CAUSE NO TROUBLE: THE EXPERIENCE OF "SERIOUS FUN" IN PAPERS, PLEASE

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Aesthetic Experiences and Political Games

Bundles of paperwork, waiting in line, and lists of government regulations are not things you'd necessarily associate with fun gameplay. Yet they are the trappings of *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), a puzzle game and self-described "dystopian document thriller" where you play a border inspector in the fictional 1980s Eastern Bloc country of Arstotzka, and you have the power to allow or deny people entry into your "glorious" nation. Designed by independent developer and former Naughty Dog programmer Lucas Pope, the game has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and won the "Innovation Award" at the 2014 Game Developers Conference. The core gameplay consists of examining people's passports, work permits, and other

paperwork for discrepancies or failure to follow government-issued rules. Let the right people into the country, and you receive wages to pay your rent and feed your family; let the wrong people in, and the consequences start with fines and get worse from there.

The game's story mode explores issues such as privacy invasion, immigration policy, and the banality of evil. In one event, you must decide whether to allow a refugee with bad papers through with her husband, which would result in your pay being docked; or, you can follow the letter of the law by denying her entry and abandoning her to arrest or worse in her home country. The way that both gameplay and narrative provide a sense of bureaucratic heartlessness and the precarious qualities of life under a repressive regime might put *Papers, Please* in good company with other seriously-themed games, such as news-based terrorism-commentary *September 12th* (Newsgaming, 2001) and historical research forgery simulator *Opera Omnia* (Increpare, 2009). Indeed, one reviewer has argued that "you couldn't really describe *Papers, Please*, as fun… it's not a game you'll fire up for a 10-minute distraction" (Whitehead 2013).

However, the gameplay has compelling and even entertaining qualities; another review describes the mechanics as "an intrinsically satisfying process" (Walker, 2013). In the other games I just mentioned, after one playthrough and after you understand the message, there is no particular reason to return to them for the experience of their gameplay. In essence the games are vehicles for their themes. On the other hand, with *Papers, Please* the gameplay is not solely a rhetorical delivery mechanism and there is even an "endless" mode to keep playing for better scores after the story campaign is complete.

What might we make of the conjunction of serious social themes and addictive, fun gameplay mechanics? How can we reconcile having a good time playing a game and acknowledging its

thoughtful subject matter? Here I examine *Papers, Please* by focusing on the embodied experience of play. That is, I share the stance elaborated by games scholar Henrik Smed Nielsen that video games are embodied experiences, and not just those most obvious examples of Wii and Kinect motion-controlled games – all games act upon sensory perception, evoke feeling, and make space for intentional action. In the end, the locus for all of that is the body (Nielsen, 2012).

Thus in *Papers, Please* I am not focused solely on narrative representation or gameplay rules, though those are certainly important determiners. Instead, I look at the actual embodied experience of "what it's like" to be in the moment playing the game. I am looking at game *aesthetics*, an area which Graeme Kirkpatrick has argued deserves further exploration:

> The tensions in the hand are shifting and if we recorded the movements of fingers and thumbs against the plastic buttons we would find a series of crystalline representations of game action, which articulated to their corresponding events on the screen would constitute the game's "effect-shapes." In a sense, the important forces that drive the action of the on-screen game fiction are present in the tension between fingers, thumbs and plastic controller. (Kirkpatrick, 2011)

To map those "effect-shapes" I look at player intentionality: how he or she acts upon the game, and vice-versa. The method that flows from examining an intersubjective relationship such as this, according to media and philosophy scholar Vivian Sobchack, is the correlation of the subjective act of audiovisual perception with the objective structures expressed by the form of the work – a phenomenological approach (Sobchack, 2011).

Bringing this method to bear on *Papers, Please* means discerning and describing how the game "feels" to play – how player intention is channeled, facilitated, blocked, and manipulated. This happens at the level of the interface, in how the player

acts upon the game and how the game acts back. That point of contact constitutes a world of experience that has room to produce both fun gameplay and the recognition of a relevant social reality. Here I examine three salient aspects of that experience: the booth, the stamp, and the queue.

