

ELO21 : 28 May 2021 / Panel: Platform Possibilities and Beyond
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“Interacting with Empathy: Migrant Narrative in the Context of Mobile Apps”

Abstract

This paper explores two mobile app narratives that deal with the issue of perilous irregular migration, *Survival* (2017, Omnium Lab) and *Bury me, my love* (2017, The Pixel Hunt/Figs/Arte France). This paper explores the way in which the mobile app form lends itself to elevation of migrant narratives and explores the capacity of such works to generate empathy.

The paper will analyse the way in which migration and its subjects are treated and placed into relation with the notion of the game. The paper will also address the comparison between game-style apps and other online modes whereby migrant experience is being represented, such as that of humanitarian photojournalism and portraiture as it arises in social media apps, such as Instagram.

Interacting with Empathy: Migrant Narrative in the Context of Mobile Apps

Introduction

This paper arose from my discovery on reading in the most recent IOM World Migration Report, published in 2020, that migrant narratives have been rendered in expressive digital forms, including the *Survival* narrative mobile app, which the report specifically names.ⁱ *Survival* introduces itself in its Google Play store blurb description as a ‘serious game about the human tragedy of migration.’ⁱⁱ I was curious when I first read about the app, developed in Algeciras, Spain, by young Spaniards, among them migrants and refugees, whether the apparent paradox of a ‘serious game’ could succeed in representing the more fraught elements of migrant experience, gamifying without trivialising.

Perhaps the need to add a defensive epithet, ‘serious,’ gestures to the traditional relegation of the game to light-hearted and simplistic subjects and aims. Apps such as *Survival* fall not so much within the scope of the commercial video game, but rather that which Rita Raley terms the ‘persuasive game,’ designated as an art practice, a piece of instructive art, more so than a marketable product designed as an enjoyable distraction from the ‘real’ world.ⁱⁱⁱ Raley emphasises the particular aptitude of the persuasive game form for dealing with ‘political themes such as labor, migrancy and war.’^{iv}

It is in this vein that I read *Survival*, as an app that undertakes the tools of ludics and interactivity to relay a didactic experience. Of course, forced migration is not a game to be played, but one of the most controversial and traumatic issues currently being faced – or not, as the case may be - globally. In recent years, it has become apparent that different approaches to generating, delivering, and elevating migrant and refugee narratives are necessary, and indeed constructive, in order to promote understanding and hopefully contribute to fairer, safer and more humane routes to safety.

While journalism and photographic reporting are essential in this regard, the starkness of the facts and the not infrequent lack of objectivity and empathy exercised in reporting to some degree fall short of the crucial rehumanisation of those affected by issues such as trafficking, forced and/or irregular migration, and separation from family members.^v Gradually, certain outlets of the media can be seen to move away from a distant, detached point of observation and instead take an approach that places refugees at the centre of these stories, and the way in which personal accounts and experiences are relayed offers a more complete picture of the complex lives of people on the move. Moving away from a language dominated by crisis and tragedy, which tends to facilitate a reductive understanding of these problems as somehow universal, homogenous and irresolvable, innate in some way to the identity of those affected by them, such an approach affords the opportunity to pluralise understandings and elaborate on the many facets of migrant experience, not least the importance of resilience, humour, collaboration, and strategy.

The fact that migrants participated in the creation of *Survival*, and that *Bury me, my Love* was based on true experiences is encouraging, and supports the apparent turn

taking place that suggests that migrant narratives are being reclaimed, recast and internally reframed by communities of people on the move. Detection of this representative shift, or at least the broadening of representative outlets, calls for a re-examination of the one-dimensionality of the migrant narrative paradigm as mobilised by mainstream media, whereby media typically speak on behalf of such groups to a presumed, detached, and materially comfortable audience, and invites further exploration of these communities in terms of how they understand and represent themselves from within.

