



Hello everybody, my name is Luis Garcia. I'm here to talk about Civil Disobedience in video games. Very excited to be here! This is my first NarraScope ever, and I decided to go in with a talk to :cringe: hope this goes well.



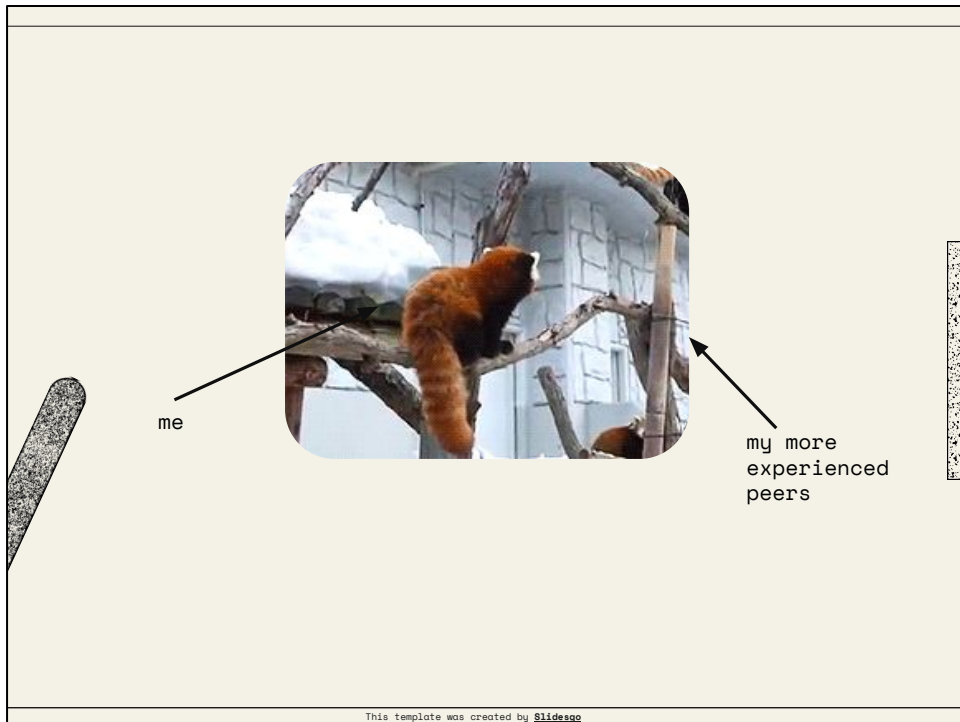
And just for a quick heads up:

Content warning: I'm going to be discussing violence, immigration law, and will be making light allusions to racism and sexism. The topics won't really dominate the talk, but I want to warn people anyway



So, I'm a PhD student over at Northeastern University, working with Dr. Chris Martens, who I believe some of you may be acquainted with. I primarily study video game AI, but I have some other interests that, while not part of my main research agenda, that I'd love to get involved in the discussion of. So this is an example of such a subject.

Also, here's a picture of my cat, Ziti. He's big.



Now, I do want to emphasize one thing about me: I have an *interest* in games criticism and studies, but I am by no means an expert in it. The point of this talk is to do what I believe a student should do when they're getting acquainted with a subject: study it, develop theories and models about it, show them in front of people who maybe know more, and then take feedback. And if I provoke somebody in the process by saying something they don't agree with, awesome. There's something to talk about.

I bring up this disclaimer because my hope is that those who are new to the topics I'm going to discuss have a good springboard to continue studying them, if they're interested in it. I am not trying to lay out a new theory for civil disobedience in games, but I am trying to start a discussion that might lead to a new theory, if such a theory is to be made.



So, when I say “civil disobedience” what do I mean? In my opinion, a good definition is hard to find. Part of the difficulty is that civil disobedience can be seen as either a tool in a suite of activist tactics or a philosophy of activism in general. In other words, if you’re an activist group, either you use civil disobedience because you think it’s effective at the moment, or because you believe, morally, this is the most justifiable means of causing social change.



For this reason, I'm going to stick to talking about civil disobedience *as a tool* for social change, not as a philosophy of activism.

“By engaging with civil disobedience one intends...to address the sense of justice of the majority and to serve fair notice that...the conditions of free cooperation [in a nearly just society] are being violated.”

- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Original Edition p. 382

The best thing I could find to describe what I mean by the term “civil disobedience” is John Rawls’s reason for engaging with civil disobedience, which he lays out in his 1999 book, *A Theory of Justice*. [read the quote]. Now, I don’t have enough time to really get into this quote, so I’ll just simplify it according to my understanding as follows:

Civil disobedience is:

- Acting against a majority rule
- Acting against an unjust law
- Non-violent demonstration

Civil disobedience is acting against injustice nonviolently. To commit an act of civil disobedience is to act against an unjust law that was put in place by a majority power. The injustice in question is



# In games?

So, civil disobedience is a tool for telling a majority group that whatever sense of justice they're promoting, either by their laws or their norms, is not just at all. Hopefully, in our heads, you can imagine examples of civil disobedience: strikes, sit-ins, illegal voting, etc. These are all physical, real world actions. So, how do games factor in?



To answer that, I'm going to walk us through some "transgressive games" and move us toward an example of a game that I think represents civil disobedience. By the phrase "transgressive games", I mean games that allow players to explore some form of norm or law breaking within the regular gameplay cycle. I am going to talk about three relatively recent transgressive games.

## Game 1: Red Dead Redemption



- Wild West-style crimes
- Occasional righteous rule-breaking

The next game, or really series of games, is Red Dead Redemption by Rockstar Games. In Red Dead and Red Dead 2, you play as an outlaw in the old American West. The games feature sandboxes in which you can do practically anything the controls allow, including some Wild West crimes like bank and train robberies, wantonly shooting at citizens, bar fighting, etc. In these games, the character you're playing as is a somewhat idealistic enlightened sort, so you are sometimes given the opportunity to do crimes for the social good. I remember a moment in Red Dead 2 where I ran into a number of Klu Klux Klan members and, well, I had enough guns and ammunition on me to greet them, if you know what I mean.

Both games' stories are heavily themed around the corrupting influence of American westward expansion, and the writing tends to frame the actions of the player that are required by the story to progress through as being righteous, though futile. In these games, you are an outlaw, but a good one.

## Game 2: Spec Ops: The Line



- Showcases the brutality of war
- Lets the player explore alternatives to the status quo

The next game, Spec Ops: The Line, is talked about quite a bit in literature on transgressive games. I want everybody to think about other In this game, you play as Captain Martin Walker, a member of the US Army on a reconnaissance mission in a war-torn Dubai. This game came out in an era of gaming that was dominated by ultra-violent military shooters such as the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare games. What makes this game stand out from the rest of such shooters is its commentary on the brutality of modern, urban warfare. In the game, you can commit war crimes.

Importantly, though, you don't have to. There are several moments in the game where you can choose non-violence against the NPCs you encounter in the game. Famously, there is a scene where you can scatter a crowd by shooting above their heads rather than mowing them down, which is a notable moment for an industry in which scoring high kill counts is the goal. For this reason, Spec Ops enables a way for the player to critique the status quo in the gaming industry as a whole through their diageitic actions.



The last game in this list is Papers, Please, made by Lucas Pope. I have a feeling this game is the one out of the four that least needs an introduction, but here it goes anyway. In Papers, Please, you are chosen by the police state of Arstotzka to be an immigration officer, choosing who can or cannot cross its borders from the outside. The game makes the word of the law very clear, but it gives you the freedom to break it. Some NPCs who are trying to cross the border are simply trying to find a more stable life within Arstotzka, albeit illegally. It's up to you to weigh your morals against the rule of the law.

This game has clear parallels to the immigration crisis of several countries, including my own, the United States. Much like how Spec Ops the line enables players to critique warfare and military shooters by giving them opportunities to act against what is normal in the scenarios it depicts, Papers, Please gives you the opportunity to critique the state of immigration, its laws, and the way it factors into the misery of so many people who contend with it.

## What do these games have in common?

- Each affords some form of transgression.
  - Diagetic: afforded by game mechanics
  - Judicial: would be illegal if done irl

So what do these games have in common? As I've stated before, this detour is about transgressive games, which are games that afford players the ability to explore norm or law breaking.

In chapter 3 of the book, *Transgression in Games and Play*, Dr. Holger Pötzsch lays out various sorts of transgression that can manifest in video games. Two of them, the diagetic and judicial forms, are apparent in each of the games I've discussed.

