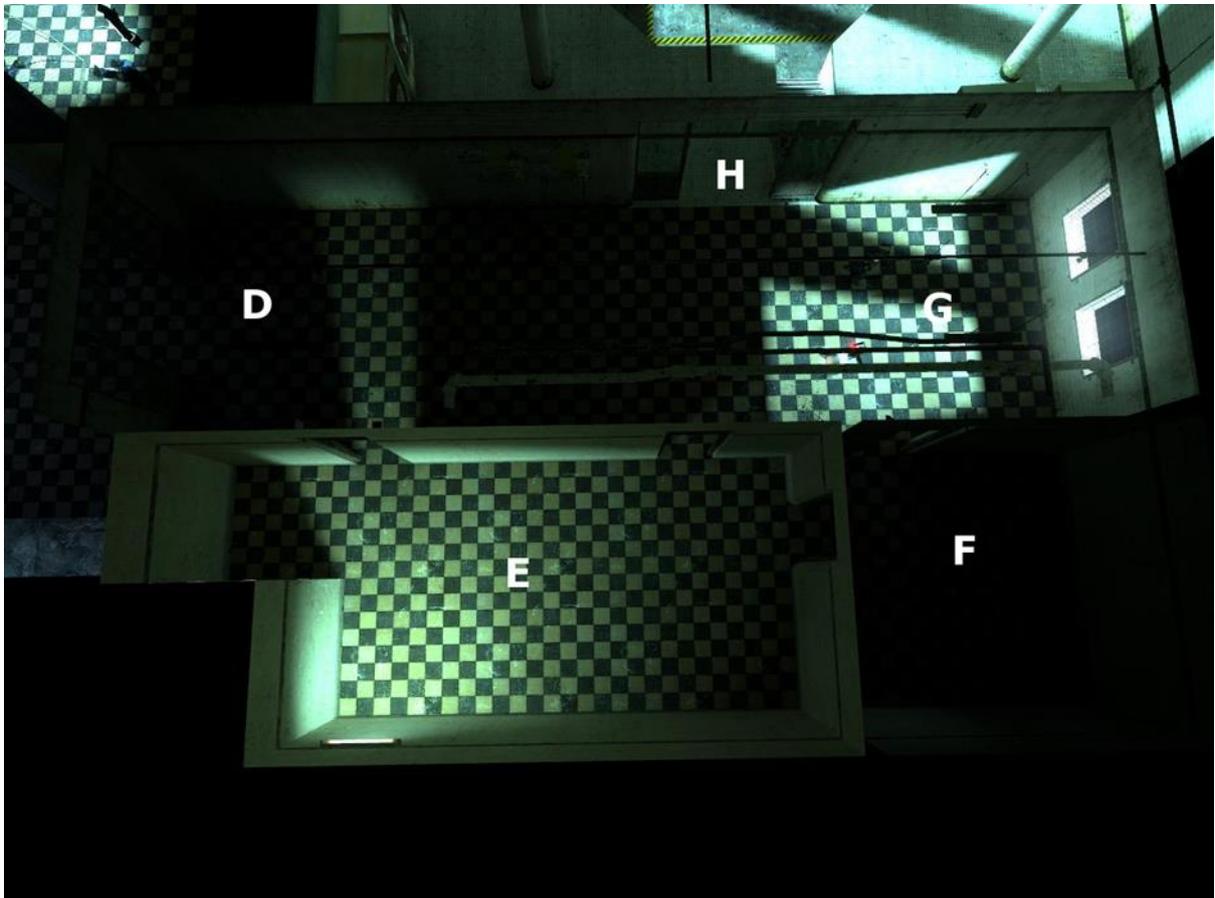
***Laundry and Kitchen:***

Nearing the rail depot at the heart of Nova Prospekt, the laundry and kitchen are the last chance you will have to fight alongside your antlion swarm; this is also the last time they will appear at all in *Half-Life 2*. Standing between you and your rendezvous with Alyx are: sentry guns, Combine soldiers, and another antlion guard.

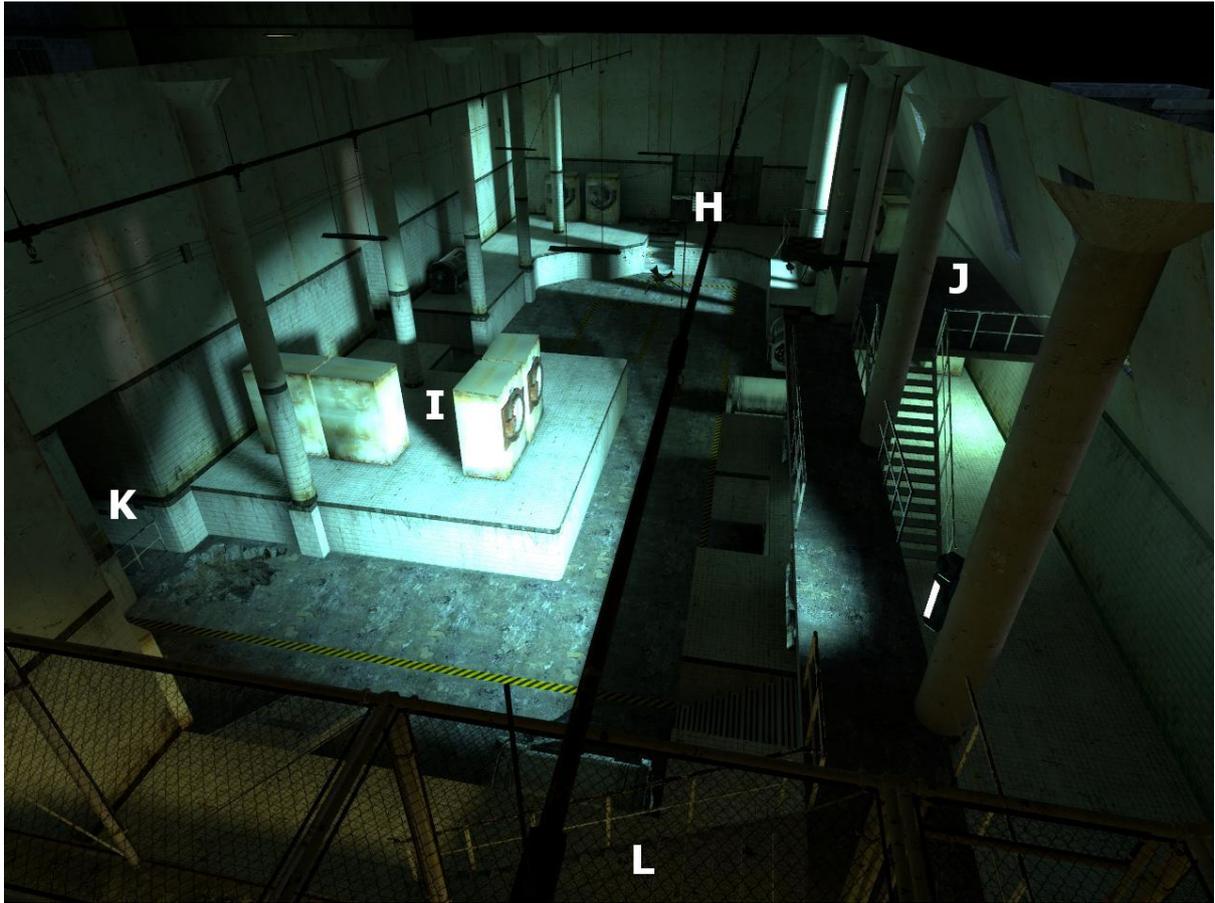
With little need of the human constructed portions of Nova Prospekt the Combine are in the process of consuming the complex from the centre out. Vast metal walls march slowly outward, grinding down what was there before and allowing it to be replaced by alien metal. Between these walls and what remains of the prison is a rubble strewn trench, your route to the rail depot.

