game environments

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Glory to Trumpland! Critically Playing Border Games[i]

Melissa Kagen

Abstract

This project examines the critical play of a variety of games about immigrant and refugee experience. These *border games* take place within fictional or actual borderlands and follow characters either in transit or trapped in detainment centers between nations. Spanning a range of genres, each deals differently with the major problem posed by their content - how to create a sensitive procedural rhetoric around migration. Drawing from Flanagan's conceptualization of critical play and Mukherjee's work on the ambivalence of postcolonial *playing back*, I explore the possibilities of critically playing border games and the extent to which each game's design (dis)allows for certain forms of play and protest. I focus on three paired case studies, *Escape from Woomera* (2003) and *Smuggle Truck* (2012); *Papers, Please* (2013) and *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* (2014); and *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) and *The Waiting Game* (2018). By considering both the design of these border games and the metagaming practices that have developed around them, I show how postcolonial misplay of fictional games draw more effective critical attention to injustice than the most well-intentioned and serious educational game.

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This article analyzes the play of a variety of video games that focus on migrant and refugee experience. These *border games* present a challenge for game designers. Serious educational games that focus on (often pedantic) content delivery rather than engaging gameplay run the risk of being termed "chocolate-covered broccoli" (Glasemann, Kanstrup and Ryberg 2010, 262) and dismissed. Alternately, games that attempt to communicate serious storylines with attempts at humorous mechanics can (and often do) result in offensive work. Regardless of how successful, games with

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migrant and refugee storylines all participate in ludic constructions of homeland and nationhood, providing a fictional space for play on and between national borders and following characters who either are in transit or trapped in detainment centers between nations.

Drawing from Flanagan's (2009) conceptualization of critical play and Mukherjee's (2017, 2018) argument that games leverage and rely on notions of the colonial while also enabling players to question it, I explore what you can do by playing border games wrong, and to what extent a game's design (dis)allows for certain forms of misplay and protest. From paratextual playthroughs of *Papers, Please* (2013) in which YouTubers perform hyper anti-immigrant *Donald Trump* runs, to *Smuggle Truck*'s (2012) reinvention as *Snuggle Truck* (insensitively re-skinning migrants as teddy bears to be killed on their way across the border), to the agonizing waits and delays enforced on players of *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) and *The Waiting Game* (2018), a player's attempts in each game to evade or transform procedural rhetoric illustrates the ambivalence which players must endure to play border games (an ambivalence which mirrors Mukherjee's evocation of postcolonial ambivalence). Through analyzing examples of critical play, I suggest ways that border games draw critical attention to injustices in real-world global or national systems. By focusing on the metagaming practices (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) that have developed around them, I consider how playing on the borders undermines national and colonialist hegemony. Finally, I argue that critical, postcolonial play of fictional games draws more effective attention to injustice than the most well-intentioned educational game.

Literature Review

As Bogost (2007, 1) has argued, the rules of a game create a "procedural rhetoric" suggesting how a player should play. The way that gameplay rewards or punishes player behavior creates a powerful moral imperative, which players (implicitly or explicitly) learn through performing repeated actions. Ergodic media require you to participate actively in their procedural ethics in order to proceed. This gives them the potential to become dangerously authoritarian, conditioning players to obey rules without question. In order to win a game, players usually must let their subjectivity self-modify according to the procedural ethics of the game. In other words, a player often must become a tool of the system in order to win.

In *Critical Play*, Flanagan (2009) outlines a history of artistic play practices – from 19th-century role-play through 21st-century video games – in which play functions as a protest against a seemingly intransigent system. Play, for Flanagan (2009, 11), turns easily into subversion: "[b]ecause they primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices". Flanagan (2009, 33) conceptualizes three major types of critical play: unplaying, reskinning, and rewriting.

In unplaying, "players specifically enact 'forbidden' or secret scenes, unfortunate scenarios, or other unanticipated conclusions often in opposition to an acceptable or expected adult-play script" (Flanagan 2009, 33). In the example she mentions, young girls playing with dolls in the Victorian era would often murder and stage elaborate funerals for them, thus going against the traditional adult script of acceptable play for that object. As Flanagan (2009, 33) writes, "this critical kind of play reverses traditional expectations [...] and allows players to rethink the conventions involved". It is worth noting that when video game players attempt this technique, they often lose, since the win/loss conditions written into computer code are usually less forgiving than the

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free-flowing nature of live role-play with dolls. When players *do* find a way of unplaying that does not cause a loss, that is sometimes referred to as a conduct in a roguelike or a speed run in an action/adventure game – a way for expert players to challenge themselves further by playing in ways the developers did not intend.

