Talking Strategy: Conceptualizing Resistance in Oppressive Systems Through Play

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In her post "Inside a Game: Using Games as a Metaphor for Deconstructing the Oppressive Nature of Reality" (2020), Sindi Breshani utilizes the game *Papers, Please* to take a deep dive into oppressive realities and the ways in which political oppression suffocates the ability to recognize one's own position in upholding the system. Breshani's writing employs an excellent analysis that truly demonstrates how videogames can provide an opening into deconstructing offline realities for more nuanced critique. Furthermore, Breshani also highlights how *Papers, Please* enables possibilities for *multiple* understandings of oppression. My response will attempt to expand upon Breshani's work and provide a different interpretation of elements or resistance and oppression at play in the game by playing between the rules of the game. I will focus on two points of Breshani's work:

> 1) Reality is co-constructed along with the dominant social, political, and cultural frameworks an individual is embedded in (i.e. knowledges);

> 2) In order for individuals to "infiltrate" these dominant frames, they must learn how to see them as frames and understand their position within them.

Cleverly, these particular points Breshani provides initiates a discussion on resistance in systems of oppression— an adventure the game *Papers, Please* certainly supports by allowing for various subversive styles of gameplay.

I will take this opportunity to carry the author's discussion through an analysis of the game leaning on a few authors in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, the volume edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007).

Situated Ignorance

The first work is Linda Martín Alcoff's "Epistemologies of Ignorance—Three Types". Here, I will only be working with two types of epistemological ignorance Alcoff discusses: generally situated ignorance and structural ignorance. Situated ignorance runs with Lorraine Code's initial challenge to the dominant narrative in epistemology: that all S's in the statement *S knows P* are equal and interchangeable. Code, and Alcoff, argue that subjects, inevitably, bring much contextual baggage to any and all knowledge claims. When a subject (S) claims to *know* something (P), or take actions based on that knowledge, the process of coming to know what they know is ultimately shaped by their experiences, their spatial and temporal contexts, their culture, and so on. As such, one subject cannot know something *in the same way* that another does.

 This is part of the power Breshani's juxtaposition between her way of knowing the Albanian dictatorship and the knowledge her parents have (2-3). It is difficult to recognize one's own ignorance, in order to resist it, if one's way of knowing is so entangled with the dominant image that it is rendered invisible and unrecognizable. As such, Breshani is able to 'know differently' because her frames of knowledge are different, and her parents are able to now know differently, as their knowledge is no longer entangled with the Albanian regime.

Breshani's underlying points here align well with Alcoff's general premises for situated ignorance, which are:

> 1. All knowers are situated in time and space, with specific experiences, social locations, modes of perceptual practices and habits, styles of reasoning, and sets of interests that are fluid and open to interpretation but that have some objective elements in regard to the conditions of the knower's material reality.

> 2. This specificity of situatedness is relevant, at least in some cases, to the ways that a knower will make judgment calls about issues of coherence, consistency, relevance, plausibility, and credibility.

> 3. From this it follows that knowers are not, in fact, fungible or interchangeable.

> 4. Further, it must also follow that knowers are not all "epistemically equal." As Code said, knowers are at once limited *and* enabled by the specificities of their locations (42).

Alcoff's premises maintain that epistemological ignorance is not a "lack of" knowledge, but in some cases, can be a type of knowledge created based on a knower's context that inhibits ignorance— in fact oppression *demands* this ignorance in order to exist.

Based on Breshani's description of the extent the Albanian government went to eradicate thinking otherwise (2), it is not surprising, given Alcoff's premises, that Breshani's parents remained willfully ignorant rather than actively resistant against dominant frames.

Breshani described her parents being both fearful of disobeying the regime and unaware of any other modes of existence/survival. As Achille Mbembe says in *Necropolitics,* "…the suspension of rights and lifting of the guarantees that protect individuals are presented as the condition of survival of these same rights" (2019, loc 738). It is difficult to recognize one's reality constructs and reenacts ignorance when that same reality also dictates the terms of survival. Sacrificing individual freedom and autonomy is presented as a necessity to guarantee the liberties of Albania against Western tyranny and oppression. It is difficult to fathom the need for resistance and risking loss of life to act against what *feels like* the only plausible means of survival.