*“Central transport facility, Nova Prospekt contact blackout, full biotic overrun.”*

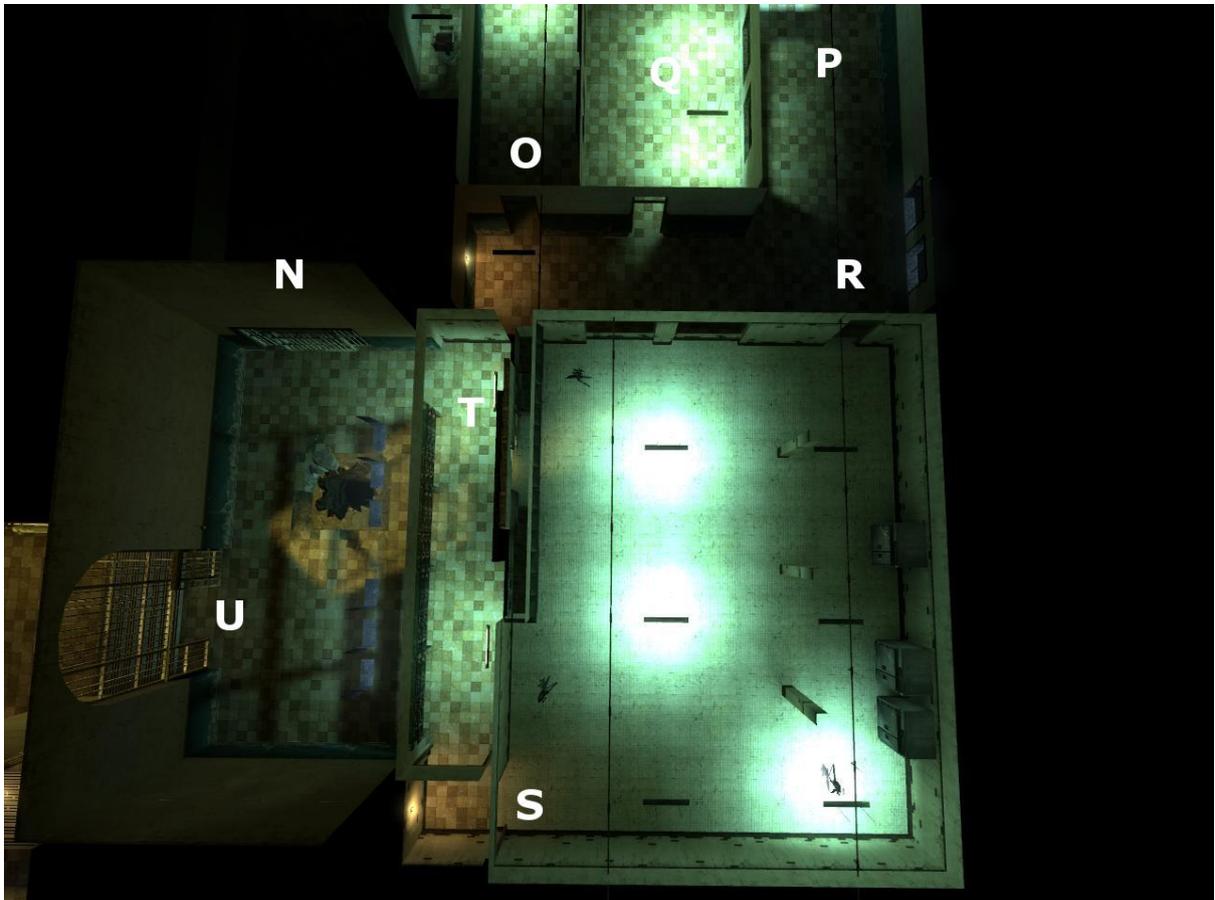
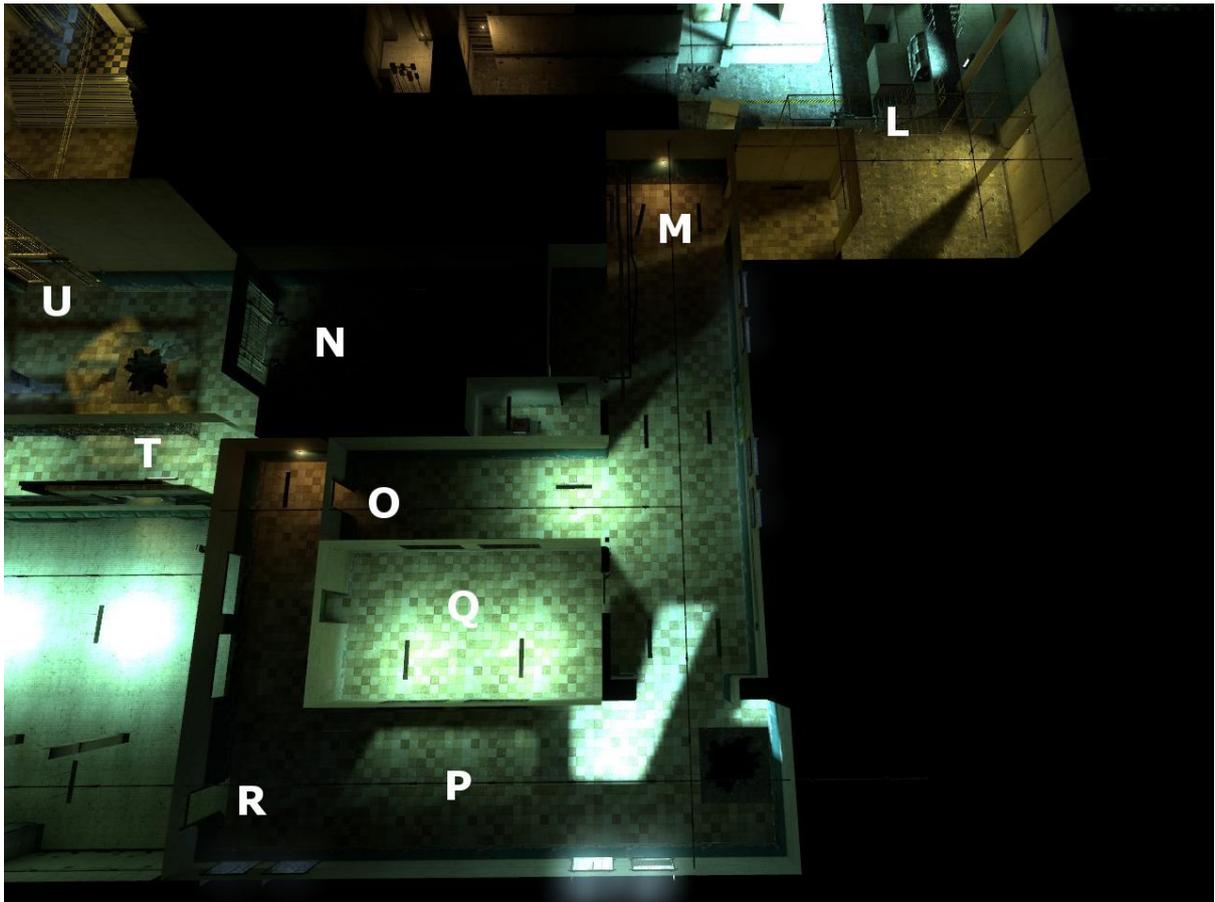
Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



