The representation of borders as historic liminal spaces in digital games: The case of Papers, Please!

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Abstract

Digital games are one of the most engaging forms of media. Players can have a first-hand experience and the possibility of feeling immersed within a digital setting where agency is exerted. This paper seeks to understand the role of digital games as new means of communication and their potential to convey messages that may defy gamers to question the moral grand narratives that shape contemporary societies.
In a moment when many countries have opted to close or limit the circulation in their borders, it is important to think about the role played by the border as a historic liminal entity for the representation of societies and communities, distinguishing those who belong from those who do not. The representation of the border in digital games have tended to follow one of the main tropes explored in other media: the border as a physical space that set boundaries between different nations and different regions of the world. In order to assert the potential of digital games to offer a more comprehensive representation of the border as a liminal space, the case of Papers, Please! (2013) will be analyzed.
Based on a qualitative methodology, having content analysis as primary data collection method, the paper intends to contribute to the discussion on how history may narrativized and, eventually, reinterpreted in digital games. Papers, Please! analysis will be centered on the relationship that is set between player and border, that is presented as a liminal space where the game's action takes places entirely. Moreover, the paper intends to discuss the role that has been played by digital games in the representation of serious topics and how they have evolved as communication tools beyond their role as entertainment products.

Keywords: digital games, representation, border, *Papers, Please!*

Introduction

Digital games are one of the most engaging forms of media. Players can have a first-hand experience and the possibility of feeling immersed within a digital setting where agency is exerted. This paper seeks to understand the role of digital games as new means of communication and their potential to convey messages that may defy gamers to question the moral grand narratives that shape contemporary societies.

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In a moment when many countries have opted to close or limit the circulation in their borders, it is important to think about the role played by the border as a historic liminal entity for the representation of societies and communities, distinguishing those who belong from those who do not, by controlling the access: the authorized versus the non-authorized to cross the border.

The representation of the border in digital games have tended to follow one of the main tropes explored in other media: the border as a physical space that set boundaries between different nations and different regions of the world. A non-place that exists in between places. In order to assert the potential of digital games to offer a more comprehensive representation of the border as a liminal space, the case of *Papers, Please!* (2013) will be analyzed. The gameplay places the player in the unusual role of an immigration officer in a fictional country with eastern European resemblances called Arstotzka, in a period reminiscent of the Cold War.

Based on a qualitative methodology, having content analysis as primary data collection method, the paper intends to contribute to the discussion on how history may narrativized and, eventually, reinterpreted in digital games. *Papers, please!* analysis will be centered on the relationship that is set between player and border, that is presented as a liminal space, an in-between space where the game's action takes places entirely, as well as player and the non-player characters that intend to cross the border and enter Arstotzka. Moreover, the paper intends to discuss the role that has been played by digital games in the representation of serious topics and how they have evolved as communication tools beyond their role as entertainment products.

The paper is organized in three sections. The first devoted to discussing the role that has been performed by digital games as means to represent history. The second intending to map the narrative trope of the border as a historic liminal entity for the representation of societies and communities, particularly in the context of digital games. And the third, and last, will be focused on presenting the case of *Papers, Please!* based on the results from the empirical research.

Digital games and history representation

Digital games are one of the digital media that has most attracted the attention of users worldwide. Nowadays there are so many different types of games that it is challenging to assure that a single definition would be representative of the whole.

Among the classic perspectives to understand games and its cultural role is the work developed by Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1971), and by Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (2001). Both authors understand play as being a volunteer activity, an activity that is a whole and that is performed due to intrinsic motivations, usually related to pleasure and fun. Playing a game may be an individual or social activity, which tend to lead to the development of different skills accordingly with the type of game. Despite not being exclusively human, games and play have evolved with human history and different genres of games have been developed over time.

These classic perspectives are key to understand the evolution of games into digital games and have been the basis for more contemporary theoretical approaches aiming at defining what a (digital) game is.

