This is video game play: video games, authority and metacommunication

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Abstract

Gregory Bateson claims that all play acts should be primarily understood as meta-communicative. In other words, playing a game implies being able to transmit and receive the meta-message 'this is play', which establishes a psychological frame among the players. I will propose a radical reading of Bateson's theory in the context of video games; specifically, I will attempt at analysing the characteristics, specificities and implications of the message 'this is video game play'. I will contend that the specific language through which video games convey this message is that of their rules, the inescapable limitations posed by their computational and digital nature. In other words, playing a video game is always, at least to a degree, playing a game of meta-communication with, against and around a video game's hard-coded rules. Finally, I will propose a close reading of the game *Papers, Please* and contend that Pope's work engages in a significant reading of the inherent reflexivity of video games, deliberately portraying their authoritative nature and communicative potential.

Keywords

Bateson; authority; procedurality; rules; metacommunication

This is play

Between December 1952 and April 1954 Gregory Bateson conducted a study on the behaviour of otters at the Fleishacker Zoo in San Francisco, California. The research was documented in two publications (Bateson, 1956; Bateson, 1972) that detailed Bateson's theory of play as meta-communication. In observing the otters, Bateson concluded that in order to be able to play with each other with the piece of paper that he introduced in their cage, the animals had to be capable of meta-communication, that is of exchanging and processing the message 'this is play'. In order for the otters to understand the difference between a playful nip and an aggressive bite, a meta-message has to integrate each action. These messages belong to the class of what Bateson describes as meta-communicative messages. According to Bateson

> human verbal communication can operate and always does operate at many contrasting levels of abstraction. These range in two directions from the seemingly simple denotative level ('The cat is on the mat'). One range or set of these more abstract levels includes those explicit or implicit messages where the subject of discourse is the language. We will call these metalinguistic (for example, "The verbal sound 'cat' stands for any member of such and such class of objects", or "The word, `cat,' has no fur and

cannot scratch"). The other set of levels of abstraction we will call meta-communicative (e.g., 'My telling you where to find the cat was friendly,' or 'This is play'). In these, the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers (Bateson, 1972: 177-178).

Meta-communicative messages establish a rather sophisticated form of communication that creates a temporary psychological frame within which all subsequent messages are inscribed. In this perspective, the playful nip of the otters, when inscribed within the frame 'this is play' «denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite» when performed outside such frame. The playful nip *stands for* the bite, it alludes to it but, nevertheless, by being inscribed within the frame established by the peculiar message 'this is play', it does not denote aggression. Bateson's idea of play being surrounded by a precise frame that temporarily re-orientates all messages exchanged among players seems to resonate with the widely discussed notion of magic circle introduced by Huizinga (1955) and adopted by game and play studies as one of the pivotal points of debate in the discipline (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Juul, 2008; Consalvo, 2009; Zimmerman, 2012). While apparently convergent, Huizinga's notion of the magic circle and Bateson's frame refer to two radically different understandings of the act of play. In introducing his theory on the separateness of play, Huizinga writes:

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds; i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga, 1955: 10).

Huizinga's magic circle is defined by a delineation of an area consecrated — «materially or ideally» (Huizinga, 1955: 10) — to the act of play. In Huizinga's theory, play is an act that is encapsulated within an *ad-hoc* world, carved out of regular life. It should be noted that Huzinga's magic circle «depicts a social frame» (Schrank, 2014: 63), or, more radically, understands play as one of the sides of a socially constructed duality between recreation and productive life, work and pleasure. Bateson's theoretical proposal, on the other hand, understands play as inscribed within an eminently psychological and, in turn, communicative frame. To Bateson, playing does not mean carving a holy circle out of 'regular' life, but rather engaging in a specific form of meta-communication where the message 'this is play' influences and informs a series of other messages, reconfiguring their denotative status.

