

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Papers, Please

Platform: iOS, Microsoft Windows, Macintosh operating systems, PlayStation Vita, macOS, Linux

Genre: Puzzle, Simulation

Release Date: August 8, 2013

Developer: Lucas Pope

Publisher: 3909 LLC

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Lucas Pope

Overview

Papers, Please story begins with the player character being assigned to work as an inspector on the border between Artotzka and Kolechia. Due to the game taking place after a war between the two countries, tensions remain high. The player character then goes through a month of dealing with changing immigration rules, desperate applicants trying to get into Arstotzka, and terrorist attacks all from a little border inspection booth.

Through monotonous, yet engaging, border documentation review that's spliced with terrorist attacks, unique visitors, and shifting rules, the player has to endure and survive a grim Soviet-Esque dystopia. The game's journey shaking the player's very moral foundation to its core as they try and survive the brutality of life under totalitarianism.

Characters as ranked in a typical, yet shifting, hierarchy of emotional attachment

The Inspector - The player character. Newly assigned to the border of Arstotzka, the faceless inspector must shift through an endless line of those trying to get into the glorious Arstotzka. Yet, as a subject of a totalitarian communist state, he must always balance the party's endless politics and border restrictions while ensuring to make enough to take care of his family.

Jorji - An applicant to get into Arstotzka. Jorji is a light-hearted drug dealer that tries constantly to get into Arstotzka with laughably bad documents. Jorji is also one of the most significant recurring visitors to the inspector's booth. Each time Jorji appears at the booth with a crayon drawn passport, it allows the player a bit of comic relief from the serious nature of the rest of the game. Jorji also provides the player with additional endings that include smuggling yourself and your family out of Arstotzka.

Sergiu - One of the guards at the border checkpoint you work at. Sergiu frequently comes into the inspection booth. Eventually, he also provides another dilemma for the player through his love, Elisa, as per usual, not having her papers and needing the player to take the citation to help a friend. Sergiu is also a character that can be killed during the terrorist attacks during the game if the player doesn't react fast enough.

Booth visitors - Varying in shape, size, and nationality, the booth visitors provide the majority of the game experience as they present the player with the main dilemma at the heart of the game. The dilemma being whether to see those that come into your booth as just their documents, as the Arstotzkan government wants you to see them, or as people. Each visitor is seen in the game's first person perspective and often place their entire lives in the player's hands. From a father seeking revenge for his daughter's death to a married couple who, of course, both don't have the correct documentation, the booth visitors force the player to confront their own moral values. They present the

player with the scenario of having to react to the dehumanization of people that occurs through the gameplay itself.

The Player character's family - The player character's family is represented in the game by just a spreadsheet that lists only each family member's relation to the player character and their status. Despite having very limited interaction between the player and player character's family, they are the main concern of the player throughout the game as the player struggles to keep them alive. They also provide a big other rationale for the player that allows the player to rationalize inhumane actions, such as separation of a family, as for a cause beyond themselves such as the protection and safety of their own.

Ezic - A mysterious terrorist organization dedicated to the downfall of the Arstotzkan Government through revolution. Ezic's agents are a consistent visitor at the player's inspection booth, giving coded messages that proposition the player with assignments such as to let their agents through the checkpoint or kill certain booth visitors for cash bonuses. As an organization, they offer the player a morally dubious option for the player to weigh against just obeying the Arstotzkan Government, even when the money Ezic offers can mean life or death for the player's family. They represent a major high risk / high reward option for the player that can cause the player to be found out and arrested for cooperation with Ezic or stick with them and eventually join them for one of the game's "true" endings. They also represent a big other for the player to have them commit murder or allow terrorists easy border passage under the rationale of being for a cause beyond them like Ezic's claimed "revolution" or for the money Ezic provides.

