

Halo 4: Rampant Defence Mechanisms

Sam Huffer, 5 September 2018

In 2012, Microsoft Studios released 343 Industries' first major gamic addition to the *Halo* canon: *Halo 4*, redirecting the franchise's focus to Cortana and the Mantle of Responsibility. *Halo 4* leads into this through the Master Chief and Cortana's struggle against both a new Forerunner threat and Cortana's rampancy. In this essay, I shall outline what rampancy is, and discuss a number of occurrences of Cortana's rampancy, briefly analysing symptoms presented relation to Freud's psychodynamic framework of defence mechanisms, and assess the level of and progression of maladaptation in each case.

As a smart artificial intelligence (AI) based approximately on a human mind (Nylund 2010, p. 303), Cortana possesses the skillset of generic programs and AIs, as well as more sentient capacities such as the ability to learn and adapt (Nylund 2010, p. 288). However, when a Smart AI's processing memory becomes interconnected and developed enough, rampancy begins to occur. Should it become too interconnected, the AI would effectively short circuit and think themselves to death (Nylund 2003, p. 195). Rampancy's progression is often characterised by uncontrolled emotions, such as with Cortana in *Halo 4*, or delusions and rebellion (Staten 2007, p. 20), and inevitably the deterioration of vital functions, thus serving as Cortana's primary source of anxiety during *Halo 4*, specifically instinctual anxiety that she'd lose control of her id-driven, rampant emotions, and objective anxiety focused on the objective, though internal, fact of her condition and its inevitability (A. Freud 1993, pp. 57-59).

The first signs of Cortana's rampancy are seen when the Master Chief's HUD and Cortana's voice become momentarily distorted during the level *Dawn*, and again when Cortana says in a distorted voice "We have asked you to give up your family, your childhood, your future..." at the beginning of the level *Requiem*. The Chief inquires what's going on, and Cortana eventually states she "was put into service eight years ago... AIs deteriorate after seven", conceding that she's not ok and becoming rampant. This exchange demonstrates Cortana's earliest use of defence mechanisms: attempting to suppress symptoms and intentionally avoiding engaging with the issue of her condition to focus on immediate concerns (Metzger 2014, p. 484), "leaving the lid" on her rampancy (Beresford 2012, p. 214). Her use of suppression here is fairly positive and adaptive, given their unwelcome visitors. Equally important is the first hint at how Cortana aids that suppression by consciously isolating rampant symptoms into duplicates, using skills acquired from a Covenant AI (Nylund 2003, p. 196) in a manner similar to what a paraphrased Sigmund Freud calls dissociation (Vaillant 1992, p. 14-15), and rooted in Freud's paraphrased conception of suppression's motivation (2014, p.3). Though not qualifying as either defence mechanism, or any at all, this technique does share traits with defence mechanisms generally, being a discrete means of managing affects to protect the ego (Vaillant 1992, p. 4), and is used adaptively to separate rampant traits, like brokenly replaying memories, from Cortana's core self for containment, thus facilitating their suppression and meriting discussion.

The next major sign of Cortana's rampancy, ignoring minor preceding incidents, is during a break from combat alongside the crew of the *Infinity*, where a rampant copy appears to exclaim "They don't care about you – they replaced you!", before Cortana expresses frustration at her failure to suppress the copy's outburst, suggesting that suppression isn't a perfect solution. When the Master Chief reassures her, she responds as follows:

"How is putting you at risk because I can't hold it together OK? Chief, do you understand what rampancy is? ... We don't just 'shut down'. Our cognitive processes begin dividing exponentially according to our total knowledge base. We literally think ourselves to death."

In expressing her thoughts directly in a manner that isn't coercive or manipulative, Cortana displays positive use of the mechanism of self-assertion (Metzger 2014, p. 483), ensuring that the Master Chief and the player can comprehend how horrific rampancy becomes for AIs.