Among the perspectives to understand digital games is the proposal presented by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in the book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2003). According to the authors: "A

game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 80). This definition excludes the general concept of play, that may involve interacting with a virtual conflict, but that tend not to have quantifiable results, nor concrete goals. Which means that a game is an interaction that implies a challenge, a challenge that is not just defined to a specific occasion. Considering this perspective, a game is, then, composed by one or more participants that interact aiming at solving a conflict, the interaction among players may be one of cooperation or competition. In order to solve the conflict, players are restricted to the rules that create the game structure and, in the end, it is expected a quantifiable outcome.

A second contemporary perspective on digital games is proposed by Jesper Juul. In an article published in 2003, entitled The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness, Jull proposes that a game is compose by six characteristics: (1) a set of rules, (2) variable, but quantifiable, results, (3) the results must be valued, being it positive or negative, (4) it must implicate effort from the player, (5) the player must have a connection with game results, and (6) there must exist negotiable consequences. These different characteristics involve different dimensions of the player/game relationship: characteristics number one, two, and four (rules, results, and effort) describe the properties of a game as a formal system; the third characteristic describe how the different possible results are valued within a certain system – meaning the personal goal the player aims to achieve; characteristics four and five (effort and connection with the results) focus on the relationship set between system and player; and the sixth characteristic (consequences) describe the existing relationship between in-game activity and the rest of the world.

Taking into consideration the definitions proposed by Salen and Zimmerman (2003) and by Juul (2003), one may consider that: a digital game is a system structured by rules, which can be more or less flexible; it requires computation, registration of the state of the game, and an interface; it has an ending determined by goals and/or rules; to play involves engagement, effort, and interest by one or more players, that must have a minimum understanding of the rules of the game; and it needs to have some degree of unpredictability.

To fully understand digital games is not enough to take into account its characteristics as formal systems. It is essential to be able to perceive them as cultural environments (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). Those environments have as central element the gameworld, representing what Huizinga proposes to be the 'magic circle' (1971), but accordingly to Salen and Zimmerman the limits of the 'magic circle' are not impenetrable, they could not be otherwise games would be hermetic worlds. The 'magic circle' boundaries are permeable, porous, allowing games to become cultural environments, which occurs through gameplay. A game space tends to be influenced by the game creators' sociocultural context, but the game experience is more dependent of players own sociocultural contexts, which means that there are several cultural elements that are imported into game spaces. Besides the 'importation' of cultural elements from first life, there is also the 'exportation' of elements from the game into first life, which result from players' interaction with the game, and with other players in the case of multiplayer games. Then, games may be understood as cultural environments and as cultural environments one may perceive digital games as being representation systems.

Digital games have evolved greatly since the beginning of this industry in the 1970s. From the basic initial graphics, game settings progressed into complex virtual environments, with the potential to be very realist and "[i]n the last few years, video games have succeeded in transferring our understanding and comprehension of particular places or times through the process of representation" (Balela and Mundy,

2011: 5). Galloway (2004) considers that games tend to represent reality even when the digital simulations are not exactly accurate. Representation is a key moment of the circuit of culture (du Gay et. al, 1997). According to Hall (2003), representation is a process to construct meaning that is historically and socially constituted: "[i]t does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (15). As systems of representation digital games mirrors the culture within which they have been produced and played, this is visible for instance in the representation of history.

Adam Chapman (2016) following Samuel's (1994) perspective, suggest that to fully understand history it is crucial to consider the "different and often popular ways in which it is constructed and received" (p. 28), and that digital games are a relevant media to understand how history is perceived from the contributions of popular culture. Historical digital games, or "games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it" (p. 31) are very popular and may fit in different genres of games, offering different gaming experiences. Which means that is highly probable that the great majority of players does not choose these games because of its historic narratives or cultural settings. Notwithstanding, as Chapman (2016) highlights: "Players are exposed to the offers of engagement with history and historical representations that these games entail and contain nonetheless." (p. 29) And according to Rosenstone (2001) "[o]ur sense of the past is shaped and limited by the possibilities and practices of the medium in which that past is conveyed, be it the printed page, the spoken word, the painting, the photograph, or the moving image" (p. 59).

