

**Perception, immersion, and subjectivity: understanding digital game narratives in 'Papers, Please'**

**Percepção, imersão e subjetividade: entendendo as narrativas de jogos digitais em 'Papers, Please'**

Caio Tulio Olimpio Pereira da Costa<sup>1</sup>; Ana Laura Matos Torquato<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This study investigates the phenomenon of immersion in video games, specifically examining how digital games act as communicational interfaces that elicit immersive experiences. Using 'Papers, Please' as a case study, we analyse the player's interaction with a meticulously simulated environment where bureaucratic decision-making and severe immigration policies unfolds in a fictional State. The study explores immersion through two theoretical pillars: the concepts of immersion in digital games and the notion of sensible experience, both of which could converge in players' subjective interaction with the game. This research relies on participant observation and qualitative analysis to assess the extent to which players can be transported into the game's narrative. Findings reveal that immersion in 'Papers, Please' is heightened by its narrative complexity, the moral dilemmas it presents, and its mechanics. These factors contribute to a unique affective experience, where players engage with social and political themes embedded in the game's design as lens to conceive the world around. This paper concludes by discussing how these immersive experiences extend beyond gameplay, fostering critical reflection on broader societal issues and educational purposes.

**Keywords:** perception; immersion; subjectivity; game studies; 'Papers, Please'.

**Resumo.** Este estudo investiga o fenômeno da imersão em videogames, examinando especificamente como os jogos digitais atuam como interfaces comunicacionais que provocam experiências imersivas. Empregando 'Papers, Please' como estudo de caso, analisamos a interação do jogador com um ambiente meticulosamente simulado, onde decisões burocráticas e políticas de imigração severas ocorrem em um Estado fictício. O estudo explora a imersão por meio de dois pilares teóricos: os conceitos de imersão em jogos digitais e a noção de experiência sensível, ambos convergindo na interação subjetiva dos jogadores com o jogo. Metodologicamente, esta pesquisa baseia-se na observação participante e na análise qualitativa para avaliar até que ponto os jogadores são transportados para a narrativa do jogo. Os resultados revelam que a imersão em Papers, Please é intensificada pela complexidade da narrativa, pelos dilemas morais que apresenta e por sua mecânica. Esses fatores contribuem para uma experiência afetiva única, onde os jogadores se envolvem com temas sociais e políticos incorporados ao design do jogo. Este artigo conclui discutindo como essas experiências imersivas vão

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal de Pernambuco – UFPE, Université du Québec en Outaouais – UQO, Coletivo Interdisciplinar de Pesquisa em Games – CIPEG; [caiotuliocosta3@gmail.com](mailto:caiotuliocosta3@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal de Goiás – UFG, L-Università ta' Malta – UM, Coletivo Interdisciplinar de Pesquisa em Games – CIPEG; [torquato.analaura@gmail.com](mailto:torquato.analaura@gmail.com)

além do jogo, promovendo uma reflexão crítica sobre questões sociais mais amplas e propósitos educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** percepção; imersão; subjetividade; game studies; 'Papers, Please'.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a remarkable surge in the number of video game consumers in Brazil and worldwide. This phenomenon can largely be attributed to technological advancements. Entertainment, when aligned with these technological apparatuses, is continually elevated to new levels of representation and expression. In addition, the interactivity that binds digital games and players transforms the act of playing into something ubiquitous in contemporary society.

Given this context, we consider video games as a technological apparatus and a communicational interface that, due to their dynamic aspect, can communicate and indicate a new framework in the relationship between apparatus and individual. With the popularization of the World Wide Web and the shift from traditional "one-to-many" communication to "many-to-many" communication, there has been a behavioural change in individuals involved in communicative processes. The anonymous mass of receivers has become equipped with technology, allowing the language to adapt directly to the groups to which messages are directed. This shift has brought to light the symbolic perspective of messages, emphasizing the desired effect on the recipient. Consequently, the idea of alterity becomes relevant, often considering the recipient's worldview over the message itself through an affective disposition. These same affects are constructed through images, sounds, and text. Despite distortions in the message due to the recipient's worldview and corresponding repertoire, contemporary times have seen the emergence of various technological devices and techniques that are learned for their use. Thus, we are led to consume symbolically and through images the various "many-to-many" communication devices.

Digital games are no exception, representing a recent territory in communication that requires the construction of messages for affective purposes. This apparatus, in its social role, holds the capacity to construct perceptions and symbolic alterations. It is, therefore, a machine for the production of meanings, which begins as fiction but can penetrate how people value the world through narratives by mobilizing the player.

From this understanding, it can be asserted that digital games become an information and communication technology, embodying in a communicational apparatus meaning primarily derived from entertainment. In this regard, whether through escapism or the simple pleasure of playing, digital games offer the possibility of diving into fictional waters through technological immersion that affects us through experience.

Based on these perspectives, this article focuses on the field of experience when considering immersion in video games. Therefore, we aim to understand and highlight how this phenomenon is established in the act of playing and what consequences arise from this interaction. This human-machine relationship can result in varied perceptions and interpretations when the individual immerses in the universe materialized by the technological apparatus in question. Methodologically, to verify these concepts, the video game 'Papers, Please' (2013) was chosen, considering the ways it can transport players into its meticulously simulated world offered by its narrative. This immersive process, when considering the player's subjectivity, can guarantee a universe of possibilities that values the products of human imagination, providing grounds for symbolic elements of gaming culture to be reflected in individuals' customs and habits.