While Huizinga's idea of play, consistently with the modern ethos pervading *Homo Ludens*, describes a clear-cut demarcation between play and work, Bateson's reasoning on play is, in the words of the man himself, «a muddle» (1972: 19). Bateson qualifies his theory as paradoxical, since the preposition upon which it relies to define the meta-message exchanged by players - «These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote» (1972: 180) — contains a logical fallacy: the verb 'denote' is used twice in two degrees of abstraction,

but the two uses are treated as synonymous. While in this article I cannot delve into the logical intricacies of the a paradox (see Jayemanne, 2005 and Engler & Gardiner, 2012 for an in-depth examination of the issue), it should be noted that, by highlighting the paradoxical nature of his theory, Bateson consciously qualifies it as non-taxonomical. What Bateson proposes is not a sound and rigid definition of play, but an attempt at constructing play as a peculiar kind of communicative frame rather than as a recognizable phenomenon and, at the same time, an acknowledgement of the self-referential, paradoxical[1] nature of such frame. In the words of Nachmanovitch, one of Bateson's most acute commentators:

> Play is easy to recognize but impossible to define. We may try to define it, but our definitions will be clumsy, inadequate, and circular. That is because play is *about* definition. It is *meta* to 'ordinary' activities like aggressing or kissing, but especially, it is *meta* to the activity of defining. In playing, we are fluidly changing definitions of things: the piece of rubber is a sword, the sword is a penis, ad infinitum (2009: 15).

Nachmanovitch highlights one of the most useful and innovative features of Bateson's reading of play: by being a meta-message exchanged among players — either human or animal — it automatically re-shapes all other messages and signals. A piece of rubber may become a sword exactly because the frame of play allows for a shift in denotation: within this frame every message (e.g. 'this is a piece of rubber') is complemented by a meta-message ('this is play') that transforms its denotative status ('this is a piece of rubber that *stands for* a sword').

In this article I will try to analyse the message 'this is video game play' by discussing the specific framing that it creates around the practice of interacting procedurally with certain pieces of software. Consistently with Bateson's work on play, I will not conclude with a definition of video game play, but rather try to propose a hypothesis on what video game play is about.

Open and closed play

Play theories of the XX Century are peculiarly sparse and idiosyncratic; critical approaches to human play may be found in the works of philosophers (Fink, 1988; Gadamer, 2004), anthropologists (Geertz, 1973), sociologists (Caillois, 2001) psychologists (Piaget, 1999; Vygotsky, 1966) and other notable intellectuals working across disciplines. Despite the variety of approaches and theoretical tools adopted in the study of play, for the purpose of this article, theories of play and games may be roughly divided into two extended families. On the one hand theories that advocate 'open play' understand the ludic activity as a liberating, creative, spontaneous one. Bernie DeKoven (2002), for instance, derives such a stance from his work with the New Games Movement (Flugelman,

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[1] Bateson himself playfully downplays the paradoxical quality of his theory when he writes that «all that we learn from such a criticism is that it would be bad natural history to expect the mental processes and communicative habits of mammals to conform to the logician's ideal» (1972: 180).

1976), an art collective born out of the American west coast counter-cultural scene, that aimed at contrasting the dominant paradigm of play found in professional sports and competitive games with free form, paradoxical games that highlighted play's creative and irreducible nature. Such theories — instances of which can be found in the work of psychologists such as Winnicott (2005) but also in texts imbued with post-modern religious ethos such as Carse's *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986) — claim that games are a more or less legitimate reification of play rather than its natural habitat. On the other hand, rhetorics of 'closed play' see in games – understood primarily as ruled autotelic or paratelic (Waern, 2012) activities — the material support of play. According to Suits (1978), for instance, play consists in pursuing a goal through inefficient means: a definite teleology and a precise reference to means and rules that openly confutes the rhetoric of open play. More radically, Gadamer (2004) describes playing as an act of submission to a set of rules, condensed in the authoritative entity called game. According to Gadamer:

> This suggests a general characteristic of the nature of play that is reflected in playing: all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. [...] The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences where there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself (2004: 106).

