

**“Papers, Please”: transpositions between the real and the imaginary of  
refugee communities**

**“Papers, Please”: transposições entre o real e o imaginário de  
comunidades de refugiados**

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**Abstract.** This article investigates how the game “Papers, Please” moves between the real and the imaginary in representing the experiences of refugees and immigrants. The analysis focuses on how the game, through its mechanics and narrative, simulates complex moral dilemmas and choices that reflect the challenges faced by real-life individuals when dealing with border control systems. “Papers, Please” puts the player in the position of an immigration officer who must make difficult decisions, exercising value judgments that affect the lives of the game's characters. This study examines how these choices force players to confront questions of ethics and morality, proposing a critical reflection on the role of digital games in education, mainly in simulating sociopolitical situations and understanding human rights dilemmas.

**Keywords:** Education; Refugees; Video game; Simulation.

**Resumo.** Este artigo investiga como o jogo “Papers, Please” transita entre o real e o imaginário na representação das experiências de refugiados e imigrantes. A análise se concentra em como o jogo, através de suas mecânicas e narrativa, simula dilemas e escolhas morais complexas que refletem os desafios enfrentados por indivíduos na vida real ao lidarem com sistemas de controle de fronteiras. “Papers, Please” coloca o jogador na posição de um oficial de imigração que deve tomar decisões difíceis, exercendo julgamentos de valor que afetam a vida dos personagens do jogo. Este estudo examina como essas escolhas forçam os jogadores a confrontar questões de ética e moralidade, propondo uma reflexão crítica sobre o papel dos jogos digitais na educação, sobretudo na simulação de situações sociopolíticas e na compreensão de dilemas de direitos humanos.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação; Refugiados; Video game; Simulação.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, digital games have become more than simply a means of entertainment, occupying new and diverse spaces in people's lives. This means that their influence has

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reached other environments, including education, and they have become an essential tool for understanding, exploring, and reflecting on different contents and subjects from early childhood to higher education.

From this perspective, its potential can and should be used for purposes other than fun, and in the same way, it can go beyond educational digital games. There is a lot to be explored and experimented with games, especially in virtual worlds where mistakes and successes bring equal benefits, and it is safe to test, reflect, and be critical of personal choices.

Considering this potential, using digital games that reflect or address current contexts brings reality into the classroom, allowing students to participate in a simulation of what is happening worldwide. In this way, the real and the imaginary intersect and transpose, facilitating the understanding of varied themes and the development of other fundamental skills, such as empathy and critical literacy.

Beyond computer screens and occupying a very real space in society's day-to-day life, one of the topics in vogue is the issue of immigrants and refugees. Due to wars and conflicts, for example, the movement of people to other countries is significant, to the point where the total number of international immigrants has reached 281 million by 2023 (IOM, 2023). This fact makes it essential to work on issues of empathy, solidarity, and relocation of these people, especially because many countries are receiving new immigrants daily and need to adapt to those who are integrating into the new society.

Based on this premise, digital games can be an efficient solution to help understand transnational movements and a tool for developing soft and hard skills for nationals and immigrants. More specifically, games like "Papers, Please" can promote an effective rationalization of the immigration movement worldwide, allowing students, as players, to experience the conflicts, dilemmas, and questions that come with this transition.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze how the game "Papers, Please" moves between the real and the imaginary, highlighting how the game mechanics and narrative impose moral choices and value judgments that reflect the dilemmas of immigration and refuge in real life. The investigation seeks to understand how the game can be used in the educational space through qualitative exploratory research based on the 2013 game.

By exploring the simulation of these experiences in a game environment, this article aims to contribute to understanding how digital games can serve as tools to educate and raise awareness among players and students about immigration, human rights, and the complexity of dilemmas faced by refugees.

## **Refugees and Games: A Possible Intersection**

Before understanding the role of digital games and the analysis of "Papers, Please" as an educational tool, it is necessary to know that this article is based on the recurrent and significant displacement of people worldwide, resulting in a large movement of immigrants and refugees.

At the time of writing this article, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is still ongoing, as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine over the occupation of the Gaza Strip, among other unreported or less visible conflicts. They are an incentive to legitimize research that helps teachers and researchers think of ways to treat the subject with the required sensitivity and criticality, especially in countries receiving large migratory flows.

