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Inside a Game: Using Games as a Metaphor for Deconstructing the Oppressive Nature of Reality

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The immigration officer of Arstotzka is reviewing the documents of the immigrants and returning citizens that are trying to cross the border. Each new day brings a novel political occurrence that alters the rules outlined on his desk. He has to follow every instruction, as any error will lead to a penalty. Meanwhile, inside a memory from the distant past, Liljana and Arben are completing their military training in the Albanian mountains, because the Party has advised them that their training will someday be beneficial in case of a potential attack from across the border. Right now, I am scrolling through the endless newsfeed on my Facebook homepage while my Apple Watch reminds me to stand up for a minute. These two platforms categorise me into a user profile according to the data they collect from me and, in return, they offer a service tailored to what I need, or at least, what they think I need.

Four Defining Traits of a Game

Gameplay is an intensive process that happens under the circumstances of exchange between a player on one hand, and the physical and virtual elements that structure a game on the other. At their core, games are ludic infrastructures that come to life through this constant interplay (Gidding and Kennedy 2008). They are constructed worlds and fictitious narratives that players navigate, which also conceal incredible operational complexity. In her book *Reality is Broken*, game designer Jane McGonigal reveals that any game, at its core, is structured upon four defining traits: the goal, rules, feedback loop, and voluntary participation. McGonigal explains that the goal evokes a sense of purpose in its player; the rules limit the possibilities of achieving the goal, thus encouraging the player to think strategically and creatively; while the feedback system assesses the performance of the players and discerns their proximity to reaching the goal. The fourth trait, the voluntary participation, requires all the players to acknowledge the goal, the rules, and the feedback, and is the trait that allows multiple players to be immersed in the same game (McGonigal 2011).

Aiming to investigate these four traits, I played *Papers, Please*, a single-player game set in the fictional dystopian country of Arstotzka. Assuming the role of an immigration officer in an office situated at the border of East and West Grestin, I was challenged to process as many immigrants or returning Arstotzka citizens as possible. My goal was to review the documents of each traveller, allowing only those who met the requirements set by the government to cross the border. My performance was rewarded with increased pay proportional to the number of travelers that I had assessed, which helped me provide food, heating, and medicine for my family, thereby also functioning as a subplot for the game. However, the penalties and fines that condemned my mistakes constrained my moral decisions; I was forced to separate a family due to their lack of paperwork. While playing with the four defining traits in mind, the goal, rules and feedback appeared very obviously on the screen. What was not as apparent was my voluntary participation: as a player I tend to ignore the conditions through which I am immersed inside the game (Pope 2013).

Four Defining Traits of a Dictatorship

By ‘voluntarily participating’ in the game, I acknowledged its structure and submitted to its system, and, consequently, entered a frame of reality which, for the duration of the game,

was a construct I accepted as real. My submission as a player to the *Paper, Please* system is analogous to how my parents submitted to the Albanian communist dictatorship; the game existed only inside its own frame of reality, albeit not lasting forty-six years as the dictatorship did. When the curtains of the dictatorship fell, Albanians found themselves in poor economic and social conditions, contradicting what they first trusted blindly and then accepted fearfully for a very long time (Fevziu 2017). As the child of two parents who grew up in a totalitarian regime, I have been haunted by their account of a system they once worshiped but now recall as an absurd memory from the past. My perception of the dictatorship is formed from various pieces of information collected during my upbringing in Albania, and is thus distinctly different from that of my parents.

In an interview I conducted with my parents, which adopted McGonigal's four traits of defining a game, they revealed that, as citizens of a communist system, the ultimate goal was to become communists—or as they put it—'valuable children of the party'. Akin to how I, through my avatar in *Papers, Please*, was convinced that immigrants were trying trespass into Arstotzka, my parents were made to believe that they lived in the most developed country in the world and were the happiest citizens, and were therefore obliged to undergo military training in order to prevent any other country from stealing their prosperity. My parents suggested that the government operated on very strict rules, as the Party had constructed an ethical and social framework that outlined what Albanians were allowed to do. They were aware of the restraints in their individual freedom of speech, but the Party dictated a communist model even for their hairstyle, their dress code, the furnishing style of their homes, the songs they were allowed to listen to, the dance moves they could use and the people they could befriend. Their performance was then assessed against a very strong feedback system manifested in the state police and civilian spies; failure to stay inside the imposed framework would be critiqued publicly, subsequently leading to punishment by imprisonment, deportation or death. The final question I asked regarding their voluntary participation unveiled that fear was the key element that drove them to submit to the totalitarian system, and they confessed that they accepted a system built on lies because they were not aware of any other alternative.