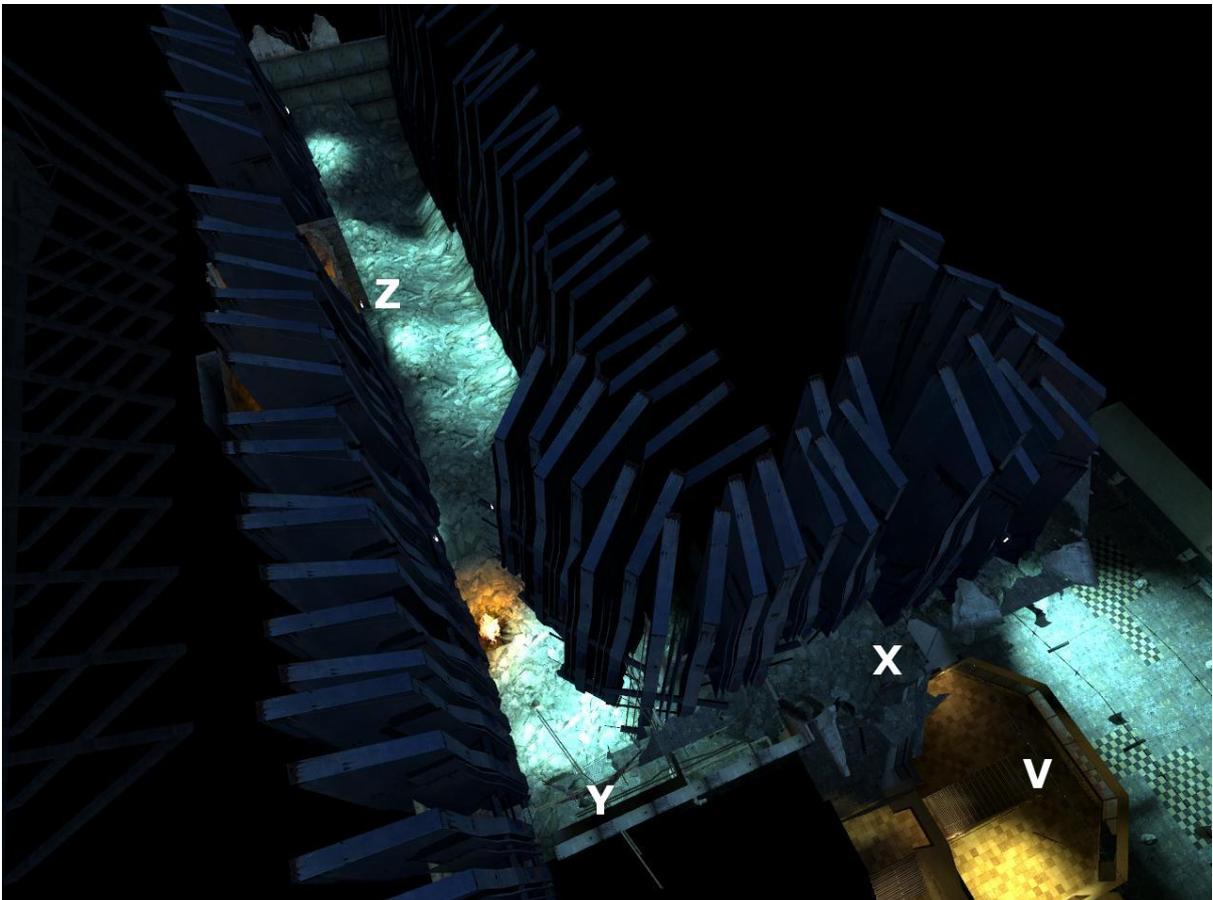
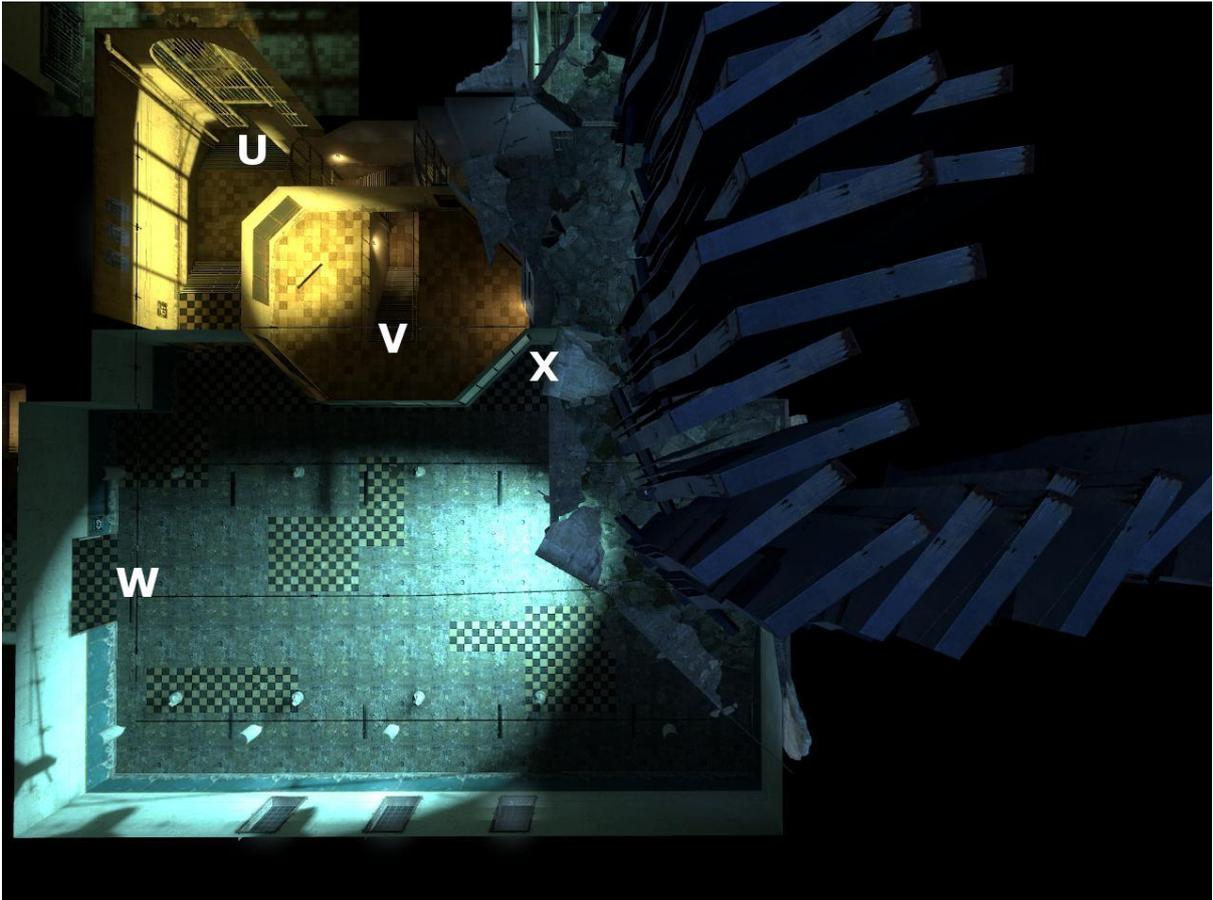
Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