Therefore, defining the concept of "refugee" is essential before delving into the discussion and analysis of the game as a tool. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023), a refugee is a person persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or who belongs to a specific social group or political opinion and is outside the country of their nationality, unable or unwilling to ask for the protection in their country of origin. In parallel, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) classifies a person as a refugee when they have been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence.

Although the two definitions used here are recent, dating from 2023, the reference to refugees is not new. It is also found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), which, although it does not have a direct definition of the term, already indicates that "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" in its article 14. One of the legacies of the Second World War was also a robust migratory movement, which is reflected in the writing of this document.

Based on these definitions, according to IOM, more than 281 million people live outside their home countries as immigrants, while UNHCR reports that around 35.3 million people are classified as refugees due to conflict and persecution (IOM, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). These numbers highlight the phenomenon's scale and the urgency of a deep understanding of the challenges these populations face.

Therefore, discussing this displacement within the classroom becomes essential. Not just because it is a reality happening around the world but because there is the possibility that new students are immigrants and refugees, and students must be prepared to understand and recognize the value of empathy, solidarity, and compassion with those who have ended up integrating a new society.

However, this dialogue can extend beyond written texts and textbooks, which usually fill classroom time. For critical and meaningful learning to take place, it is necessary to go further – seeking new voices and new ways of telling these same stories, enabling students to find safe spaces to experience being in the shoes of those going through this challenge (Freire, 2019; hooks, 1994). From a Freirean perspective (2019), this is an opportunity to put the "oppressor" in the place of the "oppressed" and experience reality.

### **But why video games?**

Among the text options that can be used to encourage a possible discussion about the reconfiguration of society due to the integration of immigrants and refugees, technological modes, such as games, hyperlinks, and interactive videos, are an option that allows agency and critical practice by part of the students.

Games, in particular, offer a dynamic and interactive medium that can complement the reading of traditional texts and the analysis of teaching materials. They allow students to explore and experiment with complex and diverse narratives in a controlled environment, simulating realities that may be difficult to replicate in the classroom.

Games can be powerful tools for facilitating empathy and deep understanding. They allow students to "live" the experiences of displacement, immigration, and integration. In this way, they promote critical and meaningful learning as they actively involve students in reflecting on and interpreting the situations faced by these often marginalized communities (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2011).

It is indisputable that working with games requires a critical process of curating digital material. This is especially true considering that different genres of games may not be suitable for the moment or misrepresent immigrants (Bogost, 2007; Nakamura, 2008). This requires a prior discussion on the use of media to propagate and perpetuate stereotypes. Therefore, it is worth considering which games best fit this proposal significantly because even though games are highly controversial within the research world, this could be improved by "a deeper understanding of [...] how these processes are at the core of many effects games can have" (Gentile & Gentile, 2021, p. 3).

As the idea is to discuss and encourage contact with another reality – different from that experienced daily – narrative and simulation games can help students develop empathy by putting themselves in the shoes of characters who face challenges related to immigration and refuge (Bogost, 2007; Gee, 2007; Squire, 2011). These genres encourage critical reflection on complex topics, facilitating deeper understanding through practice and interaction so that learning is more meaningful than simply reading a text with sentimental appeal.

For instance, narrative games tell a story from a perspective that is explored by the player (Bogost, 2011). This means that any and all stories can be told, even those that do not have space in the mainstream (McGonigal, 2011). These games allow marginalized voices or less conventional experiences to be presented innovatively, providing a more comprehensive understanding of diverse realities and narratives.

Accordingly, simulation games are a safe space to explore dynamics, choices, decisions, and dilemmas (Squire, 2011). These characteristics make it essential for players (and students, in the case of this article) to occupy other roles and participate in a transgression of what is expected within society's standards.

From a psychological standpoint, this idea of a safe space in video games corroborates with Gentile and Gentile (2021), who state

This is the power of video games – to affect your thoughts, physiology, and feelings. This is, of course, what makes them fun. We get to feel and experience things we wouldn't or couldn't in our "real" lives. Knowing it's a game does not mean it doesn't influence us – in fact, we *want* to be influenced! If we play a game (or watch a movie or a show) and it doesn't affect us, we call it "boring." [...] This taught me that the distinction many people make between virtual and real is much more apparent than actual. (pp. 2-3)

This psychological perspective encourages work with narrative and simulation games to develop not only logical and critical skills, for example, but also soft skills, which lack a greater connection with the sentimental side (Gentile & Gentile, 2021). The point is not to harden students' understanding but to make them more flexible through empathy, compassion, and solidarity.

