Chapter 3 – A View from Within

This chapter analyzes a selection of interactive practices that encourage you to take the role of a migrant or a refugee, or of a journalist in a refugee camp. They invite you to virtually cross a border or to explore, as a reporter, a non-western country. They offer a close perspective on the subject, as we, the users, must position ourselves. This "View from Within" wishes to bring you "there"—far away from a comfortable position in front of your PC or digital device, and instead close to vulnerable "others."

This view not only creates an "immersive" environment, such as those found in virtual reality applications, but the idea of immersion and embodiment is also invoked through the practices' discursive premise, by their computer game aesthetic, and by the rhetoric of an interactive text adventure. In other words, through participatory features that demand interaction. For now, we can understand "immersion" as a feeling of inclusion in a world which is not the one we inhabit, but the one belonging to the stories with which we interact.[1]

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1   Janet Murray defines immersion as "a sense of being contained within a space or state of mind that is separate from ordinary experience, more focused and absorbing, and requiring different assumptions and actions (like swimming when immersed in water). Immersive experiences are disrupted by inconsistency and incompleteness of the environment, and reinforced by encyclopaedic detail and a sense of vast spaces within clearly marked boundaries. Immersion is further reinforced in digital environments by the active creation of belief, by which the interactor is cued to explore and to take actions within the immersive world and is rewarded for the actions with appropriate responses. Immersion and in-

The interactive practices I analyze ask us to recognize our privilege. In this respect, such media offer us an illusion: to virtually live or to witness, in close proximity, a social condition (and a geographical space) which is not our own. They are simulations. These practices allow us to play, to see, to witness and to make choices within a virtual world. At the same time, by simulating border crossings, they also simulate border regimes.

I understand these practices as "cultural artifacts" and therefore I explore them both as media objects and within their broader dynamic context of circulation. In other words, I ask how these specific configurations of stories, aesthetics and media experiences engage with and participate in a larger discourse about migration and humanitarianism. What kind of knowledge about refugees and migrants do they produce?

In the following paragraphs I introduce case studies that share a similar subjective or embodied view: two serious games, three simple text adventures (or choice-based interactive stories) and two hybrids of audio-visual content, game structures, and maps. I investigate the contradictions and ambivalence that characterize these media materials, as well as their adoption of a humanitarian form of communication. Ultimately, I argue that different media practices offer a similar "view" on migration.

3.1   Simulating Border Crossings

The serious game *The Migrant Trail* (2014) is an Adobe Flash computer game that offers two possible perspectives: a migrant crossing the border from Mexico to US, or an American border patrol agent, looking for illegal migrants in the Sonora desert.[2] As part of the transmedia project

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teractivity are characteristic pleasures of digital environments." (Murray 2011, 424-425)

2   A flash game has a recognizable aesthetic, which is square-shaped. The basic form of interactions, too, tend to mimic those found in point-and-click adventures. Moreover, once we start the game from *The Undocumented* homepage, we witness the square buffering. This is a typical sign of an Adobe Flash game.

The Undocumented (2013), filmmaker Marco Williams and his company produced a documentary film, a website with an interactive map, and this serious game.[3] The documentary film partly inspired the game; indeed, the game's characters are based on real people: either migrants that illegally crossed over to the USA from Mexico, or patrol agents with first-hand experience of catching undocumented migrants alive, or, more often than not, finding them dead in the desert. The documentary argues that the condition of the *sans-papier* in the US is a result of on-going national policies.[4] The game story, on the other hand, allows us to become migrants and experience a perilous border-crossing journey. For the game's producers, it does not matter if you survive the journey or not—what matters is your understanding the human toll of border crossings.

Beginning the game as a "migrant," you first enter an introductory page. There, you realize that the game can be played nine times, with nine different characters. Each character has a personal history and a reason for crossing the border (like Diego, see figure 3). Moreover, every migrant possesses certain features that will help or hinder their survival. The story is a collective journey: for example, together with twelve other migrants, Diego is preparing his trip through the desert of Sonora. A coyote (the smuggler) tells him what he must do to prepare, and the amount of money he owes him. In the next step, the user can buy some supplies and other items for the journey. Diego's story, as well as the other character's, offers reasons why illegal border-crossers wish to go to the US. Diego, like other children that lived in the US with undocumented parents, was ejected from the country once he turned eighteen. Part of his family still lives in Chicago and he wants to return.

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3   Unfortunately, I have tried to contact both the director and the company in charge of web development but I did not receive a response to my questions. This certainly made it difficult to understand the production's workflow.

4   The French word *sans-papier*, or "without papers," broadly defines people who are not able to demonstrate their nationality through paper documents (Collins Dictionary 2020, s.v. "Sans-papiers").

The Migrant Trail is also a remake or a revisiting of an extremely popular serious game first released in 1971 called *The Oregon Trail*. The game is based on an actual route in North America used during the 19th century by settlers and traders selling fur and other products. In the first half of the century, the route was made available to wagon trains (caravans of wheeled wagons pulled by horses) travelling from Independence (Missouri) in the east, to Oregon in the west.[5] The purpose of the game was to teach users the story of the country's first "emigration route."[6] It is a simple text adventure; that is, it largely uses text or lines of text that users need to type in the game. Its structure is simple: the player has a sum of money with which they can buy supplies and items to trade and ensure that their family will survive the unfortunate events of the long journey. Both games emphasize narrative progression, and concentrate more on story development than basic gameplay structures that might encourage active and dynamic user interaction. In Jesper Juul's terminology, then, they are an example of a "game of progression" where separate challenges are presented in serial form, progressing to an endpoint (2002, 2011). The difference: *The Migrant Trail* takes the format of *The Oregon Trail* and adds to it an urgent and real issue.

Figure 3 depicts Diego, one of the migrant characters. He seems to be drawn by hand (or using animation software). There are three photographs on Diego's right, which are most likely unpublished stills from *The Undocumented*. These photographs suggest that Diego might be a real character, and I surmise that he was most likely based on *The Undocumented*'s Marcos Hernandez, a young man who, similar to Diego, now

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5   A popular version of *The Oregon Trail* from 1990 is available to play on archive.org, which is a web-repository of static pages, media and videogames. They hold a collection of around 14,000 items including 9,000 MS-DOS games.

6   *The Oregon Trail* has been criticized as a western or colonial view of the history of the United States, because it privileges the perspective of the settlers. Recently, a counter-game was released which offers an indigenous point of view. *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019) narrates the journey of "an Anishinaabeg in the 1890s displaced from Fond du Lac in Minnesota due to the impact of land allotments. They make their way to the Northwest and eventually venture into California." (Jawort 2019)
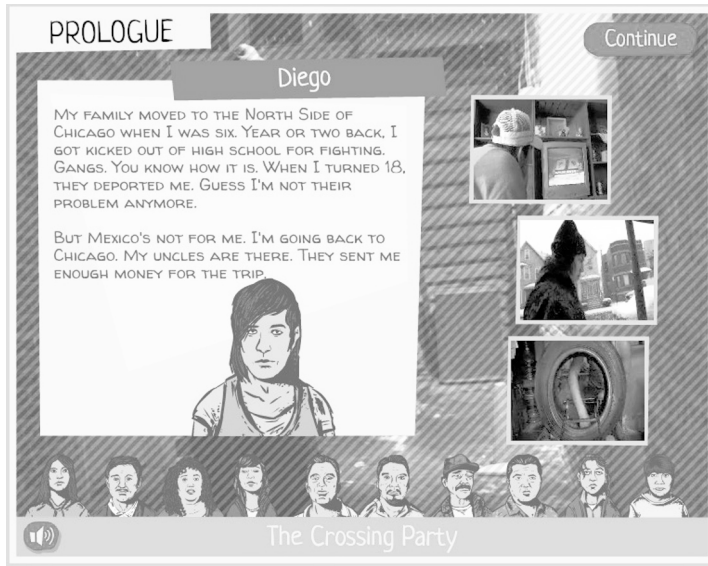
Fig. 3: The Migrant Trail: Diego's Story

Image source: screenshot from The Migrant Trail (2014), © Marco Williams.

lives (or lived) in Chicago. In the documentary, Marcos is looking for his father who was left behind by a coyote and probably died in the desert. The game, here, represents a sort of computer reconstruction, or a simulation of how things went. In contrast to other forms of documentary reconstruction where simulation is part of the story, the game puts us in charge, and we are therefore within the simulation.[7] In sum, Diego's destiny is to a certain extent in our hands.[8]

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7   I am thinking here of prominent examples such as The Thin Blue Line (1988, dir. Errol Morris). In the documentary, Morris fictionally reconstructs events with real actors.

8   But as Juul reminds us concerning games of progression, we need to believe that his "plural" destiny is in the game designer's hands (2011).

The simulation is, of course, not a realistic reproduction like a re-enactment. Instead, the drawings and font are reminiscent of comic books. Compared to the realism of certain videogame productions, this format is rather simplistic. As a result of both its "social" interest and its appearance, the game can be termed an "indie" or "casual" game (or something in-between). The difference is a question of perspective: casual games, for Jasper Juul, are games designed not exclusively for gamers but for a wider audience, whereas indie or independent games are those promoted by their developers as "having artistic merit." (Juul 2010; 2019, 11) The combination of the game's aesthetic and serious subject matter is also reminiscent of certain animated documentaries.