When writing about games rather than play, Bateson seems to suggest a third stance, resorting once again to the self-referentiality of the play act. In the recording of a symposium published shortly after his experiment with otters, Bateson (1956) seems to imply that free play — as observed in the otters or in small children, or even in his relation with his psychiatric patients — implies the use of two languages at once: that of denotative communication (embedded in the acts of play) and that of meta-communication (an ongoing meta-discussion about the borders and limitations of play frame). Regulated play — such as that of adult chess players — on the other hand decouples the two, so that meta-communication about the rules of play (how is a pawn supposed to move? What does checkmate mean? Will we play with a handicap?) happens at a different time. I will contend that, due to the unique nature of rules found in digital environments, a specific form of meta-communication is at work when playing a video game. Before moving to the analysis of this set of meta-messages, a clarification of what kind of dialogue is established between the player and the computer is in order.

Video games need computers

A first, introductory, definition of what we mean by video games and how they stand in comparison to other non-computerized games could read: *video games are a peculiar category of games that require the use of a computer to be executed and played*[2]. While

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[2] Here I am using the term 'computer' widely, referring to a number of microprocessor-driven machines and, in the case of early arcade games or home consoles, discrete-circuit based machines.

admittedly simplified, this definition may help us clarify some of the specificities of the medium, by answering a number of questions about what video games are and the kind of relationship they entertain with the player. Video games are games upheld by a machine that creates a cybernetic loop with its interactor. The machine is in charge of establishing and executing the rules of the game, that are inscribed within the code that it hosts and runs. This communicative loop between a human interactor and a machine is often defined as *interactive*. This definition has been challenged several times in game studies for being too wide and unspecific (Aarseth 1997; Moulthrop 2004); nevertheless, the notion of *interactive computing* can prove useful in order to highlight the type of messages exchanged between the player and the machine. Paul Dourish (2001) draws a timeline of interaction that allows him to clarify how the history of personal computing has shaped the way users interact with machines and how different styles of interactions have informed the design of computational media. According to Dourish, this sixty year long history of interaction can be divided in four phases: electrical, symbolic, textual and graphical. In discussing the textual phase of human-computer interaction Dourish writes:

> Arguably this is the origin of 'interactive' computing, because textual interfaces also meant appearance of the 'interactive loop', in which interaction became an endless back-and-forth of instruction and response between user and system. [...] The other significant feature of the textual interface paradigm is that it brought the idea of 'interaction' to the fore. Textual interaction drew upon language much more explicitly than before, and at the same time it was accompanied by a transition to a new model of computing, in which a user would actually sit in front of a computer terminal, entering commands and reading responses. With this combination of language use and direct interaction, it was natural to look on the result as a 'conversation' or 'dialogue' (Dourish, 2001: 10).

By characterizing this model of interaction as a conversation or dialogue, Dourish seems to refer to the process of tightening of the command/response loop involving the user and the computer. While before textual interaction all commands had to be instructed to the machine beforehand, this new configuration made the command/response dialogue immediate. In other words, with the advent of textual interaction, users started dealing more radically and deeply with the cybernetic functioning of computers, becoming an active part within an iterative feedback loop.

The possibility for video games to generate a real-time cybernetic loop with their interactors poses a challenge for semiotics as well. What kind of textual consistency and stability may be found in video games? How is play connected to interpretation and hermeneutics? In 1997 Espen Aarseth introduced the notion of *cybertext*; Aarseth's cybertexts are a category of texts — based for the most part in digital media — that need to be at least partly actualized by the user, who interacts with the text and, in turn, receives a piece of feedback from it. The Norwegian scholar uses the *I Ching*, a Chinese oracular text, and Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* as examples of early analog cybertexts, and then discusses a

number of computer games such as *Adventure* (William Crowther, 1976) and *Lemmings* (DMA Design, 1991), implicitly admitting that the computer environment is inherently more suited for the production and consumption of such texts³. Aarseth then describes the type of relation that is established between a cybertext and its user as *ergodic*; Aarseth defines the concept as follows: «in ergodic literautre, *nontrivial* effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text» (Aarseth, 1997: 1, my italics). By defining the effort of the reader as *nontrivial* Aarseth manages to set apart a specific kind of interaction from a more generic understanding of the term; to Aarseth, while all texts require an effort to be traversed, for a text to be considered ergodic, this effort must be nontrivial. While most of Aarseth's essay is formalistic in nature and employs clear cut categories and taxonomies, his notion of *nontriviality* is certainly more nuanced and vague. According to Aarseth:

> [W]hile some signification systems, such as painted pictures and printed books, exist on only one material level (i.e. the level of paint and canvas, or of ink and paper), others exist on two or more levels, as a book being read aloud (ink-paper *and* voice-soundwaves) or a moving picture being projected (the film strip *and* the image on the silver screen). In these latter cases, the relationship between the two levels may be termed *trivial*, as the transformation from one level to the other (what we might call the secondary sign production) will always be, if not deterministic, then at least dominated by the material authority of the first level (1997: 40).

Here Aarseth posits a separation between the text as an existing object in itself (e.g. ink and paper) and the text as an actualized experienced (e.g. a novel being read aloud). While reading a book aloud constitutes a trivial form of interaction with a text, completing a graphic adventure game requires the user to actively engage in a competition *against* the text, which poses itself as openly *reluctant*. Aarseth's idea of *nontrivial interaction* allows us to define what turns computational artifacts into computer mediated games. Interacting playfully with a computer, in other words, constitutes a kind of practice in which the player plays *against* her computerized partner, which acts as a reluctant entity. In interacting with a video game, the player needs to engage in a series of simultaneous cognitive acts; as noted by Arsenault and Perron (2009), video game play encompasses a hermeneutic reading of the game, performed in order to decode its semiotic stimuli, and a heuristic exploration that requires the player to actively contrast the game's antagonism.

The laws of video games

The working definition of video game that I have proposed led me to conclude that a very primitive understanding of video game play may read: *playing a video game means interacting with a procedural computerized system that exerts an antagonistic force on the*

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³ Stéphane Vial (2013) elegantly refers to this 'affinity' between cybertextuality and computers as *ludogénéité*, that is the suitability of computers to uphold rules and procedures used in games.

user. In order to approach the question of the specific frame established by the meta-message 'This is video game play', it is necessary to discuss the nature and extent of the antagonism exerted by the game upon the player. As I have stated earlier, video game rules are embedded within the code executed by the hosting machine; in other words: «la machine s'occupe du respect des règles, des calculs nécessaires et assure ainsi une forme d'objectivité ou de neutralité du terrain de jeu. [...] L'univers du jeu prend corps à travers la logique de la machine» (Triclot, 2011: 33). These hard-coded rules regulate both systemic traits such as the physics found in the artificial environment offered to the player or the way light reflects on different surfaces, and game-specific metrics, such as the stamina of a given character or the succession of turns in a real-time strategy game. Every aspect of the inner functioning of the game is demanded to the rules inscribed within the game code, so much so that scholars such as Liebe (2008) claim that video games contain no rules in the traditional sense, since what could be considered a rule in an analog game, is merely a sub-set of a larger set of machine operations in the computational logic of video games. According to Liebe

> In the computer game all possible actions are implemented in the (formal) software code. Consequently, the restrictive nature of rules does not apply to computer games in that sense; as action possibilities first have to be provided by the computer game program before they may be performed. While in traditional games players can spontaneously improvise on the gaming material and potentially do a lot more than the rules of the game would allow, in computer games the player could not do anything at all if the rules and the game space were not defined in the software (2008: 337).

