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Policing the Border in Lucas Pope's Computer Game *Papers, Please*

Lucas Pope's 2013 video game *Papers, Please* places the player-character in the position of an immigration inspector in a fictional Eastern Bloc nation. Since its release, the game has garnered enthusiastic responses, being celebrated by critics as an essential dramatisation of the ethical dilemmas associated with the migratory flows and fraught border politics of the post–9/11 world. However, this essay argues that this reputation must be scrutinised: for while *Papers, Please* indeed illustrates some of the contradictions at the heart of contemporary border policy – such as immigrant-receiving states' pragmatic application of exclusionary immigration practices that run contrary to their self-professed liberal-democratic ideals – it also engages in a 'universalising' abstraction of the border space, which limits its feasibility as a lens through which to view 2010s border discourses. Drawing from current research in Border Studies, a close reading of Pope's game illustrates how its geo-historical setting and its omission of crucial phenomena associated with the twenty-first-century border, such as the interactional processes of bordering and the existence of 'bi-cultural' borderscapes, ultimately render it a liberal-democratic fantasy, according to which the conflicts engendered by the enforced geopolitical border are abstract questions of morality and ethics rather than practical socio-political questions.

Keywords: video games; border politics; migration; rebordering

Introduction

In his list of the best video games released in 2013, critic Simon Parkin rewarded the small-budget production *Papers, Please* with the top spot, calling it, "Grim yet affecting, it's a game that may change your attitude the next time you're in line at the airport" (par. 8). This assessment is indicative of the impact and legacy of independent game designer Lucas Pope's most significant and most widely discussed work to date – a status

it has achieved in no small part thanks to its gameplay built on the ethical conundrums that arise from working at a heavily policed border checkpoint in a fictional Eastern European country. In fact, *Papers, Please* has earned a reputation in mainstream discourse as a prime argument for the video game medium's contested status as a 'legitimate' art form, with Naomi Alderman claiming in a 2015 *Guardian* column that "it's hard to imagine how you could opine on the future of literature without having played […] the sombre and engrossing *Papers, Please*" (par. 7). Similarly, Paul Formosa, Malcolm Ryan, and Dan Staines, in a 2016 paper written from the perspective of game design, laud Pope's indie hit as an "ethically notable" video game (211) that sheds light on the as yet largely untapped potential of morally challenging ludic narratives being told in a systemic rather than a tightly scripted way (see 223).

More specialised engagements with *Papers, Please*, meanwhile, read it as a moral philosophy-infused commentary on contemporary debates surrounding migration and border protection. In a 2019 essay on the ethics of *Papers, Please*, Miguel Sicart, invoking players' readiness to identify with the characters they play in video games, asks, "How does one balance the risk of barring innocent migrants against the threat of terrorism?" and "Do players place their personal, financial well-being above that of their fellow citizens, their state, or those seeking asylum?" ("Ethics" 153). Jess Morrissette, while applying the theory of Weberian bureaucracy in a 2017 discussion of Pope's game, highlights the apparently searing relevance of *Papers, Please* in no uncertain terms: drawing on United Nations statistics of the global population of displaced persons (see par. 5), thus favouring an even more hands-on comparison with the realities of global migration than Sicart, she contends that the game "leverages its repetitious gameplay and bleak narrative to represent a debate that shapes the lives of millions of people around the world on a daily basis" (par. 40). Indeed, "the semiotically enriched mechanics accomplish something that an entire library filled with Weber's writings could never do," namely grant players "an opportunity to essentially break free from the rule-bound iron cage and explore dangerous moral choices in a system that rewards blind obedience" (par. 40).

Thus, what commentators such as Sicart or Morrissette ultimately seem to argue is that *Papers, Please* manages to distil current discourses around border politics into a universally comprehensible ludic framework, in keeping with Sicart's 2014 claim that "[playing] is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves" (*Play* 6). However, there is a flaw in conceiving of this particular game in such grandiose, thematically precise