Justifying this theme, we identify three dimensions substantiating the defence of the presented choice: social, academic, and market-related, interwoven in dialogue with the elucidated technological apparatus. Regarding social relevance, we highlight the popularization of games in the current context of our society. Historically, the multiplication of digital game consoles in homes, conversations, and digital environments such as forums and virtual communities has made this technology more accessible to the public, becoming ubiquitous in many contemporary contexts. Over approximately 65 years of existence, video games have been securing and establishing their territory, becoming an inseparable part of many audiences.

The "Game Brazil 2024" survey ["Pesquisa Game Brasil"], examining the profile of Brazilian gamers, found that 73.0% of the national population habitually plays some type of digital game, justified by the accessibility of various games across different platforms in our connected society (Blend; ESPM; Sioux, 2024). Comparing this context with the results of the same research conducted in 2019, five years earlier, it states that 26.9% of gamers played daily, and 25.5% played three to six days a week (Blend; ESPM; Sioux, 2019). Thus, it can also be stated that the presence and influence of video games are emergent and complex, highlighting the urgency of investigating, within the epistemological diversity of the connected world, the experiences when digital games are at the forefront.

The academic relevance is linked to the attention given to the object in its multidisciplinary perspective. With the consolidation of this cultural industry in society, the highlighted technological apparatus has attracted academic research, sparking new conceptions about technology and its reverberations in the human context. Digital games, their narratives, and aesthetic aspects have become objects of study and social interest in many areas. Alves (2010) attests that it was in the 1990s that investigations about games began within universities, becoming a new object of investigation that signals apocalyptic, integrated, and finally critical readings, without reducing the object to just one perspective. However, despite the consumption and academic reverberations of this object, game studies still develop slowly. Despite significant advances, the small size of the community dedicated to the topic compromises efforts to mark the country's

presence on the international stage (Fragoso et al., 2015). Therefore, it is the responsibility of academia to consider this object as new and relevant, understanding it as a communicational interface in constant development.

The market relevance, in turn, highlights the digital game as a product of the cultural industry, yielding a market return/profit that rivals and even surpasses traditional media in Brazil and worldwide. In 2018, the 2nd Census of the Brazilian Digital Games Industry reported 1,718 games officially produced in national territory by Brazilian developers (Abragames, 2017). In terms of revenue, in 2017, Brazil ranked second in Latin America as a consumer of this market, establishing itself as the 13th globally, with revenues amounting to \$1.3 billion in that year alone (McDonald, 2017). In 2024, according to Statista and its Revenue Analysis, the Digital Games market worldwide is projected to reach around US\$282.30bn (Statista, 2024).

It is important to affirm that this audiovisual technological advent and its insertion into the social context of players places humans in a situation of both fascination and risk, highlighting a philosophical issue that demands a critical stance (Jobim and Souza; Gamba Jr., 2002). In this regard, these relationships can originate from the experience of playing and a possible connection with the universes proposed by the games. The possibility of experiencing distinct realities made of programmed codes can lead to new ways of perceiving the world, beyond a simple human-machine relationship, in a process of re-signifying the associations between technology, society, and communication. Therefore, it is plausible to assert that within this digital spectrum lies the potential for a critical and expanded understanding of contemporary global issues. However, it is important to consider the scarcity that video games still face as a research object in many fronts, which demonstrates a discrepant flow concerning their widespread diffusion in postmodern society.

In this sense, this article is divided into two theoretical-methodological pillars aimed at achieving the objectives and exemplifying the concepts surrounding immersion, experience, and the game 'Papers, Please'. The first pillar specifically focuses on the developments regarding immersion in a general context. Therefore, it seeks to outline examples of this phenomenon in the field of digital games so that the research corpus becomes plausible in justifying the choice. The second theoretical-methodological pillar concentrates on concepts of experience, promoting a discussion on the performativity of communication and notions of sensitive experience. By sensitive experience, it is understood as the multiple states of sensitivity that reflect and reverberate in the complexity of the human condition through interaction. The previously mentioned pillars aim to emerge a critical fortune treated here in a multidisciplinary and plural manner, considering systems of perception, sensitivity, affections, desires, images, and other examples that permeate the constellation of understanding experience.

Subsequently, backed by previous conceptualizations and theoretical contextualization, we focus on "Papers, Please," presenting its potential immersive nature and its

development. The analytical instrument adopted included a case study and participant observation. This latter process involves investigation and data collection from the researchers' personal experience and is regarded as an anthropological tool, serving as a qualitative research method capable of fostering a multilateral relationship between authors and objects. Therefore, this method is expected to provide an expressive record of the sensitive experience of immersion in digital games, considering how sensitive experience and immersion also traverse the researchers.

## **2.Immersion in the age of technology and a look at digital games**

When confronted with the term "immersion," many authors propose and develop the central idea of sinking into or encountering something. Thus, it is plausible to affirm that the term encompasses multiple understandings and different associations and applications, both in academia and in common etymological sense. As a starting point for identifying this concept, we refer to the definition given by the Michaelis Brazilian Dictionary of the Portuguese Language (2019), which states that to immerse is "to make dive," "to enter or penetrate," or even "to be engulfed and absorbed."

