

Imagining the All-Seeing Eye: Surveillance Imaginaries in Games

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Keywords

Surveillance, machine vision, imaginaries, folklore

INTRODUCTION

Surveillance technologies using machine vision are currently seeing rapid development, and these technologies find their way into games. Games such as *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020), *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* (Fictiorama Studios 2018) and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Breakpoint* (Ubisoft Paris 2019) depict surveillance cameras, drones, biometrics systems, and surveillance beyond the human visual spectrum as diegetic tools and ways for the player to perceive the digital world. Beyond being a tool for the player and player characters, surveillance and machine vision in fiction is often linked to oppressive regimes, symbolizing and enacting a lack of privacy and autonomy from machines and political systems. These surveillance technologies are malicious, as opposed to what can be conceived as benign surveillance where it is a tool that aids people and makes lives better, safer, and more efficient. Both representations fall within the notion of “surveillance imaginaries” as used by David Lyon to describe how people construct their understandings of these technologies through everyday use, news reports, and popular culture (Lyon, 2017, p. 829). To this popular repertoire we can also add games, both digital and analogue, which not only illustrates how people understand the workings of surveillance, but also how they actively construct their responses to it (Lyon, 2017, p. 830).

This presentation will present a work in progress exploring how surveillance in games is constructed both as malicious and benign, using an existing pre-coded dataset of machine vision and surveillance in popular culture (Rettberg, Kronman, Solberg, Gunderson, Bjørklund, Stokkedal, Jacob, et al., 2022). Through close readings of *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020) and other games in the dataset, this

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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presentation will engage with portrayals of surveillance systems in order to explore how these systems are constructed and imagined.

The imagination of surveillance relies heavily on existing tropes (Lyon 2017), understood as oft used and common ideas and concepts. We would argue that these tropes constitute folk ideas (Dundes, 1971) about technologies. This means that these tropes express commonly held ideologies and ideas about surveillance technologies, and are related to, and constitute a form of, folk belief (de Seta 2019). Games such as *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020) allows for surveillance to be imagined as an oppressive system that requires resistance, while at the same time presenting this system as a liberating tool in the player's hands. This communicates that the system is here to stay and must be used by the right people, for the right reasons, to be benign. Such a perspective relates to what Tama Leaver calls "intimate surveillance" (Leaver 2015), which emphasizes affective and habitual aspects of surveillance. A preliminary analysis reveals that imaginaries of surveillance in games such as *Watch Dogs: Legion* present malignant and oppressive systems, so when the tools of surveillance are used by the player and for the right reasons, they are no longer imagined as surveillance.

Using the same dataset, we have previously argued for how "games allow power fantasies and their critique—the hiding, hacking, destroying, protecting, disrupting, escaping, subverting, investigating, commanding, complying, avoiding, and exploiting—to coexist within a space of play" (Solberg, 2022, p. 154). Others have seen the relationship between games and surveillance through the lenses of its shared history with militarism and military intelligence (Whitson & Simon, 2014), how surveillance acts through games (Egliston, 2020) and how the gamification of society supports surveillance (Benjamin, 2019). This work in progress adds to these perspectives, looking at how surveillance is constructed both as a benign and useful player tool and as a tool for oppressive structures because, in the end, these imaginaries and folk ideas influence how we are able to conceptualize surveillance.

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