

STRATEGIES OF SIX (from Free For All magazine 2004)

(Complementing our review this issue of Prisoner computer and role-playing games) we take a look at the actual strategy employed by No. 6 during the episodes. It could be argued that there are different styles of tactics which are in play, in the Village, in the hands of the No. 2 leaders, or used by their prisoner: engaging in combat, employing psychology, trusting to luck, relying upon calculated prediction, inducing fear, creating coercion, resistance and deception.

In this article, we are considering not specifically No. 6 trying to escape, or to prevent his knowledge being extracted, or to unseat a No. 2, but simply the ways in which he strives, to achieve his goal, or tries to fight off an attempt against him. Was No. 6 formerly a spy or secret agent? The following examination of his time in the Village shows up some surprising inconsistencies.

In the opening episode, Arrival, all of No. 6's attempts prove unsuccessful. He encounters a former colleague who is a double agent, a woman who is assisting No. 2 (knowingly or unwittingly) and various Village personnel who are clearly bent upon disorientating him. His making off in a stolen taxi is brought to a swift end by the terrifying non-human guardian; No. 6's first taste of the spheroid beast. A second abortive departure, by helicopter, underlines the fact that No. 6 is going to have to use exceptional skills to defeat the awesome might of the powers who are keeping him imprisoned.

Adopting the standard UK screening order, in the second story, The Chimes of Big Ben, No. 6 is barely more successful. At least he manages to leave the Village shores, but while he is entombed in a packing crate, unable to see where he is going, the Village agents bring him back to the place from which he started. He soon discovers that he is in a fake office, doubling for London, which is located inside a building situated in the Village. Therefore, leaving aside No. 6's woodwork attempts in this episode, there is little evidence of the resourceful man behind the number.



In A. B. and C., there is a glimpse, at last, of No. 6 utilising some of his undercover skills. He trails No. 14, breaks into her laboratory and substitutes water for the drug he finds in a hypodermic syringe. From this point on, during the final dream monitoring session, he is able to employ his own personality traits to trick, frighten and confound his opponent, No. 2. In this story there is an entertaining display of No. 6's varied talents and he perhaps comes closer to the guise of a spy than he does in most other episodes.

In Free For All, No. 6 is persuaded, somewhat surprisingly, to stand in the Village elections. At the end, when he is drugged and defeated, we see yet another example of the Village doing the winning and No. 6 the losing.

Again, in The Schizoid Man, No. 6 is outsmarted more than once by No. 2 and the 'identical twin', who is being paraded as the true No. 6. It is only at the end of the story when No. 6's memory returns and he uses some electro-shock therapy to recondition himself, that he is able to get the better of the "carbon copy". However, it is an own goal of the Village that "Rover" kills Curtis/No. 12 and there is not much of the perceived secret agent aspect of No. 6 on view.

In The General, No. 6 happens upon a discarded tape recorder which carries a message

from the Professor that the system of educating, using the General as a learning tool, is a sham. Why No. 6 should care about this is not made clear and it is the first time in any of the initial six stories that a social conscience within our prisoner comes to the fore. And yet, curiously, it is a Village double agent, or perhaps that should be defector, who comes to the aide of No. 6. Together they substitute some broadcast material to expose the true nature of the General. Their plot is thwarted by No. 2 and his security team and at this point one might think that No. 6 would simply have been thrown in the brig. However, he is able to use his deductive skills in persuading No. 2 to allow him to address a question to the General which will be unanswerable. As is known, his masterly act destroys the Village's super-computer, and so No. 6 is able to chalk up a win.

In Many Happy Returns, self-preservation and opportunism are the order of the day. No. 6 again shows his woodcraft and navigational skills. Escaping across the sea upon a raft and doing some final swimming, No. 6 makes it to his homeland. While out on the ocean he showed his pugilistic talents by removing a pair of gunrunners who would otherwise have fed him to the fish. He visits the lair of his secret boss, but is soon once more within the grasp of the Village (almost repeating the short escape trip in Arrival and the slightly longer one in Chimes).