The reasons creators use animation to narrate nonfiction stories are numerous. For instance, in interviews conducted and published by Judith Kriger, they cite creative freedom and protecting audiences from scenes of crude violence (2012). At the same time, animation and drawing, as opposed to photographic images, allow the story subjects to maintain their anonymity. In the case of *The Migrant Trail*, the game is clearly inspired by real experiences, but combines these stories in order to give them an anonymous yet universal character. The stories, then, are not specific but prototypical, and they contribute to the broader transmedia project by simulating a border crossing. Gonzalo Frasca, a game designer and scholar, argues that simulations—in contrast to representations— "model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviours of the original system." (2003, 223) In other words, simulations do not simply show us something but reproduce someone's behaviour.

This game therefore simulates how things typically go for illegal border crossers. Once you choose to play as Diego, you can choose (drag and drop) what to wear and what kind of food and drink he takes in his backpack. You are also given cash, but must use it cautiously. After playing the game a couple of times, you learn that water is fundamental but also that antibiotics are extremely helpful against the wounds, blisters or injuries caused by desert animals. The heavier your backpack is, the slower you become. If somebody in the "crossing party"—the other migrants—receives a wound, the whole group slows down. All these

features are part of game design; you can choose between certain options, but others are limited. As the gameplay progresses, the game asks you watch over your character and their peers. During your trek, you need to constantly check the decreasing "health bars" on the top left of your screen, and use some items, like water or rehydration drinks (*suero*) when your hydration level becomes too low. Meanwhile, when you reach a crossroads, you must choose a path and decide whether you turn right, left or go back. On the bottom right of the screen, a pedometer lists miles walked and the amount left until the pick-up point. It also lists how many hours you have spent travelling. You can also pause the game and check all events that have happened so far on the upper left part of the screen (fig.4).
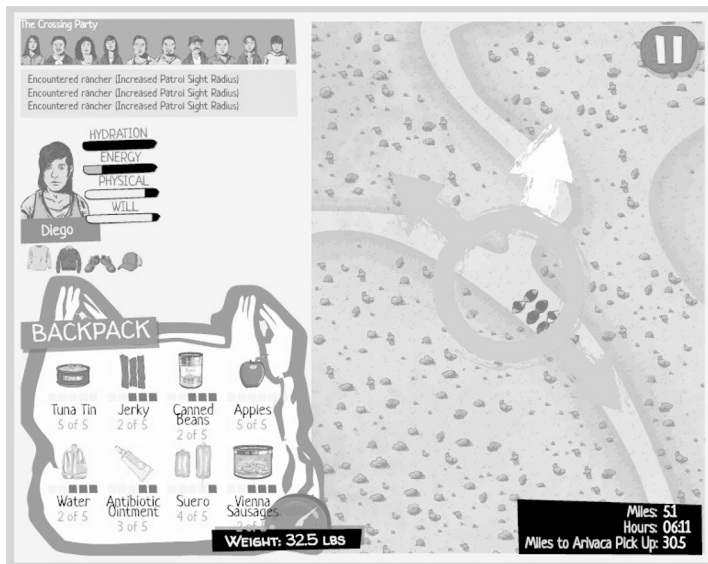
Fig. 4: The Migrant Trail: choosing the path

Image source: screenshot from *The Migrant Trail* (2014), © Marco Williams.

Ultimately, you need to decide carefully where you go. For instance, I learned that if I chose the route on the right of the first forking path, my party would be closer to border control, and would thus get caught relatively quickly. Once you finish all your supplies you face dehydration and/or heat stroke, or you might die because of complications of a wound sustained *en route*. If you are caught by the border patrol you will be held in a detention centre and sent back home.[9] If you are left behind, you will probably die in the desert and become one of many undocumented deaths.

Although the purpose of the game is to provide you with a specific migrant's point of view, you are also part of a group, and also a system. You are within the simulated world. You are positioned close to the character, but it is still a bird's eye or God's view—a common perspective adopted by most "God games."[10] This viewpoint provides an overview of the whole group while allowing players to monitor geographical space. It affords a better view of the territory, allows you to know immediately when you share space with the border agent patrol. Although the choices the player faces reproduce some of those faced by migrants, this perspective shares nothing in common with that of a migrant crossing the border.

In the game, border patrol agents are not much luckier in reaching their goal: you might patrol the border but never find anybody.[11] Items found in the desert—proven "real" by additional photographic material—testify to probable death, and contribute to the actual, although

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9   We do not see detention centers or the expulsion process. Instead, everything is textually narrativized.

10   The "God game" is a genre where you do not play specific character but instead have the power to manage the lives of different actors within the game. For example, you might manage and make a civilization develop through time (for instance in *Civilization*, *Caesar*, *Age of Empires*, etc.)

11   In the documentary *The Undocumented*, patrol agents control the border and chase migrants. Often, they *find* people on the verge of death from a heat stroke. They collaborate with aid organizations to check for separated groups, often finding only the remains of undocumented crossers.

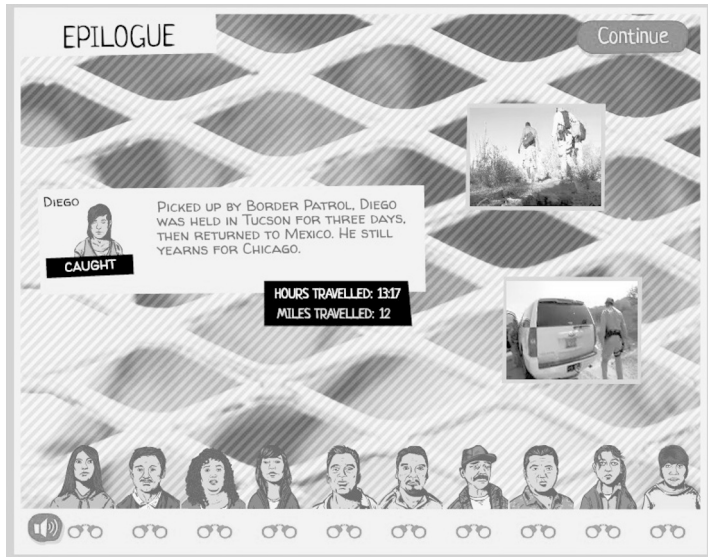*Fig. 5: The Migrant Trail: unsuccessful game epilogue*

Image source: screenshot from The Migrant Trail (2014), © Marco Williams.

invisible death toll, which is displayed in the epilogue (fig. 5).[12] On a map, crosses show the position of actual human remains or human belongings found in the desert. The outcome of the game played as a border patrol agent, then, is undocumented casualties.

This computer game was released in 2014, shortly after the film, *The Undocumented*. It formed part of a freely available web-based feature, and its purpose was to further "engage conversation, investigation and inquiry, into the themes and questions raised by the film" (The Migrant Trail 2014). The game is in dialogue with a documentary film published one year later. These two media raise awareness of the death toll of the

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12   These stills within the frame may also be part or some unused frames from *The Undocumented*.

US border regime. Looking closely at their nonfiction rhetoric, the difference lies first in narrative construction. In the documentary film, we follow the story of some migrants and their families who have tried to cross the border and died. The research starts from material findings in the desert and now at the morgue, where physicians and non-profit organizations workers catalogue migrants' remains and belongings in the hope of matching them to the "undocumented deaths" of missing persons on their lists. The game does not use the same video material, but instead drawings and animations based on real-life accounts. Nevertheless, the mixture of fictional and nonfictional elements make the serious game more involved: we are in charge of what to do, we know that it is a game, but we also know the simulated stories are based on real accounts. If the documentary shows us through the camera lens what is happening at the border, in the game we become, though distant and alienated, part of the "happenings."

Some of the purchased items are part of the equipment the border crossers take along with them in the film. Further, the causes of death within the game are identical to those of the bodies found by the forensic doctors in *The Undocumented*. The game, in short, is complementary to the film. Its use of Adobe Flash suggests a mixture of professional and amateur media practice. Indeed, Patricia Zimmermann argues that technologies like Flash animations blur the boundaries between traditional forms of distribution, production and exhibition, and therefore the traditional distinction between professional and amateur (2019, Chapter 9). Game scholar Jesper Juul also points out that at the beginning of the 2000s, Flash games portals—such as Shockwave and Newgrounds—or platforms like Steam allowed the direct online distribution of even low-budget games (2019, 12). Consequently, this shift in the production and distribution process contributed to the increased diffusion of indie or independent games and casual games (ibid.). This serious game is an example of such production.

The Migrant Trail, though, is not only a simulation of a border crossing but also a border regime. Indeed, it questions the structure of the border, its relationship to the negotiation of life and death, and its meaning beyond politically governed lines or fences. As with other in-

teractive practices about migration, you experience an uncanny feeling while playing. Some might find the game's structure engaging, while others will view its narrative style as unnecessary or uncomfortable. Of course, this is the general problem with serious games: for certain audiences who are not accustomed to playing videogames, the idea of mixing "entertainment" with a serious topic is disconcerting.[13] They feel uneasy taking the life of a migrant into their own hands, or making unethical choices on their behalf (like leaving somebody behind and condemning him/her to death).[14] I am not sure whether this direct challenge to the audience was part of the designers' original intentions. At the very least, the purpose of the game is not to explicitly create discomfort but, as the creators claim, to further investigate the consequences of certain immigration policies. And yet we feel discomfort.

