Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games

James Tregonning
Independent Scholar
Melbourne, VIC, Australia
james.tregonning34@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Video games have long courted controversy for their frequent valorisation of criminality. However, in this article, I consider heroic criminals in video games from a different perspective. I focus on two games – Lucas Pope's Papers, Please (2013) and Osmotic Studio's Orwell (2016) – that position the player as a low-level government operative in a fictional authoritarian regime. Players are expected to process information for their governments, although they are also given opportunities to undermine or subvert the regime. Thus, the trope of heroic criminal is used to comment on the function and role of the state. It becomes the lens through which issues of political philosophy and ethics are balanced against the more pragmatic concerns of personal safety. These multiple competing pressures allow *Papers, Please* and *Orwell* to position heroic criminality as a multifaceted problem for the player to critically engage with.

Keywords: Papers, Please; Orwell; video games; criminality; video game violence

INTRODUCTION

Given the tedium of debates around video game violence, the fact that they have only been happening for twenty-odd years can come as a surprise. One of the early activists protesting video game violence was the litigious Jack Thompson, a lawyer who in 1999 led a $130 million lawsuit against some video game companies including Nintendo, Sega, and Sony, claiming that media violence caused a shooting at Heath High School (Associated Press). In 2005, Thompson published 'A Modest Video Game Proposal', suggesting that if video games do not create real-world violence, game developers should create a game where the player violently murders game developers (JackThompson.org). He was permanently disbarred in 2008, but not before filing a federal civil rights action lawsuit against the Florida Bar and Supreme Court (Stuart). Of course, in discussions about video game violence, the gaming community is often its own worst enemy. In 2009, Thompson sued Facebook for $40 million for "allowing anti-Thompson groups to post messages that have caused him 'great harm and distress.'" One such Facebook group was apparently titled "Jack Thompson should be smacked across the face with an Atari 2600" (Chalk). Gaming writer Andy Chalk notes that "it may seem like a joke to anyone familiar with Thompson … but without context, it looks like a threat; and we, the gamers, end up looking like juvenile idiots or, worse, the violent psychos Thompson has worked so hard to make us out to be." It can be difficult to have a legitimate discussion about video game violence, or any other cultural issue around video games. Gaming communities can be insular and immature, and often react strongly to perceived criticism; meanwhile, *Grand Theft Auto V* has sold 90 million copies and made $6 billion in revenue, making it "the most profitable entertainment product of all time" (Batchelor).

In this essay, I would like to circumvent both the alarmists and the reactionaries by treading a more nuanced path between the two. I acknowledge that there are legitimate questions about the effects of playing like a criminal in video games; it is not unthinkable that criminal or anti-social behaviour might be influenced by a wider media culture that glorifies these behaviours. However, I also argue that video game criminality is often contradictory. On a fictional level, the player may be transgressing fictional laws, robbing virtual citizens or stealing virtual cars. But on a structural level, the player is demonstrating obedience to the overarching conditions and demands of the game. Matthew Kelly points to the "psychological and physical self-modifying practices that players must undertake during gameplay," (461) arguing that such practices make up "the interface through which gameplay is experienced and conducted" (468). To some, this claim might deepen their conviction that video games create violent criminal behaviour; players of *Grand Theft Auto* are psychologically modifying themselves to better align with the criminal behaviour of the protagonist. But considered from a structural perspective, instead of a fictional one, so-called criminal behaviour in video games might, in fact, be deepening the player's obedience to the systems of authority that surround them in their everyday life. As Kelly argues, playing a game "requires a conscious adaptation to constantly evolving goals or obstacles," a mental process that can align the individual with the cultural logics of the modern age. Indeed, he argues, "both games and socioeconomic activity within networked societies use the work/play synthesis to establish subjectivity as a fundamental component in their respective functioning" (469). One might pose some pivotal questions: do video games depicting criminal behaviour make players more obedient, or less? Is the player internalizing criminal behaviours, or becoming a better citizen?