Dance of the Dead is in many ways outside the canon set up by the other episodes. The story is a more theatrical one, with absurd characters and surreal settings. In brief, No. 6 is able to show that he can put a dead body to good use as a vehicle for a 'message in a bottle' floated out to sea; he shows that he is able to draw a reasonable map of his surroundings; he is adept at stealing items dotted about the small settlement; he manages to give a baying mob the slip. In the end, he is startled by a machine which demonstrates, almost metaphorically, that there are some powers or forces at work which we hardly know about and which can control or take charge of our lives.

Turning to Checkmate, No. 6 in some ways acts as though it is a slow day in the Village and a game of chess is at least something to do. However, once the action gets underway, we see No. 6 cleverly devising a plan to distinguish between warders and prisoners. After he has managed to create an ad hoc escape group, he uses his scientist friend to create a radio, broadcasts a trick message, fights off radio tower guards and manages to get afloat once more. It is unfortunate for him that the boat which he boards is in the control of the Village. It is even more disappointing that No. 6 failed to allow for the fact that the rook might lose his trust for the escape team leader. Therefore, in the sphere of management skills and handling people, our prisoner scores low.

It is Hammer Into Anvil in which we really see No. 6 coming into his own as the secret agent type of character many regard him to be. There is no need in an article of this length to catalogue all the acts of subterfuge or methods of scheming which No. 6 displays. By the end of the story he has overwhelmed No. 2 with his unceasing attacks on the Village leader's mental stability. By uncovering the flaws in No. 2's personality, No. 6 is able to work upon these and crush the dictator. Aspects of code writing and relaying, plus knowledge of procedures, are clear from No. 6's actions and he comes across as a formidable adversary.

It's Your Funeral is one of those other 'conscience' stories in which No. 6 is concerned for the people. There are plenty of protestations coming forth from him about dastardly deeds in the Village, but little in the way of spy games. It is a story which again revels in No. 6's skills at unarmed combat, but at least he knew what to do when there was a remote control bomb due to be detonated within a very short period of time, during which he must act.

Heading up the last six episodes is A Change Of Mind. No. 6 falls victim to foul deeds when he is given drugs or conditioning, as he was in A. B. and C., Free For All and The Schizoid Man. Whether the Village just underestimated him and made the drugs too weak or whether No. 6's own will was too strong, he found out that he had not been lobotomised at all. Of course, as we viewers know, the plot was left with a loophole so that there would be some entertainment. After all, who wants to see No. 6 lose? Therefore, when our Prisoner 'comes out of it' he is able to hypnotise No. 2's aide and turn her against the Village leader. A public unmasking follows and No. 6 has just caused the Village to have to ditch yet another leader, as they did with the Hammer No. 2.

In Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling, the Village takes its conditioning of No. 6 to a new level, namely the electronic (but not physical) transplanting of his mind into another personality. The uploaded data allows the new No. 6 (Nigel Stock) to act precisely as the owner of his mind would have done (had he not been in the U.S. of A. making the film Ice Station Zebra in Hollywood).

Therefore for the purposes of this section, it is No. 6 we are describing and indeed he does exhibit more spying talents. He can decode invisible writing on film transparencies and locate the hideout of a gifted professor. His journey to cold climes, in an open Lotus Seven sports car results in his being able to convince the professor that he is genuine. More pugilism follows but nerve gas (the second time we have seen it in the series) defeats him. In the end, it is Seltzman who wins the day by doing a three-way switch of minds. No. 6 pops up from his medical couch, fresh as a daisy, mind intact.

It is best to group Living In Harmony and The Girl Who Was Death together, as they stand apart from the other stories as outright fantasy episodes. In the former, No. 6 is able to demonstrate once more that he can overcome the most severe forms of brainwashing. The swift return of his senses to normal shows that he, unlike any lesser mortal, can grasp the true nature of his surroundings immediately after the effects of any drug or conditioning have worn off. In the second of the pair of stories, he presents to some children a tale of a hero figure, a spy who saves the day by magnificently beating a supreme foe, saving London and at the same time, in reality, infuriating a luckless No. 2, who thought that he was going to gain some insight into No. 6's former days in service.