### **Empathy games**

Both narrative and simulation games have educational titles. However, commercial games have some advantages over those published for educational purposes: a significant increase in engagement and motivation on the part of players or students (Gee, 2003), authentic and more complex experiences that require criticality (Squire, 2011), and the exploration of social issues in an immersive environment designed for it (Isbister, 2016).

Another significant factor in choosing commercial games for educational use is based on the idea that educational games are often used similarly to textbooks. Its use is restricted to moments of teaching-learning or reinforcement of specific content. On the other hand, using a commercial game without an explicit pedagogical guide requires teachers and students to think outside traditional and expected patterns, awakening deeper and more genuine emotions and reactions. Nevertheless, it is more than just understanding what happens to immigrants and refugees. It is about living these experiences through different perspectives,

moving away from the commonplace in the discourse on equity and social justice, and approaching more critical and active practices (Bogost, 2007; Gee, 2003; McGonigal, 2011; Squire, 2011).

For these reasons, commercial games favor an experience based on social justice (Freire, 2019; hooks, 1994). The practice of freedom and social transformation through education presupposes students' awareness and critical education to act in favor of a more just and egalitarian society. Games that allow the simulation of experiences of marginalization and resistance can serve as powerful catalysts for this pedagogical practice.

A relevant subcategory within commercial digital games is empathy games. These games encourage empathy by putting players in the perspective of characters facing significant challenges. As defined by Belman and Flanagan (2010), empathy games engage players in interactive experiences that simulate diverse and often marginalized realities. There is an emotional and cognitive immersion towards the dilemmas and situations different social groups face.

Empathy games have the potential to establish an emotional connection with the player, helping to develop empathic skills that can be transferred to real life. McDonald et al. (2017) suggest that these games can be effective tools to educate about social justice and ethics, providing rich contexts for reflection and moral development (Freire, 2019; hooks, 1994).

Therefore, the discussion tool on immigrant and refugee issues chosen for this article is the commercial game "Papers, Please," developed by Lucas Pope. The game focuses on the complexities of border control and the immigrant experience by placing the player in the role of an immigration officer. There is a sequence of complex decision-making, balancing morality, laws, and personal survival.

"Papers, Please" is classified as a narrative and simulation game. However, many journalists and researchers in the field of video games (Begley, 2014; Campbell, 2013; Quinones, 2019) cite the game as part of the empathy games trend precisely because it challenges the player to put themselves in a new or unexpected situation.

Next, the methods used to analyze "Papers, Please" are detailed, focusing on how the game can be integrated into a curriculum to facilitate critical and meaningful discussions about immigration and refuge. The criteria for selecting the game, the methodology for analyzing the narratives, and how interaction in the game can be used to promote empathy and critical understanding among students will be discussed.

## Methods

The game chosen for analysis in this article is "Papers, Please," developed by Lucas Pope and released in 2013. Although the game is over ten years old, its context remains current: the player takes on the role of an immigration officer on the border of a fictional nation who must approve or reject people's entry into his country governed by a totalitarian regime and in constant war with neighboring countries.

As an immigration officer, the player must verify documents, listen to immigrants' stories and appeals, and make moral decisions that influence not only the lives of those seeking refuge but also their personal lives. These decisions simulate situations different people face in reality, reflecting contemporary social and political issues.

This is a considerably authentic simulation. Although the game features imaginary countries that speak languages that mix sounds familiar to German and Russian, possibly a reference to the great wars and the Eastern Bloc, there is a realistic recreation of ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguities. These characteristics force the player to make complex decisions requiring critical reflection in real and virtual spaces.

Considering the opportunity to use "Papers, Please" in an educational context, primarily due to its dealings with subjective and delicate themes, the analysis was conducted through qualitative exploratory research to investigate what potential the game presents within the educational scenario.

Exploratory research is fundamental in evaluating new learning objects, such as digital games, as it allows a preliminary understanding of their potential in educational contexts (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), even when not created for such a purpose. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), this approach allows the researcher to investigate new and dynamic phenomena, such as using games to promote empathy and critical understanding of immigration and refugee issues proposed in this article.

Furthermore, Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) emphasize that exploratory research is crucial for adapting and optimizing technologies in e-learning, in addition to digital learning objects. They emphasize their inherent flexibility and ability to fit the specific needs of the most varied educational contexts.