I would like to answer these questions by stepping slightly around them and by considering the criminal as an aesthetic and political device in games that depict authoritarian regimes. I use two games – Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013), and Osmotic Studios' *Orwell: Keeping An Eye On You* (2016) – that problematize the trope of the heroic criminal. In these games, the player is positioned as a low-level government operative functioning under a fictional authoritarian regime. The gameplay largely consists of carrying out relatively mundane tasks for the regime, such as processing passports or trawling social media sites. In each game, the player may subvert or resist the regime, although not without some degree of risk. The games, thus, represent

an intriguing variation on the trope of the heroic criminal. Such a player does not endorse criminality in any straightforward way; on the contrary, the ludic structures of the game actively discourage criminal behaviour. Instead, the key conflict lies between the ludic structures of these games, which encourage uncritical obedience to an authoritarian regime, and the player's own moral compass, which may cause the player to balk at some of the tasks that they are required to carry out. These games reverse the typical discourse around obedience and authority in video games, pitting the player against the rules of the game rather than encouraging such a player to unthinkingly inhabit violent or criminal fictional roles in line with the game's ludic structure.

VIDEO GAMES AND (DIS)OBEDIENCE

One of the basic concerns about players playing criminals in video games is that video games are also used for educational purposes, particularly within a military context. Much has been written on *America's Army*, a 2002 game designed to teach civilians – especially children – about the structure of the American army, thereafter serving as a recruitment tool. Colonel Casey Wardynski, who directed *America's Army* project, has made comments precisely to this effect: "You can't wait until they're 17, because by then they will have decided that they're going to college, or to a trade school, or they'll already have a job that they're planning to stay in. You have to get to them before they've made those decisions" (qtd. in Pearcy 24). If video games have pedagogical value, such that the US military can use for recruitment, it is not unthinkable that the more unsavoury behaviours depicted in video games might also have some form of influence on an individual's behaviour or thought processes. The argument is often phrased as such: if in film or literature, we observe criminal behaviour and vicariously live through the rebellious protagonist, then in video games, we play as that protagonist and vicariously carry out these violent actions ourselves. The problem, according to this argument, is that by personally carrying out such violent actions, we are practicing or rehearsing violent behaviours that will transfer into our real lives. The American Psychological Association's 2005 Resolution on Violent Video Games states that "the link between violent video game exposure and aggressive behaviour is one of the most studied and best established," quietly adding that the interpretations of these well-established effects "have varied dramatically" ("Resolution"). In other words, everybody agrees that video games have some link to aggressive behaviour, but nobody agrees on exactly what that link is. Of course, the concern about audiences imitating characters in media is by no means limited to video games; Jennifer Kirby notes that after the release of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, there were "a rash of claims about 'copycat crimes' in the British Press, with reports stating that gangs of youths committed violent acts after purchasing clothing and/or make-up that resembled the uniforms of Alex and his droogs in the film" (294). She further notes that Kubrick ultimately withdrew the film in Britain as a direct result of this controversy (294). Our history with the so-called heroic criminal is, therefore, complicated. On the one hand, some may find a vicarious joy in seeing a fictional character fight back against the law or against seemingly oppressive social norms. On the other hand, that same joy is the target of censure by those concerned for the safety and wellbeing of the wider population.

A question remains regarding the form of the video game medium. Is there anything special about video games that makes them unique or exceptional in their portrayal of criminality? Or are they merely the latest victim of overzealous parents and lawmakers? The answer lies in the specific configuration of the video game medium. As a medium, video games are about rules. A synergy exists between game rules and real-life laws; they can overlap or engage with each other in interesting ways. For instance, *America's Army* assumes a synergy between the rules of the game and the real rules of the American military. If a player shoots their teammate, they will be sent to a virtual jail, where they must sit in a cell for a given amount of time. This game structure models the real-life legal consequences of 'fragging,' or intentionally killing another soldier.

The game also includes training sequences, teaching the player how to play the game, but also teaching this player the appropriate military procedures around marksmanship, gun safety, and the chain of command. Technically, game rules do not directly engage with real laws; rather they engage with the legal systems of the fictional world, which may be directly modeled on laws from the real world. That is, a player who shoots their teammate in *America's Army* is not sent to a real prison, but rather to a fictional, virtual prison, simulating the real outcome if that behaviour were to take place in the real world. Subsequently, some games have their game rules conflict with fictional laws, as is clear with, for example, *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*). As I suggested above, these games represent an intriguing contradiction: they revolve around illegal acts such as theft or murder, but in performing these acts, players are, in a sense, also obeying the rules of the game. Crime is both obedient and disobedient, both within and against conflicting rule sets. This contradiction often allows these games to reflect the alternate social and moral codes of organized crime. For example, in *Mafia III,* one plays as Lincoln Clay, a mixed-race African-American raised by the black mob in New Bordeaux. Clay robs a bank to pay a debt to the Italian mob, who subsequently ask him to murder his surrogate father and take leadership of the black mob. Clay refuses out of loyalty to his father, leading to the Italians attempting to murder both him and his surrogate father. Here the player is confronted again by conflicting sets of rules: Clay's moral sense of obligation conflicts with the brutal *realpolitik* of mob relations.