If the concept of the game's "feel" at this point appears to be somewhat imprecise and subjective, I hope that the phenomenological reductions I perform below reveal their own kind of rigor, and yet I would also argue that the realm of the subjective and personal is itself worthy of being part of what we talk about when we talk about games.

Figure 1. The main gameplay screen of *Papers, Please*, divided into three areas: the booth (left), the inspection desk with stamps (right), and the queue (top).

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The Booth: Papers over People

Aside from a few expository cutscenes and after-level transitions, you spend most of your time in *Papers, Please* on the main

gameplay screen (Figure 1). It depicts the main Inspector character's workplace, a checkpoint on the border between the nations of Arstotzka and Kolechia. Like a cubist painting or multi-windowed desktop, the screen is divided into three sections, each a separate vantage point that converges on the player character's subjective perception. The lower left corner is a first-person view of the inspection booth where travelers step up, present their documents, and answer questions. To the right is a close-up of the inspection desk, where you can examine documents in more detail. At the top is a bird's-eye view of the border, showing the checkpoint and the queue forming outside. Although this last section appears at first to be merely ambience, it plays a complex role in the flow of gameplay, which I will address later.

However, for now note how this segmentation structures the experience of gameplay and encourages your attention to flow along certain lines. Though the fixed, static viewpoints and the dreary lo-fi aesthetic help evoke the 1980s Iron Curtain setting, they also create a relationship between the player, the game space, and the characters that inhabit it.

Philosopher of technology Don Ihde has described the categories of relations formed among human subjects, technological artefacts, and the world, and one of those categories is a *hermeneutic* relation: technology allows a person to "read" the world, such as a thermometer which provides information about the temperature (Ihde, 1990). Hermeneutic relations condense aspects of the world into information for the human subject; the interface of *Papers, Please* provides one such relation. Its layout is one specific way of looking at the world, and it expands particular facets of subjective perception while narrowing or closing off others.

We can see this in action by examining an iteration of the gameplay loop, from my embodied player perspective: to start

off, I click on the loudspeaker at the top of the screen, and this brings a traveler into the lower left booth. Dialogue starts:

"Papers, please," my character says. The traveler presents two documents: a passport and an entry permit. "What is the purpose of your trip?"

"I pass through."

"Duration of stay?"

"It will be only two weeks."

I click and hold to drag the documents from the left-hand booth to the right-hand inspection desk; as they cross the threshold the objects magnify in size so I can read them more clearly. I look at the information on the entry permit: "Transit." I look at the date on the entry permit, then look at the clock and calendar in the booth. Clicking on a button to enter "Inspection Mode", I then click on each of the dates. "This document is expired," the Inspector says.

"I could not come until now." Unfortunately for him, this is not a valid excuse. Clicking on another button on the interface makes a set of stamps shoot out from the side of the screen: green for "approved" and red for "denied." On his passport, I use the red one. Then I drag the documents back to the left and through the window, and the traveler silently walks away. I click on the loudspeaker again, and my character's yell of "Next!" brings another traveler to the window. The game clock continues ticking towards five o'clock and the end of the workday.

This gameplay cycle shows that *Papers, Please* involves elements of time management along with paying attention to detail, as in hidden object or puzzle games. The ticking clock provides time pressure, while the escalating difficulty of more documents and more rules means that players are challenged to become

more efficient and precise in the way that they handle each cycle. Players must be dexterous in juggling the documents and the ever-necessary in-game rulebook within a limited space that can become a cluttered mess in the wrong hands. They must also possess mental acuity in remembering the cities of the region to detect forged documents, and a keen eye for minor discrepancies in weight, height, or even a single digit of a long serial number.

With player attention being a key resource in the game, it's significant how the interface guides and structures that attention. A major question is thus: *What is privileged by this structure?* In this hermeneutic relation, what comes to the forefront of player attention?

