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« Constructing a Dystopian Narrative Through Reading in *'Papers, Please'* and *'Orwell'* »

Annika Elstermann (Heidelberg University)

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## **Résumé**

Cet article analyse la construction d'une narration dans deux jeux vidéo dystopiques récents : *Papers, Please* (2013) et *Orwell* (2016). Il examine en particulier la dynamique entre lire et jouer et comment le lecteur est immergé dans l'histoire en participant activement au discours narratif. Nous étudierons l'effet que cela a non seulement sur les rôles traditionnels du narrateur, du lecteur et du protagoniste mais aussi sur la perception de la narration.

## **Mots-clés**

Fiction dystopique, narratologie, jeux vidéo, réception, lecture interactive

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the construction of a narrative in two recent dystopian video games: *Papers, Please* (2013) and *Orwell* (2016). In particular, it examines the dynamic between reading and gaming, and how the reader is immersed in the story through active participation in the narrative discourse. The effect that this has not only on traditional roles of narrator, reader, and character, but also on the perception of the narrative will be investigated.

## **Keywords**

Dystopian fiction, narratology, video games, reader response, interactive reading

But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. [...] 'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past'<sup>1</sup>.

In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, reality is a construct that is negotiable by those in power. When the Party speaks of controlling the past, that of course implies controlling history, specifically the historical narrative and thus the means of retrospective identity construction and justification of all present and future actions. The construction of and control through a historical narrative is a recurring motif in dystopian fiction, and contemporary instances are no exception.

In recent years, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has inspired a number of re-adaptations of the novel's prominent themes – surveillance, nationalism, oppressive regimes, control over information, and the overpowering of the individual. Two of those adaptations are the video games *Papers, Please: A Dystopian Document Thriller*, developed by Lucas Pope and published through 3909 in August 2013<sup>2</sup>, and *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, developed and released by Surprise Attack Games and Osmotic Studios in October 2016<sup>3</sup>. Both *Papers, Please* and *Orwell* place the player<sup>4</sup> in a simulative environment where they perform as an operative in a dystopian regime starting their first day on the job. These games lend themselves particularly well to literary analysis as they rely almost exclusively on textual artefacts and reading for the transmission of information. Additionally, the gameplay in both is structured into segments by days, similarly to chapters in a novel. *Orwell* presents its narrative in five episodes, each covering one day, whereas *Papers, Please* is divided into up to thirty-one days with a recurring daily routine<sup>5</sup>.

The narration in these games, particularly in *Orwell*, is not presented to the reader in a linear way. Rather, much of it needs to be pieced together and inferred retrospectively from various documents that the player handles within the game, and a narrative emerges during the continuous process of reading and connecting individual fragments of information. Neither of the two games features a clearly defined protagonist, either. Since we view the games' events through the respective player character's eyes, that character is never seen in *Orwell* and only visible in one picture in *Papers, Please* and has few if any discernible characteristics, allowing

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<sup>1</sup> ORWELL G., *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Penguin, 2000 [1949], p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> POPE L., *Papers, Please*, <papersplea.se>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

<sup>3</sup> SURPRISE ATTACK GAMES, *Orwell*, Website, < orwellgame.com>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'player' and 'reader' will both be used in the context of this paper to refer to the real-life recipient of the story. The plural 'they' will be used as a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to this recipient.

<sup>5</sup> These segments will be referred to when citing from either game directly or indirectly.

for, and to an extent even necessitating, a projection of the player's own identity onto this role.

This paper will examine how the functions of narrator, character, and reader are distributed between the player, the respective game's content, and the game mechanics. Throughout the analysis, a particular focus will be placed on the peculiar dynamic of reading and gaming to show how this diffusion of narratological responsibility can change the perception of a narrative, and what effects this might achieve particularly in the context of dystopian fiction.