terms. For while *Papers, Please* does work as a 'moral philosophy simulator' – a space where players are encouraged to think through and engage with the abstract moral dilemmas associated with the phenomenon of the enforced geopolitical border – I argue that its alleged 'universalisation' of the border experience is exactly why it is ultimately an unsuitable lens through which to view the topical border crises Pope draws thematic inspiration from (and which seem to be the reason that many critics hail *Papers, Please* as a searing commentary on the here and now). Drawing from current research in Border Studies, it is my argument that the game's conception of the border and the migration discourses that surround it is historical rather than contemporary: for Pope, the border is a mere line of demarcation that separates one geopolitical territory from the other, when it is more accurate to think of it as the dynamic, non-static, multidimensional result of a *bordering* process, which is relevant not just for the geographic boundary line, but also for the entire *borderscape* that adjoins it and which is marked by hybrid cultures, identities, and practices. That the game undertakes a somewhat simplistic framing of the border in this way is noteworthy because, in doing so, it contributes to the popular understanding of borders – it fosters a perceived public 'knowledge'; a *border imaginary*. The fact that *Papers, Please* is widely read as a pointed reflection of current border politics regardless may therefore speak to a desire among the commentariat for these politics to be more theoretical, more philosophical, than they are.

Following a brief explanation of the most salient aspects of the game's story and gameplay as well as an overview over the relevant theory, my discussion will be divided into two main sections: first, I shall read *Papers, Please* as a critical engagement with the basic concept of the geopolitical *border* as a material fact, as a site of conflict between liberal democracies' self-professed anti-exclusionary values and their pragmatic application of exclusionary practices at the border. In a second step, I will explore how the game's universalisation, or 'flattening,' of the in-game border – i.e. its lack of recognition that borders are social products resulting from *bordering* processes – ultimately renders it an untenably abstract portrayal, which in turn calls into the question the validity of the widely disseminated claim that *Papers, Please* is a roundly progressive border narrative.

Border(scape) Politics in Theory and Practice

Opening in November 1982, *Papers, Please* sees the player take charge of an unnamed protagonist starting a new job – the highly coveted position of immigration inspector at the East Grestin border checkpoint between the fictional Eastern Bloc nations of Kolechia and Arstotzka. The latter, which is also the player-character's home country, has recently ended its long-standing military hostilities with Kolechia and is starting to readmit immigration applicants, albeit warily, if not outright reluctantly. The gameplay is dedicated to managing the influx of Kolechians, Imporians, Republians, Antegrians, Obristanians, United Federation citizens, as well as Arstotzkans wishing to return to their native home. In more concrete terms, this means leafing through stacks of paperwork, official communication, and labyrinthine protocol to ascertain whether the person standing in the cramped checkpoint booth is who they claim to be and is in possession of the necessary documentation. This task is complicated by a steady increase in the complexity of admission regulations – caused by terrorist attacks, foreign agents gaining legal entrance, shifts in state policy, and extraordinary events in foreign nations – as well as the protagonist's struggle to process enough applicants over the course of a day in order to be able to afford rent, food, heating, and medication for their family upon returning home in the evening.

On the surface, *Papers, Please* indeed dramatises the fundamentally paradoxical, ethically problematic nature of enforced geopolitical borders, as shall be explored in more detail in the next section. This contested status of borders is an area of debate that is of particular import in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath, because, as Anton A. Kireev writes in his chapter on the state border in a 2015 introductory volume on Border Studies he co-edited, this historical moment ushered in a new era of state borders: "only at the end of the twentieth century," Kireev contends, "has the world in general become a system of sovereign, i.e. at least formally independent nation-states" (99), in contrast to the prevalence of satellite, vassal, and puppet states prior to the fall of the Soviet Union and the bipartite order of competing global superpowers. In this new era of nation-statehood, borders are often a prominent site of conflict between the self-professed 'liberal-humanist values' of many immigrant-receiving countries, such as the United States or European Union member states, and their more utilitarian and exclusionary impulses and traditions, according to which the restriction of immigration and the rigid hierarchisation of citizens and non-citizens may seem like political and economic

necessities. As Jennifer Bickham Mendez and Nancy A. Naples write in their introduction to *Border Politics: Social Movements, Collective Identities, and Globalization*: "Liberal conceptualizations of citizenship and human rights are founded on a concept of universal personhood equated with an autonomous, property-owning individual who acts within a masculinized public sphere and is assumed to be both male and heterosexual" (18). In other words, critical border discourse challenges the 'Minority World's' application of the Enlightenment values that allegedly underpin its politics, as it lays bare the normative logic inscribed in even the most emphatically egalitarian liberal democracy.[1]