Murray (2003) contextualizes this connection between environment and individual with further conceptualizations. On the perspective of making one dive, it is stated that the experience of being transported to a meticulously simulated place is pleasurable in itself, and independent of the fantasy's content. In addition, immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. Thus, we seek from a psychologically immersive experience the same impression we get from a dive into the ocean or a pool: the sensation of being enveloped by a completely strange reality, as different as water and air, that takes over all our attention, all our sensory systems (Murray, 2003).

As contemporary human beings, we possess "brains programmed to tune into stories with such intensity that it is possible to even obliterate the world around us" (Murray, 2003). In this context, technological fascination relationships can be fostered by diving into the experience of living or playing, possibly connecting (sometimes intimately) with the simulated universes that serve as stages for immersion. Therefore, possibilities of freedom are generated that a player must understand and explore a meticulously simulated world to learn how to manipulate it. Hence, this scenario alone already holds the capacity to ensure some immersive instance, although it is not the only one. Consequently, it can be said that the game is a possible world because, in it, player and game are inseparable, each exerting control over the other. In it, the player learns the implicit rules of the game as they interact with it, based on a mental navigation map that forms from predictions based on the game's ongoing experience (Santaella, 2004).

Immersion relates to the living environment of impulses that create lived experience as a kind of cohesive structuring in itself, "enabled to foster a feeling of spatiality for

exploratory purposes" (Ryan, 2001, p. 67). This assertion justifies why some digital games treat the exploration of an expanding space as an important element within their structuring mechanics. The game also mimics basic thought processes done through images. Naturally, each thought has its own narrative elaboration when telling a story, recalling facts, planning the day, dreaming, but these elaborations constantly use images. Given that digital games are the invention of a language that use images, they initially have great suggestive power for narrative elaborations for thought, gradually using movements and cinematic effects for idea construction.

In this sense, as an immersive path, projection-identification is a kind of "subjectivation" (Machado, 1996), in which the spectator subjectively immerses in the narrative universe and starts to participate actively, becoming a subject in the act of enunciation (Lima, 2003). For Dansky (2006 apud Mendonça, 2012), in dialogue with Murray (2003), immersion occurs when the player identifies with elements of the digital game through a connection between the player and the items of the proposed environment. It can happen through the player's emotional link with the game, according to their involvement with the story. In games, therefore, we have the opportunity to enact our most basic relationship with the world – our desire to overcome adversity, to survive our inevitable defeats, to shape our environment, to master complexity, and to make our lives fit together like pieces of a puzzle."

Reinforcing the discussion, Santaella (2005) states that the more a narrative is developed in the technological environment, that is, using artifices and resources in its development, the more an individual has chances to immerse. Brockmeier and Harré (2003) bring points that agree with and reinforce Murray's (2003) proposals by stating that narrative is a generator of interaction possibilities, as it functionally and clearly works as a model of mediation between each of our lives and the interpretation of the world around us. The narrative in games acts, therefore, as a primary cognitive mechanism for understanding the world. Accepting and believing in the artificial conflict system proposed by a game's narrative can also constitute an immersive path, taking a simulated reality as plausible. After all, immersion can occur even when the player is submerged in a game that is not plausible to reality because it may require a simple flooding of the mind with sensations (Murray, 2003).

Consequently, several factors can be listed that facilitate this experience between game and player, but it is the player who categorizes whether a digital game is immersive or not. Being a subjective process, it is also inexhaustible, which precludes the intent of categorizing all forms of transportation. During the immersive process, we tend to concentrate our attention on the world that surrounds us and use our intelligence more to reinforce than to question the veracity of the experience (Murray, 2003).

Therefore, many factors contribute to the occurrence of immersion. Sometimes, a simple detail, other times, a complex where the whole narrative plot is tied together. Beyond simple cognitive stimulus-response reflections in human-machine relationships,

immersion goes far beyond transports through sensorialities. It can also substantiate in projection-identification/subjectivation with characters, empathy for a narrative, soundtracks with affective values, subjective relationships of proximity.

### **3.The sensitive experience and the hybrid reality of playing and feeling**

The experience with games, which can trigger immersion, pertains to living through, encountering, being touched, crossed, activated, and provoked. It involves something that may not necessarily be real but, based on the lived and experienced by the player, interferes with and acts upon cognitive and subjective domains.

For a brief etymological contextualization, as was done with the key concept of immersion, we bring forth the definitions from the Michaelis Brazilian Dictionary of the Portuguese Language (2019) for experience, which encompasses the ideas of something that is "experimented" while simultaneously configuring as "knowledge acquired through life's data" or "knowledge of things through practice or observation."

In dialogue with these common-sense definitions, albeit in a scientific context, Duarte's (2015) propositions classify the concept of experience idealistically as a residue of the lived, which, in its sensitivity, brings a catalytic effect of living. From these considerations, it can be inferred that through experience, we establish, as individuals, an experimentation of the world and its effects, which re-signifies experience not as reality itself but as an interaction with the perception of the surrounding real.

