

Callum Holley

10/15/2025

INTLSTD 401,004, Midterm

“On the Blood of Our Fathers, On the Blood of Our Sons”: Orientalism in *Halo 2*

At the time of its release, *Halo 2* was one of the most anticipated video games of all time. Theatrical in scale, it was the first time a video game had cinematic cutscenes, a complex plot more reminiscent of a movie, and trailers released in movie theaters. *Halo 2* was much more than a game: It was a cultural phenomenon, beloved by fans and an integral part of that generation’s childhood. Indeed, popular media shapes and impacts the cultures that create them, and through their study, we learn about ourselves.

Though often being regarded as “unserious” and “child's play”, video games have raised a whole generation. We can learn a lot about the environment they grew up in and even understand how their actions may shape the future based on the messages they received from their media. For Halo fans, the Master Chief was a futuristic escape from the post-9/11 reality they lived in; It was a world defined by American imperialism stoking anti-Eastern fervor in the face of perceived existential danger. While the heroes battled on ancient space rings instead of Baghdad, when we look at Master Chief’s enemies, we realize the Covenant may not be much of an escape after all.

Halo 2 uses an orientalist framework to depict the Covenant as a religiously fanatical yet intellectually inferior “other” contrasted with the rational, Americanized humanity; yet the hierarchy is inverted as the Covenant is technologically superior. This inversion reflects Techno-Orientalism, and the Covenant’s false religion reaffirms Western moral and intellectual centrality.

Ultimately, Orientalism exposes post-9/11 War on Terror narratives, which, while not allegorical of Islam, utilizes video game logic to demonstrate the era's fear of religious extremism.

Constructing the Alien Other

To begin, one must define the kind of orientalism used to analyze the Covenant's culture. In Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the author defines a variety of its uses, with one of its most critical aspects being intellectual power. Orientalism is a cataloging tool to attribute generalized properties of foreign societies to "see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics." (Said, 2014, p.41) It is a way to view reality that contrasts the familiar with the different (Said, 2014, p.43), yet difference is not the only thing highlighted by Orientalism. Said tells us that the Orient is described as "irrational", "depraved", and "childlike", unlike the "rational", "virtuous", and "normal" West (Said, 2014, p.10). Describing oriental societies as inverse is done to undermine them. When Said states orientalism scrutinizes "oriental" things in "class", "court," and "prison" (Said, 2014, p.41), he reveals how all dimensions of foreign societies are subjected to Western scrutiny. It's a type of hierarchical analysis implying inferiority, and by using orientalism in this context, we examine a set of civilizational characteristics that make the Covenant different from and inferior to humanity.

The opening sequence of *Halo 2* gives the audience its first real insight into the Covenant's civilization, and through it, we learn about the "characteristics" that frame this oriental society. We are greeted with ancient music: deep strings that build a sacred ambiance. We observe an ancient city, with a text scroll reading, "Covenant Holy City, High Charity Ninth Age of Reclamation" (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004). From the text, we gather that this civilization is religious and archaic, and the ensuing scene shows decorative honor guards in formation with spears. Characters speak with deep voices in a biblical vernacular, and in this first

mission, we witness a trial (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004). The character on trial, later revealed to be the player's avatar, pleads his case to an inquisition led by three powerful priests called the “prophets,” who, in the end, sentence him with “heresy”. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) From the evidence presented, we are introduced to the “stagnant eastern society” trope common in orientalism, which we can contrast with humanity in the following mission *Armory*.

Humanity is first introduced with a military ceremony, announced by snare drums and pristine uniforms identical to U.S. Marine Corps. Dress Uniforms. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) Familiar weapons and computers line the halls, characters speak in American accents, and we can see eagle symbols found on American battle standards. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) Indeed, humanity is portrayed in the familiar light of the U.S. military, using the audience’s implicit understanding of American values like freedom, secularism, and democracy to depict “future America”. It’s an allegory of our contemporary civilization, contrasted to an alien religious opposite.

The events of each mission are also poetically inverse. The humans are celebrating a victory; the Covenant mourns a loss, with the result of the trial being a public execution. For the crime of heresy, our avatar is publicly stripped naked, tortured, and branded with a ceremonial mark. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) Not only is the Covenant’s “other” a backward society, but a barbaric one. Indeed, the characteristic that marks the Covenant as “oriental” is its religious institution, which we see as zealous, brutal, and irrational: the complete antithesis of space America. Comparing ourselves to the Covenant portrays them as an inferior society. Orientalism doesn’t just highlight differences, though; it explains the reasons for these differences.