*Papers, Please* is set in the fictional communist state<sup>6</sup> of Arstotzka, where the player character is instated as an inspector at a border checkpoint which has recently been reopened after six years of war against the neighbouring country of Kolechia. The game takes place in late 1982 and employs a pixel graphics aesthetic reminiscent of 1980s video games. The player's interface consists mainly of the inspector's booth at the checkpoint, where the player character, who is referred to as male in *Papers, Please*, handles documents, sees the respective entrant sitting across from him, and is reminded of the passing time by a small clock. The top third of the screen is taken up by a bird's eye live overview of the checkpoint. Here, the player observes the endless queue, witnesses terrorist bombings when they occur, and can see the armed guards removing those entrants that the player chooses to detain.

The basic gameplay is fairly formulaic: The player character is assigned the task of ensuring that only entrants whose papers are in order are admitted into the country. To that end, the player needs to check documents provided by the prospective entrants for compliance with the current rules. These rules governing admittance change from day to day as a consequence of events narrated via different in-game documents. A polio epidemic that is reported on in the daily newspaper over several days<sup>7</sup>, for example, first leads to an entry ban from the affected country<sup>8</sup>, which is subsequently replaced by obligatory proof of vaccination by all entrants<sup>9</sup>. Following a terrorist attack on Day 2, the headline in *The Truth of Arstotzka* mentions that "Kolechian Agitators" are under suspicion<sup>10</sup>. After the second bombing on Day 6, which is reported in the newspaper with the subheading "Suicide Bomber Slips Through Security<sup>11</sup>", security measures are tightened: The inspector must now ensure that entrants carry no weapons or contraband (by confirming that the weight in their documents matches the

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<sup>6</sup> POPE L., "Frequently Asked Questions", *Papers, Please*, Website, <papersplea.se>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

<sup>7</sup> POPE L., *Papers, Please: A Dystopian Document Thriller*, 3909 LLC, 2013, Days 23-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 7.

weight indicated by the scale in the checkpoint booth). Additionally, linking this second bombing back to the suspected "Kolechian Agitators" from *The Truth of Arstotzka*, the inspector is informed via Official Bulletin that "Kolechian extremists" are suspected in yesterday's bombing" and that all Kolechians must be searched before their entry can be approved. In the character's interaction with entrants from Kolechia, these suspicions are not voiced. Instead, the inspector tells them: "You have been selected for a random search. Face the scanner<sup>12</sup>." An image as though by a full-body scanner is produced of the respective entrant.

In *Papers, Please*, information is received via various channels, and the narrative occurs on different levels. In broad strokes, these can be separated into the narrative that is centred on the inspector, i.e. the actions of the player character within his daily routine and the events such as terrorist attacks that he observes directly in as far as they affect him, which corresponds to the extradiegetic narrative in Genette's model<sup>13</sup>; and the events that are reported and narrated within that extradiegetic narrative via different text artefacts – events that he does not directly experience, but is informed about, which corresponds to the intradiegetic narrative. An entirely clear distinction between the two cannot be maintained, though, as will be shown in due course.

Information is mostly transmitted via newspaper headlines, Ministry Bulletins, the rulebook, notes and letters passed to the inspector by entrants, and the information that entrants reveal when they speak to the player character – which, as all dialogue, is not actually voice acted, but presented to the player as written text. These micro-narrations include personal stories, the nature and duration of their visit, wishes and pleas, family relationships, and past events. A coherent narrative only truly emerges when individual pieces of information are viewed in a causal connection to one another.

Though this also holds true for storytelling in *Orwell*, assembling a narrative is much more at the forefront of *Orwell* than it is in *Papers, Please*. In fact, it is ingrained into the player character's position as an investigator in the newly launched nationwide security system called Orwell. Within the game, this system is described as a means for "crowdsourced surveillance of the web as a whole<sup>14</sup>". Investigators read documents and distil the information they deem relevant into open files in so called "datachunks<sup>15</sup>", i.e. bits of information taken from their context and sorted in a way that allows them to be read as seemingly objective facts.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 7.

<sup>13</sup> GENETTE G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by J. Lewin, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> OSMOTIC STUDIOS, *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, Surprise Attack Games, 2016, Episode 5 (conversation between initiate and w1n5t0n on initiate's desktop).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Episode 1.