In video games rules are final and unmodifiable. Or, to say it with Bateson, they are not subjected to any meta-linguistic operation; players have no means of *discussing* the rules outside the configurative spaces allowed by the code. In a video game such as *FIFA 14* (Electronic Arts, 2013), players can configure a large number of options — from the weather conditions to the strictness of the referee — but are able to do so only within the context of the meta-rule represented by the game code. Players will not be able to replace the goal posts with a pile of t-shirts — like one would do in a friendly soccer match in a park — because such option is not present in the code. Similarly not even the most transgressive player will have Lara Croft cross the threshold of a Venetian palace in *Tomb Raider 2* (Core Design, 1997). On these premises, DeLeon claims that «[r]ules in computer games are more like laws of physics, rules in non-computer games are more like laws of society» (2013: 1), implying that the hard-coded rules of a video game cannot be discussed within the frame of the game (although they can be altered by modifying the code), while rules in non-computer games hold the potential for iterative changes.

Characterizing video game rules as final and authoritative – to the point of questioning their nature of rules and resorting to the idea of laws — is one of the main evidences in support of what could be called a disruptive theory of video games. In other words, the situation in which humans play with (or against) computerized machines

generates a specific kind of asymmetry: one of the two players — the machine — is responsible for both upholding and executing the whole of the rules of the game, while the other — the player — is subjected to this rules and cannot engage in any meta-linguistic operation regarding the language of the game[4]. The exceptionality of this situation when compared to 'traditional play' has been noted, among others, by scholars associated with the theoretical school of proceduralism. According to proceduralists the processes of meaning-making stimulated by the interaction with video games emerge from the confrontation between the game's hard-coded rules and limits and the player's subjective understanding of those rules. In other words, proceduralists recognize the inherent asymmetry of video game play and locate the expressive potential offered by video games to designer and the hermeneutic agency afforded to the players within the very iniquity presented by playing with unmodifiable rules. Ian Bogost's research (2006; 2007) moves from this assumption in order to understand how video games can convey meaning through rules and procedures. Bogost defines *configuration* the operations that the player executes within the procedural environment of a video game; in other words, according to Bogost facing a procedural medium means choosing which procedures need to be actualized from time to time or, using the terminology proposed by N. Katherine Hayles' (1999), determining a subjective pattern within randomness. In evoking subjectivity as a defining trait of gameplay, Bogost refers to the fact that playing a video game means approaching «the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work» (2007: 42). A more radical reading of this communicative asymmetry is offered by German media scholar Claus Pias (2011), who claims that «[a] game program is thus not only a set of instructions, a kind of law code for the world of the particular game, that I have the duty to follow when I am in the company of computers, but at the same time also a police agent that precisely monitors my actions» (Pias, 2011: 179). For Pias, there is no such thing as an 'open' computer game, since at the material level of code, certain actions cannot be executed within the environment provided by the machine. Pias' discourse interestingly shifts the location of the inherent *closedness* of computer games from their procedural nature to their computational nature. Computer games are not closed because their rules are authoritative and final, but rather, and more radically, because the platform that executes them inflexibly upholds the operations of a code, the very material computer games are made of. In other words, «[c]omputer games are a plea in favor of the material intransigence of the concrete found in 'games'» (Pias 2011, p. 181). While not a proceduralist by any stretch of the imagination, Pias indirectly validates the theory according to which the act of playing a video game should be read as an act of playing *with* and *against* an inflexible set of rules rather than *despite* them.

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[4] It should be noted that this theory applies mostly to single-player games, since in multiplayer games processes of negotiation and emergent rule systems can be often observed.

This is video game play

Bateson's account of the decoupling of play and meta-communication in ruled games seems to allude to a process of impoverishment that the rigidness of rules acts upon the frame of play. In other words, the more play is constricted within an institutional game, the less relevant and effective the meta-communicative frame becomes. Otters playing with a piece of paper need to constantly re-negotiate the boundaries and limits of the psychological frame established by the message 'this is play', while chess players are acting within a rigid frame that requires little negotiation. This interpretation of Bateson's stance on games and play could lead us to conclude that video games contain no play at all, since their rules are non negotiable and the potential construction of a psychological frame supported by the human player would eventually be nullified by the rigidness of her digital antagonist. Nevertheless, I contend that a meta-message such as 'this is video game play' is created not despite, but because of the peculiar nature of video game rules. More specifically, I will contend, with Nachmanovitch, that since playing is always «meta to» (Nachmanovitch, 2009: 15) something, playing a video game is meta to, or about, authority and bureaucracy. In other words, while the rigidness of video game rules seems to nullify the possibility of a psychological frame akin to that of free play, within which denotation floats constantly, I will argue that that same rigidness is the object of an ongoing meta-discourse on authority in which video game play is entangled. The message 'this is video game play' may just mean 'we are now playing with authority'.

