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CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE: FOUCAULDIAN PANOPTICISM REPRESENTED IN INTERACTIVE MEDIA

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Abstract

This paper strives to establish the case of Valve's *Half Life 2* is a piece of interactive media that excellently portrays the Foucauldian construct of the panopticon. The videogame was released to the public in 2004, and features the continuation of the escapades of Gordon Freeman, the heroic scientist who dons the now iconic HEV suit and is controlled by the human player. *Half Life 2* shows earth that has been subjugated by an alien collective called the 'Combine'. They use human collaborators in this process of subjugation that the player gets to witness and even experience over the course of the game. The player is hunted by Combine's police and soldiers throughout the game. Foucault's Panopticism represents a besieged society that grovels under the oppressive domination of a syndic or agent who represents the cruel and fearsome reigning authority. The most appropriate forms for the panopticon are that of a town or a prison that has towering over it the seat of the oppressor who has eyes and ears everywhere with an elaborate intelligence network. This paper holds that *Half Life 2* lets the player experience through its gameplay what such an oppressive society looks like.

Keywords: Panopticism, Surveillance, Policing, Movements, Torture, Control

I. INTRODUCTION

Half Life 2 is its developer Valve's attempt at realism and responsiveness. It was released in 2004. It was the first game to require the installation of their videogame store app Steam. It was meant to, and continues to showcase the power of their 'Source' engine. The engine represented a new evolution of the technology of its kind, as it came with good physics mechanics, beautiful graphics, and excellent AI. The game is the sequel to *Half Life*. The game was later brought to gaming consoles as well. The videogame has thirteen chapters excluding the credits segment ("Half Life 2").

II. PANOPTICISM

Foucault's panopticism is a society under duress and suffering. He describes his panoptic society based on a seventeenth century plague-struck town (195). The town's districts are partitioned by the rulers into easily controlled quarters. The town is closed down. Movement is paralysed; people are not allowed to go out of their homes. Not even stray animals are spared; they are all culled. The ruling group appoints their agents or 'syndics' to administer the town with ruthless efficiency. The most common punishment for even the slightest infraction is death. This agent will personally ensure that his subjects are cared for or punished. He is usually required to personally lock in his subjects. Canals and other minor projects are carried out which allow the residents to communicate and exchange things with minimal contact. The residents are expected to stock up on provisions and wait till the quarantine is lifted. Only the guards and the agents may enjoy the privilege of moving from one house to another, even the infected ones (195). The situation is a dire one, as (the town), "It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment." (195)

This policing is robust, and it goes perfectly alongside the equally important objective of utter surveillance. Control is paramount, so is knowledge of what the residents are up to. No chances may be taken and punishment is cruel. Keeping such tight control are the aforementioned guards, who may be numerous and obedient themselves, so that "Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere: 'A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance', guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people..." (195-196) The guards are well funded, as they have observation posts by the town gates. Nothing escapes their surveillance. The head inspector or agent knows all the subjects by name and demands unflinching compliance. Secrets are anathema, and torture or even death may be employed to glean even the most secure of these secrets, "...he calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and every one of them - 'in which respect the inhabitants will be compelled to speak the truth under pain of death'..." (196). The only things the draconian lawmen care about are compliance and honesty; the sentiments of the subjects do not outweigh the crisis.

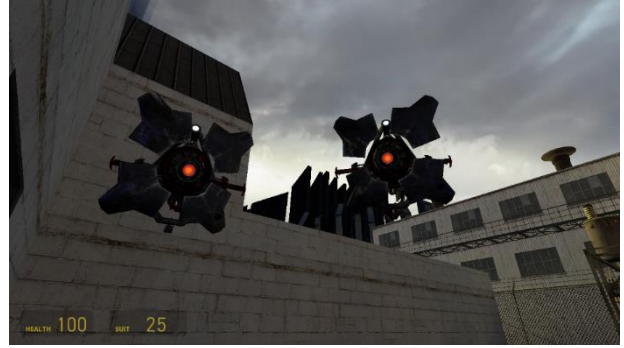
Bureaucracy plays a complimentary role to this oppressive rule, "At the beginning of the 'lock up', the role of each of the inhabitants present in the town is laid down, one by one; this document bears 'the name, age, sex of everyone, notwithstanding his condition': a copy is sent to the intendant of the quarter..." (196). Everything is diligently documented, and nothing is underestimated. Even the most seemingly trivial things are noted down. This arrangement is generally centralized (196). Alongside this, the residents are moved around by the authorities so that their homes may be sanitized (197). This represents government-sanctioned displacement.