Situated Ignorance in *Papers, Please*

To elaborate, I would like to take a closer look at the rules and reprimands in *Papers, Please.* The player is demanded to follow the rules of immigration strictly. The rules often seem to make sense: Ban people without immunization records to prevent the spread of polio. Make sure people have documents confirming their identities and where they are going. Check people for trafficking illegal weapons or drugs.

The newspapers the player receives each day and the in-game scenarios are also filled with terrorist attacks on the checkpoint, the player, and the nation. These newspapers also

contain reports criticizing how "loose" checkpoints are and what a poor job border-enforcers (like the player) are doing of keeping the nation safe— allowing the riff-raff in to steal away Arestotzka's freedoms and securities. The lived-experiences of the character further increase the plausibility, and the necessity, of the rules to the player; needing to disassemble the occasional bomb when one's typical in-game events consist of paper-pushing is mildly stressful.

Game Aesthetics and Context Curation

In videogames, two types of situatedness are taking place. The first, is the situatedness of the *player-character*. The knowledge available from the in-game world, rules, and information available through the character's experiences. The second, is the situatedness of the *player*, themselves. This involves knowledge contexts the play brings from outside the game, their goals, and their lived-experiences. Both of these situated knowledges interplay to help curate the game experience for the player. As such, if the only context that informed the player's decisions were the rules of the game, the press, and the experiences working at the checkpoint, it would be pretty difficult to morally justify disobeying the rules in game. Outside of the game, these rules seem quite understandable for what is associated with state (and state official's) duties to citizens— protection, order, bureaucracy— and these rules do not seem outwardly ridiculous or totalitarian when the player is witnessing deaths of fellow checkpoint guards and being hand-delivered bombs.

Furthermore, the player is strongly punished for mistakes. Two mistakes are tolerated, but after these 'free-passes', mistakes scale in cost from -5 credits to -15 credits per error. As Breshani pointed out, the player is not just playing for themselves. The player-character is doing this job to take care of his family and keep them fed, warm, and healthy. Even in flawless runs of the day, the player is only 5-10 credits ahead of rent and necessities. So, three or four mistakes can mean the difference between family members dying of hunger, cold, or illness.

Furthermore, *Papers, Please*, is not a text-based game. Game aesthetics are a critical part of cultivating the player's understanding of what is happening in the in-game world (Gidding & Kennedy, 2008).

The title screen of the game uses high-contrast, dramatic colors (black, white, grey, and red) with strong lines and block text. An eagle with a shield emblem spreads its wings across the top of the game title (see image). The main theme music of the game is a repetitive, alto march to which the title moves in sync. Before the game begins, the player views a cutscene that contextualizes the player-characters situation. The player-character 'won' this job through the "labor lottery". The cutscene shows the character's family being uprooted from their home to be housed in a hideous (and horrendously expensive) government apartment complex. Setting the stage with this distinctly authoritarian tone and context, the game immediately wrongs and disadvantages the player-character for the sake of Arestotzka.

Despite these more ominous tidings the aesthetics of the game foreshadow, the player has very little guaranteed incentive to disobey rules, aside from bribes. And the player has less

reason to resist the government, as it is unclear precisely what one would be resisting or why (or if resistance is futile). Couple that with a high risk of monetary discipline and responsibility for family, is resistance—towards an unknown purpose, against an ambiguous entity, and at an extreme cost—really worth anything? Further, what does resistance achieve at this point?

"There are losses that participate in necessity, because they guarantee survival" (Mbembe, loc 667).   As such, one must lose the possibilities of individual autonomy, freedom, and knowledge to take on the reality of survival in oppressive systems. Survivors must learn to live through ignorance, sometimes at the loss of the self— benefiting from "seeing the world wrongly" (Alcoff, p.47) out of necessity.