Digital Journeys and Empathy

Luc Boltanski (quoted in Walker Rettberg) has argued that ‘the aestheticisation of what we see in the media emotionally and morally insulates viewers from the suffering of others.’^{vi} However we might also choose to see the ways in which aesthetics may be mobilised to make the suffering of others a more tangible and relatable phenomenon. The media often fail to depict the faces of refugees, or deliberately depict large groups of men, whereas portraiture offers the chance to break this fourth wall and bring the viewer face to face with children on the move, as well as observing interactions between families. While, on the one hand, the scrolling Instagram user might find the sudden appearance of a refugee portrait a jarring interruption to the pastel-hued interiors and stencilled lattes that dominate the platform, these accounts hold a powerful capacity to disrupt apathy and serve as strong and crucial reminders that this, too, is life.^{vii}

While photography and storytelling over social media prove valuable as tools to educate the broader public and restore human faces to sensationalised media reports that run the risk of reducing these vulnerable lives to numbers, they are just one outlet among many possibilities for the representation of the more human side of migration narratives. Here I will explore two narratives set in the specific migration corridor from Syria to Europe, that have as their backdrop the highly dangerous Mediterranean routes. As distinct from more practically orientated apps, such as the Italian-developed app game Workeen, which provides migrants with information to assist them in navigating the European job market, the apps I will discuss below are specifically dedicated to storytelling and fostering engagement with the different aspects of refugee’s journeys and experiences.^{viii}

Survival

Survival is an app that is free to download, and which challenges the app user to align with a migrant who is faced with a number of difficult decisions: in the first level, the player’s avatar encounters a wolfish figure, depicting the common presence of people smugglers in zones of conflict and socio-political upheaval. The conversation that is generated offers the player options of two responses; to an extent they ‘choose’ the unfolding of the conversation by deciding whether to disclose information or accept offers of help from the stranger. Their interactive engagement with these choices quickly demonstrates to the user how illusory and constrained the choices are for those who find themselves in these vulnerable situations.

The user navigates through the levels in *Survival* not so much in an embodied mode but rather symbolised in the form of a quite nondescript human outline. The emphasis is thus placed on the experience as one in which the user is implanted, rather than centred in the perceptions of the figure whose journey they are undertaking. This is quite distinct from the approach taken in the other app I will discuss later in this presentation, *Bury me, my love*.

While the layout of the *Survival* app allows for sensitisation to the conditions under which difficult, irregular migration takes place, arguably its power to convey the depth of this experience is limited by the fact that it does not root its narrative levels in a developing protagonist; something that makes it easier to dismiss the obstacles encountered as inconveniences to be avoided, in the spirit of the game, rather than fully contextualising the dangers that compel such decisions and give rise to these struggles. One of the user reviews in the Google Play store reads ‘I like it but why does the boat level have to take so long’ (sic.)^{ix}



The *Survival* app is commendable for its general simplicity: the facts outlined at the beginning of each instalment of the game contextualise the issues that come into play as the user navigates the dark and testing landscapes. The language is objective and informative; it is simple enough for older children and young adults to engage with. I would like to think that the app could serve as an educational resource for parents wishing to gently but realistically introduce their children to some of the issues faced by those forced to undertake dangerous journeys and the struggles faced by people seeking to construct a safe and dignified life outside of their country of origin.

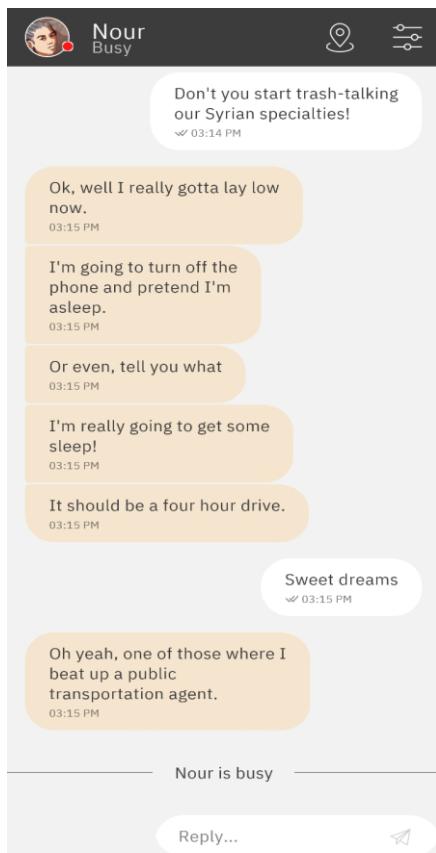
Survival is just one isolated example of an app that deals with migrant and refugee experience through game aesthetics and digital narrative; the organisation Games for Change specialises in convening and fostering the development of games with a social conscience that broaden on mainstream narratives of gender, culture and society.^x Games for Change have highlighted a number of games, apps, and VR works that adopt migrant narratives in order to offer an interactive and educational experience.

