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Spreadsheets and Spaceships: How *The Outer Worlds* Critiques Corporatocracy, Colonialism and Revolution

Comments

An in-depth analysis of the political messaging behind the video game "The Outer Worlds" by game developer Obsidian Games and a larger critique of how popular culture can reflect political philosophy, this was a final paper for POSC 379 with Professor Andrea Molle.

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The author

Spreadsheets and Spaceships: How *The Outer Worlds* critiques Corporatocracy, Colonialism
and Revolution

By

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POSC 379

Dr. Molle

"Space, the final frontier" - Captain James T. Kirk. The game *The Outer Worlds* embodies the spirit of this famous phrase. On the surface, *The Outer Worlds* by game developer Obsidian Games presents itself as a spacefaring adventure. Throughout the 37 hours of the potential gameplay, you will be met with scenic views of faraway planets, encounter alien life and explore the various worlds in your trusty ship, "The Un-reliable." Although this game provides the heart-pumping adventure you expect, underneath it all is a story of revolution and revolt against an oppressive corporate regime. You begin by being woken up aboard the lost ship "The Hope," the last frigate sent to the Halcyon system from Earth. Aboard this ship holds the brightest minds the Earth has to offer, leaders, engineers, doctors, and other people who would benefit the system. However, the ship was lost, allowed to drift perpetually by the Halcyon Holding Corporation (HHC). When you are woken up, you come to learn about the state of the colonies. The HHC has wholly subjugated the settlers, food is dwindling, disease is rampant, and the entire system is on the verge of collapse. As you explore *The Outer Worlds*, you will discover how the game harshly critiques corporatocracy, colonialism, and revolution.

The Halcyon Holdings Corporation operates the central government of the Halcyon system. Before interstellar travel became commonplace, ten major corporations came together to buy a stake in systems that they deemed had "potential." These corporations included: Universal Defense Logistics, Spacer's Choice, Hunters & Trackers Ltd, Kolway Pharmaceuticals, Auntie Cleo's, Rizzo's, C&P, Monarch Stellar Industries, ARMS, and Terra One Publications. The influence these corporations have upon the colonies in total. They go beyond controlling the central government and hold a monopoly on all goods, employment, travel, trade, and currency. As a result, it is nearly impossible to go anywhere in the system without encountering a storefront selling one of its products or a colony they do not control directly.

This system of governance within the Halcyon System is a Corpratetocracy.

Corpratetocracy is when one or a handful of powerful corporations work together to influence or control the government via business practices. In the real world, it is often said that the United States has married itself to Corpratetocracy. For example, government lobbying is commonplace in the United States, with corporations like Exxon (a petroleum corporation) paying 6.2 million dollars in political lobbying to get pro-oil legislation passed (Exxon). Through lobbying, corporations like Exxon can purchase political power and favors; if we look at which politicians receive money from Exxon, we see a stark increase in their voting practices in support of big oil (Exxon Mobile profile). However, The Outter Worlds takes corporatocracy to an extreme level.

Halcyon Holdings Corporation's power over the settlers is established before the game begins. In a cutscene at the beginning of the game, a narrator says, "Why stay earthbound when prosperity awaits you among the stars? Our hibernation chambers will make the seven-year journey feel like minutes as you reach the only colony run by prominent corporations! With only a mere working contract of seven years, you can begin your adventure in the Halcyon system!" This narration establishes the concept of indentured servitude, which is central to the game. Indentured servitude is where an individual (or corporation) pays for travel for a person, typically to a new colony. The person then will be tied to the organization for some time to work under contract. This practice was common during colonialism and was often seen in the Americas during the 17th century. It is estimated that from 1850 to 1900, nearly 90,000 individuals came to the "New World" under a contract of indentured servitude (Guasco). These indentured servants were held under contract for 4 to 7 years, after which they could leave and establish themselves in a hemisphere with plentiful opportunities. This time limitation is not the case in the Halcyon system. As the system is a product of corporatocracy, there are very few options for people to strike out on their own, and it is common to see these people work their whole lives for one corporation. Furthermore, indentured servitude goes much further than we

have seen in the real world; those who come to work for the HHC become the property of the company to which they are tied.