The Albanian dictatorship, much like a game, developed upon a fictional reality constructed inside a framework of rules. Despite the immersion that the game offered, I participated in *Papers, Please* aware of its fictional nature. In contrast, my parents blindly accepted the dictatorship as their only legitimate frame of reality. This raises questions about the reality I am participating in, especially in the current political climate. Are there any lies that stand at the core of my reality? How am I being supervised?

In Book VIII of *Republic*, Socrates explains to Glaucon the transition from democracy to tyranny:

Whenever a democratic city which is thirsting for freedom has fallen under the presidency of a set of wicked toastmaster, and has quaffed the wine of liberty untempered far beyond the due measure, it proceeds, I should imagine, to arraign its rules as accursed oligarchs, and chastises them on that

plea, unless they become very submissive and supply it with freedom in copious draughts ... (Plato 1997).

Their dialogue uncannily foretold the erosion of the value of objective facts that would define governance several centuries later, in our present-day post-truth era. As per Socrates' prediction, our democratic system has fallen into the hands of toastmasters, both in political and technological spheres, and can easily transit into a totalitarian system which (as identified in my research on the Albanian dictatorship) is frightening. With this in mind, the following analysis of reality aims to understand the conditions that lead to the current situation of control and deception.

Four Defining Traits of Reality

The Goal

The layer of fictions constructed in the game system supports its narrative and allows the player to perceive the purpose of their role in the game: in *Papers, Please* I embarked on a fictional scenario that made me believe that immigrants were trying to trespass Arstotzka. On the other hand, in communist Albania, the Party told fictional tales on the wealth of the country and invasion plans of countries across the border to encourage its citizens to undergo military training. When immersed inside a game, we can probably easily dissect the mythical elements of its storyline without realising that our social institutions function as a layer of fictions structured on top of our physical, tangible world.

In his book *Sapiens*, Harari identified that humans are the only species that can talk about and be convinced by abstract entities that do not exist in the physical realm, from creation myths to the national myths of modern states. He explains that a monkey would not trade a banana for a green piece of paper, but a human would, because she or he believes in the fiction of money. The value of money does not arise from the physical object that represents it, but the universal fiction constructed on top of it and, most importantly, the extensive belief us humans have in it (Harari 2018). Harari traces our ability to communalise fiction to the beginnings of our cognitive evolution:

Many animals and human species could previously say, 'Careful! A lion!'
Thanks to the cognitive revolution, Homo Sapiens acquired the ability to say,
'The lion is the guardian of our tribe.' This ability to speak about fictions is
the most unique feature of Sapiens Language (27-28).

"Careful! A lion!" speaks of an immediate survival impulse—base or primal impulses—while "The lion is the guardian of our tribe" reflects higher orders of thinking regarding social structuring, superstition or purpose. These shared fictions are thus indicative of a matured communal mentality, as Harari further identified that we as humans are able to collaborate with each other when we have a communal belief in a myth, akin to how multiple players can play in the same game because they believe in the same goal (McGonigal 2011, 21).

Harari draws a comparison between a church, a state, and a legal system, claiming that all of them are built upon myths. He suggests that the objective of two Catholics is to fight in a crusade or raise funds for their Church because they both believe that God sent his Son to our planet. Likewise, the purpose of two Serbs is to save the lives of one another because they both believe in the Serbian flag and nation. In the same vein, two lawyers aspire to defend another stranger because they both believe in the juridical system (and the fiction of money) (Harari 2018). Harari discerns a simple lie from a fiction following the criteria that a fiction can build an imagined reality that a large number of individuals can believe. His judgment criteria effectively suggests that, since the earliest stages of cognitive evolution, humans have been living in a dual reality that blends the physical world of rivers and trees with the fictions of states and corporations. Furthermore, as time goes by, this imagined reality becomes so powerful that it controls the survival of the physical world (Harari 2018).

The Rules

When playing *Papers, Please*, my ability to achieve my goal was constrained by the rules imposed by the game; the book found on my desk and the daily paper comprised the information and the possibilities offered to my avatar, dictating what I needed to know and was capable of doing. Similarly, my parents revealed that the Communist Party had constructed a framework that defined the social and ethical rules that trapped Albanians. Even outside a game or a totalitarian system, reality is broken down into frames that allow individuals to grasp it, as the Italian philosopher Federico Campagna (2018) suggests in his book *Technic and Magic*. Campagna defines reality itself as “the frame within which the existent presents itself to our experience” (24), referencing Martin Heidegger’s essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, from which he extracted the concept of *enframing* (or *gestell*). Heidegger claimed that enframing is a necessary process that allows us to break the world into clear and distinct entities in order to experience it better (24). Campagna further draws inspiration from Emanuele Saverino’s notion that the sets of constraints are similar across various political doctrines. According to Saverino, systems as different as capitalism or communism are able to prevail simply because they impose constraints whose frames set the limits of the information revealed and the performance of the individuals inside of it (25).

