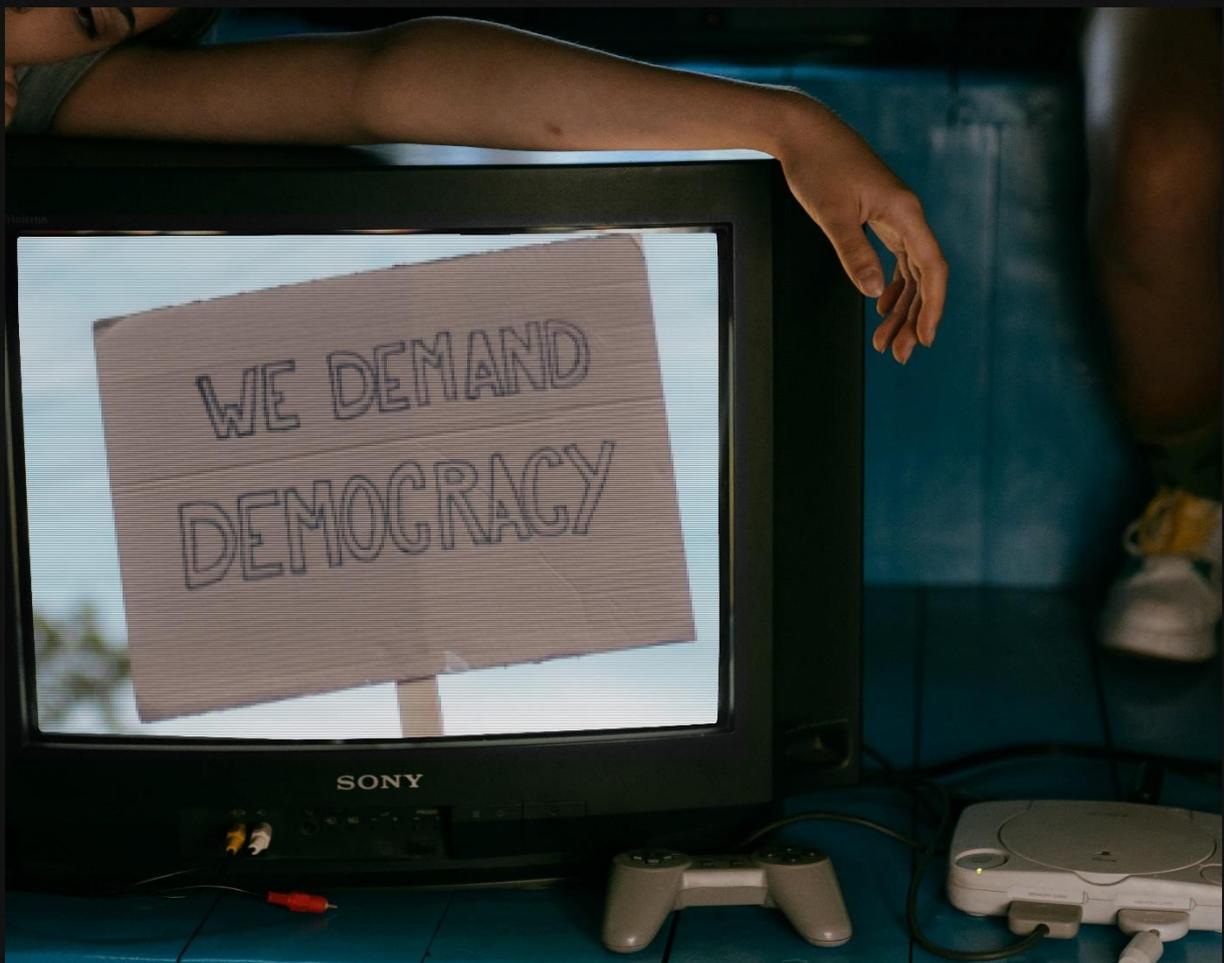


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Untitled. © Collage by Felix Zimmermann. Photos by cottonbro, Pexels, and Fred Moon, Unsplash.

















