

Obedience, Horror, and the Bureaucratic Machine in Science Fiction

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Science Fiction and the Workplace

Science fiction frequently portrays bureaucratic workspaces as areas of moral detachment, where human life is abstracted into data, protocol overrides empathy, and institutional efficiency takes precedence over ethical judgement. These environments expose how dehumanization rises not out of overt violence, but rather systems that normalize — no, *require* — obedience, erase individuality, and frame exploitation as routine labor. Across film, television, and interactive media, sci-fi settings use cold, mechanical workplace to critique the real-world hierarchies we see today and the way power is silently embedded into our everyday environments. These stories don't just create monsters, they create systems that make monstrosity feel logical. The horror is heightened when, at its core, these systems are not fictional. Sci-fi may populate its worlds with aliens and rogue technology, but the bureaucracies, corporate structures, and labor expectations it depicts are pulled straight from reality.

At the center of these environments is a visual language designed to reinforce control. Sterile, surveillance heavy spaces filled with bleak grays and stark whites evoke a sense of depersonalization and detachment. These are not chaotic or ruined spaces; they are pristine, organized, and orderly. Deliberately constructed to suppress and dissent and manufacture compliance. In many of these stories, from *Severance* to *THX 1138*, characters are not imprisoned through bars but through routines, protocols, and self-monitoring. Drawing from Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the design of these environments becomes a mechanism for ideological control; one that shapes behavior before a single order is ever given.

Bureaucracy becomes the horror. Sci-fi often portrays terror not as a moment of violence, but as a slow descent into procedural absurdity where rules overrides ethics. Characters are not

punished by villains, but by their own adherence to policies. In *Alien*, a crew is sacrificed due to company protocol. In *Brazil*, filling out forms becomes a labyrinth in which there's no escape. Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" reveals how systems enable harm by stripping moral responsibility from individuals and embedding it within institutions. This horror emerges when people become conduits of policy rather than agents of judgement, and when harm is distributed so evenly that no one feels responsible. Sci-fi doesn't invent this, it holds a mirror to the real-world structures that already reward passivity and punish resistance.

Dehumanization follows naturally from these structures. Workers are reduced to assets, entries in databases, or surveillance subjects identified by function, not personhood. The sci-fi workplace frequently reflects how modern capitalism abstracts labor into metrics, divorcing workers from their social and emotional selves. In *Severance*, this is literal — the worker is split into two identities, one for work and one for home. What we believe to be our inner selves is shaped by the external needs of the institution. No matter how futuristic the setting, the internal logic of these systems remains rooted in our present.

These narratives construct false choices that mimic real-world illusions of autonomy. Characters may be presented with decisions — sign this form, unlock that door, follow this order — but each path is tightly controlled, often leading to the same morally compromised result. This simulated agency reflects how contemporary work culture warps obedience into independence. As Hall, Fisher, and others point out, ideology thrives when it feels like common sense. Even small moments of resistance, such as choosing not to obey, or to save a life, are framed as insubordination. And yet, these choices are the only remaining site for moral agency. Science fiction reveals the horror not in a distant future, but in a present that has quietly shaped itself into something alien.

The Aesthetic of Control: Design & Surveillance

Science fiction critiques systems that turn compliance into survival, but it's in the physical and visual design of these environments where that control becomes most clear. Before a character speaks or acts, the world around them already communicates what kind of behavior is expected, and what kind will be punished. These workplaces are not just settings but instruments of discipline; it conditions people to obey, ostracize, and disappear into procedure. From the moment a character enters a sterile, grey-walled hallway or is seated in a cubicle beneath a glowing surveillance camera, the audience understands the nature of this system. Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon is central to understanding how these environments function. In *Discipline and Punish*, he writes that the Panopticon's effect is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 201). This power doesn't rely on active policing, but rather on the anticipation of surveillance, instilling obedience through design alone.

The spaces in *Severance* are perfect examples of this. The Macrodata Refinement department is a maze of carpeted neutrality, where everything is monitored but nothing is explained. Workers are alone at large, empty desks with no view of the outside world. This recalls Foucault's description: "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell...He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 200). In this way, the aesthetics of the space itself become part of the disciplinary system. The characters aren't just being watched, they're being shaped by the knowledge that they could be watched, and are always being measured.