One such example is the narrative VR work, ‘Another Dream,’ which is not so much a game as a virtual documentary that focuses on the specific LGBT refugee experience of a young migrant couple. The narrative unfolds as an immersive digital experience in which the protagonist recounts the couple’s flight from post-revolution Egypt to seek asylum in the Netherlands. The creator of ‘Another Dream,’ Tamara Shogaolu, believes in the use of first-person narration and the connection to the protagonist’s voice as a vehicle for intimacy and empathy.^{xii}

Bury me, my love

Indeed, the personal aspect adds greatly to the power of these narratives, and I would argue that this is one of the weaknesses of *Survival*, and a factor that limits the app’s scope for creating empathetic engagement. Characterisation in the app narrative, *Bury me, my love*, by contrast, is highly compelling, and the way in which the narrative entwines itself in the temporalities and tones of instant messaging is exemplary of the great potential of the mobile app as a fitting platform and a promising vehicle for immersive storytelling.^{xiii} The user grants the app permission to send push notifications to their device, which means that the narrative unfolds at its own pace, with the frequent interruptions and suspensions typical of communicating with someone on the move. Just as Nour is at the mercy of doubts, obstacles, and delays encountered on her journey, the app user must also wait patiently for the app to notify them of updates or messages received.

In terms of characterisation, *Bury me, my love* attains a warm and believable register from the outset. The dialogue resists any tendency towards melodrama, and in fact the central couple are quite droll. While the dangers of Nour’s departure from Syria are made clear, the tone of the exchanges is often deadpan, playful or ironic.



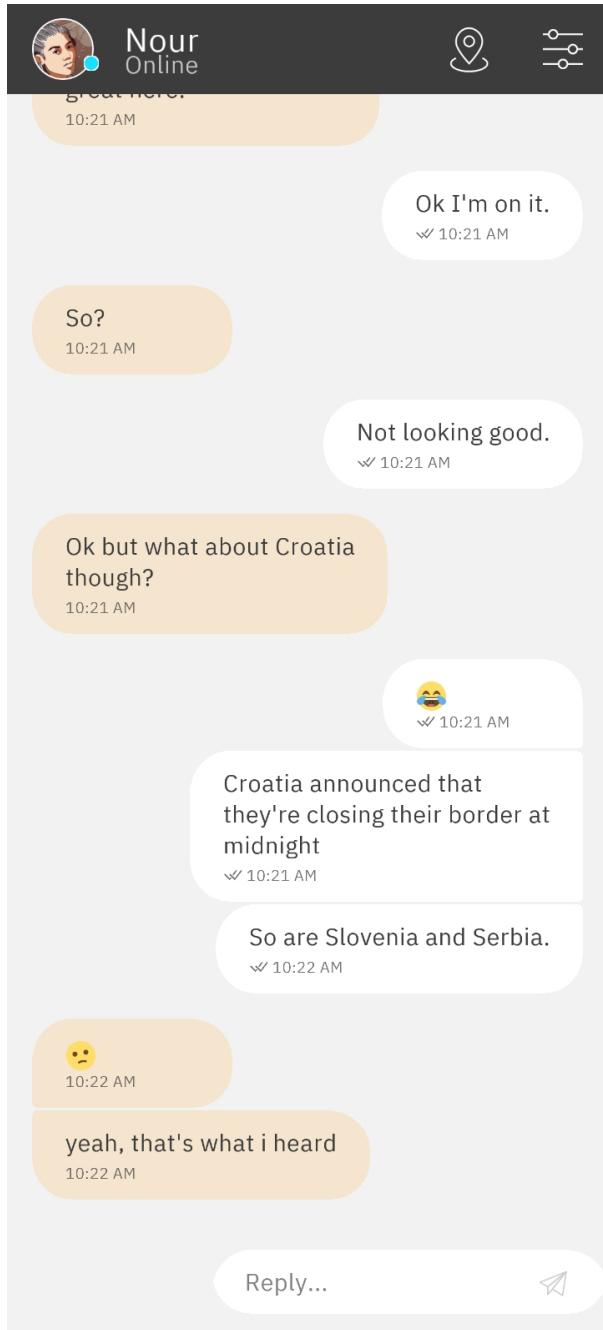
Conversation between Nour (yellow) and Majd (white) in *Bury me, my love*