Early in your adventure, you will come across the town of Edgewater, owned by Spacer's Choice and exclusively exists to produce Saltuna. Before you enter the town, you will be met with a gravedigger who will give you a quest to collect the gravesite fees from some of the residents from across the town. In order to be buried, you must pay a stipend up front to the company monthly, just like a typical insurance policy. During this quest, you will encounter a person who cannot pay due to a lack of funds. The only way he can afford the grave site fees would be to pull the gold crowns out of a dead man's mouth, which he is reluctant to do, not for any moral reasons but because "his body and any rare minerals there within are the exclusive property of Spacer's choice." The town's people are not seen as citizens or workers but as the exclusive property of the corporation. The "foundations" quest further develops the concept of human possession. You discover a young man committed suicide, unable to handle the mundanity of working for Spacers' choice. You discover that the people are not upset because a young man took his life but because of the financial repercussions that will occur from Spacer's Choice because of his actions. The foreman of the Saltuna factory refers to the incident as "the malicious destruction of Spacer's Choice property." He explains how the town will have to pay the corporation to compensate them for their loss. This level of possession, again, shows the control that the corporations wield over the people; they do not see them as individuals but as resources to be controlled and utilized. This philosophy is an exaggerated version of company towns that emerged in the United States during the 19th century. Towns like Lowell provided housing for factory workers whose entire lives were run and operated by the company; every aspect of life, from when to sleep and what to eat, was established by the company with no interest in the well-being of the workers (Hirsch). These practices expanded even further in Halcyon to the point that they verged upon slavery.

In Edgewater, we meet our first potential companion, Pavarti. Parvati is the engineer of the town of Edgewater, and when you ask what her story is, she will explain the following "well, I was not; I lived with my Pa', he moved here with me when the company reassigned us. My Ma's contract said that any children she had during her time would be Spacers Choice's property from conception, so when I was old enough, they moved me out here." This level of human ownership brings back the images of the old south, where slavery was commonplace. It was a widespread practice for slavers to encourage their slaves to have children, as once they were born, the child was legally considered their property. It was furtherly common to see the separation of families as there appeared to be no consideration for keeping a family together over profit.

Within the Halcyon system, there are three locations of notable significance: Edgewater, The Groundbreaker, and Byzantium. Each of these locations demonstrates how corporatocracy can influence society's development and the imbalances it creates.

Edgewater acts as the introduction to society in Halcyon for the Player. Upon entering the town, the Player is shown the impact the corporation has in everyday life. Everything is done in a bureaucratic corporate system. For example, in a correspondence found in a terminal on Edgewater terminal, you read about how the town's manager (also the town's mayor) attempts to get resources from the company to build a new wall around the town. His request was denied because he needed the signature of the previous manager, who has since died. The memo reads: "Your request for additional building materials has been denied. The walls around Edgewater were built thirty years ago by your predecessor. Any alterations, expansions, or repairs to this wall MUST be signed and approved by your predecessor. If your predecessor is unavailable due to incarceration, re-education, or death, it is YOUR responsibility to obtain a last will and testament demonstrating your predecessor's intentions." Bureaucracy is a staple of life in Edgewater (and throughout the Halcyon colonies); everything requires paperwork, signatures, and processing. This philosophy permeates throughout everything in daily life, even instances of

illness. Another memo says that people are encouraged to "Be considerate toward other members of the Spacer's Choice family. Allow two to four weeks to process and approve your scheduled sick leave. The company must be compensated for lost hours." It is impossible to predict four weeks in advance when you will require sick leave, and requiring processing is another bureaucratic way the corporation attempts to control its workers. Furthermore, it is essential to note that a terrible plague was going through the town during this time. Another way the corporation controls its workers is through the allocation of medicine. Those who fall sick only receive medicine if deemed "of worth," meaning only those working the hardest and contributing to the bottom line can receive life-saving medicine.

The following location, which you will discover, is the ship *The Groundbreaker*. Unlike *Edgewater*, the *Groundbreaker* is not controlled by any corporation and is considered the last vestige of freedom in the Halcyon system. This independence results from a contract between the HHC and the original captain of the *Groundbreaker*. The people of *Groundbreaker* are fiercely protective over their independence from the HHC, and due to their status as a free port of trade, the HHC is willing to allow the people to operate outside of the Board's control. However, the influences of the corporatocracy are still present throughout the ship. Once entering the ship, you are met with a quest detailing that the venting system upon the *Groundbreaker* is malfunctioning due to out-of-date parts - parts only the corporations can provide. When talking to Junlei - the captain of the *Groundbreaker* - she is reluctant to go to the Board to ask for replacement parts because "every time we accept the board's help, we have to make concessions to our freedom, and soon there will be none left."