In *The Migrant Trail* you move virtually within the simulated infrastructure of the border. The border can be understood not only by its material structures, but also by different and less visible infrastructures, which are the outcome of social, political, economic but also geographical, negotiations. It affects you differently depending on your position. As a migrant you must walk, face blisters, heat strokes and risk your life. As an American patrol agent, you move fast and can drive a car, and you do not risk your own life. Instead, you are in a position to save lives. This latter position is one of privilege, and expresses a social hierarchy based on nationality. These two perspectives also aestheticize a broader process of expulsion and expansion, where a specific force redirects human fluxes. This is the force of a border regime, or a "bor-

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13   See also Braida (2018).

14   In the game, you are often asked whether to rest and gain energy—but become slower—or to keep going and risk physical collapse. It is not only the coyote that manages the dynamics of the group or "crossing party," but also your choices. If somebody suffers a wound you might help them, but this decision could compromise your virtual destiny: if you decide to offer some of your antibiotics, you could run out of medical supplies and perhaps lose your life.

derscape."[15] *The Migrant Trail* focuses on the border between the US and Mexico, but the regime it simulates could be any deadly border regime. It simulates a relationship between the migrant and the border, and how one affects the other, or how the latter defines the former. In this case, the border primarily excludes.

Thomas Nail understands the border as "something to be created not only by the societies that divides them within and from one another but also something that is required for the very existence of society itself as a 'delimited social field' in the first place." (2018, 4) The function of borders, following Nail, is not simply exclusion and inclusion, but also different forms of redirection and circulation (2015a, 2016, 2018). The migrant, from this perspective, is a fluid figure caught between different historical categories of mobility and social expansion, and they are defined with respect to the social order from which they are expelled (2015a). The migrant figure also forms part of Nail's political theory, which he calls "kinopolitics" or the politics of movement (2018). As Nail claims, "societies themselves are not, as they are often treated, static entities of fixed members, but continuous circulations of metastable social flows." (2015b) Today, the condition of what we call migrants and refugees is central to our understanding of where power exercises or redirects these flows. In "liquid modernity", some people can act and move faster, while others are compelled not to move (Bauman 2000). Or, in Nail's words, they are constrained by "junctures," and expelled to or from a certain circulations, which in turn allows others to expand their movements. Returning to the *Migrant Trail*, I found it very troubling that as a border patrol agent in the game, you can use a radius—a sort of radar vision—to catch migrants. And as a migrant, you must elude this radius by walking in opposite direction. This scenario strangely echoes the process of expulsion and redirection of flows. It simulates the border relationship between Mexico and the US, and how this affects and defines the condition of migrants.

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15   The term is taken from Perera (2007; 2009) to indicate the "patterns of connection and division that invest the relations between radically heterogenous borderscapes." (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 9)

Nail's concept of the migrant goes beyond our everyday understanding of the word. It does not coincide with the juridical notion of either "refugee" or "migrant" but instead shares more in common with Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* (1995). For Agamben, this figure of old Roman law defines a condition of inclusion by exclusion, and is at the very origin of politics: the *homo sacer* is both excluded by the law and the reason it exists (as the exercise of sovereignty) in the first place. Their life is not sacrificial by law, but if they are killed, there is no law that would condemn the act as homicide (ibid.). As Achille Mmembe argues, it is a life which is fundamentally disposable (2003). This leads Mbembe to define what he calls a "necropower" that, in a state of permanent emergency, expresses itself through its "right to kill." (2003) This concept of power reminds me both of how uncomfortable it is to control the life of a migrant, and to not be able to determine your *own* life as a migrant in *The Migrant Trail*. At the same time, this power is not exactly what the patrol agent experiences. Indeed, the border decides the migrants' fate—not the agent (or perhaps it is the game's algorithm). As a patrol agent you are equally powerless; you can deny entry across the border and expel migrants, but this capacity is itself determined by other, hidden power relations that delineate the border. And luck is the only protection migrants have against it.

These refugees and illegal migrants, then, are at the bottom of what Nails sees as a fluid hierarchy that affects people´s movement. For Bauman, this liquidity affects people on different levels, and accelerates or decelerates their movement within the world. In "liquid times" Bauman argues:

> Domination consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, to 'be elsewhere', and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done—while simultaneously stripping the people on the dominated side of their ability to arrest or constrain their moves or slow them down. The contemporary battle of domination is waged between forces armed, respectively, with the weapons of acceleration and procrastination. (Bauman 2000, 120)

Indeed, for him, rapidity and ease of movement are today the privileges of the few, and reinforce the uncertain status of everyone else; they are the key to domination and the first agent of social division. On the one hand, refugees and illegal migrants are those that are usually condemned not to move and to be dominated; on the other, as Nail stresses with his theory, they demonstrate the only "resistance" to this condition of domination. They move in spite of the laws of a liquid globalized society, while facing death and the loss of basic human rights. *The Migrant Trail* simulates the border and how domination affects migrants' movements within it.

In 2018, following a call on social media networks, a group of migrants from some of the poorest countries in central America formed what the media would subsequently call a "caravan" (a wagon trail). Around 3500 people wanted to escape criminality and famine and reach the US border (BBC 2018). As a "multitude" in Hardt and Negri's terminology, they embody Nail's definition of the migrant—especially if we understand it not as a powerless figure, but of resistance to border regimes.[16] The response was to treat it as an act of war: Trump sent troops to the border with Mexico. But this "multitude" is crucially different from the small group of migrants presented in *The Migrant Trail*. Their journeys are the most common way to cross the border: they fear being caught by police patrols, and rely on coyotes to make it to the other side. Invisibility is more important than visibility in this context.

As well as this invisibility, the negotiation of time and space, weather, and health conditions is fundamental to a "successful" outcome in *The Migrant Trail*. But what does success mean other than crossing a border illegally? The game, by wanting to raise awareness

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16   Hardt and Negri define the multitude in their book *Empire* thus: "This constituent aspect of the movement of the multitude, in its myriad faces, is really the positive terrain of the historical construction of Empire, [...] an antagonistic and creative positivity. The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction." (2000, 61)

about the death toll, unfortunately replicates the same border conditions present in real life. How can a game instead resist or challenge this same view?

3.2   Rules of the Game

Every computer game is made using a certain set of rules. For Juul (2002, 2011) these rules, might be simple while allowing strategies and variations (games of emergence) or they might be embedded in the story itself, as goals, challenges or quests (games of progression). The latter might be even presented as set of choices: where to go (north or south, right or left), or what to do (open a door, take poison, etc.). In *The Migrant Trail* and, for instance, in the serious game *Against All Odds* (2005), rules are often masked as questions. The latter game puts you in the role of a migrant/refugee. The narration does not cover exclusively escape or border crossing; instead, it is divided into three sections, as you come to understand the reasons for leaving your homeland, escape, and finally arrive in a new country and claim asylum.

In the first part of *Against All Odds*, set in an unspecified country where a new government is threatening basic human rights (like freedom of speech), you play a citizen who has been arrested while protesting the regime's rights violations. This section of the game is called "War and conflict," and the goal is to escape persecution. A text explains: "you have been called for questioning because we suspect you have dissenting opinions. We will give you 10 statements to respond to. We hope your answers do not conflict with the interest of your country." You are then presented with simple statements to sign such as "Do you give up your right to vote?" You can pick "yes" or "no," but if you disagree you are beaten. Blood will drop on the statement page until you sign it and affirm "their" vision of reality. These options are part of the rhetoric of the game, which makes it clear that you do not have any choice: you must accept the new regime and your consequent loss of freedom. In fact, if you persist, you end up in jail. Nevertheless, the game lets you play again and if you lie well you might be able to escape the regime. What

we learn is that living in an oppressive regime means we have no choice but to submit to draconian rules, and subversion will be repressed with violence.

Against All Odds is an educational game, financed by the UNHCR as a tool with which teachers can help children understand the refugee experience. Like *The Migrant Trail*, the game was developed with Adobe Flash, and uses computer animation software to draw its characters. The graphics are simple, and the gameplay is divided into a series of steps spread across the three sections. Within the game, the player engages with different styles of gameplay. At the beginning, the player adopts a first-person perspective when they sign away their rights to the regime, but other parts involve a God-like perspective (when you escape the city) or mimic a drag and drop game (when you decide who is viewed as a refugee and who as an economic migrant). Each part therefore uses a different scenario to make certain statements, and to construct a rhetoric.