Affordances for transgression are diagetic in that they are expressed as acts that are illegal *within* the game world. In other words, the game worlds have laws that the player may break.

Many of the actions the player can commit in these games are also judicially transgressive. In this case, the actions are considered illegal in the real world.

## What do these games have in common?

- Each affords some form of transgression.
  - Diagetic: afforded by game mechanics
  - **Judicial**: would be illegal if done irl

Now, I want to circle in on the judicial transgressions.

## Judicial transgressions



Murder, theft, assault



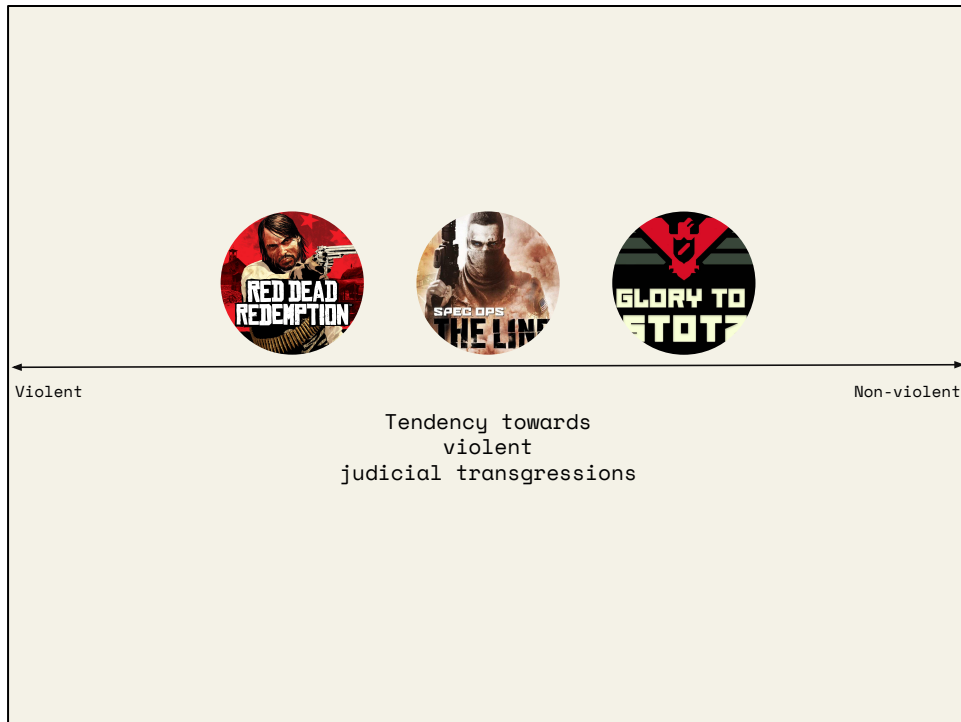
War crimes



Bribery, illegal immigration

All four of the games I laid out here represent judicial transgressions. In each, the player is invited to commit diageitic actions that break real world laws. In the case of HATRED and Red Dead, we're talking murder, assault, and theft. In Spec Ops, the player can commit virtual war crimes if they progress through the story one way. In the case of Papers, Please, acting against the government of Arstotzka is a crime. More specifically, granting people passage into the country even when they lack the proper documentation is breaking the law, moral or no.





However, the games differ on how much their transgressions tend toward violence. On one hand, practically every transgression you can commit in HATRED and Red Dead require the player to execute violent acts, though in Red Dead there are some acts that are not totally violent, such as stealing peoples' horses. On the other, Papers, Please involves (as far as I know) no directly violent actions that the player can make.



And this is significant because many popular games are like HATRED or Red Dead Redemption. I don't have a good statistic to point to, but, as a long-time gamer, I'd wager that most popular games in which the player can commit judicial transgressions only afford violent expressions of disapproval or disagreement with the virtual society that the player inhabits.

The violent expressions are not part of civil disobedience.



So, we come back to the notion of civil disobedience by saying that Papers, Please's representation of judicial transgressions is the closest representation of civil disobedience out of these four games. The transgressive actions of the player in the game are non-violent. By using their power as an immigration official to break Arstotzka's immigration laws, the player is serving fair notice to the government that no one in their place in their society ought to be obligated to follow these laws in particular. By breaking the law, the player is stating that the law has no place in a just or nearly just society.