Aarseth (2007, 130) points towards a similar concept when he imagines a rule-following "implied player" and names "transgressive play" as that which differs from the implied player norm. Although most players are likely to behave as implied players, Aarseth (2007, 132) argues for the value of transgressive play as

> "a symbolic gesture against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself".

We can also recognize this, as Flanagan points out, as a kind of culture jamming, a détournement of mass cultural objects in order to disrupt mindless uncritical consumption, which is a technique reaching back at least as far back as the Frankfurt School. *Countergaming*, a related concept developed by Galloway in 2006 (125), is noteworthy in that it describes avant-garde artist-made mods of games that are radical in their *graphics* but not in their *gameplay*. Radical *gameplay*, Galloway predicts presciently, must emerge alongside an independent, avant-garde video game culture.

Flanagan's (2009, 33) second type of critical play, reskinning, occurs when

> "players make alternative arrangements and disguise their dolls for subversive roles, altering the appearance or the presentation of dolls in a way that allows dolls to enter the forbidden scene".

The third category, rewriting, refers to the practices that proliferate when players "revise or rewrite" the play script themselves (Flanagan 2009, 33). Video game versions of rewriting could include modding, machinima, or paratextual Let's Plays (Mukherjee 2015). Flanagan (2009, 33) points, as well, to the fact that doll manufacturers eventually began to offer "black mourning outfits" for sale to take advantage of the critical way in which girls were remaking their doll play. Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 311) would refer to this as "transformative play" – the girls began playing out doll deaths and funerals so much that they transformed the normative way that a doll might be played with, and manufacturers responded to the new norm by creating mourning outfits. Another example comes from speedrunning – enough expert players engage with action/adventure games by speedrunning that games like *Axiom Verge* (2015) and *Celeste* (2018) have incorporated speedrunning modes into regular gameplay in recognition of the tradition.

This, then, is one possible goal of critical play: by subverting the rules of a game intentionally (through unplaying, reskinning, or rewriting), players can attempt to transform the seemingly intransigent system in which a game takes place. For the purposes of this project, attempts at transformative play are interesting for the ways in which the rules of the game (especially the computer code) can mirror the barrier of a real-world national border. It is particularly relevant in light of the awareness that critical play can make real-world political protest more possible. Protesters during the US Civil Rights movement, for instance, have spoken of dramatically rehearsing resistance in fictional spaces before attempting real-world resistance.[ii]

When it comes to the subject of border games and migration, Flanagan cites Homi Bhaba (1990, 221) in writing that "[g]ames may be apt vehicles to explore the complexities of migration if only because they emphasize the problematic boundaries

of modernity and enact the 'ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space'". In playing border games, the anxiety around these *problematic boundaries* is made visible. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, xv) argue in *Games of Empire*, video games are "*a paradigmatic media of Empire* – [of] planetary, militarized hypercapitalism – and of some of the forces presently challenging it". Play on and around national borders (in fictional and non-fictional representations) contributes to the construction of imperial power by illustrating what kinds of resistance will and will not be considered acceptable.

In calling these *border games*, I am drawing from discourses in border studies, especially work done on the concept of *borderscaping*. As dell'Agnese & Szary (2015, 5) define it, borderscapes (a portmanteau of *landscape* and *border*) are the practice and representation of a transnational border, co-creating said border within the cultural imaginary. A borderscape can incorporate physical and geologic boundaries, shifting practices of crossing and re-crossing (practices which can be inscribed on and in migrating bodies), aesthetic depictions of a border (in music, visual art, storytelling, etc.), and individual perceptions of a landscape rather than an objective definition of where or what the border signifies (dell'Agnese & Szary 2015, Brambilla 2015, Amoore 2006, Strüver 2005, Fubara-Manuel 2019). Whether they intend to do so or not, art and cultural objects "make the border; they scape its material and imaginary universes even when their explicit purpose is to resist the dominating regime" (dell'Agnese & Szary, 2015, 8). In a video game, playing back against a digital border functions as a method of borderscaping; through playing on the border (both in its representation of nation states, and as a critical player on the border of the ludic system's rules), the player collaborates in creating the idea of the boundary. In recent work on digital games as borderscaping, artist and scholar Irene Fubara-Manuel (2019) has presented virtual environments "as a zone in which migrant gamers can

