Papers, Please as Critical Making: A Review

Eddie Lohmeyer

North Carolina State University

Abstract

This review examines Lucas Pope's independent game *Papers, Please* as an instantiation of critical making within the discipline of the digital humanities. By confronting the player with moral decisions in their capacity as an immigration officer allowing or denying entry to immigrants within a totalitarian state, the game introduces an expressive form of game design in which conceptual practices are used to examine political and social realities. This type of critical media practice introduces a political ethic to the digital humanities that is arguably scarce within the discipline.

Keywords

Papers, Please; digital humanities; critical making

A number of recent indie game developers have experimented with making serious games that can be described as "anti-fun," gameplay that is self-reflexive of what the medium can do while also engaging critically with contemporary social and political issues. Of these recent experimental interventions into normative gameplay is Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013), a game described by the developer as "A Dystopian Document Thriller" (Pope, 2013). In *Papers, Please* the player takes on the dismal role of an immigration officer working at the border checkpoint of the fictional, totalitarian country of Arstotzka. As the player is introduced to a seemingly endless line of immigrants hoping to cross the border—some attempting to reunite with family while others are suicide bombers—they are given the responsibility of approving or denying entry, while dealing with an increasing load of bureaucratic regulations. Pope's purpose with this serious game is clear. Instead of developing *Papers, Please* with entertaining gameplay in mind, Pope provides a type of critical intervention that prompts the player to consider the political and social tensions that exist upon entering another country when a traveller is confronted with the complex and overly bureaucratic nature of national security measures.

As much as the element of fun in Pope's soul-shattering gameplay is perhaps not readily apparent, *Paper's Please* can at times be quite entertaining and emotionally impactful. There is satisfaction that comes from the detective work of noticing disparities between an immigrant's ID card and passport, or discovering that a terrorist is attempting to smuggle in a bomb during an interrogation and subsequent full body scan. At the same time, the player must decide, for instance, to allow or deny entry for a woman missing some of her paperwork who simply wants to reunite with her son. Do you allow her access out of pity and risk the State docking your pay or turn her away based on the duties to your country? Certainly there are times when gameplay becomes repetitive and monotonous, but then again so is the work of an immigration officer in a totalitarian state as we might imagine. Yet, the real significance of *Papers, Please* lies in Pope's effort to produce a work of critical game making that within the emerging discipline of the digital humanities, can be thought of as a form of expressive coding in which material and conceptual practices are used to examine political and social realities. As a video game, *Papers, Please* demonstrates a much needed approach to critical media practice within the digital humanities, one that explores a type of political ethic that is arguably scarce within the discipline.

As an emerging academic discipline, the definition of "digital humanities" has continued to evolve, integrating a number of related fields at the intersection of computer science and the traditional humanities. The digital humanities are often seen as a coming together of methodologies in the humanities (literature, history, art, etc.) with digital tools and computational practices (data visualization, text mining, 3D printing,

and electronic prototyping) as a way to further humanistic inquiry. Practices of developing independent games can be included within the realm of digital humanities, particularly through what Matt Ratto has called critical making, a type of material and technical intervention that places emphasis on "value-sensitive design" that investigates societal values and their relationship to the technologies we use (2011). As an instance of critical game design, *Papers, Please* urges the player to consider social and political values through a medium often used for spectacular entertainment and not necessarily for artistic, conceptual explorations.

In story mode, *Papers, Please* begins in November of 1982 with an explanation that the player has won an employment position from the labor lottery and will begin work as an immigration officer manning the thin line between the glorious nation of Arstotzka and its neighboring state of Kolechia. Every element about the appearance of the game communicates a type of Cold War aesthetic through minimal graphics and an intentionally drab color palate. The look of *Papers, Please* suggests that Pope attempted to create a sterile and institutionalized game setting reminiscent of Cold War East Berlin. The player's responsibilities as immigration officer begin with permitting or denying immigrants based on whether they have a passport. Sitting within a cramped booth, the player uses their official Ministry of Admission rulebook, crosschecking passport information via a regional map and making sure that they have not expired or that no discrepancies exist between the immigrant's nationality and the city issuing the passport.

As a new immigrant comes to the window, the player demands their paperwork, quickly checks their credentials and then using a stamp, either allow them to pass the border or dismiss them away. The player's work day is timed, and they must check paperwork quickly and efficiently. Each person that is successfully allowed through the border means that a day's salary increases and the player is better equipped to buy their near-starving family food, heat, and medical supplies. It is possible to check in on your family huddled within the confines of a low-income dwelling at the end of each level and administer whatever meager resources the player has garnered to keep them alive. If an immigrant is denied entry, it means less money at the end of the day so the player must work as quickly as possible. If they allow an immigrant through in error based on forged or incorrect paperwork, a citation from the Ministry of Admission is immediately forwarded to the player's desk stating that their pay has been docked. Receive enough warnings and the player is arrested for outstanding debt which also ends the game and they are replaced almost instantly by another officer who is looking for opportunity in the motherland. Through these hopeless in-game conditions, *Papers, Please* does a substantial job of generating an affective play experience of what it feels like to live and work in a totalitarian state. Even if the player thinks they are doing well in *Papers,*

Please, they are often immediately reminded of the dehumanizing nature of being a drone under the watchful eye of Arstotzkan big brother.