Since the early 2000s, game scholars have claimed that, although games share common elements with narrative media, they have essentially different mechanics, and therefore offer other rhetorical possibilities (Frasca 2003). In *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost explores what he calls "procedural rhetoric," which is "the practice of using processes persuasively." (2007, 28) Procedurality is a characteristic of computational objects and is, as Janet Murray argues, the ability to create meaning by executing a set of rules (1997). As Bogost explains: "procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models." (2007, 29)

The rhetoric of *Against All Odds* works by addressing the user's ability to make choices in a repressive regime. The rules of the game tell us to pick between different options. Nevertheless, only by choosing to commit to the regime are we able to proceed in the game. The procedural rhetoric tells us: we have no choice but to submit and renounce our personal freedom. Bogost further suggests that games deploying procedural rhetoric often have or encourage reflection upon political

values, and to do so he discusses web-based game *Kabul Kaboom* (2002). The game questions the post-9/11 attacks by the US in Afghanistan. In it:

> The player controls an avatar borrowed from Picasso's Guernica to catch hamburgers (representing air-dropped food) while avoiding bombs. The game highlights the simultaneity and inconsistency of aggression and relief. Eventually and inevitably, the player contacts a bomb, and the game depicts a scene of dismemberment. (Bogost 2007, 85)

Bogost claims that this specific procedural rhetoric, which condemns the player to failure, uses tragedy as a trope (2007, 85). This "rhetoric of failure" characterizes videogames that make "claims about how things don't work." (Ibid., 85) In the first part of *Against All Odds* we must deny our belief in freedom to go further, and the impossibility of reaching your goal in *The Migrant Trail*—crossing the desert illegally, and reaching a road where a pickup is waiting for you—also adopts this rhetoric of failure.[17]

And yet, both *Against All Odds* and *The Migrant Trail* are not just games: the death toll behind these simulations is real. As aforementioned, in *The Migrant Trail* the epilogue of the patrol agent story includes a map: not a typical map that shows the topography or the geography of the border, but a "counter-map." Counter-mapping is a practice of re-appropriating the territory which was taken or expropriated by colonizers. It aims to question to whom a territory belongs, but it also highlights unseen parts, or what is left blank. It also means challenging borders. The map at the end of *The Migrant Trail*, for example, is featured as part of an interactive map on the website of the broader transmedia project. Its aim: to record the territory by tracing

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17 That said, this might simply reflect my game-playing skills. Indeed, I found a video on YouTube that shows a player successfully completing *The Migrant Trail*. The user also uploaded other videos which show them succeeding as a patrol agent or playing as an unsuccessful migrant. See ("Migrant Trail [played as Migrant Successfully]" 2014).

both the remains of the migrants, and what they leave behind. Those material remains are the image of disposability. If you think about the game in relation to its filmic counterpart, *The Undocumented* it becomes clear that this is a forensic process which begins after the crossings themselves. This practice, to locate and commemorate (often together with migrants' belongings), gives a name, and thus an identity to all those undocumented deaths that the border regime produces. Like waste, or scattered records, identities are partly recomposed. This is the game's counter map.

The Migrant Trail and *Against All Odds*'s rhetoric of failure allows me to understand the difficulty and danger of a migrant's journey through the desert. Nevertheless, the games do not ask us to question why there is such an oppressive and deadly border regime. In *Against All Odds*, we escape from an oppressive regime so as to find a new life in foreign and but discriminating country. It teaches me that I have no choice but escape or suffering. The repetitious gameplay makes me uncomfortable, because I do not want to make unethical choices in order to win the game, and yet I still want to *win* the game. The negotiation of life and death from this perspective is disturbing. I might play simply to get caught by the police, imprisoned, but crucially keep my life. What kind of choice is that, and how do we challenge such conditions?

Media psychology scholars analyzed the influence of individual moral intuitions on decision-making in videogames (Joekel, Bowman and Dogruel 2012). They tested both adult and young groups, and hypothesized that an individual's sense of morality plays a unique role in the game experience and can affect how one interacts with certain games. They constructed a scale of issues with more or less moral weight. They discovered that a player's prior moral judgments often affect the way they make decisions in games. When simulations depict a very urgent issue, we are of course influenced by the media we consume, and thus already have a specific disposition towards it. Indeed, we are constantly fed images of refugees, through social media and the news. Consequently, in some respects, even before playing the game itself, we have already played it. This might explain why the

game's rules make us uncomfortable: they directly relate to the rules of real life.

Mia Consalvo has shown with regards to fictional games, there is no clear boundary between the rules of the game and those "outside" of it. She indeed rejects what Huizinga calls the "magic circle" of play ([1938]1950): an enclosed situation where the rules of everyday life are suspended (2009). For her, previous paratexts influence play practices. A game in this sense is not only, as Juul argues, definable because of its structure, but also because it is a "contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made" (ibid., 411). In sum, *The Migrant Trail* and *Against All Odds* produce different readings and interpretations, depending on our biases, the prior knowledge we possess, and the sorts of images and feelings we associate with the subject. I step into the role of the migrant, make decisions for them—often unethical ones—and, especially in *The Migrant Trail*, I cannot help them to succeed. I am caught, imprisoned, rejected. I am treated as pure waste. Even in *Against all Odds,* which is critical of unspecified repressive regimes, as well as the bureaucracy and intolerance of supposedly "welcoming" countries, I do not feel accepted and am treated with indifference.[18] Still, I keep on living. Despite my precarious condition I can fail and try again. But I feel hypocritical: we pretend we can be like them, and understand their suffering, but we are just playing.

This paradox is at the heart of our uncomfortable feeling while playing a game that simulates reality, and thus positions us in the role of managing, regulating, and supporting the human existence of migrants as individuals—but not empowering them as part of a community. Indeed, as Lilie Chouliaraki might say, these games are an example of a post-humanitarian practice where "the pleasure of the self has become

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18   It is interesting to note that *Against All Odds*' "English" version went offline. However, you can still play it in other languages such as German. There is also a gameplay review of *Against All Odds* on YouTube. It is a complete mockery of the game and highlights its inconsistencies and the oddness of some of its features and gameplay ("Against All Odds aka. "dem FLÜCHTLINGSSIMULATOR" - Review/Walkthrough 2016).

the heart of moral action." (2013, 4) The superimposition of our pity and pleasure, as well as solidarity and domination, is the reason I find the user-oriented gameplay disturbing. As players we are oppressed by the power of the border, yet the gameplay enables precisely such an exercise of power. I feel inadequate, and this provokes a form of estrangement: I am reminded that this is not just a game. But if in the simulation we are vulnerable others, in reality we are merely ironic spectators (Chouliaraki 2013). After playing I still ask myself, "how can we change the situation?" But I do not have an answer.

3.3   Verfremdungseffekt

If a game's meaning is not only contingent on how it is structured using a specific procedural rhetoric but, as Mia Consalvo suggests, its dynamic negotiation with users, how can we create a game that engages with genuine social change? Here, it is useful to turn to the concept of Brechtian "distancing effect"[19] or *Verfremdungseffekt*. Gonzalo Frasca applies this idea to the fact that in videogames we are often reminded of the virtual nature of our immersion, or about reality outside of gameplay. He argues that, in contrast to theories around flow and immersion, which look at how those who engage and identify with the story are immersed within it, Brecht views alienation as way to encourage critical reflection upon theatrical performance (Murray 1997, 2011; Bogost 2007). He explains:

> some drama theorists do not promote immersion as a desired goal. German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed a theory of drama that was clearly against Aristotle´s ideas; he argued that Aristotelian theatre keeps the audience immersed without giving them a chance to take a step back and critically think about what is happening on the stage. Brecht created several techniques, known as A-effects, in order

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19   Also referred to as "alienation" or "estrangement."

to "alienate" the play, reminding the spectators that they were expe-
riencing a representation and forcing them to think about what they
were watching [...]. Instead of being "inside the skin" of the character,
he wanted them to be a critical distance that would let them under-
stand their role. (Frasca 2001, 169-170)

Drawing on Boal's theories of the theatre of the oppressed, Frasca sug-
gests that a game that requires a critical rethinking of the role of char-
acters and rules might offer a space for discussion and the challenging
of social realities. Therefore, if we reconsider this *Verfremdungseffekt* as
a part of refugee games, how can a critical distance while playing be
developed? What I described previously as a "disturbing" feeling can
also be understood as alienation. And this particularly concerns serious
games. The ability to disconnect ourselves from the narrative of being a
migrant or going somewhere else is to reflect on what we are doing (or
what we might be doing instead). At some point it becomes uncanny,
but for many it might only happen once you rethink your gameplay from
a critical perspective. That is, once you return to your own shoes.

For Brecht, however, *Verfremdung* was a way of depicting a theatrical
situation in such a way that the audience would think and act differ-
ently. For instance, when a character is "supposed" to be enraged, the
actor builds this "estrangement" by acting in a strange way, thus mak-
ing people reflect on rage as only one of multiple emotional possibilities
(Brecht 1964). He wrote about *Verfremdung* and its benefit thus:

Where does this get us? We arrive at a point where spectators no
longer see the persons on stage as unchangeable, closed off to influ-
ence, helplessly resigned to their fate. They see: this person is like this
because the conditions are like that. And the conditions are like that
because the person is like this. But this person can be imagined not
only as he is but also otherwise, as he could be, and the conditions
too can be imagined other than they are. (ibid. 168)

The techniques used for *Verfremudungseffekt* speak of a theatre where
emotions are collectively negotiated with the audience, and not per-
formed by the actors to encourage "empathy" and immersion. A typical

move is directly addressing the audience. Brecht would ask questions about the theatre that are akin to the questions that game designers and scholars currently ask. He was concerned with how to make the theatrical experience both entertaining and instructive.

Like theatre, a game is a performance, and Frasca's argument concerning the possibility of designing games to foster critical thinking needs to be discussed further. If the experience of immersion and embodiment can bring us a gratifying feeling of acting smoothly in the virtual world, this pleasurable act conflicts with our moral sentiments. This is especially true if we are constantly reminded of the discrepancy between our comfortable position and the precarious condition of a refugee or migrant. This potential feature of video games represents a good technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Yet, how are we to construct the collective aspect of this negotiation, and use interactivity as a tool rethink the rules of the border regime?

