

Post-Heroic Play in Social Work Education: Structural Constraint and Impossible Care

Christian Voigt

Hochschule Düsseldorf, University of Applied Sciences
Münsterstraße 156, 40476 Düsseldorf
christian.voigt@hs-duesseldorf.de

Keywords

ethical cognitive friction, post-heroic play, social work, intersectionality

GAMES AS IMMERSIVE LIFEWORLD LABORATORIES

Social work addresses social inequalities structured along class, race, gender, disability, and migration status. When multiple inequalities intertwine, the task is not to aggregate discrete forms of discrimination but to develop an integrated, intersectional perspective based on the analysis of underlying power relations. Intersectionality describes how multiple systems of power structure unequal access to resources, recognition, and participation (Frühauf 2017).

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for using digital games in social work education to provoke reflection on intersectional discrimination. Rather than treating games primarily as sources of harm, the paper examines how specific gameplay structures can expose players to ethically complex situations shaped by institutional constraints and social inequalities. Through a comparative reading of *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) and *A Plague Tale: Requiem* (Asobo Studio, 2022), the paper argues that post-heroic gameplay can function as a pedagogical space in which students confront the limits of individual agency within structurally unjust conditions. Identifying and relating to intersectional positionalities is a critical competence for social work students, particularly given that discrimination is often subtle, situated, and dynamic (Eder et al. 2024).

The term 'Laboratory', is a reference to Sicart's (2009) account of ethical gameplay, in which player values interact with values embedded in game structures. Games thus offer a discursive ground for engaging the structural complexities of social work practice, including the profession's classic triple mandate. Under the first and second mandates, practitioners are expected to normalize clients in accordance with societal expectations and to empower them in line with their own needs and resources. The third mandate consists of the profession's ethical commitment to human rights and social justice (Staub-Bernasconi 2018, 114).

This ambivalence poses a didactical challenge: how can students learn to inhabit, reflect upon, and shift between these roles in complex, ambiguous situations? Traditional case-

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

based teaching can model such tensions (Hollenstein and Kunz 2019), but often lacks the affective immediacy that characterizes real encounters.

DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORK

The suggested framework integrates three elements: (a) a brief analysis of reference games, linked to social work; (b) a discussion of intersectional structures within these games and (c) a consideration of ethical cognitive friction as a condition that enables morally reflective play.

Game Corpus and Social Work Relevance

Papers, Please (Lucas Pope, 2013) is a dystopian document-inspection simulator in which the player assumes the role of an immigration officer at the border of the fictional authoritarian state Arstotzka. Each day, passports, visas, work permits, and identity records must be checked under time pressure, requiring rapid decisions about entry, detention, or rejection. The game stages a series of intersectional bureaucratic encounters organized around migration status, class, statehood, and family situation.

A Plague Tale: Requiem (Asobo Studio, 2022) is structured around sustained dread, with tension accumulating through stealth, flight, and the constant proximity of loss. Amicia's violence is framed as protective rather than heroic; her care is relational and embodied, yet structurally unsupported. This is significant for social work students, whose professional training tends to emphasize methodological distance and boundary management as protective mechanisms (Turney 2010). Amicia providing informal care under conditions of chronic stress and institutional abandonment mirrors the tensions described in Staub-Bernasconi's (2018) triple mandate: to normalize, empower, and uphold ethical standards simultaneously, while the game renders the simultaneous fulfillment of all three structurally impossible.

Intersectionality and the Simulation Gap

Lutz and Wenning (2001, 20) organize discriminatory structures along three axes of difference: embodied differences (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, health, age); socio-spatial differences (class, nation/state, origin, culture, global North-South and East-West divides); and economic differences (class, property, level of social development).

Papers, Please implicates players in a bureaucratic system that generates discrimination through administrative procedure, confronting them with the choice of enforcing or resisting exclusionary rules. In contrast, *A Plague Tale: Requiem* positions players primarily on the receiving end of persecution, enacted through church authority, military power, and medical interpretations of the "macula" curse. While the game does not model systemic discrimination with the same procedural clarity as *Papers, Please*, it foregrounds vulnerability, care, and persecution from the protagonists' perspective.

