

RESEARCH

Ethical Self-Reflection in *Papers, Please*

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This article argues that multiple endings and narrative memory within interactive narratives can engender ethical self-reflection in relationship with broader discourses surrounding controversial issues. It introduces the term 'expressed self' to describe this process. The expressed self is how an interactive text 'sees' the player – through either their alignment, faction favour, flags, etc – and is used to generate a personalised response to the player through their unlocked ending. This concept is then applied to a close analysis of *Papers, Please* by juxtaposing the 'Antegrian Husband and Wife' choice with the 'Snowier Pastures' ending. The manner in which this process takes place has implications for the ways in which videogames and interactive narratives engage with open literacy.

Keywords: Interactive Narrative; Multiple Endings; Player Choice; Expressed Self; Branching Narratives; Alignment; Open Literacy

Introduction

Lucas Pope's border-control simulator *Papers, Please* (2013) was released shortly after a United Nation's paper titled *Displacement: The New 21st Century Challenge* (UNHCR, 2013) which declared that the number of internationally displaced people on earth had reached a 20-year high. As an interactive narrative with multiple endings, *Papers, Please* interfaces with public discourses surrounding refugees, border control and asylum in ways that have implications for the role that 'open literacy' plays in the realm of videogame narratives. It encourages the player to offer their own answer to the question: how do we respond to border control? – and then offers them a nuanced takedown of that response. It does this not just at the end of the experience, but by keeping track of the player's long-term behaviour. In doing so it interfaces with broader cultural discussions by directly interacting with a player's long-term unconscious and instinctive responses to moral dilemmas.

This article analyses *Papers, Please* through the *expressed self*. The expressed self is a new term that describes the process whereby choices made by players in an interactive narrative are saved – either as alignment, flags, character favour, etc. – resulting in a rough proxy of the player that the interactive text can see and respond to. *Papers, Please* is one of the best examples of a choice-driven game in which the player's choices are accumulated into an expressed self which is then responded to in a way that exists independently of any objective 'win' or 'lose' conditions. This article particularly focuses on the 'Antegrian Husband and Wife' event, contrasting that with the 'Snowier Pastures' ending, showing how the two are thematically connected. It will then tie this analysis back to a broader discussion regarding open literacy and how these games can interface with larger discussions.

On its release, *Papers, Please* received widespread critical acclaim, including a 2014 BAFTA award (BAFTA awards database, 2014), and The New Yorker's 'Best Game of 2013' (Parkin, 2013). As an *ad hoc* explanation for its commercial and critical success, games journalists quickly gave it the label of 'empathy game'. A particularly strong example of this labelling can be found in Patrick Begley's piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled "'Empathy gaming" focuses on emotions and moral decisions' (2014), which situates *Papers, Please* as part of an 'emerging category of...computer games' that 'can be used to discuss awkward, even painful subjects.' The flurry of conversation and fixation on 'empathy' came at a cost – critics and commentators failed to identify how *Papers, Please* actually went about generating empathy beyond a surface-level observation of its 'moral dilemmas'. In 2016 games journalists such as Minoff (2016) and Ibister (2016) would go on to compare the game to *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015) as constituting another example of an empathy game. *Her*

Story has the player peruse police footage of a detective interviewing a woman suspected of murder – and plays out similarly to a hypertext novel. Although both games do involve empathy, this comparison fails to account for the unique approach that *Papers, Please* takes towards generating empathy. Subsequent ‘empathy’ games such as *Her Story*, *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), while trying to live up to the example of ‘empathy’ set by *Papers, Please*, have all failed to reach its commercial and critical success. In all cases a focus upon ‘empathy’ in *Papers, Please* has come about without a deep understanding of the ludic and narrative structure that generated it to begin with. If games culture wants a repeat of this game’s success, then it needs to be understood on more than a thematic level. This article aims to do exactly that, examining how the game’s reflective choices give rise to an expressed self that the game then goes on to critique, forcing the player to move past a simple understanding of narrative themes and into a personal reflection on their own (in)humanity.

In *Papers, Please* the player takes on the role of a border control officer in the fictitious totalitarian nation of Arstotzka. Each day the player must try to process as many would be entrants as possible, while following a byzantine number of rules and regulations. They can declare that each person is either accepted or denied with a stamp. Allowing people through with mistakes in their paperwork tends to lead to ‘citations’ – monetary penalties. The player is not paid enough to provide for their family – and so the game’s narrative presents them with many opportunities to engage in petty corruption, bribery, treason, or bureaucratic disdain for the many incoming visitors in order to survive. Interspersed among the entrants are individuals with stories. While most entrants are a simple game of the player reading their documentation, these entrants have a unique dialogue and trigger special events. An example of one such story is a husband who enters with the correct paperwork, only to be followed by his eager wife who has a minor error on her paperwork. Opportunities such as this provide a fictional opportunity for the player to do the ‘right’ thing – without any apparent ludic rewards. *Papers, Please* has 20 endings – three of which are ‘good’ endings while the rest are ‘game over’ states that encourage the player to try again. Each of the good endings elicits self-reflection on the part of the player, with the ‘Snowier Pastures’ ending in particular communicating to players the impact of their moral complicity. The three ‘good’ endings of *Papers, Please* are as follows:

- The first involves completing ‘missions’ for a mysterious group called EZIC, which intends to overthrow Arstotzka’s authoritarian government by destroying the border checkpoint that the player guards. The first ending requires that the player commits treason by finishing at least 4 of EZIC’s 5 possible missions. The uncertainty and danger of aiding EZIC forms part of a player’s moral trade off – they are told repeatedly that they are under close investigation, and the player witnesses constant terror attacks against the border that they are guarding. To serve EZIC is to break the law for an uncertain end result.
- The second involves fleeing Arstotzka using forged papers. The second ending requires drone-like obedience from the player. The player must embody the ‘banality of evil’ – doing what is necessary and as a result becoming complicit in the inherent inhumanity of the border control system.
- The third involves simply surviving to the end of the game as an obedient border control officer. The third ending requires the player to save up large sums of money. The only way they can do that is to repeatedly turn away many applicants who have sympathetic and personal reasons for passing through the checkpoint but false or incomplete paperwork. They also need to engage in extensive corruption – for which the game provides the player with many opportunities. It is this third ‘good’ ending – which ends in the player and their family fleeing their country as refugees – that particularly encapsulates the notion of an authorial response to the expressed self.

This article invokes Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ and Max Weber’s notion of ‘rational authority’ in its description of *Papers, Please*. The phrase ‘banality of evil’ appears in Arendt’s book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964). In it she documents the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, a major organizer of the Holocaust. She argues that Eichmann’s evil did not come from psychopathy or monstrous malice but that instead he was an ordinary man who followed orders. This ties in with sociologist Max Weber’s notion of rational authority and the iron cage. These concepts refer to the way in which politics is organised in modern bureaucracies as regimented and regulated processes, which ensure that each individual agent enforces the policies of the bureaucracy consistently and rationally without recourse to personal morality or individual preference. Jason Morrisette (2017) creates a connection between Weber and *Papers, Please*. He argues that the game is essentially about the conflict between rationally applying the law and acting with impartial compassion. However, like much of game’s culture’s discussion sur-

rounding *Papers, Please*, Morrisette largely confines his analysis to the surface-level moral dilemmas of the game. *Papers, Please* goes further in its exploration of the 'iron cage' by placing players in a broader position, similar to many contemporary border-control officers in the contemporary West. Zygmunt Bauman (1989) argues that the same rational authority that efficient modern governance relies upon is just as capable of impersonally and efficiently carrying out mass atrocities. This is fundamentally what *Papers, Please* explores – the moral status of the individual in a system of rational authority, and whether or not they choose to become a bureaucrat.

Continental philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser depict power as something that creates subjects – by loyally following the rules of the Weberian iron cage players become a bureaucrat. As such the use of the expressed self in *Papers, Please* becomes a very real, literally coded depiction of the player coming into being, being 'gilded' by the iron cage and becoming a subject that the game is pressuring them to become. It is worth noting that each of the three 'good' endings represents a different form of subjectification. The player who chooses to follow the orders of the game's anti-authoritarian terrorist group EZIC, for example, is not so much rebelling against a bureaucratic system as becoming a 'good terrorist' and embedding themselves within an alternative organisation. None of this makes the expressed self, interactivity, Foucault and Althusser's observed process of subjectification or even rational authority 'bad' per se. Much in the same way that modern governments can utilise rational authority towards positive ends, *Papers, Please* itself is using these tools to achieve a positive effect. In this instance, it is to discover how players when placed within a rational bureaucracy attempt to express themselves and find agency within that situation. It then uses the same tools that it is critiquing, i.e. standardising the player through a set of rules, in order to launch a personalised response in the form of a player-tailored ending.

Papers, Please exemplifies the use of a response to an expressed self. The response is particularly relevant to understanding the game. This concept will be illuminated by contrasting the 'Antegrian Husband and Wife' event with the 'Snowier Pastures' ending. 'Snowier Pastures' does not just present the player with their expressed self, but it comments upon it. Even more uniquely, the player feels judged on a narrative level even while the ending is presented as a ludic victory. This shows how the response is distinct from a ludic win/lose condition. The player still 'wins', but they do not escape criticism from the game's implied developer.

