

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Papers, Please
Platform: PC, OS X, Linux, PS Vita
Genre: Simulation Puzzle Game
Release Date: August, 8, 2013
Developer: Lucas Pope
Publisher: 3309 LLC
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Lucas Pope

Overview

In *Papers, Please*, a game created by independent developer Lucas Pope, the player takes on the role of an Immigration Inspector, forcibly assigned to a recently open border checkpoint in the “Glorious Nation of Arstotzka”. Based on criteria from the Arstotzka government, the player must inspect immigration and entry documents and either approve or disapprove their owner’s request to enter the country. Through this, the player holds the fate of themselves, their family, and their entire country unknowingly in their hands.

Characters

The Immigration Officer – This character acts as a vessel for the player’s choices. He was compulsorily assigned by the Department of Labor to man the recently opened border checkpoint and must do a good enough job despite having no training whatsoever. The only clear motivations he has include making enough money from his job to care for his family and avoid being fired or killed (or having his family killed). What he wants, whether it be helping overthrow the government, maintaining the status quo, or even what to hang up on the walls of his booth, is entirely up to the player and influence the game towards one of the 20 endings.

Arstotzka Government – This omnipresent force is both your bane and motivator. They are portrayed as a stereotypical Communist-like government type, complete with corruption, strict laws, seemingly pointless and frivolous bureaucracy, and very harsh penalties. They are the primary driving force behind the narrative, forcing the player into their position of Immigration Inspector and constantly adding and shifting the rules of who should be allowed or denied

access into the country. Mostly portrayed through various newspaper articles and paper notices, you never really see “the government” besides it’s embodiment in a commissar-esque figure who checks on you every once in a while. Their primary motivator is power; having you properly maintain the border and keeping out contraband, weapons, and terrorists keeps the balance of power in their favor.

The Order of the EZIC Star– Depending on the view you choose to adopt as the Inspector, the mysterious EZIC organization are either freedom fighters or terrorists. Represented by merely a star-like symbol, this group introduces itself to the player during a normal workday with a mysterious note and instructions to deliver it to someone passing through the checkpoint. The EZIC organization is explained as wanting to free Arstotzka from it’s seemingly corrupt leaders, and they need your help to do so. Throughout, they will have more and more tasks for you that you, as the player, can choose to complete or ignore.

OTHERS – In the parade of seemingly random NPCs you process everyday, there are a few special ones that have a short narrative arc of their own. From Jorgi, the lovable old man who tries to get past you with a hand drawn passport, to a couple who begs you to let the wife in even though her credentials have expired; you influence each of these individual lives based on your actions in a major way, though not always seeing the consequences of your actions.

Breakdown

The story of *Papers, Please* begins with the Arstotzka government informing the player that their name has been picked by the October labor lottery to be the Immigration Inspector for a newly opened checkpoint in a location that borders a nation that had recently been at war with Arstotzka. Tensions are high, and the government is depending on you to maintain the integrity of the border.

And thus begins the job. The player is in charge of checking passports and papers to make sure they are in line with the requirements to enter the country. The lines are always much longer than the day allows, and the rules change every single day. Sometimes people will have the correct papers from yesterday and have been waiting for ages, but must be denied today. Any sympathy the player has is penalized, as too many “mistakes” they approve or deny wrongly leads to losing money out of the day’s wages, threatening the well-being of your family.

Eventually the complexity begins to add up. First is simply just a passport, then a passport and an entry permit, then a passport and an entry permit and a work pass. But if the person is a citizen of Arstotzka, all the need is a passport and an ID card. Then contraband starts flowing in which you must stop, people have forged documents that have the wrong issuing cities from foreign countries that you must check, and even the official stamps are stolen from

the Ministry of Labor and are starting to be forged. All of this and the player's speed and accuracy must never drop, as again their family is at stake.

In the midst of this chaos, the player is presented with several pieces of minor, self contained narrative through interactions with several "unique" characters. A lady begs the player to not let the man behind her in, as he's going to exploit her for money. But his documentation is correct. Another couple has the opposite problem; a husband begs to be let in so he can be with his wife, but his documentation is not correct while her's is. The player must make these decisions while weighing the needs of his family. Can you afford to make one "intentional" mistake?

The player slowly learns about the world primarily through the local newspaper, and the various notices that come in advising about new rules that have been put in place that day. Eventually they receive a mysterious note from an organization represented only by a star-like symbol to pass along some attached information to a specific person who will come through the border that day. The organization reveals itself to be the Order of the EZIC Star, a group who wants to take down the "corrupt and greedy" Arstotzka government.

As the days progress, the player receives more and more contact from this mysterious organization, with requests to perform certain tasks. One may have you steal a passport from a visiting diplomat. Another may have you let in certain agents of theirs with incorrect documentation. The player may either complete these tasks or ignore them.

Eventually the day comes where EZIC decides to attack the border where you are stationed. This is the culmination of the player's choices. If they assisted the organization sufficiently, they are given forewarning and are not attacked during the proceeding; if not, they player is attacked along with the rest of the guards at the border checkpoint. Regardless, the player is given the option to shoot to stop the attackers.

