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The Library Wants to Kill You: Places of Information as Battleground and Sanctum in Halo

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Introduction

Why study video games in connection with library science? Not only are video game players some of the most serious archivists today, modern gaming encourages reading and gathering information as a key narrative choice. While gamers often hunt and search for in-game knowledge, some then create entire wikis with validated sources, make extensive lore & cheat videos of this gathered information, and even build careers solely around maintaining information systems inside the gaming sphere.

However, most information science and video games studies research focuses on behaviors *outside* of the game (e.g. looking up how to beat a boss fight), how to “repurpose” games mostly for academic purposes (and often not realizing that that takes the fun out of it), and the argument about inclusion of games in library collections. To look *inward*, one can study the way information science is reflected within the game space for the players engaging with it; in video games, library spaces can help players address current problems for distant goals, much like our physical libraries (Taylor & Liew, 2023).

Using *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001) as a case study, I seek to investigate how library spaces and information collecting are depicted in video games, and what messaging the audience receives when those places become antagonistic. I wonder what players think about libraries and informational professionals when they are portrayed as hoarders of data, rather than curators – and how that perception might change as *Halo: CE*'s lore does. Beyond that, I call into question the ways real concerns about archive control are represented within enemy forces in-game.

Information as Narrative

Seeking information is a key narrative move for single-player video games, mirroring real-world information-seeking behaviors. Active seeking and searching entails: (i) physical, actual actions taken; (ii) affective, feelings experienced; (iii) cognitive, thoughts concerning both process and content (Kuhlthau, 2004). However, ludic (game) navigation also requires that easy analogues to physical spaces outside the game world are utilized, with conversions of physical action into virtual action, still connected to both thoughts and emotions. Asking players to traverse places in the gameworld with familiarity is challenging but can be done very well; a good example of this is the *Assassin's Creed* video game series that allows the player to use parkour to navigate historical recreations of cities and

spaces. While jumping from roof tops and diving off steeples may not be something the player is accustomed to, their experience with the real, lived-in world helps to orient them to up and down, the way gravity works, how to walk-through streets, guesses at how buildings will be constructed, where people are likely to gather.

The further removed your game space is from reality, the more you must teach the player, hopefully before they refuse to continue from frustration. *Doom* is a perfect example of the simplicity of this idea – walk through hallways and open doors, never mind there are demons about. Increasing gameplay time was done by toughening up enemies or increasing their number, rather than creating more advanced “maps” within the game. The realization developed through the six generations of gaming consoles (after the likes of Atari, NES, Sega Genesis, GameCube, PlayStation 2 to Xbox One), developers began to understand the necessity of onboarding players to navigation and controls before letting them loose in the game world – oft dubbed the “tutorial” level. The further away from real-world physics and settings, the more handholding seemed to be needed.

Halo: Combat Evolved (2001) was the flagship game of Microsoft’s Xbox console, releasing with the most progressive gameplay and storylines in modern gaming – since then, many have copied and implemented ideas originated from the execution of the first few iterations of the series. Dealing with the complexities is the challenge. Set in space, in the future, within a military system, as an elite soldier character, fighting aliens and infections, deep in lore about religion and generations of sentient species, long-fought intergalactic wars, conversations with AI... As such, the first moment of the game has you, the player, as your avatar Master Chief, emerge from cryostasis and *relearn* how to look, walk, and use abilities, an ingenious way to orient the player without leaving the ludonarrative. As such, game spaces must continually mirror and reintroduce the player into the world – I argue that the use of a known place, such as a library, can affect the way players interact with information contained there, even as their real-world understandings of information spaces are subverted within the ludonarrative.

Place as Gameplay Mechanic

As a new player, *library* is an easy analogue for video games to capitalize on with relative ease. Libraries have a distinct ethos and common design. They will feature some sort of shelving/storage of physical (and digital) information, mostly that worthy of presenting, safekeeping, and funding for the general public’s

access. Libraries are one of the last free and available places to seek shelter and resources, without being charged with loitering. Librarians, at the very least, hold some authority as the representative of the vast data systems contained within. We give credence to the fact that – like a museum – while the pursuing is encouraged, it must be mediated.

Creating real-world analogues in game space is not groundbreaking; the games have to take place somewhere. However, when converting the library from a safe haven of wisdom into an active threat, players begin to question the sanctity of the information they have — and the existence of sanctuary at all.