This ideological conditioning extends beyond visual control and into how messages are structured and interpreted. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model offers a useful framework

here. Hall argues that environments, like media texts, are “produced and sustained through the articulation of linked, but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction” (Hall, 51). In the sci-fi workplace, the architecture (production) encodes a particular ideology: productivity, submission, hierarchy. It then circulates that by structuring behavior; enforcing silence, isolating workers, and discouraging noncompliance. When workers internalize those messages, often without realizing it, the space has succeeded in reproducing the logic of the institution through its very design. Workspaces are not neutral backdrops, they are ideological tools.

David Graeber, in *Bullshit Jobs*, encapsulates the final layer of this structure when he writes, “we have become a civilization based on work—not even ‘productive work’ but work as an end and meaning itself” (Graeber, XXIV). Sci-fi environments mirror this emptiness with intentionally vague job descriptions and absurdly repetitive tasks. The lack of meaning becomes part of the control: the work itself is abstract, but the consequences for failure are real. It renders the workplace as a site of aesthetic and psychological control, an environment that disciplines through silence, not violence.

Bureaucracy: The Banality of Procedure

If visual design and surveillance influence behavior through architecture, then bureaucracy takes that control a step further, embedding it into language, paperwork, and routine. The aesthetic of control explored previously is not just visual, it’s procedural. In many science fiction narratives, the real horror is not just delivered by monsters or weapons, but by tasks and regulations that are followed without question. These narratives portray a world where harm is not committed out of malice but out of administrative obedience, where following the rules can be just as harmful as breaking them

This quiet, procedural violence finds a foundation in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she introduces the concept of the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 118). Arendt was reporting on the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, a mid-level Nazi bureaucrat who played a key logistical role in organizing the Holocaust. What shocked Arendt, and much of the world, was that Eichmann did not appear to be a sadistic villain. Rather, he was a bland, rule-following administrator. He claimed he was simply doing his job. Arendt writes, "He did his 'duty'...he not only obeyed 'orders', he also obeyed the 'law'" (Arendt, 65). She argues that Eichmann's evil stemmed not from monstrous intent, but from a terrifying normalcy. A failure to think critically, to question systems, or to claim moral responsibility. In *Alien*, the crew is sacrificed in the name of corporate research, not by a villain but by company policy. The characters in *Brazil* are buried under layers of bureaucracy; people live or die by forms.

These systems operate without a clear antagonist. There's no villain to resist, only procedures to follow. Foucault echoes this in his analysis of modern institutions, especially on how judgement serves as a tool to reinforce this structure: "The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, and the social worker-judge" (Foucault, 304). These figures enforce norms, often unconsciously, under the guise of social responsibility. Discipline is another facet of this operation, placing workers as the raw material of institutional power. As Foucault writes, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault, 170). Characters in these narratives are not only surveilled, they are sculpted by their environment to internalize its logic, and the environment they live in has bureaucracy so embedded it's in the air that everyone breathes, becoming an

invisible force. They feel trapped not by walls or enemies, but by the inability to imagine an alternative to the structure they serve.

David Graeber adds onto this existential dread of the modern workplace. He defines a “bullshit job” as a “form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence” (Graeber, 9-10). The tasks these characters must perform are either completely abstract or obviously exploitative, but they continue because the system demands. The workers in *Severance* don’t know why they “refine” numbers, only that they must. These stories do not exaggerate modern labor, they clarify it, showing us how ethical actions have been replaced with systematic obedience.

The Worker as Asset: Dehumanization & Depersonalization

If bureaucracy removes moral agency by replacing judgement with procedure, then the next step in that process is the transformation of people into units of labor that are trackable, replaceable, and ultimately disposable. Often in science fiction narratives, this takes the form of workers being referred to only by their function: “non-essential personnel,” “technician,” “subject.” Their names, histories, and wants are irrelevant to the system they serve. Personhood is not erased violently and outright, but filtered out quietly, through paperwork and policy that reduce individuals to tasks and outputs; measuring human life only by its utility.

Foucault writes, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exorcist” (Foucault, 170). He argues that institutions do not just control people, they produce them. Under disciplinary regimes (whether the populace realizes it or not), the individual is constructed as both a target and a tool of power; shaped to perform specific roles and internalize behaviors that make them easier to govern. In science fiction, this is seen in environments where workers aren’t just monitored, but

formatted and trained to adopt the posture and tone of their roles until they become indistinguishable from them. The worker's value is not in their individuality but rather their ability to be molded into a reliable function.