Mafia III uses conflicting rule sets such as these to explore the precarious social status of a black American in the 1960s. Teresa Godwin Phelps describes the picaro, hero of the picaresque novel, as an outsider who reveals the illusionary nature of social order: "the picaro seeks order, finds none, and his disordered life disintegrates further, mirroring the society he uncovers." In this narrative structure, society is deeply unbalanced: "the stalwarts of society, the enactors of societal order – judges, jailers, police – are not merely stupid or indifferent; they are corrupt" (1436). Such comments are equally true of *Mafia III*: as a black man living in New Orleans, Clay is frequently subject to racial epithets from enactors of the social order. Early in the game, a white security officer condescends to Clay, calling him a "shit-heel" and complaining about affirmative action: "Sad day when a God-fearin' white man can't get a job, but any old nigger who staggers in is hired on the spot." The game also demonstrates wider social ills through its depiction of class. An IGN review notes "if you steal a car in an affluent neighbourhood, cops will show up quickly and in full force. Steal a car in a poor neighbourhood, and the cops might not even show up at all" (Sliva). The game systematizes racial and economic inequality, suggesting that the police are far more concerned with the wellbeing of those at the top of the economic pyramid than those at the bottom. The police do not protect and serve indiscriminately: their support is shaped by wider issues of political power, which in turn are informed by America's history of slavery. As with the picaros, Clay's criminal activity can be read as a wider metaphor for the social and economic displacement experienced by black communities in America. Phelps comments particularly on the role of birth in the picaresque: "The picaro is usually low-born – an orphan, bastard, or bungled baby of some sort whose origins are disreputable or unknown. Society rejects him because of his shameful birth and thus mandates he become a criminal or trickster in order to survive in a hostile, unaccepting world" (1433). Lincoln Clay is himself a biracial orphan, but there is a wider point about the relationship between race and social standing in America. That is, the problem Clay faces is not specifically the problem of biracial orphans, but rather of black communities more broadly. From that perspective, criminality in *Mafia III* is posed as a way to explore the marginalized and tenuous position of African Americans in 1960s America.

BUCKING THE SYSTEM

There is certainly more to be said about the contradictions involved in games premised on criminality. However, the games I am focused on take a different approach to the concept of criminality altogether. Both

Papers, Please and *Orwell* are set in authoritarian regimes, where the player takes on the role of a low-level government official who must carry out tasks for the state. Game rules are aligned with fictional laws, but these fictional laws are themselves often deeply immoral, rooted in a corrupt or fascist political system. The player is placed in morally compromising situations and must decide how to act. As I suggested above, the conflict is no longer between game rules and fictional laws; here, those two are interrelated. Rather, the conflict lies between the fictional laws of the game and the moral compass of the player. Criminality is not assumed, as in *GTA* or *Mafia III*, but rather posed as a question. The player might simply complete the given tasks, glossing over these ethical questions and demonstrating a straightforward obedience to the fictional state. Other players might look for marginal spaces within the structure of the game, small exploits and loopholes that allow the player to behave against the interests of the fictional state. These subversive behaviours often carry a direct penalty for the player, resulting in warnings, fines, or in some circumstances, imprisonment and the end of the game. Each game has different stakes and presents the player with different problems; in both games, however, criminality is an ethical problem to be considered by the player.