Thus we can discuss two openly conflicting elements of *Papers, Please*: its semiotic overlay and ludic mechanics. The semiotic overlay of the game has two primary components: the first is its visual architecture and the second is its textual dialogue. Developer Lucas Pope has set *Papers, Please* in the dreary world of his earlier game *The Republica Times* (2012). In this world, a series of authoritarian nation states vie for supremacy in a fraught web of constant warfare and diplomatic unease. The art, style and mood of these states, particularly that of the player's home nation Arstotzka, are all designed to evoke the imagery of twentieth century authoritarian regimes such as the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Allusions to these regimes are numerous, including:

1. The phonetic similarity of the name "Arstotzka" to the word "Aristocracy" – indicating a society based on class hierarchy;
2. The use of a 'labor lottery' to allocate work is reminiscent of the centrally planned economy of the Soviet Union (**Figure 1**);
3. The eagle logo emblazoned upon the passports of Arstotzka citizens bears a strong visual resemblance to the Reichsadler eagle herald of the German Nazi regime (**Figure 2**);
4. The phrase 'Obistan above all', uttered at the end of the 'Snowier Pastures' ending is strongly evocative of the Nazi slogan 'Deutschland über alles';
5. The symbol of a hammer displayed during the Arstotzkan lottery is reminiscent of the Soviet hammer and sickle emblem.

Such examples are pervasive and litter the environment of the game. They directly indicate to the player that they are living and working as part of an authoritarian regime. When asked in an interview about the authoritarian imagery of the game, Lucas Pope replied that he tried to evoke an authoritarian society based on a 'collection of tropes' and that 'I worked pretty hard to make it so it wasn't specifically anything.' He went on to note that when instructing translators, he advises them never to use the word 'comrade' to avoid any explicit connection with communism. He justifies this by stating that 'to me, it's richer that it's not specifically anything' and that 'I wanted to show that in politics, all sides of any kind of issue have some justification. There's not just the good guys and the bad guys – even the bad guys have some justification for why

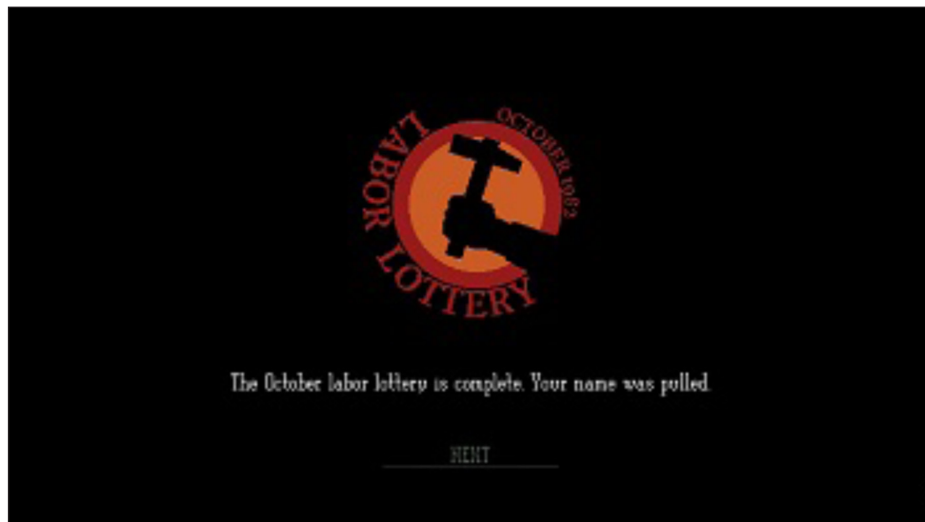


Figure 1: “The October Lottery” (Source: Papers, Please).

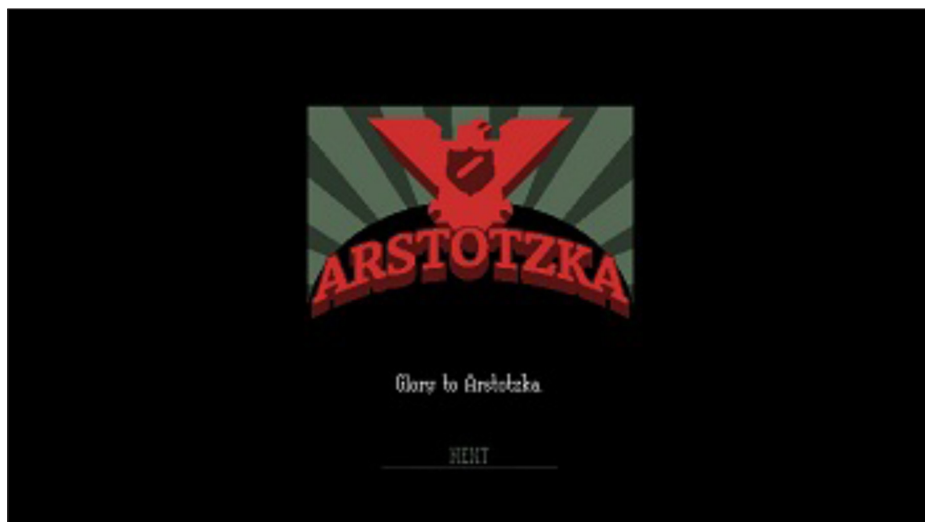


Figure 2: “Glory to Arstotzka” (Source: Papers, Please).

they want to do something’ (Cullen, 2014). As such, the visual imagery of the game immediately informs the player of the type of society in which they are complicit by playing off of a ‘collection of tropes’ that exist in the collective unconscious as a result of the history of twentieth-century authoritarianism.