This same experience, under the notion of exploration, is treated in this research as a transaction between an organism and its environment (Quéré, 2013), thus distancing itself from exclusive sensory perceptions, within the intimacy of the set of senses (hearing, taste, vision, smell, and touch), as well as from understandings of experience solely grasped by the faculty of understanding (Kant, 2012). In this domain, and objectively, individuals experience the world in which they live through an integration with the environment they are immersed in. The relationships established by this environment are subject to exchange, allowing us to be affected by its various stimuli (Duarte, 2015). Consequently, since this individual-environment relationship is not merely passive, it establishes a cycle of actions that compose an experiential circuit, characterized by a chain of transformations where reciprocity exists. In other words, the environment and the individual modify each other and end up feeding back into one another, as "every creature maintains constant interaction with its environment while awake. It is engaged in a process of giving and receiving, acting upon surrounding objects and receiving from them, in return, some action – impressions, stimuli. This interaction process constitutes the structure of experience" (Dewey, 1997, p. 44).

Furthermore, according to Oliveira (2018), the way in which experience forms in the individual, whether through the production/enjoyment of an aesthetic film, book,

painting, or video game, engenders a temporal experience, or rather, a sensitive experience of duration, as it goes beyond simple logical interpretation, reaching layers of memory and sensibilities previously considered forgotten, dormant (Oliveira, 2018). The boundary stimuli that intensify the residue of our lived experience guarantee experiences capable of formulating judgments, once again amplified by emotions, generating a more complete framework than a simple energy discharge by reflex (Duarte, 2015). Hence, experience acts as a practical dimension of every breath of life we take as individuals. And, when considered by science for observation and analysis criteria, it is configured as a phenomenon that only through its behaviour can it be distributed and assimilated. In this sense, a formulated residue of affections emerges, blending memories and actions to the point where social processes are consolidated.

Therefore, immersing in the digital game through experience ultimately generates a manifestation of constructed and available repertoires of know-how, combined with the discovery of new actions, movements, new understandings that did not previously compose one's frame of reference, neither of pleasure, nor pain, nor know-how (Duarte, 2014). Taking these precepts as a personal experience allows us, as researchers, to do a conduction and perceptual expansion endowed with re-significations of the observed material and its formulated judgments. Communicating the experiences that constitute us, in this sense, allows us to exercise the empathy of inhabiting another's place, even if this other is a digital avatar or bodily extension from the real to the virtual. This framework allows, through imagination, a relationship between individuals' experiences.

In this context, the digital game, as a communicational interface facilitating the enjoyment of experience, not only conducts the experience but constitutes it as an inseparable part. The transport caused by the human-machine relationship at this point leads us to assume that the impacts and other effects exchanged and shared by the game-player (environment-individual) allow for an infinite range of individual contours, varying and molding differently for each experimentation of the fantastic universes offered by this communicational interface. From this contact, the digital game can narrow the relationships between real and virtual spaces, originating and rescuing configurations that can impact the social processes of affective mobilizations.

To evidence the sensitive transformations brought about by the communication of the game-player, for the sake of sharing, it is necessary to consider an alterity with the other's experience, here also interpreted as the way of dealing with the different. In this sense, the message, as a symbolic record that portrays the active experience, undergoes deformations and re-significations when interpreted by another, as often, this individual does not possess the repertoire or does not share the same experiences to deduce and understand the author's place and their message in the way it is expressed. Therefore, a message never reaches the other in a fully faithful manner, as it does not function as a mechanical insertion or a kind of system-to-system download (Marcondes Filho, 2010).



In this context, communication does not communicate; it performs. And this performance characteristic is responsible for shaping the message until it is possible to create meaning for it. In this process, obviously, "noises" are created that hinder comprehension. Among so many technological devices capable of communicating, as well as specific literacies to operate these devices, our greatest concern, in contemporaneity, is knowing how these machines, especially the digital game, touch us. And consequently, how we share our experiences of this touch. Traversing all this, a crucial point of these relationships emerges: affect. Through the understanding of the other, it becomes possible to be affectively touched. In this instance, bonds of affection and trust can be configured in the reception of the message, in the understanding of the other's experience. In this context, the digital game is seen as capable of mobilizing social potentials, where after retaining experiences, players can mix them, in dialogue. In this domain, subjectivities also merge as immersion reports emerge and communication performs. This practice, in addition, is capable of instigating distinct behaviours, both in individual and collective realms. This subsequent dialogue space, based on what the game tells us (environment-organism/game-player transaction), presents a dilution of subjectivities, as placing oneself at the game's disposal ensures a moment that triggers an expansion of subjectivity, originating from an anthropological dimension and heritage.

In the sensitive experience, the game's universe occurs in the performative effect of traversing it. And from this relationship, therefore, emerges a unique field where sensations assign affective meanings. The software, in this context, merely triggers the territory through which emotion performs.

#### **4.Experience and immersion in 'Papers, Please'**

With the possibilities of emotions offered by digital games, the player may or may not undergo an immersion process. The transport, in this conjecture, will always depend on both the type of game in question and the social and historical context in which the player is situated, that is, their experience and lived residue. Based on this idea, this section proposes to analyse the game *Papers, Please*, independently released in 2013, which aims to reinterpret Europe in the 1980s (a time when the world was under tension due to the Cold War), following events at the border of a fictional country called "Arstotzka", an allusion to the former Soviet Union. The game's narrative, which aims to bring issues of the past to light, also resonates with the current context. Due to recent conflicts marked in Europe, the security policy regarding the entry of immigrants is a reality in several countries – as observed in nations like the United States, where security, in the face of fear of new terrorist attacks, becomes more stringent and severe, a case that has even reverberated in Brazil and its neighbouring countries between 2016 and 2018 (Ayuso, 2019; Hasselbach, 2020).