In *Papers, Please*, the player takes on the role of a customs inspector who sits in a booth and verifies the passports of people wishing to cross the border into Arstotzka, a fictional communist country during the Cold War. The Cold War setting is important for this game. For many people, immigration is a controversial issue. Some players might have a different approach to the game if they were, for instance, positioned as an American immigration officer processing refugees from Syria. The game, therefore, takes pains to establish the government of Arstotzka as corrupt and inefficient. These measures entice the player into considering criminal behaviour as an ethically viable option. Thus, the game heavily exaggerates its negative depiction of a Soviet-style government. Arstotzka, for instance, uses capital punishment and forced labor. At the start of the game, the player is given the job of checkpoint investigator after that player's name has been pulled from a monthly labor lottery, suggesting high unemployment. Paranoia and distrust are high: if the player accepts large bribes, his/her neighbors notice that player's increased wealth and report them to the authorities, who arrest both the player and their family. Strict adherence to the law is not necessarily productive either, as government officials are often corrupt. One of the guards, Calensk, offers the player a bribe if they aggressively detain people instead of just denying their visas and asking them to leave. The player's supervisor, Dimitri, also orders the player to let his lover through the checkpoint trouble-free. But when she arrives, her papers are not in order. The player can deny her entry, earning the supervisor's ire, or detain her, in which case the supervisor will fabricate charges against this player and subsequently have him or her arrested, thus, ending the game. However, the player who allows the woman through receives a citation and loses their wages. The sum effect of such types of events is to disconnect players from any introduced notions of national or social allegiance. Justice and neighbourliness are hollow values; players can only rely on themselves.

Wages are crucially important in *Papers, Please*, as the player must earn a certain amount of money to keep their family fed and healthy. Players are paid for each person processed correctly, whereas each incorrect processing results in a citation and a loss of wages. Subsequent citations on the same day may carry further financial penalties. The player is therefore incentivized to process people as quickly and accurately as possible, a process which itself dehumanizes the people coming through the checkpoint. Under the auspices of the game's system, these travellers are primarily constructed as work for the player, as part of a quota, rather than as human beings. The problem is exacerbated by the increasingly labyrinthine bureaucratic systems, which demand the player's full attention. At the start of each day, the player may receive a new directive from their superiors, adding an extra step to the customs process. The player must maintain a certain processing speed despite these complications or risk their family's health and wellbeing. This Kafkaesque bureaucracy represents the first ethical problem for players. Some travellers may appear at customs with discrepancies in their paperwork. For instance, a worker might appear with their passport, but without a worker's permit.

The player is allowed (but not required) to investigate and resolve these discrepancies; for instance, the player might ask the worker for his or her permit, which the worker might then produce from a pocket, having simply forgotten about it. However, the interrogation process takes up valuable time, and investigating discrepancies is not legally required. If the worker does not initially produce that permit, the player may immediately deny that individual entry without bothering to investigate any further. This decision makes good financial sense, as the player will save time and still receive their wages. However, it is also arguably unethical, as that player is penalizing travellers who may have the correct paperwork but do not present it all correctly. In the above example, the worker has the legal right to enter the country, but because of failing to initially present the worker's permit, and because the player is not obliged to investigate discrepancies, the worker might be denied entry into Arstotzka.

The artistic achievement of *Papers, Please* is to model a tension between wages and job performance. The financial vulnerability inherent in the job means that players might try to meet their performance targets by exploiting loopholes and gaming the system. The human consequences are discovered by those denied entry by a rushed customs officer. Of course, some players might have little sympathy for those with incorrect paperwork, emphasizing instead, the individual responsibility of these travellers. The game certainly seems to encourage this attitude, at least in part. Many of those who approach the customs desk do have incorrect paperwork. Some travellers will simply acknowledge their mistakes and leave, while others plead ignorance or clerical error. Many travellers are largely unsympathetic characters – some do not even think to bring their passports. It is easy to become jaded and cynical towards the travellers, especially given that their haphazard paperwork threatens the livelihood of the player's fictional family. However, even though many travellers do not elicit much sympathy, the game also positions these unsympathetic characters as part of an overarching structure designed to cultivate a studied indifference in the player. Many travellers do not themselves evoke sympathy, but the structures of the fictional government in *Papers, Please* equally discourage the player from developing any deep sense of attachment or shared humanity. The player's predominantly negative experience with immigrants confirms and reinforces the systems set in place by Arstotzka's authoritarian government, allowing the player to rationalize the decision that is being taken to deny entry to potentially legitimate travellers without asking any questions. It is both emotionally easy and financially convenient for the player to assume that travellers with any discrepancies are illegitimate.