Video games, and especially single-player games, are often solitary experience. However, some game scholars have explored how gamers build communities and negotiate emotions through MMOs, or Massively Multiplayer Online games. In these communities, the space of the game becomes a place for the negotiation of emotion itself. These games "allow player[s] to explore unfamiliar and challenging terrain and to share their experience" (Isbister 2016, 118). Further, multiplayer online games sometimes require "elaborate plans and communication among players through voice-based or text-based chat." (Ibid.) Games—especially web-based games—can therefore offer the possibility of collective action. It is simply a question of finding a way to act collectively. In this case, we would not simply accept the sad and gruesome destiny of vulnerable others, but see it as just one possible outcome. Interactivity and procedurality in serious games and other interactive practices are strategies that can invite users to make decisions and develop a different rhetoric, but the point is that we need to collectively negotiate the simulation and change the rules. Provoking empathy through the illusion of putting ourselves in the role of others only produces pity and a sense of "solidarity." We do not act, but instead feel for the other. This

is not the path to rethinking our global society, which we share with refugees and migrants. They need to be empowered, not pitied.

3.4   Freedom of Choice.
Text-Adventures and "Regimes of Circulation"[20]

In the quest for a new online audience, media outlets, broadcasters and news media are adopting new strategies like interactive practices. We might see this use of game features as part of a "ludic" turn in media (Raessens 2014). I would like to discuss three different projects produced by *The Guardian*, the BBC and Channel 4 between 2014 and 2016. *The Guardian* is one of the pioneers in tailoring online content. Indeed, it was the first to create its own "interactive" department. The first "interactive team" was composed of only a few staff members and was lead by Francesca Panetta, who is often a speaking guest at the IDFA Interactive Conference in Amsterdam.[21] The BBC news also has its own "interactive" department, which takes care of online content. Its role is to respond to growth in the use of new technologies and thus "make their content available to people whenever and wherever they want." (BBC 2019)

In 2014, *The Guardian* released its first interactive adventure, a typical text-based adventure, entitled *The Refugee Challenge: Can You Break into Fortress Europe?* The interactive adventure (fig. 6) is available both on PC and laptop, and is optimized for mobile access. This choice-based journey makes use of text, maps, and photos to show user progression in the game. Labelling this sort of media object a "game" is perhaps a little imprecise, as the game's structure is instead typical of text-based adventures. Choice-based storytelling has a longer tradition that goes beyond games: it is a form of non-linear narrative that gives the reader, viewer—or user in this case—a certain freedom in the development of

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20   See Nail (2018) for more information on this concept.

21   She is now XR Creative Director at the MIT Center for Advanced Virtuality (MIT Open Learning 2020).

the story.[22] Nevertheless, the choices are not endless, so a predetermined structure is present. I would argue that *Refugee Challenge*, then, is a game, as it invites you to "play," or at least that is what the title suggests by requesting your participation in a virtual challenge.[23]

The storytelling is organized in a branch-like structure. You begin from this premise: you have to take the role of a female refugee, a young Muslim widow, who, forced by the war in Syria, decides to use her money to plan a journey to Europe. Thus, the narrative introduces you to a refugee at a crucial juncture in their life—a moment in which you need to make a choice to go further: you must decide if you want to travel to Europe or go to a Turkish refugee camp. The text tells you that it will be safer to go to Turkey, but given that the challenge is to break into Fortress Europe, I am compelled to choose the riskier option. If you decide to stay in a refugee camp in Turkey, you have the option to apply to a resettlement program run by the UNHCR. Alternatively, you may try to get to Europe illegally from there. If you apply for the program, you will be told that you chances are very low. Again, you must decide if you want to stay in Turkey or illegally travel to Greece.

Two journalists from *The Guardian* wrote and shot this text adventure (John Domokos made the videos and Harriet Grant wrote the text) and two members of the interactive team—Seán Clarke and Paul Torpey—produced it. Domokos explained in interview that part of the reason why they decided to create such an interactive experience was because they had a lot of material left (they were reporting the situation for a video reportage), and they wanted to discuss the different routes and difficult journeys they had witnessed since the beginning of the Syrian civil war (2016). The structure the game allows for the recounting of multiple journeys, and many videos in the adventure indeed recount

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22   This is a common structure in interactive fiction—even in recent iterations familiar to broader audiences, such as the interactive episode of *Black Mirror* (2016-) entitled "Bandersnatch." Book series such as *Choose Your Own Adventure* first developed and commercialized interactive fiction.

23   The concept of a "challenge," though, reminds us of a competition—and thus a game.

what happened after the end of 2013 (the text-adventure was published, though, in 2014). In the game we are told, for instance, that in September 2013 Sweden offered to give asylum to Syrian refugees, which is one of the reasons that might encourage you to go to Europe. You always have two or three options, and if you go to Greece or Bulgaria you might be sent back (these sort of events are often linked to real reports that include audio-visual material). Once you play and start the challenge, you are advised by the text and linked article you are reading that the best option is to reach the EU and in particular Sweden. You can also go to the UK, but the longer journey to Sweden will give you more rights. You are presented with a safe option and dangerous option, but you often take the riskier of the two because, in the end, the better way to get to Europe is illegal.

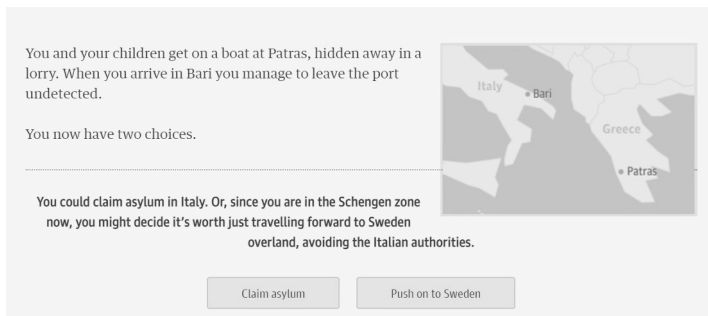*Fig. 6: The Refugee Challenge: choice-based structure*

Image source: screenshot from The Refugee Challenge (2014), https://www.thegu ardian.com/global-development/ng-interactive/2014/jan/refugee-choices-interac tive.

As the title of the game suggests, it focuses on problems with the asylum system in Europe. Bulgaria and Turkey, for example, are portrayed using images of fences; in Italy and Greece you find yourself in Europe, but the conditions of asylum seekers or refugees are worse that many other European countries. A video about Rome shows that refugees are forced to live on the streets, as there is no reliable system to

take care of them. The continent is represented as an enclosed place. It is not welcoming to you—despite Sweden and other countries opening their borders around 2013— because you can only apply for asylum after the Dublin Regulation has been enacted in your first country of landing, or you reach a refugee camp and secure help from an Aid organization first (European Commission n.d.). Regardless of the perilousness of the journey, however, it is ultimately easy to reach Sweden and succeed.[24]

A text-adventure that the BBC news published one year after *The Guardian* treats border crossing to Europe somewhat differently. In *Syrian Journey: Choose Your Own Escape Route* (2015) you are once again asked to become a Syrian refugee (the title refers to a children's book series of interactive games first published by Bantam Books and now owned by Chooseko LLC).[25] In 2015, a peak number of refugees tried to reach Europe, and this was followed by some questionable agreements between Europe and Turkey. This text-adventure does not make as much use of photographs as *The Guardian*'s example; instead, it uses drawings as re-enactments or possible outcomes of your choices. However, some character's stories are shared as video content at the end of the

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24 Once you arrive successfully in Sweden you read the following: "You explain to the officials why you left Syria and within a month you are told you have permanent residence, an offer they have made to nearly all Syrians since September 2013. You are given social housing and free Swedish lessons. The way that refugees are treated varies wildly from country to country. Experts warn that as long as these differences exist, people will continue to make dangerous journeys to reach countries where they feel they will have support in the challenging task of building a new life. Of all the Syrians who have claimed asylum in Europe since the conflict began, around 55,000 people, more than 70 per cent made their claims in just two countries, Germany and Sweden. In 2012 the Swedes received 7,814 asylum requests from Syrians—more than France, the UK, the US, Australia and Canada combined. 12,000 Syrians have applied for asylum since September 2013 when the offer of permanent residency was announced. But the vast majority of exiled Syrians are nowhere near Sweden. Instead they carry on with their suspended lives in the refugee camps of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey" (The Refugee Challenge 2014).

25 After Netflix produced and aired "Bandersnatch," the first interactive episode of *Black Mirror*, Chooseko sued them for trademark violation (Gardner 2019).

text. Additionally, the BBC created a hashtag (#whatwouldyoutake and #Syrianjourney) to invite users to participate with their own story.

The text-adventure works like *The Guardian* iteration, although you may now decide if you want to start as a man or as a woman. Next, you embark on a journey towards Europe. At least, reaching Europe remains our ultimate goal. But in comparison to the easiness of *The Guardian* text adventure, the choices presented in *Syrian Journey* are much riskier. You can die, lose your family, or be separated from them. All the outcomes of the journey, as the journalist and makers declare in the homepage, are based on real stories that they collected during their research. The text adventures use drawings to depict the cruelest outcomes: you might end up drowning, being sold to militias, or failing to reach the shores and becoming stranded and penniless. As with the rhetoric of failure in *The Migrant Trail*, you have no freedom of choice. You are put in a vulnerable position, cannot move, and are oppressed by a form of "necropolitics" (Mbembe 2003). You recognize this discrepancy and feel discomforted and helpless. And you may have to play many times before reaching a "happy ending," which could mean being rescued by a ship during your perilous Mediterranean crossing (which cost you an inordinate amount of money). However, you are not going to know what will happen next, or how happy this ending really is.