In his books *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost (2007: 5-7) presents a case in which the authoritative nature of computational procedures is evident . Bogost proposes the case of someone who buys a defective DVD player and returns it to the store after the warranty period has expired. While at a retail store human clerks may decide to arbitrarily extend the warranty period in order to avoid commotion or with the intent of offering a better service, a computerized agent — for example the return and refund system of an on-line retailer — will enforce its computerized procedures and refuse to refund the product. Bogost claims that the computerized systems act as impassible bureaucrats enforcing what Weber defined as the «iron cage» (Weber, 1930: 181) of bureaucracy, a rationalist mechanized machine that exercises its power through procedures. Bogost concludes his account of authoritative procedures claiming that more human-centric forms of design may be applied in order to loosen the yoke of digital bureaucracy. As an example, Bogost speculates that

> the computer system might also recall the customer's previous purchases, forgoing the cutoff policy for frequent buyers. It might even reason about the customer's future purchases based on a predictive model of future buying habits of similar customers. We think of computers as frustrating, limiting, and simplistic not because they execute processes, but because they are frequently programmed to execute simplistic processes. (Bogost, 2007: 7)

Bogost's use of the Weberian concept of the iron cage is central, since it implicates the closed nature of procedural systems. The refund and return system of the on-line

retailer may be expanded in order to encompass more human-centered procedures, but its closed nature of upholder and executor of rules will remain. The iron cage only gets slightly larger. In Weber's word, the change is in «the intensity of the administration» (Weber, 1946: 212), not in its nature. While Bogost's claim that a more nuanced design of the computational procedures connected to mundane tasks would make our relation with technology less infuriating is certainly valid, one should ask whether it is precisely their authoritative nature that makes video games play-able objects. Or, once again with Weber, it is possible to speculate that video game play arises from the consciousness of an asymmetrical confrontation, where «[t]he bureaucratic structure goes hand in hand with the concentration of the material means of management in the hands of the master» (Weber, 1946: 221).

Video game players engage in playful activities with and within procedural systems. As noted by Murray (1997) and Bogost (2006), procedurality is not exclusive to computer games; most computational media ask their interactors to initiate or respond to different procedures. An ATM machine or an e-commerce website are navigated through subsequent procedures, based on precise rules. What video games do is reframe these procedures as playful or, to stick with Aarseth's terminology, as *nontrivial*. While in the writing of Pias (2011) and other media theorists this affinity between everyday computational artifacts and video games is portrayed as a tool to build a completely subservient player, who *does her duty*, I argue that engaging critically through play with the very procedures that govern much of our lives is a complex and heuristically relevant activity, and may in fact be what *video game play is about*. If play is always about something or, rather, is contained within a psychological frame that makes it *meta* to other activities, one might contend that engaging playfully with a digital games means building a frame around the iron cage of digital bureaucracy. If the playful nip denotes the bite, then the playful subservience to computational procedures *denotes* — and at the same time *is about* — the daily interaction with the bureaucratic authority of computational machines. In this perspective, the player of a video game, possibly more than the theorist, is herself a procedural critic, who navigates and interprets sets of arbitrary rules upheld by a computational system that often acts in opposition to her actions. While most video games will attempt at naturalising this interaction, by constructing seemingly unbound, open worlds, players will eventually encounter — by accident or on purpose — the limitations of those worlds, experiencing the authority of game code. Being a player of video games does not consist in exploiting a *possibility space*, as argued by proponents of a theory of open play, but rather in exploring the *impossibilities* of a designed system, its borders and limits, the idiosyncrasies of its rules in order to play with — and about — authority. It is this very authority that video game players — possibly the real ludologists — consciously choose to confront.

