Simulating Experiences of Displacement and Migration:
Developing Immersive and Interactive Media Forms Around Factual Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is a highly politicised and emotive area of public discourse. During the peak of the so-called 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe, a number of EU politicians and mass media outlets manipulated the abstract idea of 'the migrant' as a scapegoat for a number of social ills including rising crime, unemployment and national security. Yet, during these years, some news organisations did seek to counter the dominant negative narratives around migration by exploring new modes of storytelling around interactive and immersive digital environments. This study examines four such media projects, all developed between 2014 and 2016. Their interactive narratives sought to break down popular discourses which portrayed migrants as "the other" by creating an emotional connection between media user and the experience of refugees themselves. For this research, journalists, editors, and producers were interviewed to determine the motivations of the content creators and the impact their storytelling techniques had on viewers.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

During the year 2015, an estimated one million people left their homelands to make the dangerous journey into Europe. According to the UNHCR, this "unprecedented" number of migrants were forced to flee due to "persecution, conflict and poverty" (UNHCR / IOM, 2015). Half of these displaced people were escaping the civil war in Syria. Others came from Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of these refugees endured the perilous voyage across the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Greece often in small and fragile inflatable boats. In the same year, about 150,000 crossed the Mediterranean Sea into Italy from North Africa. During the first five months of 2016, more than 2,800 were feared drowned in the Mediterranean. In May 2016, the G7 summit in Japan declared the 'large scale movements of migrants and refugees as a global challenge which requires a global response' (G7 Statement 2016).

It was a humanitarian emergency in the heart of Europe that spanned several years and still continues into 2019. During this time, as a number of studies have shown, many EU political leaders and media organisations sought to make political capital out of the crisis by portraying refugees as a threat (Wodak 2015, Crawley & Skleparis 2018). According to Krzyzanowski et al. (2018), these "politicized and mediatized visions" portrayed "mainly imaginary scenarios of migrants as

a danger" (p.8). Pineo-Pineo and Moore (2015) describe the conscious manipulation of the public discourse on immigration as a "narrative or oppression" (p.4). In this charged social climate, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, warned about the escalation of "anti-foreigner sentiments" (UNHCR / IOM, 2015).

Public debate over the social and economic impact of the refugee crisis became distorted through a lens of right-wing mediatisation (Trianafyllidou 2017, La Barbera 2015). As this happened, once-commonly used terms in immigration discourse became loaded with ideological and populist rhetoric. In this way, the word "'migrant' comes implicitly to mean someone who's travelling for economic reasons, rather than for as yet undetermined ones" (Kingsley, 2016). However, some media organizations did seek to counter these dominant negative narratives in popular discourse. In August 2015, for example, the TV network Al Jazeera banned the use of the word 'migrant' to describe those crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Barry Malone was the online editor at Al Jazeera who states:

The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative. (Malone, 2015)

In a similar vein, the categories of 'refugee', 'economic migrant', and 'transitory migrant', for example, became either redundant or misleading. According to Crawley and Skleparis (2018), "these categories prove largely incapable of adequately explaining the complex experiences and back stories of those crossing the Mediterranean in 2015." (p. 51). Other researchers have warned against the use of the word "crisis" itself. Krzyzanowski et al. state, "referring to a migration "crisis" is both stigmatizing—especially for the migrants themselves—and adding an unnecessarily alarmistic connotation to this discourse" (2018, p.3).

Migrants Portrayed as "The Other"

This negative mediated narrative was cultivated over several years and, in many cases, was designed to raise doubts over the status of refugees and to solidify public support around their policies of exclusion and rhetoric of 'border control'. As their agenda converged, both politicians and ring-wing newspapers manipulated the lexicon of immigration and portrayed the migrant 'crisis' through a simple vantage point: Ourselves against 'The Others'. As a result, according to Triandafyllidou (2017) media reporting was "subjugated to dominant discourses on who belongs and who are the 'aliens', the 'outsiders'" (p. 2). In discussing his notion of a "New(s) Racism", Van Dijk (2000) describes that "ethnic issues provide … polarized identification for most white readers: Us and Them" (p.37). At a time when European countries were still reeling from the financial crisis and dealing with the politics of austerity, these 'others' became a scapegoat who were blamed for all manner of social ills. At various times immigrants have been blamed for rising crime, social unrest, unemployment and national security concerns. "Anybody can potentially be constructed as dangerous 'other', should it become expedient for specific strategic and manipulative purposes" (Wodak, 2015). To La Barbera (2015), "migrants in Europe are still the most marginalised others" (p. 6). Fox describes the UK debate on immigration ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum: "it almost became a mythical fight against evil forces that had to be named, shamed and expelled from the country" (2018, p. 97).