Digital historical games offer players the opportunity to "play with the past" (Kappell & Elliot, 2013, p. 3). The past is recreated narratively through worldbuilding mechanisms and strategies, but also through players' agency, a needed condition to be able to proceed in the gameplay. Due to the complexity of digital games as representation interactive systems, we consider that Ryan's (2006) proposal of functional ludo-narrativism is a key approach for one to be able to in depth understand the role of digital games as media:

> "[…] a functional ludo-narrativism that studies how the fictional world, realm of make -believe, relates to the playfield, space of agency. By connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games." (p. 203)

This approach encompasses the possibility of representation (Hall, 2003) but also of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Digital historical games do not have the obligation to do historiography, but they tend to be accurate, even when they do not aim at being realistic (Kappell & Elliot, 2013, p. 6). By having the possibility of engaging with history through immersion (Ryan, 2006; Calleja, 2011; Chapman, 2016), players are offered the chance to appropriate facts, characters, sites, for instance. This is an opportunity to rethink, and even to renegotiate, the grand cultural narratives that inform contemporary experience.

In the next section attention will be devoted to one of these narrative tropes. The one of the border, particularly the border as a liminal space.

The liminal condition of the border

"There are more international borders in the world today than ever there were before." (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p. 1) Borders define frontiers, borderlands, states and belongings. They play different roles: historical, political, economic, geographical, cultural, and social. And they have been studied in the scope of different scientific areas and, consequently, from different approaches. The border and its representation are part of

the shared imaginary, nevertheless the perspectives about its meanings and cultural roles are different according to regional, national, ethnical, and even individual perspectives. Wilson & Donnan (2012) propose that: "[b]orders have become a master narrative and hegemonic symbol in popular, commercial, youth and liberation cultures." (p. 2) In order to further contribute to a better understanding of the border as a narrative trope, attention will be paid to one perspective, the one of the sociocultural construction and experience of the border.

According to Grimson (2012): "[b]order areas represent liminal spaces where both transnational identity and intergroup conflict occur" (p. 201). Space grounds us. Liminality is the condition of in-between-ess, associated with mobility. Borders are one of the markers established by Humans to contribute to settle a sense of place and that allow setting a position in relation to others in a permanent "state of the in-between" (Tally, 2016, p. ix).

The liminal condition of spatial locations as borders and borderlands makes them simultaneously spaces and places, according to the attributed meaning, "[t]hey are familiar, yet unknown; they are secure, and yet intimidating." (Downey, Kinane, & Parker, 2016, p. 3). According to Yi-Fu Tuan (2001) both space and place result from our experience as human beings and the negotiation made with the surrounding environment. Despite being contiguous and indissociable concepts, the relationship established with space and place is different. Tuan presents space as being more abstract than place. Space becomes place by being structured and by acquiring meaning, meaning that may be subjective and individualistic, or collectively shared by a community. Space encompasses freedom, while place offers security and stability. Space is surrounded by movement; place offers the ability to pause (Downey, Kinane, & Parker, 2016). Both space and place are perceived and negotiated in-between the physical surroundings and what Tuan (1979) proposes as the "landscapes of the mind". Between experience and perception. Which means that liminality is perceived through experience, observation, and not through use (Thomassen, 2014; Downey, Kinane, & Parker, 2016). The first approaches to liminality focused on its dimension of in-between-ess, liminality as passage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). Thomassen (2012) considers that Van Gennep: "[…] clearly saw territorial border zones or border lines, thresholds or portals, as structurally identical with the intermediate period of a ritual passage: spatial and geographical progression correlates with the ritual marking of a cultural passage" (p. 24). Thomassen (2014) considers that it is necessary the existence of a frontier to be able to make sense of the spatial conditions of liminality (p. 21). The frontier should be not just interpreted as something that exists, but as something that needs to be experienced.