Although Pope cautions against viewing the regime in simplistic binary terms, the legacy of authoritarianism in the west flavours the visual architecture of *Papers, Please*, and indicates to the player that their side is not necessarily the right one, nor is what they are doing necessarily ethical or justified. The dialogue of the game feeds into the bleak atmosphere, with applicants pleading with the player as their claims are variously rejected or accepted.

This all clashes with the ludic world of the game, which encourages a cold approach to processing the applicants so that the player can acquire enough money to feed their children and to achieve one of the game’s three ‘good’ endings. The events of the game present the player with a sequence of reflective choices. These choices then create a body of accumulated memory. *Papers, Please* utilizes this body by responding to it and making it a subject of criticism. This occurs in a particularly poignant manner during the ‘Snowier Pastures’ ending, and understanding the expressed self is a key element of how that ending delivers its critique of the player’s behaviour.

The Expressed Self

The term ‘expressed self’ is new, although similar ideas have been explored in prior game studies literature. These include Miguel Sicart’s ‘second self’ (Sicart, 2009), Grant Tavinor’s ‘fictive self’ (Tavinor, 2009), Marie-Laure Ryan’s notion of ‘narrative memory’ informing the outcome of endings in interactive narra-

tive (Ryan, 2015), and Barry Atkin's observation that accumulated memory allows a machine to 'see' a user (Atkins, 2013). A similar idea can also be found in the field of software studies, that of Estee Beck's 'invisible digital identity' (Beck, 2016).

This literature regarding selfhood in games emerged partly as a response to the 'narrative paradox'. The narrative paradox is the conflict that exists between narrative and interactivity within a game. Narrative demands a level of linearity in order to produce a tight narrative arc; interactivity demands the expansion of different paths (Muckherjee, 2015, pp. 1–9). This problem can be thematically linked to the 'combinatorial explosion' often seen in traditional branching-path texts. The exponential proliferation of different pathways requires ever-greater effort on the part of the author, making a wholly non-linear interactive narrative impractical due to time and effort constraints (Ryan, p. 15). In response to this issue, many academics placed a special priority on the player avatar, and specifically the avatar as a player-centric phenomenological experience. Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) singles out what she calls the Flowchart as the 'best way to reconcile a reasonably dramatic narrative with some degree of interactivity' (2015: 171). The Flowchart is built around small episodes that branch out, then to re-join at a single node. Choices and decisions are saved in the memory of the text, whether through changes to the avatar or by turning on flags. This 'narrative memory' then influences the outcome of later episodes and dictates the final ending that the player can access. Ryan explains that this 'use of memory makes it possible to include nontrivial choices at every stage in the story and to make the end dependent on the middle (2015: 172). The Flowchart design is most commonly used in story-heavy computer roleplaying games, with the avatar being used to track player choices. It is also the way in which the narrative of *Papers, Please* is structured. Grant Tavinor (2009) explores a similar concept with his notion of the fictive self. The fictive self becomes the locus of meaning for players as they make choices. Different narrative events beget choices, which are then saved as changes at the level of the avatar. The cumulative changes to the player avatar then create an image – Tavinor's fictive self – of events tying the avatar together to become the player's personal 'narrative' that emerges from their experiences (2009: 122–3). Finally, Sicart's own notion of 'the second self' is explored (Sicart, 2011). His 'second self' is about the hermeneutic relationship that exists between the player and their 'second self', which is the subject that emerges within the game as an internal power-relationship. He uses the language of Foucault to articulate this, stating that 'Power creates subjects, and so games create players' and that 'Games create subjectivities because they operate as power structures' (2011: 68–9). What unites this research is a focus on the 'avatar' as both a central locus of meaning in the fusion of gameplay and narrative and as a solution to the narrative paradox.

This research also goes beyond the literal avatar that one may gaze at visually as they play a game, and instead observes the emergence of a second ludic subject with its own distinct unifying narrative. While most of this research focuses on the hermeneutic circle between the player and their ludic subject, the expressed self builds upon this research by situating the expressed self as a phenomenological experience of Ryan's 'narrative memory', something that is not only understood by the player as a product of their self-expression, but is also something that is utilised by games as a rough proxy by which they can 'see' the player, and respond to them personally and directly. Thus, the expressed self is an actualisation of Barry Atkin's (2003) observation, that the 'essential characteristic of what is termed interactivity in relation to the computer game is that it must watch the reader (2003: 146).