Beyond these fictional concerns, the gameplay is also designed to systematically dull the player's interest. Daniel Johnson notes that the gameplay is repetitive, instilling "the feeling of seriality through anonymous segments that blend together. Take documents. Check for errors. Deploy stamp arm. Reject or accept. Retract stamp arm. Return documents. Call next in line. Repeat" (606). He further notes that "the act of play becomes an act of administration, of labouring" (607). The player's behaviour becomes routine, and individual (fictional) human beings are reduced to processible data points. Kelly further notes that the player is not even allowed to experience the humanity of their family outside of work: "instead, you are treated to a black screen with stark, piercing text that reminds you which relatives are dying, which bills are not paid, and how much harder you will need to work tomorrow in order to keep your loved ones alive" (471). The family is reduced to data in much the same way as the travellers, or immigrants, are, thus, highlighting the wider effects of this dehumanizing system. It is not only about dehumanizing the foreign Other, the immigrant or the non-citizen; on the contrary, the systems set up in Arstotzka also neutralize the most intimate and personal relationships between its citizens. Spouses, children, and parents are all conceptualized purely in terms of financial data.

The dull, repetitive nature of gameplay in *Papers, Please* further encourages its players to act 'automatically,' without much thought given to any individual case. One is struck by comparisons to the Milgram experiments or Hannah Arendt's wider concept of the banality of evil. Paul Hollander quotes

Milgram's conclusion after his infamous obedience experiments: "ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process" (57). Arendt similarly discusses how Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi commander largely responsible for organizing the logistics of the Holocaust, rationalized his actions: "he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to – to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care" (25). Of course, one might question whether Arendt's account of Eichmann is entirely correct; Hollander notes that Milgram's biographer, Thomas Blass, disagreed with this depiction of Eichmann's character. Hollander quotes Blass as saying that Eichmann "pursued his goal of shipping as many Jews as possible to the extermination camps with a degree of drive, perseverance, and enthusiasm that was clearly beyond the call of duty" (59). Regardless of Eichmann's psychology, Milgram's experiments seem to support Arendt's general point that many people will suspend their ethical compass at the behest of authority figures. Individuals may rely on the systems and structures that surround them, abdicating their own moral responsibility in favour of obedience to authority. Arendt raises this concept explicitly in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "the defense would apparently have preferred him [Eichmann] to plead not guilty on the grounds that under the then existing Nazi legal system he had not done anything wrong ... [and] that it had been his duty to obey" (21). One can imagine players in *Papers, Please* deploying many of the same explanations. They were only playing the game; they were obliged to follow the laws of Arstotzka.

As a medium, then, the system-oriented nature of video games makes them a prime tool for reflecting on systematicity in general. *Papers, Please* uses its systematic gameplay to reflect on the perils of social and legal systems of obedience and authority, particularly the way in which systems, as systems, encourage individuals towards being unthinkingly and uncritically obedient. Within that framework, criminality becomes a type of legitimate resistance, elevating *Papers, Please* above those games that uncritically celebrate criminality, whereby criminal behaviour is transgressive on a fictional level but not on a game level. In ludic terms, criminal behaviour is a form of obedience to the overarching ludic structures of the game. However, criminality in *Papers, Please* is a fictional transgression as well as a transgression against the procedural logic of the game. This doubled transgression allows *Papers, Please* to critically highlight systems of power and the problem of the so-called moral or heroic criminal. It asks the player: when do you disobey?

Within the context of the dulling gameplay of *Papers, Please*, this call to critical reflection is prompted by some of the travellers, who provide troubling exceptions to the player's practiced disregard. For instance, after a bomber attacks the checkpoint, travellers are required to provide an ID card. If the player challenges those without an ID card, they might reply "I never got one" or "I left before they were issued." If the photo on the card looks different, they might say "It is an old picture" or "The years have been cruel." Some have changed their name; some could not afford certain certificates or documents. Asylum seekers need special grants, or they will be detained. These more marginal instances are often morally troubling for the player. Some of these characters have reasonable discrepancies that they can easily explain, and, thus, ought to be allowed into the country. These characters are perhaps less troubling, relatively speaking, as they are inconvenienced and annoyed rather than placed in danger. The other, more emotionally difficult category includes characters who have incorrect paperwork but have compelling emotional reasons why they should be allowed into the country. On the fifth day, for instance, a husband enters the booth with valid papers and tells the player his wife is next in line. His wife enters, but without an entry permit. If the player interrogates her, she says "They would not give me permit. I have no choice. I will be killed if I return to Antegria." The player here has the two options of either following the rules and denying the woman entry, in which case, she will leave the booth, presumably to her death, or allowing her passage and knowingly incurring a penalty. From a strict gameplay perspective, the most beneficial decision is to deny her entry and receive a regular wage. On the other hand, it