Now, I say "maybe" because of the "nearly just society" part of John Rawls's description of civil disobedience. There's a debate to be had about whether or not Arstotzka's society is nearly just at all. It's dystopian, run by a sometimes cartoonishly evil government. That conversation is out of scope for this presentation.



What is in scope, though, is asking, "Okay, so Papers, Please is a representation of civil disobedience. Why does this matter?" Perhaps I should have started with asking, "Well, why does thinking about civil disobedience in general matter?"



Civil disobedience is an accessible process by which a minority community can tell the majority that enough is enough. From protests, to sit-ins, to strikes, the methods of civil disobedience are effective at making a statement, moving a society toward change, and, when all goes well, lead to minimal bloodshed. People are less afraid to participate in a protest than they are shooting guns at a majority.

Because of its lower barrier to entry than, say, actual lawmaking or full on insurrection, civil disobedience is a process that can amass a large amount of strength through numbers—enough strength to bring entire industries to their knees.



Several forms of media can be used to move people toward action. Who hasn't been outraged at something on the news, or moved by the plight of civil leaders in movies?

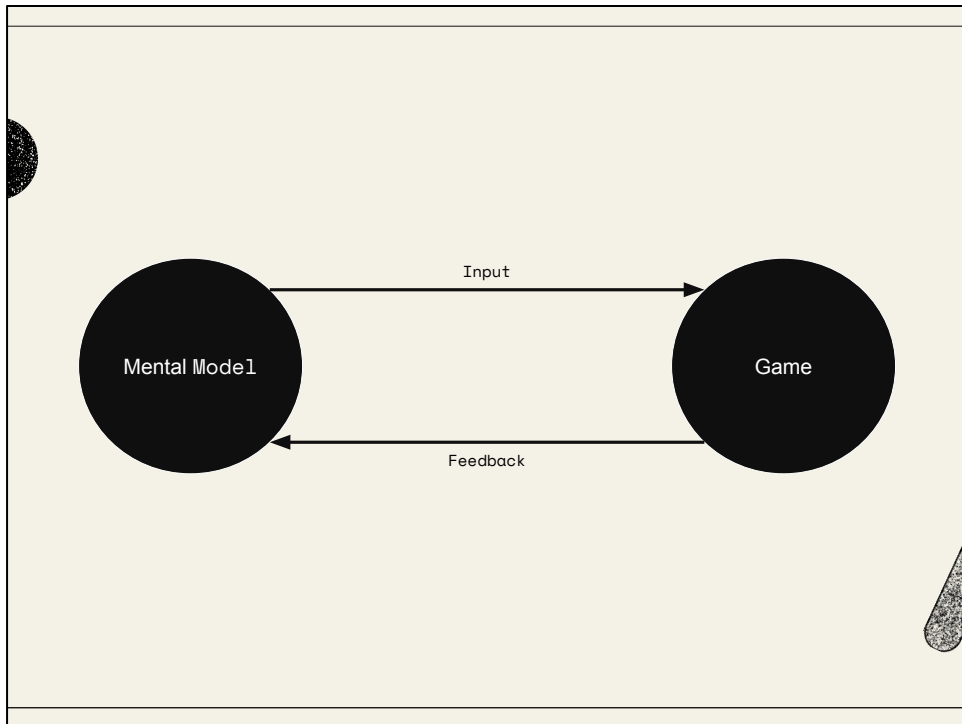


Video games, I feel, have yet to join this list of media. Yet, of all of the media here, it has the most untapped potential.

