

The creator of *Papers, Please* wants developers to make weirder, more personal games

Lucas Pope, the solo creator of games like *Papers, Please* and *Return of the Obra Dinn*, received the Pioneer Award from the annual Game Developers Choice Awards this year. It's a major achievement that puts him in a league with industry giants like Gabe Newell, Yu Suzuki, and Roberta Williams.

"Now that I'm an official pioneer, I have some requests," he said in his brief acceptance speech. "World peace, obviously. But for this crowd, I'd be happy if you kept making the kinds of unique off-beat, experimental, creative, and especially personal games that I love."

It was similar to something Pope had said to me earlier – especially the personal part. I had asked him what advice he might have for developers just starting out. "Make something personal, make it small, release on [Itch.io]. Try to find the people who like the same things you do and then make the things you enjoy."

"I want this kind of game. I like looking at documents."

Games, for him, have always been about "making something that I want to play," Pope said. With *Papers, Please*, where you have to make tough decisions while working as an immigration inspector in a fictional country, "it was, 'I want this kind of game. I like looking at documents.' Nobody else really likes that, was my thinking. And then I made it and I found out, actually, lots of people like the same things I do."

That experience gave him the confidence to follow a similar path for his next game. "I'm just going to try that again. I'm going to make a game that doesn't exist, that I wish I had and that I could play, and I'll make that. And just based on faith, I'm going to hope that other people also like it," he said. "If there's something that you're passionate about, then make a game about it."

That game turned out to be *Return of the Obra Dinn*, where you're an insurance inspector investigating deaths and mysteries on the namesake ship. Pope's latest title is *Mars After Midnight*, a game for the Playdate about screening aliens at a fictional Martian support center.

It's much sillier than *Papers, Please* and *Obra Dinn*; one scenario in *Mars* asks you to only admit aliens that fart. In a blog post about the game, Pope described it as "something my kids might like," and he told me that while the kids know about *Papers, Please* and *Obra Dinn*, they're too young to play them because they're M-rated. "That's kind of why I wanted to make *Mars*. I wanted a game where they could just full-on play it and enjoy it."

Pope said they played *Mars* "dozens of times" and offered suggestions for some of the sessions in the game. As kids, they don't have a lot of preconceived notions, he said, so while some of their ideas might have been "a little ridiculous," he could see "the core of a really cool thing that I could munge it a little bit and get it in there." He added, "I think about games a certain way, but the kids have no framing like that. So having kids does help me see how they play games."

As for what Pope wants to explore next? "When I could reflect on *Obra Dinn* and *Papers, Please*, I kind of realized [that] maybe I should be going back to 2D," he said, noting that *Mars* is "more or less" a 2D game, too. From a production and creativity standpoint, "it's nice to work in 2D," he said.

“But as far as actual topics and mechanics and things like that, I’m working on a few things. Nothing that is ready for announcement, unfortunately.”

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