In this case it's certainly not the people. Consider the ramifications of alternate design choices and of what could have been. In this case, we might imagine a version of *Papers, Please* that used only a "realistic" first-person perspective: you see the world only through the eyes of the Inspector. Travelers walk up to the booth, and you pick up their documents in a similar way, perhaps using a button to zoom in and examine them more closely – but the key difference here is that this perspective, with unified space and a more personal point of view, uses the scale of person-to-person interaction as the default. Such a perspective emphasizes the nature of these travelers as people.

This sense is not totally absent from the actual game, but the game's aesthetic effaces that sense in multiple ways. The queue provides a distant and detached perspective where people are seen as a blob of amorphous silhouettes, and even when they step into the booth they seem to fade into the background with their cool colors and muted tones. The most colorful elements in the game are the passports, which are a bold rainbow of reds and greens and blues. The game's spatial structure privileges the presence of the documents over the people. Not only is most of the game's space reserved for those documents, but they are also

the only objects that directly cross from one section of the game environment to the other, and from one section of the interface to the other.

You must pass the documents from left to right, from the booth counter onto the desk, in order to read them. As they cross the threshold, they are magnified and grow larger than life; when you're done with them, they go right to left and shrink back down again. This motion and transformation is visually striking within the game, and it also happens quite frequently. As you rapidly cycle through these documents, this transition occurs forty or more times during an average level. All this motion is certainly livelier than the people themselves, who primarily remain in one place with an unchanging expression matching the ones in their documents.

This interface privileges a certain way of looking at the world. Comparing it to the hypothetical only-first-person *Papers, Please*, which might be characterized as interacting with people carrying documents, this game encourages the inverse – dealing with documents that happen to be carried by people. The documents are of course key gameplay elements, but the privileging of documents over people also informs the game's thematic preoccupations with bureaucracy and state control. Other elements of the interface make this connection not only visible, but tangible and tactile as well.

The Stamp: Touching the Game

Another category Idhe uses to map human-technological relations is the *embodiment* relation: tools and implements serve as a channel for human intention upon the world. The hammer is a quintessential embodied technology, transforming bodily intention into pointed force. In *Papers, Please* embodiment can be found in the controls the player acts upon and the cursor that makes those actions manifest. Here, the tangible and tactile

quality of things is paramount, and the game uses a number of audiovisual strategies to evoke those qualities. Although this dimension is subtle and perhaps not something one consciously considers while playing the game, it is key to structuring the world of the game and the way one plays through it.

The sense of touch here is not a literal one; you do not actually touch any of the elements in the game, and though one could conceivably play this on a touchscreen, the game assumes a mouse and keyboard as the default controls. Nevertheless, there are objects that, through the correlation between what we see and hear and how we manipulate the controls, feel more tangible and more responsive than others.

Again, the documents come to the fore. It starts with the simple sound of rustling paper when you click on a document to pick it up. They also have a sense of heft to them, as you have to hold down the mouse to carry the documents around the screen and from one space to another. You can position the documents anywhere on the desk and stack them on top of each other, while within the booth passports and papers clatter onto the surface of the counter. Some of these aspects simply speak to competent and intuitive user interface design, but little touches add up to create the feeling of these documents having manipulability and tangibility. In any case, the player's relation to these documents could have been designed in any other number of ways.

Imagine another version of *Papers, Please* where instead of needing to handle representations of physical documents, all the relevant information were displayed in a table on the screen. The same information presented in a different form changes play. If the same type of information were displayed in the same position on the screen every time, that rigidity and sameness would make discrepancies and errors less difficult to spot. It would also eliminate the difficulty in managing and organizing the available space. Part of the game's challenge comes from

positioning the rulebook and documents on the table so they can be cross-referenced, as you need to click on both the rule and the violation to link the two. A player might also need to compare serial numbers across multiple documents, which may be difficult to fit in the space allotted and thus would require shuffling through papers. A poorly-organized space can lead to a key document being lost under another or left in a corner, requiring precious seconds to retrieve. These challenges stem from the documents possessing tangible and tactile qualities.

