Introduction

In 2014, the Franco-German broadcaster ARTE was about to release on-
line one of its first newsgames, *Refugees* (2014).[1] ARTE reporters and
game developers created the newsgame format, which mixes journal-
istic reportage and audiovisual interviews with a rewards-based game
structure in which users undertake a specific mission and make de-
cisions. The game, published episodically, gave users the opportunity
to become an ARTE reporter and travel to three different locations in
Iraq, Nepal and Lebanon, and explore life in a refugee camp. It included
a map that was discovered by watching interviews that the game de-
signers had previously conducted in the camps. The game gave users a
specific time frame—five hours in the game, and thirty minutes in real
life—in which to collect information requested by their chief editor on
the life of refugees in the camp; in short, the user had to collect enough
(pre-recorded) video material to be able to release a report and pub-
lish a multimedia story, which they could also share on social media.
As it turned out, after the release of the first episode, set in the Iraqi
Kawergosk camp, the game failed to keep the audience engaged long
enough to reach the end. ARTE decided to cut the length of the fol-
lowing episodes, so as to sustain the audience's interest and interaction
with the game. The project was nevertheless one of the first examples

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1   Newsgames are a genre of computer games that sit at the intersection of
     videogames and journalism. This is because they not only provide a journal-
     ist/reporter's perspective, but also factual information via gameplay (Bogost,
     Ferrari and Schweizer 2010).

of a mixture between computer game features—a point-and-click adventure, where graphic symbols on a photo/video background tell the user where to click—and audiovisual material typical of a reportage.[2] Financed in 2013 for a period of three years, the game required the work of journalists and video reporters, as well as web and game developers. In 2018, *Refugees* was placed offline because its maintenance would require additional funding.

In this dissertation, I explore what I call "Interactive Practices about Migration." This includes practices that combine documentary material with game features, and practices that make use of interactive maps and data visualization. All of the above share a web-based circulation, similar formats, and interactive features. Media objects like *Refugees*, referred to by some scholars and practitioners as "interactive documentaries," or "i-docs" (or "webdocs," initially, in France), were made to attract younger audiences that had turned away from traditional media such as television broadcasts, newspapers and film, towards web-based media. Such terms highlight a connection with a documentary film tradition that goes back to Grierson, and his concept of documentary. This scholarly tradition (Rotha [2011]1936) understands documentary as essentially an art form: it was born with directors such as Robert Flaherty and possesses a specific narrative structure and film form. The use of terms like "webdocs" or "i-docs" would then continue this tradition by augmenting the traditional documentary form with different interactive strategies. Interactivity enables users, producers, and creators to collaborate, to "co-create" (Wiehl 2016) or to simply shape the narrative in a non-linear way. Such productions form part of so-called "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006). According to Jenkins, the benefit of participation is that instead of merely consuming media, users have the chance to create content themselves. Indeed, in interactive documentaries, participation is celebrated as a way of stepping outside a "passive" form of viewing (O'Flynn 2012). Interactive practices

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2   Point-and-click refers to those early videogames in which, using a cursor, a user could literally point at an object and click on it. *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) is a famous example of this genre.

about migration use different formats and a range of narrative styles and game structures. They are part of a media production which is made specifically for web circulation by broadcasters, institutions and independent creators. The corpus of interactive practices I have chosen does not respond either to the film art tradition or canon to which documentary theorists like Rotha and Grierson refer. Instead, these media objects invoke a different nonfiction production, which began in the early days of film (Bottomore 2001). This research adopts a different approach towards non-fiction production, then, which goes beyond the established canon, and instead looks at non-theatrical and non-"artistic" forms. Here I am indebted to the work of Yvonne Zimmermann (2011) on Swiss industrial documentary film production and Alexandra Schneider (2004) on home movies.

When I first discovered *Refugees*, I was keen to understand how the Internet was changing the media landscape, but I was mostly surprised by how difficult it was to combine interactive features from computer games with serious topics. Interactive practices, then, posed a challenge: how do you study a media object that is at the same time a website—or that circulates on the web—a documentary, a journalistic reportage, and a game, which combines both fiction and non-fiction elements? How do you study a then-undefined genre that is undergoing continuous change? How do you look at these practices through the lens of migration?

Up to now, the study of interactive documentaries has focused on attempts to redefine the documentary film genre in a changing landscape of media production. Scholars have sought to define and re-define *what is* or *what is not* an interactive documentary, emerging practice, or webdoc, etc. What is clear is that the industry beyond these practices, mostly broadcasters and legacy media, is in a continuous process of redefinition. Indeed, public broadcasters and television channels in recent decades have ceded their power to on-demand video providers such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, as well as other news providers. Since the early 2000s, they have had to redefine themselves—something they also did when facing their first private competition—and win back the part of their audience that went online. Part of the scholarship around

these practices welcomes this ongoing experimentation; for instance, the MIT Lab has, since its beginnings, been interested in developing new technologies more than creating an established standard (Uricchio, Wolozin, Bui, Tortum and Flynn 2016).