Recent video games such as *Every Day The Same Dream* (Molleindustria, 2009) and *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), by presenting highly bureaucratized environments for players to navigate and interact with, seem to stand as commentary pieces on the player's role as interactor of an authoritarian machine. In the next paragraph I will propose

a reading of Pope's game that highlights its self-reflexivity and characterizes it not only as an acute reflection on the inherent violence of bureaucracy but, more specifically, as a commentary on the very act of playing a video game.

Papers, please: a meta-game

Papers, Please is an independent video game for Windows and Mac OS designed by Lucas Pope and released in August 2013. The game casts the player in the role of a custom agent who is in charge of guarding one of the borders of the fictional republic of Arstotzka. *Papers, Please* is divided into two parts: the core of the game consists in reviewing and confronting documents that potential immigrants supply while crossing the border. This activity is performed by the player during her workday, a timed section of the game that ends abruptly at the end of the player's shift. After every workday the player is required to manage her finances. The player receives five credits for every immigrant that she manages to screen successfully and can then use the currency to attend to a series of trivial tasks: buying food and medicines for her family, paying the rent and other bills and upgrading her booth. The player can also amass credits through bribes and other illicit sources of income. The game is programmed in a rather crude pixel art style and contains few auditory clues: an anthem-like march and a series of unintelligible mutterings that stand for concise sentences such as «have your documents ready», «glory to Arstotzka!» and the eponymous «papers, please!» that the player commands to every potential immigrant.

According to a reviewer «*Papers, Please* is about freedom» (Edge, 2013). More specifically, it is about freedom within the context of a highly bureaucratized society where the player functions as a small cog in a relentless bureaucratic mechanism. If one is to support this claim, Pope's aesthetic characterization of the game becomes of extreme relevance; the republic of Arstotzka is portrayed unequivocally as subjected to a socialist regime. From the martial insignia to the rather bleak anthem, from the Russian-sounding name of Arstotzka and its neighboring countries to the uniforms of custom officers, aesthetic and contextual details seem to indicate that Pope locates Arstotzka behind the iron curtain. While constructing the game as a political critique of the bureaucratized violence of oppressive regimes is not uncalled for, one could contend that the lack of historical contextual factors and the relative simplicity of the simulated procedures make for a rather weak political stance. When interviewed by the libertarian magazine «Reason», Pope himself seems to suggest a different reading of his game:

> I'm an American living in Japan and pass through international airport immigration a couple times per year. After a few times of this, I paid extra attention to what the immigration inspector was doing. The shuffling of papers and documents/computer screen correlating looked interesting and I thought there could be a fun game there. Thinking about it more, I was excited by the idea of approaching this subject from a non-traditional direction. In popular media you've always got the hero spy sneaking through

checkpoints but wouldn't it be cool to play the guy on the other side? Instead of letting the super-spy slip through, you can be the one to throw him in prison (Shackford, 2013).

Pope alludes to a reversal of roles: while the typical hero of video games is alone against an army of enemies, *Papers, Please's* unremarkable white collar clerk is part of that army[5]. Pope's game introduces what Foucault (1974) defines the process of *examen*, the authority derived from monitoring, within the practice of video game play. While usually players are asked to exert more or less arbitrary justice over a number of foes, the protagonist of *Papers, Please* administers a different kind of authority: not that of the punishment, but rather that of the screening. Whereas action video games usually empower the player with the authority to punish their enemies (customarily by killing them), Pope's game bureaucratizes the player by granting her the power to examine the immigrants. Thus, a second, possibly more interesting, hermeneutic approach to Pope's work may contend that *Papers, Please* is a reflection upon the role of the hero in video games and its relation with power and the exercise of power.