In the midst of this emotive and politicised public discourse, the power of the metaphor was employed as an ideological tool. This was not a new strategy specific to the 'migration crisis' but the resurgence of an established practice of demonisation in media representation. In 2008, David Cisneros stated that "immigrants are framed visually and metaphorically, using similar representational strategies, as dangerous and destructive pollutants" (p.570). Such negative and loaded metaphors result in the de-humanization of refugees and asylum seekers. According to Pineo-Pineo and Moore (2015) "metaphors present a cultural narrative that affects the moral consideration of the characters involved in the story" (p.1). Such pejorative metaphors around immigration were not confined to

newspapers and the manipulation of language. The use of photographic images and videos were a powerful means of influencing public opinion: both on television and shared on social media sites. Such visual content was used extensively by political campaigns during the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. For example, in June 2016, Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK pro-Brexit party UKIP, unveiled a poster using an image of a large group of refugees under the heading "Breaking Point." The refugees, however, were not attempting to get into the UK but rather crossing the border between Croatia and Slovenia.

Simon Tilford, director of the Centre for European Reform, criticized both Labour and Conservative political leaders by stating that they should have "shown some leadership by refusing to link immigration with social and economic problems, and by facing down populist sentiment in the media rather than pandering to it" (Tilford, 2015, p.3). It is a view shared by Fox (2018) who found that "British politicians have nourished this false popular representation of immigrants" (p.93). According to Goodwin and Milazzo (2017), the British public's views on immigration were a deciding factor in the Brexit vote because, according to their research, most of those who voted to leave the EU, "felt negatively about how historically unprecedented levels of immigration were impacting on the national economy, culture and the welfare state" (p.462).

Between 2014 and 2016, European TV news programmes were filled with the images of the 'migration crisis' on a near daily basis: tens of thousands of people walking from Hungary to Austria, overcrowded boats carrying hundreds of Syrian families into Greece and the conditions of refugee camps in Northern Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. The sheer scale of the humanitarian emergency, coupled with the logistics of daily TV newsgathering, meant that migrants were often visually represented as a large group of 'other people' rather than as narratives of individual people with individual challenges.

However, during these years, a number of media organisations did attempt to break down the political and ideological portrayal of migrants as "others". This article examines the interactive and immersive projects that sought the emotional involvement of viewers in the experience of refugees. This required a departure from the conventions of journalistic storytelling and required the development of user agency within simulated digital narratives as a means of fostering empathy and shared understanding.

Research Methodology

Four case studies have been analysed for this research: all mediated digital narratives with a focus on EU migration between 2014 and 2016. The projects were commissioned by mainstream news organisations and each develops an interactive or immersive digital simulation which enables users, in different ways, to experience the life or journey of a refugee. For each project, a member of the production team took part in semi-structured interviews aimed at determining the context of production and the evolution of the media product from inception to delivery. This aspect of the methodology is rooted in a process of elite interviewing as envisaged by Laura Nader as a "kind of anthropology concerned with power" (Nader 1974). However, in the context of media production studies, elite does not necessarily mean the senior managers and editors of media titles. Instead this research has sought an understanding of the creative and journalistic drive behind the interactive narratives. As Brunn states: "the purpose of media production analysis is to gain insight into what is going on 'backstage'" (2016, p. 134). Interactive media projects, of such ambition and scale, are not the result of one person but a group collaboration including reporters, photographers, camera operators, artists and editors. Caldwell (2014) describes media texts as "dynamic sites of intrinsically collective, negotiated interactions by industry" (p. 721). For this research, a selection of different voices was sought that would be reflective of the range of professional and creative inputs into the projects. The interviews, which were conducted throughout 2016, sought to examine the underlying motivations and production processes themselves. Each interviewee was asked about conventional storytelling within the public discourse of immigration and how their project diverged from this in terms of form and intention. Interviewees were also questioned about the means of engagement with their audiences in relation to audience participation and user agency.