The Arstotzkan Government - The game's totalitarian communist regime with the distinctive motto, "Glory to Arstotzka!" The game starts with them giving the player character his position as an inspector, the government always stands above as an intimidating all powerful presence in the game. They are the entity that turns the game

world into a panopticon with the Arstotzkan government as the jailers, embedding the fear in the player that they are always being watched. With occasional checkups by an SS-Esque Arstotzkan official visiting the player's booth as well as the dreaded sound of a printed citation during a day in the game, the Arstotzkan government is the main threat to the player and the main consideration for each and every decision to either approve or deny each booth visitor. They also represent the major big other in *Papers, Please* that acts as a way to allow the player to justify horrendous actions as for a cause beyond them that the Arstotzkan government provides as prevalent state in the game.

Breakdown

Papers, Please is a game that flourishes at its core by building up its game world's reality through each and every one of its elements. Upon starting *Papers, Please*, it's hard to not feel yourself transitioning into a game world with exuberant party rhetoric contrasted with grim and bitter disillusionment at its core. The contrast of the gameworld as built up by the aesthetic and audio design choices as its most significant introduction to the reality the player is stepping into. Once you're greeted by the game's signature theme and pixelated logo, you're instantly transported to a not so ancient historical era and reality. The game immerses the player into an era of intense disillusionment, increasing instability, and boiling tensions that marked the declining years of the Soviet Union and its puppet states.

The era is also something backed by every aspect of the game, from the intentionally clunky interface to the first person perspective's ability to let you study not only people's documents but the people themselves. The game's most prominent aspect being player choice, which the game uses to constantly add into the gloomy Soviet-Esque main narrative. The game utilizes player choice by forcing the player to confront the fact that the reality of *Papers, Please* is just as morally gray as the history it's based on as well as the modern day realities of the issues it addresses.

As a result, the game is able to use its narrative as a way to beautifully execute historical storytelling through its fictionalized E. Europe in the 80s. The microcosm of the inspection booth showing how day-to-day life in the brutally grim reality of the Soviet Union in its death throes actually functioned. Just like the history its based on, *Papers, Please* ensures that no choice is truly black and white. The game accomplishes this by making player choice revolve around the constant shifting of moralities and priorities. Through every visit from Arstotzkan officials and every rule change, the player is forced to immerse into the game's reality in order to survive the ruling party line while also not being part of that line's collateral damage.

The constant navigation of the infamously arbitrary totalitarian party line is also shown in the fact that few people play through all 20 of the game's endings. The game's use of endings helps to create a challenging tightrope act in its gameplay that bolsters its narrative. With each and every ending that ends in death, there is a reinforcement of the amount of power of the state that stands above the player. The power of the Arstotzkan government forces the player to have to respect them as an entity in a way that makes the player always feel expendable to the state and thus vulnerable at every moment of the game. Thus, every moral dilemma the player encounters is made more intense by the thought of the party as always looking over the player's shoulder.

Papers, Please's focus on ensuring both the challenge and narrative of surviving as a subject of a totalitarian regime, causes the game to have multiple endings in the form of many lesser endings and only a few satisfactory 'true' endings. The lesser endings in the game can only really translate into failure to weave through the fickle world of party politics as a worker just trying to survive the game's worker's utopia turned dystopia. As a result, only a few endings provide satisfactory conclusions as a way to better mirror the real-life challenge of life under regimes.

Papers, Please instead focuses much of the other alternate endings to showcase the harshness of the game's Soviet-esque reality through how many paths end in death or imprisonment for you as the player or your family. The always prevalently shown challenge in the game also helps to make the satisfactory conclusions that much more satisfying by keeping the challenge from becoming simply just difficult. *Papers, Please* instead provides satisfaction that is because the game requires the player to learn and adapt to a reality that is often completely alien to them, and thus rewards that adaptation with often fulfilling conclusions.