There is, then, an ideological contradiction at the heart of the geopolitical *border* as a material fact, just as there is a contradiction at the heart of the very concept of a demarcating boundary. To invoke Yuri M. Lotman's seminal work on the topic, 1990's *Universe of the Mind*, "The notion of boundary is an ambivalent one: it both separates and unifies. It is always the boundary of something and so belongs to both frontier cultures" (136). Borders are barriers as well as bridges between distinct but inextricable spaces. By way of example, one could point to the fact that the United States and Mexico, in a sense, both 'begin' and 'stop' at the Rio Grande, or at the border checkpoints between the neighbouring cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. The separation has significant legal, political, and social ramifications, ranging from currency and public signage to legal drinking age, police jurisdiction, and, not least, immigration requirements. Yet the influence of either semiotic space is not subject to the same kind of limitation: 'Mexican' (or 'Chihuahuan') and 'American' (or 'Texan') culture clash, blend, evolve, and potentially converge at the border that notionally keeps them apart. As will become clear later on, *Papers, Please* does not consider this attribute to a great extent, thus calling into question its own applicability to ongoing border discourses.

Thus, the cultural phenomenon of the border relies on much more than the mere presence of a geopolitical demarcation, as it is, in the words of Henk van Houtum and Stephen F. Wolfe, "an imagined-and-lived-reality" (132). Borders may be a physical reality, but they are also discursively produced – through "contingent, ongoing processes with dimensions stretching beyond the geopolitical boundary line" (Nyman and Schimanski 5). They are, in keeping with Lotman's models of semiotic space and the semiosphere (see 125), predicated on a shared understanding on

[1] 'Minority World' is used as a less loaded synonym for 'Global North' here. For a succinct discussion of this terminological issue, see Marc Silver's 2015 article.

what differentiates 'here' from 'there,' on "a shared truth" (van Houtum and Wolfe 132). This necessitates an expansion of the concept of the border from the proverbial 'line in the sand' into the more multidimensional image of the *borderscape*, which encompasses the liminal spaces adjoining the line as well. Many terms have been coined in order to give expression to this reality of interactional border-drawing (see Nyman and Schimanski 5), with the most salient and useful one, especially to the discussion at hand, being that of *bordering*: illustrating the dynamism at play in the borderscape (see Newman 172), it describes "a continual space-fixing process" that, through social and cultural practice, keeps a border intact and discursively meaningful (van Houtum and Wolfe 132). This expanded definition, too, contrasts with Pope's game, whose dramatisation of a hard border, as I shall illustrate in due course, does not entertain the possibility of an overlapping Arstotzkan-Kolechian borderscape culture.

It must be noted that, being a work of art, *Papers, Please* of course does not have an obligation to accurately reflect contemporary geopolitics in this way. Its rather simplistic notion of borders is nevertheless noteworthy because, as a work of art, it also plays an active role in the bordering process, in suffusing the border space with cultural meaning, in creating so-called *border imaginaries* that ultimately help shape the popular understanding of borders and border-crossings (see Schimanski and Wolfe 150). After all, as Wolfe and Mireille Rosello argue, "The social and institutional practices that manage (inter)national and regional borders involve or rely on cultural productions" (6): the reality of the border(scape) influences the art that thematises the border(scape), which in turn produces a warped collective 'knowledge' of what the border(scape) is and what happens there – a knowledge that eventually finds its way back to the border(scape) in the form of political and social practice. "The signifying practices of the border," Rosello and Wolfe contend, "are not created passively or all at once but take place over time and are often over-written and reinterpreted by creator and audience alike" (6). *Papers, Please*, then, is embedded within a larger process of meaning-making that is significant on the level of both aesthetics and politics, as border policy, particularly in liberal democracies, is subject to public sentiment and popular notions widely accepted as true.

Thus, what I hope to demonstrate in the following is that Pope's ludic framework is very much cognisant of the contradiction at the heart of liberal-democratic border policy – that the *border* as a material reality is effectively antithetical to the Minority World's supposedly anti-exclusionary ideology. However, *Papers, Please*, as a work that contributes to ex-

isting *border imaginaries*, is content to leave it at that: its border is a 'line in the sand,' a barrier to be crossed or bounced off of, rather than a result of *bordering* processes – rather than a membrane that both separates and connects, that brings into being a borderscape that is marked by overlap, interconnectedness, and liminality.