THE PROJECTS AND INTERVIEWEES

Can You Break Into Fortress Europe? - The Guardian Newspaper

In January 2014, as the 'migration crisis' was beginning to grow in scale, the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK created an online interactive experience for its readers. It used multimedia tools - text, maps, stills and real video testimonies - to construct the various possible routes for Syrian refugees to get into Europe. The title itself employed its own metaphor: Europe as an unwelcoming stronghold. When users enter the site they are told: 'Your name is Karima. You are a 28-year old Sunni woman from Aleppo, and you have two children'. (Guardian, 2014) Users then take part in an interactive journey and are presented with many of the choices and challenges which face refugees. The first decision they have to make is whether to travel to Europe or Turkey.

Interview: John Domokos is a documentary film maker for the Guardian who has made a number of factual films on the migration crisis including travelling with migrants as they made their journey from Syria to Germany. He was one of the producers of *Fortress Europe* for the *Guardian*.

Refugee Republic - De Volkskrant / Submarine Channel

Refugee Republic is an online multimedia project which was commissioned by *De Volkskrant* newspaper in the Netherlands. It was created by an artist, a journalist and a photographer working in collaboration. Together they were given access to the UN Domiz refugee camp in Northern Iraq to document the lives of the 58,000 Syrian refugees who live there. Rather than shoot and edit a conventional film, the team developed an interactive online experience which is a combination of art works, still images, text, audio recordings and video footage. The site was launched in September 2014. It opens with an illustration of the camp, and lets users explore the community by walking down virtual streets, entering makeshift homes and hearing the personal stories of the residents.

Interview: Jan Rothuizen was the artist involved in the project. He created the illustrations of the camp including street scenes, tent interiors, personal belongings and images representing the UN presence in the camp.

Two Billion Miles - Channel 4 News

By the end of 2015, the UK news programme *Channel 4 News* estimated that migrants coming into Europe had collectively travelled a total distance of two billion miles. The production team used existing TV footage to create an online interactive experience which invites people to put themselves in the position of an asylum seeker escaping from terror or war and attempting to make it to Europe. The site asks people to 'choose your route and make touch decisions' (Fraser et al., 2015). Every time a user enters the site, they begin in one of six possible locations: Sinjar in Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea and three cities in Syria. Depending on the choices they make, there are a number of different outcomes to their journey. For example, the user (as virtual refugee) might make it to Europe, they might be turned away at a border, they could fall prey to people smugglers or end up in a boat which capsizes in the Mediterranean Sea.

Interview: Ed Fraser is the Managing Editor of *Channel 4 News* and has an overview of the digital and online content of the programme output. He was the commissioning editor of *Two Billion Miles*.

The Displaced - New York Times / VRSE Works

The Displaced is an 11-minute Virtual Reality factual film commissioned by the *New York Times* and made by the production company VRSE Works based in New York. The film aims for limited *sensory immersion* and was filmed using a 360-degree six Go Pro camera rig to create stereoscopic moving images which enable viewers to virtually inhabit the filmed space. *The Displaced* was released when the New York Times unveiled its new Virtual Reality App for headsets in November 2015. The film

follows the experiences of three refugee children: an eleven-year-old boy called Oleg from eastern Ukraine, a Syrian girl called Hana who is twelve, and a 9 year-old boy named Chuol from South Sudan.

Interview: Imraan Ismail is a freelance documentary maker for VRSE productions who directed *The Displaced* working alongside journalists and editors from the *New York Times*.