would seem humane to let the woman in and accept the penalty. The situation is further complicated by wider questions about asylum seekers and refugees, immigration, corruption, political processes, and the customs officer's ethical responsibility to the state, to their family, and to the individual human being in front of him. Yet, on the simplest level, players are faced with a conflict between the game rules, which incentivize the player to obey the game's fictional laws, and the helplessness of a refugee navigating an uncaring system. The conflict is equally one that differentiates between various types of players: the player can abdicate moral responsibility and simply act as a drone, or begin to interrogate the underlying presuppositions of the Arstotzkan regime.

CRIMINALITY IN THE SURVEILLANCE STATE

In summarizing *Papers, Please*, one might note that it positions criminal behaviour against the structures and logic of the game, whereas other games might more frequently align criminality with game structures. Even then, of course, criminality is not always thoughtless or automatic, as illustrated by *Mafia III*. Nevertheless, *Papers, Please* problematizes criminality and invokes weighty moral and philosophical issues around political resistance and the banality of evil in a bureaucratic society. *Orwell*, the second game under consideration, is clearly inspired, in part, by *Papers, Please*. It takes many of the same thematic concerns and applies them to the more contemporary context of digital surveillance. For many reviewers, *Orwell* is slightly heavy-handed with its dialogue and themes, and is arguably not fully equipped to deal with the enormity of the questions that it raises (Carpenter; Savage; Walker). John Walker, a reviewer for *RockPaperShotgun*, wrote that the game does not "employ subtlety in its delivery of the subject matter. There is no deep understanding here, you won't have your mind changed, and it certainly doesn't have any of the emotional impact of *Papers, Please*." But he continues, "within its own barmy universe, it works!" This seemingly contradictory review captures something of the nature of *Orwell*. It has some serious flaws and is relatively superficial, but is, nonetheless, at the same time, oddly compelling.

Developed by Osmatic Studios, *Orwell* is the first of two games in a series. Retroactively subtitled *Keeping an Eye On You*, the game locates the player as part of a modern-day surveillance system, crudely akin to the American surveillance program PRISM. These digital surveillance systems make up the bulk of the gameplay, which revolves around the player trying to catch a bomber. At the start of the game, the player is shown CCTV footage of a bomb exploding in a plaza. A blue-haired woman is seen leaving the plaza moments before the bomb explodes; facial analysis from the CCTV records shows that the woman has a criminal record. The player is tasked with tracking down the alleged bomber and is told to begin by investigating this suspicious blue haired woman. *Orwell* suggests that the player exists within a dystopian *1984* regime. The game is set in The Nation, a fictional country ruled by The Party, and the player must survey the population to root out terrorists and dissenters. At the outset, the game demonstrates a superficial understanding of the issues surrounding the contemporary surveillance state. James Harding notes that "the common refrain is that the proliferation of surveillance technologies threatens democracy" (225), but argues that the more pertinent problem is that the government has largely outsourced responsibility for its public services, "[subordinating] those services to the business models developed by private contractors" (226). Ultimately he suggests that "Western governments [are] becoming increasingly beholden to private companies, upon which they now rely not only to provide government services but ironically also to possess the competence and means to provide oversight of those services" (226). Yet, *Orwell* does not deal with any such high-level theoretical framework for understanding the problems of the contemporary surveillance state. Rather, its strength lies in its evocative and unsettling portrayal of social media platforms, which accurately captures elements of our own online experiences.