Where *Papers, Please* commits to the Cold War aesthetic, *Orwell* is firmly situated in 2017. Information can be retrieved from online news reports, websites, social media profiles, online chats, emails, calls of people under investigation (and thus under surveillance), blog posts, medical records, criminal records, remote access to personal computers, online banking accounts, etc. Additional information about the Orwell-system and events in the ongoing investigation is occasionally provided by the adviser, the player character's assigned partner in the investigation, and the one person within the game who can communicate with the investigator from the beginning – though this is a one-way communication channel; the investigator cannot reply<sup>16</sup>.

The adviser, initially a man called Symes, does not have access to the detailed information that the investigator can read, but only to those datachunks that the player has deemed relevant enough to upload to the Orwell-system. Symes can access those files directly, and he is the one who decides which course of action to take based on the investigator's assembled information. However, the adviser has no way of knowing which context these datachunks were extracted from, or which information the investigator decided to discard or withhold, and for what reasons. At the same time, however, it is crucial to note that the player is not entirely in control of the information they can access or pass on into the file either. The game's mechanics determine at which point new documents are made available to the investigator. Within the storyworld of *Orwell*, this is explained in an ethical codex that Goldfels, one of the narration's central characters, outlined about three years before the launch of the Orwell-system and the game's primary *now* in an attempt to secure a minimum of privacy protection:

The discovery of new documents shall be restricted to those on which a 'target person' can be identified beyond any doubt, and similar data to the already contained can be detected. The investigator must be prohibited from 'browsing' the web freely, even from public pages. There shall be no distinction between public documents and privately accessible ones<sup>17</sup>.

And, in his private notes:

Searching for new source documents shall be restricted to where such 'target persons' appear. Only after thorough consideration by the adviser and the administrative staff can a person be considered a 'target.' This should reduce the damage done to privacy to an absolute minimum<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> In *Orwell*, Episode 4, the adviser expresses some rare resentment over this fact.

<sup>17</sup> OSMOTIC STUDIOS, *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, Surprise Attack Games, 2016, Episode 5 (note on Goldfels' computer: CODEX\_DRAFT\_0012A\_4.dcmnt).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Episode 5 (note on Goldfels' computer: notes\_august2014.dcmnt).

Narrative gaps and imprecision are thus built into the game's mechanics by design; practically every character in *Orwell* is a narrator, and most of them are unreliable to varying degrees<sup>19</sup> in the persona they create and present in different contexts. Since there is an in-game explanation for these circumstances, a disconnect between the player and the player character need not take place at this point: they both experience the gap in the same way – and they both have a similar interest in closing it. New documents are made available when there is a connection to either a "target person", i.e. a suspect, or to a datachunk that the investigator has uploaded to the Orwell-system. In order to acquire enough information to construct a reliable narrative, then, the investigator (and by extension the reader) must continue actively participating in the surveillance by passing data to the adviser.

In both games, the reader is coerced into making decisions, albeit by different means. For the player character in *Orwell*, not much is at stake on an extradiegetic level. The investigator is recruited from a country outside The Nation and works remotely, so there is a significant degree of personal detachment. If the reader were to stop making decisions – i.e. uploading datachunks, particularly when presented with conflicting information – then the intradiegetic narrative would stall. Pressure on the player to submit to the rules of the game, and simultaneously on the character to submit to the rules of the surveillance state, is enacted via a human urge to find out what the story is, to solve the problem of an incomplete narrative<sup>20</sup>. While curiosity outweighs ethical concerns, the reader's cooperation with the oppressive regime can continue – reluctantly, perhaps, but nonetheless the story is advanced. The atmosphere created by the game's light colours and soothing instrumental background music also fosters this curiosity and invites the player to take the time to read comprehensively and find out more information.

The reader is able to take this time since in *Orwell*, though the five episodes represent five days (13 to 17 April 2017) and the end of an episode is narrated as the end of a work day, time does not pass in the same way as it does in *Papers, Please*. Rather, the story is designed to progress to a certain point within each episode, and the day ends only when that point has been reached, no matter how long this takes in actual played time.