THE EFFECT OF INTERACTION

All of the media outlets discussed in this paper invested significant time and resources to report on the migration crisis over a long period of time. For the most part, their newsgathering and coverage remained traditional: online articles, TV news reports, and video documentaries. Each also developed tailored social media content to enable users to share and comment on the coverage. On a practical level, it quickly became clear the 'migration crisis' was a tragedy which was going to endure over a long period. Media organisations could spend the necessary time developing interactive projects which would continue to be relevant over months and years. *Channel 4 News* was able to use footage from its core coverage which was adapted and refashioned into the interactive experiences. Ed Fraser, from *Channel 4 News,* states: "We wanted to create a big public interest project. We had got all of these amazing reports and we had captured all of this powerful video. We thought: 'let's find a way of using all this footage to follow a migrant path journey from start point to end point. Do these journeys, make it very interactive and give viewers real choices".

Among the interviewees, there was an awareness that some audiences were becoming de-sensitized of the ongoing coverage around the crisis. This is not to say that people no longer considered the issue important but rather that they felt overwhelmed by the scale and duration of the emergency. John Domokos describes the discussions within the *Guardian* newsroom in 2014: "many of the stories and videos we were putting out weren't really getting clicked on," he says, 'this was partly because of the repetitive, almost endless nature of the news on the migration crisis. It felt like viewers and readers got a bit weary of the stories and it was harder and harder for each new story to make an impact". Jan Rothuizen, an Amsterdam-based artist, describes how *Refugee Republic* was designed, not only to alter the structure and content of conventional press narratives, but also to break down the highly politicised tone around the reporting of immigration. "We have to think why these stories are being told over and over again in the same way", Rothuizen says, "Political subjects are helped by alternative storytelling. With the migration crisis, we've seen quite a lot, but when you think about what you've seen it's from the same perspective and from the same tone of voice'.

Narrative Complexity

The process of conventional news reporting is constrained by a number of factors: from the logistical demands of daily newsgathering, to the requirements of balance within regulatory frameworks, and the practical limits imposed on story duration (both in broadcasting and in print). As a result of this, some have claimed that such techniques have, at times, become insufficient to convey the depth and complexity of the Refugee Crisis. As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) observe, the media makes "simplistic assumptions about the experiences of those on the move" (p. 59). Likewise, according to Triandafyllidou (2017), "Media reporting more often than not privileges simple black-and-white accounts of such complex phenomena" (p. 2). In all these case studies, interactive and immersive tools were adopted in conjunction with traditional forms to provide a depth of emotional and psychological understanding with the plight of refugees. Imraan Ismail, the director of the *NYT* Virtual Reality film *The Displaced,* states: "It's a subject that's really hard for people to grasp in general: it's so big and complex. That complexity means that people are more open to telling the story in different ways." According to Jan Rothuizen, "to decipher something as complex as the migration crisis, alternative storytelling does help."

Both *Two Billion Miles* and *Fortress Europe* employ similar interactive devices to enable users to engage with a factual story as complex as the migration crisis. This was achieved by requiring

participants to make hard choices: selecting the least dangerous route into Europe, deciding between land and sea, or between paying people smugglers or remaining in refugee camps. As much as possible these choices were based on the real-life experiences of refugees and the dangers they faced. These threats, according to the International Organisation on Migration, "were harsh natural environments, lack of food and shelter, and violence inflicted by smugglers and national authorities." (IOM, 2016, p. 4) John Domokos says that the decision to develop *Fortress Europe* was 'almost secondary' to producing a traditional documentary. 'It was a decision that we took halfway through editing our main film', Domokos says. 'We thought the material here is too difficult and complex to fit into a singular linear film story. We wanted to explain some of the challenges and dilemmas faced by migrants and refugees'.