Another powerful manifestation of rampancy occurs during an argument with the *Infinity*'s Captain. Del Rio's insult that he's "not willing to jeopardize [his] ship because of the hallucinations of an aging Spartan and his malfunctioning AI" visibly enrages Cortana, prompting her to yell "I will not allow you to... leave! This! Planet!" and send a brief surge of electricity through the ship. Immediately displaying embarrassment, she says "I didn't mean to... I didn't mean to do that..." Here Cortana demonstrates two defence mechanisms. First, the mechanism of acting out in response to Del Rio's arrogant stupidity, with her yelling and causing of an electrical surge constituting the outward-directed, "immediate translation" of anxiety into action intended to instantaneously relieve it (Beresford 2012, p. 71-74). As befitting its negative connotation of thoughtless destruction (p. 74) and categorisation as an immature defence (Beresford 2012, p. 71; Vaillant 1994, p. 45), this response to Del Rio was unconstructive and thus maladaptive. That she unconsciously resorted to acting out, rather than consciously isolating her developing anger in a duplicate and suppressing said duplicate, highlights the furtherance of her rampancy and that it's becoming harder for her to manage her id-driven symptoms (S. Freud 2001, pp. 73-74) and postpone facing these impulses (Vaillant 2000, p. 94); Cortana's strategy of "isolate and suppress" is beginning to fail, with Beresford's alluded pot (2012, p. 214) starting to become a pressure cooker. This leads to her superego-enforced (S. Freud 2001, pp. 59-60) apologising for and attempting to make up for her inappropriate outburst, employing the defence of undoing (Freud 1959, p. 119). Cortana's attempts to reverse that she acted out, as with the acting out itself, tend towards maladaptive. The obsessional (Metzger 2014, p. 479), neurotic (Vaillant 1994, p. 45) defence fails to help her with normal functioning, instead drawing more attention to her outburst.

Upon to the space station holding the Composer, a Forerunner superweapon, Cortana again descends into another rampant outburst before crashing their ship:

"Do you know what that condescending bitch said to me after our first game of chess?... Even I don't call him by name anymore... Yes, well he also said he works better alone... I can see why you chose him, Catherine... I'm your greatest achievement and you detest me!"

Once the Master Chief regains consciousness, she immediately apologises: "I'm sorry- I just... can't stop them!... It's like a thousand of me arguing all at once!" Here we can see another instance of undoing (Freud 1959, p. 119) pertaining to failure suppressing symptoms of rampancy. This also provides implicit explanation for several outbursts discussed above, highlighting Cortana's use and suppression of copies, which becomes a caricature of dissociative identity disorder akin to but less severe than other depictions that mental health organisations have denounced (ISSTD 2016; SANE Australia 2017), with *Split* (M Shyamalan 2016) being a recent, high profile example. (Note: the mechanism of dissociation is not used here (Beresford 2012, p. 165; Brand, Loewenstein, & Lanius 2014, p. 441), nor do her symptoms properly match the criteria of dissociative identity disorder (Brand, Loewenstein, & Lanius 2014, pp. 439-440).) Once the Chief had regained consciousness, Cortana was again suppressing her clones, but by this point we have already seen that it's becoming harder to postpone engaging with their rampant symptoms (Vaillant 2000, p. 94). Reinforced by a subsequent increase in lesser rampant incidents, this suggests Cortana's reliance on her "isolate and suppress"

strategy is failing and tending towards maladaptation, though not becoming maladaptive, as the suppression isn't making it harder for her to function properly, merely increasingly failing to help. She acknowledges this when she assertively (Metzger 2014, p. 483) asks the Chief not to tell Dr Halsey how bad she got.

As the Chief and Cortana pursue the Composer-possessing Didact, with Cortana using the Didact's ship's portal system to aid the Chief, we see further evidence of her symptoms worsening and the strain of suppressing them when she says she "Can't fight... [the] Didact... and... [herself]... simultaneously" and that she "can't control what [her] processes are doing". When they reach the Composer, Cortana instructs the Master Chief to put her in its shield terminals, where she demonstrates an ingenious and effective switch of defence mechanisms perhaps unique to rampant, duplicable AIs. Cortana knew the copies were becoming too much to suppress, exacerbated by the Didact (Vaillant 2000, p. 94). Rather than continue her failing suppression strategy, she instead emptied Beresford's alluded pot (2012, p. 214), ejecting several "rampant personality spikes into the system", literally channelling her symptoms into the positive, external, and constructive activity (Vaillant 2000, p. 94; Beresford 2012, pp. 255-256) of overwhelming the Composer's shielding. As such, this use of sublimation is very positive and highly adaptive with regards to the productive effects of the ejected copies, as well as the likely easing of the strain of suppressing the other copies. That Cortana and her copies were in the system would prove crucial during the Chief's confrontation with the Didact, with her rampant selves altruistically (A. Freud 1993, p. 126) restraining the latter, allowing the Chief to eliminate him and nuke the Composer, albeit seemingly (Microsoft Studios 2015) at the price of Cortana's death.

Throughout *Halo 4*, we see Cortana use an array of defence mechanisms and similar tactics to defend against rampancy-based anxiety. Cortana exhibits an initially positive approach centred on isolating symptoms in clones to facilitate suppression, which gradually fails and is marred by maladaptive outbursts as her symptoms worsen, before they are ultimately sublimated to defeat the Didact. Overall, they form an engaging case study for students to analyse and speculate on, and contribute to *Halo 4*'s compelling narrative, enriching the *Halo* franchise.

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