Structural Ignorance

Here, it becomes possible to transition into Alcoff's other identified form of epistemic ignorance: structural ignorance. This perspective lends its basis on Charles Mill's chapter "White Ignorance" and focuses on the concept of systematic ignorance that shapes and permeates culture, institutions, and society. It is not an absence of knowledge about harms and disadvantages these social orders cause but the active unknowing that takes place to *keep them that way.*

Alcoff's premises for structural ignorance are as follows:

> 1. One of the key features of oppressive societies is that they do not acknowledge themselves as oppressive. Therefore, in any given oppressive society, there is a dominant view about the general nature of the society that represents its particular forms of inequality and exploitation as basically just and fair, or at least the best of all possible worlds.
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> 2. It is very likely, however, that this dominant representation of the unjust society as a just society will have countervailing evidence on a daily basis that is at least potentially visible to everyone in the society.
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> 3. Therefore, cognitive norms of assessment will have to be maintained that allow for this countervailing evidence to be regularly dismissed so that the dominant view can be held stable (48).

If we turn again to the injustices Breshani's parents suffered, and the removal of individualized identity and agency in all aspects of Albanian lives— from their hairstyles to their clothing, to their dances— we can see the "maintenance of cognitive norms" that Alcoff postulates. To allow any possibility for choice, freedom, or autonomy, to risk any site or source of resistance, was to open the possibility for the oppressed to come to *know* of possibilities and possible worlds beyond of the dictatorship.

To risk knowledge of other ways of being was to risk losing the power ignorance afforded the regime. The Albanian communist regime was waging wars on knowledge, insurgency, and political ideology simultaneously within their own borders. To borrow again from Mbembe,

In truth, this interlocking of wars, as causes and consequences of one another, is why they give rise to so much terror and atrocity. It is also why, among those who have suffered them or participated in them, they sometimes provoke a belief in an illusory all-powerfulness, or sometimes even a terror and the vanishing, pure and simple, of the feeling of existing. (loc.152)

Breshani is concerned about how easily her parents blindly accepted the dominant images of ignorance put forth by the Albanian dictatorship. In the same turn, she expresses concern for how she, or anyone, could know if their reality is based on ignorance and how we can resist being blinded and totalized by it (4)— avoiding 'vanishing' act performed by the self and knowledge in these types of wars, as Mbembe terms it. Resistance, even epistemological, is always an act of violence to power. It is a move to dismantle or destroy the dominant image and the people who know and uphold it. Is resistance possible in such high-risk situations? What type of moves towards resistance are possible?

Sparks of Resistance in Arestotzka

In order to resist oppression, one must recognize the oppression. Further, an individual must be able to recognize *and reflect* on their own position within it. As Alcoff suggests above, this may not be particularly easy— as oppressive societies obscure their oppression, but it is possible to exploit weaknesses that might provide openings for dispelling the illusion of justice and equality and discover possible options for resistance within the oppressive system. Considering the game *Papers, Please*, there are constant in-state rebellions, complaints about quality of life from various travelers, and the treatment of Arestotzkan citizens at the border is abysmal.

Further, the game encourages the player to turn away foreign press members and sacrifice speed (and pay) for ever-increasing bureaucratic 'safety' measures that do not seem to be preventing in-house terrorism. The real last straw for me was when I had my character hang up one of his son's drawings at work, thinking that it would make him feel a bit happier, to be promptly fined twenty credits (twenty credits!) for "unauthorized wall décor".

 Upon returning home after the work day, I was quickly ushered to jail for delinquency, as the twenty credits had put me in debt (zero-tolerance policy in Arestotzka), and the game ended. I was so angry, not just at losing, but because I felt like my character had been wronged beyond reason. Delivered a bomb in your first week? Fine, no problem. Disassemble and keep working. Hang up your kid's drawing? 20 credits, jail, game over. What?