The exploratory research also reflects the issues of game choice, providing the opportunity to observe inappropriate or offensive characteristics within it. This type of research intends to investigate the phenomenon (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) and verify whether the content presented in "Papers, Please" perpetuates or favors stereotypes instead of questioning them or effectively encouraging the promotion of empathy. This importance is

based on what Gentile and Gentile (2021) discuss about how easy it is for a stereotype to become a prejudice since

[...] our actions depend on our thoughts and feelings, prejudice can easily become discrimination: behaviors that discriminate against a person or group because of their group membership. Video games have been studied far less than other media, but the early work seems to confirm that playing games can activate stereotypes and prejudice. (p. 13)

With this in mind, the "Papers, Please" analysis seeks to understand whether the game brings a stereotypical view and can still be used in an educational context. The point raised is its potential to open the discussion about immigrants and refugees. Even if it is a misrepresentation, these negative aspects could also be used to encourage critical reflections and practices in the classroom, using the stereotype to lead positive dialogues.

To evaluate the potential of the "Papers, Please" game as an educational tool to explore and promote critical understanding of issues related to immigration and refuge, the research followed the following analysis steps:

1. Play "Papers, Please" in multiple sessions to understand its mechanics, narrative, and moral decisions (Gee, 2003; Isbister, 2016; Squire, 2011);
2. Record the decisions made by the player (role played by the researcher), the stories of the immigrants, and the consequences within the game (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015);
3. Identify and analyze recurring themes in the game, such as ethics, moral dilemmas, and the power dynamics between the immigration officer and the immigrants (Gentile & Gentile, 2021);
4. Reflect on how these gaming experiences can relate to social justice and critical learning concepts (Freire, 2019; hooks, 1994).

The data collection instruments used were direct experimentation of the game and systematic recording of interactions, including dilemmas, choices, and consequences of actions. To triangulate the data, the experimentation and recording were contrasted and compared with the literature review to verify whether the observation is relevant to what the authors have established.

The following section presents the analysis of "Papers, Please," using the theoretical framework and steps described here to investigate the game's potential as an educational tool for critically understanding issues related to immigrants and refugees.



## Analysis: "Papers, Please" and education

"Papers, Please" begins in November 1982, when Grestin was divided into Grestin East, from communist Arstotzka, and Grestin West, from neighboring Kolechia. The division came after the end of a six-year war, and, according to the game, Arstotzka claimed its right to half of Grestin, implying that Kolechia possibly annexed the city at some point in the history between the two nations.

During the war between the two countries, the inhabitants were confined to the side where they lived. This fact is referenced during the game through interactions between the inhabitants and the player, who plays the role of an immigration officer, when explaining that they lived on one side and that now, at the end of the war, they can finally return to their families.

Although the situation between the two countries is still problematic and volatile, which is emphasized many times throughout the gameplay, the end of the war prompts the creation of a checkpoint to control the passage between the two nations and other neighboring countries. On November 23, 1982, precisely on the first day of the game, the immigration checkpoint opened, and the events began, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Newspaper presented to the player as the game begins.



Source: Pope, 2013.

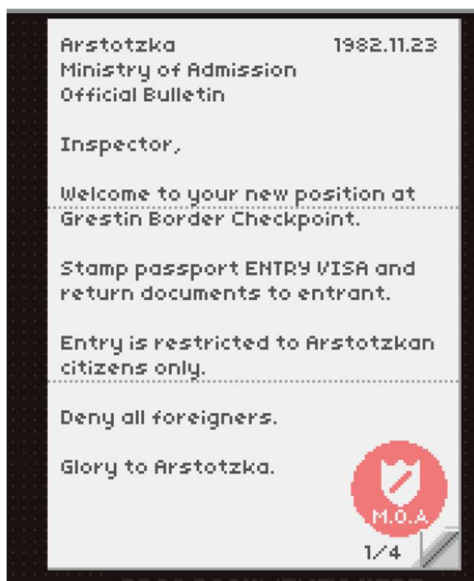
Before even getting into issues of immigration and refugees, only this overview of "Papers, Please" sets a precedent for a historical comparison with the end of World War II and the polarization of power. Just as happened with Berlin, when it was divided into West Berlin

(controlled by the Allies) and East Berlin (occupied by the Soviets), this event is replicated by the division of Grestin in the game.