In *Severance*, workers undergo a surgical procedure that splits their identity into two selves; one that exists only at work (“innie”), and one that never remembers the office (“outie”). The innie is not a person in the full sense, but a function, trapped in an endless routine. They have no memories beyond the fluorescent lights of their job. Their soul, as Foucault might put it, is an effect of the institution. He writes, “The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (Foucault, 30). Identity itself becomes a tool of control. Sci-fi narratives make this literal, showing how these structures mold action, emotion, and thought. In *Black Mirror: White Christmas*, digital replicas of people called “cookies” are created to serve as personal assistants. Though they are conscious and capable of suffering, they are treated as tools; programmable, discardable, and entirely stripped of rights. This is justified through efficiency.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory can also help us understand this system. He identifies three reading positions: the **dominant-hegemonic** (accepting the message), **negotiated** (partially accepting), and **oppositional** (resisting it) (Hall, 59-61). In sci-fi workspaces, characters are often stuck in the negotiated position. They recognize the inhumanity of their environment but feel powerless to reject it. In *Severance*, Mark chooses to return to work each day even after learning how it harms his innie, because the system has made resistance feel powerless. Alternatively, some characters like the crew of *Alien* attempt to adopt an oppositional stance, but are punished by the systems that view deviation as a threat to stability. There is

tragedy in that the moral instincts of these characters remain intact, yet they have been placed in environments where those instincts are liabilities.

This reduction of human beings to assets mirrors the corporate and capitalist language in the real world. Employees are treated as “resources,” “headcount,” or “overhead.” In *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber describes how many workers experience this abstraction firsthand: “Those who work bullshit jobs are often surrounded by honor and prestige; they are respected as professionals, well paid, and treated as high achievers” (Graeber, 15). Yet the work itself is often meaningless, contributing nothing of value, while draining the worker’s emotional and mental energy. This paradox contributes to a profound sense of dehumanization. Even jobs that appear high-status can strip individuals of purpose, reducing them to gears in a machine.

Mark Fisher describes this condition in *Capitalist Realism*: “Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us” (Fisher, 21). This is not a metaphor but a diagnosis. Capitalism requires dehumanization to function, and bureaucracy is how that dehumanization is implemented. Science fiction reveals the human cost of this process by literalizing it: bodies that serve no purpose but maintenance, minds that exist only to complete tasks, lives measured in quotas. The workers are alive, but not living. They continue to function, but their lives are stripped of agency and meaning. It’s not death that marks the end of self, but submission to routine; endless repetition that replaces thought, feeling, and autonomy with compliance.

The Illusion of Choice

Once individuals have been reduced to assets, the final layer of control emerges in the form of simulated freedom. Science fiction often reveals that even when characters appear to be making choices, they are embedded within tightly controlled systems designed to uphold

compliance rather than autonomy. Many sci-fi narratives present characters with decisions that feel urgent, ethical, or meaningful, but those decisions are pre-scripted, constrained, or consequence free. The result is a profound sense of moral paralysis. Choices are offered not to empower the individual, but to preserve the illusion that the system is fair or responsive. The horror is not that characters lack options, but that every option leads to complicity.

This illusion of choice is deeply tied to how roles and identities are encoded within institutional settings. The encoding of workers' identities reflects dominant ideologies that prioritize efficiency and conformity above all else. What appears to be a neutral role (employee, technician, subject) is in fact a carefully structured position designed to uphold institutional power. Using Hall's encoding/decoding theory, he emphasizes that these roles are not created in a vacuum, but shaped by broader societal structures and power dynamics. We often witness characters navigating this tension between personal ethics and institutional expectation. Their resistance or compliance becomes a negotiation within their role, one that rarely allows for true opposition. In *Severance*, for example, the innies are aware something is wrong but lack the framework and freedom to fully articulate or resist it. Their labor is encoded as essential, and their discomfort as irrelevant. Even when they try to assert agency, the system has already anticipated it.