The lights are out in the hallway beyond the security gate. Shining through the window to your left, the weak illumination from outside is now the same blue grey as the Combine lighting emanating from the security office ahead. This cold light from outside creating a bright square on the wall, contrasting with the soft warm yellow glow from behind you.

Leaving cell block B4 the connecting corridor opens into a wider hallway (A). Diagonally opposite a security office (B) overlooks the once locked gates you entered through.

Around the corner a trio of Combine soldiers have erected a barricade (C).

Pass them is a doorway (D), a pair of sentry guns stand at the end of the corridor (G).

The room to the right is accessible (E). The sentry guns cannot target you here, letting you move forward and flank them from the darkened room further ahead (F). The doorway between these two rooms (E and F) is open, but the door back into the corridor behind the sentry guns is protected by a laser tripmine.

Once the sentry guns have been dealt with you can head through the doorway they were protecting into the laundry (H).

A Combine soldier lies dead on the floor. A dark stain trailing back toward a pair of holes in the ground, rubble lies strewn across the floor, along with the corpse of an antlion guard. The antlions have broken through in force here, a grim moment of foreshadowing for the conflict to come.

The degree of damage here suggests the security gates to cell block B4 were closed to keep something from getting out, just as much as they were to prevent you getting in.

A supply crate and health charging station can be found within the security office. The monitor hanging from the ceiling is broken, you can still cycle through the images but the distortion makes it difficult to get a good idea of what is waiting for you.

The security office is bathed in cold light, the colour close to that coming from outside where dawn is breaking. This marks a change in the colour associated with the Combine. Until now security offices and other spaces linked to the Combine forces within Nova Prospekt were illuminated by the warm yellows of human created incandescent light bulbs. Now, as you move further into the complex, warmer colours become dramatically less common. Hostile spaces signified instead by the cold blue grey illumination provided by the Combine spot lights.

Around the corner the Combine have erected a makeshift barrier. They are far enough down the hallway that you won't be able to see them without putting yourself in their line-of-fire. Constructed from bed frames and mattresses, these barricades offer little protection from the attacks of the antlions under your command. They are also physics objects, meaning you can simply strip the soldiers

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

of their cover with your Gravity Gun.