It is interesting to reflect, here, on the use of the role-playing narrative—the "choose your own adventure" trademark. In both examples, the user is invited to step into the shoes of a character. Whereas in *Syrian Journey* you are an unspecified male or female Syrian refugee (it makes almost no difference to the outcome), in *The Refugee Challenge* you are a named female. The latter story is based on a real character, Karima, a 28-year-old Sunni woman from Aleppo, and a widow with two children. The first photo you see—although not providing a clear reference to the aforementioned woman—shows two women with two children in front of bombed ruins. This is the reason that your character chooses to escape. In comparison, the first image in *Syrian Journey* shows a family: a man and a woman with children. But in this case, it is a drawing. There are a finite number of drawings in the story—depicting the outcome of your choices—that are used to represent different endings. Drawings

as animations can depict the most violent outcomes without creating too much emotional discomfort or distress in the viewers.

Although both text-adventures make use of a role-playing feature, *The Refugee Challenge* is more "faithful" to news aesthetics. Indeed, it mostly uses photos and videos taken by the same journalists that wrote the text-adventure. In *Syrian Journey*, the comic-like graphic and also the indefinite gender role of the character/avatar allows the story to become more fictional, despite both being based on real stories. The populist newspaper *The Daily Mail* criticized the BBC for having produced "a sickening game." (2015)[26] The newspaper saw the game as uninformative, and only depicting a macabre journey.

Roger Odin's concept of "documentarizing reading" is relevant in this hybrid context, in which journalism and games combine with interactive storytelling features. For him, every text can be read semio-pragmatically through a "documentarizing reading." (Odin, [1984] 1998; 2000) This semio-pragmatic approach is a methodology that considers not only the text but also its reception, and thus what Odin refers to as the space of communication. This method allows for the possibility that texts can generate multiple readings, or that different meanings can be applied to the same text. The process of this "documentarizing mode" starts with the "real enunciator"—that is, the viewer or receptor of any media ([1984]1998; 2000; 2011). In our case, it could be the creators or journalists from *The Guardian* and BBC news. The platforms themselves then are spaces which enable such documentarizing reading. The use of photos and videos help to legitimize this reading as they offer evidence or "truth." Nevertheless, *The Daily Mail*'s critique represents a distorted reading. Further, if we consider playing such text-adventures or other serious games in a different context to that of a journalistic platform, a festival dedicated to documentaries, or the website of UNHCR, this

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26   See also Braida (2018).

would change the nature of the documentarizing reading and thus produce a completely different text.[27]

Nevertheless, it is possible to produce a documentarizing reading of serious games. Some researchers demonstrate how certain strategies can reconstruct a reality that points to a documentarizing mode (Ibanez-Bueno and Allain 2017). In some serious games this is achieved through CGI and the construction of a model that simulates reality. This model is built using a recollection of facts and usually puts the user/viewer/actor in a first-person role, as for instance in *Against All Odds*. Other broadcasters use this same idea of a choice-based interactive narrative and employ text, photos and video material in a more dynamic way. A good example is Channel 4's *Two Billion Miles* (2016), an "interactive video story" which aims to count all of the miles Syrian refugees covered during their exile from their homeland. Upon arriving on the homepage, a looped video shows you images of a boat crossing the sea, refugees walking along fences, and stranded migrants taking shelter somewhere in a city.

The stories explore what happened in 2015 when media outlets began to talk of a "refugee crisis." As Germany and other countries in northern Europe opened their borders to refugees from Syria, migrants from other countries were also tempted to claim asylum in Europe. The story's branch-like structure is exactly the same as the previous case studies. But here, audio-visual material is of greater importance. Although most video material is combined with dramatic extra-diegetic music, we are sometimes able to listen to interviewee testimonies. Subtitles provide narrative progression and address us directly. As in *Syrian Journey* or *The Refugee Challenge*, the text creates narrative flow and provides you with choices (fig. 8). In contrast to previous examples, you cannot choose your character. Instead, an algorithm randomly selects a location from where you must start your journey, and you are given some details about your struggles and goals.

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27   This is what happens when video-captured gameplay content is uploaded to YouTube, and the player or commentator misinterprets the game's reception. I here refer to the YouTube video mentioned in footnote 98.

Fig. 7: Two Billion Miles' Homepage

Image source: screenshot from Two Billion Miles (2016), http://twobillionmiles.com/.

However, narrative choices here are more numerous, and thus the structure of the non-linear stories is more complex. We can start our journey from Syria (different cities such as Aleppo, Homs and Damascus), Iraq, Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia or Eritrea. Different reasons may be offered as to why you chose to escape: civil war, repressive regimes, state violence. The narratives converge once you attempt to cross the Mediterranean or reach Europe by land using the Balkan Route. If you start in Africa, you end up either in Libya or Egypt; if you start from Syria you might end up in Turkey or Lebanon. Still, you try to reach Europe by land or by sea and thus end up in Italy. Once you reach a country in which you can apply for asylum, the narratives converge again. The stories cover many countries: Turkey, Lebanon, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Italy, France, UK and Sweden.

Every sequence presents a video short story that you can always skip in order to reach the next crucial narrative point. Sometimes, news broadcasters provide the videos, as evidenced by the videos' lower-quality resolution. These videos explore all of the significant episodes and developments from 2015. For instance, we witness some already iconic

Fig. 8: Two Billion Miles :an algorithmically selected journey in Northern Iraq. *The choice-based narrative asks you to make you first decision*
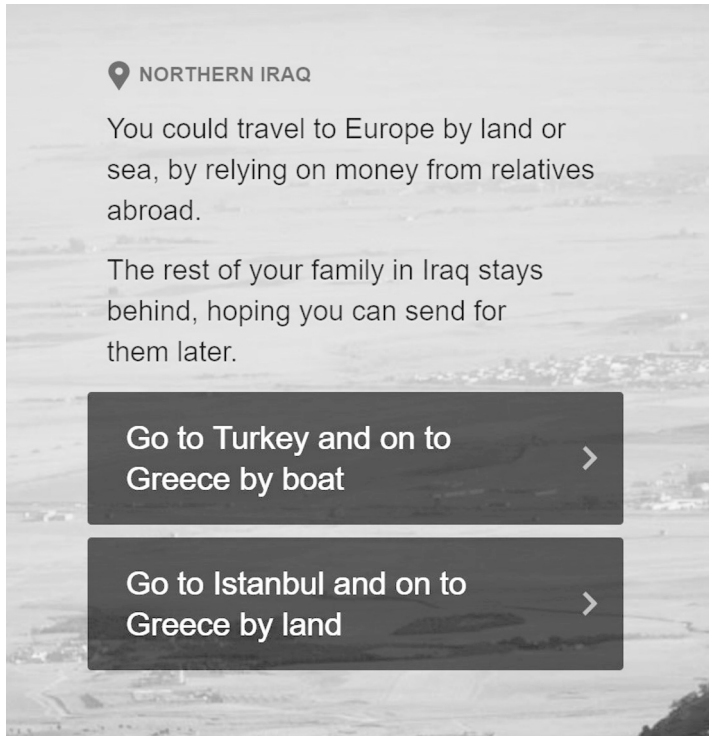

Image source: screenshot from Two Billion Miles (2016), http://twobillionmiles.com/.

images: the death of the young boy Aylan Curdi on the Turkish coast, the rescue of a group of refugees by Italian coastguards, and, once again, images of police brutality visited upon migrants at the border between Serbia and Hungary. At the end of every journey, a collection of video links offers you the opportunity to watch additional Channel 4 news broadcasts on its YouTube Channel.

In terms of narrative progression, the video material is secondary to text. Moving images here work mostly as a commentary on the actual story. There is only one dead end in the game—when in Libya, you choose to board a smuggler vessel—but otherwise the narration evolves, as you make many attempts to cross borders, and negotiate with smugglers. Hopefully you succeed in reaching Europe. Once you enter a European country, you have the option to start another journey in order to reach a place where refugee conditions seem more favourable. The stories paint a clear portrait of an uneven Europe. Southern European countries are often a long stop rather than a final destination. Settling in Italy or Greece might make you consider other options, because the countries' refugee camps are often crowded and asylum procedures take too much time. Chaos reigns. Mediterranean and eastern European countries are also unwelcoming. Setbacks, mishandling, poor conditions, and the violation of human rights are part of the daily routine in some eastern countries like Turkey and Lebanon. Even cities in eastern Germany like Dresden are not particularly friendly to refugees, whereas West Germany seems more tolerant, and on par with Sweden and the UK.