The concept proposed by Marc Augé (1997) of non-place helps to further understand the hybrid nature of borders and borderlands as liminal locations. Place, or anthropological place, is localized, occupied, familiar, organic, historical and meaningful to its occupants and visitors. Augé (1997) attributes three main characteristics to anthropological place: it is a place of identity, of relations and of history (p. 52). And going further his analysis he states: "of course, the intellectual status of anthropological place is ambiguous. It is only the idea, partially materialized, that the inhabitants have their relations with territory, with their families and with others" (p. 56). Non-places arise from the transformation of place by supermodernity's flows. Non-places result from the fluidity of some places and from the difficulty of bonding with some transitory destinations, either due to its lack of content, or for its excess. Archetypal non-places are motorways, airports, shopping centers, theme parks, and borders, for instance.

Borders and borderlands are not fixed lines, despite geographical and political frontiers. They are in-between spaces. Spaces of hybridity that allow us to "[…] not inhabit *un mundo* but many" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. xxxvii). The multi-layered nature of borders makes them complex, "[…] the border connecting disparate locations, social behavior and expression" (Alvarez, Jr, 2012, p. 545). Green (2012) considers that borders and borderlands have characteristics not only of spaces, but also of places, mixing them up and renegotiating the individual attributed significance of each concept: "Borders provide the possibility of making different, perhaps additional, worlds" (p. 580).

These hybridized liminal spaces are then shaped around identification dynamics and discourses, mainly focusing on the division between 'we' and 'the other'. Media play a major role in consolidating these discourses (Seidel, Bettinger & Budke, 2020, p. 2). The importance of the other for the constitution of the self was recognized by different thinkers throughout the 20th century. Sigmund Freud, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida are among those thinkers. Freud argues that the other is part of the development of the self and that alterity is a constitutive element of individual identity (Freud, 2001). Lévinas, on the other hand, argues that the other does not play a part in the constitution of self because it is always inaccessible (Lévinas, 1999; Pinchevski, 2005). Following this conceptualization Derrida proposes alterity for understanding the role of the other. Alterity is important for acknowledging that subjects need to interact with others, and that it is from this interaction that the individual self emerges. The self is then relational – "a self that defines itself primarily in terms of the relationships it holds both within human communities (of family, friends, and larger groups, including polities) and the larger natural (and for some, supernatural) communities surrounding us" (Ess, 2010, p. 110). We consider that the border due to its liminal condition shapes alterity, by spatially circumscribing who belongs and who does not; to whom is permitted access, and to whom is denied. Those who have the responsibility to grant or not access to others may be empathetic towards the other or may accentuate the division 'we' versus 'the other' by simply exerting the power they were given to decide.

The 20th century history was marked by conflicts that brought the representation of the border back to a main role in sociocultural discourses and dynamics, a role shaped by its liminal condition (Downey, Kinane, & Parker, 2016; Seidel, Bettinger & Budke, 2020). As a narrative trope the border has been a constant presence in literature and film. Media that offer the possibility to get narratively immersed in the cultural, social, and political traits of borders. With the rise of digital media, classical narrative tropes become possible to be explored by experiencing different types of immersion (Murray, 1998; Ryan, 2004, 2006). Digital games due to its procedural nature are among the richest environments from the point of view of immersion (Calleja, 2011). Despite its interactive nature, in digital games, the border has been represented following the perspectives that have been present in other media: the line, frontier that set the boundaries of a geographical territory; and/or a liminal space where it is determined who is authorized to enter and who is not. In historical digital games the trend is the same. For instance, in popular game series as *Civilization* (1991, 1996, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2016) and *Age of Empires* (1997, 1999, 2005, 2021) borders define the territorial limits of each empire; but in games such as *Border Zone* (1987) or *Papers, Please!* (2013) as the narrative takes place in borderlands, in the first case, and in the border, in the second one, the condition of liminality shapes entirely the game experience:

> "The frontier – that liminal space – is a place between two places; it is a universe with its own rules and meanings, which are different from those we find on both sides of the border. The frontier is a

> transit area but it is also a detention zone, where the authorities decide who enters and who stays out. It is in that paranormal borderline sphere" (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 121)

In order to contribute to a better understanding of the experience of the border as liminal space, in the next section the case of *Papers, Please!* will be presented.

The case of Papers, Please!