Jenkins (2006) argues that "the hunger for complexity" and the "desire to rewrite core stories" are demands that consumers place on the media in a converged environment (p.259). Yet *Two Billion Miles*, *Fortress Europe* and *Refugee Republic* should be viewed as more than interactive multimedia websites. It's significant that these sites were created by mainstream media groups. *Two Billion Miles* serves as a launch-pad for users to move between media channels and platforms in order to access other stories on migration. At each stage of the virtual refugee journey, links appear directing users to news articles and other relevant information sources. It is an interactive experience which comes close to one definition of a transmedia narrative process as "the careful planning and development of a larger narrative that has a coordinated presentation to its audience via multiple methods or storytelling platforms" (Dowd et al., 2013, p. 6). Jenkins writes that transmedia storytelling is "the art of world making" where consumers have to chase down "bits of the story across media channels" (2006, p. 21). This is a good description of how young audiences consume news online and on social media sites: in a non-linear fashion, jumping from one source to another, moving between platforms in the search for information, explanation, analysis and (significantly) opportunities for *participation*. Such audiences want choices and they want to be actively involved in media discourse. Ed Fraser, the Managing Editor at *Channel 4 News*, says his team is planning to do more projects similar to *Two Billion Miles*: "We will definitely do something else in this area", says Fraser, "It's incumbent on us not to just go on social media to get more viewing for our traditional linear TV pieces. We can bring a different, distinctive, original and innovative take on these stories".

The Evolution of User Agency

According to many scholars, the concept of user interaction is a necessary component of transmedia narratives whether they're based in fact or fiction. Phillips (2013) says interaction is "an emergent property of transmedia" (p. 119), whilst Giovagnoli (2011) argues "the most important narrative dimension of a transmedia project always consists of the way in which the audience interacts with it" (p.43). This active process of traversing between media channels, of making conscious choices and exploring worlds, demands a high degree of audience agency. "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" says Murray in her seminal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997, p. 126). In essence, 'agency' involves empowering users and giving them a sense of responsibility over their actions. It is a term commonly used in the realm of game studies which is now increasingly relevant in the response to interactive factual narratives.

Engagement by means of heightened user agency is one of the central themes that links all of these interactive projects on migration. In experiencing *Refugee Republic,* for example, users are able to navigate along streets in the refugee camp and dip in and out of personal refugee stories contained within. Jan Rothuizen explains: "You give the viewer some sort of responsibility to look and to wander, to ask more and to see more. You enter a world where you have the feeling that you discovered yourself". Tincknell and Raguram (2002) argue that the concept of an active audience needs to be reconfigured: "the development of new kinds of 'interactive' media texts … suggests that such audiences may go beyond simply responding to a text – they may also help to change it" (2002, p. 201).

Virtual Experiences of Migration

Virtual Reality is one type of simulation where 360-degree visual representation enables a form of sensory immersion. Murray (1997) describes immersion as "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (p. 98). Castranova (2006) argues that people turn into VR players by being "lured away by fun synthetic worlds" (p. 16). Elsaesser (2014) describes virtual reality as a "fantasy" of "body-based sensations". The notion of 'immersion' can apply to a number of media forms and experiences: from being absorbed in the narrative of a novel, to playing a VR game or watching a film at the cinema. In order to categorise this multiplicity of meanings, Ryan (2015) outlines a taxonomy of immersion by listing three varieties: spatial, temporal and emotional immersion. Within the context of simulated digital environments, these concepts immersion can be closely related to forms of interaction. According to Sauve et al. (2007), simulation is defined as "a simplified, dynamic and precise representation of reality defined as a system" (p. 252). More than twenty-five years ago Pimentel and Teixeira (1992) argued "interactivity, like immersion, is a crucial aspect of VR" (p. 15). Similarly, Lasko-Harvill argues that "VR is intrinsically interactive" (1992, p. 222).

The *New York Times* recommends viewers to watch its film, *The Displaced,* through a VR headset. In the first scene, viewers find themselves in a bombed-out classroom in the Ukraine. It's possible to look down to stare at the rubble and detritus at your feet or look out of the window at the destruction of the town. "The fact that you are doing physical things", says director Irmaan Ismail, "just moving your head from side to side, you feel that sort of agency in what you're doing and what you're seeing. You feel as if you have some sort of role in it." The film lets the displaced children speak for themselves by means of their own audio testimonies. Towards the end of the film, viewers find themselves following a group of laughing children through the alleyways of a refugee camp. The presence of the filmmaker can only be glimpsed in the moving shadows on the tents. Otherwise the user feels part of the crowd. In this way, the film attempts to engender a sense of empathy and emotional engagement by means of a feeling of 'being there'. This notion of 'tele-presence' gives users the perception that they are able to interact with their environment and thereby step into another's shoes if only for a moment. Jones (2017) describes VR as "a tool to generate empathy and connection with the story" (p. 175). To Ryan (1994), "the ultimate freedom in the movement of the sensors is the adoption of a foreign identity" (p. 17). Within narratives of migration and displacement, such freedom of the senses can break down the sense of "otherness" that has dominated media discourses on immigration.