These Combine were protecting the hallway to the prison laundry, through a door to their left. A pair of sentry guns stand at the end of this hallway, silhouetted by the windows behind. A several doors open onto this hallway from the right, the nearest is open, you can dart in here to avoid the sentry guns. This room has a second door back into the hallway, though using it will put you directly in front of the sentry guns; even closer than you were before. It also has a connecting doorway to a smaller room further ahead (F). Inside this second room a laser tripmine has been placed to catch anybody attempting to flank the sentry guns using this route. Through the door, you are back into the hallway, now behind the two sentry guns and free to use your Gravity Gun or other weapons to disable them. This is just one way of dealing with the two sentry guns, you could also have launched the barricades once used by the Combine down the hallway, or sent your antlions forward to attempt to overwhelm them. Whichever method you use once the sentry guns are no longer a threat you can continue on into the laundry (H).

Entering the laundry (H), Combine soldiers will fire upon you from the cover of the dryers on the raised platform in the centre of the room (I). Another Combine soldier stands on the end of the raised walkway to your left (J).

Under the stairs at the far end of the room (L) stands a single sentry gun. As you deal with the Combine in this area additional reinforcements will enter from the fenced off space at the top of these stairs.

To either side of the raised platform (I) two narrow passages lead away to the right. They terminate in a small space (K) where a Lambda Cache is protected by a poison zombie.

The way out of the laundry is up the stairs (L).

Tiled floors run around the edges of the room, bounding a central section that is several feet lower; the concrete floor here marked out with yellow and black hazard lines. Slender columns form parallel rows to either side of the central depression; supporting the ceiling, providing limited cover, and reinforcing the directionality of the space.

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt



*Built across three tiers, the laundry is smaller than cell block B4 yet more open, making for a different style of combat encounter.*

Steps link the lowest tier to the surrounding tiled floor, while a flight of metal stairs at the far end of the room (L) connect to the walkway running approximately three quarters of the length of the room. This walkway - originally used by guards to watch over prisoners - meets the stairs at a metal fence partitioning off the end of the room. A single door in this fence the only way out of the laundry.

Identified by their chitinous black carapace and the hissing noise they emit before an attack the, incorrectly named, poison headcrabs injects the player with a venom that immediately drops them to 1 HP. If the player receives no additional damage during the next few seconds their HEV suit will restore all lost health, minus 10 from the initial impact of the attack.

Though on their own not capable of inflicting a killing blow they are rarely encountered in isolation. In the most extreme cases they are found along with a poison zombie – the result of a poison headcrab coupling with a human host. Bloated and slow moving this form of zombie serves as a host to three poison headcrabs in addition to the one that has taken control of it. These passengers will be thrown out by the poison zombie to subdue potential victims before the zombie itself can stumble into range and finish the job.

A section of the tiled floor extends out into the middle of the room, creating a platform. Ahead, and

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

behind this platform two tall and narrow passages, fronted with metal railings, lead back into semi-darkness. Here is a small space isolated from the rest of the laundry. Up a short flight of stairs into this space there are side rooms to your left and right. One is dark, the other illuminated dimly from within. Inside the latter is a Lambda Cache consisting of two supply crates, a crossbow and a health charging station. Entering this alcove will cause a poison zombie to stumble from the darkness behind and attack. In such a confined space the poison headcrabs it hurls at you present a real challenge, especially as the passages leading to this area are too narrow for your antlions to traverse. Running is an option however, there is little either creature can do to prevent you making a break for it back to the laundry.

Beyond the fencing at the top of the stairs a doorway leads into a network of interconnecting parallel and perpendicular corridors, though initially confusing they all lead toward the same place, the prison kitchens.

To your immediate left upon leaving the laundry a laser tripmine has been placed to cover the corridor (M), a pair of Combine soldiers hold position beyond.

Beyond the waiting Combine a darkened corridor connects to the prison dining area, the locked gate at its end prevents you using this as a shortcut. A pair of sentry guns stand in the darkness ahead of this gate (N).

A second corridor, ending in an open doorway (O), runs parallel to the first. The two are separated by a small room barely larger than a closet.

Additional laser tripmines have been planted further ahead where the main corridor merges with another leading to the right (P). A final tripmine is positioned at the end this corridor, protecting the door to the kitchen (R).

Between the last two corridors (P and O), with windows looking out onto each, is a small room (Q). Combine soldiers will emerge from here as you approach.

A laser tripmine has been positioned just beyond the doorway from the laundry. A pile of barrels stands in the corner to your right, at least one of them is explosive. Triggering the tripmine will cause this to explode too, inflicting substantial damage. A Combine soldier stands in the middle of the hallway, in their rush to attack your antlions can easily run through the laser, the resulting chain reaction potentially damaging you even if you are still inside the laundry.

Moving ahead a darkened hallway to the right terminates in a locked gate (N). A pair of sentry guns stand silhouetted against the light from the other side of the gate. You are still within their range in the main hallway and they can be a nasty surprise should you cross in front of them, fortunately in the

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

fight with the Combine soldiers your antlions are likely to trigger the sentry guns before you do giving you at least a few seconds advance warning. Through a doorway adjacent to this hallway is a room barely larger than a closet. Inside, bolted to the floor beneath a single florescent light, stands another torture chair.

By this point the light scheme within Nova Prospekt has nearly completed its shift, hostile spaces now marked out by the cold blue grey of Combine lighting.

In the next level - once you've pushed through into the heart of the facility - this inversion will be complete. The few remaining signs of warm human illumination serving as refuges from the overwhelming Combine presence.

Between here and the kitchen the hallways form a square around a central observation room (**Q**). With windows overlooking the halls to either side, and a doorway in each of the adjacent walls this room is where the primary Combine attack will come from. Multiple Combine soldiers take positions in this room to fire on you, via the windows if you use one of the two flanking corridors, or by storming through the door into the main hallway.

A windowed central room around which all foot traffic has to pass. The spatial design of these interconnecting hallways suggests how this space would have functioned when Nova Prospekt was still being used for its original purpose. Guards stationed inside could monitor the movement of prisoners between the kitchen and laundry, and response rapidly to any infractions.

Another example of the duality of space seen throughout Nova Prospekt. Here again the division has been broken down, you are now able to move unmolested between both those areas built for prisoners and those built for guards.

The hallway on the near side of the central room ends in a closed door (**O**), well illuminated this provides the most direct route to the kitchen.