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perform artistic interventions and enact their mobility within borderscapes," including the author's piece *Dreams of Disguise: Errantry* (2018), in which players contend with intrusive colonialist violence while traversing an abstracted airport security checkpoint (2019). This notion of borderscaping as a practice of intervention, autonomy, and reclamation recalls Lammes' (2010, 4) discussion of in-game mapping, in which she writes that **"borders are shown as opaque lines that are not consolidated but ever-adapting to where the player is going,"** thus reinforcing the player's sense that they can and do shape the literal demarcation between one area and another. At the same time, the player is also aware that they are, to use Adrienne Shaw's (2014) phrase, "gaming at the edge" – on the border, in the margin, defining themselves in opposition to a norm.

In his formidable work on video games and postcolonialism, Mukherjee (2017, 6) writes of "the complexity of the postcolonial 'playing back'". The practice of *playing back* against a former or current imperial power is, simultaneously, a necessary form of resistance and a fraught reminder of the continued entanglement of colonized and colonizer. Mukherjee (2018, 519) writes,

> "[i]f the Postcolonial is a 'writing back,' then it is an ambivalent writing back involving the apparatus of colonialism. This ambivalence involves 'a strong articulation of repugnance and repudiation of the colonizer but also its mimicry' (Muppidi 2004, 43). The video game, therefore, is a metaphor that makes this ambivalence all the more obvious: Alternative narratives can be written into being in the game world but only within the system that the game provides".

Video games can and do enable resistance, but they do so on their own terms, defining the limits of critical play.

In Penix-Tadsen's (2019, 11) recent edited volume *Video Games and the Global South*, he points out a potential problem with the concept of *writing back* – the danger of "reinforcing the same binary, center-periphery paradigm that much of our work aims to challenge". Doing so, as Shaw has argued in *Gaming at the Edge* (2014) and elsewhere, "privileges the dominant gamer identity while marginalizing all others" (Shaw 2010, 408-409). Instead, Penix-Tadsen (2019, 12) suggests

> "an opportunity for 'border thinking,' which Mignolo defines as "a machine for intellectual decolonization" (2012 45) that conceives of "the modern/colonial world system [...] in terms of internal and external borders rather than centers, semiperipheries and peripheries".

As Penix-Tadsen (2019, 12) continues,

> "[u]sing border thinking to approach technologies such as video games allows us to understand the multi-tiered obstacles and affordances to game development and consumption that exist beyond nationality alone, delving into the particular subcultures, differences in player practices and inequalities in access to game hardware and software that can exist within a single nation".

Penix-Tadsen's conception of gaming – hybrid, multiplicitous, constructed by myriad players and developers modifying, sharing, and unplaying each other's' work – connects Mukherjee's earlier work in *Videogames and Storytelling* (2015), in which he conceptualizes each Let's Play of a game as a Genettian paratext, to his postcolonial gaming scholarship. Playing back, Mukherjee (Mukherjee 2017, 103, Quoted in Penix-Tadsen 2019, 21) writes,

> "is the playing of the plural; it disrupts linear chronologies and centers of truth; implicitly, it speaks for those voices that cannot be heard in the colonial archives; and it presents scenarios where both colonial stereotypes can be simulated and anticolonial alternative stories can be told".

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By multiplying the possibilities of play and using border thinking and unplay to blur nationality, border games open up space for rebellious critique.

In the following sections, I focus on three paired case studies of border games – *Papers, Please* and *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* (2014); *Escape from Woomera* (2003) and *Smuggle Truck*; and *Bury Me, My Love* and *The Waiting Game*. Some of these provoke critical play, some have attracted a web of metaplay practices and discussion, some attempt to criticize immigration policies directly.

Together, these case studies expose some of the ways that players and developers utilize critical play techniques to play back against colonial discourses when making and playing border games.