A similar concept called the 'invisible digital identity' (IDI) has also been coined in the field of software studies (Beck, 2016). The IDI refers to the user of a social media platform, or search engine, as seen and constructed by that platform (2006: 125–128). It contrasts with the Visible Digital Identity (VDI), which refers to a user's carefully constructed and curated digital identity (2006: 126). If the VDI refers to a user's LinkedIn profile, Instagram pictures, and Twitter posts, then the IDI refers to the unseen and hidden variables used by various algorithms to construct an image of that user. This image can then be responded to in a variety of ways, such as through tailored newsfeeds, search engine results, and advertising. The context and set of circumstances that the IDI describes differs from the literary gaming context that the expressed self as a term is designed to analyse. Because of this, fully adopting the IDI to a study of literary gaming goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth observing that the notion of a 'self' as constructed out of a user's/player's interactions, before being processed by algorithms (whether simple or complex) and providing tailor-made content to a user/player is a phenomenon that is not exclusive to game narratives, and parallels similar trends within broader digital media. The expressed self therefore takes these broad, cross-disciplinary understandings of constructed digital selves, and synthesises it into a way that can be applied to the study of interactive narratives.

It is through the expressed self that an interactive text can see the player, and an example of this can be found in Choose Your Own Adventure-style gamebooks and branching novels. In a branching novel,

there exists a textual footpath of choices and the path made by the reader as they navigate the story. Such map views are characteristic even of 1st-generation hypertext. An example of this can be seen on the web-site *Writing.com* where interactive e-novels have a 'Story Outline' function that allows users to view each branching e-novel from a top-down view and to navigate directly to a different section. Each location in each e-novel is marked by the choices needing to be made in order to reach that section – effectively a textual coordinate system. For example: "1" is the first lexia; "1-1" is the lexia that follows once you have chosen the first option on the first page; "1-2-3-3" is reached by first choosing the second option on lexia one, then the third option, then the third option after that. The significance of the expressed self in the eyes of the text's implied author is that it gives them a rough image of who the reader is. For example, lexia "1-2-2" might be only reachable through constant deceit, as such the implied author can respond by punishing the reader for their deceptive behaviour. **Figure 3** shows an example from a story titled 'Mystical Forest' (2008).

There exist a few different ways in which an expressed self can be manifested to the player. An expressed self can be *instantiated* within the outcome of the narrative; it can be *presented* to the player at the end of the process with no commentary; or it can be *metaphorical*. An instantiated expressed self is what occurs in *Papers, Please*. It involves a literal body of flags, numerical values and code being generated to create an image of the player, which then not only determines the outcome of the game's narrative but also infuses that outcome with a veiled commentary on the player's behaviour. An expressed self becomes instantiated when the text's accumulated memory of the chooser ultimately determines the final outcome of the text.

Conversely, it is common for games such as *Firewatch* or Pippin Barr's *The Trolley Problem* (2011) simply to take the player's expressed self and show it to them directly without any response – these are a *presented* form of the expressed self. Barr's game is an unusually direct example of this phenomenon. In it, the player must respond to a variety of different 'trolley problem' thought experiments. At the end, the player is presented with a summary of how they responded to each Trolley Problem with no judgement or commentary on the part of the game. Miguel Sicart (2013) commends this approach, arguing that the game 'presents ethical gameplay not in choices but in how these choices are interpreted', and that players 'are left alone with their choice to make sense of them and what they say about them. They are left alone with their principles' (2013: 7). This is a good example of a *presented* expressed self in play, lacking any sort of strong authorial pushback or commentary but nonetheless providing the player with something upon which to reflect.

A *metaphorical* expressed self is particularly common in games such as *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) and *Mass Effect 3*. Here the ending is determined by a single choice made at the end of the experience.



Figure 3: "Mystical Forest" (Source: Writing.com).

This choice functions as a representation of the player's overall reply to the broad themes of the game. Through this, the ending that follows can perform as a response to the player's broad understanding and reaction to these themes. Although the endings of a game like *Deus Ex* do not serve as a response to the player's instantiated expressed self – as they do not involve narrative memory – they do serve as a response to their personal emotional response to the game's themes. That is, they employ the expressed self in a strictly metaphorical sense, attempting to replicate what a game such as *Papers, Please* achieves, but without the burden of having to personalize the ending using narrative memory. Although marginally effective, the response generated by this model erases the significance of prior choices made by the player, generating a perception that the player lacked any real agency in the process. In addition, the response generated by this model does not carry the weight that it would otherwise have in a game with an instantiated expressed self as it is constructed using only a bare minimum of player feedback. The metaphorical expressed self lies at the heart of the outrage that game culture was expressing towards *Mass Effect 3* and *The Walking Dead*. *Papers, Please*, in contrast, successfully generates a sense of agency by delivering endings which do not just respond to the player's understanding of the game's themes, but to their actual in-game behaviour via their instantiated expressed self. It is for this reason that *Papers, Please* generates not only a sense of agency, but also a response that more directly critiques the player's in-game behaviour.