In this work, I view interactive practices about migration not as an established form but as something in constant mutation. I choose the term "interactive practices" precisely because I do not consider media merely as material objects, but rather as "cultural artifacts." In this sense, I argue, interactive practices must be studied by looking both at their materiality and appearance, as well as the dynamic context of their circulation and production—that is, the infrastructures that enable them to circulate. As media that circulate on the web, for instance, they have to follow technological changes, and consequently, must adjust quickly. When, in 2019, I introduced *Prison Valley* (2010) in class, a webdoc that was not even ten years old, a student remarked that it looked "not yet so old to be interesting, and not new enough to be cool." Interactives like *Prison Valley* produced in 2010 were mostly browser-based and often developed with Adobe Flash—a now-deprecated software format unsupported since the end of 2020. Producers not only struggle to create something new, but they have to work hard to keep these media accessible in the decades following their release. Interactive practices, then, tell us a story of the media that are rapidly fading away. While longing for innovation, these media condemn themselves to vulnerability and risk swift obsolescence.

But this is not the only problem that interactive practices face. Interactivity as a technological promise is often tied up with a form of political agency, which aims to make a social impact or provoke change. Indeed, some interactives are marketed based on new features of immersion, interactivity and participation, as "media for change". This distinguishing feature not only challenges traditional storytelling methods, then, but also implicates the user in a political world not so different from their own. In the newsgame *Refugees*, for example, we are confronted with decisions we have to make. The question "would you like to help this person or not?" is not only a way to decide where to go next in order to progress in the game—it is also an ethical matter. Deciding

to help a refugee does not stay within the "magic circle" of the game (Huizinga [1938] 1950), but it is a choice that reflects our own position in the real world. In this sense, interactive practices such as *Refugees* subtly suggest that we are doing something about a real situation. And yet, it is just a game.

Some people find the novelty of the interactive format exciting and promising; others reject the possibility of mixing entertainment with a serious and urgent matter. We are therefore inclined to ask if these media have an impact. Of course, such an impact is not measurable. But interactive practices about migration, I argue, might contribute in different and unexpected ways to the social construction of refugees and migrants. These media objects participate in building a relationship that overcomes the distance between those that are suffering—the "vulnerables"—and those that might help them, or the *non*-vulnerables." That is, interactives not only tell stories about migrants and refugees, but they also address and build *our* (as viewers and players) relationship with *them*. In other words, they produce a certain idea of solidarity by simulating a close relationship between *us* and *them*. In this way, they build a specific humanitarian imaginary. In so doing, they construct a notion of solidarity that reinforces the idea of migrants and refugees as vulnerable others. Moreover, they suggest that migration is an urgent problem that needs to be solved, while hinting that there are political motivations behind the way Europe and the West frame migrants and refugees as a global emergency.

In this dissertation's case studies, the question of migration engages with interactivity's technological features to produce a "crisis" which asks European and Western citizens: what can we do? This "humanitarian impulse" transforms, I argue, into two specific "scopic regimes" (Rangan 2017; Metz 1975; Jay 1988). Here I inherit Martin Jay's notion of "scopic regimes"; this refers to certain modalities of viewing which produce a visual model of how to understand the world. However, my distinguishing two visual regimes does not mean that I emphasize visual sensory apparatus over other forms of perception. Instead, this is simply a tool, which allows me to deal heuristically with multiple ways of constructing a vantage point. Indeed, these views position users as sub-

jects within a broader humanitarian discourse: as the non-vulnerables opposed to the vulnerable others. These scopic regimes mobilize users though a form of "mediated humanitarian affect" (Ross 2020), mixing the visual with digital interactivity. I ask how these specific configurations of stories, aesthetics and media experiences engage with and participate in a larger discourse about migration. What knowledge about migrants and refugees do they produce?

One view involves our need to get closer, to step into the role of someone else, and travel somewhere else. The other view alerts us to the urgency of the situation and of its scale. One tells us to be empathetic. The other suggests that we are in the midst of a "crisis" which affects hundreds, thousands—even millions—of people. Both encourage us to act immediately, so as to help solve a global "crisis." That said, most of the geopolitical decisions made in response to the perceived migration crisis, have "been less about rescuing the migrant in peril, and more about rescuing the idea of Europe from this same migrant, about restoring a vision of territorial governance and administrative right-headedness that had been imperiled by the arrival of the migrant to European shores." (Lynes, Morgenstern and Paul 2020, 28)

Migration, then, is understood in this work as human movement caused by economic, political, social or environmental factors. It is notable only because the current global political situation, distinguishes, on a geographical level, nations and states, and the people that traverse them. Migration confirms a world made of physical and political borders, which, as Mezzadra and Neilson argue, "far from serving merely to block or obstruct global passages of people, money or objects, have become central devices for their articulation." (2013, ix) Viewing the world from this perspective helps us to see humanitarian infrastructures, and how humanitarian discourse itself reinforces a specific visual regime, which offers not an objective point of view, but merely an empowered standpoint. So while interactive media address us with questions of solidarity and calls for action, images of migrants have contributed to a climate of hate and distrust, and helped foment political changes that are turning Europe into even more of a fortress. As Mezzadra notes, "the discourse surrounding the 'migrant' (or 'refugee') crisis dramati-

cally shifted the responsibility toward a threat coming from the outside of a supposedly stable and ordered European space." (2020, 12) And indeed, in 2020, data about refugee arrivals suggests that after the events of 2015, Europe militarized its external borders via different political actions—its agreement with Turkey and Frontex's border management, for example—while the number of asylum seekers plummeted (UNCHR 2020d). We might then ask if these practices concern migrants and a "migration crisis," or, as Thomas Nail instead provocatively suggests, a crisis of Europe—or perhaps the entire Western world and humanitarianism itself (2020).