'Papers, Please' is a digital game available for Windows, Mac, Linux, iPad, and PlayStation Vita, created by the independent American developer Lucas Pope in 2013. Renowned for developing independent and experimental games, Pope conceived the idea of creating a game involving an immigration officer during his travels, materializing this concept through 'Papers, Please'. The game is also labelled as a "dystopian documentary thriller," as indicated by its subtitle. It features a "retro" pixel art visual style and is set in the year 1982 in the Communist State of Arstotzka, which, after six years of war with Kolechia, is attempting to recover from the damage. The player's seemingly simple objective is to inspect immigrants and tourists wishing to cross the country's border and decide whether to grant them a visa based on their documentation.

Throughout the gameplay, there is always a long queue waiting for inspection at the top of the digital game interface, consisting of individuals seeking employment, visiting relatives, as well as terrorists, criminals, and many others attempting to enter the country (Figure 1). At times, the border suffers terrorist attacks, resulting in the early closure of the checkpoint. It is noteworthy that before the digital game actually begins, the player of 'Papers, Please' must choose their path: they must decide whether to play in "story mode," which allows for insertion into a linear game with a beginning, middle, and end, or in "endless mode," which prioritizes various forms of gameplay.

**Figure 1.** *The interface of 'Papers, Please'*



Source: 'Papers, Please' (2013).

In story mode, there are twenty possible different endings, varying with each player's choices and performance over thirty-one fictional days within the game. In "endless mode", the player can choose "timed mode," evaluating how many travellers can be

attended to in ten minutes; "perfection mode," where the game ends after the first penalty for document inspection; or "persistence mode," allowing the player to earn points for each correct evaluation, which can be nullified by mistakes, minimizing penalties as much as possible.

Considering the aforementioned game options, its narrative is undoubtedly one of the factors that allow for greater coherence and cohesion between the two game modes—story and endless—being one of the highlights and perhaps the most attractive aspects of 'Papers, Please'. Considering potential immersion in this context, one of the crucial characteristics of this environment is the possibility for the individual to freely enter and exit it if they no longer wish to participate in the game's dynamics. Murray (2003) argues that stories told in digital games are important elements for inserting the player into the game environment, as they provide representations that enhance the player's self-image and many of their experiences, contributing to the possibility of symbolically living experiences within the virtual environment and carrying those experiences into real-life learning, such as judgment formulations. Here again, the opportunity to enact our most basic relationship with the world is reiterated; after all, just as we experience the religious ceremonies of passage through which we mark birth, coming of age, marriage, and death, games are ritual actions that allow us to symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives (Murray, 2003).

In order to further attract the player's interest and complexify their immersive experience in the game, 'Papers, Please' employs suspense and a frequent atmosphere of tension at various points in the narrative, justifying its subtitle as a thriller. During terrorist attacks, when daily headlines are released, or when checking the salary at the end of the workday to see if the protagonist will have enough money to survive, the player is exposed to situations with little knowledge of the future.

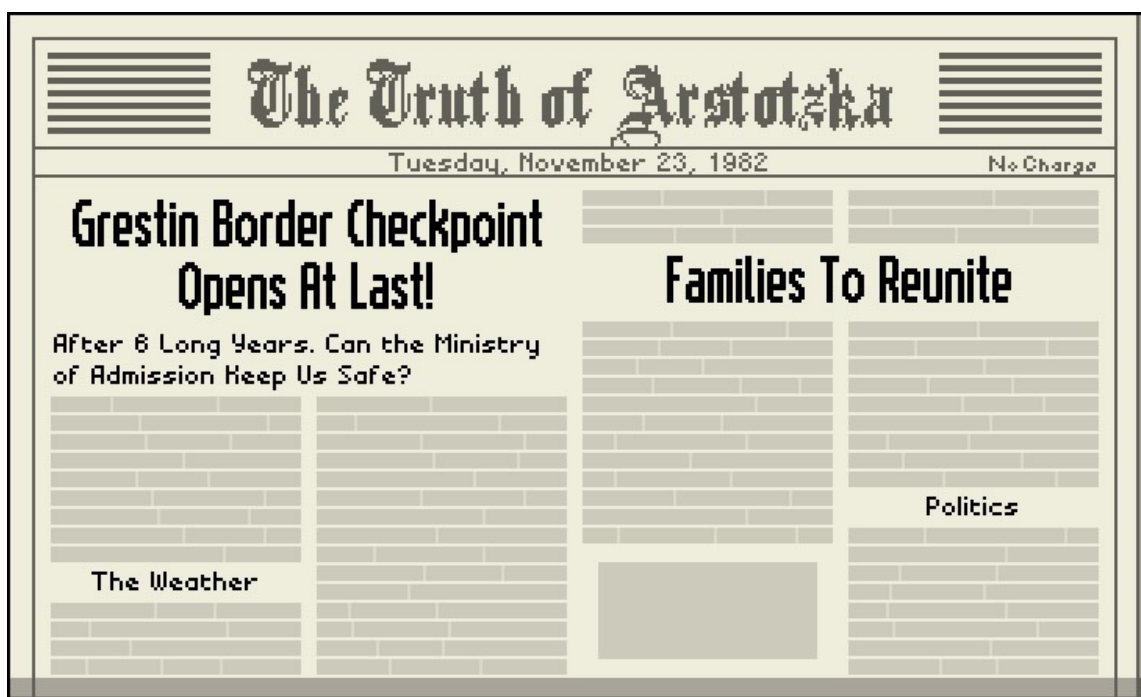
This strategy of generating anxiety, tension, or fear tends to be widely used in digital games, as explained by Zagalo, Branco, and Barker (2004), because emotion is a crucial factor in the world of entertainment. It provokes diverse sensations in the audience, ranging from a pleasurable and peaceful moment to the catharsis of accumulated and repressed feelings, thus attracting the audience's attention. For this article, it is also assumed that using suspense frequently implies providing a state of uncertainty, which can enhance many emotions while following a narrative (Zagalo, Branco and Barker, 2004).