Returning to Said, he provides an account from Henry Kissinger, explaining what made the “West” distinct from other global societies. According to Kissinger, these societies subscribed

to a “pre-Newtonian prophetic style” which observes the world as internal to the observer (Said, 2014, p.47). Kissinger identifies the difference between the “West” and “rest” as being our society's basis of science (Said, 2014, p.47). While the scientific revolution allowed the West to clearly perceive and dominate the world, other societies were trapped in alternative world views, like philosophy or religion. As stated before, it's assumed humanity abides by the typical American conception of the world, while it's obvious the Covenant aligns with “prophetic style” because of its religious worldview. Interestingly, Kissinger gives some credence to the “prophetic style”, saying that previous conflicts, revolutions, and empires have proven that this style, “...is not entirely without its successes.”. (Said, 2014, p.47) Non-Western and non-scientific states have risen to power before, which seems to undercut the orientalist framework of a “lesser” East losing to a “superior” West.

Indeed, this observation makes oriental analysis of the Covenant nontraditional; Throughout the series, the Covenant is portrayed as being technologically *superior* to humanity, and indeed, as the existential threat that comes dangerously close to annihilating humanity. On the surface, it's ironic to claim alien inferiority, and to explain how orientalism can make this possible, one can look to Techno-Orientalism: a concept described in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. While traditional orientalism defines the West by portraying an inverse East, Techno-Orientalism, “symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further affirm the West's centrality”. (Roh, 2015, p.7) While Asia might be imagined as technologically superior, by continuing to frame the “West” as the “center”, it constructs the “East” as ideologically inferior. As Kissinger points out, the West still has something that the East does not, reaffirming the West's superiority.

How this is expressed in Halo is not simply that the Covenant is a religious society. Indeed, where techno-orientalism is most visible is at the core of the Covenant's religion itself. *Halo 2* portrays Covenant religion as wrong, making them one of Kissinger's "prophetic societies" blinded by a flawed worldview, and humanity as saviors who possess the "Western Truth."

False Prophets, Great Journeys & Western Centrality

Returning to the beginning of the game, the Prophets give our avatar, and by extension the audience, some expository lore. We learn the Prophets rule the Covenant through the dogma of the "Great Journey," a religious belief that the activation of the "Halos," the series' "MacGuffins," will bring its believers religious salvation (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004). Dissent brings swift and extreme repression. The inciting event to *Halo 2* is Humanity's destruction of the first Halo, explaining the conflict, but Humanity is not the only obstacle to the Prophets. We learn in our next encounter that they are willing to give our poor avatar redemption by killing a group of "heretical" Covenant, who claim the Great Journey is false. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) In the player's confrontation with the heretics, *Halo 2* foreshadows that the "Great Journey" may be a lie through the introduction of another character: an "Oracle" droid connected to the "Halo" who is ignorant of the "Great Journey" (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004). It takes until the mission *Gravemind* for the audience to uncover this truth.

Gravemind is the climax of a few different subplots of *Halo 2*, and it's the first time our Covenant avatar meets his human counterpart, the Master Chief. Joined by the Gravemind itself, an eldritch horror that fathers space zombies named The Flood, we begin with a cross-examination of an Oracle and a captured Prophet. While the Prophet talks about the Great Journey, the Oracle dismisses him and urges the activation of the Halo to "contain" the Flood.

(Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) The Gravemind puts aptly what the game has been hinting at, stating, “This one's containment...and this one's Great Journey are the same. Your Prophets have promised you freedom from a doomed existence, but you will find no salvation on this ring. Those who built this place knew what they wrought. Do not mistake their intent.”. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) The Covenant was wrong: Halo is a weapon to destroy The Flood by cleansing the universe of life.

While overdramatic, the nature of the Covenant's error reinforces Orientalist thinking; Although technologically advanced, the “orient” is held back by its “prophetic style” worldview. They are powerful, but ultimately wrong, a near suicidal blunder. We can find less existential and real-world historical evidence for the “incorrect oriental” in chapter 2 of Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism*, in which he describes the French view of Algeria's Islamic Waqf institution. According to Hallaq, the French saw Algeria as a backward society controlled by the church. (Hallaq, 2020, p.117) Dominated by the Waqf, a social institution of resource redistribution, the French viewed it as a “cultural malaise” causing “material decline”. (Hallaq, 2020, p.117) Hallaq goes on to address the recurring theme of “western centrality”, in that Orientalism doesn't simply label others as inferior, but posits that the West knows better. Indeed, the French reason that the Waqf was in fact un-Islamic, something ill-defined in the Sharia and a later “un-Qur'anic” addition to the religion. (Hallaq, 2020, p.120)