Several possible endings can happen at this point. The player has the option to attempt to escape to a neighboring country with their family (provided they stole enough passports to do so). If they choose to remain, they must accept the consequences.

If they helped EZIC throughout the game and did not betray them at the end, EZIC seizes power and asks the player to come assist in their revolution. On the other side of the spectrum, if the player did not help EZIC in any way and successfully protects the border, they are commended by the government and are allowed to remain in their post. Most of the other options, like betraying EZIC or failing to defend the border, lead to being fired from your post and, at worst, being executed by either side for assisting the other.

Strongest Element

Papers, Please's greatest strength is how well the mechanics of checking information and checking passports connects with the overall narrative and commentary it's trying to tell. The subtle way the difficulty increases, while never truly becoming too unmanageable is almost gorgeous in it's design. The process and monotony of doing this same task over again, as well as the parade of random faces and names, unconsciously causes the player to dehumanize the people crossing the checkpoint and merely see them as the numbers they need to take care of their family. Due to this, the variety of moral choices that come up are entirely more difficult than they may seem otherwise; these morally ambiguous situations create a commentary on how good people can go along with really terrible orders (a la *the Milgram experiment*). Also, in a broader sense, it sheds the light on the job of immigration and passport control which many people never think about.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the weaker aspects of *Papers, Please* is the lack of real randomness in both the major and the minor story elements. Yes, the NPCs and the various issues with their documentation that you must sort through are mostly jumbled, but the encounters with the various "important" or special NPCs are almost always in the exact same place in the story each and every time you play, for every single person that has ever played. So while its easy to relive specific days to explore the various different choices, much of the sense of discovery and wonder that made the game interesting and compelling in the first play-through is gone.

Another possibility for a weaker aspect of the game is, for some people, the very repetitive gameplay. The primary mechanic of stamping passports and checking papers does not change significantly over the course of the game, so each day is essentially the same semi-monotonous task as the last. However, this is not a flaw necessarily, as it is hugely impactful in getting the message across, but it may present a barrier to some who play the game.

Highlight

The highlight of *Papers, Please* occurs on the last day, the climax of the game. This point is the culmination of several choices that the player has made throughout the game pertaining to The Order of the EZIC Star. Depending on the number of tasks you succeeded in for them, the ending can change very drastically. EZIC, regardless of how much help you've given

them, attacks the border in a rare moment of overt action on their part. Even if up to this point you've supported them and their activities, you're still given the chance to reconsider. "Are they more than terrorists?" you may ask yourself, "Was everything for naught?" If you choose to support them in even this most dire of situations, you are rewarded with a message saying they've taken power while the corrupt and greedy government is failing! Your family will be moved into better house! And they want you to help continue in their revolution. While it feels satisfying that you, a lowly border agent, has helped spark something new, you can't help but question, will it be better? Or just as bad? A very powerful moment indeed.

Critical Reception

Papers, Please has won a multitude of awards, with critics praising it for not only its novel design and great narrative, but for the way these things interweave and create a commentary on society and, as Sam Machkovech states, "provokes an intense emotional reaction". (<http://www.polygon.com/2014/3/20/5529502/opinion-papers-please-awards-haul-is-a-big-win-for-gaming>)

Many critics focus on, as put eloquently by Justin McElroy, how the game is a "meaningful exercise in misery" (<http://www.polygon.com/2013/8/9/4606420/papers-please-review-mundane-tyranny>), citing how the game itself does a tremendous job in having players "trapped in a dehumanising role" (<http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/08/12/papers-please-review>) while slowly increasing the complexity to a point where you "start reducing people to numbers" (<http://www.polygon.com/2013/8/9/4606420/papers-please-review-mundane-tyranny>). With that, they seem to agree that this game provides some incredible commentary on how people can go along with some terrible things by simply following orders.

Among some of its awards includes Seumas McNally Grand Prize, "Excellence in Narrative", and "Excellence in Design" awards at the 2014 Independent Games Festival and the Best Downloadable Game and the Innovation Award at the 2014 Game Developers Conference Awards. In addition, the game has won the "Strategy and Simulation" award at the 2014 BAFTA Video Game Awards while being nominated in several other categories.

Lessons

- Independent games can take great risk with design, and, in doing so, can come up with something new that both reverberates with meaning and is enjoyable to play.
- Good design can make the choices within the game much harder than they may initially appear through emotional attachments, or lack thereof.
- Placing players in situations modeled by the real world can lead to exploration and thus revelation about the world we live in.

- A seemingly simple mechanic can be made satisfying through simply how it is framed
- Leaving the surrounding story intentionally vague and allowing players to discover it as they progress and interpret it on their own leads to a sense of ownership over the story.

Summation

Papers, Please takes something like checking passports that most people view as monotonous and miserable and places it in a new light, commenting on society in a powerful way by doing so. Not only is the story of the border inspection agent who unknowingly holds the fate of an entire country in his hands compelling, but the meta-narrative of being in a dehumanising role, reducing people to numbers, and making choices a certain way because “that’s the rules” provides some insight into human nature. People who make seemingly “evil” choices aren’t necessarily bad people; many just want to make it to the end of the day with enough money to take care of those close to them.