The influence that the Board has on the *Groundbreaker* is minimal at most, but upon it, a board embassy exists that represents the Board's interests. If you sneak into the embassy, you will find on the terminal that the ambassador for the Board advises that they should "let the *Groundbreaker* sweat a little longer." The withholding of the parts is an attempt to allow the Board to gain leverage in bargaining over the *Groundbreaker* to gain greater control. The

practice of strongarming smaller states to bend to the will of corporate interests is prevalent today, as climate change increases the rate of natural disasters in the southern hemisphere. In the podcast "Who Pays the Bill for Climate Change" by the New York Times, the host speaks about how private equity firms are willing to give loans out to developing countries in the case of natural disasters, but these loans come with conditions. These conditions limit how the countries can spend these loans, limiting them to spending on specific projects, which will help ensure that the bank will receive their investment back (Tavernise). This manipulation is a real-life example of corporatocracy; these firms can dictate how these states respond to crises through financial power. Although the situation in The Groundbreaker is not a natural disaster, the experience is the same; the Board can leverage its position of power to influence the government of The Groundbreaker to do what they want.

The final location of notoriety is Byzantium - the crown jewel of Halcyon. Byzantium is a city located on the same planet as Edgewater, but the two could not be more different. Where Edgewater is suffering from disease and food insecurity, Byzantium holds an abundance of wealth and prosperity; when walking down the streets, you will see lavish townhouses, people on the street in clean clothes, and conversations regarding the latest ether wave production. The inhabitants of Byzantium are untouched by the hardships affecting the rest of the colonies. As the headquarters of the HHC, Byzantium is the wealthiest city in the Halcyon system. When entering a bar in Byzantium, you can converse with the bartender who will say, "I do not know why people work, and I never would; it seems so dirty." The Bar is run exclusively by auto mechanicals, allowing the bartender not to lift a finger in labor. The bartender acts as a catalyst for how the rest of the colonies are perceived by Byzantium. The colonists work for them to live in luxury. The disregard for the other colonists is underscored at the end of the game by Chairman Rockwell (The head of the HHC). Rockwell tells the Player of his plan to hibernate the citizens of Halcyon and systematically unfreeze them in his "lifetime employment program," saying, "I will do anything to those people so that we can live in luxury." This plan is the ultimate

show of corporatocracy. In a corporatocracy, all benefits of the working class are funneled into a few wealthy families and corporations under the guise of politics. One real-life example which mirrors Byzantium is Dubai in the UAE. When looking at Dubai at a glance, you will be met with pictures of extreme wealth and exuberance, sports cars lining the streets, and skyscrapers that measure to be the tallest in the world. However, looking at the rest of the country, you will see vast amounts of poverty, water, and food insecurity. It is estimated that the top 1% of the UAE holds over 50% of the nation's wealth, with the bottom 50% only holding 22.8% of the total income. Furthermore, with a water production rate of less than half of 1,000 cubic meters (the minimum to be considered water scarce), resources are extremely limited to the other 98% of Arabians who do not live in the capital (Bradbury).

As shown, the Halcyon system's governmental structure is very oppressive; between the heavy-handed bureaucracy and general disregard for human life, it is no surprise that dissent would rise from the colonies. However, just like in any regime, some benefit from the current system and advocate for its continuance.

The primary plot driver is for the Player to incite revolution within Halcyon; this mission is given to the Player by Phineas Welles, a fugitive scientist wanted by the HHC for crimes against the Halcyon colony. After seeing the atrocities committed by the Board and the inevitable collapse of the habitability of the colonies, Welles re-animates the Player from the lost ship "The Hope." Throughout the game, Welles will continuously inform the Player of the evildoings of the Board. Phineas is an example of a radical revolutionary. Welles sees no possibility of reform with the Board, and the only way for long-lasting change is to tear it down and begin again. If you decide to side with Welles, you will do that, going through the city, eliminating members of the Board, and ultimately toppling the established government. French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville theorized of two modes of revolution, and the ideology and methodology of Welles constitute the second revolution. The second revolution is one in which the "sole aim of the French (or any other people) nation seemed to be to make a clean sweep of the past and a

second, in which attempts were made to salvage fragments from the wreckage of the old order" (Kahan). Welles embodies this theory of revolution; his ideology to sweep clean the fragments of the old world order and to implement a new, fairer government establish that he believes that the only way to save Halcyon is to tear it down and start again.