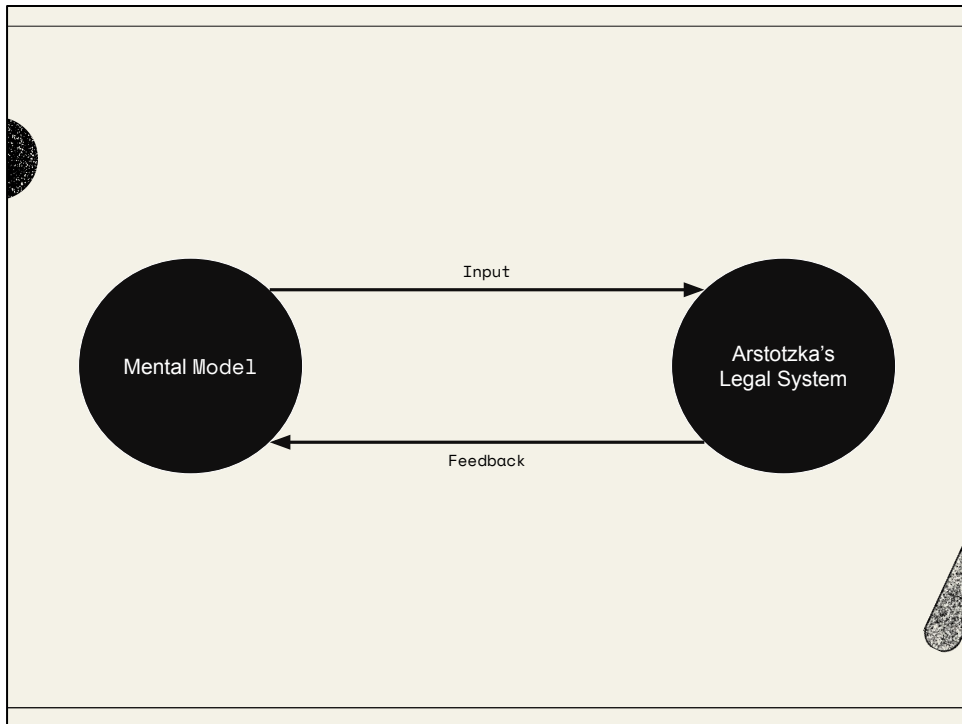


Video games can teach us how to be effective organizers by simulating scenarios and tactics.





In the back-and-forth between the player and a game's system is a feedback loop that builds up the player's mental model of that system, helping the player better predict how the system will react to its inputs. If the game is simulating a real life system, then perhaps by playing the game, the player is learning that system as well.




If the game is simulating a real life system, then perhaps by playing the game, the player is learning that system as well. Imagine if Papers, Please's Arstotzka was an actual place. Maybe, by playing the game, you learned something about that government's legal system.

**Agent-Based Modeling of Human Decision-makers Under Uncertain Information During Supply Chain Shortages**

Nutchanon Yongsatianchot Northeastern University Massachusetts, USA yongsatianchot.n@northeastern.edu	Noah Chicoine Northeastern University Massachusetts, USA chicoine.n@northeastern.edu	Jacqueline Griffin Northeastern University Massachusetts, USA ja.griffin@northeastern.edu
Ozlem Ergun Northeastern University Massachusetts, USA o.ergun@northeastern.edu	Stacy Marsella Northeastern University Massachusetts, USA s.marsella@northeastern.edu	