The hallway on the far side of the central observation room is protected by laser tripmines planted along its length. The first three are at the corner where it connects to the main hallway, a fourth is placed closer to the door to the kitchen (**R**). If you rush past your first encounter with the Combine you can easily get caught by these tripmines as there are partially obscured by stacked crates, barrels, and other physics objects.

All routes through this area eventually lead to the corridor running along the back wall of the kitchen.

There are three sentry guns inside the kitchen, as soon any of them detect you they will open fire, igniting the gas leaking into the kitchen and starting a fire. Even with large parts of it on fire, you will still need to enter the kitchen (**R**) to continue.

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

Keeping to the edge of the room you can exit the kitchen into the serving area through the door in the far corner (S).

A laser tripmine has been planted behind the counter (T), you will need to get past it to reach the canteen.

A trio of sentry guns have been erected inside the kitchen. One in the corner closest to the windows, the other two on the far side of the kitchen, guarding the doorways (R and S).

As you approach the windows overlooking the kitchen additional antlions will smash through the wall their impact causing gas pipes to rupture, allowing gas to escape. This gas is just barely visible and if you fire into the kitchen it will ignite engulfing the corner of the kitchen in flame. If you don't ignite the gas yourself the bullets from one of the three sentry guns will do it for you. It's all but impossible to avoid their detection meaning one way or another the kitchen will be aflame when you enter.

Moving into the kitchen through the main door (R) a sentry gun stands directly ahead. With the space beyond the pillars to your right engulfed by fire there's little way to prevent this sentry gun targeting you the moment you enter. Explosives or thrown objects can knock it to the floor and cause it to deactivate, fortunately there are a variety of suitable objects within reach.

The explosion that ignited the fire should have been enough to deal with the sentry gun near the windows, and keeping to the back wall of the kitchen should allow you to avoid triggering the final sentry gun near the far doorway (S).

Out of the kitchen through the door (S) and another laser tripmine has been attached to the wall just ahead. It can easily catch you if you are fleeing the fire in the kitchen, though it's more likely your antlions will trigger it first. If it is still active it can be detonated with explosives or physics objects, or simply avoided by jumping over the beam. This latter course of action doesn't deal with the tripmine itself, so it could still be triggered by antlions or thrown explosives from the Combine forces that will attack through the open gate (U) on the far side of the counter. It's best to detonate it safely yourself lest you get caught out by it in the upcoming firefight.

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*The safe route through the kitchen is reinforced by the trio of pillars that serve to partition off the portion of the room now on fire.*

Combine soldiers enter from the stairs (**U**) opposite the serving counter, past them is a security office overlooking the dining hall.

A pair of Combine soldiers wait in this security office, the narrow stairs in the middle of the room your only way to reach them (**V**).

One of the reinforced glass windows overlooking the dining hall is broken, as you approach you will hear gunfire from the open doorway below (**W**). Upon jumping down into the dining hall Combine soldiers will retreat through the doorway pursued by an antlion guard.

Piled debris in the corner of the room (**X**) needs to be moved to progress deeper into the complex, this will be easier to do once the antlion guard has been dealt with.

Moving around the end of the lunch counter there is a locked gate in the wall to the right, this connects to the darkened corridor (**N**), and the two sentry guns at the end will be in whatever state you left them. Even if still active they will be facing the wrong way to be of any threat.

Through the gate opposite the serving counter another pair of sentry guns are standing on the landing halfway up the stairs. Beyond is the locked gate to the currently deserted dining hall.

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

The framing of this space suggest that the majority of inmates would have used these gates to enter the dining hall. The presence of two different routes to the kitchen can be explained by there being a need to separate prison staff from any inmates assigned to work in the kitchen. This division of personnel explains why despite the central observation room looking out over both hallways it was not constructed with reinforced glass windows as the other security offices are - any personal moving through this space would need to be monitored but not as heavily as the general inmate population. The differing utility of the various hallways in this space is further reinforced by the different styles of door used in each: solid metal for those routes taken by the prison staff; gates for the general population.

As you reach these stairs you should just be able to make out the sound of a train in the distance. Alyx advised you to meet her at the train station within Nova Prospekt, you are close to your rendezvous. A reunion with Alyx suggest a new style of level, it's unlikely you will be fighting alongside both Alyx and your antlions. Therefore, a climax must be coming to cap off your time with the antlions, and lead into the next level.

Off the landing to the left is a small gate, the corridor here rises up several steps to another landing and another gate. The room on the far side has collapsed, the huge metallic teeth of a Combine Smart Barrier can be seen through the bars.

The Combine Smart Barrier is a series of huge interconnected metal teeth used by the Combine to reclaim space. Part terraforming tool, part security apparatus they consist of an outer section of metal blocks and an inner section housing the hydraulics and motors (or potentially more esoteric Combine engineering) that allows them to move.

When activated the outer section rises up to come crashing down crushing anything in its path. The entire construct then drags itself forward allowing the space left behind to be repurposed for whatever the Combine need.

To the right a narrow flight of stairs leads up into a security office (**V**) overlooking the dining hall. Two Combine soldiers wait within, they will try to prevent you ascending the stairs. Their grenades and weapon fire can be hard to avoid in these narrow confines. Your antlions can advance on them, though it will be difficult to find a good angle to throw your Bugbait without exposing yourself to damage.

The stairs end in the middle of the security office, the windows ahead are constructed of reinforced glass and look out and over the dining hall. There is a health charging station on the wall to the left, next to a pair of supply crates, and a HEV suit charging station on the opposite wall. Gunfire can be

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

heard from somewhere through the open doorway off the dining hall (**W**). If you took the time to watch the security footage on the monitors earlier in this section (before the laundry) you might have a sense of what's waiting for you. The reinforced windows are cracked and broken, the hole large enough for you to crawl through and drop down onto the floor below.

Each encounter with antlions is separated by a fight with an antlion guard.

These begin in the 'Sandtraps' chapter where you first encounter an antlion guard in the canyon outside the resistance base. This occurs after your initial exposure to antlions as hostile during the preceding chapters ('Highway 17', and 'Sandtraps' itself). After defeating this antlion guard, you gain access to the Bugbait harvested from its corpse. Now you are able to control the antlions.

The second encounter with an antlion guard occurs within the shower block after you have entered Nova Prospekt and been separated from your antlion swarm.