A possible criticism of the expressed self as a term is that players do not necessarily choose their authentic selves. Because of this, there is a limit to the extent that a response to the expressed self can be read as a response to the 'player', which may be as fictive as the game. Players make choices for any number of reasons, such as pure escapism, narrative exploration or power-play. Although it's true that there isn't a perfect equivalence between a player and their expressed self, and that the response that a game can provide to an expressed self will not perfectly match a response that could be delivered to a real life player, players *do* often choose in a way that is informed by their real-world habits and values. Studies in player expression in games show that the avatar often serves as a 'reflection' for the player. Nicholas Taylor, Chris Kampe and Kristina Bell's in-depth study of player behaviour in Telltale Game's *The Walking Dead* (2015) is an empirical study that conducts its analysis with the understanding that the avatar is a reflection of the self 'viewed voyeuristically' and that 'game avatars are seen as externalized representations of our anxieties and desires'. They note that players, when articulating their choices, simultaneously move between identifying with their avatar and distancing themselves from it. Amanda Lange's empirical study (2014) similarly employs a large dataset to uncover how players engage with good/evil alignment systems in video games. Her conclusion is that 'Gamers are most interested in exploring a character whose moral choices closely match to their own' (2014: 1). Ferchaud and Oliver (2019) expand upon this finding, where they conclude that players not only prefer to play characters who match their moral compass, but that when they do so they begin to refer to their avatar with first person pronouns ('I did this'). Players often engage in identification with their avatars to such an extent that they expand their sense of self so as to include them, a finding that emerges from (Slater et al., 2014). These data indicate that players more often than not *do* choose as their authentic selves, and that when they do so that they personally identify with the avatar that enacts those choices. Although the relationship between the player and the expressed self that emerges through their choices in *Papers, Please* is not perfectly equivalent, the expressed self that does emerge can reasonably be taken to be a rough proxy of the player (unless deliberate fictionalizing tactics are used by the player). Literary reception theorist Wolfgang Iser observes how a 'text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with' (1980: 107). Yet the expressed self enables an interactive text to do *exactly* that. The notion of an 'implied reader' has played a large part in reader response theory, and represents a limitation to the ways in which a text can specify its target audience. An author does not know who precisely is going to read their work; however, they can target a generalised audience in the hope that the work will connect with them. The expressed self bypasses this concern and opens up a space for literary games to be able to create narrower subsets of 'implied readers', albeit via an imprecise proxy. The expressed self therefore represents a unique interactive affordance which can more precisely narrow down who the player is, what their values are, and in turn provide that player with a response that speaks to the player more directly than would be possible in a linear narrative. If an author of a non-interactive book can challenge the assumptions of an 'implied reader' in a specific cultural context, without knowing who the reader is, then it follows that interactivity can be used to deliver more pointed responses to a player who is actively feeding a game information about their instincts, habits and values. This framework applies particularly well to *Papers, Please*, and this is the dynamic that emerges when the 'Antegrian Husband and Wife' choice is juxtaposed with the 'Snowier Pastures' ending.

Reflective Choice – Antegrian Husband and Wife

Interspersed among the stream of applicants presenting at Arstotzka's strict border are specific characters whose detailed backstories provide the player with acute moral choices. These events often provide the player with a reason why they should let the applicant through the border, even if there are flaws in their paperwork. There are other examples, such as those involving corruption. But the primary focus of most events is to provide the player with choices in which they must choose between the ludic demands of *Papers, Please* – where they reject, imprison and humiliate applicants in order to earn money – and the narrative overlay, which elicits sympathy and respect for the applicants. The 'Antegrian husband and wife' event of the game is a particularly strong example of the conflict between the ludic and narrative elements of *Papers, Please*. This specific event, and many others like it, signal a pattern of behaviour to the game. This pattern allows the game to craft an expressed self of the player to which it can then respond in one of the game's three 'good' endings.

The semiotic side of this event is primarily expressed through dialogue, with visuals being less significant. This event ties in thematically with the 'Snowier Pastures' ending that will be explored later. Here, however, the player is in a position where they can deny entry to a refugee family based on faulty paperwork. In 'Snowier Pastures' the roles are reversed and the player instead becomes the refugee with a family in tow and flawed paperwork. As such this event/ending dyad presents both sides of the citizen/refugee divide, a divide that dominated the debates surrounding migration during the development phase of *Papers, Please*.

The event is straightforward. A man passes through the checkpoint with correct paperwork. He mentions that he is 'free from Antegrian tyranny' and asks the player to 'be kind to my wife, she is just after me'. The wife arrives immediately afterwards, but has incorrect paperwork. While the player peruses her paperwork, she asks 'Did you see my husband? He made it through, yes?' When the player interrogates her over her lack of an 'entry permit', she pleads, saying 'Please, I beg you. They would not give me permit. I have no choice. I will be killed if I return to Antegria.' (Figure 4).



Figure 4: "Antegrian Wife" (Source: *Papers, Please*).