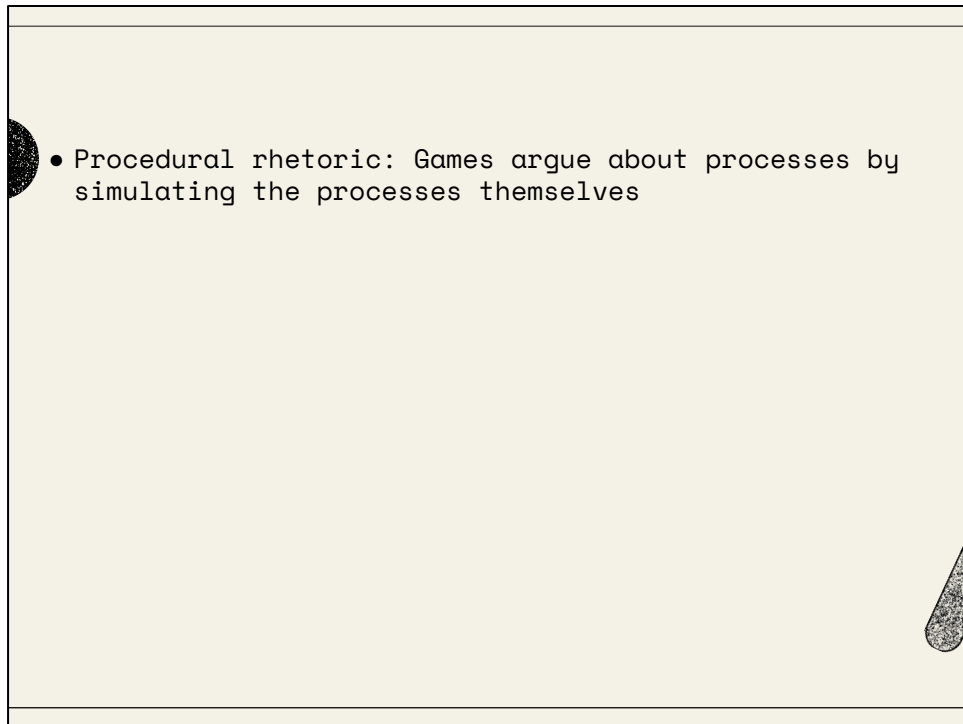
**MODEL DIPLOMACY**



Of course, this isn't that far-fetched of an idea. There's research into this quality of video games, and a number of existing examples of games' being used to simulate real world scenarios to train students, soldiers, and the like. There's also, of course, quite a few board games that also simulate civil disobedience.



Video games can present arguments against the status quo and for action.



First laid out in the book, "Persuasive Games" by Ian Bogost, the concept of procedural rhetoric includes the stance that games can present arguments about processes.

- Procedural rhetoric: Games argue about processes by simulating the processes themselves

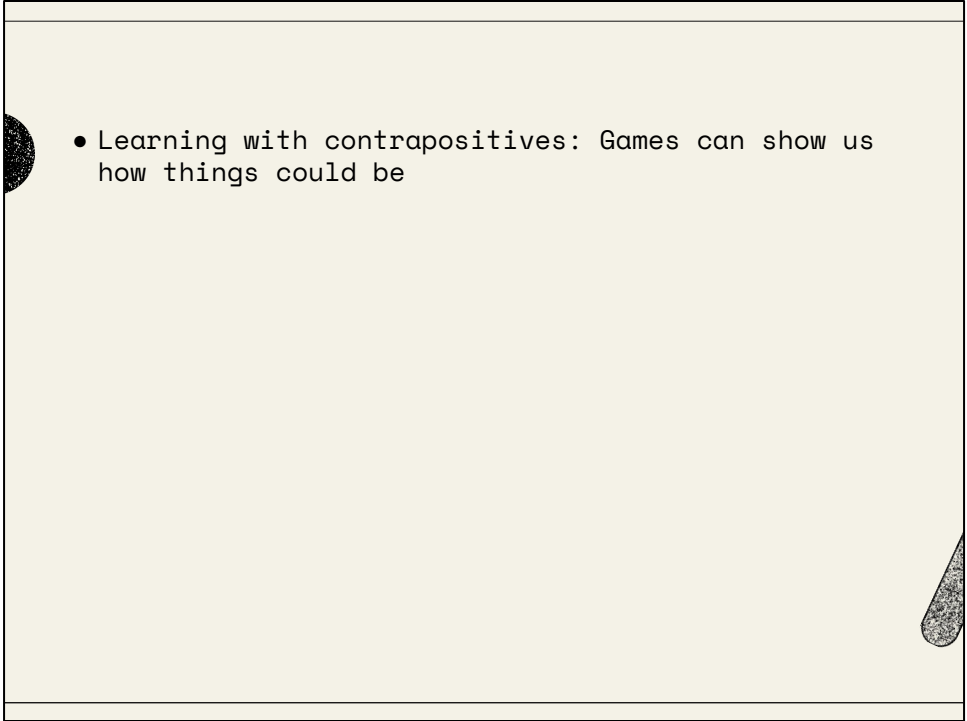
GAMING

## “There’s Basic Rules. I’m Sorry.”

How *Papers, Please*—a video game about border agents—illustrates the cruelty of our immigration system.

BY EVA-MARIE QUINONES JULY 09, 2019 • 10:05 AM

Consider how *Papers, Please* presents the process of immigration into Arstotzka. Its laws are enforced by this process, and you, as an enforcer, follow rules that govern what you should and should not do in this scenario. In *Papers, Please*, the law is represented by these very rules, and it is clearly showing that these rules aren’t as just as you’d like them to be.