Many of the websites and social media platforms presented in *Orwell* are real-world technologies:

'Timelines' represents *Orwell*'s Facebook; 'uTell' symbolizes Facebook Messenger; and 'Singular' is similar to Tinder or some other dating app. Many of the comments and behaviours on these platforms eerily echo similar real-life situations, forcefully highlighting the ways we ourselves might be studied online. For instance, on the Timelines page for the blue-haired woman, Cassandra Watergate (or Cassie), one character repeatedly leaves comments that mock her for her rich and controlling parents. When Cassie posts a picture of her newly dyed hair, a Jake Klefton comments "did mommy and daddy agree with that? xD." When she posts about leaving her parents' pharmaceutical company, Klefton comments again: "what? who's gonna pay for your stuff now? mommy and daddy won't like this! xD." Further similarities include Goldfels' blog containing spam comments, promising higher traffic through search engine optimization. The dating app Singular also shows conversations with men who turn hostile after being rejected: "Now I totally get why you are over 30 and still single. Arrogant bitch." Many of these little moments accurately evoke our own online experiences. Such evocation is deeply uncomfortable, as players are engaged in monitoring these digital sources and extracting personal information about different individuals. By performing surveillance activities within this fictional setting, our thoughts are inevitably drawn to the ways that other unseen eyes might be monitoring our own online excursions. This evocative portrayal prompts players to consider their own precarious position in a surveillance state, activating the figure of the heroic criminal as a problem for the player to consider.

This uneasy feeling that accompanies playing *Orwell* might be explained through the concept of the data double. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson define the data double as "a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information." These doubles "serve as markers for access to resources, services and power in ways which are often unknown to its referent" (613). *Orwell* asks the player to construct these data doubles in the pursuit of a terrorist bomber. In gameplay terms, the screen is split in half. On the right side, the player can access information stored on computers – be it publicly available information on websites, or private information from sources such as emails, phone calls, texts, private messages, and bank records. Using these tools, the player must collect information about their targets, and upload it into the Orwell system, which sits on the left side of the screen and holds the constructed profiles of different subjects – their data doubles. It includes information such as date of birth, address, occupation, relationship, background information, social and professional networks, activities, and personality traits. The transfer of information from right to left actualizes the reduction of the individual into bits of data, stripping away the individual's context and interpersonal relations, treating digital footprints as reliable indicators of personal identity. This assumption has its own parallels in the real world; Anna Hedenus and Christel Backman write that in the professional job market, recruiters "tend to view applicants' data-doubles as keys to who they really are" (644). The data double haunts the individual, much like a shadowy double in a Gothic text. This haunting spawns the uneasy feeling that arises while playing *Orwell*: players recognize hints of their own data doubles in the evocative depiction of various online spaces. As the characters are haunted by some of the things that they have said and done online, players are haunted by the idea that the same thing could happen to them, too.

Within this context of doubled haunting, the player must make decisions about how to deal with the characters that resist the surveillance state. At certain points in the game, the player is presented with two pieces of conflicting information and must determine which one to upload into Orwell, with each piece having different implications for the subjects under surveillance. For example, before the events whereby the game begins, Cassie participated in a protest and was arrested for assaulting a police officer, although she was eventually found not guilty due to a lack of evidence. Cassie discusses the assault in a series of texts with her friend Juliet Kerrington. The distraught Cassandra frets about how she assaulted the officer in anger, and Juliet tries to calm her, suggesting purer motivations: "You hurt that officer to save me!" The player must choose which piece of information to upload into Orwell. It is unclear which person is telling the truth: Cassie clearly feels guilty, and Juliet is obviously trying to make her feel better. Both statements highlight Cassie's mental state,

and neither represent attempts to neutrally and factually recount the actual events. Nevertheless, the player must choose one statement to upload into Orwell, knowing that the police will treat it as a factual recount and even as a confession. The player's decision might be driven by an affection for or dislike of Cassie, or by that player's subjective judgment about which statement is more reliable. Once again, the player is confronted by the trope of the heroic criminal – but where in *Papers, Please* the player could become the heroic criminal, sacrificing wages to safely bring a refugee into the country, in *Orwell,* the heroic criminals are monitored by the player. Again, the idea of 'heroic criminals' exists here in perpetual scare quotes. Characters like Cassie and Juliet problematize the trope of heroic criminal for the player, who must choose how to act given the information made available to them. If the player decides that Cassie and the members of her activist group, Thought, are indeed heroic criminals, then such a player might try to skew the relayed information to cast those characters in a better light. However, if the player decides that Thought should not be supported, they might more aggressively skew this information against the characters. Conversely, as a mid-point between these two options, the player might try to relay information as factually and neutrally as possible, striving towards some attempt at an objective judgment about which statement holds more truth. The game allows players to respond to the trope of heroic criminal, as played out in the actions of Cassie and others. It allows players to influence the government's treatment of Thought, all the while maintaining a discourse on the contemporary issue of digital surveillance.