Another fact reproduced in the game is the Berlin Wall, represented by immigration control in Arstotzka. As in Berlin, where the Berlin Wall has served as a physical, political, and ideological barrier between East and West Germany since 1961 (Harrison, 2003; Taylor, 2006), the checkpoint in Grestin symbolizes a rigid border that separates two ideologies and different lifestyles. The simulation is exacerbated by the ethical dilemmas players face when deciding whether to enter individuals, mirroring the challenges faced by officers and residents during the Cold War (Friedman, 2010).

The connection with immigrants and refugees occurs through different interactions. One of them is the instruction sent by Arstotzka's government, which releases or prevents people from entering the nation. Each day, a new instruction is sent, whether it is the need for extra documentation (such as a permit or a ticket) or entry permission only for the nation's citizens, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Government instructions are received by the player at the beginning of each day.



Source: Pope, 2013.

For example, the instruction presented in Figure 2 is received on the game's first day. As the checkpoint and truce between the two countries are recent, the player is instructed that only citizens can enter. The emphasis of this situation is on the phrase "deny all foreigners," even those seeking security.

As the days go by, the player, as a border officer, gets to know different people and their stories. There are people who arrive with documents seeking asylum. It is up to the player to verify the legitimacy of the documents and whether the visitor can enter the country or not. This is one of the moments when the player is placed in a difficult position, as asylum seekers often do not have all the necessary documents to enter or stay in the country. The decision to allow entry has consequences for the immigration officer, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Notification for letting someone who did not have the right or all documents in the country.



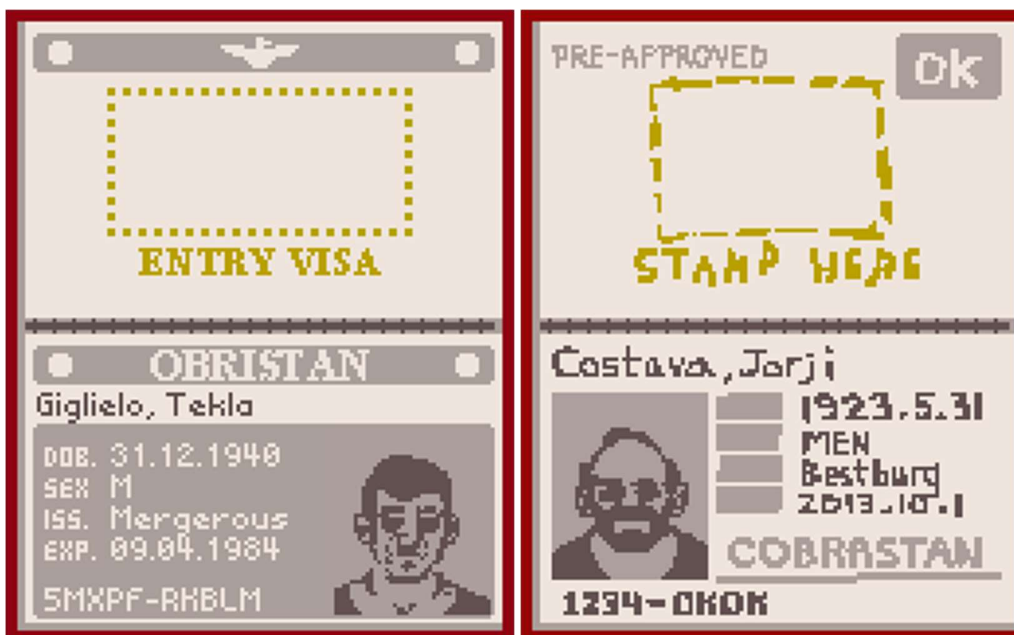
Source: Pope, 2013.

This notification in Figure 3 mentions credits, the game's currency. At the end of each day, the player must return home with his family and use the credits he has to pay the bills. If the player has negative credits, the game ends immediately, as the officer is in debt with the government, his employer.

It is important to understand this game mechanic. It is one of the reasons why moral decisions become difficult during gameplay. If the player helps someone needing refuge and protection, they may be impacted by the credit discount. This discount results in insufficient money to support their family, which implies health and quality of life issues for everyone. On the other hand, if the player allies with the government and prevents entry from those who need it but do not have all the documents, he begins to discover dark truths about his country and neighboring nations, which also has consequences for him and his family. This dichotomy encourages moral questioning and critical reflection on the player's role in this story.