In *Papers, Please* on the other hand, the in-game clock is constantly visible, reminding the player of the pressure to keep working. The inspector does not receive stable pay for the twelve

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. PORTER ABBOT H., "How Do We Read What Isn't There to Be Read?: Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps", ZUNSHINE L. (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> HERMAN D., "Stories as a Tool for Thinking", *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, Chicago, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003, p. 163.



hours he has worked, but for how many entrants he has approved or denied and at the end of each working day, expenses (rent, heat, food) need to be covered. The inspector has a family who will fall sick and die if he is unable to provide. Apart from moral concerns on the level of the character and emotional involvement, this also has pragmatic repercussions for the player: If the inspector's family dies, he has failed as a citizen of Arstotzka, and the game ends prematurely. The game mechanics thus compel the player to handle as many entrants as possible in one day – which is complicated as the narration progresses due to the increasingly complex rule system and the number of documents that need to be checked per entrant. These circumstances can tempt the player to strictly follow the rules rather than focus on the intradiegetic narratives, for example in the form of personal stories told by entrants, but this too becomes progressively harder as the inspector is actively involved in various plotlines, mixing the extra- and intradiegetic narrative threads. Furthermore, the story in *Papers, Please* continues whether the player actively participates in it or not. The player can spend the in-game hours reading the rule book and reviewing entrants' documentation without ever making an active decision. They can likewise choose to ignore the pleas of various entrants as well as the prompts by checkpoint guards<sup>21</sup>, government officials<sup>22</sup>, the daily ministry bulletins, and the secret organisation EZIC<sup>23</sup>. Whether the player decides to act or not, that decision usually needs to be made without knowing the full story, particularly in decisions involving EZIC. And decisions, including the decision to do nothing, generally have significant consequences, more than once the potential death of other characters. The outcome of the inspector's action or inaction is often related back to the reader – in newspaper headlines, via a direct reaction, or as a delayed consequence some days later. Notably, *Papers, Please* has twenty different endings, which underscores the multitude and the significance of choices open to the player.

Even though pressure is generated in very different ways, making decisions is still required in both games. In order to comply, the reader automatically needs to infer information to temporarily fill narrative gaps and ascertain the potential magnitude of the consequences either decision might have. In doing so, the reader creates what H. Porter Abbott calls a "shadow story<sup>24</sup>": a way of filling a narrative gap, temporarily or permanently, with "sensed possibilities of what might be the case, what might link the dots, however likely or unlikely<sup>25</sup>".

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<sup>21</sup> On Day 9, a guard asks the inspector to detain more people and offers him a share of his bonus in return; on Day 25, a different guard asks the inspector to let through the woman he is in love with despite her not having adequate documentation.

<sup>22</sup> POPE L., *Papers, Please: A Dystopian Document Thriller*, 3909 LLC, 2013, Days 12, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g. Days 8, 17, 20, 23, 27.

<sup>24</sup> PORTER ABBOTT H., "How Do We Read What Isn't There to Be Read?: Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps", p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

When a reader consciously or subconsciously constructs such a shadow story to fill a gap, they are not only adding to their own received narrative. According to Wolfgang Iser, "[w]henver the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. [...] Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text<sup>26</sup>". While videogames may not have been what Iser had in mind, his hypothesis of reader response and communication can fruitfully be applied to the concept of an interactive narrative. The reader bases decisions on "shadow stories", and these decisions in turn have consequences that impact the course of the actual, textual narrative. Thus, the reader not only forms their own ideas about the text, but actively influences the way that the narrative is going to progress; they are an active participant in the formation of the plot, not just pragmatically, but also in accordance with established narratological concepts.

In "Stories as a Tool for Thinking", David Herman argues that forming stories to map "mere temporal flux onto patterns of temporal progression<sup>27</sup>", i.e. to make sense of a sequence of events by filling in narrative blanks<sup>28</sup>, is essentially a basic human necessity<sup>29</sup>. For Herman, the ideation of a narrative – specifically the narrative discourse – is a problem-solving strategy, and he lists five different activities for organising events and occurrences into a narrative: "'chunking' experience into workable segments, imputing causal relations between events, managing problems with the 'typification' of phenomena, sequencing behaviors, and distributing intelligence across groups<sup>30</sup>".