Nour and Majd's exchanges are snappy and by no means overly sentimental. When this chirpy tone breaks for a moment, it is exceptional. At one stage in the conversation, Nour confesses to Majd that she is weary and fed up of the abuse she is enduring. This is the first truly frank mention of difficulty in its pure form: hitherto Nour has been playfully framing her interactions as a sort of adventure, whereby she reckons mischievously with obstacles in her way, sneaking on the bus, for example, with an almost impish spirit imbuing her descriptions. The very occasional frank and jarring message comes as a sharp reminder that she is continually euphemising her experience for Majd's sake. Majd and the user that is aligned with him are equally startled to hear this. It might be argued that at this point the reader is reminded to query the truth of Nour's accounts and they are thus compelled into a more actively compassionate role, rather than a more passive and unquestioning receiver of the accounts received from Nour as a plain relation of events.

This rare jab of the cruel reality that Nour is confronting is thus all the more powerful as a generator of affect for its brevity, and its break from the conversations' 'usual' tone, insofar as it calls into question all that has been recounted previously, and what else may not have been included in Nour's accounts. Majd, when Nour relays to him that she has been spat at countless times, as well as being insulted, is lost for words. When the reply bleeps through this simulated conversation: "I had no idea..." it serves as a reminder that we are merely living a mediated version of the experience that Nour's journey represents. The fiction she relays is a sort of self-defence mechanism from the cruel realities of her journey. The ostensible intimacy, then, of the communications between the couple cannot bridge the gap between the experience

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of struggle and the way in which it is recounted, lightened for an easier delivery to a loved one.



Screenshot from *Bury me, my love*

In terms of the interactive dimension of the narrative, the app user adopts the role of Nour's husband, Majd, and they are given limited choices of how they respond to Nour's text updates. Occasionally the app prompts 'Majd' to send a selfie, which is animated and provided as a feature within the app itself. The way in which *Bury me, my love* inhabits the user's device means that it runs parallel to the user's real life, their phone screen is interspersed with updates and cues to resume the conversation between Majd and Nour. This fragmentation and spreading of the narrative gives

depth to the journey depicted, conveying a more realistic sense of the delays and distances involved.

The separation of the protagonists from each other is also conveyed by these interruptions – Nour occasionally cuts the conversation short, wary of low phone battery, etc. Majd, like the app user, benefits from relative stability, and the comfort of convenient charging facilities, as Nour is the one who is on the move.

As Nour's correspondent, the user is constrained to endure the same delays and periods of suspense between updates. This tendency to advance to the next level that characterises the game genre and feels more present in an app such as *Survival* is largely absent from *Bury me, my love*. The user is held to adapt to the intradiegetic logic and events of the narrative app and the journey it depicts. The app runs in the background of the device user, who will occasionally receive a message notification from the app along the lines of 'made it past the Turkish border.'

The above exchange reminds the user of *Bury me, my love* of the somewhat ironic discrepancy between presence and access to information about one's environment in the Internet age. Nour is making her way clandestinely across borders and, due to her limitations in access to phone charging facilities (at one point she jokes that 'I doubt I'll find electrical outlets on the side of the road'), she is dependent on Majd to fill in gaps in knowledge and provide information to her about the nature of her surroundings. Despite being present 'on the ground,' Nour is not in a position to circulate freely and ask for information in Eastern Europe, and certainly not to ask questions in relation to immigration and border control updates. The above screenshot is taken from an exchange of texts in which Nour relays that she is travelling in a horsebox. Nour interrupts Majd's quip about her deodorant coming in useful to tell him 'Well anyway/ You should look into Croatia because if we need a change of plans I'd rather be prepared for it.' Majd is reminded of his relative comfort with regard to his access to information. We imagine his search for information paralleling her journey and updates; when Nour updates Majd that she has arrived safely in Belgrade but that there are 'police everywhere / I'll let you know as soon as I know,' we imagine he might search for news reports that might let him piece together some context for these fragmentary images.