The game *Papers, Please!* was designed by Lucas Pope and developed and distributed by his company 3909 LLC, being part of indie games. The game has won several awards, among which awards that distinguish narrative and design innovation traits. The genre is puzzle simulation and the graphics are characterized by being pixelated, resembling titles from a time period when realistic settings where not achievable due to technological constrains. The plot, despite simple and linear at a first glance, is very realistic – the daily work life of an immigration officer at a border checkpoint and the decision-making about who is allowed to enter the country and who is not. The 'physical' gameworld is visually limited to the checkpoint where the player interacts with those who are aiming at being granted the authorization to enter the territory of Arstotzka, a fictional country that has just open its borders after being closed due to a political conflict. The game mechanics revolve around checking documents and deciding who is allowed to enter.

The game experience is shaped by the sense of being in the former Soviet Union, which is recreated not only by the plot – the life of a checkpoint border officer in a country which name recalls the toponymy of territories of the East side of the Iron Curtain; to the proper aesthetics of the gamespace. Nevertheless, the control protocols implemented by the player in the role of the immigration officer resemble not only the atmosphere of the Cold War, but current narratives about control, terrorism, and security. The ability to be able to give access to the 'right' people has impact in the player capacity to provide for his family. If the wrong people are given access, and by wrong is meant the people that is not supposed to enter the country independently of their personal contexts, there might be consequences. These consequences are certain, but "[t]here is the possibility to poke holes in the system […]. The player might be creating a greater evil or damaging their own interests, but at least they are able to negotiate beyond the limits of this frontier" (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 121).

To assess the role of this game for engaging with history – historical events, but also perspectives that shape the shared cultural imagery, an empirical research based on a qualitative methodology was conducted, having content analysis as primary data collection method. For designing the content analysis, we have followed the model proposed by Chapman (2016) as the most appropriate framework to study digital historical games:

> "The approach herein is therefore grounded in what Ryan calls a 'functional ludo-narrativism' (2006: 203) and is designed to account for both the narrative representation of history common to all historical forms and the aspects of action and agency that are unique to the game form, as well as for the interplays between these components." (p. 37)

The content analysis model proposed is rooted in five categories considered to be the fundamental formal structures of digital historical games: (1) simulation style and epistemology; (2) time; (3) space; (4) narrative; and (5) affordances (Chapman, 2016). The first variable considers the style of historic representation, if it is realistic or conceptual, and the type of historical epistemology followed –

reconstructionist, constructionist, or deconstructionist. The second focuses on the temporal structures used to engage players with the story and with history: real/realist time and discrete time; and the third on spatial structures – narrative garden and narrative canvas. The fourth variable pays attention to the formal narrative structures used in digital historical games: framing narrative and ludonarrative. The fifth, and last, on the affordances of these types of games: heritage, reenactment, and narrative historying.

Papers, Please! incorporates the conceptual simulation style. It does not offer player the opportunity to experience past historical events or characters, but to participate in a specific argument about a border checkpoint that resembles a particular historic context. The historical description operates both through the visual elements and the rules; notwithstanding, the visuals does not comprise the high-resolution realistic graphics aiming at recreating historical settings, but pixelized-look static components representing not only the security and controls protocols inherent to a border checkpoint, but also its atmosphere. The experience of the historic context occurs through gameplay; player's process of decision-making and the capacity to deal with the consequences of his choices will determine the meaning attributed to the narrative trope of the border: "Conceptual simulations communicate through the 'natural' language of the digital game, procedural rhetoric, by arguing through rules, challenge and affordances" (Chapman, 2016, p. 103). Taking this into account we consider that the epistemology is the constructionist one, the historical concern with facts and social theories, even those are not directly narrated, but resulting from the game experience and the underlying narrative dependent on player's decisions.