Adaptation to challenge in the game also serves to illustrate the effectiveness of the historical narrative in the game as the player has to begin to act and embrace the official and unofficial rules that existed under the hammer and sickle's shadow. Thus, the player is forced to learn extensive amounts about the real world reality through the navigation of the fictional and the constant consideration of how to thrive in a world that reeks of decay and stagnation around every corner. The consideration of thriving through stagnation that also poses the question of if the prospering of life is really even possible in a state so focused on the dehumanization of life into nothing more than cogs in a machine. The game also ensures you know how volatile the Soviet-esque world of *Papers, Please* is and how, as shown for each and every "good" ending, survival in such a world demands constant and often draining sacrifice, whether it be of morality or of family is up to the player.

Additionally, beyond the historical storytelling of the collapsing Soviet Union, the game is also able to utilize its fictionalized reality to create a general system of dehumanization, fear, and oppression that can apply to totalitarianism generally as well as modern day society's issues. With the game's focus on immigration and the struggle between dehumanized efficiency and humane empathy and compassion, *Paper's, Please* is able to thoroughly touch on modern day issues that become more prevalent with each passing day. As immigration policies become one of the most divisive issues

in the western world, *Paper's Please* provides an extreme totalitarian example that reminds the player that, beyond ideology and politics, there are human beings immigrating, not faceless threats.

Constant sacrifice as a key focus in the game is shown best through the constant struggle to keep your in-game "spreadsheet" family alive. The contrast between the visible booth visitors and the invisible portrayal of your family in the game presents a key dilemma in the game that quickly becomes the very heart of the game's narrative. The dilemma of the game being who do you as the player feel morally responsible for? The conflicting responsibilities of the player shines best in the fact that, no matter what, the player character's family will often push to be a priority in the player's mind even despite the fact that they only exist as plain and off center text showing their relation to you and their health.

Although the prioritization of the family can be dependent on the player and can take away from the narrative if they fall too low as a priority, the family remains at the center of most of player choice towards the game's moral dilemmas. The lack of connection between the player and the player character's family is something that contrasts completely with how, despite having no relation to you, those who come into your booth are fully visible and vibrantly showcase their humanity in more robust ways than the player's own family. Thus, the game forces you to have to reevaluate your own moral compass through in-game decisions that reflect how responsible you feel towards a faceless and nameless family versus seen strangers who you interact with.

The game's presentation of a faceless family that's looking solely to you for survival as well as an animated, talkative, and humanized array of strangers, who are similarly putting their lives in your hands, causes a balance to emerge that does hinge on player's caring for the family. The balance in the game ironically makes the player know random strangers' names yet not their own son's. Yet, the player has to see past this in

order to consider how to act, when providing for their nameless son demands separating families who you were able to see and who pleaded with you to act in matters that are sometimes life and death. In addition to all of this, is also the previously mentioned high wire balance of how much you give in to the dehumanizing apparatus of the party. The balance between the party's demands and your own morality's demands causing you to have to weigh the perspective of the party that demands you to only see the dehumanized papers in front of you versus the impractical humanity in you that wants to still see the people standing before you.

The first person perspective of the game causes the morality, as well as its shifts throughout the game, most expressed by the player to be their own. With a faceless player character that the only info the game reveals to you about being just that, you have a family and that you've been assigned as border inspector, the player character acts as a primarily blank slate for the player. As a blank slate, the player is better able to project themselves onto the player character to the point where they feel like they are in the gameworld and that their actions in the game are the same they would perform if in the game's scenarios in reality. Consequently, each and every moral dilemma the game causes is responded to by the player's own morality in a way that causes the player to question the very nature of their own humanity and the morals their own lives hinge on.