Foucault described Bentham's 'panopticon' to be the architectural embodiment of such imprisonment or denial of freedom. "Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring..." of much relevance here is the tower as it represents complete control and unmitigated surveillance (200). The prison holds people of all kinds, from schoolboys to workers. Privacy is a privilege they cannot have, as the tower has windows that observe these caged creatures. "Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap." (200) This surveillance is a taste of total control.

III. PANOPTICISM OF *HALF LIFE 2*

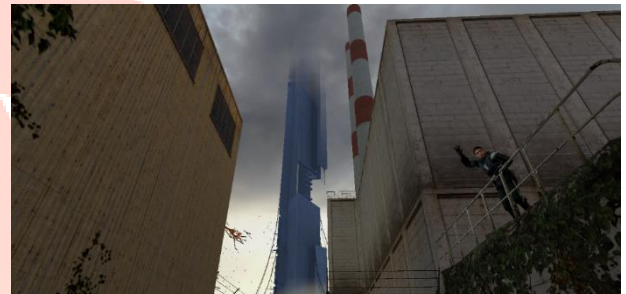
The world of *Half Life 2* is one overrun by the interplanetary alien empire of the Combine. Their presence on earth is a plague to humanity, as they defeated humans in a matter of mere hours and begun a process of subjugating and eradicating the remaining human inhabitants of the planet. The Combine has taken over every inch of land seen within the game world. They are the unchallenged rulers for years until the protagonist Gordon Freeman's intervention. What the game world presents is the point of interest to this paper.

A collaborator named Dr Breen communicated with the aliens and negotiated a surrender. This might have saved humanity from annihilation, but pushed them into slavery. Dr Breen becomes the syndic or agent here of the ruling Combine. He stays in a skyscraper called the Citadel, in the middle of the Eastern-European style city. As humanity lives in an open prison during the events of the videogame, the whole place can be called a panopticon (prison), and the Citadel is the tower that is the centre of control and surveillance. This is where the oppressive Combine troops are headquartered alongside Dr. Breen himself. Garrisoned here are everything from massive tripods to elite soldiers of the empire. The Citadel corresponds with the central tower of the panopticon in spirit, symbolism and role. It is the centre from which the residents of the city are deprived of their privacy, and dignity. Its symbolism is emphasised as the characters comment about it in crucial points of the plot, and the plot itself is essentially the protagonist's journey to the place to sabotage it. Dr. Breen, as the syndic of this game world, communicates with his people through radio and televised broadcasts. A broadcast is the first thing the protagonist notices in the very first chapter when he alights the train ("Point Insertion"). One of the TV screens playing Dr Breen's propaganda is destroyed by the rebels in act of defiance, and is witnessed by the protagonist.



the citadel

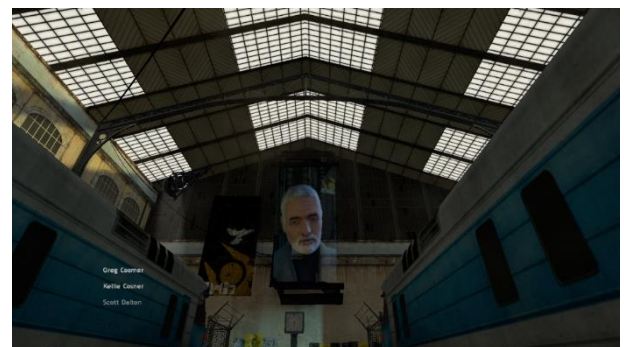
Spatial partitioning has taken place in this world as the Combine has deliberately turned settlements into controlled places. They have renamed the places into mere numbers; i.e., every city has its unique name banished in favour of a serial number. City 17 is the one that the protagonist infiltrates. Dr Breen has the Combine's police force, (quite ironically) referred to as the 'civil protection', checks on the Combine's subjects. The subjects cannot hide, nor can they refuse to do what they have been instructed. These represent Foucault's guards who have tight control over the population.