the production and economic success of games tackling serious societal issues (Croghan 2018). As Dürnberger (2014) notes, the rapidly growing gaming market allowed for a breadth of artistic and story-driven video game production previously unseen, but also necessitated questions of how video games could be designed to communicate ethical discussions of serious political issues. Ethical game researchers often deride traditional morality systems in games which create “narrative-based decision trees” (Sicart 2010, 2) that are based upon a binary good/evil continuum. For example, the original *BioShock* (2007) made the player choose between freeing and harvesting power from little girls that contain large amounts of energy. *BioShock* positions freeing the girls as inherently good and harvesting the girls as inherently evil, and characters and scenes will change positively or negatively depending on which decision the player chooses to make. Games that show ethical decisions in binary oppositions often simplify complex social issues, making multi-faceted problems facily solvable through simple, singular decisions (Dürnberger 2014). Through a dichotomy of good/evil decisions, the game designers place a procedurally rhetorical claim on what is morally right and morally wrong; even by choosing the evil option, players engage in and reinforce the definition of these actions as inherently immoral and the opposite decision as inherently moral. The treatment of ethics as an easily solvable black-and-white opposition limits the thought behind ethical decision-making, perhaps encouraging simplistic views of social issues and the world writ large.

Ethical gaming researchers offer ways in which video game design can complicate ethical decision-making, more fully portraying real-world ethical issues. These scholars call for game design that requires ethical consideration rather than strategic thinking. Sicart (2010, 8) calls for game design that increases “cognitive friction” and creates a tension between both the “procedures and semantic layers” of the game

(ibid.), forcing players to consider how the story and gameplay elements ethically link with and contradict one another. Sicart (2010) notes design scholars Alan Cooper (2004) and Donald Norman (2002) argue this “cognitive friction” is bad for user accessibility, encouraging designers to focus on time optimization over ethical interactions that require extensive player consideration before acting in the game. The focus on time optimization may lead to simplified morality systems described above, reducing moral quandaries to simple decisions that can be easily and quickly solved. Sicart (2010) calls for game design in which values and morals are embedded in the code of the game world but are not communicated to the players directly by the game, as they might be in visuals like a morality meter. In turn, the lack of information about one’s moral standing in a game world will force a player to turn from a “reactive agent to a reflective agent,” (Sicart 2010, 10) interpreting their moral rectitude in the game rather than relying on the game’s representation of their moral standing. Dürnberger (2014) sees this cognitive dissonance as a potential avenue for empathy, as games have the unique ability to place the player in another’s experience through interactivity. Ethically designed games complicate fundamental questions about ethical decision-making by depriving players of prescribed morality systems and forcing the player to reflect on their actions, complicating questions about what is morally right and wrong rather than prescribing good/evil dichotomies (ibid.).

Ethical game design focuses on the gray areas of morality, calling into questions the moral rectitude of each decision made and rejecting simplistic answers to complex issues. When focusing on social issues like immigration, ethically designed games reject simplifying the experiences of those involved, often showing how the same situation can affect different people in different ways (Toma 2015). Similarly, these ethically designed games that focus on complex issues reject a traditional satisfying conclusion for one that is open to interpretation or contestation. In this way, video







which are heavily-regulated sites at the edge of national territory and “liminal spaces, or zones of indistinction, where human rights are suspended and migrant bodies exist only in so far as they can be excluded at any time by border practices.” As Topak (2014, 821) argues, “territorial calculations and surveillance, practices of death and exclusion, and suspension of rights” characterize the practices of borderzone policies. The term borderzone is more specific both geographically and functionally, not referring just to the border between two nations but specific nodes on that boundary where migrants try to cross the border and face resistance. Topak’s (2014) article looks specifically at the violence, force, and heavy surveillance by Greek and Frontex forces, an EU organization specializing in borderzone regulation, at the Greece-Turkey borderzone, following this article with another focusing on the dehumanization and oppression immigrants face at the Moira refugee camp in Greece (Topak 2020). Jonathan Xavier Inda (2012, 78) notes US government officials have similarly advocated for and implemented strict regulation, control, and surveillance at the US-Mexico border. Tristan G. Creek (2014, 377) argues Australia’s policy of mandatory immigration detention for those coming via boat subjected asylum seekers to violence, oppression, and maltreatment at the hands of detention center officials, particularly for women.