After a terrorist attack at the border prompts heightened security, the player is introduced to more required paperwork at each new level of the game. This means more announcements from the Ministry of Admissions informing the player of security protocols and new documents to scrutinize: admission tickets, identification cards, work licenses, and so on. Unfortunately, this also means that the chances of making errors are increasingly higher and keeping your family alive and healthy becomes a considerable challenge. As much as comparing credentials on multiple documents sounds tedious, this element of gameplay is actually entertaining. For one, the value-inherent design of *Papers, Please* immerses the player into a bureaucratic position of power in which allowing those with legitimate paperwork through is as satisfying as discovering errors in someone's passport and interrogating them further. Once the player is suspicious of an error, they can opt to select inspection mode which allows one to directly interrogate the immigrant or select more severe options such as a full body search, fingerprint scan, or detainment. These options are made available after progression through the game and only under certain bureaucratic conditions.

The compelling element of gameplay in *Papers, Please* is the learned efficiency the player gains as they work their job from day to day. After a number of immigrants are processed and the player progresses through the game, they slowly begin to accrue a mental checklist of what discrepancies to look for: a false seal on a document, an inaccurate photograph on a Grant of Asylum, an expired polio vaccination. Not to mention the excitement of finding an explosive device during a body search. Each time the player's keen eye spots an error, there is a satisfying sense of bringing down the stamp with a resounding strike to deny entry, even if this ultimately means less money at the end of the day to feed and keep their family warm. It is also the way Pope has designed the immediate workspace in the game that lends a sense of challenge and mastery as the player progresses through the levels. The desk within the crowded booth is small, paperwork begins to pile up quickly, and it becomes increasingly difficult to crosscheck documents against the clock.

As a product of critical game development, *Papers, Please* often puts the player in moral predicaments that prompt a critical reflection of the social and political tensions that exist at the border of two nations. At certain crossroads in the game, the player must decide to split a husband from his wife because she has invalid documents. Does the player sympathize with these poor immigrants out of kindness and risk monetary penalty or remain obedient to the state and attempt to provide for their own on the straight and narrow? As the game

progresses and Arstotzka's political terrain becomes rockier due to internal and foreign threats, the player must confront other ambiguously moral decisions. Should they accept bribes from shady foreigners attempting to enter the country so as to support their family? Do they agree to cooperate with a radical organization that is bent on assassinating powerful officials and possibly overthrowing Arstotzka's government? Much of the effectiveness of this value-sensitive design stems from the way these moral situations force the player to consider political tensions that emerge from gameplay.

There are times when gameplay does become tiresome and repetitive, especially in story mode as elements of the narrative tend to be revealed in the same progression; work diligently in the booth and then pick up new snippets of information ever so often that begin to reveal the larger political landscape the player is situated in. The game does have multiple endings that can be played out depending on choices made in the game; however, these can only be explored by playing back through the levels and once again wading through piles of paperwork. As one might imagine, replay value is diminished simply through the repetitive nature of each level which can become quite tiresome after several playthroughs. The game does feature an "endless" play mode that focuses solely on the player's mastery of document processing skills, forgoing any plot elements and assessing one's ability as an immigration officer based on how quickly they work and how long they can go without making any mistakes. This mode isn't nearly as thought-provoking as story mode and again tends to emphasize the repetitive nature of in-game tasks as opposed to allowing reflection of how the tactility of moving, searching and stamping documents is imbricated within the broader political complexities outlined in the narrative. Perhaps the repetitiveness of gameplay could have been limited if narrative elements were broadened and more details regarding the relationships between opposing political organizations, key government leaders, and neighboring countries were incrementally revealed. In many ways, a storyline that provides a richer and more immersive account of these political relations might do well to break up the monotony of shuffling and crosschecking documents.

Tedious gameplay aside, Pope's game stands as a significant contribution to the independent gaming community in the way game design functions as a type of critical making. Arguably, *Papers, Please* isn't supposed to be "fun" in the sense that a popular first-person shooter is fun. Instead, the game opens up a productive dialogue for thinking about a political ethic within the digital humanities through a type of affective, embodied experience of play. Jamie Bianco has questioned if the discipline of digital humanities should include an ethical imperative beyond the creation of computational tools to explore humanistic inquiry. She proposes what she calls creative critical media, or a "performative interaction, composed affectively through the

production of discursive and extradiscursive sensations in order to effect a synaesthetic rhetoric—felt, seen, and heard—that forges ethical relations out of the captured, inventoried, and composed remains or ruins of injustice, harm, violence, and devastation, out of the social and political conditions in which we find ourselves" (2012). Taking Bianco's definition of creative critical media into consideration, *Papers, Please* does a highly successful job of persuading players to reflect upon the political conditions and anxieties of crossing into the boundaries of another nation through the sensory, visual-tactile experience of attending to personal documents afforded by the video game medium. To this end, Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* wonderfully demonstrates the potential for critical game making to suggest a political ethic within the digital humanities. Perhaps this is exactly the type of creative forms of critical practice that is lacking in the discipline; a type of expressive game development that evokes felt experiences and pushes the digital humanities toward an ethical turn.

References

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