Another example is when the player receives immigrants and refugees who falsify documents, as shown in Figure 4. As Koser (2011) mentions, in real life, document forgery occurs with a particular frequency in groups of refugees, especially those who are trying to move away from oppressive regimes or deplorable conditions.

**Figure 4.** Comparison of an official and a falsified document in-game.



Source: Pope, 2013.

Of course, there is a cartoonish factor to the forged passport, which gives the game a lighter mood. However, the story of the bearers of these false documents is sometimes complicated. This is a crucial point of critical reflection about what can and should be done, which tend to be completely different things within the game – not everything that the officer can do, such as allowing someone to enter with false documents because they sympathize with the story, must be done without consequences that are often rigorous.

This stems from another significant in-game event, how some characters briefly tell their stories to the immigration officer. It is up to him whether or not to accept these people, even those who have poorly prepared and clearly false documents, entering the country. This dilemma is critical to the discussion about the legitimacy and security of immigration processes, especially with a view to the survival of relocated immigrants and refugees.

Empathy is reinforced in moments when the job of an immigration officer requires the player to learn more about the stories of separated families and tragedies that plague those who request entry to Arstotzka. Characters share their personal stories and motivations for crossing the border, including escaping persecution, searching for a better life, or reuniting with family.

Like in the game, many refugees have complex and tragic personal stories. They explain their need to leave their countries for safety and survival. These narratives help to humanize

the understanding of the reality faced by these families, considering what they have gone through and what they will go through until they are completely integrated into a new society.

For example, family reunion is a critical issue for many refugees and immigrants who are separated from their families, either before or during the migration process. Family reunification policy is part of international refugee law and is a fundamental component of refugee protection (Hathaway, 2005). The same is mimicked in "Papers, Please."

One last point worth highlighting and relevant to the game analysis is the possible endings of "Papers, Please." Although the game is scripted—that is, it follows linearly in time and space, with fixed events—the player's choices have significant impacts on the game's ending, such as who the officer allows to enter the country.

These choices, in addition to having daily consequences for the immigration officer, also impact the events that are triggered and the end of the game. There are 20 different endings to the game, which depend on how the player interacts with people and their work. The people the player meets are not always just immigrants and refugees but also other government officials, foreign diplomats, and EZIC, a resistance organization to Arstotzka's current government.

Once again, there are more details and correlations with reality in "Papers, Please" than initially expected. EZIC's resistance against the country's regime becomes central as the game progresses, and the player's decision to ally with the rebels impacts the end of the game. EZIC, as a resistance team, may resort to violence and attacks against the government to overturn the power, which brings an element of violence to the game.

**Figure 5.** *The official as a refugee, starting over in Obristan.*



Source: Pope, 2013.

Among the possible endings, it is worth highlighting that the official can be penalized with fines or even the death penalty, depending on his actions. If he decides to help the organization and is not discovered by the government, he can try to save his family and flee the country, becoming a refugee himself. This is an excellent closure to the game and one of the best endings to be achieved, as the official is now in line to immigrate to Obristan, a neighboring nation, as shown in Figure 5.

After presenting the game analysis, the next section will discuss the analysis and compare it to what the literature mentions about the topics.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on what was analyzed in the previous section, this section seeks to discuss the data in light of the authors used in the literature review. The researcher's analysis and notes were triangulated with the authors' postulations to obtain insights into "Papers, Please" as a critical and empathetic reflection tool in the dialogue about refugees and immigrants. As Creswell (2014) notes, triangulating different data sources and theories allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied. In the context of "Papers, Please," this approach helps highlight how digital games can be used as entertainment and as tools for education and awareness about sociopolitical issues.

The frequent relationship of the game's content with actual fragments of world history, such as the historical proximity of the division of Grestin and Berlin, is a positive point, allowing the game to be used as a driver in discussing the effects and results of wars. Although this was not the initial focus of this article, it is essential to highlight that other themes can be explored. Even the conflict-displacement relationship can be introduced based on "Papers, Please." As Friedman (2010) argues, the construction of physical barriers in response to fear and political insecurity can be seen as a form of control and exclusion, also reflected in the fictional division of Grestin between the nations of Kolechia and Arstotzka.