The third and final antlion guard encounter comes here at the conclusion of the 'Nova Prospekt' chapter, it serves to mark the end of the antlions' role in *Half-Life 2*. You will not meet them again until *Half-Life 2: Episode One*.

As you land on the dining hall floor two pairs of Combine soldiers will back into the area through the open doorway (**W**) firing at whatever they are fleeing from. They are fighting an antlion guard. It is only seconds behind and comes smashing into the dining hall, taking a chunk of the wall with it.

Unable to follow you through the holes in the reinforced glass your antlions have been left behind in the security office. This fight marks the end of them as an ally - from here on you will be too deep inside the facility for them to come to your aid. Again, you have to face the antlion guard alone.

For the start of the fight you can use the Combine soldiers as a distraction, they will ignore you in favour of focusing their fire on the antlion guard. It in turn will go after them as the more immediate threat, only turning its attention to you once they have been dealt with – it will in fact largely ignore you until all the Combine have been eliminated, so you are free to shoot at in without fear of retribution.

The large metal teeth of a Combine Smart Barrier have taken a chunk out of the dining hall, smashing through the walls and collapsing the roof. Where once was a gate a supporting wall has been destroyed creating a hole (**X**). Piled in front are barrels and other junk, much like the way in which the door out of the shower block was obstructed in your earlier encounter with the antlion guard. Unlike there it's possible to move this debris aside and escape without having to deal with the antlion guard at all. This can be worth attempting as the dining hall is a much smaller space than the shower block, making avoiding the antlion guard's charges harder. It is also prone to smashing through the columns

## Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt

supporting the roof, which can cause the explosive barrels clustered at their base to detonate, potentially injuring both of you in the blast. You can exploit this behaviour by goading the antlion guard into charging while one of the columns is between you, though ensuring you keep a safe distance from the explosion is not always easy. Other than these columns this fight is similar to the one in the shower block, there's no trick to defeating the antlion guard, just keep inflicting damage until it finally succumbs.

Moving through the debris (X) and out of the dining hall, you reach a set of half-collapsed steps, a single zombie waits on the landing between the two flights (Y).

Down into the rubble strewn channel and the Combine Smart Barrier will begin to move. You'll need to use the scattered crates and other junk to create steps up to the hole in the concrete wall (Z). Through, past a solitary headcrab, and down a hole in the floor to the next chapter.

Out of the dining hall, the collapsed and ruined rooms along the side of the vast Combine Smart Barrier are hard to differentiate; the roofs are gone, the walls little but rubble. Two supply crates sit on the floor just beyond the gate to your left, on the other side of which are the stairs up to the security office (V) from where you entered the dining hall.

Further on, after moving between the intact tiled wall on your left and the Smart Barrier to your right, you reach a broken and buckled set of metal stairs leading down. A solitary zombie is slumped against the wall at the bottom of the second flight. It will rise to attack as you approach. Trapped in the nowhere land between the Combine constructed heart of the facility and the remains of the original cell blocks, this zombie has likely been here for years, maybe even since the initial Combine invasion during the Seven Hour War.

The destruction here is total, the entire floor littered with junk, small fires burning in various spots. Sections of the Combine Smart Barrier loom overhead on either side, you are caught between two separate rows. As you descend into a canyon running between them, they will start to move, groaning as they rise up and bite forward like teeth, holding briefly before slamming down, closing off the way you came.

If you stay in this channel the Smart Barrier will simply continue to move, inexorably devouring everything in its path. If you remain here, you will die.

There is a break in the Smart Barrier to your left (Z) where the blue metal gives way to pale grey concrete. A fire burns from within drawing the eye, and there are rough ledges leading up to the edge of the hole. The lowest of these is unreachable from the rubble covered ground, but there are enough crates and other physics objects within reach that you should be able to build your own way up and out of the channel before being crushed.

### **Groping the Map – Nova Prospekt**

A single headcrab is scuttling around the masonry in the hole. Beyond a small gap in the wall the floor drops away. Jumping down here will take you through a map transition to your long overdue rendezvous with Alyx Vance in the next chapter: 'Entanglement'.

### Conclusion:

A beach assault at dusk beneath the looming shadow of prison walls; a fight for every inch through a warren of corridors and cell blocks, the glowing eyes of the Combine soldiers picked out against the dirty white industrial architecture. From the very moment you set sight on it, Nova Prospekt is iconic. Occurring at the close of the second day, and commensurately near the end of the Act Two, Nova Prospekt is location as set piece. Where prior levels saw you traversing abandoned towns or taking a road trip along a deserted highway, the majority of your attack on Nova Prospekt occurs within the compound's walls. In its own way Nova Prospekt is as different from the rest of *Half-Life 2* as Ravenholm is.

From the assault across the beach to the rendezvous with Alyx at its heart, Nova Prospekt highlights the way in which *Half-Life 2* overlaps its mechanical twists. As one new concept is winding down - culminating in a climatic test encounter – another is winding up, moving the player through a series of teaching encounters. Here at the end of 'Sandtraps' in the prison yard of Nova Prospekt the player reaches the conclusion of the "RPG and Combine gunships" arc while still learning how best to use their new antlion companions. This constant overlapping of concepts means there's always at least two twists to the core first-person shooter combat occurring at once, and you'll only ever be expected to learn one of them at a time.

This is vital to keeping *Half-Life 2* feeling fresh as on its own the combat is not the game's strongest element. With access to all available weapons at once, and with ammunition scarcity never a concern, the enemy and encounter design has a lot of heavy lifting to do when it comes to the moment-to-moment combat encounters. It's rare for the game to throw more than one enemy species at your at once (zombies, Combine, aliens) and within those species only the zombies have a significant degree of mechanical variation. This leads to combat encounters often feeling flat, each fight with Combine soldiers is largely the same. Neither your available weapons nor theirs change dramatically, fights are predominately close to mid-range and heavily reliant on the randomised spread of the various hitscan weapons. As a lot of Nova Prospekt takes place in the corridors and interior spaces of the prison itself the combat rapidly begins to lose any sense of differentiation, one fight is much like another. Even the inclusion of antlions does little to change this. The actual gunfights of *Half-Life 2* are good enough, but on their own lack the dramatic spikes that make for memorable moments.

