

Polybius

In 1981, a third electronic game is installed at the only arcade in Gresham, Oregon. The young flock to see the new title while the Iranian hostage crisis comes to a close in the world beyond.

Introduction

Polybius has a plain black cabinet. The graphics are a single, glowing shade of green. The only movement is the player's cursor drawing lines to close irregular polygons, and the level clock counting down from 30 seconds. It feels more like school than a game. Most customers tune out and go back to playing Asteroids before learning the controls.

A couple of the kids have grown into patience, but the game tests them. The first to get past level 6 is Eutimio Rodriguez, the 13-year-old son of a bricklayer. He's the one who understands that the shape on level 6 needs to be rotated with the second stick for the gap to appear. It's not a triangle. It's a pyramid.

In the last hours of January 29th, while the clerk sweeps the candy wrappers into a pile on the brightly checkered floor of the Campground Arcade, Eutimio and his friends are stuck at level 16. Three times in a row, the clock hits zero and the game is over. The players groan and curse the name of Royal Road Entertainment, the only name on the splash screen.

An adult, playing Space Invaders in a suit and tie, makes an offhand remark. He seems to know the clerk and says he played the game in New York. He tells the kids to "Lift the stick." They hit level 24 over Super Bowl Sunday, mesmerized by the four-dimensional levels. They never see the man again.

There is progress all through February. Only school and money hold the players back. New kids tune in briefly, but they cannot follow the action into five dimensions, or even comprehend what the players are getting from the experience. The dedicated ones are quiet now, reverent, repeating familiar levels as though each move contains the next, pushing deeper into unknown territory. Jenny Alexander, a girl of 11, gives up Polybius. She complains of dizziness and headaches.

On March 1st, Jenny's brother Brian and Gabriela Urbina run out of coins and call it a night, leaving Eutimio playing alone. A day later, men in USPS uniform roll Polybius past Eutimio's mother while she's raising her voice at the clerk. He swears he doesn't know where Eutimio might have gone if he didn't go home.

Two hours after the cabinet is moved out of Gresham on March 2nd, Gabriela Urbina is having an argument with her mother, Julieta. It is about breaking curfew, wasting her allowance on Polybius, and spending too much time with boys. Without a sound, Gabriela disappears in front of her mother.

Background

Polybius is an experiment in computer-assisted poristic instruction techniques inspired by the study of the Roswell craft. Prolonged exposure to the "game" causes structural changes in the right parietal lobe and, to a lesser extent, the left prefrontal cortex. The effect resembles that of the bacterium causing leprosy, insofar as the first affected cells become migratory and reproduce as stem cells, gradually forming abnormal attachments to the central nervous system in a highly coordinated manner.

The research project is named after the anecdote where Ptolemy Soter asked for a simple way to learn geometry. Euclid told the ruler that there was no royal road to the subject. Indeed, adult students in project ROYAL ROAD did not have the necessary brain plasticity to navigate in higher dimensions. A child, orphaned in one of MJ-6's purges, showed more promise, but the project lost her in another purge. Eutimio and Gabriela are the best yet. The two children each took a step at an angle perpendicular to everything they'd known before.

Hook

The Gresham Police Department sends out a plea for state or federal assistance in profiling the four parents of Eutimio and Gabriela, on the suspicion that these working-class Hispanics are confining or murdering their children for reasons unknown.

On March 3rd, an old boys' network in the military and federal law enforcement answers the plea. Delta Green arrives in Gresham later that afternoon, to feign skepticism when the cops go over the main suspect's testimony to her daughter's miraculous disappearance.

Investigation

Jenny Alexander still plays pinball at Campground. While Delta Green takes notes on Polybius from her, men in USPS uniform are installing that same game at the Crackatoo, a bigger arcade in downtown Portland. The men have wiped the leaderboard. They proceed from the arcade to their hotel, change into dark suits, pick up sidearms and FBI badges from their suitcases, and head back to the suburb of Gresham to bad-jacket the Urbina family. Majestic is about to clip Delta Green like a landmine.

Local reporters angle for a backlash against the video game industry, nearing its \$3.2 billion peak before a coming crash. If the agents make a mess of this operation, it may take the attempted assassination of President Reagan on March 30 to push the story from the news. On February 6, Reagan authorized the Accord with the Greys. MJ-6 is being reorganized to study certain gifts. Any complication at this time will put project ROYAL ROAD on ice, but only for a few decades.

NPCs

Johnny Odine, the clerk at the Campground Arcade, is a Vietnam veteran from a family of carnies. His memories are all bad but his popcorn is excellent. For himself, he prefers the morphine he got from "Max" Thomson, an old army buddy who recently came back into town with a sweet deal on a short lease.

Maxwell Thomson, though legally dead, brought Odine the game and took it away. For project ROYAL ROAD he is Samuel B. Kremsky with the FBI. He is also Cliff Steiner, a Business Semcon salesman. That particular Portland electronics firm closed down in 1979. It has quietly reopened under new management, its phone number routed to Maryland, its office unfurnished. "Max" told the kids how to crack level 16 while he was playing Space Invaders.

Chaco and Febe Rodriguez have lost their only son, Eutimio. They half expect him back at any moment. "He always moves as he pleases", they say, stapling their flyers to telephone poles. When he was grounded for spending borrowed money at the arcade, he would find a way out of the house. He had a knack for the unexpected approach. A clever kid.

Alejandro and Julieta Urbina believe that God has taken their daughter, Gabriela, as punishment for their suspicions against her. They have five other children, two of whom shared a room with the

missing girl. On her nightstand, untouched, stands a slim origami star. Touch it the wrong way and it unravels, yards of graph paper snaking impossibly out of hidden inner dimensions.

Brian Alexander never gave up on Polybius, but out of all the dedicated players, he was the dumbest. Brian clings white-knuckled to his mathematics textbook while they roll him into the emergency room at the local hospital. The margins are littered with complex geometries. The kid is cold and shaking, terribly nauseous. Shapes turning in his mind are turning his body inside out. His autopsy will go down in history unless Delta Green does something about it.

Polybius weighs 460 pounds. Disassembling the cabinet reveals military-grade ROLM electronics. A DARPA safe box holds a 50 MB disk drive with complete usage data and a Betamax VCR hooked up to the user-facing camera. That hidden camera shoots every attempt to beat every level, until it's beaten for the first time. Children on the tape stare intently into the monochrome glow, as if into a coming world.

Adaptation

As written above, this scenario supports a purist style of play. Delta Green will not realistically learn the fate of the children. The attempt to do so is just a backdrop for the meeting of two clandestine factions with similar cover stories. This makes for a game heavy on deception and espionage, light on closure and spectacle. To shift that balance, make any of the following changes:

- Add a monster. A dimensional shambler slips in through Brian Alexander's mental spasms.
- Bring in Delta Green at a later stage, when people have begun to disappear in Portland. The cause will be relatively obvious, reducing investigation time.
- Make Gabriela a poltergeist. Her handwriting extrudes from curved surfaces, leading children to the glowing screen. She cannot return, in the same way that a piece of paper cannot be perfectly flattened after it is folded. She needs help, she writes. She needs an army. Something in her terrifying new existence ate Eutimio, and it will eat her too.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polybius_%28video_game%29