Immersion, Empathy and Emotional Intensity

There is a scene in *The Displaced* where VR users find themselves in the middle of a field in Sudan waiting for an aid agency plane to drop food. When the sound of an aircraft is heard overhead the VR user, in common with refugees on the ground, instinctively looks up to the sky to discover where the sound is coming from. It is an emotional and uncomfortable moment for the user who is both inside and outside the action simultaneously. The mechanism of virtual reality makes it difficult to turn away from the experience. "All of a sudden you feel like you're there", says Imraan Ismail, "that's powerful because it forces you to interact with the medium. It forces you to respond to what's in front of you. You can't walk away because you're still in that world. It forces people to be more engaged". The VR headset is anti-social: it puts a user in an immersive world, removes any outside distractions and makes it hard to leave. Pimentel and Teixeira (1993) describe the VR experience as "the disappearing computer". The immersive nature of VR captures (and captivates) the audience. According to Imraan Ishamil, "Interactivity forces you to stay in there and gives you another reason to keep listening to the story."

During the years of the so-called migration crisis, a number of news outlets produced virtual reality films alongside their other coverage. In November 2015, Sky News released a 4 minute 360-degree film called *Migrant Crisis: The Whole Picture* (Sky News, 2015). The report, by correspondent Alistair

Bunkall, is very similar to a conventional TV news story. It doesn't seek to simulate the experience of a refugee but instead gives viewers an immersive sense of what it would be like as a TV reporter standing on the beach in Greece when a refugee boat lands. Another VR film, made in collaboration between RYOT and AP, puts the viewer in the heart of the refugee camp in Calais which was known as 'The Jungle'. The film, *Calais Migrant Camp: Seeking Home* (RYOT / AP, 2015) gives viewers an insight of the streets and inside the tents of this community. As with *The Displaced* film, refugees narrate their own stories from the camp. There is no reporter voice-over guiding the viewer attention and telling them what is important. This aspect of conventional news reporting is what Heath (2012) describes as the 'Voice of God' and it is notably absent in each of the case studies for good reason. Jones (2017) argues that immersive journalism "is revoked when there is a reporter who becomes the barrier between the audience and the subject" (p.181). Instead, in relation to authorship, successful VR experiences come closer to transmedia storytelling practices. As Giovagnoli (2011) observes: 'in transmedia projects, the authorship is often more hidden than shown, and the responsibility for the tale is disguised in the story and its different uses' (p. 19).

The absence of an explicit 'storyteller' is one aspect that unites all the case studies explored in this research. However, beyond *The Displaced*, can any of the other migration case studies stake a claim to be *immersive*? There is an argument that the process of interacting with content moves the user away from a sense of immersion. Ryan (2015) makes a clear distinction between VR and other interactive forms: "In VR we act within a world and experience it from the inside', she says, 'but in interactive texts of the selective variety we choose a world, more or less blindly, out of any alternatives, and we are not imaginatively committed to any one of them" (p. 12). It's important to make a distinction between the immersion of the senses (tele-presence) and being caught up in a narrative (temporal immersion). In this way, users might get immersed in *Two Billion Miles* because they want to know how their decisions will shape the outcome of an imaginary refugee's virtual journey.