The Physical Border as an Ethical Dilemma

With the help of Bickham Mendez and Naples, I have already outlined how the concept of the enforced border effectively highlights a conflict at the heart of liberal notions of statehood and citizenship. Indeed, Pope's game does recreate this tension between liberalism in theory and practice, between hard borders as an ethical problem and a stabilising force ensuring the continued cohesion of the state. Although Arstotzka is an ostensibly totalitarian, stereotypically 'dystopian' setting – the specifics of which will be under discussion later – its draconian border regime is not depicted as being entirely frivolous. On the one hand, in the context of the narrative, Arstotzka appears to be a desirable enough migrant destination, judging from the never-shortening queue in front of the inspector's booth and the steady stream of would-be immigrants brandishing work permits. On the other hand, the checkpoint also becomes the site of multiple terrorist attacks over the course of the game, committed by people the player-character has carefully vetted and assiduously processed only moments before. This reflects the ethical grey area that is the geopolitical border: because of the protagonist's limited viewpoint as an expendable cog in the vast Arstotzkan state machine, "[p]layers never know whether an action is 'good' or 'evil' or what long-term consequences their choices might have," thus finding themselves unable to make informed, 'morally right' decisions. "A player might commiserate with an innocent-looking man who begs to enter the country to visit a dying mother only to learn afterward that the man was a murderer" (Sicart, "Ethics" 151). If one accepts the reality, severity, and urgency of such dangers – dangers that play a significant part in the narrative progression of *Papers, Please* – one might even be inclined to accept the increasingly arcane paperwork requirements, and perhaps even the intrusive full-body scanner, the tranquilliser gun, or the sniper rifle introduced at later points in the story, as adequate preventive procedures. Indeed, because one does not have access to a more encompassing view of the political situation in and around Arstotzka, let alone any means of gaining further insight into the history

or psychology of the people one processes, one has little choice but to acquiesce to the demands of one's unseen superiors.

At the same time, however, it is difficult not to draw parallels between Arstotzka tightening its immigration controls in response to a violent incident at the border and the overzealous, often at least latently racist border-policing measures taken by the United States and many European countries after the traumatic attacks of 9/11 in the U.S., 11M in Madrid, and 7/7 in London (see Bickham Mendez and Naples 8). In part, this occurs through the game's re-enactment of the somewhat paradoxical evolution of borders in the age of digital connectedness and globalised economic structures. Bickham Mendez and Naples point out that "[g]lobalization has involved integration and interconnection, but also fragmentation and particularization" (7); so "the 'debordering' of economies coexists with 'rebordering' in the form of the reenforcement of racial-ethnic boundaries and the reterritorialization of nation-states through newly configured forms of governmentality, national security initiatives, and intensified surveillance of populations" (8). In *Papers, Please*, this is reflected in the opening of the Arstotzkan economy to migrant workers from formerly hostile territories and the simultaneous deployment of drastic, nationality-based efforts to protect the border and the state from undesirable interlopers – efforts which the player-character is very much at the centre of.

More specifically, however, Pope's game also dramatises the process of dehumanisation at work in the media landscape, political rhetoric, and targeted exclusionary border policy of the War on Terror era. Following the real-world terrorist attacks mentioned above, "ethnic minorities associated with Islam in most Western countries […] experienced increased negative attention from the media, police and security forces, and indeed from agitated citizenry" (Poynting and Perry 151). In the United States, from where Lucas Pope hails, this climate of fear was used to legitimise not only the weakening of certain civil rights, particularly those of Muslims (see Alsultany 162), but also the Iraq War, whose justification was famously predicated on exceedingly dubious intelligence (see Kessler par. 13). The Arstotzkan equivalent to this phenomenon in public discourse is the way in which the game's protagonist receives information about the world they inhabit and try to survive in. Harking back to Pope's 2012 browser game *The Republia Times*, in which players take on the role of a newspaper editor who must manipulate news stories in an authoritarian government's favour, *Papers, Please* prominently features newspaper headlines conveying 'the official version' of events happening at the border and elsewhere. It is here that attacks are framed as terrorist acts com-

mitted by foreigners working for hostile powers. It is here that the Arstotzkan economy is characterised as a booming marvel attracting workers from all over the geopolitical region. It is here that one learns that certain neighbouring countries' public infrastructures appear to be failing, that foreign governments are insidiously staging economic blockades, that "Kolechians are crazy." Given the dystopian atmosphere of the game, this 'official version' naturally invites scepticism regarding the veracity of such reports. Yet, players ultimately have little choice but to modify their actions in accordance with this framing of the world, as the game's incentive structure "trains players to dehumanize the travellers they process" (Formosa et al. 215), to behave as the xenophobic state media demands, to replace notions of individuality and nuanced differentiation with a flattened-out belief in collective guilt by (national) association.