My approach, although grounded in film and media studies, adopts and develops other standpoints from interactive documentary studies, games studies, and software studies. My discussion of interactive maps, in particular, draws from the field of critical cartography and focuses on questions of visual design and data visualization. With regards to materiality or media infrastructure, beyond or behind the case studies, I refer to format studies and critical media and software studies, as well as to media economics. Part of this work is combined with an investigation into the production of such practices: that is, I have interviewed makers and producers at ARTE, *The Guardian*, but also independent contractors, that were open to discussing their reasons for working on interactives. These interviews are "corings" and were undertaken before proper "excavation work." I also questioned archivists at different institutions. I visited the Sound and Vision Institute in May 2018 and I spent a few weeks in September 2019 at Concordia University in Montreal, where I was able to visit the National Film Board of Canada to interview engineers and software developers. My research includes therefore interviews I conducted in person, over Skype or via email.

This dissertation's methodology is also the product of many trials and failures. It has featured at conferences on interactive practices (such as I-DOCS 2016), on media and migration (in Prague), and in other academic contexts. But mostly, it is the result of the ongoing discussions around media and film with which I have engaged as part of the "Configurations of Film" research collective at Goethe University in Frankfurt.

This work is dedicated to interactive practices that produce a specific media ecology. I argue that studying the latter through the lens of migration helps us to think about media in a broader sense. In the following chapters, I will address interactive practices as "interactives" when I refer to their belonging to a certain media production, and as "media objects" when I regard them merely from a materialist perspective, as goods that circulate and have a specific form or format. When I refer to the corpus of media objects analyzed in this work, I use the term "interactive practices" so as to address their process-based nature.

The Structure of the Work

This work is composed of five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter, "Rethinking Interactive Practices as Cultural Artifacts," delineates the methodological approach and provides an overview of previous scholarship. The chapter discusses interactive practices as "cultural artifacts" and suggests approaching them as if they were archaeological artifacts. This methodology analyzes interactive practices as "media objects" (thus material objects) within a broader dynamic context, and focuses on their "framing."

The chapter outlines the issues that interactive practices about migration give rise to, and provides a summary of previous discussions in media archaeology, film studies, game studies, critical cartography, format theory, etc.

The second chapter, "(Digital) Outcast," focuses on the materiality of interactive practices and views them as goods in a specific market: the Internet. It discusses media economics, and how interactives are framed within established economic and material infrastructures. With contributions from format studies and software and platform studies, the chapter explores the digital format interactives use, and how they are economically determined. The analysis is supported by several interviews with makers and archivists, and it highlights the vulnerability of interactive practices and their complex process of preservation. This, in turn, suggests a way of re-conceiving the archive today.

The third chapter, "A View from Within," outlines the first of two "scopic regimes" that define interactive practices (Jay 1988). It is thus dedicated to practices that place the viewer or user in the role of a migrant or witness to the processes of human migration and humanitarian aid. These practices promise to bring you closer to the condition of refugees and migrants, by either virtually living their journey or travelling through a refugee camp. They consist of serious games, text-adventures, newsgames and interactive documentaries. The chapter explores the game structures of some case studies and argues that they simulate the functioning of border regimes, thus replicating pre-existing political structures rather than critiquing and offering a revolutionary—although admittedly utopian—alternative.

The fourth chapter, "A View from Above," analyzes the second scopic regime, which is a distant and empowered view. It investigates the interactive maps that show "trajectories" of migration or migrant data over time. These maps make use of data visualizations and interactive features to present migration from an unspecified point of view, and do not ask the user to step into a role but instead offer a global perspective. The chapter not only explores the implication of using maps and data following design rules, but also investigates which specific software(s) and viewing infrastructures are used to produce and create new forms of interactive storytelling about migration. This points to a new form of seeing, which integrates "operational images" into storytelling (Farocki 2003).

The final chapter, "The Promise of Humanitarianism," reworks the key findings of the previous two chapters in order to analyze and contextualize the production of interactive practices about migration within certain humanitarian discursive and material infrastructures. I argue that the views embedded in interactive practices about migration suggest and support a humanitarian view of refugees and migrants. Moreover, this view contributes to a certain political representation of "vulnerables," and thus helps to define a world divided between those that are vulnerable and those, like us, which are empowered and "non-vulnerable."

I am not interested in offering a definition of interactive practices about migration, their real-life success or failure, or their veracity vis-à-vis real life stories. Instead, this work focuses on specific media productions in a situated historical moment. It asks: why were interactive practices about migration developed and produced in this specific moment? What do they tell us about our film and media culture and how we, as humans, relate to and communicate the topic of migration?