Unplaying Authoritarianism: *Papers, Please* and *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation*

Papers, Please is what its creator calls "A Dystopian Document Thriller" (Pope 2013). The popular and award-winning indie viscerally gamifies the moral quandaries of being a border agent in a repressive state. Players serve as border guards of the fictitious Arstotzka, an eastern European dictatorship circa 1982, where they are inundated with the words "Glory to Arstotzka!" (*Papers, Please* 2013) at every turn. During each day of game time, they process the paperwork of as many entrants as possible at five dollars per person, highlighting discrepancies with reference to a rulebook and denying anyone whose papers seem amiss. The player's meager salary must cover rent, food, heat, and medicine for your family, which means they must correctly process ten people per day to sustain them. This task grows more difficult, as, every day, players are given increasingly complicated regulations and more and

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more items to check besides passports – admission tickets, identification cards, work licenses, vaccination records, and eventually full-scale body scans. Stories about terrorists in neighboring Kolechia add to the player's sense of paranoia, and sometimes terrorist attacks cut short a workday. The player also must reckon with tragic stories of human trafficking and separated families that come across their desk; a woman might beg the player not to admit the man in line behind her, as he plans to force her into prostitution, but when the man appears, his papers are in order. Rejecting him will earn the player a citation and a loss of sorely needed income. What do you do? *Papers, Please* is designed such that there is no *right* way to play; players must try to balance the outcomes as well as they can. Do you kindly let in someone with the wrong papers and let your children starve that day? Your decision comes down to *who* rather than *whether* you want to help. It follows that there is not exactly a right way to unplay the game, either. Or, alternately, every way to play is a kind of critical play.

The fan culture surrounding *Papers, Please* has added another layer to the critical play possibilities. Let's Plays, a popular practice in which players create playthroughs of games and post them as videos online, take multiple forms; sometimes they are competitive speed runs or recordings of a contest between very skilled players, sometimes they serve as a live review of a game with the player narrating their thoughts and experiences, sometimes they function as a how-to manual for players unable to solve a particular level or puzzle. Let's Plays have become an integral part of gaming culture, offering everything from relatively dry information about a new game to gamer performances that are full creative productions in their own right. In *Watch Me Play!*, T. L. Taylor's (2018, 11) book on Let's Plays and the culture of watching competitive gaming, she writes that these gaming performances are highly political, although not always in recognizable ways:

"[e]veryday life, filled with both work and leisure, is where people regularly navigate deeply political, culturally productive, sociotechnical systems. It is where politics comes at us sideways. Users, owners, and systems co-constitute a space that in turn shapes experience. This means that those very moments when people are engaging in play remain some of the *most* politically infused spaces".

Papers, Please was published in 2013 and has enjoyed a long life as the focus of millions of YouTube playthroughs. Because of the game's political subject matter and clear cultural referents, it invites very imaginative performances from playthroughers, who often adopt Russian accents and gruff, harsh, sometimes cruel personas while playing. They also often reference contemporary political events relevant to the game's themes of political repression, asylum seekers, refugee status, and immigration. Earlier playthroughs referenced the Arizona Immigration Law, the so-called European refugee crisis, or the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. In early 2016, playthroughs began to reference (then candidate) Donald Trump.

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As a short note on methodology, I do not mean to suggest that these examples are representative of how all players experience this game, or how I first experienced it when I played – as Aarseth (2007) points out, transgressive play is, definitionally, a marginal mode of playing and is perhaps primarily interesting to scholars rather than a predominant way that people interact with a commercial video game. Nor are they representative of the literally 11.8 million YouTube posts which appear when one types in *Papers, Please*. In March 2017, December 2017, and February 2018, I searched for playthroughs of the game referencing Trump, manually collecting several dozen Let's Plays that were posted between 2015–2017 (see Let's Play section of the bibliography).

Many of the political playthroughs I found of *Papers, Please* were a version of Flanaganian reskinning or rewriting. In one example from January 2016, the player

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says nothing while they perform, but they superimpose relevant video clips of Trump speaking on *border security* in debates and interviews (Jonnii 2016). In a playthrough from September 2016, the player performs the entire run impersonating Trump, improvising in reaction to ludic events:

> "Mike Pence said I need to be tough on immigration. I'm gonna be tough on immigration. In fact, I've been training as an immigration officer all this time. Papers, Please! Uh, look at this, the liberal media, always ignoring Trump's successes. Why doesn't this say 'Donald Trump closes borders, deports illegal immigrants.'? Crooked Hillary owns the media" (Game Society Pimps 2016).

In another, a player narrates as themselves rather than as a character and pauses their play to deliver a political monologue about their personal reaction to the game just after Trump's election (Fuzzy Astro 2016). Many Let's Plays offer political commentary on Trump's immigration policies and referring to themselves as Trump *simulators*.