Breaching admission protocol either inadvertently or deliberately, such as by denying entry to a 'deserving' person or approving an immigration application in spite of missing or faulty paperwork, results in written warnings. If one bends the rules too many times in a day, one is subject to financial penalties. Should the offences accumulate beyond an acceptable point, the player-character is dismissed and arrested, which ends the game prematurely. In addition, because one is paid daily, based on the number of applicants processed on a given day, and because part of the playing challenge is to efficiently invest one's sparse, usually insufficient income in rent, food, heating, and medication according to the protagonist's family's needs, the game effectively asks the player to privilege quick, decisive, robotically precise action over pondering the nuances and ramifications of individual decisions. As a result, the more one succeeds in mentally reducing applicants to dehumanised clusters of analysable data hiding potentially incriminating details, the more one is rewarded by the game.

Through this knowing incentivisation of dehumanising migrants, as well as through its depiction of the border as a site of conflict between 'liberal-humanist values' and normative liberal notions of statehood and citizenship, it becomes clear that *Papers, Please* explicitly operates in the delicate liminal space that is the policed geopolitical border after the fall of the Iron Curtain. By making terrorist attacks by (ostensibly) foreign agitators a key feature of the game's narrative progression, Pope acknowledges that, at least in certain contexts, there may be a case for enforced national boundaries as an instrument of safeguarding a nation-state's stability. However, because this acknowledgment is set against a signally

dystopian backdrop, players are also encouraged to question the ethics of such measures; just as they are invited to be doubtful about the accuracy of the state-sanctioned information they are given – even though they must ultimately still follow it in order to successfully play the game.[2] In short, the implied 'ideal' player of *Papers, Please* – most likely a person in their 20s or 30s, living in an immigrant-receiving country in the Minority World – is constantly challenged to square their own 'liberal-humanist values' with the oppressive demands and needs of the Arstotzkan border. They are confronted with the moral dilemma of navigating the line between (possibly) necessity-driven governance and dictatorial government overreach, between illegal moral principle (such as helping 'undeserving' immigration applicants) and legal cruelty (such as making use of the sniper rifle), between wanting to 'do good' and ensuring the protagonist's own personal and familial survival.

The Abstracted Border

Aside from this engagement with the border as a geographic and political fact, however, the game's feasibility as a reflection of contemporary border issues is much more limited, as Pope conceives of the border(scape) as little more than a line of demarcation, rather than as a dynamic, interactionally produced space. Indeed, beyond these theoretical, broadly philosophical invocations of the ethical dilemmas and moral quandaries associated with the post-Cold War border, *Papers, Please* is not a particularly helpful lens through which to view border discourse in the twenty-first century. In part, this is due to the fictionalised period setting, which, in trying unsuccessfully to circumnavigate ideological specificity, maybe somewhat inadvertently presents outdated geopolitical realities. In a 2014 interview with *VG247*'s Johnny Cullen, Pope outlined one of the fundamental concerns of his vision of Arstotzka and its Eastern Bloc-inspired environs:

> [T]he game never ever uses the word "comrade." When I hired people to localize the game, I gave them specific instructions not to use the word "comrade" or its translated equivalent. That's because, to me, it's richer

[2] *Papers, Please* admittedly does not lock the player in the role of authoritarian collaborator, as one of the game's 20 possible endings is the successful overthrow of the Arstotzkan regime at the hands of the shadowy EZIC organisation, whom the player can aid (or hinder) in their subversive efforts.

> that it's not specifically anything. If you use the word comrade, it's obviously Soviet Russian people talking. And to me, that would have hurt it a bit. (Pope, qtd. in Cullen par. 41)

The problem with such protestations is that the attempt at universalising the East Grestin border checkpoint between Arstotzka and Kolechia ultimately falls short, because the game nevertheless seems to recall the rather stereotypical portrayals of 'Communist Russia' that abounded in Cold War–era American popular culture and have persisted in one way or another even after the fall of the Soviet Union.