This isn't as damning a criticism as it might be in a different game, because the mechanical twists are such an important part of *Half-Life 2's* design. So rarely are you asked to engage in pure first-person shooter combat that it can get away with being less impactful and diverse than a game where combat is the focus (see *Halo: Combat Evolved*).

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Leading your antlions on an assault on the Combine guarded beach is a sequence that highlights the best aspects of antlion combat and behaviour. There's enough cover for you to hang back and the encounters are both open enough that the antlions won't get in your way, while still constrained enough that you never have to deal with an overwhelming number of Combine.

Moving inside the problems the antlions introduce become more noticeable. Despite their prodigious jumping ability, they still have a tendency to congregate behind you making it difficult to retreat if necessary. Out of combat they can make the simple act of moving through a door fussy and time consuming, they tend to crowd around you and won't immediately move out of your way. Combat through the corridors and cell blocks of Nova Prospekt might be emotionally one-note without them, but it can also be frustrating with them. To attempt to mitigate the potentially souring experience of managing antlions in confined spaces the game introduces a new twist: Combine sentry guns.

*“The man you have consistently failed to slow, let alone capture, is by all standards simply that--an ordinary man. How can you have failed to apprehend him?”*

One of the first locations from *Half-Life 2* that was publicly revealed. Though the lighting and enemy design has changed, architecturally Nova Prospekt is easily recognisable from those initial images (at least the section of cell block B4 that was shown). That this level was one of those chosen to shown off *Half-Life 2* is notable as throughout Nova Prospekt there is a sense of this being almost a *Half-Life 1.5*.

Where other levels focus on outdoor sequences with vehicles and numerous NPCs, or horror-themed physics playgrounds, here the focus is on close range combat through interior spaces – a *Half-Life* staple. Even some of the texturing is reminiscent of Gordon's time inside the Black Mesa Research Facility.

If this level is to be compared to *Half-Life* then it's a *Half-Life* with the edges rounded off. A core trait of *Half-Life 2* – which can be seen most starkly here given the clear similarities to the original – is that it views player experience as paramount. While comfortable with your exploring off the beaten track to a limited extent what *Half-Life 2* really wants is for you to see all the cool things it has to offer. It wants players to have fun, and it will strive to direct them towards that fun whenever possible.

The methods used for this player direction are a mix of the subtle and the occasionally frustrating. A lot of the larger world of the Combine controlled Earth is glimpsed via security monitors, or through impassable obstacles; sound too plays a pivotal role in creating this sense of a world larger than the one directly experienced. Unfortunately, if you – either wilfully or unintentionally – miss its cues and look or move in the wrong direction the illusion of a “real” world” can start to crack. Look left when the game is encouraging you to look right and you'll miss the Combine fighting off the antlion

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incursion; look down when the game wants you to look up and you'll not see the Combine Dropship that deploys the soldiers to attack you.

Impressively *Half-Life 2* is able to create this sense of a larger world despite levels that are sparsely populated even for the standards of 2004. In a form of interior design by contextual consensus, props are used throughout to indicate the function of each space. A square room becomes a kitchen because of the presence of stoves, a simple box room is transformed from a cell to an office just by changing the door. It's an economy of detail that is helped by the inherently spartan nature of an oppressive dystopia.

Running throughout Nova Prospekt is a theme of spatial duality. This was once a human constructed prison before it became whatever it is now, and with that function comes certain requirements for the separation of spaces. Most clearly visible in the larger rooms there is a divide between those spaces used by prisoners and those used by guards and other prison staff. Usually these divisions are vertical, with raised platforms and overhanging security offices used by the guards to observe the prisoners below. Some of these divisions are less rigid than others, this is especially true in corridors and other spaces intended primarily for movement. Pillars and columns are used frequently to partition space, sometime reinforced by the addition of chain-linked fences which provide a physical barrier to reinforce the conceptual one created by the pillars, while also retaining the shared visibility between both sub-spaces.

With no voice in Gordon's ear to give him directions (something that will actually occur in 'Entanglement' after players are reunited with Alyx Vance), architecture and lighting have a large role to play when it comes to guiding the player. It's here that *Half-Life 2* is at its strongest.

The cliché is that the Valve Software approach to player guidance is "just hang a light on it", and though that's true to an extent, lighting is only one method of player guidance employed.

Desired movement is supported by the directionality of the spaces themselves. Rooms that serve primarily as combat encounters tend to have a square aspect, a shape with no inherent front or back, one that encourages lingering and exploration. Spaces that want players to keep moving are more rectangular in nature, the walls serving to frame player movement and funnel it in a particular direction. This can be seen most clearly in cell block B4 where players are turned completely around multiple times without them really noticing because their primary movement direction is always along the space's longitudinal axis.

Lighting is used frequently to highlight important elements within a space, however this isn't as simple as putting a light on something and hoping players notice. Contrast and colouration are important. When a light is used to pick out a particular area it's done in a way that contrasts with the other visual

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signifiers within the space; rarely does *Half-Life 2* put a light on a door at the end of a rectangular space because the space itself will do the work of guiding the player.

As well as being used as a contrasting element to pick out important features, lights are also used in a similar way to pillars and columns to create a sense of directionality where none exists; a row of lights creates a line, a large spot light defines a space.

Subtly used and never explicitly commented upon, colouration is also important to both player guidance and the establishment of a coherent sense of place. Early on warm lighting is used to pick out areas of Combine activity against the cold light of dusk. Security offices and other spaces from which Combine will attack are initially lit by yellow blubs, as you journey further into Nova Prospekt, as the signs of Combine occupation become stronger, those yellows cease being used to signify the Combine and instead begin to represent what little humanity remains. By the time you reach the train station at the beginning of 'Entanglement' this inversion is complete, blue-grey lighting is the predominate colour scheme, any yellows you see are the timid faltering remains of humanity not yet consumed by the Combine; refuges from the harsh artificial lighting surrounding you.

Nova Prospekt is both "format breaker" and prototypical *Half-Life 2*. The same techniques that are used throughout to guide the player through a series of twists on the first-person shooter format are themselves twisted to handle the exploration of a single enclosed location. As much a first-person adventure as a first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* wants you to always be able to see or do something "cool". When the methods it employs are subtle enough that you don't balk at them, they are incredibly effective, carrying you seamlessly through each new twist on the core first-person formula.