To heighten the emotional impact, each media project focuses on the everyday: the normality within an abnormal crisis. None of the case studies attempt to convey the vast scale of the Refugee Crisis. Instead they seek to tell the reality of the situation by concentrating on the personal and intimate. "It helped to convey a child's truth" says Imraan Ismail, "this was more about conveying the humanity of it, rather than simply placing an event." The team behind *Refugee Republic* turned away from the stereotypical news images of refugee camps and refused to portray refugees as victims. Jan Rothuizen states "I was keen to get really close to people, not to portray them as such, but in order to show daily life. If you are a proper journalist you have to stick to the facts, but I can really play with my own emotions". One of the drawings he produced for *Refugee Republic* shows the inside of one of the tents in the singles quarter of the Domiz camp. It is full of personal, everyday items and is surrounded by short quotes detailing the hopes and frustrations of the person living there. "The tent is really intimate", says Rothuizen, "it's about daily life… and sharing your room." Phillips describes transmedia storytelling of this type as 'the realm of deep experiences and completely immersive stories, and it can evoke emotions that simply can't be replicated in a single novel or film'. (2013, p. 5). This is the last of Ryan's immersive forms which she describes as "emotional participation in the fate of imaginary characters" (2015, p. 148). This is one aspect of immersion that all these simulated experiences share, even though they deploy different technologies and narrative devices to do it. Triandafyllidou (2017) argues that traditional media routines "tend to ignore the perspective of migrants and refugees themselves" (p. 2). These projects, in abandoning such conventional media narrative techniques, have attempted to re-establish the individual perspectives and experiences of refugees.

Gameplay and the Limits to Interaction and Immersion

The interactive nature of projects like *Two Billion Miles* and *Fortress Europe,* has re-ignited the debate around the compatibility of narrative forms and interactive gameplay (Pimentel &Teixeira, 1993; Ryan 1994, Murray, 1997; Juul, 2001). A number of scholars maintain that genuine interactivity within a narrative is "an impossibility" (Elsaersser, 2014). However, old boundaries have blurred as

many computer games have become more plot-driven and, by contrast, online stories (both factual and fictional) have embedded user agency within their structure. Transmedia narratives, in particular, have been inspired by digital gameplay interactions to create new hybrid media forms. According to Dowd et al. (2013), "the opportunities for video games as components of the transmedia property are tremendous in terms of extending and expanding the storytelling" (p. 155). John Domokos agrees with respect to *Can You Break into Fortress Europe?*: "It had an element of gaming about it', he says, 'but I hesitate to use that word because some people misunderstand it and think that you are trivialising things. Not in the slightest. Gaming, at best, can put people in the shoes of the migrants or the refugees at the heart of the story".

User interaction within meditated digital environments will always be subject to limitations. To date, the interactive opportunities in most virtual reality factual video experiences face significant restrictions. Users can look around simulated worlds, but they can't easily move within the virtual space nor can they 'touch' any object within the mediated world (without the help of haptic gloves). Agency and interaction face significant restrictions in the other migration projects too. Within *Refugee Republic* viewers are free to virtually explore the camp but only within strict parameters: they can't go into any tent they choose, for example, or approach any person featured in the camp. In both *Two Billion Miles* and *Fortress Europe*, users are presented with choices but are given only two or three options at each stage of their journey. There are, of course, good reasons for the boundaries inherent in the simulated world: the migrant journeys can only represent an aggregate experience based on real refugee journeys into Europe. Beyond this, the scale of the interactive project is limited by both the scope of the technological systems and the existing digital content used to steer the narratives. The outcomes of the journeys - although varied and multiple – are restricted and built into the structure of the systems. They should be considered 'embedded' narrative experiences and, as a result, the scope of interaction and the sense of user agency is limited.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, what is significant in these projects is the perception of agency and user involvement within the narratives of migration and displacement. These experiences engender the 'prospective, anticipatory attitude of the game player' (Ryan, 2001). The four projects have proved popular because they enable users to feel a connection with the lives of other people fleeing their homes. In the case of the VR film *The Displaced,* this involves a form of sensory immersion. With the other transmedia narratives, users feel a connection to the personal stories of refugees because interaction enables them to feel like they are experiencing, at least in a small way, the emotional journey of a refugee. It is important to stress that not one of the interviewees suggested that these interactive forms can or should replace traditional news reporting or documentary filmmaking. Instead, interactive and immersive forms have been used as a additional method to generate empathy and break down the social and psychological barriers that frame migrants as "others". In this way, they seek the challenge the negative politicisation of immigration in public discourse.

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