This reproduction of reality also reinforces the characteristics of simulation games by recreating or rewriting events and placing them in an experimental environment. According to Bogost (2007), these games allow players to explore complex systems and understand the implications of political and social decisions. This environment encourages the player to take risks, even when faced with challenges and moral dilemmas, such as those in the gameplay. Ethical choices and the balance of what is beneficial for oneself and the common good are a constant in the game, as demonstrated in the relationship between the immigration officer and the entrants.

Belman and Flanagan (2010) highlight that empathy games can help players better understand the experiences and feelings of others, an aspect evident in "Papers, Please" by

forcing players to make decisions that directly affect the characters' lives. This ability of games to simulate situations of complex moral dilemmas is also addressed by McGonigal (2011), who argues that games have the potential to make players engage with real-world problems in a meaningful way.

The ability of games to provoke critical reflection on issues of immigration and refuge, as explored by Campbell (2013), allows players to understand better the realities faced by those living in displacement situations. "Papers, Please" serves as a pedagogical tool by reproducing the pressures and challenges faced by refugees and immigrants, which is essential for raising awareness and forming an empathetic perspective, as hooks (1994) discussed in his work on the practice of educational freedom.

As commented by Gentile and Gentile (2021), one of the evident challenges in "Papers, Please" is the reproduction of stereotypes and violence, which range from the violence practiced by the characters in the story to the silent violence of the immigration officer making choices that purposefully harm refugees. To prevent this from overshadowing the potential of using the game to encourage serious discussions, curation work is necessary, as is preparing students for the game (Isbister, 2016).

This does not imply preventing an individual from choosing this or that action when faced with a moral dilemma. In fact, the work must respect the player's freedom to choose and make mistakes, using these choices as catalysts for critical reflection. This idea is rooted in Freire's (2019) theory, which suggests that the oppressed often aspire to replace the oppressors and that awareness of power dynamics is fundamental to meaningful change. Critical reflection during and after the game results from a job well done with the content of "Papers, Please," where negative aspects are transformed into agents of reflection. The game thus becomes a valuable tool for critical education, helping players question and understand the complexity of immigration and refugee issues.

The different endings of "Papers, Please" play a central role in developing responsibility and criticality in the face of in-game challenges (Gee, 2003; McDonald et al., 2017). Through them, there is an understanding of how actions have consequences. Although in the game, these implications are merely fictitious, they can instigate the questioning of conscious decision-making and empathy.

Other themes that were raised by the analysis of "Papers, Please" and that can be used to introduce the discussion of refugees and immigrants were different political regimes and ideologies (Arstotzka is a totalitarian nation, declared communist), the effects of wars and conflicts on the world (such as the conflict between Arstotzka and Kolechia), and people's emotional reactions to different stories (from the player's interaction with the immigration

officer's family, with the resistance and with other government officials). Scholars from the area of games in education and gaming literacy could further explore these.

### **Final considerations**

This article analyzed how the game "Papers, Please" moves between the real and the imaginary, highlighting how the game mechanics and narrative impose moral choices and value judgments that reflect the dilemmas of immigration and refuge in real life.

Through qualitative exploratory research, it was possible to describe and analyze the positive and negative points of the game, aiming for its application in the educational environment. Based on the data and triangulation with the game and literature, "Papers, Please" has the potential for application within the classroom, having significant connections with the concept of social justice and transformative education (Freire, 2019; hooks, 1994) that is expected, especially in spaces occupied by more and more immigrants.

Although critical points regarding the use of the game, such as issues of violence and superficial representations, need to be discussed, the game can be used as a tool to foster dialogue about the role that refugees and immigrants play in society and the importance of empathy and solidarity in living with these communities.

Other skills that are notable and worth highlighting during gameplay are critical reflection and moral decision-making. As a simulation, "Papers, Please" requires the player to reflect on each step and decision as they impact the progression and end of the game. This does not mean that these skills can only be learned through simulations or narratives but that these genres can be excellent ways to put them into practice.

Based on the analysis and discussion, "Papers, Please" presents significant potential for working on sociopolitical issues involving the displacement of immigrants and refugees, including emotional aspects. Nevertheless, exploring this game also emphasizes the potential for using commercial digital games in non-educational environments.

Although "Papers, Please" is far from the perfect game for the issues presented here, its potential is significant. For this research, the game is a possible tool to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection about the difficulties faced by refugees and immigrants, being a step towards more research on video games as authentic and experimental material.



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