A document-less *Papers, Please* would (aside from requiring a new title) also shift the balance of the player's intention and attention as currently split between the people and their documents. Not only are the papers in the game more vibrant than the people, you interact with the documents more directly. You pick them up, move them from place to place, click on them, and stamp them. In fact, with a few exceptions, you do not directly interact with these people unless they are rendered into documents themselves. The Inspector character may question a traveler, for instance, but those questions do not become something for you to act upon until they are printed out in transcript form. In later levels, you X-ray people for contraband or examine their fingerprints to verify identities; the resulting documents are touched and grasped, while the people are handled at a push-button remove. In the game the people can only be "read" or "touched" via the paperwork they provide.

Even without having any knowledge about the game, an observer would probably be able to guess at the significance of the stamps, as they are the most lovingly crafted and detailed part of the interface. When you press the button to access the stamps, the spring-loaded tray shoots out from the side of the screen with velocity and momentum; multiple frames of animation give it a little bounce before the tray settles to rest. When you use the stamp on the traveler's passport, it lands with a meaty thump and holds for a moment to make sure the digital ink seeps into the

digital paper. One in-game upgrade even gives you a keyboard shortcut for the stamps, which not only saves precious seconds but adds a more tangible dimension to the tool, a physical button to press. All the attention to detail in this part of the interface (and the detail that draws attention to it) is fitting, as the choice of stamp is the ultimate gameplay decision in *Papers, Please*. With every traveler, all your actions and observations boil down to answering the question: "Approved or Denied?"

The Queue: Dynamics of Attention

The rules of *Papers, Please* encourage you to perfect a process: what steps to take, in what order to take them, and how to physically execute them. As a game, it also throws up challenges to test that process. Generally that challenge steadily and predictably ramps, as more documents and more rules are added in each level, which means you must perfect a more complicated set of tasks. That gradual complication is also punctuated by extreme moments that call the process itself into question. Within the interface, the queue plays a major role in structuring the shape of that process and the shifts of player attention and intention that accompany it.

The top of the game screen shows the queue of travelers waiting at the checkpoint along with the border and the guards patrolling it. At first, this interface element appears to be mere window dressing, like the ambient crowd and traffic noise, to help situate you in the otherwise solipsistic space of the inspection booth. Indeed, the only element you can act upon in this section is the loudspeaker to call the next traveler, and because of this the entire queue recedes from subjective awareness. With your attention focused on the booth and desk below, the top of the screen becomes merely a large peripheral button to press.

However, the game disabuses that notion rather quickly; during the second level, your controls are suddenly locked out and the

booth's security shutter slams down. The queue up top becomes the center of attention, as a silhouette jumps across the fence and throws a bomb at a guard before being shot and killed. This scripted event ends the day and the level; at this point the queue's "attentional value" permanently shifts. Most of the time it remains a benign background presence, but it also carries a latent threat. This comes to the fore in later levels when you are suddenly asked not to deal with documents below but with threats from above; you must defend the checkpoint by unlocking a cabinet, retrieving a gun, and pointing and clicking in the top portion to shoot someone. In these moments, the game interrupts familiar routines and brusquely shifts the space of play; you must think and act quickly in that shifting space.

In other words, when I play *Papers, Please*, during each day the bottom portion of the screen is a flurry of activity and attention: I shuffle documents back and forth, click on buttons, and stamp passports. As I approach an optimal process of embodied and hermeneutic relations with the game, that process takes shape within and through my body in the form of elegant, precise action. I develop a rhythm that is matched by the game's aesthetics. The shuffle of papers, the thump of the stamp, and the blare of the loudspeaker correlate to my actions. These actions grow more and more difficult, but usually in predictable ways; I *internalize* the process. Yet the queue, which recedes into the background of my perception, remains. It marks the threat of something unexpected, something to disrupt my rhythm. It reminds me there is always something *external* to the process I'm enacting. My flow is a fragile thing, after all.