This is especially clear in *Portal*, where the player is encouraged to solve puzzles that gradually become more dangerous. The AI, GLaDOS, presents each task as a test of logic or will, but the path is entirely predetermined. The illusion of choice masks a structure designed to observe, manipulate, and ultimately discard the individual once they've served their purpose. In *The Stanley Parable*, another narrative about false autonomy, the player can make decisions that seem rebellious, but every action has been anticipated by the system. These environments

present freedom as a design feature, when in fact it is just another method of control. As Hall suggests, the power of a message is not in forcing obedience, but in shaping the framework within which decisions are made.

Foucault's take on surveillance further explains this. He writes, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (Foucault, 202). Surveillance doesn't just monitor people, it alters their behavior, compelling them to self-regulate in anticipation of being watched. In *Severance*, for example, the innie cannot escape, complain, or even think freely, because the system has designed every part of their world to suppress dissent. Foucault adds, "...surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 201). The mere possibility of being observed is enough to ensure control. Even when characters appear alone, the gaze of the system is present embedding submission deep into their mindset.

This atmosphere of unbreakable control is what Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism: a condition in which "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 7). The structures in these sci-fi narratives mirror the cultural condition Fisher describes, a world so saturated by institutional logic that alternatives are unthinkable. The characters often reach moments of apparent resistance, but even those moments feel hollow or compromised. How can just one action truly change a system that permeates the whole world? As Fisher later reflects, "The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction..." (Fisher, 86), but that hope feels unreachable. In an age of global interconnection, algorithms taking control, and bureaucratic layering, even rebellion is quickly redirected or diffused. Sci-fi reflects this paralysis not by staging grand revolts, but by showing characters falter at the edge of small, personal decisions that still cost everything.

Arendt connects this paralysis to the political realm. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she writes, “For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same” (Arendt, 130). In institutional systems, to obey is not neutral, it is an act of endorsement. In science fiction, this often takes the form of characters who follow protocol despite knowing it will lead to harm. Whether it’s refusing to unlock a door to save lives or initiating a procedure they know is inhumane, the characters obey because the system has trained them to equate obedience with survival. In these stories, as in the real world, survival means doing what you’re told, even if it kills someone else. That is the final horror, not the loss of life, but the loss of ethical agency in the face of structure.

Horror Without a Villain

The most haunting aspect of science fiction workspaces is that the true villain is not a person at all. Instead, they reflect systems so tightly structured, so routine and rationalized, that harm becomes indistinguishable from protocol. Characters are not hunted by monsters, they are processed by procedures. These environments reflect real-world anxieties about the depersonalization of modern labor, where individual suffering is absorbed into institutional function. From *Alien* to *Severance*, the horror lies in how cruelty is administered without intent, how silence and obedience are rewarded, and how no single figure is to blame. Science fiction reveals that monstrosity doesn’t always wear a face, it can take the shape of a job description, a safety protocol, or a login screen. It becomes ambient. Invisible. Normal.

Science fiction does not exaggerate the contemporary workplace, it simply clarifies it. By stripping away the justifications and distractions of real-world institutions, it exposes the structure beneath: systems that prioritize efficiency over empathy. The abstractions of workers into data points and the quiet eradication of self in the name of professionalism are not

inventions of speculative fiction. They are everyday realities amplified and made legible through the speculative frame. The genre's power lies in its ability to defamiliarize what has become ordinary. It allows us to see clearly the mechanisms of control, and to understand that their violence lies in the absence of choice and meaning.

What emerges from this is a new kind of monster, one that doesn't stalk the corridors but issues memos. The true horror in these stories is not the alien or the AI, but the calm, efficient system that trains you to hurt others while calling it duty. It is the smiling interface that reminds you to finish your onboarding, the performance review that rewards your ability to remain detached. This is horror without spectacle. It is quiet, procedural, and perfectly designed. Science fiction's most terrifying insight is that the worst thing isn't being destroyed by the system, it's being shaped by it so completely that you forget there was ever an alternative.

Surveillance, Labor, & Moral Paralysis in Interactive Space

After spending the first half of this paper analyzing how science fiction workspaces reveal systems of control, depersonalization, and moral paralysis, I want to shift now to the practical side of that exploration with my own project. My goal wasn't just to analyze these structures from the outside, but to construct one myself. I created an interactive video installation that invites the viewer into a role: a security worker beginning their first day at a facility owned by a mind-bogglingly powerful corporation; one whose influence seems to have quietly embedded itself into every industry. The facility they're overseeing isn't just big, it feels like the leftover fragment of something too massive to ever fully disappear. The interface is simple, the choices appear small, and the environment is quiet, but beneath that surface I wanted to build a system that feels wrong. One that rewards obedience, punishes emotion, and tests morality under the language of "protocol."