Papers, Please remains one of the most effective games at accomplishing the feat of moral questioning in a way that enriches our very society by forcing its players to confront the very nature of how they act and make them question their nature, and in some cases, even change it for the better. By putting players into such a massive test of morality through the moral dilemma of how to live morally in an immoral world that is shown with the state of Arstotzka, *Papers, Please* give players a drastically expanded understanding of the methods and rationalizations of dehumanization and horrific actions. Due to the game having you rule on a matter that is sometimes life and death for complete strangers, it has the player personally traverse the morally gray area of the

world around us. Thus, forcing players to often utilize the same rationalizations for real life actions that are viewed as horrific in order to get the player to understand how easy it is to slip into those pitfalls of inhumanity. Separating a husband and a wife may seem always undefendable until you're forced into the same situation and realize that it can often become a decision of either separate the husband and the wife or you won't have enough to feed your son tonight.

The game also utilizes the player's increasing efficiency in the game along with recycled character designs in order to create an intentional, yet optional, detachment from the booth visitors. As the player progresses through the game, the rate at which they process visitors naturally increases in ways that typically have the player form a typical routine for each visitor. Check the date of birth, verify the stamp, verify the height and weight, stamp, return docs, rinse and repeat. Yet, the very nature of this formation of a routine in most players causes an excessive emphasis on efficiency that can often gradually shift the booth visitors into nothing but dehumanized documents and passing faces. Additionally, The occasional terrorist attack events in the game causes the player to also begin to mistrust each passing face and hold a suspicion that the next visitor could have a bomb strapped to their ankle that further adds to this dehumanization. Consequently, the player subconsciously becomes more and more infected by the Arstotzkan government's view of people as merely tools or threats to the system as each visitor becomes nothing more than the money the player gets for processing them correctly or a possible threat.

The repeated character designs in the game also emphasizes the dehumanization of progress in *Papers, Please* in that the player stops seeing each visitor as unique when they've seen their exact face dozens of times. Consequently, this reuse of character design allows the game to utilize the constraints placed upon it as an indie game with an inability to create thousands of unique character designs in order to convey part of the narrative. Just like a real border inspector, the player stops seeing a uniqueness in

every visitor as faces blend together to common templates and become nothing more but another thing to check and verify.

The dehumanization that occurs as the player goes along is effectively utilized by the game to highlight the ease at which dehumanization can happen in order to educate and prevent it in reality. Through consistent breaks in the usual routine with return visitors like Jorji or one time unique visitors such as the visitor that gives you a poem to convince you to let them in, the game allows for sufficient disruptions of routine to break the player out of the dehumanizing process. Each disruption allows the player to break out of the typical search for efficiency in the game and see the humanity standing in front of them that the game's main cycle along with the Arstotzkan government gets you to momentarily forget about.

Papers, Please combines morally demanding balances with historical and modern realities to create an experience that challenges the player's morality and player's apathy. Through challenging gameplay, the game is able to effectively address issues such as complacency and apathy towards unjust realities in our society in a way no other media is able to. Every action holds weight and every action holds the player responsible in a way that evokes guilt in a potent way, narratively speaking. The game allows players to put themselves in an impossible situation that is learned about in history books and talked about as a foreign environment and answer the question of how they would react.

Strongest Element

The game's most effective element is how it utilizes its gameplay to make the player question their own morals by how their views on booth visitors shift and who they feel responsible for. It's a game that excels best at forcing you to combat seeing the world through the party line or as a human being through its purposely clunky interactivity and

interface. It's first-person perspective combined with the focused and swift attentiveness required to play as the character, makes the player have to balance how they see people.

Just as in the reality *Papers, Please* is set in, this perspective forces the player to have to choose between seeing living beings as nothing more as right or wrong documents. The gameplay adds into the dehumanization dilemma of the game as it causes the player to strive for efficiency as a standard default throughout most of the gameplay, just like the glorious state of Arstotzka prefers. Yet, efficiency means having to dehumanize both visitors as a feared and unknown other in the game to be suspicious of, with the main way to break away from such a view meaning to break away from that strive for efficiency and accept penalties for it. In order to best resist becoming just another abstract and detached Arstotzkan official, like the one that visits the player, you have to act altruistically towards strangers that are placing their entire lives at your mercy.