The harsh policies at the borderzones of Greece, the US, and Australia reflect the borderzone in *Papers, Please*. Migrants coming through the player’s border station are met with rifle-wielding guards and fences made of barbed wire and concrete. Migrants who refuse to leave the borderzone in *Papers, Please* may also be shot by the guards. This characterizes the main setting of *Papers, Please* as a borderzone of liminal violence and oppression. Thus, an analysis of the ethics and representation of governmental power and bureaucracy in *Papers, Please* must investigate not only how the borderzone operates through the player, but also how it is used by various

factions to maintain dominance, insight violence, or cede power. Through these negotiations and lapses in power and authority, *Papers, Please* complicates notions of morality and rationality at heavily regulated borderzones. The game's portrayal and operationalization of borderzone politics, bureaucracy, and power struggles stakes claims as to how borderzones operate, providing more insight into cultural negotiations of what the idea of *border* means and criticizing oppressive and dehumanizing borderzone policies in governments like Greece, the US, and Australia.

**Dehumanization of Migrants in *Papers, Please***

In the game *Papers, Please*, the player acts as a border agent in the town of Grestin, half of which is under the control of Arstotzka and half of which is under control of neighboring country Kolechia. Using only the documents provided by travelers and the Arstotzkan Ministry of Admission's primitive inspection systems, the player must decide who can enter Arstotzka, who will be detained, and who will be rejected. With each passing in-game day, the rules for entry become increasingly complicated, forcing the player to spend more and more time investigating each entrant's documents. As an agent of the Arstotzkan government, the player is punished for incorrect identifications, potentially being fired, arrested, or killed if they let in too many incorrectly documented travelers. Additionally, the player must balance the will of the Arstotzkan government with that of an insurgent group called The Order of the EZIC Star that views themselves as the saviors of Arstotzka. Although EZIC coerces the player into committing heinous acts, like poisoning a supposed assassin, the group claims it aims to purge the Arstotzkan government of corrupt politicians and give the country back to the people. The player may choose to side with either EZIC or the Arstotzkan government, or even escape to another neighboring country to completely avoid the conflict. Yet, sixteen of the twenty potential endings end with

















oppressive policies. While other pop-cultural representations often focus on singular stories, *Papers, Please* invests more time into questioning the system behind border operations, showing how something as seemingly innocuous as an inspection station provides an understanding of complex social issues and the failures of borderzone policies by governments like the US, Greece, and Australia. Yet, the game also sometimes places too much power into the player’s hands, allowing them to dictate endings by exerting surprising amounts of influence on the immigration system of a whole country. Because *Papers, Please* is a game, it makes sense that the player has more power than a typical border agent would. Allowing that amount of leverage on the system allows the player to envision ways to combat issues like war and immigration on a small scale. Yet, that agency also distracts from the ways governmental powers that supposedly cherish law and order can implement policies at borderzones that oppress vulnerable populations.

Thus, more research must be done to see how players of games such as *Papers, Please* react to and interpret the themes of the game. As Gabriel (2015) notes, games about immigration may inadvertently support stereotypes and convey misinformation about immigrants despite the creators’ efforts to look at the global issue with nuance. Looking at both the critical and audiences’ responses to the game may illuminate what major elements players take away from playing serious games. Additionally, as Sandell (2016) stated, no one representation could accurately rearticulate all the intricacies behind real-world issues, *Papers, Please* being no exception. Although the game approaches the topics of immigration and border politics in a unique way, there are still many issues the game does not tackle, like the abuse of women, racialized politics, and how economic trade affects borderzone policy. More research should be done on how other pop cultural texts including video games might represent these intersectional issues. Immigration continues to be a key issue in many countries,

including the heavily surveilled borderzones of countries like the US and Greece (Kantouris and Gatopoulos, 2020; Burnett and Liasson 2019) and the increasingly restrictive policies of Schengen Area counties like Germany (Schumacher 2019). We should continue to analyze how people learn about and conceptualize what a border is, particularly through the messages the receive and decode from pop cultural texts, which is critical in making sure future policies treat immigrants and refugees humanely. Pop cultural texts tackling immigration issues are one possible way people can become informed, but more must be done to assist the general public in understanding what is happening at heavily-regulated borderzones. Investigating how pop culture works like *Paper, Please* can coordinate with journalism or other platforms to inform citizens offers a unique and potentially effective way to greater knowledge and understanding of such a dire issue.

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