This is already visible in the game's very premise, as both the wintry 1980s setting and the fact that the protagonist is given the immigration inspector's job through the "October labor lottery" evoke popular 'Soviet' images from the Western imaginary – from the allegedly anti-meritocratic Communist ethos to the perennially frozen 'Mother Russia,' glimpsed in Audre Lorde's "Notes from a Trip to Russia" (see 17) and Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky IV* alike. *Papers, Please*'s general aesthetics follow suit: the title card features blocky letters in a mock-brutalist style, with the capital *E*s looking like reversed *3*s and the capital *S*s looking like reversed *Z*s, which calls to mind the long-standing Western practice of using letter reversals and 'false friend' homoglyphs to create Faux Cyrillic typography in an attempt to mimic Russian (see Caudle 123). Similarly, the labour lottery logo, which appears at the start of the game, depicts the black silhouette of a hand clutching a hammer against a red-and-orange background – an image rife with socialist connotations: the nod to the hammer-and-sickle symbol and the use of red and a darkish shade of yellow echo a number of Communist-era state flags, both past (U.S.S.R., People's Republic of the Congo) and present (China, Vietnam, Angola). Finally, both the level design and accompanying music appear to be strongly influenced by popular vistas of Russia during the Cold War. The game's synthesised main theme, a military marching track identified as the Arstotzkan national anthem, mixes monotonous drum beats (which are actually generated by bass saxhorns) with pizzicato strings that are reminiscent of the emblematic sound of the balalaika, resulting in a soundscape that is eminently comparable to previous iterations of 'Soviet' music, encountered in media texts as diverse as John McTiernan's 1990 spy thriller *The Hunt for Red October* (Basil Poledouris, "Hymn to Red October") and the 1993 *Simpsons* episode "Krusty Gets Kancelled" and its brief spoof of Eastern European animation, entitled "Worker and Parasite." Meanwhile, the view from inside the inspector's booth, where the vast majority of the game takes place, consists of the protagonist's own desk,

which is strewn with papers and equipped with official stamps, tapping into clichés concerning Communist bureaucracies; the processing space, which is dominated by shades of brown and dingy linoleum green, evoking the image of cheap, 'depressing' Eastern Bloc building practices; as well as a bird's-eye view of the East Grestin border checkpoint: located in the upper third of the game's main level screen, the scene is one of brutalist dilapidation, all cracked grey concrete and faded chalk marks, while outside the inspector's booth, there is a never-shortening line of black-silhouetted immigration applicants, seemingly mirroring the infamously iconic breadlines generally associated with the failure of Communist states' planned economies (see Burns par. 8).

Considering these aspects of *Papers, Please*, Pope's decision to excise the word "comrade" from the game ultimately does very little to dissuade people from reading the setting as "Soviet Russian," calling into doubt his claim that the game takes place in an anonymised geo-historical vacuum. Indeed, the game is still very much rooted in a historical period of border discourse, one which predates what Kireev identifies as the point at which sovereign nation-statehood became the global norm. The borders of the Eastern Bloc – even the fiercely contested one imagined by Pope, which does not seem to have the equivalent of a Warsaw Pact in place – are not those between the U.S. and Mexico, between Turkey and Syria, between the European Union and European non-member states, to name just a few of the geopolitical fault lines that constitute the thematic backdrop to *Papers, Please*. There are no hybrid cultures, no cross-border identities, no visible practices of bordering other than the political and militaristic land claims expressed by totalitarian Arstotzka's central command. The setting of Pope's game is, in short, largely divorced from the laws and mechanisms of global interconnectedness and globalised economic flows, which are foundational to twenty-first-century border politics. The world into which *Papers, Please* was released was, and is, one of transnational movements and hybrid identities, of hyper-mobile populations crossing comparatively permeable borders, of labour being one of the most economically and demographically significant export goods – a world where immigrant-receiving countries "contend with a set of irreconcilable issues stemming from the growing demand for inexpensive labor combined with the perceived threat that new immigrants pose to the social and cultural cohesion of nations, fueling contests over political identities and social membership" (Bickham Mendez and Naples 6).