At this point it is worth explaining the way that finance and currency work in *Papers, Please*, in order to understand whence the moral ambiguity of this event arises. The player is paid a small amount of money for each applicant processed. Admitting applicants with incorrect paperwork can result in financial penalties and future negative narrative consequences. At the end of each day, the player must manage their family's finances, choosing how much money to spend on necessities such as Food, Heat and Medicine. The player's legal income is insufficient to cover these necessities. Failing to care for your family or to cover financial debts can lead to 'bad' endings where the player fails and must restart from the last day to try again. As such, the game encourages what might be called 'evil' choices, immoral behaviours that go against a player's moral intuitions. By choosing to allow the wife through, the player risks losing income that could be used to pay for basic needs. The event serves as what Sicart would describe as a Wicked Problem (2013: 105–106), providing the player with a clash of priorities between aiding a stranger and feeding their family.

In this event – as with many others like it – the game's moral and ludic demands clash. The narrative overlay prompts sympathy on the part of the player. The characters are refugees fleeing death, with practical reasons for their incorrect paperwork. Pleading requests such as 'be kind to my wife' and 'Please, I beg you' place a moral onus upon the player, making them complicit not only in the refugees' ability to cross over into Arstotzka, but also in their continued survival beyond this short interaction. Sicart (2013) provides one of the possible elements of a Wicked Problem as presenting an ethical gameplay dilemma which has 'some solutions that make the procedural and semantic levels collide, suggesting no optimal strategies that have emotional, cultural, and contextual value' (2013: 105–106). In this case there exists a direct clash between the 'semantic' and the 'procedural'. The 'procedural' level requires the player to adopt the cold logic of border control bureaucracy, whereas the 'semantic' level engenders sympathy and a refusal to engage in the cruel elements of their job. To behave coldly towards the fleeing Antegrian couple is but one of many possible actions the player can take throughout the game. If they repeatedly behave in this manner it creates an image of the player – a cruel yet lawful bureaucrat who is willing to do anything to survive. It is this expressed self to which the game responds when the player unlocks the 'Snowier Pastures' ending.

Response to the Expressed self

In order to unlock the 'Snowier Pastures' ending at the game's conclusion, the player must amass a large amount of credits.¹ In order to do this, they must manifest not only a coldness towards characters such as the Antegrian couple, but also engage in petty corruption and bribery. Finally, towards the end of the game the player must illegally confiscate the passports of applicants from the nation of Obristan, which they may then pay to have altered so that the player may escape with their family. The 'Snowier Pastures' ending takes the player's role from the 'Antegrian husband and wife' event directly and reverses it. In doing so the player is forced to consider the hypocrisy of their actions. The name of the ending itself reflects its dual nature – it is both a 'good' ending and a representation of ludic success, and yet it is simultaneously a critique of the player's moral behaviour and an example of a response in action.

After fulfilling the requisite goals to unlock this ending, the player and their family board a train to Obristan with forged passports. They are provided with an image of an Obristan border security guard standing behind his security booth – a mirrored reversal of the normal position of power that the player occupied throughout the game. Now the player is the one who is vulnerable, with a story of seeking refuge from danger and bearing forged documentation. The ending sequence then provides the player with the following exposition overlaid with still images as they attempt to cross the border into Obristan.

You board the late train to the Northern Territories. It is nearly empty. You pay for the hastily forged passports and re-entry tickets. They look terrible. You reach the border crossing at dawn. The line is immense. Six hours later (at the Obristan border).

[Inspector] your documents.

Here

[Inspector] Are you entering alone?

¹ When played on the popular gaming platform "Steam", this ending provides an achievement called "Snowier Pastures". As such I have named this ending after the corresponding achievement.

No, my family as well

[Inspector] Hand over all documents now.

We come to visit relatives.

[Inspector] I do not care why you come. Wait here. (the shutters close)

**KACHUNK* (the sound a stamp makes; repeated once for each family member; the shutters open after a short pause)*

[Inspector] Welcome to Obristan. Next!

Obristan above all

The image of the guard watching the player from an elevated position behind a desk labelled “OBRISTAN IMMIGRATION” is an ironic mirroring of the player’s own former position as a powerful and callous border security guard (**Figure 7**). Much of the scene’s dialogue and exposition is designed to elicit retrospective empathy for the many travellers that the player had turned away. The image of an ‘immense line’ (**Figure 5**) merges with the large throng of people the player needs to process during gameplay. The exposition, dialogue and process of passing the Obristan border – handing over documents (forged), providing an explanation (a lie), waiting for the guard to return as they process the documentation – are all designed to mimic the unbearable tension and anxiety that applicants at the player’s own border had to endure as the player applied the same mechanistic process to them (**Figure 6**). ‘I do not care why you come. Wait here’ echoes the cold and disinterested approach that the player must have taken to reach this ending and reflects it back at them, albeit with a positive outcome. This is the game responding not only to the last few choices that the



Figure 5: “Immense Line” (Source: Papers, Please).