The continuity established by the audio-visual material and accompanying soundtrack makes the experience of playing *Two Billion Miles* fluid. You do not simply read text and make decisions—you also watch and listen to a coherent succession of events. However, compared to the BBC and *The Guardian*'s simpler text-adventures, you do not really care or identify with a character, and the role-playing element is simply a thread that ties together the narrative of facts and news. The story's branch-like structure is therefore less visible, and you are often not aware at which step of your journey you have arrived (in *Syrian Journey*, for example, this is made explicit through a simple map on the right column of the page). Thanks to the clarifying nature of videos and actual interviews, there is no risk of a distorted reading. Instead, crucial decision-making points in the narrative feel more like constraints on the flow—a rupture in the flux of images. In contrast, *The Migrant Trail*'s interruptions and discontinuities offer you time to reflect; but here, you do not have to interact as much or control your avatar. You are merely

a witness: while watching the images, your perspective is more akin to the reporter's that shot the images, or perhaps a viewer watching news footage on TV. *Two Billion Miles*, then, is more of reportage-like: despite the immersiveness of its audio-visual flow, we rarely adopt a refugee's specific, subjective point of view. Indeed, this only happens in the text narrative.

This sort of interactive reportage, in which we are able to explore a number of migrant journeys, fulfils the journalistic purpose of collecting and retelling real refugee stories. It uses video material as evidence of these retellings. *Two Billion Miles* is a testimony to the inequality and diversity of European responses to the "crisis;" Europe is not simply a fortress, but a complex organism where different bordering processes coexist. The game experience simulates different forms of negotiating the border regime from different locations and positions—but never from the position of a privileged European citizen. If a border, following Nail, exists only as long as it is performed, it becomes clear that the border politics behind pushbacks (forms of expulsion) and crossings (flows and circulations) are permanently renegotiated. Even if a migrant manages to survive and reach the EU, her social position is still unstable. In other words, as Nail reminds us, even if migrants decide to move, they will never be "free to determine their social conditions of their movement." (2016, 34).

All these case studies show how media outlets adopt online strategies, using game structures and interactive storytelling tropes to attract different audiences. That said, what these examples in fact simulate are simply different "regimes of circulation," which end up recreating the space of the border (Nail 2018). In the following paragraphs I explore the specific space of refugee camps by investigating interactive practices that asks the user to step into the role of a reporter.

3.5   Witnessing Refugee Camps

What does it mean to become a reporter and travel to a refugee camp, or meet aid organizations and refugees that escaped war, famine and per-

secution? These are the premises of two newsgames produced in 2014 by ARTE and by the production company Submarine Channel: *Refugees* and *Refugee Republic*. The newsgame is a hybrid that sits at the "intersection of videogame and journalism" (Schweizer, Bogost and Ferrari 2010, 6). Although we could distinguish between various formats, the focus in these two newsgames is clear: the user takes on the role of a reporter. Although *Refugees* became unavailable in 2018, a YouTuber uploaded a video capture of his playing the game (in German), so that audiences could view one specific episode of the newsgame. It is therefore still partially accessible as an individual's recorded gameplay experience.

Fig. 9: Refugees: YouTube gameplay video

Image source: screenshot from YouTube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJE-qjbY8VM.

In figure 9 you grasp the game's aesthetic: you are face to face with your chief reporter, who gives you a task while you take notes. You must report on four refugee camps. In this way, *Refugees* is not a CGI simulation, but combines photos and videos with computer graphics and gameplay. It functions like a role-playing game and looks like a point-and-click adventure (Adams 2014, 565; see fig. 10). This means that there are graphic symbols to click on, and through them we make choices: for

example, by clicking on one of the icons, which becomes visible once we reach a specific location on the refugee camp map, we can either watch a video-interview or reach another point on the map. We have two maps: one appears very briefly before we start the journey, and shows the location of the place we are going to visit (Nepal, Iraq, Lebanon); and the other is always available during gameplay, and shows the refugee camp itself, or at least the location chosen by the creators. In this newsgame, there are three different refugee camps (in Iraq, Lebanon and Nepal).

A group of ARTE-hired journalists did most of the pre-production work, such as writing the scenario and sketching the structure for video material. As Laure Siegel—one of the journalists—explained to me in an interview, they used Twine software to construct the choice-based structure of their first script (2015). Twine is simple open access software that allows you to create exactly the kind of choice-based interactive stories that the BBC, Channel 4 and *The Guardian* have made. The web development and game aesthetic were outsourced to the French company Method in the Madness. This work lasted a year and it involved weekly meetings with the ARTE journalists. The newsgame was released in episodes, and the first, that explores a refugee camp in Nepal, is the longest. The initial outcome was unfortunate: only fourteen players won the game during the first week of its release, and thus played it to the end (ibid.). For that reason, the team decided to shorten every video interview in the two subsequent episodes set in Iraq and Lebanon so that they only lasted around one minute.

In contrast to the BBC, *The Guardian* and Channel 4 text adventures, this web-based interactive possesses a clear game structure. Its gameplay— "everything a player can do while playing the game" —has an explicit goal and offers rewards (Mäyrä 2008, 17).

The layout of the user interface has two levels: a bi-dimensional level—or what Agata Meneghelli calls a *spazio rappresentante*, or the "representing space"—which simulates a computer desktop display, and a three dimensional level, which is the world of the game: the Kawergosk refugee camp (2007). The photographs belong to the world of the game, and at the same time to the real world. But the simulated and bi-dimensional space of the graphical interface belongs to a sort of *hors-*

Fig. 10: Refugees: an example of the point-and-click aesthetic and double-layer interface

Image source: screesnshot from Refugees (2014) © ARTE G.E.I.E.

champ that breaks with the world of the game, and enables our role-playing. This layout represents both a computer desktop in the game world, while also performing our subjective view from an invisible camera. At the same time, our positioning in the real world mirrors this two-dimensional level: we are in front of our desktop or laptop computer. When we conduct interviews, we are placed behind the camera. This layer is a control panel, and offers us the ability to disconnect through a "pause" symbol. The three-dimensional level is shot with a video camera and positions us just behind it. To emphasize the role-playing aspect, there is a "recording" symbol on the image, and we are able to press "abort the shooting" if we so choose. These graphic symbols further suggest our inhabiting the role of a video reporter. The indexical images are shot so as to give us a first-person POV during interviews and travel sequences. Diegetic sound further helps us to immerse in the world of the game.

The two-dimensional level also supports the role-playing aspect of the game: for instance, while playing, we receive chat messages from our editor-in-chief, who gives us feedback on our progress. If the world

in which we are immersed (the world of the game) is constituted by video recorded images, we are able to explore it on the two-dimensional level in which clickable symbols give us access to people and places. Everything is at once virtual and real. Stories of witnesses and interviews with aid workers are supposed to be trusted and are presented as truthful. Images are "real". At the same time, we are only "virtually" visiting and working as reporters. At the desktop-like level of the interface, we are able at the end of the exploration of one of the refugee camps to edit the material— video interviews and photos we browsed during the game—and shape a multimedia story that will be published with a link on a social network. Once the story is published, we receive "fake" feedback (a game reward) from the ARTE team. We post to real social networks, but the media-reportage itself is fake, because we are not ARTE journalists. That said, interviewee stories are testimonies of actual exile experiences.

This constant tension between the supposedly real and the virtual is reflected in the hybrid nature of the aesthetic, which combines two- and three-dimensional graphics. In the world of a CGI videogame, despite the often-realistic nature of the images, there is no such disjunction. It is even more discomforting and uncanny than the photographs used in *The Migrant Trail*, which evidenced the "truthfulness" of the fictionalized world of its computer graphics. But in *Refugees*, this double layering and double meaning works in reverse. The real world becomes the world of a game. How do these game strategies influence our perspective on the story of exile? What kind of view are we enacting? Is it that of a witness, with a point of view that we might have from our computer desktop, TV, or mobile phone? Is it just about watching news? Or is it about playing a game?[28]

The game structure is perhaps a way to attract particularly younger users with additional rewards, but the power of the video material dominates. That said, the configuration of the user experience, which for the

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28   As Laure Siegel explained, the ARTE team received emails from gameplayers who wondered if they could be hired by ARTE. The game, in their "reading" was a training exercise to become a journalist (Siegel 2015).

first episode requires significant time, disrupts the flow of the moving-images. This structure might confuse and annoy users. For example, in order to view the map in its entirety, you must watch all previous material, which means you need around 30 minutes for each episode—which does not include prior game attempts if we wish to complete and "win" the game. We cannot skip interviews, but only "travelling" sequences that take us from one place to another on the map.

Although as compared to a traditional linear documentary or reportage we are given the impression of being able to make choices and create our own story, all that we can draw from at the end of the game is an archive of pre-recorded interviews and photos which give us little freedom. The reportage we can post online is also pre-written by an imagined ARTE reporter. It feels like pretending. Depending on our interests, we might find the exile testimonies relevant and compelling. Whatever the case, the overarching game structure adds nothing to player experience. Instead, it works as a voice-over, which leads us through a convoluted and confused story and frames witness accounts.