Playing Between the Rules

Papers, Please has 20 possible endings. These help to accommodate different player goals and play styles and do not pin players to a "right" or "wrong" strategy for survival. While the game certainly has hard and fast boundaries that apply, there is room for some flexibility that

relies on player discretion. After the drawing debacle, I began to lean on principles I learned through Alison Bailey's chapter "Strategic Ignorance".

Employing María Lugones's curdled logic, Bailey argues that it is possible to resist oppression by harnessing the dominant images enfolded in ignorance to reclaim agency through them—like oil in water. Bailey also describes this as hearing a song on the car radio but pieces and parts of alternate stations keep interrupting and challenging the station's purity. Open rebellion in *Papers, Please*, much like any other dictatorship or authoritarian regime, often yields only suffering and death—not martyrdom nor a revolution. Obvious resistance only results in the player character being imprisoned or executed and their family in limbo. But subversive resistance, resisting oppression by playing into its blind spots, is a tactic the game supports.

For example, consider the warning system— two mistakes before penalty is paid. Now, if the player gets incredibly skilled at navigating Arestotzkan bureaucracy, consistent flawless runs are possible. If the player is also careful about budgeting funds, only feeding family members when they are hungry, turning heat on when they are cold, or providing medicine only if they are 'very' sick, the player can even stockpile enough cash to temper a few 5 credit deductions.

The dominant image of the player-character in the game is that the character is incompetent, obedient, and easily manipulated. So, I played into that reading. I started using my 'warnings' to help people. Where Breshani decided to divide the family during her gameplay, I decided to sacrifice one of my "warnings" to allow them to be together. "Whoops, I guess I am just a bad inspector," I say as I wrongly deny entry to a known sex trafficker and allow a woman in need of a medical procedure without documentation. Then I proceed to file all of the remaining passports flawlessly.

Exploiting Ignorance

The game encourages this type of experimentation by saving each day individually and allowing players to pick up where they left off upon death (or replay whole days). As the player gets more familiar with this strategy, and the player's situated ignorance about the structural ignorance the character is facing is reduced, more options for resistance become visible. The player is able to work through *and with* the player-character in order to unveil new possibilities for survival *and* resistance. At some point, the game transitions to become survival *through* resistance as more attempts at undermining oppression are successful.

Individuals are able to resist the dominant images the system imposes by becoming an expert *about* the system of oppression and its ignorances, and playing on that ignorance, to one's own advantage, for one's own purpose. This is agency and resistance through oppression. Curdled logic. While this may not have been the type of epistemological oppression Breshani initially had in mind, the game opens to this possibility.

Worthy of note, this type of resistance does seem to require individuals be able to "step back" and reflect on the system of oppression while simultaneously being situated within it— not easy in reality. In the game world, the player is operating under a duality of situated knowledges: the knowledge available to the player-character and the knowledge available to

the player. This makes it a bit easier to fall back to one's self-outside-the-game to consider possible options and risks in-game.

What I consider a worthy sacrifice to my family in-game, would likely not be the same if I *was* the character. I cannot just hit "play again" and all goes back to how it was before the decision to resist was made. Furthermore, I am privileged outside of the game to be able to recognize authoritarian overtones; I have studied political theory, and I did not grow up in a communist regime or dictatorship. As such, the elements of the oppressive society in *Papers, Please* that raise red flags for me and spark my desire for rebellion— the "countervailing evidence" as Alcoff terms it— is much more apparent to me due to my general situatedness outside of the game. And it is "safe" in my reality to engage in acts of resistance in-game because I can afford to have different goals in game than outside of it.

While strategic ignorance opens some possibilities of resisting oppression with and through structural ignorance, I think more work needs to be done on investigating the relationship between strategic ignorance and risk. Especially insofar as determining what expectations can be had of persons living in these frames. More particularly, is strategic ignorance and curdled logics epistemological goals in themselves? Or are these means to more permanent ends of escape and revolution, or less pleasantly, enslavement to constantly thinking in relation to violence and those in power?

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