Although not a significant character, Sanjar Nadi engages in an alternate form of revolution. Sanjar is the CEO of Monarch Stellar Industries; the Board abandoned Monarch due to it being deemed too dangerous, leaving Sanjar alone with no resources to keep his company and his people afloat. Unlike other leaders on the Board who brutalize their employees, Sanjar saw where reforms could be made, providing benefits, breaks, and a variety of other workplace reforms to keep his employees happy during this difficult time. However, their situation is dire; without the Board's support, Sanjar cannot keep his people going, so he seeks to return to the Board. In order to do so, Sanjar sends the Player to retrieve a BOLT-52 cartridge. In typical bureaucratic fashion, the only way for Sanjar to gain a place on the Board is to fill out the BOLT-52 form (Bill of Liquidation/transfer form 52), which will protect Monarch when he makes a move against the Board by temporarily assigning them to the pass-through entity. Sanjar seeks to change the culture of the Board, not for the whole system but for his employees on Monarch. Tocqueville also theorized about this type of revolution. Tocqueville believed that when the revolutionaries met with the Estates General during the French revolution, the revolution was already won in society. Although the old regime was still in power, it was inevitable that change was to come because everyone agreed that change was necessary for life. Sanjar embodies this revolution ideology; he provided his employees a glimpse into what absolute freedom could look like without the harsh rules of the Board and was determined to keep it for them. Although revolutions require dissent from the current establishment, there will always be a subset of those who believe that the current government should remain in power. These people fall under two distinct categories: those who benefit from the establishment and those who are too ignorant to see the oppression.

Reed Tobson is the manager of the town of Edgewater; when the Player first interacts with Reed, he will provide a quest for them to cut off the power supply to the Deserters at the Botanical garden. Reed believes that the only way to survival is to continue down the path that the Board has established; if the Deserters are to continue to stay outside of the colony, Reed believes that the Board will cut off all supplies and support to Edgewater. If we are to look at his terminal, however, we see that he will receive a substantial bonus if these deserters are to return from the Board. Reed has a monetary incentive for the town to succeed and for the rule of the Board to continue. Once you finish the game, you will be met with a cut scene. If you redirect power to Edgewater - forcing the Deserters to return - the narrator will prompt that Reed was unable to cope with the new establishment, ultimately succumbing to madness, mumbling to himself that he wishes things to return to the way they were. Reed is what Karl Marx considered the "bourgeoisie," the middle class which benefits from the system but does not reap the full benefits of oppression (Ryan).

Marx once said, "religion is the opiate of the masses," and that is no more true than in character Maximillian Desoto. Also known as Vicar Max, Desoto is a Vicar of the Order of Scientific Inquiry (OSI) assigned to Edgewater. OSI is the official religion of the corporations and is the only recognized religion in their eyes. OSI was established by the corporations when the colonization of the Halcyon system began, and the reasoning behind it mirrors what Marx believed precisely. The motto of OSI is "Work invigorates the spirit" when speaking to Desoto, he will often speak at length of how corporations are the only thing keeping the universe together. Scientism instills the mindset that everyone has a predetermined path, and straying from one's job or place in life is heresy. That statement is contradictory as if one were to believe that whatever they did would be on that path regardless of their choices. However, it is utilized by corporations in order to keep the masses in order. Desoto is one of the few characters who can be recruited into a companion; throughout his questline, you are searching for answers to the secrets of the universe, throughout which Desoto is confronted with the unfortunate truth-

everything he believed was a veil which the corporations raised. Ultimately Desoto would become a staunch revolutionist, but this only occurs after his entire worldview is dismantled. Desoto represents Marx's Proletariat, the lowest class, essentially slaves to the oppressors (Proletariat).

The Outer Worlds is filled with a much more political philosophy that cannot be contained within ten pages, ranging from propaganda to the influence of religion on society. However, the core concept is that when capitalism goes unchecked, corporatocracy will inevitably emerge. *The Outer Worlds* provides the unique opportunity to explore a system in which all safeguards a typical government would provide against corporate monopoly or control are absent. As the Player ventures into the game, the choices they make will determine the fate of the entire system, to incite a revolution or further the grip which the HHC has on Halcyon. *The Outer Worlds* does a fantastic job of weaving multiple political theories into its game, ranging from corporatocracy, and colonialism to revolution. It is only possible to play the 37 hours of potential game time by experiencing and questioning how the world would respond if these events were to play out in real life. Furthermore, the game's choice of the Player to side with the revolutionaries or the HHC forces the Player to make moral decisions, further instructing them on the dangers of total corporate control. *The Outer Worlds* is a beautiful game with breathtaking beauty and exciting gameplay, but where it truly succeeds is cultivating an important message about the dangers of corporatocracy and colonialism.

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