Dr Breen in a propaganda broadcast

Further, the residents are not allowed to travel freely as they want. They are expected to live wherever they have been assigned, and move when commanded. This whole process is carried with bureaucratic efficiency. The Combine has outposts or checkpoints where people are let through or detained. The subjects are always watched and every whisper that emanates from them is noticed. Not only are they directly watched, but there are photographing drones that float around and capture suspicious persons or activity. This corresponds to Foucault's requirement of complete control over movement (and the establishment of outposts or here, checkpoints, to control movement). This case of control is reinforced when one considers that in is the Combine control all the basic necessities of the humans. They are given rationed food. And to ensure that no farming happens, arable land is poisoned (as evinced by large swathes of land filled with toxic waste) or the chance is not given. People are required to wear similar clothes, so that their expression is curtailed. This is just another tactic to demoralise the subjects, like the aforementioned erasure of identities of cities.

Surveillance and policing are incessant, as expressed by Foucault. The surveillance drones truly ensure that visibility is a trap, as the Combine's police would soon follow it to apprehend any undesirable individuals. If any miscreant or rebel is caught, they are immediately taken for questioning. Deviance is discouraged with the pain of death. The tactics employed are cruel, with various forms of torture frequently used to coax information out of interrogation victims. Rebels or resistance fighters suffer ignominy at the hands of the Combine's soldiers as they are often executed. There are



combine's surveillance drones

several segments in the game where the player may come across the Combine's attempts at execution, or rather, whatever remains of the dead rebels. Only charred remains of the people remain for the protagonist to observe ("Sandtraps"). The most disagreeable of dissidents end up in the hated prison complex named Nova Prospekt. The prisoners are inhumanely treated, and the (blood-stained) torture equipment found here hint at the cruelty that happens here. The Combine was about to eradicate humanity anyway, and human lives not valuable enough for them to care about public sentiments. Nova Prospekt's status as a prison only reinforces the relevance of the concept of the panopticon. The Combine knows the details of almost of all their subjects and have succeeded in quelling most meaningful resistance attempts.

The police almost immediately identify the protagonist as a threat and begin their schemes to eliminate him. They grab him first for questioning, but he is rescued by his friend Barney who is essentially a spy for the resistance who works within civil protection. Many Combine police troops and military troops are sent to hunt down Freeman. As implied before, the player who plays as Freeman comes across many of the outposts with dead rebels and participates in battle alongside the rebels.



charred remains

The videogame actually has a better ending than simply enslavement (the 'episodes' are not considered for this paper), as Freeman sabotages the Combine's operations by ruining the Citadel. The final monologue by the enigmatic character of the G-Man prompts a philosophical enquiry about free will, as Freeman (quite the ironic name in this context) has only an illusion of free will, as the G-Man claims to have made a choice on his behalf. It must appear that enslavement is both physical and mental, no matter who is the oppressor.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper holds that *Half Life 2* is a very appropriate way to experience in the interactive medium of videogames the philosophical construct ascribed to Foucault. It is a fairly presentable representation of the concept in the format of a videogame. Given Foucault's description of the concept and its implications, what can be recognised here is the ideal match between it and the videogame world. The game must be recognised for producing what it offers not just in its game mechanics or the plot, but also the philosophical depth of the whole game-world, whether it was intentional from the side of the game developers. The plot involves a tale of resistance and ultimately unravelling the panopticon (of City 17 in particular), but as implied above, provides anyone with interest in the philosophy the opportunity to experience it as a simulation in the virtual world of the videogame.

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