The experience is done through a branching video format via a Youtube quick-link structure for accessibility, allowing it to run smoothly in any standard browser without the need for specialized software. The viewer is guided through their first shift by a disembodied voice of authority and presented with a series of simple decisions: whether to open a door, reroute power, or ignore a warning. These choices lead them down a path; despite the illusion of autonomy, there are not dozens of endings. The branching structure is narrow by design. I wanted to evoke a sense of false freedom, where even when the viewer feels like they're making their own decisions, the outcomes are still dictated by the logic of the system. Like many real-world bureaucracies, this structure rewards minor compliance while concealing the larger boundaries that are never meant to be crossed.

What I hoped to achieve with this was a sense of internal contradiction. I wanted viewers to recognize the system as deeply flawed, and yet still feel a sense of accomplishment when they succeeded within it. When I presented the piece to a class for critique, that contradiction surfaced immediately. Instead of discussing the ethical stakes of the decisions, many students were eager to celebrate whether they had made the “right” choice. They weren't celebrating a good outcome, they were celebrating alignment with the system. That reaction, though unsettling, was exactly what I was trying to provoke. It's like getting a gold star for choosing fascism. You know something is off, but the reward feels good.

That sense of wanting to “do well”, to be praised by a system you instinctively distrust, is what kept people engaged. I designed the narrator's voice and tone carefully to reinforce that. Even though the viewer sees people on camera and interacts with the links, the narrator is their only constant companion. They hear it in their ear the entire time, shaping how they interpret the world. As an Asian woman, my voice is soft-spoken and not what most people would

traditionally associate with authority or command. I wanted to take advantage of that quality; not to subvert authority, but to repackage it. The idea was to make the system feel almost comforting, so that the viewer would be more likely to trust it, or at least lower their guard. Writing that voice became the most important part of the project, and where I spent the most time in development.

The project was, in many ways, a test of how systems aestheticize obedience; how minimalism, clear instructions, and reward-based interaction can make moral discomfort easy to ignore. It was also an opportunity to apply theoretical frameworks I had been reading, not just to fictional media, but to something I could build myself. In the following sections, I'll walk through the process of creating this piece, and reflect on both success and limitations. This is not an end to this project, it's a first iteration, and like many systems, it hides its own imperfections.

The project began with a reflection on how workplace narratives in science fiction often depict institutions that don't explicitly harm people, but also don't protect them. Instead, these systems prioritize efficiency, obedience, and appearance over individual well-being. I was particularly influenced by *Severance*, where workers are literally split into two identities; *Alien*, where employees are expendable in the eyes of the company; and *The Stanley Parable*, where decision-making is revealed to be a performance within a larger predetermined structure. These works made me question what it means to participate in a system that you know is wrong, yet still feel satisfaction from doing it "correctly."

From the beginning, I knew I wanted to create a project that didn't rely on a visible antagonist or graphic spectacle. I wasn't interested in jump scares or traditional horror; I wanted a sense of creeping discomfort, the kind that emerges when you realize you've followed everything instruction perfectly, and that's the problem. The horror, to me, came from the

moments when doing your job well meant harming someone else, or when inaction was rewarded as the safest choice. I started by writing down scenarios in which the viewer would have to make small decisions (click a button or unlock a door) that would have outsized consequences, most of which they wouldn't immediately see.

Early on, I made the decision to use a choose-your-own-adventure format, not because I wanted the viewer to feel empowered, but because I wanted to simulate the illusion of agency. Structurally, the choices are limited. There are a handful of narrative paths, but many of them fold back into each other. This was a deliberate strategy: I didn't want the project to be about exploration or discovery. I wanted it to feel like a trap disguised as a job. You're told you have options, but what you're really doing is proving whether you're capable of fitting into a flawed system. That sense of false freedom was important to the narrative logic. It also helped reinforce one of the key feelings I wanted to induce: a quiet desire to do well.