Although *Papers, Please* invokes this latter conflict at least in theory, as has been discussed previously, the border between Arstotzka and Kole-

chia, which is historically situated yet presented as a quasi-universal abstraction, is missing many of the key sites of human conflict associated with modern discourses of bordering processes, border-crossings, and (im)migration. As Kireev writes, "Like many other social systems, state borders exist not only at the level of explicit, public and documented manifestations, but in an informal latent level" (103). Bickham Mendez and Naples use even more concrete terms: "the militarization and policing of borders is interwoven with and reinforces hierarchies of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and race" (13). In some marginal cases, Pope's game toys with this idea: for example, at one point, the player-character has the option to subject a person named Sonya Hawk, who is presenting as a woman in terms of name, clothing, and hairstyle, to a full-body scan because her sex is given as male on her passport. Doing so shows that, in the logic of the game's abstract style of displaying naked bodies, Sonya Hawk has a penis, revealing that she is, evidently, transgender.

Elsewhere, the way in which policed borders reinforce hierarchies of class – and, in addition, the classification of neurodivergent people as fundamentally undesirable individuals – is illustrated through a recurring character identified as Jorji Costava. A bumbling would-be con man in his 50s, whose status as a comic relief character is underscored by his being named after the doltish *Seinfeld* character George Costanza, Jorji makes his first appearance on the protagonist's third day of work: entering the inspector's booth without any documentation, he claims, "Arstotzka so great, passport not required," before leaving when asked any further questions. In the following, he intermittently returns, first holding a cheap imitation passport he has obviously drawn himself, then holding a seemingly valid passport but lacking an additional entry permit, and later trying to smuggle contraband into Arstotzka. In spite of all the rejection and legal punishment his stunts lead to, however, he remains a vocal supporter of the Arstotzkan regime, regularly uttering phrases like, "Glory to Arstotzka!" or "Arstotzka the best." While this enthusiasm is certainly to be taken with a grain of salt, given that Jorji seems to be trying everything to ingratiate himself to the player-character, his crudely naïve, consistently optimistic attempts at crossing the border do suggest that there is at least a degree of sincerity to his protestations. And yet, for all his eagerness, he is thwarted by the border system: not only does he appear to have no legal means of obtaining the proper documentation, possibly as a result of his confused mental state; he, unlike other immigration hopefuls one encounters, also makes no attempt to bribe the protagonist before his eventual successful entry, suggesting that he lacks the financial means to

do so. When he finally does manage to scrape together all the necessary paperwork to cross the border into Arstotzka, on the eleventh day of in-game time, the feat is revealed to be of a financial nature: "Look at all good papers," he proudly tells the player-character. "Was not easy. Or cheap! Haha!" Promises of patriotic loyalty did not do the trick for Jorji, and his unconventional behaviour seems to have actively held him back in his quest to immigrate. Only after he invokes the power of money, rising above his class, so to speak, does he gain the right to traverse the policed border.

However, by virtue of being set in an imagined, broadly stereotypical Eastern Europe of the 1980s, *Papers, Please* is also devoid of two essential discursive fields relating to current debates about migration and (re)bordering – religion and race. Bickham Mendez and Naples point out that global migration patterns in the 2010s have prompted an American, a European, and also an Australian "backlash against multiculturalism and the perceived cultural, economic, and social threat posed by international migration," as well as a predominantly Western European trend of even mainstream right-of-centre political parties pursuing "anti-Islam and closed-border platforms" (8). Pope's game, conversely, does not mention religion at all, as the practice is presumably outlawed in authoritarian Arstotzka and its similarly Communist-coded neighbour states. Moreover, in keeping with its stylised setting, *Papers, Please* also reduces 'ethnic' differences to differences in fictional nationalities: the most important signifier of otherness is whether an immigration applicant hails from Kolechia, the formerly hostile regime to the north and west of Arstotzka. Kolechian travellers are, for the most part of the game, subject to the most intrusive, most dehumanising of checks; more so than those with passports issued in Obristan, Antegria, Republia, Impor, or the United Federation; and significantly more so than those with Arstotzkan papers (at least initially). After the protagonist's first day on the job, where only Arstotzkan applicants with acceptable documentation are allowed to enter the country, the country gradually opens its gates to more and more immigrants. But following a suicide bombing on the sixth day, committed by a Kolechian entrant with valid papers, all Kolechians are henceforth required to undergo a body search. On day 19, however, even this distinction is flattened out somewhat as, at the beginning of that day, the daily briefing bulletin instructs the player-character to deny entry to all Imporian applicants – an Arstotzkan act of retaliation against the trade sanctions introduced by the government of Impor. In the end, this system of internally coherent, citizenship-based privilege breaks down entirely: first, fol-