This is a precise description of the task assigned to the investigator in *Orwell*, and it is via these activities that the reader can identify and begin to make sense of the narrative, which is presented anachronistically<sup>31</sup>. As has already been implied, the reader is not the only one generating a narrative from received information in *Orwell*. By uploading data into files, the investigator is constructing a narrative for the adviser. This narrative has significant gaps, which the character of the adviser will fill in his own way in order to interpret the information presented to him. Significantly, while the player can generally choose which information to exclude – as long as it is not the next crucial piece of information required to advance the plot – they cannot decide entirely freely which information to put into the file. Only segments that are

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<sup>26</sup> ISER W., *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 169.

<sup>27</sup> HERMAN D., "Stories as a Tool for Thinking", *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Chicago, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. GENETTE G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by J. Lewin, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 35.

pre-selected by the system as potentially relevant datachunks can be uploaded at all. Additionally, the player does not have free access to all available information, but only to that which is deemed relevant in relation to suspects, i.e. those documents made available to the reader by the system. Hence, the narrative the investigator constructs for the adviser is in part restricted by the mechanics of information gathering. The narrative that the reader constructs in their own mind is, of course, far less restricted and informs the decisions that they make as the investigator. This, however, means that the investigator is not entirely in control of the in-game narrative, even though they are in charge of assembling a large portion of it and dismissing irrelevant strands. Essentially, the investigator controls the narrative discourse, while the story is provided by the environment within the game.

The construction of a narrative, particularly the process that both *Orwell* and Herman refer to as "chunking", is viewed very critically within the game. While at first glance, this seems pragmatic – Herman describes the narrative action of chunking as segmenting a stream of events "into units that are bounded, classifiable, and thus more readily recognized and remembered<sup>32</sup>" – it also means taking small bits of information out of one context and placing them in a new one, essentially creating narrative gaps which might later be filled with wrong conjectures and lead to harmful consequences. The Nation and the Orwell-system make the process of chunking appear objective: The investigator is extracting facts, and facts are not themselves subjective. However, the nature in which data is arranged is highly dependent on how the reader filled their own narrative gaps when deciding whether to upload or dismiss a piece of information – and that kind of narrative construction can be a highly subjective process. This "bending of the truth" is repeatedly pointed out and criticised, most explicitly in Goldfels' notes on an early trial run of the supposedly ethical surveillance system:

The investigator somehow managed to convince the adviser that every single person in the test was suspicious. They turned ALL OF THEM into target persons by bending the 'truth' to his [sic] liking. They spied on all of their documents! Persons became labeled without looking at the full picture, without seeing the human being! Nothing works as it was supposed to!<sup>33</sup>

Originally, splitting up the responsibility over conducting research and drawing conclusions from it between two people was intended to ensure that no single entity would hold too much power, that there would always be a disconnect between the raw data and the decision to act on it. As Goldfels comes to realise, though, and as the player can experience first-hand, the

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<sup>32</sup> HERMAN D., "Stories as a Tool for Thinking", *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Chicago, Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003, p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> OSMOTIC STUDIOS, *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, Surprise Attack Games, 2016, Episode 5, note on Goldfels' computer (notes\_november2014.dcmnt).

investigator's power over the narrative discourse is considerable – in a similar vein to the Party's power over the historical narrative in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Using that power is pragmatically unavoidable for both the player and the investigator, considering that a narrative must be constructed in the context of the game.

In the beginning of both games, the character is more of a distant, unaffected observer, a homodiegetic narrator by their position in the story, but certainly not an autodiegetic one<sup>34</sup>. As each game progresses, the respective character is brought closer to the story. The Arstotzkan inspector is faced with progressively more frequent requests and decisions, and the stories related to him by prospective entrants become more elaborate and more personal, frequently involving themes of love, family, children, hope, or revenge, and appealing to the character's emotions. Requests by EZIC also become increasingly direct and demanding. Perhaps the clearest break in *Papers, Please* occurs when the inspector is provided with a gun<sup>35</sup> that can be used during scripted attacks. By involving the character directly in the action, the focus definitively shifts from intradiegetic to extradiegetic narration, and the inspector more clearly takes on the shape of the protagonist.