Another issue with the game is its emphasis on refugee camps. Focusing on the camps means adopting a perspective that is not exactly that of the refugees, but is instead an overview of the structural organization of international aid in non-western countries, and the infrastructure of humanitarian relief agencies. What we learn, then, is how the UNHCR and UNWRA (the organization exclusively responsible for Palestinians) help refugees in emergency situations. If the camp offers refugees the ability to act, it also confines them: that is, rights might be granted within the camps, but the space outside of them can easily take them away, or reduce refugees' social mobility. Moreover, the camps depends on the local government, which grants residents more or less rights. This is shown by the lack of recognition of Palestinians in a Lebanese camp; outside the camp, they are not allowed to practice their professions (such as a physician or engineer). In Nepal, camp residents are highly dependent on food distributed by aid organizations but they do not have land to cultivate. This is in spite of the fact that most of the refugees are farmers of Nepalese origin that have been pushed out of Bhutan. If some of them are dependent on drugs,

most of them are dependent on international aid. In contrast, in Iraq, refugees share a common nationality with the host nation; they can obtain permits to work outside the camp, and this allows them conquer a space by opening businesses and conducting trade. The refugee camp, in this articulation, becomes a sort of enclosed or liminal space where material and "immaterial" bordering practices are enacted, and where the organization offers more or less freedom. Spaces like refugee camps represent what Nail would call "junctions" where a sort of perceived stasis is secondary to the forms of circulations that traverse them (2016; 2018). Camps (formal and informal ones, like in Calais) represent, inside and outside Western countries, a space to redirect these fluxes through practices of resettlement.

There is nevertheless a strong *Verfremdungseffekt*, which is enacted via the double layering of the virtual and the real. The difference with previous examples, however, is that this was not an intended effect of the game play experience. It is thus, from a critical standpoint, a failure. We are not asked to question our position as virtual witnesses in the camp. Instead, the game is reduced to a form of entertainment, offering rewards and precise goals, which nonetheless fail to amuse even the most carefree gamers. This failure, evidenced by the game's recent disappearance online, as well as the creators' own testimonies, suggests that a more complex interface and unconventional aesthetic is not enough in itself to engage an audience (Siegel 2015). Ultimately, the experience remains individual: even if you are able to publish your story on social networks, you cannot discuss the topic within the game with other players.

In the interactive documentary produced by Submarine Channel entitled *Refugee Republic* (2014), we are also given access to a refugee camp in Iraq, this time in Domiz. Here, our perspective can quickly shift from distant to close. The map, drawn by Dutch artist Jan Rothuizen, is a subjective representation of the Domiz camp, and is composed of drawings and words.

The camp's map instead is a "personal" view which is not meant to be objective; it is rather a very intimate portrait, which includes comments

Fig. 11: Refugee Republic: the map, and a view from one side of a street while taking one of the documentary's proposed routes

Image source: screenshot from Refugee Republic (2014), https://refugeerepublic. submarinechannel.com/.

added by the artist.[29] If we decide to take a closer look, we can choose four routes that are represented by different colours on the map. With the zoom tool and, like in Google maps, we can go to "street level" and adopt a subjective point of view (fig. 11).

Once we click through, we are offered another perspective: as in *Refugees*, it is a camera's point of view. We are again put in the position of a refugee camp visitor, as we are placed behind the camera of an actual visitor—a video reporter. But this time the visit, although planned and structured, goes smoothly. We can jump from one route to another, and quickly scroll down or to the right to see different video material and browse the embedded individual stories. This more linear storytelling style allows us to decide what to explore without constraints. We are not really playing a role; we are simply exploring from a subjective point of view. What kind of witnessing are we then performing?

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29   Jan Rothuizen is also known in Amsterdam for having drawn a guidebook to the city using this same style, which mixes detailed drawings and text.

Many scholars have explored the question of "media witnessing" especially in relation to traumatic events, such as the Holocaust (Frosh and Pinchevski 2008; Felman and Laub 1992). I will not delve into this matter in detail; instead, what I wish to focus on is how this specific configuration of interactive practices implicitly or sometimes explicitly involves witness roleplay. John Durham Peters asks if media can sustain the practice of witnessing and replies that in media events "the borrowed eyes and ears of the media become, however tentatively and dangerously, one's own. Death, distance and distrust are all suspended, for good and evil." (2008, 717) He defines different forms of witnessing, which involve varying degrees of absence or presence in space during or after a specific event. "Being there" means being present in time and space, while a recording of an event—like the material collected in newsgames and interactive documentaries—means being absent both in space and time (ibid.). For the latter form to become a performance of witnessing, what Coleridge called a suspension of disbelief is necessary (Ji and Raney 2016). We know that we are not present in time or in space, but this is what we need to forget in order to become sensorially immersed in a mediated world. As Roger Odin argues, this is as necessary for fiction as it is for non-fiction. That is, we rely on a real enunciator for a "documentarizing reading"—in this case we might argue that it is the video-maker or the artist who drew the map (Odin [1984] 1998). Yet, we are encouraged to take their position and thus their role. This double position—between witness and enunciator—is therefore ambiguous.

All the examples I have analyzed in this chapter ask us to make different readings— especially those that mix photographs or video material with fictional game elements in a superimposition of graphic layers. We need to believe in the fictionality of the role-playing game, but at the same time in the truthfulness of what we see, listen to or read (or at least that they are based on real life). The urgency of the topic and the question of vulnerability affect and craft our emotions, and heighten our experience of "being there," getting closer, and stepping into the shoes of the vulnerables. By responding to the urgent need for solidarity, the games risk producing incompatible, often distressed readings by their players. We do not witness events through the eyes of refugees, but from

the point of view of a news reporter. This point of view simulates a form of witnessing—a "participatory act of self-expressive solidarity"—while also mimicking news reportage (Gregory 2016, 185). We listen to a story being recounted, we watch, we look at a detailed map of a refugee camp. Our reportage, then, is not only a recounting of a refugee's life. It is also an exploration of how the infrastructures of humanitarianism work: the bordering process limits movement and confines refugees within a cir- cumscribed space. They wait to be resettled, go back home, and start a new life. Humanitarian infrastructures of aid keep them safe—but still.

3.6   Viewing from Within: Simulating Vulnerability, Simulating Borders

I have showed how different interactive practices offer a perspective that claims to bring us closer to the condition of migrants and refugees. They are different practices, but all wish to be "playful" (Raessens 2014). In serious games, text-adventures and newsgames, the role-playing as- pect performs this function. We are asked to step into the role of a mi- grant or a refugee and take control of his or her choices. We neverthe- less feel the dissonant combination of discomfort and pleasure while playing the game. But ultimately, we never leave our comfortable posi- tion. And if we are reminded of it, through a mechanical or conscious alienation, we might once again feel discomfort. If interactive practices want to be tools for action, or for political of activism, they need to expand their focus from simply immersion and embodiment. Instead, they could offer or promote a critical distance, encouraging users to re- flect on the space that separates the real conditions of those suffering from those who act in solidarity. They should propose alternative sce- narios instead of focusing on a rhetoric of failure. This dichotomy that separates *us* from *them*, and the representation of the other as a vul- nerable individual, could be challenged with a different rhetoric that empowers the vulnerable, and makes them part of a shared commu- nity. Serious games such as *The Migrant Trail*, as well as text-adventures

such as *Syrian Journey*, simulate the border regime, but do not question or collectively negotiate it. That is, while we play as migrants, the border tries to expel us, and so we seek redirection. However, we are still oppressed by the power of the border regime. Often we die, and succumb to its "necropolitics." (Mbembe 2003) Camps become part of an extended border regime which redirects the circulation of migrants.

Text-adventures also put us in the role of refugees and migrants, but they do not produce notable discomfort, because we do not embody a human subject or immersively role-play. They are still playful, but the employment of drawings can often lead to misreadings: practices like this give creators freedom, but they still break with the tropes of a "documentarizing reading" (Odin [1984] 1998). They recall the same "view," and the possibility of overcoming a distance between the player and vulnerable other. In newsgames and in interactive documentaries such as *Refugees* and *Refugee Republic*, we are promised a witness role, and to explore a refugee camp in close detail. Here the discrepancy—the gap between the virtual and the real—is more a question of not being present in the camp, rather than our taking the specific role of a vulnerable other. The role-playing narrative is here used as a strategy to "be there," and to get closer to the condition of migrants and refugees. In so doing, we are able to empathize with them.

Yet, a rhetoric of pity and vulnerability is still at the centre of all these interactives. We once again experience the isolated individual's disempowerment. Online games, on the other hand, could promote a collective effort towards empowerment, and generate a community which is conscious of the distance between *us* and *them*, and aware that the border regime can be negotiated, contested, and eventually torn down. The spectacularizing of suffering which calls for a moral response is part of a larger contemporary political discourse. As Didier Fassin writes, "moral sentiments have become an essential force in contemporary politics." (2012, 1)

In his book *Humanitarian Reason* (2012), Fassin criticizes the elicitation of such emotions as they represent the humanitarian desire to "define and justify discourses and practices of government of human beings." (Ibid., 2) In other words, we should not simply see refugees

and migrants as vulnerable. To do so is to allow humanitarian aid to provide a stable infrastructure which might respond to the urgent issue of human suffering, but also reinforce a power relation in which one side is allowed to manage and regulate the existence of the other. Ultimately, interactive practices, while hypocritically encouraging users to feel what migrants and refugees feel, and to witness "being there," nevertheless focus on the players' moral engagement, instead of the causes of migrant suffering. They suggest that the infrastructures of humanitarian aid are a solution, as is offering of our immediate solidarity. These practices, through different technological means, simulate suffering and border regimes, without exploring the conditions for their dismantling. This is different to what Patricia Zimmermann utopically hopes for with new documentary practices, and represents a failure to mobilize new imaginaries (2019, Chapter 1).