“The Library” level in *Halo:CE* takes place on a *Halo* space installation (a ringworld with livable surface but concealing its purpose as a superweapon), in which the A.I. Monitor of the facility, 343 Guilty Spark, and its protector robots, the Sentinels, become antagonists.

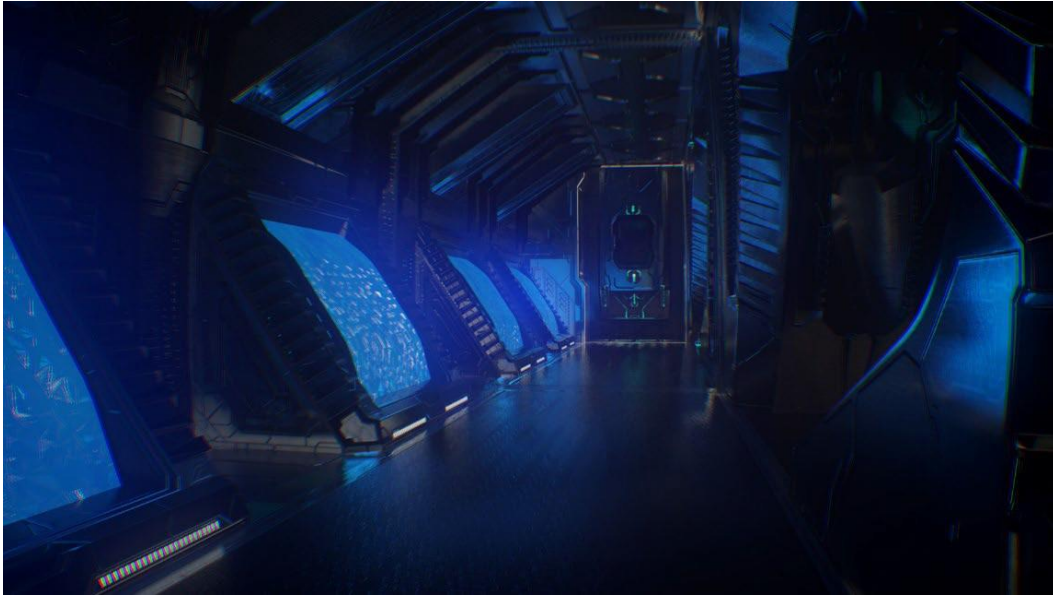


Figure 1: The library shelves at the beginning of “The Library” level in Halo: Combat Evolved (2001).

Librarians Fight Back

343 Guilty Spark is a complicated figure long since explored and retconned in the *Halo* universe. Its initial function is to first guide the player, as avatar Master Chief (whom Spark calls “Reclaimer”), through the maze-like library levels, much like an attendant librarian would. Spark frequently hums and makes small

quips as their levitating, orb-like shell floats about the chaos below. Voice lines consistently remind the player to stay on track: “That is not the correct direction, Reclaimer. If you do not follow me, you may become lost.” Some even express emotion: “How I will enjoy each moment of its categorization!” (*Halo: Combat Evolved*, 2001).

Spark is single-minded: they must get to the lowest level, to activate the Index (the source of information being sought by the player). The winding map design and dimly lit spaces do echo the large libraries of universities or main hubs in cities.

However, there is one stark difference – the information in “The Library” is stored in a completely ancient version of technology, practically inaccessible by any current species alive in the galaxy (though obviously much more advanced than our real-world tech). Spark, as the Monitor of this specific Installation 04, repeatedly tells Master Chief that it has been awaiting his arrival, as only humanity can activate the Index. The atmosphere of the level gradually shifts the further the player explores, but the illuminated blue cabinets of data that serve as nearly the only light source feel sinister even in the lulls.

While there are antagonist librarians in many games, it is the library, its inhabitants, *and* the contents that threaten the player in *Halo: CE*. While other sci-fi games use libraries as level design, often they serve as just any other setting, a backdrop filled with enemies, no different than if the gameplay took place in a café or hospital. Libraries themselves are places of protection, for cultural artifacts and people, but also for dangerous knowledge. As we have seen throughout time and