The whole point of recruiting foreign nationals as Orwell investigators is that they are supposedly impartial<sup>36</sup>, but a similar development to that in *Papers, Please* takes place in *Orwell*. As the reader learns more about the characters under investigation – which is unavoidable considering that the investigation mainly involves looking at their personal lives and social interactions – they potentially begin to empathise with these characters and become aware of the consequences that the investigator's decisions have for those characters. They also have increasingly more information at their disposal to fill narrative blanks, allowing the reader to actively manipulate the narrative that the adviser will infer. The character in *Orwell* is gradually drawn deeper into the story as they, similarly to *Papers, Please*, are made increasingly aware of the consequences their decisions have. The switch from detached organiser of narrative discourse to autodiegetic narrator happens at the latest during the conference call in Episode 5, when Juliet addresses the investigator directly and pleads for their help with her plan for dismantling Orwell. The player still has the choice: The investigator can turn themselves in, look for incriminating evidence on the Secretary of Security in charge of the programme and turn her in, or turn the members of Thought in based on a piece of information taken

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<sup>34</sup> GENETTE G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by J. Lewin, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 245.

<sup>35</sup> A tranquiliser gun on Day 16 and a sniper rifle on Day 23.

<sup>36</sup> OSMOTIC STUDIOS, *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, Surprise Attack Games, 2016, Episode 5, note on Goldfels' computer (notes\_august2014.dcmnt).

completely out of context. As the character is pulled so directly into the narrative, the gameplay takes on a much more performative quality, and the decision of how to end the game becomes a personal one, particularly since the reader has at this point been conditioned by the game to take the consequences of actions and of a narration into account.

If the distinction between reader and narrator is fluid in both games, so is that between the player and the character. In *Papers, Please*, the reader and the character are more easily separated, as a certain distance is built-in. The inspector, for example, interacts with non-player characters in short, pre-scripted conversation over which the player has no influence. He is also identified as male and has a family, and as the game progresses, the reader finds out some additional information, such as the province he is from<sup>37</sup>, the fact that he has a sister<sup>38</sup>, and his son's birthday<sup>39</sup>. While this still does not paint a clear picture, the inspector in *Papers, Please* certainly has much more of a defined shape than the investigator in *Orwell*. A further discrepancy between reader and character is that the inspector, unlike the reader, knows Arstotzka and its history with the neighbouring countries because he grew up there. Consequently, the reader's perceived narrative gaps are much larger than those of the character, and the reader is constantly in a state of information deficit.

The player character in *Orwell* meanwhile is designed in such a way that distinguishing them from the player is significantly harder. The character, as has been pointed out, is recruited from an unspecified outside country to work for The Nation as part of their newly launched surveillance system *Orwell*. They are essentially as foreign to The Nation and as new to *Orwell* as the reader is. It is also implied that the investigator remains in their own country and works remotely<sup>40</sup>.

Where the user interface in *Papers, Please* represents a physical desk within the character's booth, *Orwell's* 2017 workspace is represented as a virtual desktop. From the very beginning, after a brief cutscene sequence, this desktop is all the player sees – so the contents of the character's screen and the player's screen are precisely the same, and all their tasks are the same. Since both the game installed on the player's computer and the security software installed on the character's computer are named "Orwell", there is not even a disconnect in the interface (options such as "logging out" or "exiting" for the day make sense for the character as well as the player). The gameplay itself is also designed in a way that will be intuitive to most

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<sup>37</sup> POPE L., *Papers, Please: A Dystopian Document Thriller*, 3909 LLC, 2013, Day 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Day 19.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. the mention of potential extradition in one of the possible endings in Episode 5.

readers – scrolling through websites, social media timelines, chat logs, etc.