Besides the narrative and the use of suspense, other factors contribute to potential player immersion in 'Papers, Please'. The game's theme music, for example, acts as an important immersive trigger for the tense and austere atmosphere of the fictional country of Arstotzka, recently emerged from a war and under high security and surveillance control. Its melody conveys the idea of a context full of adversities where a challenge needs to be overcome by the hero (the player in an epic journey). Music and sound effects, in general, are often intrinsic to contemporary gameplay. In this context,

they become inseparable from the stimulation of various emotions and feelings, even serving as part of the game's imagery, aiming for a truly immersive and coherent experience in the video game universe (Collins, 2013).

The in-game newspaper available at the start of each workday also contributes to better immersion (Figure 2). The news helps inform the player about current events in Arstotzka and provides insights into the country's politics, economy, and notable personalities. The game's artwork, including illustrations, typography, colors, and shapes, was utilized as a resource to situate the story in a specific time and space context. As mentioned earlier, a "retro" aesthetic was adopted, focusing on pixel art with predominant colors of white, black, and red, befitting a fictional nation situated in a region dominated by communist countries.

**Figure 2.** *The Truth of Arstotzka newspaper*



Source: 'Papers, Please' (2013).

However, all these immersive strategies employed by the digital game are not used haphazardly; they call and invite players to action. After all, 'Papers, Please' does not merely use audiovisual elements, like a film or a regular series where we are spectators of a story, but it is a digital game endowed with intense interactivity. Therefore, it is designed for people to interact and determine the protagonist's fate and those trying to cross the Arstotzka border through their choices.

Illustrating concepts that we use to exemplify immersion in 'Papers, Please', Murray (2003) also offers a delicate perspective by noting that when the things we do bring tangible results, we experience the second characteristic pleasure of electronic environments—the sense of agency.

However, amidst so many game explanations, it is also necessary to illustrate how a player can genuinely act in 'Papers, Please'. These propositions can be reached by observing the game's mechanics. According to Santos (2010), the mechanics are linked to how the player can progress in the game and make it happen, taking into account the rules, restrictions, and general objectives also pre-established by its creators, whose planning may, depending on each user, be partially or completely subverted according to each player's interests, desires, and aspirations (Vieira, 2016).

At the beginning of the digital game, we are transported to the protagonist's personal booth, an inspector at the Arstotzkan immigration department. Viewing all objects from a first-person perspective, all activities in the game can be performed with just "clicking and dragging," such as stamping passports, interrogating, handing over documents, consulting the rule book and data about the possible immigrants' countries of origin, reading the daily news bulletin, viewing the audio transcripts of interviews, calling the police, etc. The action options are unlocked as the character reaches more complex stages of the game and narrative.

Although 'Papers, Please' may seem like a simple "document-checking" digital game, it is constructed as a kind of "puzzle": the player needs to find matches and inconsistencies in the speeches and documents of people wishing to cross the fictional country's border, thereby preventing the entry of smugglers, political prisoners, illegal immigrants, fugitives, and terrorists. At the end of the workday, the inspector must have earned enough money to support himself and his family living in the city, managing his resources to buy food, medicine, heating, and pay rent—which will only be possible if the player attends to as many people as possible at his post without committing infractions and errors.

A very useful tool for helping to check immigrants' documents is the inspection equipment. Accessible at the lower right corner of the digital game interface screen, the tool helps to find discrepancies between people's documents passing through the booth (Figure 3). It basically works by selecting—via clicks—the information that would be incorrect, comparing it with other documents or with the instructions present in the rule book on the counter—essential to the game, as the instructions change daily on the title's fictional calendar. In this context, the decision to approve or deny a citizen's entry into the country must be made. Stamps and passports are accessible at the right corner of the screen on the protagonist's desk. Each selection of yes or no, through green or red stamps, resembles a Roman tribunal, where the protagonist, like an emperor, points his thumb up or down.

**Figure 3.** *Discrepancy detected*



Source: 'Papers, Please' (2013).