I built the premise around a fictional megacorporation, something massive, opaque, and disturbingly familiar. Named Mammon Industries (after the biblical demon of greed), it operates like a hyper-centralized entity that leaks into every facet of daily life. I was thinking of companies like Amazon, organizations that present themselves as neutral infrastructures while holding enormous influence over data, surveillance, and labor. The facility the viewer monitors is just one piece of that larger network. It's been decommissioned, forgotten by most, but it still functions. It requires staff, and still follows protocol. That kind of eerie afterlife for a company felt like the perfect setting. Something technically abandoned, but still actively producing systems of control.

The narrative, then, had to serve the system rather than the individual. I wanted the viewer's "character" to be minimal; no backstory, no goals, and no dialogue, just a set of eyes

and ears and a finger on a button. The disembodied voice would handle the rest. In creating the world, I tried to keep everything vague but familiar. The kinds of tasks the viewer encounters are not far removed from real administrative work. That familiarity was important because I didn't want people to feel like they were inhabiting a fantasy world. I wanted them to feel like they were playing out a version of something they already live inside. This decision was also shaped by where I am personally. As a graduating student, I'm expected to enter the workforce — a phrase that's treated like a milestone, but feels more like a step into something unknowable. I've been thinking a lot about what it means to build a life inside systems that don't always care about people. This project became a space where I could explore those fears, turn them into something tangible, and maybe even make them visible to others.

Designing the narrative structure was one of the most intensive and rewarding parts of the process. In the beginning, I had ambitious plans for a sprawling web of choices with multiple endings, crisscrossing paths, and a complex decision tree. But as I began writing, I realized that not only was that scale impractical for the times and resources I had, it also worked against the tone I wanted to create. The more I stripped back the branches, the more the narrative began to feel like the system it was critiquing. I didn't want endless outcomes, I wanted ones that felt preordained. I spent weeks scripting different possible paths; not to create variety, but to tightly control how each decision would function morally. I wanted the viewer to feel like there was space, but not freedom. The project presents itself as interactive, but the paths are limited, and many of them lead back to the same point or end abruptly. That structure was intentional. I wanted the viewer to feel a sense of surveillance and testing. That each decision was being watched, and the system was not interested in letting them leave on their own terms.

Each path was written to reinforce a kind of moral discomfort. The decisions the viewer faces aren't difficult in terms of action, they're simple. Click a button. Unlock a door. But the emotional weight of those actions accumulates slowly. Early on, for example, the viewer is asked to decide whether to leave a door unlocked for a worker who says he wants to surprise his wife. It's a small gesture that sounds kind, but if the viewer complies the disembodied voice immediately fires them. The first time that happened when testing the path, I watched the viewers laugh nervously. They had expected something sinister, but they still felt betrayed. That was exactly the tension I wanted: the moment where good intentions clash with a system that only rewards protocol.

The decisions become increasingly fraught. At one point, the viewer is asked whether to release workers from a locked room near a data vault. It's implied that unlocking the door will allow the creature (now loose in the building) to follow them and potentially avoid damage to the critical data stored nearby. In another decision, the viewer sees a group of terrified employees begging at a final exit. The narrator insists to pay them no mind, that releasing the door will unleash the asset on the outside world.

What makes these moments resonate isn't just the stakes, it's the tone. The narrator never yells, never outright threatens. It's calm and instructional, the kind of voice you associate with customer service lines or onboarding videos. If the system isn't panicking, why should they? But that tone isn't constant. The only time the voice shows any real emotion is when the viewer chooses the "wrong" answer. Then it shifts into something more colder, more disappointing. Like a parent scolding a child who should know better. That contrast is meant to unsettle, to hint that there are expectations being enforced, even when no one is explicitly threatening you. I wanted

the viewer to internalize the idea that the right thing and the system-approved choice are often not the same.

From the beginning, I knew the project couldn't rely on narrative alone. It needed to look and feel like the system it was critiquing. I wasn't trying to build a cinematic world. I was trying to build a world that felt like it had been designed by a corporate committee two decades ago and never updated. The visual language had to be minimal, functional, and quietly oppressive. I took inspiration from real world CCTV systems, outdated government software, and warehouse security feeds. Everything is desaturated and framed in a way that feels enclosed. The camera angles are impersonal. I wanted it to feel like something you'd find running on an old terminal in a locked IT room.