However, as my research on the Albanian dictatorship certified, the reality-frames act as a filter through which information is selected and revealed. The French philosopher Michel Foucault attributes the ability to outline limits and create a frame to ‘power’. He conceptualised discourse as the process by which power is rendered into language or images; infiltrating our thoughts and confining what we consider to be true or normal; framing a reality in which we organise ourselves and our social institutions, where contradicting discourses are confronted and often defeated. Throughout his work, he questioned how and why some discourses proliferate and others do not; some have infiltrated our reality-frames, actively producing meaning and defining the operation of individuals inside of it, while other discourses and their truths are absent (McHoul and Grace 1993, 57-59).

The Feedback

The third defining trait of a game, the feedback loop is a direct interaction between the game system and the player, as it regularly assesses their performance by constantly inspecting how close they are to reaching their goal. Initially, players develop skills to master the game, yet, as a consequence of the constant observation from the system, players begin to regulate their behaviour according to the response they receive from the system. Thus, as the game allows progression only if players comply with the coded instructions, the game begins to discipline its players (Gidding and Kennedy 2008).

Michel Foucault discovered that individuals, similar to the players of the game, regulate themselves inside the structures of power imposed upon them. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault sketches a theory of modern disciplinary power which interprets power as a force that has penetrated the bodies it guides and controls. He traces the mechanism that modern prisons adopt to supervise each individual by separating them and regulating their daily routines, suggesting that punishment is no longer about crushing, dismembering and overpowering the body, but instead, about isolation, evaluation and supervision (Foucault 1995).

Foucault interprets our societies to be disciplinary, as the disciplinary agents exert power upon individuals as bodies such that their discipline largely self-manifests, thus making them responsible for their own surveillance. He reveals that the *modus operandi* of disciplinary agents is to train individuals by regarding them both as objects and instruments of its exercise, as power begins operating on and through them, producing what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’. Parallel to how a player is constantly observed by the game, disciplinary power applies to individuals via a series of calculated manipulations: the human body enters a machine of power that assesses it, breaks it down, rearranges it, and ultimately, takes the power out of it (Foucault 1995).

The Voluntary Participation

The dangers of fictions and frames of reality arise when they dismiss other alternatives and evolve into what the French philosopher Louis Althusser describes as “ideology”. Althusser built his theory of ideology after Karl Marx, who interpreted ideology as “the system of ideas as representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Althusser 2012, 121). Marx implied that ideology, similar to fictions, is an imaginary construct that defines how individuals position themselves within the world and alongside each other (121).

When discussing ideology, Althusser asserts that individuals refer to religious or political ideology from a critical perspective, sometimes openly claiming that ideology is dangerous because it is imaginary and deviating from reality. However, in this discussion, individuals fail to recognise that they might be part of an ideology themselves and this (in)voluntary participation worries Althusser. He associates ideology to “the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the ‘people’ on a falsified

representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations” (Althusser 2012, 124).

However, Etienne de La Boétie believed that domination is constructed on the basis of popular servitude, and in his 1530 thesis *On Voluntary Servitude*, offered fundamental insight into how every tyranny is grounded upon popular acceptance. The central problem for La Boétie (2015) was the individuals’ subjection to their own enslavement:

I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him (42).

This observation suggested that the structures of power and control depend on the servitude of the individuals—if the public ceased to obey, both tyranny and governmental rule would cease to endure (La Boétie 2015, 42-46).

Emancipating the Player

As Federico Campagna (2018) declared, “imagining an alternative to that which rules our world today is a matter of necessity rather than of philosophical solipsism” (98-99) and probably the best we can do, in Socrates’ words, is to acknowledge our own individual ignorance (Harari 2018, 222). Individuals can change reality if they treat it as a problem that can be solved rather than a static order that they have to adjust to, like how a gameplayer adjusts to their game. As Plato (1997) suggested, the objective of liberating the chained men from the cave is not to give those men the ability to see; on the contrary, they possess the ability already, and freeing them serves to turn them around, against the direction they have been facing so far, so as to acquire a broader and more informed world view (230). Therefore, the process of liberation does not involve creating and imposing a different conception of the world, as that would be enacting the method of oppression this paper precisely aims to deconstruct. Instead, it is an attempt to facilitate the infiltration of the individual into the structures of reality by encouraging readers to see reality as a space they have to discover and evaluate themselves—rather than passively waiting for reality to reach them, like a game reaches its players—in order to uncover the illusions that they have been following until now. Only then can they grasp where they are and decide whether they want to instigate their own change.

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