Probably Once Upon A Time and Fall Out are best grouped together as well. They leave behind the rest of the series in more ways than one. No. 6 in the first segment is heavily brainwashed or drugged and is gradually returned to normal as the regression process is progressed in stages. All we discover is that throughout his life No. 6 was a lone individual, a rebel and a man with high morals and principles (not unlike the person who wrote, directed and starred in the episode). However, we are seeing only scenes during the Degree Absolute procedure which have been created by the Village, not necessarily reflecting No. 6's true past. Being dropped behind enemy lines is part of the role-playing process during the session, but it does not necessarily follow that No. 6 was once in that position.

By the time of Fall Out, No. 6 has had enough. With his trusted team, he makes one super-human effort to overcome his captors and destroy their Village. From that point on, there is a party atmosphere and he simply makes it back to London and signs off. Clearly, one cannot take the two fantasy episodes or Fall Out literally (even within the surreal concept of the Prisoner series as a whole) and so there is no real conclusion, other than the fact that No. 6 is once again free, has

regained his individuality and, presumably, would wish to go back to his old job.

The ultimate 'twist' is in the final few frames when his face fills the screen as it did at the start of Arrival, as if he is once more about to be abducted. It is highly unlikely that the makers of the series had that ending in mind when they went to Portmeirion in September, 1966.

And so, looking at the episodes as a whole, we have No. 6 displaying certain special and tactical skills. We don't know for sure that he does have priceless information in his head. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Village have made a mistake and simply believe that he possesses vital knowledge which they must extract from him. In this situation, it would not be enough for No. 6 to protest that he really hasn't got anything of the sort locked away in his mind and so instead he simply resists attempts to extract the perceived details.

The ultimate question must be whether No. 6 could have been a spy, or secret agent, or special operative prior to being abducted and taken to the Village. If he had been simply a scientist, or some secret technician engaged upon work of global importance, he would surely not have had years of combative and tactical training, obvious from the skills which No. 6 employs during his imprisonment. The notion of an advanced scientist who is also a top-level exponent of the fighting arts, and all kinds of undercover activities is difficult to accept.

It is never admitted during the series that No. 6 had any particular past occupation although there are hints, through use of photographs from Patrick McGoochan as John Drake in Danger Man - and obvious references in the Girl Who Was Death episode - that this is a man based on the earlier character, if not the actual character. The series left it open as to what No. 6 had been, what his name was, or what he might have known. In any event, the series took a sharp turning at some stage and became about all kinds of social issues and the subject of individuality.



Sticking with the examination of a spying background, the best one can say is that the jury is still out. No. 6 must surely have been a shadowy figure with knowledge of government circles and the bearer of valuable secrets. However, it must be remembered that in the sixties, many TV shows were based around spies, as in the seventies super beings and people with robotic body parts were the order of the day. Before Danger Man there were only westerns, just as, nowadays, crime and detection fill the TV bill.

Six of One has reproduced over the years different documents produced at the time the Prisoner was being planned. Synopses and programme details all talk about a mystery man held against his will. It was therefore, possibly the intention of the makers to leave the audience guessing and in this way the vital information in No. 6's head was the "McGuffin". For those unfamiliar with the term, famed director Alfred Hitchcock used to claim that in his film plots, or in some scenes, there would be a particular object, or a piece of information, which was not essential to the plot, but which drew the audience's interest:

A device or plot element that catches the viewer's attention, or drives the plot. It is generally something that every character is concerned with. The McGuffin is essentially something that the entire story is built around and yet has no real relevance.

Thus what we do know is that No. 6 was/was not a spy etc., did/did not have official secrets, or formulae, or other data in his head, was/was not captured by his own side, or a foreign power. When one boils down all this information it seems strange that so much has been written about No. 6 being a spy, but based upon so little. What does shine through from the episodes is the notion of strategy, with detailed plotlines and devices being used by the writers and by the lead character, to keep us entertained. And pleasing an audience is always a good strategy!