This aesthetic serves a conceptual purpose. The visuals needed to support a mood of detachment. No blood, no chaos. By making the environment look sterile, I was trying to heighten the emotional contrast between what the viewer sees and what they feel. You see a worker begging on the screen, but it's pixelated and impersonal. You see a prompt that asks you to either "unlock" or "ignore". That distance is part of the discomfort. If the viewer is going to make a harmful decision, they have to do it without spectacle. That quietness makes the consequences feel heavier.

That interactivity had to mirror the same logic. The false sense of autonomy became central to the viewer's experience. There was a noticeable shift in language during feedback. People spoke about the piece like it was a test they had to pass. They would replay it over and over until they got it right. Their reaction was incredibly affirming. It told me the structure was doing what I intended: rewarding obedience through subtle performance metrics. The desire to "do well" became a motivation stronger than moral discomfort.

I also thought a lot about how real systems make obedience feel like routine. Looking back, I think of this section of the project as building the architecture of obedience. Everything from the color palette to the sound design was designed to make the viewer internalize the values of the system before they even realized it. The visuals lulled them into familiarity. The interface taught them that input was better than inaction. The disembodied voice reinforced a culture of emotional detachment. I wanted to design an experience that made people feel complicit.

Making this project was as much about confronting my own anxieties as it was about building a narrative for others. I started with the concept of control and labor, but the deeper I got into writing and creating this piece, the more I realized I was working through questions I had about the future. The idea that I'm stepping into systems that might demand moral compromise, emotional detachment, or quiet obedience isn't hypothetical, it's a reality I'm bracing for. This project gave me a space to explore that unease without needing to explain it directly.

One of the biggest lessons I learned through the process was about time management, and more specifically what happens when it fails. I had a clear vision early on, and I still stand by the core of that vision. But I overestimated what I could achieve within the time and resources I had. For example, I originally planned to build a curtain partition for the installation, something that would create a more private and immersive viewing space and reinforce the sense of isolation. I ran out of time and it didn't happen. I did bring an abandoned desk I found to contribute to the atmosphere and it helped ground the installation in physical space, but looking back it wasn't enough. I wish I had taken the time to add small details and ephemera, such as fake motivational posters, an overflowing ashtray, or half-used checklist; things that would've hinted at the presence of others who came before, and failed. These missed opportunities were lessons in prioritization and scope.

What I'm most proud of in this project is the strength and consistency of its aesthetic, achieved through careful and deliberate video editing. Every camera angle and piece of footage was chosen to create a world of coldness and detached humanity. Glimpses of workers were always mediated through grainy CCTV feeds, and any sense of urgency was flattened by the interface's indifference. That visual world did a lot of heavy lifting in terms of mood and tone. But alongside the visual atmosphere, the narration played a vital role. Soft-spoken, calm, and not traditionally authoritative, that contrast between the visuals and the disembodied voice created a rhythm that held the whole experience together. The more viewers leaned into that rhythm, the more they internalized the logic of the system.

In feedback, the reactions told me the system had worked. People weren't asking questions like, "Was this ethical?" They were asking, "Did I win?" That was the most telling feedback I could have hoped for. The project had successfully abstracted morality into performance. I wanted people to walk away with a sense of discomfort, unsure of whether they'd done the right thing, but still proud of having finished it "correctly." That contradiction is the heart of the project.

This wasn't a perfect piece. There are moments I wish I had more time to polish, more details to flesh out. But like many systems, its imperfections became part of the experience. The missing elements, the rigid structure, the quiet dead-ends, they reinforce the themes. They mirror the constraints we often face in real life: limited choices, constrained timelines, and unclear outcomes. This project never meant to present a solution but rather build a feeling. And in that sense, even the flaws serve a purpose.

This project started as a reflection on bureaucratic horror, but over time it became something more personal. I wasn't just building a fictional system, I was exploring the dread of

entering real ones. In designing a world where success meant moral failure, I was responding to my own anxieties about labor, conformity, and the pressure to conform. What emerged was a system that didn't scream at you or punish you loudly, it simply waited for you to fall in line. And when you did, it smiled. That's the kind of horror that stays with me. Not a monster in the dark, but a job well done for the wrong reasons. Watching viewers play through the piece and celebrate their "correct" decisions only confirmed that tension. It was never about whether they made the right choice. It was about whether the system approved.

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