The trope of heroic criminal only becomes a direct problem for the player's self-conception near the end of the game. In a climactic scene, the player listens in on a phone call where Juliet realizes that Thought is being observed. She directly addresses the player, asking them to tear down Orwell. The player is presented with a choice – to push forward and have the final members of Thought arrested, or to disobey the government and subvert or destroy Orwell's efficacy. Thus, the trope of heroic criminal becomes a problem for the player's own self-conception. They must weigh the morality of the Orwell system and decide whether it should be continued or ended. At this moment, the awful power of the surveillance apparatus is revealed. *Orwell* has allowed the player to sit as judge over the members of Thought. Throughout the game the player has been reading their emails and texts, arbitrating as to what information the government should receive. I have suggested that this process of arbitration is already morally uncomfortable. In this climactic scene, however, the player can use Orwell to go into a government minister's phone and computer, read her private emails, and upload controversial out-of-context lines to the police, who are then legally obliged to investigate (another artificial constraint of the game). If the player follows this course, the minister resigns, and Orwell is dismantled. The player is given the immense power to single-handedly destroy a mammoth government initiative. Orwell might be immoral, but at the same time, one unelected and relatively unskilled government employee is able to determine the national security policies of an entire nation. The awful power of Orwell is inadvertently demonstrated when it is misused by an individual trying to destroy it. Similar comments might be made with reference to Edward Snowden, an external private contractor hired by the government to help maintain systems that the government was incapable of maintaining internally. There are legitimate questions about the power as well as the oversight of elected government ministers in comparison to the privately contracted "information mercenary," as Harding calls them (228), and about how those power dynamics strengthen or weaken the institutions of democracy. The trope of heroic criminal takes on a nastier edge; the player might decide to destroy Orwell, framing the decision as a heroic act of criminality, but this illegal action, made in the name of preserving democracy, points to a wider softening of democratic structures and the vulnerability of the institutions they are ostensibly trying to preserve.

Both *Orwell* and *Papers, Please* problematize the trope of heroic criminal. *Papers, Please* uses repetitive gameplay loops to dull the player's interest and to ease the thoughtless rejection of potentially legitimate immigrants or even refugees. In *Papers, Please*, criminality is arguably heroic when it resists the status

quo, obstructing the structural systems of control manufactured by the fictional Arstotzkan government. Resistance is neither petulant nor childish, as the player must balance their magnanimous acts against the lives and welfare of family members. In *Orwell*, the stakes are not as complex. On the surface, *Orwell* is a much more sanitized and comfortable system than that of *Papers, Please*; the player need not worry about the lives of their family or the speed at which the information is processed. The gameplay experience is often less stressful, and direct resistance only becomes possible at the climax of the game. In the meantime, players must decide how to judge the characters of the game, the potentially heroic criminals resisting the widespread digital surveillance of The Nation. Despite its often clumsy and overwrought dialogue, the strength of *Orwell* lies in the uncomfortably accurate depiction of social media and our broader online existence. Just as we survey the characters, we are, in turn, made aware of the ways in which we, too, might be under surveillance. This eerie feeling might inform our responses to the problem of heroic criminality, lending weight to the concerns of Thought. Most importantly, in both games, the player who chooses the path of the heroic criminal plays in opposition to the structures and systems of the fictional government in question and the rules of the game. Where some games might position criminality as a type of uncritical adherence to the rules of the game, *Papers, Please* and *Orwell* position criminality as a position whereby the player decides to strike out on their own, resisting banal obedience to the rules of the game, and trying to find more ethical ways of being.

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AUTHOR BIO:

James Tregonning is a Masters graduate from the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. His area of research is video game narrative, with a specific focus on the narrative potential of virtual space. He writes broadly on video game narrative at *Death is a Whale* (https://goingthroughthewash.wordpress.com/); his scribblings there have been cited by Critical Distance, a weekly roundup of "the most important critical writing on games."

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