

Tetris in the Time of Snowden

Review of Lucas Pope's "Papers, Please"

From TSA agents to MIT's desk workers, security policies cause daily frustration for anyone in transit. But what if you had to enforce those policies? Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* plays with that idea, casting you as border control for a dystopian regime, revealing how "evil" bureaucracies come to be. On the surface level, *Papers, Please* can be summarized by "Customs Official: The Game" – from that tagline, you already get a sense of the frustrations and tedious document-based gameplay you'll face. However, the true power of the game comes from forcing us to realize that corruption and power abuse lurks within all of us – and is accessible with just 30 minutes of repetitive stamping¹.

The game unobtrusively pushes you to objectify people, turning them into "[documents that happen to be carried by people](#)". With the huge portion of document-only screen real estate, the game encourages you to completely abstract away people into details in order to help your "family" - another further abstracted set of people (SON:COLD). The business cards you receive reinforce this point – whether for brothels or engineering companies, people are just commodities to be traded, their stories and struggles – meaningless. Effectively, the people in *Papers, Please* become like *Tetris*' tetrominos – an endless stream of Russian multicolored pixels which exist only for your puzzle-solving enjoyment. Both games focus less on the individual elements and more on abstract pattern matching. Although uncontroversial with *Tetris*' blocks, this repetitive gameplay dangerously erases all of the human rights violations within

¹ One [critic](#) was so affected by the realism that they could not keep playing the game – it just brought back too many bad memories of immigration frustrations, which the author couldn't face on the inspector's side.

NOTE: All German articles were found by this [Gamasutra compilation post](#) and was translated by Google Translate

Papers, Please. You completely stop empathizing with other humans in pursuit of a meaningless “high score”, epitomized by the [power gamers](#) of *Papers, Please*’s Endless Mode². Gone are the annoying backstories and difficult moral decisions! In its place – a pure infinite expression of an orderly process.

Pursuing a “perfect process” causes us to dehumanize not only the in-game immigrants, but also ourselves. By training ourselves to mechanistically follow orders like a computer³, we become the perfect cog in the bureaucratic regime. Individual judgment is replaced by system demands. “Hiding a gun is bad” seems like a [comically obvious](#) observation, but a good player will diligently cite the precise rules this breaks rather than use common sense. The game is definitely aware of this self-objectification – mockingly rewarding you for “sufficiency” and “presence” while encouraging you to purchase minor upgrades (ex. bookmarks). Even out of game, I found myself optimizing my workflow with incredibly minor tricks and glitches (ex. moving the passport before the stamp was raised). Abstracting others’ suffering makes it easier to ignore your own boredom and focus on being the best pawn possible.

But what if you refuse to get caught up in this high score race and force yourself to stay tied to narrative? The game instead encourages you to be the cruelest dictator of your small customs world. Within the game, your supervisor demonstrates his power by giving Game Overs for not letting his lady friend in or hanging unauthorized pictures. On the gameplay level, you’re repeatedly nudged towards corruption in order to support your abstract “family”. The desire to keep the OK bubble on everyone caused me to detain more people and always shoot during a

² Notably, the Endless Mode is also only unlockable if you don’t engage in any EZIC activity – the reward for being the most industrious worker is to do even more work! Another callback to Tetris and [Janet Murray’s controversial narrative reading](#)

³ Our job is completely automatable as seen by the implications of the automatic citation software and a United Federation immigrant talking about their automated border control.

terrorist attack. Despite these good intentions, these corrupt tendencies soon developed into a sadistic pleasure. Arbitrarily detaining people on minute details wasn't enough; I wanted to provoke the passive immigrants into any reaction. Once body searches started, I began to wave the nudes in front of the immigrants, hoping for some response of "Please stop". The lack of outburst against this incredibly degrading act just pushed me further, encouraging me to use my power in even pettier ways⁴ - I seriously considered denying the person who insulted my son's drawing purely out of spite. The game gently eases you into this violent mindset, as it goes from hiding the issues (ex. offscreen detaining or a rifle beating only shown via silhouettes) to making you fully responsible for deaths – whether shooting at terrorists or poisoning your fellow guards through an EZIC assassination. Your [son's drawing](#) underscores this point. You're ultimately a hero to your son because of your gun and knife, not for supporting your family.

Given these bleak options (accept the machine or revel in schaudenfreude), it might be tempting for the player to break out of this by replaying levels and fixing moral judgment errors as they occur. Indeed, the game encourages this behavior with their unexpectedly complex branching save structure. The game allows you to start from any day and makes a new branch, giving you the opportunity to try different decisions. However, one thing quickly become apparent – most of the decisions you make are fairly inconsequential with no real impact. Although the game nominally gives you several choices, the difference is usually just a small text change in the newspaper. Combined with the draining experience of hearing the exact same dialogue repeated by different people, the compulsion to go back and fix things is quickly stifled. It's pointless to shoot for perfection, so you're better off accepting the system or taking advantage of the power given to you.

⁴ This ironically led to my first Game Over, as I over-extended my power tripping and waved the EZIC flyer in front of the Gestapo officer's face and was promptly led to jail

Papers, Please's excellent points about “the evil within” are slightly marred by the game being easily compartmentalized. Despite the unsubtle references to [Checkpoint Charlie](#) with [Grestin's east-west split](#), the game is comically dystopian with the near-fake Cyrillic [logo](#) and the gratingly bombastic soundtrack, evocative of Soviet propaganda. This, combined with the shoehorning of games into “play” can make the player forget that *Papers, Please*'s scope stretches beyond the game itself. As [one author](#) noted, the *Papers, Please*'s rave reviews were quite hypocritical to the [current state](#) of [immigration policy](#).

Despite this shortcoming, *Papers, Please* remains an excellent gaming experience, using repetitive yet addictive gameplay to make us understand how bureaucracy can lead to objectification and power tripping. As [one critic](#) summarized well, *Papers, Please* makes us confront “questions that a single person can hardly decide alone - but needs [to]” – for the glory of Arstotzka.