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However, some Let's Players enact more of a Flanaganian unplay/Aarseth transgressive play by disobeying the rules entirely and performing *Donald Trump runs*. A Donald Trump run (as defined by YouTuber Epsilos) consists of the following additional rule while playing *Papers, Please*: "Accept every Arstotzkan citizen regardless of the passports being valid. Decline all foreigners" (Epsilos 2016). The strategy works very well on day 1, loses momentum on day 2 when more complex paperwork problems emerge, and results in an inevitable loss. The rules of the game demand that the border guard (the player) check much more than the applicant's citizenship. By simplifying those complications into the sole question of citizenship, the Donald Trump runner can get through more applicants per day, but will also make more mistakes as they disregard the increasingly complex set of rules that govern entry to Arstotzka.

By unplaying the game with a rule that directly opposes the actual rules of the game, the Donald Trump run presents a particularly overt form of critical play (whether or not that was the intention of the Let's Player). By setting out to unplay the game in this way, knowing full well that the digital object's constitutive rules (which is to say, its code) will supersede their own eventually, the Donald Trump runner intentionally sets out to lose the game, but in so doing, highlight a political point. This is what makes for interesting critical play – the idea that a game and an authoritarian government are both intransigent and often punishing systems, and by unplaying them, a player can rehearse resistance and safely familiarize themselves with the cost and discomfort of critical resistance. With *Papers, Please*, the game's narrative setting within a harsh, repressive regime contrasts with the resistance it is possible to enact and practice by unplaying it.

To highlight this idea of unplaying authoritarianism – and how players are and are not enabled to do so – compare *Papers Please* with *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation*, an educational game developed by iCivics for young students. Other than the time pressure of *Papers, Please*, which does not exist in *Immigration Nation*, the mechanics are very similar. Every gameday, players who serve as border guards glean more information about who should and should not be allowed into a country, prospective immigrants each tell a sympathetic story about why they would like to enter, and players judge whether or not they may do so. At the end of each day, there is a recap with points. Aesthetically, the games are polar opposites – where *Papers, Please* offers droning Soviet music and a color palette of black, white, and red, *Immigration Nation* offers peppy pop music, colorful cartoonish faces, and the Star-Spangled Banner playing at a fast tempo over the triumphant final screen.

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But despite the aesthetics, it is not possible to successfully unplay *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* (in the sense of playing directly wrong). In *Papers, Please*, if the player feels moved to help someone cross the border despite their insufficient paperwork, they can do it. If they feel moved to play like Donald Trump or in the performance of a character, the game enables it. They player will lose points and could lose the game if they persist – there is still Aarseth's (2007, 130) "implied player" expectation. But *Papers, Please* creates a space for critical play and enables the player's refusal to follow authoritarian rules.

In *Immigration Nation,* the player is faced with an impassive computer system that will simply not allow them to progress if they use their own judgement to accept someone who does not fit the rules.

For example, one character in *Immigration Nation* introduces herself with the following: "Hello, I'm Marta. In my country, many families don't think girls should go to school. I'm worried about my future! In the U.S., I can get an education" (*Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* 2014) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation.*

The player knows that Marta cannot enter the USA under any of the rationales available (Citizen parents, Marriage to a citizen, Permission to work, Seeking refuge, or Born in the USA). If a player tries to allow her entry anyway, the cartoon Statue of Liberty falls into a cringing shrug and explains, "Marta's situation makes me furious, but lack of opportunity is not enough to get authorization to live in the U.S." (*Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* 2014) (See Figure 2). The game will not progress until the player rejects Marta. In the equivalent situation in *Papers, Please*, Marta could be allowed entry if the player chose to unplay the game and admit her despite the illegality of doing so.[iii]

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Figure 2. *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation.*

It is important here to note that the two games are distinct in genre, purpose, and fictionality. *Immigration Nation* was developed by iCivics as a nonfictional browser game with the purpose of teaching middle-grade students US immigration law, and the developers need to make sure the correct information is communicated – namely, the fact that a person like Marta would not be allowed to immigrate to the USA. By portraying the Statue of Liberty as apologetic and uncomfortable, the game designers are themselves making a critical commenting – the Statue is a sympathetically reskinned version of US immigration law. In context, however, this reads like an affirmation of Frederick Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991) – when capitalism integrates critiques of a system directly back into the system, such that they are defanged of their critical bite. The Statue of Liberty in *Immigration Nation* critiques US immigration policy while continuing to uphold and maintain it,

presenting the friendly face of an authoritarian power structure. *Papers, Please* offers an aesthetics of unforgiving authoritarianism but space for critical play; *Immigration Nation*'s authority is procedurally implacable and uncompromising, but super friendly about it.