However, witnessing discrimination in a game is not equivalent to being structurally positioned within it. Players occupying dominant positions in everyday life may gain a comparatively safe exposure to discriminatory structures through play, but this does not substitute for a lived position within such structures. Ian Bogost (2006) describes this as the simulation gap: simulations necessarily omit aspects of reality, and players fill these gaps with their own experiences and interpretations. This is where the two games offer complementary perspectives: *A Plague Tale: Requiem* generates affective identification and a sense of injustice through the fate of its protagonists, while *Papers, Please* models the structural logic of discrimination — the bureaucratic procedures and ideological rationalizations through which systemic exclusion is produced and normalized.

A shared feature of both games is their post-heroic play: situations in which individual action cannot resolve systemic injustice. Rather than offering heroic solutions, these games expose players to structural constraints that remain largely unchanged by player intervention. Bogost (2007, 87) argues that procedurally unwinnable systems can prompt players to reflect beyond the game itself, as the limits of the system become part of the experience.

Ethical Cognitive Friction

Ethical cognitive friction describes the tension between what a game communicates procedurally and what it signifies narratively or symbolically (Sicart 2013a, 95). The friction emerges when player actions produce outcomes whose moral meaning remains uncertain. As a consequence, instrumental play - the pursuit of goals and rewards without ethical reflection - becomes less likely and moral thinking gains in importance as a gameplay driving factor (Sicart 2013b).

In *Papers, Please*, for example, the procedural requirement of efficiency (stamping passports correctly to support the family) and the moral weight of those stamps, separating families or turning away refugees can be experienced as a moral conflict. Sicart recurs to 'ludic phronesis' (practical wisdom) as players weight on moral and strategic arguments, pausing "the loop of instrumental play" (Sicart 2013b, 31).

In *A Plague Tale: Requiem*, successful progression increasingly comes into tension with what appears to be the game's central objective: protecting Amicia's brother. This tension becomes particularly evident when Hugo's ability to control rats is used, even though this power signals that he is being consumed by the Macula, a hereditary affliction within the game's narrative. At this point, players are prompted to pause and reassess the meaning of their actions from a moral perspective.

REFERENCES

- Bogost, Ian. 2006. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. MIT Press.
- Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT Press.
- Eder, Sabine, Habib Güneşli, Renate Hillen, Claudia Wegener, and Rebecca Wienhold, eds. 2024. *Un|Sichtbarkeiten? Medienpädagogik, Intersektionalität und Teilhabe*. Schriften zur Medienpädagogik, Band 60. Forum Kommunikationskultur. Kopaed.
- Frühauf, Marie. 2017. 'Intersektionalität Und Ungleichheit'. *Soziale Arbeit–Kerntemen Und Problemfelder* 1: 124.
- Hollenstein, Lea, and Regula Kunz. 2019. *Kasuistik in Der Sozialen Arbeit: An Fällen Lernen in Praxis Und Hochschule*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Lutz, Helma, and Norbert Wenning. 2001. 'Differenzen Über Differenz — Einführung in Die Debatten'. In *Unterschiedlich Verschieden: Differenz in Der Erziehungswissenschaft*, edited by Helma Lutz and Norbert Wenning. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-11705-6_1.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2009. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. MIT Press.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2013a. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. MIT Press.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2013b. 'Moral Dilemmas in Computer Games'. *Design Issues* 29 (3): 28–37. https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00219.
- Staub-Bernasconi, Silvia. 2018. *Soziale Arbeit als Handlungswissenschaft: soziale Arbeit auf dem Weg zu kritischer Professionalität*. UTB

Turney, Danielle. 2010. 'Sustaining Relationships: Working with Positive Feelings'. In *Relationship-Based Social Work-Getting to the Heart of Practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

LUDOGRAPHY

Lucas Pope (2013). *Papers, Please*. [PC] 3909 LLC.

Asobo Studio (2022). *A Plague Tale: Requiem*. [PC] Focus Entertainment.