In Halo, this sentiment is expressed through Humanity, who, since the first game, have understood Halo's true purpose as a weapon. Unlike the covenant's “prophetic” mask, they see reality objectively, much like Kissinger's scientific West. Their fight to stop the Covenant from inadvertently destroying the universe overtly pushes the “western savior” stereotype, and to rub salt into the wound, the Oracle describes the Master Chief as the “reclaimer”. Indeed, it's

revealed that only humans can activate the Halos, which they use to their victory in the final mission by refusing to activate them. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) Yet again, the West knows the truth about the Orient's religion, promoting the idea that the Orient can't achieve its own goals properly without the West.

This appears in Hallaq, in which the French, dissatisfied with the Waqf, decide they can "fix" Algeria by removing it from society and "reforming" their Muslim subjects economically. (Hallaq, 2020,120) They do this through manipulation. Hallaq describes Algerian students educated by the French, who embark upon a campaign to "reengineer the Shari'a" by advocating "...anything from reforming the Quranic law of inheritance to eliminating it altogether.". (Hallaq, 2020, p.123) The West has both the power of "knowing" and the ability to repair the intrinsically flawed orient, which *Halo 2* demonstrates in its finale. Indeed, upon realizing the truth, our alien avatar switches sides; the Covenant splits between our avatar's race, who ally with humanity, and the Prophets, who continue to hold to their false dogma. (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) Like Hallaq's students, humanity's aliens become "fixed" when enlightened by the West.

From the evidence presented, we see how *Halo 2* examines the Covenant through various Oriental lenses. It establishes a set of "oriental" characteristics that make up a backward theocracy in comparison to our future contemporary society. The Covenant's worldview, while allowing them to be technologically powerful, ultimately plays into the techno-orientalist trope of "intellectual backwardness", with their Great Journey being false and requiring the "West" to save the universe and "redeem" the mistaken aliens. It's a narrative in theme with classic orientalist stories; Powerful Muslim sultanates held back by archaic practices. While *Halo 2* could easily be a 19th-century colonial epic, it is a much more contemporary and urgent story.

Created during the late 90s and early 2000s, the *Halo* series is the product of the War on Terror era. Re-examining *Halo 2* lets us see this: The U.S. military at war with barbaric and crazy religious extremists whose misguided jihad is to destroy the world. At a glance, *Halo* is a direct rip-off of the war against Al Qaeda; on closer review, we see that the Covenant is not a direct allegory to Islamic Extremism, rather, *Halo 2* uses video game logic and War on Terror rhetoric to frame its antagonists.

Video Games & War on Terror Narratives

In Peter Mantello's *Military Shooter Video Games and the Ontopolitics of Derivative Wars and Arms Culture* he describes how video games, "Like actual political and military doctrines that portray the world as an omnipresent threat environment, the majority of post-9/11 'militaryshooter' (MS) video games link present concerns or past conflicts to a future, risk-oriented U.S. political imagination". (Mantello, 2017, p.495) Indeed, video games used topics of security to establish conflicts in video games (Mantello, 2017, p.486), a reversal of the Clausewitzian "politics as war" dictum. (Mantello, 2017, p.487) Politics has goals it wants to accomplish, often requiring force to do so, but for the military shooter, the goal is to have fun shooting the "bad guys". In this case, the "ends" is the shooting, meaning the plot's purpose is to explain why the player is doing so. In *Halo 2*, we shoot the Covenant, the purpose of the game, with the explanation later being to stop the genocidal "Great Journey" campaign. It establishes a "shoot first, ask questions later" logic, and in the context of the War on Terror, suggests the U.S. military shoot the bad guys first and later come up with goals, like the explanation of "religious fanaticism".

This formula does not always work. Mantello describes that while contemporary fears can be an inspiration, video-game companies are wary of depicting an overly accurate reality.