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- Learning with contrapositives: Games can show us how things could be

In addition, games can have non-linear narratives, presenting opportunities for even greater reinforcement of procedural arguments. Research into how we form and understand explanations of phenomena has shown that we tend to use counterfactuals when we try to understand cause-and-effect relationships.

- Learning with contrapositives: Games can show us how things could be

X instead of Y?

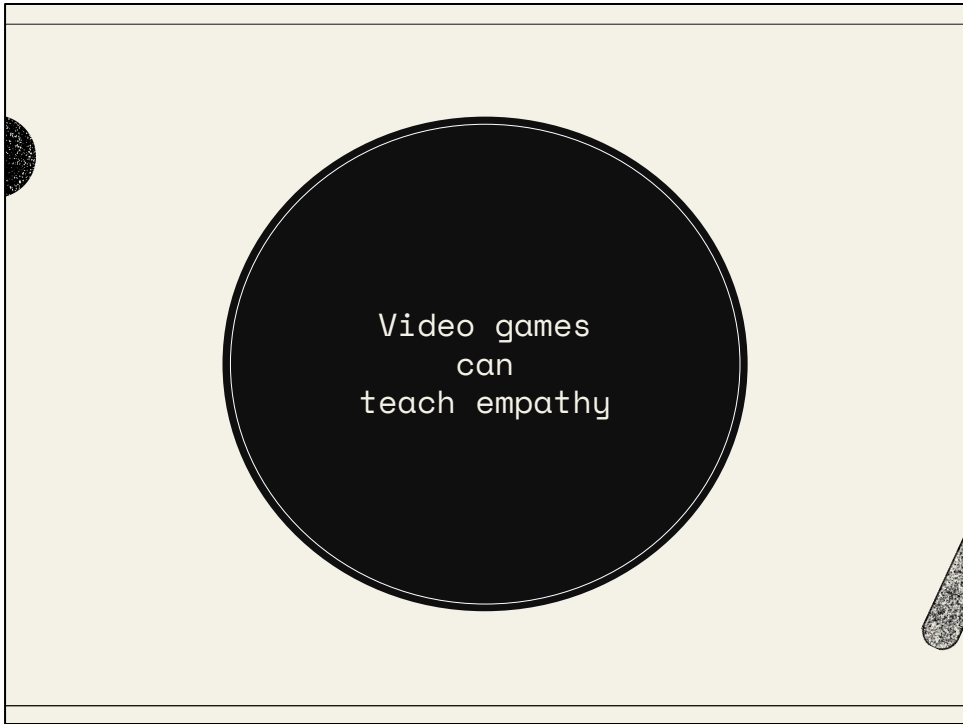
Counterfactuals are statements of the form “X instead of Y”. I contend that you can turn that statement into an argument.



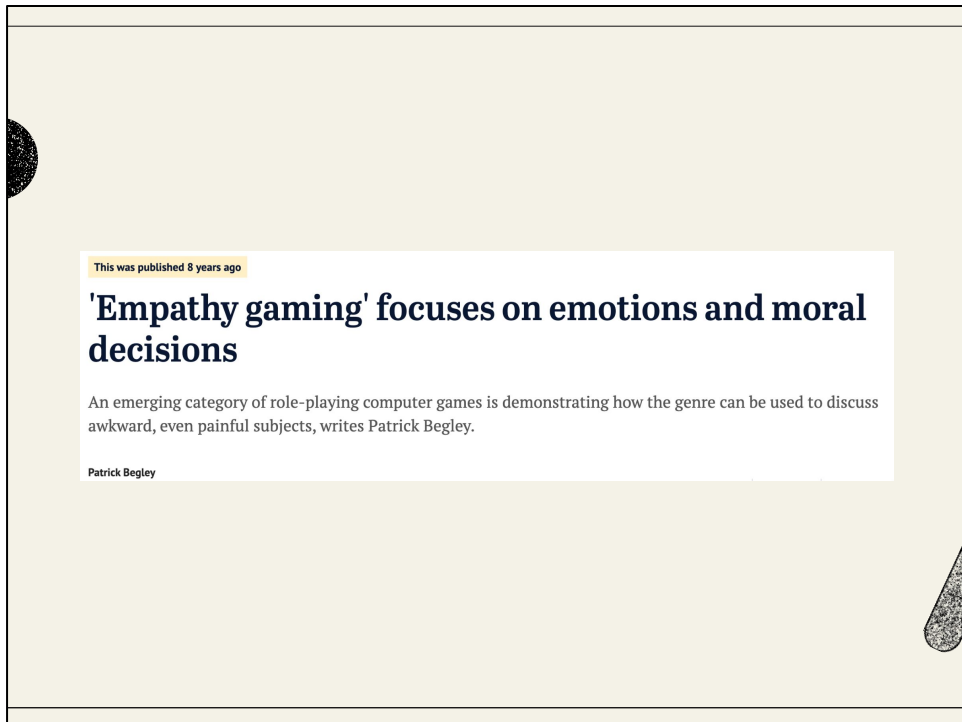
- Learning with counterfactualism: Games can show us how things could be