Unsuccessful Element

The player's family as nothing more than a spreadsheet is the game's most notable ineffective element. *Papers, Please's* "spreadsheet" family is a part of the game that is incredibly unsuccessful at building a bond between the player and those the player character is already bonded with. Given only status indicators and their relationship to the player character, the player is less likely to feel connected to them as characters when so little interaction occurs between the player and their family in-game. Yet, this less successful element of the game does help create the reality of the game's communist dystopia as well as force the player to remember that they are evaluating human beings that the player can form bonds with just as much as they could their family.

For many players, they'd easily replace the player character's uncle for the wonderful Jorji because he's a visible character that receives so much more time and player interaction compared to the player's family (as well as the fact that Jorji can smuggle drugs and give the player a cut). The contrast between player connections to NPCs is something that is because the game lets the first-person perspective show the humanity of the people that come into your booth to be judged in matters that for some is life and death. As for the "spreadsheet" family, there is still enough interaction between the player and them to still have a limited emotional connection to them, but the inability to see them for anything other than their current status does make it significantly weaker compared to those who pass through your booth.

Yet, this difference in connection seems to be done for a purpose to help build the Soviet-esque reality of the game. The Soviet reality being one that works you to the bone to provide for a family that the intensity of your labor forces you to become emotionally distant to as the provider. Instead of playing with your son, you must whittle your life away like a perfect worker just for the slight hope of your family's survival. The family's survival depending on you even more than those you judge in your booth, as all try to simply endure and survive with only a slight hope of making it through the harshness of a decades-long Soviet-style societal winter.

This shortcoming as viewed as intentional can also be framed as part of the game's narrative about dehumanization. When you know a stranger's name while not knowing your own son's, the focus of whose being dehumanized contorts a bit with the stranger presented as much more prevalently human and unique than a depersonalized and dehumanized pixelated photo and line of text that reads only "son." Consequently, the focus of character in the game shifts radically towards the booth visitors in a way that combats the dehumanizing monotonous majority of the core gameplay loop.

However, despite this purpose, the spreadsheet family problem is still an issue for other aspects of the game in terms of the struggle of priorities. As a player, the faceless spreadsheet heavily constrains any build up of empathy between player and their family that makes the game's dilemmas not as powerful with no real sense of emotional connection and not much of an emotional response to the family that is supposed to take top priority. In the game's ability to let the player experience the alien perspective of a border inspector through their own morality, the lack of a connection to the game's family presents the game's biggest shortcoming. Without the emotional presence of the family in the player character's life, it's much easier to prioritize the booth visitors you are constantly interacting with and begin to view the family as more of a at times disregarded diegetic health bar for the player. When the player never interacts with their son in a way that shows him shivering in the cold or trying to distract himself from hunger pains, they are more likely to see switching off the heat or not feeding their family as less of a weighted dilemma and more of just resource management to keep the gameplay going.

Highlight

The absolute highlight of *Papers, Please* starts on day 29. A nameless father approaches your booth and slides you nothing but a photo of his dead daughter, and asks you to help him hunt her killer. This moment in the game, no matter whether you help or not, isn't long yet is one of the most memorable encounters throughout the whole game that highlights the moral grayness the game's choices thrive in. The encounter presents you with brutality being responded to with brutality and asks you to decide whether to allow it.

This moment works so well because it forces the player to be unable to avoid seeing a tragedy in one of the booth visitors. By having the father present only a small photo of a smiling child with the heart wrenching words "I love you daddy" scrawled on the back, the game pulls the player away from any sort of dehumanizing perspective they might

have held about the game's npcs and forces them to face raw and uncensored humanity in front of them. With each line from the father, it becomes more and more prevalent that ideologies of either Ezic or the government have no place in this father's mind and forces the player to disregard them for a moment as well. With the removal of ideology, the player is able to see one of the core messages of the game with the struggling human beings that exist below the titans of Ezic and the Arstotzkan government. The father presents a pivotal moment in the game that ensures the player understands that each booth visitor is exactly like the player character, people struggling under a system that has no regard for human lives and no tolerance of compassion.