(Mantello, 2017, p.495) He does this through the case of *Six Days in Falluja*, a military shooter set during the Iraq War. According to Mantello, the game flopped, utilizing real veteran accounts of cowardice and dark topics “too real for U.S. public tastes”, causing the developer Konami to “pull the plug” on its distribution. (Mantello, 2017, p.496) Even in *Halo 2*, authenticity was avoided. In a tweet from *Halo 2*’s composer Marty O’Donnell, the alien avatar’s name was originally set to be the Dervish, but was changed to be the Arbiter (O’Donnell, 2024). According to O’Donnell, the name was based on Sufi Islam but not wanting to create a “potentially problematic allegory”, Microsoft urged the developers to change the name to avoid the perception of a “revenge fantasy of the US against Islam for 9/11” (O’Donnell, 2024). It’s obvious that the developers were aware of the Covenant’s similarity to Islamic extremism and took steps to mitigate the association as much as possible; the “present concern” in this case was not an inspiration, but rather deliberately avoided. Still, it’s clear the Covenant exhibits oriental characteristics, but if not a direct allegory to real “oriental” societies, what is it? While not real, the Covenant uses War on Terror rhetoric to justify its orientalist ideology.

Gabriel Rubin explains what this is in *George W. Bush: Policy Selling and Agenda-Setting After 9/11*, in which the U.S. developed its narrative about its enemies. According to Rubin, the narrative on terrorism was “borrowed” from the Cold War, in that “The war on terrorism would represent an ideological battle between civilization and ‘evil’”. (Rubin, 2020, p.6). Indeed, Bush connected al-Qaeda’s spread to an implied goal of world domination. (Rubin, 2020, p.6). In this, we find the logic *Halo 2* pulls from. The Covenant, while not al-Qaeda directly, ascribes to the same existential domination that the U.S. imagined in al-Qaeda. This is the “present concern” Mantello claims videogames draw from, with which *Halo 2* constructs the “future-risk oriented U.S. political imagination” as the rise in power of religious terrorism.

Orientalism is applied by showing the brutality and suicidal insanity of the Covenant; they are an irrational power outside of logic and reality. War on Terror and video game “War Is Politics” rhetoric converge in *Halo* by suggesting that if religious extremism is allowed to flourish, it could pose a similarly existential threat to the West; unless defeated ideologically, the enemy must be vanquished. Indeed, by portraying humanity’s heroes as the U.S. military, the game associates the U.S. with Bush’s “civilization” that fights against the “evil” ideology of the Covenant.

Replay: *Halo 2*’s Legacy

From the evidence presented, it’s clear that the developers of *Halo 2* created the Covenant through orientalist rhetoric to construct a polarized “bad guy” for humanity to oppose. Though technologically advanced, techno-orientalism protects us by giving the Covenant a fatal intellectual flaw, ultimately redeemable by the more enlightened West. As Edward Said reminds us, Orientalism often reveals more about the societies that produce it than the ones it describes (Said, 2014, p.12), and in this sense, *Halo 2* reflects the early 2000s anxieties about religious extremism. Ultimately, the game re-imagines these fears using videogame logic to propel its plot.

Still, many children growing up during the 2000s have fond memories of playing *Halo 2*. Blasting aliens guided us through the fear and uncertainty characterizing the time, and while the game's intent may not have been used to overtly generate Islamophobic fearmongering, it clearly channels the War on Terror’s ideological framework. Entertainment was transformed into global politics, and for those who grew up playing *Halo 2*, the narrative subtly encouraged a worldview of Western heroism against the irrational other. Recognition of this lets one not only critique the rhetoric, but understand how popular media, no matter how escapist, can mirror and mold the cultural imagination of its time.

Works Cited

- Hallaq, W. (2020). Restating Orientalism. A Critique of Modern Knowledge. *Welt Des Islams*, 60(4), 484–486. U-M Articles Search. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-00604P07>
- Mantello, P. (2017). Military Shooter Video Games and the Ontopolitics of Derivative Wars and Arms Culture. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 76(2), 483–521. U-M Articles Search. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12184>
- Marty O'Donnell [@MartyTheElder]. (2024, November 29). <https://x.com/MartyTheElder/status/1862602851312443546>
- Microsoft Game Studios. (2004). Halo 2 (Xbox.) [Dataset]. Microsoft Game Studios.
- Roh, D. S., Huang, B., & Niu, G. A. (2015). Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction. In D. S. Roh, B. Huang, & G. A. Niu (Eds.), *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (pp. 1–20). Rutgers University Press. <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.36019/9780813570655-002/html>
- Rubin, G. (2020). George W. Bush: Policy Selling and Agenda-Setting After 9/11. In G. Rubin, *Presidential Rhetoric on Terrorism under Bush, Obama and Trump* (pp. 55–80). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30167-5_2
- Said, E. W. (2014). *Orientalism*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=5337468>