The idea of reversal is central to a third interpretative hypothesis that I contend is the most relevant to Pope's work. *Papers, Please* is not (or not only) a critique of highly bureaucratized, oppressive societies, nor it is a reflection on the agency of the player, but rather it is a game about playing video games, that inverts the role of the player and the machine. In Pope's game the player is required to act as precisely and efficiently as possible. When immigrants approach her booth and supply their documents, the player needs to arrange the documents on her desk in such a way that visual confrontation of data — possibly the main mode of interaction in *Papers, Please* — is made possible. Day after day, the player is asked to conform to ever growing safety measures that make for a multiplication of documents — ID cards, passports, entry visas, diplomatic permits, etc. —which forces her to juggle with papers on her desk in order to complete the confrontation process. A process of constant cluttering that rapidly becomes one of the central aesthetic features of the game. The player needs to adapt rapidly to ever changing procedures and develop modes of confrontation that make for exact and fast responses. In this regards, the game seems to grant the player two distinct sets of operations, that can be defined, using Wilden's (1972) terminology, analogue and digital. After receiving the documents the player can perform a series of analogue actions – that is actions that are not inherently dualistic and discrete. The player can choose to arrange her desk in various fashions, can place the passport under the stamp in different ways, and can return the documents to the immigrant in any order. The player must also perform a series of digital operations — that is discrete operations that bear consequences of dualistic nature. She can highlight a discrepancy, force the immigrant to supply fingerprints by pressing a button and, finally approve or deny the entrance to Arstotzka to the immigrant. While analogue operations will not bear any consequence on the game state (for example the

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[5] This same approach to game design, that reverses the role of the player, from the idealized all-conquering hero to an unremarkable foe, is present in Stefano Gualeni's experimental game *Necessary Evil* (2013).

player can choose to stamp the entry permit anywhere on the passport without affecting the outcome), digital operations are relevant to the advancement of the game. The player income depends on the correct assessment of the eligibility of immigrants and on the exact correlation of data found in their documents through the 'examine' function, that allows the player to highlight specific pieces of information. In other words, the player apparently operates in the analogue realm, but is forced to make digital, inherently dualistic decisions: accept or deny the immigrant's request, scan or detain them. On the other hand, the computer-controlled immigrants display a wide array of behaviors: some will have no documents at all, others will forget to supply some, some will try to bribe the player, while others will try to smuggle weapons. Computer-controlled characters, usually defined non-playing characters, or NPC, are paradoxically cast as the players in the game of bureaucracy.

The reversal of roles evoked by Pope seems to be even more radical than the author claims it to be. The player is cast in a role that is not only unusual for a video game, but that is the exact reverse of the role of a player of video games. In *Papers, Please* the player acts as a computer, performing a series of simultaneous and integrated procedures based upon a set of rules; she is forced to act digitally, exercising a form of bureaucratic authority (that is upholding and enforcing a set of rules) that we previously attributed to the computational procedures executed by the computer. On the other hand, computerized characters simulate the quirks and idiosyncrasies of human behavior and act against or around those same rules. To say it with Bateson, if video game play is about authority, *Papers, Please* is about the authority that video game play is about.

Conclusions

In this paper I have proposed an application of Bateson's theory on play to the peculiar form of play that is found in video games. I have claimed that video games exercise a specific form of authority upon the player — that of a *digital bureaucracy* upheld by computational procedures —thus negating any form of meta-linguistic dialogue. Rules in video games cannot be discussed, negotiated or changed on the fly. I have contended that it is precisely this rigidness that creates play in video games: playing a video game means confronting, acting against and reflecting upon the very notion of authority, thus *playing* with authoritarian systems and processes found in 'real' life. Finally, I have proposed a reading of Lucas Pope's video game *Papers, Please* that characterizes the game as a meta-analysis of video game play. Notably, Pope's game casts the player in the role of a custom agent who needs to adapt to new laws being passed, ever changing custom rules and modification in the geopolitical scenario. By *representing* procedures (in the form of a paradoxically complex bureaucratic system) instead of merely *executing* them, *Papers, Please* externalizes the critical potential of the role of the player in video games. The methodologies and tools used in this article are based in the tradition of procedurality, but are revised in the light of an understanding of video games as machines through which it is possible to play with, around, and about authority. ✐

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