

After Cambridge Analytica, this game about government surveillance feels quaint

It can be difficult to find time to finish a video game, especially if you only have a few hours a week to play. In our biweekly column Short Play we suggest video games that can be started and finished in a weekend.

What if the government could dig up information on you, and use that information to discredit you? Not because you broke any laws, but because they just didn't like what you were saying. This is the central conceit of *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength*. It's a sequel to 2016's *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, a game about how much you're willing to invade someone's privacy on behalf of the government in the name of security. The sequel diverges slightly, having you again invade someone's privacy on behalf of the government, but in order to discredit them on social media.

Both games play out through the interface of a fictional research and surveillance program called Orwell, run by a country called The Nation. The software is powerful, but somewhat limiting, letting the user only dig through information that it deems as being relevant to the case at hand. This data is then put into a dossier which is shared with an adviser who is allowed to draw conclusions about the data and act on it. Data added to the dossier also opens up new documents and websites to sift through as the program deems them as being related. In the world's fiction, Orwell is constructed this way to be the best case scenario ethically for invading people's privacy. On a more practical level, it also serves as a way to keep the player from being overwhelmed.

[embedded content]

The events of the two games actually take place concurrently. In *Ignorance is Strength*, you can pull in your saved data from the first game so that the events and choices you made in the original happen the same way in the sequel. This not only helps to make the world of these games feel more well-realized, but it also has seemingly huge consequences on some of the later plot points of *Ignorance is Strength*. I had a character die who might not have if I had stopped an attack from happening in *Keeping an Eye on You*.

The points of divergence for these games are in their stakes and tone, as well as a new mechanic introduced in *Ignorance is Strength*'s last episode. *Keeping an Eye on You* has you constantly questioning what you are actually okay with when it comes to invading the privacy of people in order to have security and potentially save lives, as you get swept up in using this incredibly powerful and invasive tool to try to stop terrorists. *Ignorance is Strength* lacks this same level of ethical quandary. Instead, you're basically helping a very shadowy government department abuse the system in order to suppress someone they don't like.

You do this in the last episode of the game using a new system this secret group has added onto Orwell called Influencer. The system allows you to construct essentially a tweet to counter, or attack, statements the blogger makes. These tweets then get disseminated through the Influencer system which somehow boosts their signal to get the tweets in front of more people. It's not clear exactly if it does this with bots, actual people with lots of followers who are working for them, or if they just have a way to manipulate the site's algorithm to get its information in front of more people. However they work, the point is to discredit and embarrass the blogger to the point that they lose all their followers.

When I first sat down to write this review, everyone else in the *Verge* newsroom was watching Mark Zuckerberg testify before Congress. He was attempting to explain what Facebook is, and how something like Cambridge Analytica could so easily obtain so much private data. In the shadow of this, *Ignorance is Strength* feels weirdly quaint. Because, like *Keeping an Eye on You*, it's built on the conceit that we need to be worried about the government violating our privacy to collect data, and then in *Ignorance is Strength*, using that information to manipulate social media to turn people against you.

This feels like far less of a concern when in the real world we're watching people knowingly give away their information to corporations to receive better targeted ads and social media posts, while other groups use that data to try to nefariously manipulate people through social media. Though it's hard to fault *Ignorance is Strength* too much for not addressing these things, as each of its three episodes was released two weeks apart starting February 22nd. The final episode released six days after the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke and a day after Mark Zuckerberg apologized for Facebook's failings on CNN – not exactly enough time to make allusions to it in the game.

But that doesn't mean it's not worth playing. The style of narrative gameplay pioneered in the first *Orwell* is still really interesting and engaging, as is its attempt to raise concerns about how governments could potentially silence voices that are contrary to their agenda. At a different time, or if I lived in a different country, I could see its message being more apt. But for someone living in the US in 2018, the game's take on privacy and social media influence feels ripe for further exploration.

Orwell: Ignorance is Strength *was created by Osmotic Studios. You can get it on Steam, Humble Store, and GOG for \$9.99 on Windows, Mac OS, and Linux. It takes about three or four hours to finish.*

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/15/17229072/orwell-ignorance-is-strength-cambridge-analytica-privacy-short-play>