Unlike *Survival*, which has an introductory page with six thumbnails that signifies a kind of index of the levels to be navigated, *Bury me, my love* is a narrative that gives much less signposting to its user in terms of the duration of its unfolding. The commitment of engaging interactively with *Survival* is quite measurable: the first level is relatively brief, and it is one of six. There is no aerial view of *Bury me, my love*'s breadth or the time it will take to unfold; from a user review, I gleaned that to play the game from start to finish takes a total of 90 minutes, but this is not possible to do uninterrupted, as the stalling and waiting on Nour's end are important elements for conserving the verisimilitude of the journey. In a sense, this conveys the urgency of the communications the narrative depicts: the user finds themselves rushing to check a notification, hopeful for promising updates on Nour's progress. One review criticised the largely one-sided nature of the dialogue, but one has to wonder whether the didactic ambitions of the narrative should be privileged over the enjoyability of the game or the opportunities for player participation.^{xiii}

The app has been largely praised by user reviews in the gaming community, which respond positively to its characterisation and aesthetics. Depending on the user's selections and responses on behalf of Majd, the game has 19 possible endings. While the title's allusion to burial might be interpreted as harking to a tragic end, it is in fact that translation of quite a common Syrian Arabic expression that is often used when saying goodbye.

Another issue raised as a negative in reviews of *Bury me, my love* is the fact that the player's choices are not incentivised, there are no structures resembling rewards or points to be won within the game.^{xiv} The responses selected by the user simply stand in for responses from Majd, which keep the narrative moving. There is no right answer as such, neither of the two options prompts any kind of boost for the player. For users playing for the emotional fluctuations and competitive energy commanded by a more conventional video game, these aspects are naturally a little underwhelming. It could be argued that this is more a categorisation issue than anything else: the app is, strictly speaking, an interactive narrative more so than a video game, and yet the relative novelty of the former genre means that apps such as *Bury me, my love* will be advertised and categorised as games, and as a result assessed against the criteria of the game, on account of the medium on which they are relayed and their nonlinear structure.

The issue of the game as a questionable format for 'serious' or topical narrative thus recurs, particularly considering the issue of categorisation. The interactive narratives of *Survival* and *Bury me, my love* adopt the form of a game more so in the sense of their interactive and engaging features – the enhancements that the app platform can bring to otherwise linear prose or mono/dialogues – than in terms of transforming their subject matter into something as light-hearted as a point-scoring exercise. That said, in the first two levels of *Survival*, the player must navigate forwards, first through a nocturnal medina, and then through the sea at night, collecting coins as they move through the darkened streets and cross choppy waves.

These hallmarks of simpler games in which the player must collect 'lives' are arguably not out of place in the context of *Survival*, which deals on an allegorical level with conserving secrecy, safety, and resources. One mode in which we might contemplate the seemingly problematic encounter between entertainment and social issues that correspond to real-life peril and suffering is that of 'pleasure activism,' a concept offered by author and social media phenomenon adrienne marie brown, who argues that rendering the discussion and pursuit of social justice into forms that are enjoyable need not be an issue per se, but indeed may serve as vital to the furthering of progress on important social issues.^{xv}

The way in which *Bury me, my love* runs adjacent to the user's other social media and messaging updates could also be read on an allegorical level, insofar as it is a narrative that the user must choose to make space for. Permission must be granted to the app; the user must choose whether its updates are of value to them, whether they are something worth paying attention to. In the competition for attention that implicitly runs between the competing apps in a device, each one nudging the phone user to dive back in, the narrative of *Bury me, my love* must be intentionally accorded elevated status. More than a narrative, if the player is to persevere with the game, they

must adopt a sense of attachment and urgency in relation to *Bury me, my love's* protagonists and their fate.