The vengeful father also shows the real cost of a brutal system, like that in Arstotzka, by showcasing the brutalization of the society under that system. The game shoves the poster child of innocence with a little girl clutching at a teddy bear and shows the complete destruction of it with the loving father turned into the killer-to-be the player sees in front of him. More importantly, it causes the player to question what type of society is so brutal to include the brutal murder of a child and what type of society is so brutal to force fathers to seek their own justice for brutality that spawns as a byproduct of a brutal system.

Critical Reception

Despite being a now six year old game, *Papers, Please*, is still showered in discussion and praise just like when it was initially released. The game's core focus on immigration and switching of perspective to a border inspector is something that has seemed to still garner attention today due to its continued relevance six years later. One reviewer, Wesley Yin-Poole, even referring to the immigration aspect of *Papers, Please* as "more powerful now as the decade comes to an end than it was back in 2013." Yin-Poole even calls *Papers, Please* "one of the standout indie games of the decade" in praise revolving around putting the victims of a brutal system as at the forefront of the game.

The reception of the game that ranges from reviews from the year it was released to today as primarily singing praises of the game's powerful presentation of the dilemma of being stuck under "impersonal institutions" as reviewer / studier of *Papers, Please* Dr. Jason J. Morrisette calls them. The usual negative thrown at the game focuses on the monotony and routine of the majority of the gameplay as pushing away some players despite the monotony being part of the game's narrative. Yet, the negative is seriously outweighed by the positives of the game being described "as an example of video games as true art," as reviewer Sam Machkovech puts it.

Papers, Please has been drowned in awards of best game of 2013 by websites such as Wired and Ars Technica as well as winning a 2014 BAFTA for strategy and simulation. Yet, the main focus of much of the buzz around it is that it stands as a powerful example of video games' ability to tackle powerful issues better than any other medium and forces players to be confronted by issues that echo resoundly throughout our history and our world. What is good and evil action in a morally gray world? How do you apply good moral values when forced to live in an often immoral world? What is better, safer complacency with an inhumane present? Or perilous action towards a better future?

Sources:

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Lessons

Lesson 1

Independent games have varied possibilities for strong historical storytelling and don't require AAA budgets in order to establish powerfully accurate historical realities.

Lesson 2

Video games contain a tremendous amount of educational potential for such subjects like philosophy and history that can remain engaging as well as address certain aspects of various subjects that other media aren't able to.

Lesson 3

Video games are more powerful in representing certain issues and conveying certain aspects of storytelling, and all that is required to tap into this power is meaningful and well thought out design choices.

Lesson 4

Planned and intentional disconnection between the player and certain characters can be a powerful tool to help tell the story if done with meaning behind it.

Lesson 5

The mechanics of a game forcing the player to physically carry out actions rather than see them allows for the real power of interactivity's possibilities to shine through. Games are the only medium that can powerfully evoke feelings of guilt and responsibility and *Papers, Please* illustrates that well thought out design and execution is all that is required to tap into this potential.

Summation

Papers, Please is a game that demands to be constantly analyzed and praised as a game that eloquently utilizes interactivity to tell a narrative of morality and oppression that transcends just the totalitarian regime of the fictional Arstotzka. The game creator,

Lucas Pope, figuring out not only how to accomplish this with an indie game, but also doing so in an engaging way that can draw players with just the gameplay alone is a remarkable achievement that cements the game into video game history. Additionally, the game's amazing ability to showcase the truth about the history of life under communism through recreating the aroma and reality of the collapsing Soviet Union is astonishing. *Papers, Please* alone is undeniable proof that video games provide a method of nontraditional historical storytelling that can be an integral tool in a historian's tool belt by reaching larger audiences and touching on aspects of history that only video games can touch on. This game needs to be studied for decades to come as a brilliant example of how games can outperform other media in telling certain narratives.