Given these considerations, moral dilemmas emerge from the narrative and mechanics of 'Papers, Please'. In the game, the only dialogues we observe occur within the booth, in the tense context of approving or denying entry to Arstotzka. Due to this approach, Formosa, Ryan, and Staines (2016) argue that a process of dehumanization is inherent in the game. Within this framework, themes such as loyalty and transparency are also explored. Additionally, the theme of privacy, concerning sex, gender, and the abuse of power, is present in the narrative of 'Papers, Please'.

Each passport contains a sex field marked with M or F (male and female, which the player must verify). However, the game (intentionally) and the inspector (probably unintentionally) often confuse issues of gender and sex. If the appearance (gender) does not obviously match the documented sex, such as when a male (sex) appears very feminine (gender), a discrepancy is noted. Accepting and allowing this traveler is a violation (surprisingly recorded as "invalid gender" instead of the technically correct "invalid sex"). The player is thus encouraged to seek out such discrepancies. When a traveler is interrogated about this discrepancy, the conversation is typically brief: "Are you a man or a woman?" the inspector's automatic dialogue asks, and "The document is correct" is a common response. Sometimes, travelers express disbelief and embarrassment at such an offensive question, responding with "Why do you ask?" or "What is this question?" (Formosa, Ryan and Staines, 2016).

Reflecting on the immersion and contextual experience in 'Papers, Please', it becomes clear that the game's narrative is punctuated by suspense and tension, used at the beginning and end of each fictional day to maintain the player's interest in the context of Arstotzka. Another notable aspect is that the game often challenges the player's own morality, requiring decisions that may conflict with their values and principles: Should

they allow an immigrant to enter despite having false documents? Should they accept a bribe to pay off their debts? Can they permit a family to reunite after years, even if it's illegal? Should they spend their salary to cure their child's illness or prevent their spouse from starving? The practical solutions to these and other questions, which are highly relevant to the current immigration issues in various countries, will depend on each player's engagement with the game. Each individual, throughout their journey in the game, is invited to exercise their agency to determine the fate of dozens of characters passing through the checkpoint, as well as their own and their family's fate.

In addition to the use of suspense in the narrative, it was observed during participant observation that 'Papers, Please' employs a striking soundtrack and art direction, which contribute to the player's immersion in the austere and militarized context of Arstotzka. The daily bulletin at the beginning of each workday, "The Truth of Arstotzka," also aids in "localizing in time and space" the totalitarian country, serving to introduce changes in immigration policies.

Regarding its mechanics, although 'Papers, Please' presents itself as a game with increasingly complex stages, all activities concerning the narrative require only dragging and clicking as a form of interaction with the digital interface. This simple movement of pulling objects onto the inspector's desk allows for better visualization and reading, making the game more accessible to those unaccustomed to playing games requiring advanced motor skills. It is up to the player to organize their own workstation. The mechanics of a game are designed for interaction with the game's state (Santos, 2010, p. 63).

For contextualization, similarities are found between Weber's Iron Cage and 'Papers, Please' (Morissette, 2017). According to Francisco Neto (2019), from the writings of Max Weber, this expression emerged, designating strict organizations with their bureaucracies, often dominant within industrial society, public administration, schools, businesses, churches, etc. It is bureaucracy as a form of rationalization, which serves to control and direct people's behaviour and social actions, directing them toward models designed to achieve the system's objectives, whatever they may be (Francisco Neto, 2019). In this metaphor of imprisonment, people are subjected to a bureaucratic and hierarchical organization, which consequently suppresses the spontaneous nature related to creativity and freedom.

Morissette (2017), however, argues that the digital game in question clearly conveys specific feelings and ideas about issues that could not be presented in the same way through any other medium, even prompting us to ask questions about ourselves when we return to reality. While the player is invited to be the passport inspector, balancing morality and the rational execution of rules, the game is both tediously simulative and thematically consequential – particularly concerning the "real world" debate on refugees and immigrants.

Despite the game's popularity and international awards for its relevant themes and other attributes, the fact remains that when it comes to sensitive experiences, each person may perceive and absorb the digital game differently – depending on their cultural, economic, and psychological/emotional context, or rather, based on all the lived experiences guaranteed by individual-environment interactions.

During the time period available for research, as authors, researchers, and players, we have come to understand that 'Papers, Please' goes far beyond a digital game about document verification. It not only provides a historical recapitulation, even with a fictional country, but also aims to reflect on current immigration policies. It is a game with a different theme than usual: it is rare to find games focusing on bureaucracy while also making a social critique. Each character trying to enter Arstotzka brings a different story and context, potentially activating (or not) immersive triggers for the player. Throughout the narrative, the player must make morally challenging decisions when there is an alterity with the game world. While a refugee with false documents might die if not allowed entry, another person offers a bribe to gain entry.

Lopez (2015), in her dissertation on 'Papers, Please', proposes a series of perception studies and tests using a control group model with adolescents, aiming to contextualize the game in museums to extend dialogues in this field to discuss similar topics. Based on this, the author asserts that digital games are permanent fixtures of our contemporary culture. With the advent of independent games, there are opportunities to continue studies not only on immigration but also focusing on social issues surrounding poverty, depression, cancer, sexuality, and other social matters (Lopez, 2015). It is interesting to note that even though 'Papers, Please' was a significant part of Lopez's (2015) control group, which judged it as an essentially simple title, it is still capable of demonstrating how digital games and their fictional worlds can provide experiences that serve as life lessons. Despite telling a story that never existed in reality, the many layers behind the narrative are present in life outside the screen, where reality tends to be much harsher and more unforgiving of the mistakes we make throughout our existence.