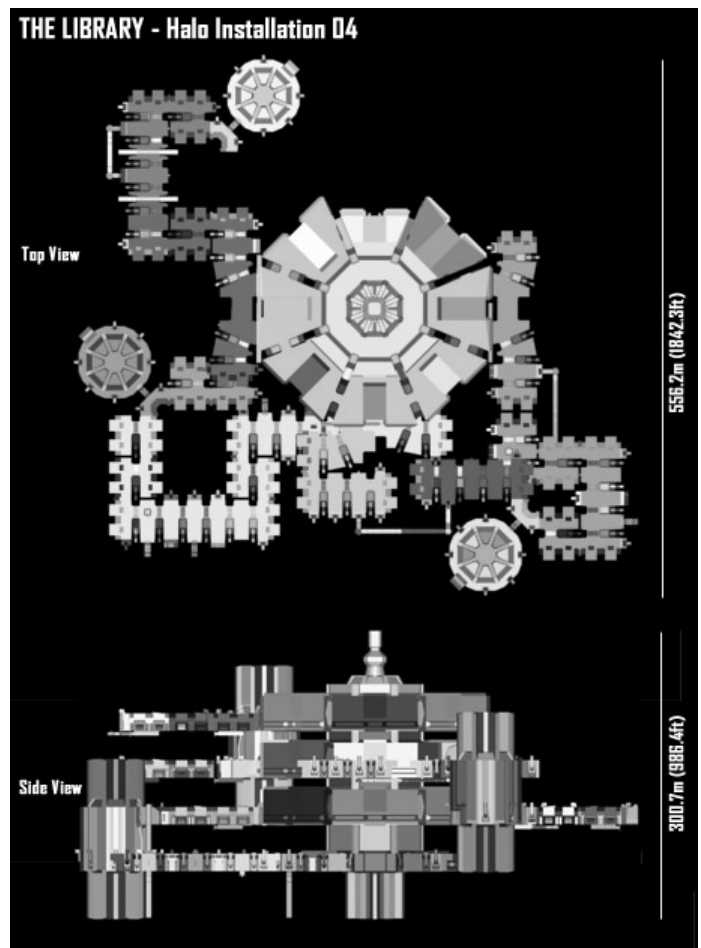


Figure 2: A render of the Library game design for the level map, reconstructed then sourced by a Reddit user (*bigdaddygas_*).

especially in our moment now, carefully controlling information is a power wielded by whoever remembers they can do so. To ban books is to claim they are dangerous and to remove the “threat.”

Yet the danger curated in “The Library” is not just a metaphorical or ideological one. When sabotaged by Spark, Master Chief finds that the reason humanity is the only species that can use the Index is that humans are the key to activating the power of the halo ringworld and (unknowingly) destroying all sentient life in the galaxy.

But Spark is not the only enemy in “The Library.” To be fair, Spark does have some accompanying non-sentient droid-like companions, Sentinels, that float around with it. Their chief purpose is *also* to guard the library – but with plasma cannons. They start off just as friendly as Spark, but do, in fact, turn the weapons on you.



Figure 3: Master Chief (left) speaking to 343 Guilty Spark (right, floating) in the Library near the Index in Halo: Combat Evolved (2001).

To make matters worse, there is in fact another faction you must encounter and fight in “The Library.” These halo rings, like the one much of *Halo:CE* takes place on, were originally created for a dual purpose: to collect the genetic and cultural data from every lifeform in universe (as a sort of mega-library) *and* to be prepared for eradicating the parasitic, zombie-like Flood. The Flood reproduces and spreads the uncurable infection to organisms and analyzes their cells (and memories and intelligence), reconstructing them however it chooses. All of the Flood forms one single consciousness, growing in strength, understanding, and capabilities with each victim it consumes. In *Halo:CE*, the sheer impact this would have on the games as a series would have been impossible to fathom. How do you keep a narrative going when an unstoppable enemy force, literally

consumes you to gather your information for its own collection? Since there is no way to *stop* the Flood, the only known way to stop their spread is to stop providing hosts (the real purpose for the halo rings). We have a physical repository of information in the Library – but a biological collection with the Flood (a very surreal and odd juxtaposition).

On top of all of this, there is yet *another* threat. Humans are not the only spacefaring people. The Covenant, a theocratic hegemony tied in all manners of war, religion, and politics, is an alliance between “alien” races that features a fairly strict caste system – an alliance at odds with the human race. The lowest caste is held by the Unggoy (Grunts) who are essentially slaves; surrendering to the Covenant immediately, they had their entire history and knowledge systems wiped out upon “recruitment.” Here again, we have the consolidation of the vastness of knowledge, in all of space no less, and the instinct is to *break* it to wield it. A consolidation of information only to eradicate it.

The constant scramble for information is the major plot for this triple-A video game, one in which all antagonists participate in. The Library, with its formal design and structured purpose represent the tradition of information collection, while the Covenant represent the eerily familiar political domination. It is the Flood, perhaps, that is the most grotesque (literally and figuratively) as it represents the real fear of extraction and elimination of knowledge totally.