Time is an always present element that frames play experience. The action is organized in days, which are organized in sections devoted to different sets of activities. All days follow the same structure. First, the reading of the headlines of the news – every new day opens with a view of the front page of The Truth of Arstotzka, the local newspaper. Then the inspector goes to his booth, he checks the Official Bulletin and the new orders and get ready to begin the workday, which will involve visits from several government authorities and the control of the border entrances. The third stage initializes with the first entrant, which turns on the in-game clock, that marks time from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. During this timeframe, the inspector check documents, either through reading or using specific tools to assess if they are in order and, to decide if the entrance will be allowed or not. The last stage is devoted to inspector's personal life and duties, like family evens and paying bills. The day 1 is on November 23rd, 1982; the last, day 31 is on December 23rd, 1982. November 23rd marks the overture of the border, after the 6-year war between Arstotzka and Kolechia. December 23rd announces the uncertain future of Grestin's checkpoint.

From an analytical perspective, time is perceived through the relationship between play time, fictive time, and past time (Chapman. 2016). The play time is the time spent playing; the fictive time regards time's rhythm within the game; and past time or how the past is integrated in the game. The relation of time spent and in-game time is of ca. 10 minutes to one day. So, the rhythm is accelerated when compared to first life time passing; but the action is sequential and the player does not have control over time. It is a realistic time game. Past time frames the events; the war changed territory organization and influences the tone, practices, and occurrences. Despite presenting a fictional world, "[i]t is widely accepted that Lucas Pope's game, Papers, Please, recreates a frontier that reminds us of a former Soviet republic" (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 121).

In this game space also plays a major role. The narrative takes place in a fictional country named Arstotzka. The spatial experience is configured through geographical representation and through the discourse. The

wide geographic location is represented in a map of the region. Arstotzka has boundaries with Kolechia and Obristan; the other countries of the region are, Antegria, Republia, Impor, and United Federation. Action evolves in Grestin, a divided city, half being ruled by Arstotzka's government and the other half by Kolechia's because of the recent war between the two countries. The booth of the immigration border officer is the location of the great majority of gameplay. The map allows to visualize the territory, but the specificities of the divided territory are presented through discourse – the news, the Official Bulletin, the orders, the dialogue interaction with other character, all these elements contribute to set the narrative in a particular spatial liminal context. Space is clearly an important element for reaching immersion. Chapman (2016) proposes that "[i]n historical games, this generally means attempting to evoke a player's historical understanding, invoke the larger historical discourse and providing a challenging 'space' for players to exercise their (narrative) agency in relation to" (p. 134). Considering this, the author proposes two spatial structures as being the most suitable to create the spatial layer of digital historical games. Narrative gardens spatial structure gives player freedom to explore the realistic gameworld in order to engage with the story and with history. While space as canvas structure emphasizes the gamespace as a resource within which players negotiate historical narratives through agency. Papers, Please! does not offer an open-world, or even a spatial exploration experience. It uses space as canvas structure offering players the possibility to discover the territory mainly through discursive practices.

The variable Narrative does not focus exclusively on the plot or story, but on the "different functioning elements of narrative in (historical) games" (Chapman, 2016, p. 157). Two types of narrative structures are considered to be the most distinguishable among digital historical games: framing narrative and ludonarrative (Chapman, 2016, p. 160). The first concerns narrative segments decided exclusively by the developer; gameplay does not influence how the plot evolves. In the second, on the other hand, narrative is cocreated by the developer and the player, player's actions connect the different narrative segments. These two types of structures are not mutually exclusive; they may be used in a same game, offering different ways to get players engaged with the narrative. In *Papers, Please!* we find the two types of structures. Framing narrative fragments directly guide player's actions: the playable character is a male from Arstotzka, with no name, who becomes a border inspector by winning a job lottery; in his job he should follow the defined protocol; everyday he will face the challenge of earning enough money to cover family expenses; his choices at the checkpoint will influence how action proceeds. Despite the sequence of the timeline being presented through framing narrative structures, the decisions taken influence the continuity of the game and the possible endings, resulting from occasional fragments of ludonarrative. This game fits into the game narrative category of deterministic story structure (Chapman, 2016, p. 168). The historical narrative sets the context for the action, that occurs in the present. The combination of framing narrative and ludonarrative fragments give player the opportunity to think about the outcome of historical conflicts, since he is forced to decide who will he help contouring the regulations and which will be his positioning towards the possible upcoming revolution.