The bureaucracy in 'Papers, Please' leads us, as players, to the idea that organization and patience are fundamental. We tried to strictly follow the rules each day, but when there was a story and context that we found interesting, we would let the person pass even if it wasn't the correct action. The game, at many times, seemed somewhat tedious and repetitive. However, after following the routine, we perceived and interpreted this possibility as a faithful portrayal of the game's true intention to denounce and address totalitarian bureaucracy. Although this might not have been the developers' objective, what we carry with us from the perspective of researchers and players, in terms of lived experience, immersion, and experience, led us similarly to attribute this meaning to the organism-environment transaction in which we were immersed. Thus, we impart our own sense to the game's narrative and mechanics, re-signifying our gameplay.



Additionally, having developed, during projection-identification, a minimum of empathy with the main character we control, we felt the desire to know more about him – his dreams, desires, origins, dramas, etc. Everything was addressed superficially, so at certain moments, we couldn't connect as deeply as we wanted. This situation, for analytical purposes, proved interesting because we considered how these subtle immersive breaks affected the transportation to the meticulously simulated reality of 'Papers, Please' and its fictional reality. Therefore, as a character, when "our son" was hungry and "our uncle and wife" were cold, we weren't affected as we would have liked. We did not know their names or faces, so they seemed not to exist for us.

The idea of making choices that could go against our values also seemed interesting. While following all instructions did not guarantee that terrorist attacks would cease, there was no possibility of opting not to follow some rules, as we would be punished anyway (with salary reduction or imprisonment). Between being imprisoned and denying the visa of many people with whom we did not establish connections as we would have liked, the first alternative seemed much more reasonable. In other words, if our only option was to follow the rules, there was no point in breaking them for someone; otherwise, we would lose the game.

Nevertheless, during the time period of analysis, through different perspectives and daily experiences, we managed to develop sporadic empathy with the other characters in the digital game, although we personally would have liked to have more options, to take more risks, to have the possibility of subverting the norms, to know that our actions would really make a difference in that universe. At certain moments while playing, we felt like a "pawn" in a chess game working for a "great machine," whose actions change daily. Perhaps the situation is akin to real life, where we often feel powerless to change a reality, but the fact is that until we reach that conclusion, we make many conscious or unconscious choices and establish connections with people – which can make certain decisions difficult.

The verification of the nuances and possibilities experienced during participant observation brought light to various themes as discussions, including historical contextualization, empathy (or lack thereof), possible paths, and transports to the universe of 'Papers, Please'. It is evident that there are elements that group together (and may be common to all who play) as immersive triggers, while there are elements that separate, holding a certain individuality and unique meaning for each playing experience, even diminishing/blocking immersion. This scenario configures an infinity of possibilities and triggers.

## **5. Final considerations**

Exploring conclusions about the dynamism of digital games as a communicational interface requires considerable caution. Referring to a medium that tends to produce

immediate effects and has the potential to create reverberations in the future life of the individual who interacts with it, we run the risk of positing premature certainties, which may quickly become the subject of new questions and inquiries regarding their effectiveness. Nevertheless, as it is a requirement demanded by formal scientific practice, we will focus on presenting our considerations on the universe of connections between digital games, their fictional universes, and players. In this regard, it is essential to note that a portion of the conclusions, rather than simply aiding in the process of reaching a final point in this article, offers us the perception of numerous viable paths in light of the desire to investigate various questions that this research has sought to address.

From the outset, we committed to understanding what constitutes and how the immersive consciousness experience of players in interactive digital game universes occurs. In this journey, seeking answers and strategies that could be applied to achieve this objective, we encountered an extensive array of possibilities. The elements treated as immersive triggers were briefly explored. Through narratives that dialogue, inform, and perform directly to the player's innermost being, as well as soundtracks that evoke emotions or colors that invite memories to surface, the process of transportation was addressed. Moreover, through the conceptualization of the theoretical-methodological pillars discussed and contextualized in digital games, it was possible to establish a horizon of inexhaustible possibilities that, in different times, circumstances, and contexts, can affect us in various ways. From these perspectives, considerations emerge marked by the evidence that the use of technologies can change how we perceive ourselves and the virtual worlds we connect with, enabling new ways of experiencing the offline world. Therefore, the manifestations of affective mobilizations caused by the game recover and value the dynamics of the sensitive.

In this sense, digital games mediate and provide sensitive experiences to players through immersion. The transportation caused by the human-machine relationship at this point leads us to assume that the impacts and other effects exchanged and shared by the game-player (environment-individual) enable a range of infinite individual contours, varying and shaping differently for each experience of the fantastic universes offered by this interface. The relationship between this imaginary and the sensitive experience also facilitated the conception of the digital game as a technology of image and imaginary, where its fruition, through the interactivity of environment and individual, acted as a cognitive trigger of sensitivities, sensations, and emotions. This could reveal a minimal portion of effects and practices that constitute an ocean of possibilities in which we can dive and immerse.

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