Halo:CE exemplifies what happens when the cliché “information is power” becomes personified. For the player, seeking out archives is now dangerous and game-ending, if the mission fails. Unlike real life, however, the player’s avatar can respawn or load from a save file, while in our world, the consumption of truth and obfuscation of data are “fail states” without recourse.

The Question of Player Demographics

How would a player recognize this overlap between library analogues in- games and those of reality, to further explore this complexity? Becoming familiar with the use and purpose of a library is a learning process in and of itself – one that no one is innately familiar with, without exposure.

Video games, too, must include learning as a segment of the gameplay, in order to ensure the user understands the purpose of choices and actions. Many early players of *Halo:CE* may well have been youth forming continued opinions about libraries and their use.

In 2002, when most households across the globe would have had access, though perhaps not means, to buy an Xbox console, “60% of Americans [played]

video games” (Kirriemuir, 2002, p. 2). A study done a year earlier found that “58% percent of home console game players are 18 years of age or older” which means that a whopping 42% were minors. Indeed, a 2002 study found that “92% of children and adolescents ages 2–17 play video games” and that “more than two-thirds of all children ages 2–18 live in a home with a video game system” – and that this is an activity that children tended to do alone, unsupervised (more so than even watching television) (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002, p. 1). It is likely that many children, adolescents, and young people were interacting with this new generation of console systems – and, if they were playing Xbox, would have almost certainly encountered *Halo:CE*, as it was the game released *with* the console itself.

How many children, teens, and young adults were exposed to console gaming through community usage (“the neighborhood kid who had an Xbox *and* a PlayStation”), local rentals, and over-the-shoulder play (watching as older siblings or relatives engaged with a game)?

Regardless, data across the board has pointed to the average age of gamers drifting slightly older as video games have become a more dominant mode of entertainment (even some approximating average gaming age as 35, though, of course, consolidating both console and computer gaming). This leads to the possible conclusion that video game series are ‘growing up’ with their initial audience (Statista, n.d.).

Changing Player Attitude

With further installations in the *Halo* franchise, we can watch how gamers and the games themselves transform over time. Who would have been playing *Halo:CE* when it came out? Likely, according to the survey data, quite a number of children. Who would have been playing *Halo 4* when it came out in 2012? Are gamers, in fact, “aging” with their games? It appears so. We then might question how the real-world experience of players affects interaction within the game.

The Library itself changes throughout the later iterations – but 343 Guilty Spark is only ever called a *Monitor*. I wonder about the impact of the perversion of the library on these young players. We know that players interact with both narrative (story) and ludus (game rules) in video games differently than they would in other genres. In fact, we know that how people are engaging with *libraries* is even changing: “Librarians are finding that they must compete with other, often more convenient, familiar, and easy-to-use information sources. The user once built workflows around the library systems and services, but now,

increasingly, the library must build its services around user workflows” (Connaway et. al., 2015, p. 112). Real-world analogues cannot be ignored, as we know that there is a use for them in game design regardless of narrative choice. The Library in *Halo:CE* is immovable and the player must roam within – but the enemies will travel to meet the player character anywhere, much like a database shifting to follow a user’s new pathway. The A.I. of non-player characters and opponents do, at once, stand and wait for player action (like a book sitting on a shelf) as well as seek them out (like a search engine configuring its algorithm).

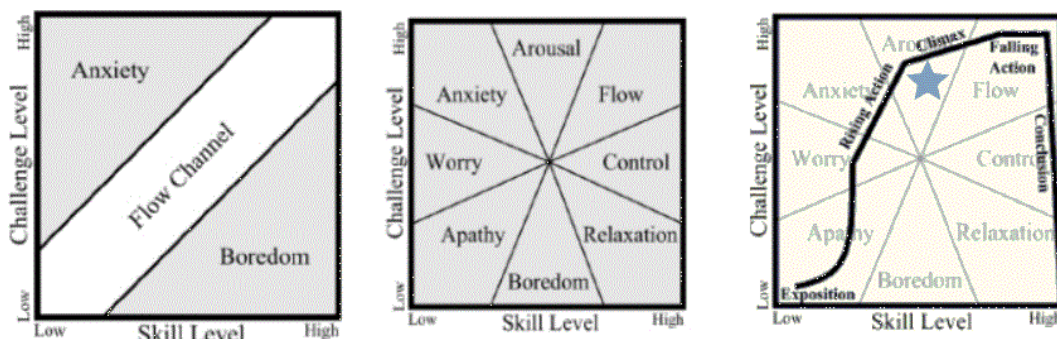


Figure 4: Narrative arcs in gameplay, expressed as challenge level and skill level aiming for the “flow channel” (Rolfe et. al., 2010, p. 449-450).