Why not Y instead of X?

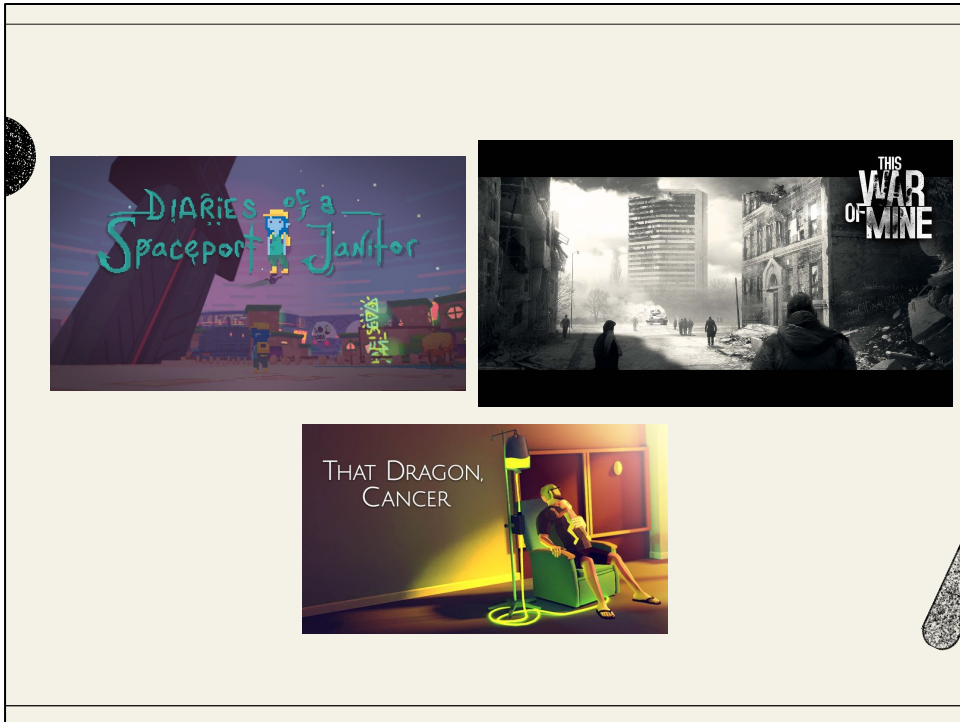
“Why not Y instead of X?” Why not let that person go through the border despite Arstotzka’s laws? Why shouldn’t we unionize instead of working in these conditions?



Last, but not least, video games can teach empathy.



Papers, Please itself has been touted as an example of an “empathy game”, a term defined by journalist Patrick Begley as a game that asks the player to step into another character’s emotional world. In Papers, Please, you are an immigration official making potentially life or death decisions for people who are trying to get through the border for an extremely oppressive government. You are helpless against the law. You are helpless against the rules of the game, which represent the law.



There are a great number of indie games that I'd consider empathy games as well. Though, of all of them, Papers, Please presents methods for acting on that empathy.



My talk ends on this note. Civil disobedience is an accessible tool for gathering the strength of a community to fight against injustice. Video games can help a community argue for social change, understand the effects and outcomes of mass interventions, and work up empathy for their cause. Games can be tools for civil disobedience. But to do that, a game must allow us to explore the unjust rules, to help us imagine what it's like to be rid of them or at least to fight them, and to encourage us to fight them civilly, without violence.

**Thanks!**