Conclusion

The fact that these narratives are engaged with on a voluntary basis, and on devices and through media usually reserved for entertainment, call for attention. The mobile phone nonetheless represents an intersection between practicality and entertainment, urgency and distraction. As distinct from mobile app platforms, VR narratives for instance require the infrastructure and resources of a gallery space, which determines to whom the work becomes visible. Galleries are undeniably gated spaces, frequented by people who enjoy the freedom to dedicate their leisure to the deliberate consumption of niche art forms. The use of the mobile app thus may be read as a more democratic choice of platform in the case of these narratives, and a platform on whose use the privileged person and the migrant may converge.

This paper has probed some of the initial questions surrounding app-based games as instruments for encouraging empathy on social issues, and their ultimate potential to function as catalysts for social change. Specifically thinking about two examples of migrant narrative here, these ideas resonate also with the forms that have been developed to explore the complexity of LGBT issues and violence endured by members of this minority community. A return to the ‘persuasive game’ notion will no doubt prove fruitful in gaining a fuller understanding of the game form beyond ludics, operating more intentionally as a catalyst for change.

I would like to broaden on this by posing the question of whether the notion of the ‘serious game’ or ‘persuasive game’ inverts the traditionally held perception of the video game form as rooted in fantastical escapism, instead engaging the player in urgent immersion and confrontation with ‘real world’ issues. In the two examples discussed here, characterisation was felt to be a crucial element to the engendering of empathy in the app user. The reviews testify to a valorisation of authenticity and believable characterisation that stands in contrast to the reductive idea of gamified space as escapist and superficial.

In reference to the title of this panel, ‘Platform Possibilities and Beyond,’ I am interested in the way in which migrant narrative can be captured and expressed not only in the app narrative form, but also in terms of taking up space on social media sharing platforms such as Instagram, dominated by commercially-sponsored and heavily stylised content. Content created by people on the move and communities traditionally marginalised by social media algorithms in my view stands to powerfully transport the platform into an iteration beyond itself, salvaging storytelling from collapse into mercantile boomerangs and seeding awareness and solidarity with social justice issues.

ⁱIOM World Migration Report 2020, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf; viewed 7 January 2021.

ⁱⁱGoogle Play Store, *Survival* App Description
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.omniumlabstudios.peaceapp.survival&hl=en&gl=US>; viewed 7 January 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱRaley, Rita. 2009. *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press), p.4.

^{iv}*Ibid.*

^vThe sociologist David Fitzgerald, author of *Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) in fact began his career as a photojournalist and changed paths partially due to issues in the way that media briefs limited the workings of representation. (Zoom discussion, ‘Displacement: Global Conversations on Refuge,’ 28 January 2021).

^{vi}Walker Rettberg, Jill. 2014. *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 25.

^{vii}The information gained from analysing datasets from Instagram has given rise to interesting projects that examine the way in which the platform showcases and perhaps indeed engenders inequalities. One such project is Inequaligram, <http://inequaligram.net/>

^{viii}Workeen, A Game for EU Labour Markets Integration,
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=eu.sirius.workeen&hl=en&gl=US>; viewed 7 January 2021

^{ix}*Ibid.*

^x Games for Change, ‘About Us’, <https://www.gamesforchange.org/who-we-are/about-us/>; viewed 7 January 2021.

^{xi}Tola Onanuga, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2019, ‘Virtual Reality : How Women are Taking a Leading Role in the Sector,’ <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2019/may/28/virtual-reality-how-women-are-taking-a-leading-role-in-the-sector>; viewed 7 January 2021

^{xii}Icomedia, ‘Bury me my love’ <https://www.icomedia.eu/bury-me-my-love/>; viewed 7 January 2021.

^{xiii}<https://switchplayer.net/2019/12/21/bury-me-my-love-review/>

^{xiv}“It effectively connects students with the harrowing journey of a Syrian refugee, even though some of the interactive elements are underwhelming.”
<https://www.commonsense.org/education/app/bury-me-my-love>

^{xv}Brown, Adrienne Marie. 2019. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, California :AK Press)