Players are looking for a “flow state” – much like the Zone of Proximal Development – wherein they are faced with challenges that are not too hard to frustrate but not too easy to bore. As their skill level increases through familiarity of the gameplay, the challenge must raise with them.

Compared with the traditional Freytag’s Pyramid linear narrative arc (1908), the climax of the narrative should take place near the height of the challenge and near the middle of the player’s skill level (“arousal”). “The Library” is the *Halo:CE* level that takes place near the middle of the game *and* the storyline. It takes place right at the moment when the player is the most dialed in, the most keyed for fear and violence, at the climax of the story. It’s curious that a library is the place for this – and that it is an *evil* library.

Monopolizing on player’s real-world knowledge to subvert and weaponize the library space casts a shadow on the perspective future use of information. However, in the world of *Halo*, the Library, the Index, the Monitor — all of it — turn out to actually be religious figures of an ancient species, the Forerunners. They are the custodians of the galaxy who have taken on the ‘Mantle of Responsibility,’ an obligatory moral philosophy to protect and archive all species in their domain. Among them, the player meets the Librarian in *Halo 4* (2012).

Her deified presence casts information in a new light — within her shrine, she keeps the Janus Key, the catalog of all Forerunner technology. She reveals she had been curating humanity all along, like gathering each entry into a Dewey Decimal system, preparing them for the time they would use the information to become the new stewards of the galaxy (“I’m close to finishing the task. The indexing and the archival processes are as complete as I can hope for. If we wait longer, we risk catastrophe,” *Halo 4*, 2012). A retcon, to be sure, but if we think about how the number of gamers has only exploded since the early 2000’s — and also the fact that players who were young during *Halo:CE* and may now be adults in *Halo 4* — the changing attitude toward the library is notable to be sure.

It cannot simply be dismissed as ‘just a game’ when we know that young people (and adults!) are interacting with video games more and more; “...there is much to learn from others who encode information in learning systems...much to learn about those who envision information as they decode these systems” (Schiller, 2008, p. 364).

Conclusion

Because information seeking is a narrative device in *Halo:CE*, place becomes incredibly relevant when the player relies upon existing knowledge to overlay on the gameworld. As the space evolves to grow enemies within, the player may have a complete upset of expectation. However, through further analysis, we can see how the destruction, co-opting, and suppressing of libraries and information in *Halo:CE* very much has roots in our reality. Some research has even shown that youth often view *people* as information sources and have some distrust of libraries in general (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005). Understanding this complexity in information presentation, seeking, and destruction in *Halo* has impacts beyond academic study. “The fact that students have learned how to succeed and understand games, a context situated outside of normal life, can help them develop situated learning in the context of the academy, if librarians and educators can show them the links” (Schiller, 2008, p. 353).

The timeline of *Halo* is obviously messy; it was impossible upon the first game’s release to comprehend the sheer magnitude of the franchise and fandom. That initial act of betrayal by the Library in *Halo:CE*, when juxtaposed with the holiness of the same knowledge later in the series means that, while released on two separate consoles, over a decade apart, two very different generations of gamers were introduced to these two alternative perspectives. (Or even the *same* generation of gamers, who have watched the books they read as kids be banned as

their own kids are attending school.) It would be curious inquiry in player perception to investigate changing attitudes to *Halo* in further study. Moreover, it seems as if the polarization of access to information will persist in our *real* world. Studies conducted on youth perception of games show that, while mostly challenge and entertainment value are key motivations to playing (especially when violence is an essential feature), young people “acknowledged that they learned through gaming...[and that they] read in-game texts and paratextual information, and interpreted them to make sense of the game and solve problems” (Gumulak & Webber, 2011, p. 250). What happens when the information is itself the problem?

The Library, along with the collective antagonists, serve to render safe spaces of information sharing as hostile, violent environments. But more intriguing is that the power of collecting and maintaining information and library systems is a surprising key plot and gameplay element of one of the most popular first-person shooters of all time. As the themes shifted from the hazards of collection to the revelatory relief of preserved information, players watched as the Library’s importance only continued to grow. Time will tell what *Halo* will do with its libraries next.

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