This vector of experience links fun gameplay with the meaningfulness of the game's social realism. That is, the game's aesthetics encourage a mindset of focusing on documents over people and then nuances, challenges, and disrupts that mindset. For one, it does so overtly with the story's political commentary and moral choices. The game's characters—asylum-seekers,

criminals, terrorists, corrupt officials, soldiers doing their job—all disrupt the gameplay with their political signification. However, the act of disruption is itself significant.

As we play, the rhythm of the gameplay process takes form within and through our embodied perception; in the flow of gameplay that process may even appear to the constitute the totality of the circumscribed world of the game, not in the nations and places and times that lie outside the inspector's booth but in the seemingly transcendent process within it. A fun activity is inscribed onto the representation of dreary work, not through simple mimesis but through the similarities of form and urgency as they act upon the living, perceptive, active body. The game completes this inscription by reminding us through disruptive events that the transcendence of that process (of bureaucracy) is at best fragile, illusory, and fleeting. The disruptions within the world of the game have narrative significance and gesture towards social significance, of course; but even before we read those events into a narrative as such, they immediately appear to us on the horizon of experience as disruptions of our intentionality and embodied action, and thus we experience these disruptions (these people) as threats or hindrances or problems. In producing that kind of experience, *Papers, Please* also evokes a social concern worthy of reflection.

An Attitude Adjustment

Returning to the basic formulation of the phenomenological approach, at this point we can correlate the objective structures expressed by the game with the bodily and subjective perception that we bring to that game. At its core *Papers, Please* is a game of error-checking paperwork. Like many other games, it takes what would otherwise be tedious drudgery and reshapes the experience. It builds drama around it. It takes an amorphous activity and gives it a definite shape. To play the game is to play with that shape, and to feel its texture and its rhythm; that shape

gives us access to both the rewards of playing well and a sense of the social reality underpinning that play. The Inspector in the game's story wants to do his job well so he can feed his family and not die; by the game's rules, we want to do his job well so we can earn points and overcome challenges. In story and in play, we encounter obstacles to success. Our embodied intention and action upon the game links those facets together.

An experience that builds such a connection must maintain a careful balance between focusing on the player's actions and the world that flows out from those actions. A game that deploys social commentary too self-consciously and too didactically runs the risk of making any sort of play feel trivial in light of a serious issue; it delivers a message, but sloughs off its sense of "gameness", and calls to question why it was a game in the first place. On the other hand, a game that uses the political and social charge of real history without sufficiently connecting it to the actual gameplay experience ends up marginalizing the reality of that history and treating it as mere window dressing.

Papers, Please successfully modulates those two extremities with a gameplay experience that encourages the player to inhabit a role more effectively than many actual "role playing" games. At no point in playing did I ever "feel like" an Arstotzkan Inspector, but the mindset cultivated by successful play – an obsession with efficiency, intensive focus on details, following the letter of the law – is the same mindset demanded of the Inspector, and embodies the attitude one might develop in the shadow of bureaucratic repression. Specific events in the game bring this idea to the foreground, but even the game's basic structural and aesthetic components help suffuse this "attitude adjustment" throughout the world of the game, and into the player's sensory, embodied, intentional experience.

In a video playthrough of the game, one reviewer noted a missing document, and instead of continuing to interrogate the traveler

to find out more, he merely stamped the denial and handed back the papers. The reviewer jokingly added, "I don't give a fuck about your story" (Scanlon, 2013). It was certainly a valid gameplay action, and from the perspective of earning money and scoring points, even the optimal one, because the story indeed mattered very little when the papers said it all. In the video's comments one viewer mentioned having worked a similar job in real life; singling out that moment, they noted that mindset as being all too common. *Papers, Please* provides a gameplay experience that helps you cultivate and internalize that mindset yet also gives the space to step back and examine that attitude, the reasons for it, and the consequences it carries. In trying to mix the fun of playing games with the weight of social realism, it's a strategy as good as any.

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