The fourth wall in *Orwell* is slightly blurred to begin with, and it is pushed even further out of focus in the final episode, when the members of the resistance organisation thought that the player character has been investigating address the investigator directly. Particularly because the investigator is not defined at all other than by the reader themselves, this produces an effect that is much more akin to breaking the fourth wall than communication between equal characters within a story. Even within the game's storyworld, these people are still characters in a narrative that the investigator has been compiling, who are now aware that the investigator has turned their lives into a narrative, and address this fact directly. Unlike in *Papers, Please*, the character in *Orwell* never enters into a dialogue with anyone; the investigator cannot reply directly due to the imposed technical limitations. *Orwell* thus ensures that the character's identity very distinctly remains a narrative blank, into which the reader will by necessity project at least some aspect of their personality<sup>41</sup>. In strictly pragmatic terms, the reader and the character are of course distinct entities. A reader could, for example, play this game performing as a character who is extremely loyal to the oppressive regime even if that does not reflect the actual real-life sentiment of the reader. However, the way that *Orwell's* gameplay is constructed is highly conducive to the reader's immersion in the narrative.

The narrative strategies of both games – the constantly required decisions under pressure in *Papers, Please* and the deep immersion of *Orwell* – are elaborate, and in some ways remarkably similar, particularly regarding the significance of narrative gaps and the process of making decisions for the construction of a plot. Considering that both are recent dystopian simulation games, there is likely some shared further significance to the effect these narrative strategies produce.

In Episode 5 of *Orwell*, the reader can access an archived conversation between Goldfels and Juliet, in which Juliet urges him to turn over his incriminating information about the surveillance system to the press. Goldfels replies that this would not lead to any change in public attitude and argues:

[T]here is one thing I've learned out of all of this – people need to see the consequences before they ever learn. They must experience them first hand, or at least see them affect someone they can relate to. Otherwise it is all just an abstract concept. [...] Consequences that happen right before the eyes of the everyday person. Not some report. An event that is going on while everyone is watching<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> ISER W., *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 168.

<sup>42</sup> OSMOTIC STUDIOS, *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, Surprise Attack Games, 2016, Episode 5.

This, of course, is precisely the process the game is designed to achieve. The player begins by reading news reports and conversations as someone who is detached from the whole situation and narrative, until they are drawn into it and made to realise, in several instances, the consequences of their decisions. They are made to relate to the people they are investigating via the insight into their personal lives and relationships, and then are shown the consequences of the narrative the investigator has been constructing and of Orwell in general on those very same people. Through the *de facto* conflation of reader and character in *Orwell*, and Juliet's direct address of the investigator, a greater effect of evoking a sense of responsibility for those consequences can be achieved.

*Papers, Please* places the player in a highly stressful environment – both in terms of the narrative stakes and the pragmatic ones of game mechanics – continuously forces the player to make decisions, and constantly confronts them with the consequences of those decisions. The increasing involvement in the plot despite the narrative disconnect between the reader and the character can effect the realisation that even within an oppressive situation with seemingly insurmountably strict rules, choices are always being made, and they can have far-reaching consequences.

Both games defy traditional game mechanics: There is no objectively right way of 'winning' the game, and both have multiple endings that occur depending on the player's choices. This defiance is more straightforward in *Orwell*, as the game is presented like a simulation, and simulations often do not feature traditional objectives. *Papers, Please* on the other hand offers a clock, a reward system (in the form of monetary compensation for the inspector and praise or scorn by the inspector's supervisor), a framework that resembles a level structure with a routine that is repeated in each instance (i.e. each day), but with increasing difficulty, etc. By making consequences of the player's decisions explicit, however, and by offering a variety of endings, many of which are arguably more satisfying than merely receiving a positive report for thirty-one days of reliable state service, *Papers, Please* subverts the expectations of a traditional game and reinforces all the more strongly the significance of decisions and their consequences.

Neither of these games would succeed in achieving this effect if the reader was not actively involved in the genesis of the narrative. This involvement and immersion is rooted in

the reader's "eventfulness of mind"; their "cognitive busyness"<sup>43</sup> is rooted in the process of reading itself, which is emphasised so significantly in both *Papers, Please* and *Orwell*.

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<sup>43</sup> PORTER ABBOT. H., "How Do We Read What Isn't There to Be Read?: Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps", p. 115.



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