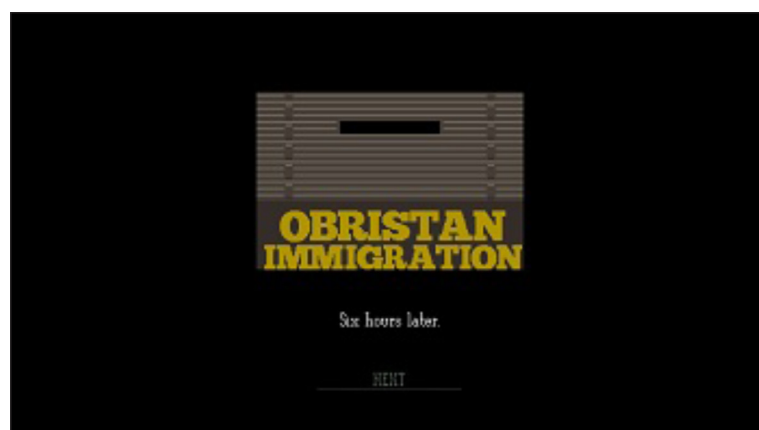


Figure 6: “Six hours later” (Source: Papers, Please).



Figure 7: “Obristan Immigration” (Source: Papers, Please).

player made at the end of the game but to the collected body of accumulated choices made by the player during all of their experience as a border control guard. *Papers, Please* taunts the ‘successful’ player in its final moments, reminding the player of their own abject cruelty.

It is particularly important that the player succeeds and passes through this checkpoint. If the player had been rejected, then players could simply rationalize that this was a ‘bad’ ending and then go back to try another. By allowing the player through, the game provides them with a particularly resonant clash between semiotic and ludic dimensions. The ending plays a specific Victory tune as they pass through the border, which is markedly upbeat and celebratory. The ending is also a reward for good gameplay, including completing objectives, not making mistakes, gaining rewards. Yet, the power reversal presented by the situation reflects the player’s own hypocrisy back at them. The player has treated the many applicants to the Arstotzka border with one standard, and has subsequently expected, and received, a different one from the Obristan guard. Through this, the player’s expressed self forms the foil, while the naïve yet accepting Obristan guard acts as an unconventional exemplar with their (potentially deliberate) incompetence allowing the player to survive an otherwise inhuman and byzantine system of borders and checkpoints.

The name of the ending itself, ‘Snowier Pastures’, reflects its dual nature as both a ludic victory condition and an authorial pushback against the player. The ending’s name is a play on the common expression ‘the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence’: a foreign land or new environment that is ‘greener’ or better than the old. While ‘greener’ indicates the warmth of spring, ‘snowier’ indicates coldness and callousness. ‘Snowier Pastures’ reminds the player of the phrase it evokes – a new environment. Yet at the same time the allusion to the cold reflects the player’s own moral nature, a cold-hearted Eichmannesque bureaucrat. The ending’s name, then, calls to mind both its status as a ludic victory – a new environment discovered as a result of the player’s mastery of the game’s mechanics – as well as its demonstration of a moral failing, with the game criticising the player’s moral coldness. The ‘fence’ in the original expression is also worth noting, offering a hidden allusion to the many borders and barriers within the *Papers, Please* setting.

The ‘Snowier Pastures’ ending challenges the player directly, responding to the accumulated body of their choices. The specificity of this reaction, and the ways in which this ending reverses the player’s position of power while exposing their own moral bankruptcy, is a personalized reaction that can only take place amidst a ludic system that can save and systematize the player’s overall behaviour. This contrasts with simply showing the player their body (e.g. as displayed by Telltale’s ‘survey screen’ at the end of each of their episodes) or disciplining it (as done by a Choose Your Own Adventure novel that punishes bad choices with a bad ending). The game instead says something, not to an implied player, but to an actual, individualized player, as seen through their expressed self. This is a unique form of expression, and one that can elicit self-reflection on the part of the real player in a way that cannot be achieved in a non-interactive narrative.

Conclusion

It is significant that interactive narrative, multiple endings, branching pathways and narrative memory systems are being used by a game to interface with larger discussions surrounding migration, refugee rights and border control. Although the game appears to take a largely pro-refugee position, it is worth noting that the other side is also given credence. For example, there are events where the player must use their border cross-

ing to catch international criminals. All of the endings criticise the player to some extent. Here *Papers, Please* works to add ambiguity to the player's pre-existing biases regarding border control, without fully attacking their beliefs. While it is important to look at the discourses surrounding border control surrounding current issues like the US-Mexico border crisis, it is also worthwhile to see how these discourses are informed by and in some instances are a product of various media forms that try to sway, influence and frame these discussions. In doing so *Papers, Please* serves as an example of Open Literacy, emerging through the medium of interactive narrative in a way that tries to enhance and complicate the player's beliefs surrounding topical and controversial conversations taking place in their broader cultural context.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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