According to Chapman (2016, p. 223), the last variable Affordances intends to realize what a given game afford players in relation to history. He considers that the affordances of digital historical games may be identified if its role as heritage, reenactment, and (counterfactual) narrative historying is understood. Heritage affordances are dependent on realistic simulations, which allow players to explore heritage sites and to have a sense lived history. Reenactment affordances consist of the active reenactment made possible

by tangible skill, action and challenges. Chapman (2016) considers that games allow the reenactment of exploratory historical challenges: "[a]s such, reenacting through digital games can help us to understand historical challenges, the skills needed to overcome them and the relevant information to these processes" (p. 239). These possibilities offered by digital games are not different from the ones offered by other media. But since digital games are interactive media, players are afforded the possibility of negotiating the exploratory historical challenges by learning how to proceed. Narrative historying is considered to be a skill derived from actively engaging with a historical game; the ability to historicize due to narrative agency, even without having the proper formation or tools essential to a factual approach. Digital historical games may then offer the affordance of experiencing counterfactual historicized narratives; counterfactual because they do not rely exclusively on facts, empirical evidence, or other variables of scientific knowledge. In games facts and historical information are built by the developers, who give players the opportunity to appropriate and interpret them. The more open the game, the greater the possibility of 'writing' history.

The affordances of *Papers, Please!* rely particularly on its role as reenactment and (counterfactual) narrative historying. Heritage experience is not made available; players cannot explore or experience history through the engagement with historic locations or characters, for instance. The reenactment of exploratory historical challenges, on the other hand, informs player's progress; his capability to act according to what is expected, meaning the rules and regulations specific of the historic conflict context, will directly influence his ability to succeed – success that results not only from the capacity to make decisions 'by the book', but also from his aptitude to contour those rules wisely aiming at helping others and/or himself and his family. In what concerns the game's ability to offer players the opportunity to participate in historicizing practices, this is limited when compared with games that foster historical narrative agency more openly. Nevertheless, the game offers a space built upon narrative structures that give players the opportunity to engage with counterfactual historical narratives. Through the experience of embodying the Arstotzkan immigrant officer, players can make decisions and witness their outcome, even if his actions 'rewrite' history and result in alternative endings. This is possible because when playing a game "my own actions speak to me in a voice which is not mine" (Klevjer, 2002, p. 196).

Concluding remarks

Digital can contribute to the emergence of alternative perspectives on the relationship set between media and history. As narrative systems they (re)create worlds to be lived and explored in the shoes of digital representatives. Those worlds may be informed, inspired by facts or by fiction, either way digital games offer different opportunities to history representation and appropriation.

Digital historical games may then contribute to a change in the relationship established with history, being it heritage sites, characters, or events. The afford players the possibility of appropriating, recreating, and remediating historical narratives, having the possibility of play the role of technologies of memory: "Human memory may well be an anthropological given, but closely tied as it is to the ways a culture constructs and lives its temporality, the forms of memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change" (Huyssen, 1995, p. 2). The recreation of history in digital games can contribute to modifying people's perspectives about historical facts and historicized narratives. Interactivity plays a key role in this process,

as it is fundamental to the creation of personal experiences. Webber & Griliopoulos (2017) even propose that digital games are fascinating media to engage in philosophical thought, which may lead to the appropriation of historic and cultural narratives.

Papers, please! offers players the opportunity to engage in a narrative that explores the border as a liminal space. The in-between-ess is built upon the liminality of a war conflict that resulted in a divided territory. In the border it is crucial to recognize who belongs and have access to the territory, and who do not. Empathy becomes key in dealing with the daily events and challenges; nevertheless, this needs to be balanced with the capacity of following governmental rules. The game asks the player to embody bureaucracy and civil servitude, but at the same time gives him the opportunity to counterfactually experience historic narrative: he can become a rebel and make use of his job position to renegotiate the political and social (in-game) reality: "[…] the popularity of Papers, Please, and similar games, would seem to suggest there is a desire (at least for some) to explore other realities that are less fantasy but more closely tied to the world we live in […] Video games then help connect us with multiple realities and experiences." (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 122-3).

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