lowing the temporary barring of Imporian entrants, citizens of the United Federation are also kept from crossing the border due to a polio outbreak in the Federation on day 25. Not long after, on day 28, the situation escalates into outright police state totalitarianism, when the protagonist is instructed to confiscate all Arstotzkan passports, signalling measures to stop cross-border movements altogether, no matter the applicant's nationality or direction of travel. Differences in fictional nationality, then, are highly significant to the world and gameplay of *Papers, Please*, but they are also, as has been demonstrated, anything but stable indicators of privilege.

Moreover, since there are no distinctive and consistent visual cues separating said nationalities, apart from the mildly differing design of the official documentation applicants pass over the inspection booth counter, it is virtually impossible for the game to activate racial or xenophobic biases in the real-world player's decision-making. The characters the protagonist interacts with are, without fail, presented in a style that recalls generic animated depictions of white people, with most of them, regardless of fictional nationality, being given stereotypically 'Eastern European' clothes or hairstyles, and some government officials' character design recalling popular images of military officers from Imperial or Nazi Germany. Likewise, skin colour, to the extent that it is even a noteworthy presence in the game, has no connection to individuals' places of origin, let alone the material reality outside of Pope's game world: generated randomly, people's skins are animated in stylised hues of blue, yellow, green, and beige. In short, skin colour is simply not a factor in *Papers, Please*. This stands in stark contrast to public discourses of migration and bordering processes, where racially motivated xenophobia is effectively ubiquitous: one does not have to look further than the numerous white nationalism-adjacent statements from long-term Republican Congressman Steve King, some of which predate the release of Pope's game (see Ta); former U.S. President Donald Trump's infamous take on "shithole countries" (Vitali et al. par. 1); or the many examples of European politicians and government officials making use of racist anti-immigrant rhetoric (see Marlowe par. 2; de La Baume par. 3; Falkenbach 88). Functionally excising questions of race and ethnicity in a discursive context such as this seems a curious omission on the part of a game concerned with the ethics of immigration policy and practice. Indeed, it points to *Papers, Please* being a more suitable contribution to the canon of philosophical games – defined by Lars Konzack as games that "express and present philosophical ideas in a game system" (34) – than to that of contemporary migration and border narratives.

In light of this apparent unsuitability, it is pertinent to consider why *Papers, Please* has garnered such thematic attention in the first place. Its success in dramatising some of the ethical concerns underlying the concept of policed geopolitical borders means that it may well "change your attitude the next time you're in line at the airport," as Simon Parkin would have it. However, the attempt to interpret this success as an indication that the game also functions as an intricate commentary on twenty-first-century border issues is undercut by Pope's failure to sufficiently disentangle *Papers, Please* from its aesthetic and thematic Cold War trappings. Indeed, the game displays an outdated, even somewhat limited understanding of the constitution and (tenuous) fixation of borders – one that is situated in a historical context that, following Kireev, predates the current mechanisms governing geopolitical boundaries. As a result of this simplistic view, which pays no mind to the cultural and political productivity of cross-border contacts, or to the active bordering processes occurring in the borderscape, *Papers, Please* inadvertently promotes an exclusionary view of the border, buying into the constrictive cultural imaginary of it as a fixed 'line in the sand' separating 'here' and 'there,' 'us' and 'them.' Considering this, it seems highly notable that the game has nonetheless garnered a reputation for being a key border and migration text of the 2010s, in spite of its relative lack of engagement with and specificity regarding contemporary border and migration discourses. Indeed, the fact that it has inspired such enthusiastic responses may speak to an altogether different impulse on the part of its audience, or at least the commentariat. In framing a heavily abstracted, severely pared-down depiction of a fictionalised border as a way of understanding the dynamics at play at, say, the U.S.–Mexico border in the mid-2010s, one engages in an awkward but perhaps soothingly cathartic act of simplification, in the fortification of a self-exonerating liberal border imaginary: to deem *Papers, Please* a searing reckoning with present-day border politics is to naïvely assume that current debates surrounding immigration are ultimately a question of ethical theory rather than socio-political practice.

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