Modding and (A)politicizing: *Escape from Woomera* and *Smuggle Truck*

In the action/adventure point-and-click prototype *Escape from Woomera*, players begin in a refugee camp and try to escape through legal or illegal means. The game was created to highlight and protest conditions at Australia's Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (1999–2003), which had, by 2003, become an infamous site of hunger strikes, media blackouts, and accusations of mistreatment of the thousands of largely Afghani refugees who sought asylum in Australia in the wake of the Taliban's fall and the US war in Afghanistan. The game's design was based on actual escape attempts, grounded on media reports and interviews with detainees (Hughes 2003). The game was produced as a prototype and was never fully funded or completed.

Escape from Woomera was one of the first documentary-style video games that tried to shed light on real-life refugee or immigrant experience (although Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga's *Vagamundo* (2002) was created a year prior). As such, it was accused of sensationalizing a serious issue. As Mukherjee and Hammar (2018, 3) describe it, there exists a

"counter-reactionary dynamic [...] in videogame cultures, where dominant reactionary consumers organize against those who oppose the status quo, with the complicity of multinational corporations [....] Meanwhile, videogames that are complicit with colonial power achieve enormous success with little by way of critical reaction".

For the game's creators, the design goal was to re-center real-life refugees as video game heroes, after they had been put in an impossible situation by precisely the type of people *usually* presented in video games as the heroes. Developer Julian Oliver wrote, "we're sick and tired of games that create heroes out of professional killers and US marines. For us, refugees are some of the greatest and most legitimate heroes of our time" (EFW Collective 2007). As Lead Developer Katherine Neil put it, "Surviving in a place like Woomera, you had to have your wits about you [...] You weren't just sitting around looking sad. In real-life there were really heroic escape stories" (Lien 2014).

Escape from Woomera was a mod of *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), the famous First Person Shooter in which aliens have overtaken the world and the player character, scientist Gordon Freeman, fights back. As Poremba (2013, 355) notes,

"[u]nlike *Half-Life*, primary gameplay [in *Escape from Woomera*] does not involve any combat. The game is instead structured like a classic adventure game – playing as detainee Mustafa (RAR-124), players must query nonplayer characters (NPCs) in the facility in order to build a correct chain of dialog and action (primarily retrieval and exchange tasks) that will advance Mustafa's narrative toward freedom [...] or deportation".

Another difference is that in *Half-Life*, Gordon Freeman is not presented as problematic or political in a real-world sense – not because the game is truly unmarked by politics (*the resistance* is a pivotal force in the series), but because colonizer culture in general (and gamer culture in particular) tend to see white male

characters and storylines as apolitical, whereas games that feature people of color or white women are seen as political. In *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Salter and Blodgett (2017, 75) point out that straight white male avatars "are often presented as marginalized [...] literally, [they inhabit] game worlds where white men are a persecuted 'minority'". The hostile aliens of *Half-Life* attack everyman Gordon Freeman, who reacts by fighting back and escaping the facility, a violence which is legible in game culture as action-adventure rather than political commentary.

With this framing, *Half-Life* replicates the traditional tension between science fiction and politics that is as old as the genre itself. As Rieder (2008) points out, the connection between science fiction and politics can be located in the discourse of colonialism. He argues that the genre of science fiction was born as a way of rehearsing European fears that the violence of colonialism could be visited upon white Europeans by an all-powerful alien species:

> "many of the repetitive motifs that coalesced into the genre of science fiction represent ideological ways of grasping the social consequences of colonialism, including the fantastic appropriation and rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth in the homeland and in the colonies, the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and the cognitive impact of radical cultural differences on the home culture" (Rieder 2008, 20–21).

When H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898) imagines a Martian invasion of England, the aliens can only be stopped by a microscopic pathogen rather than British Imperial might. Casting Britons in the role of the colonized "is a reversal of positions that stays entirely within the framework of the colonial gaze and the anachronism of anthropological difference, but also highlights their critical potential" (Rieder 2008, 10).

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When the EFW Collective created the *Escape from Woomera* prototype by modding *Half-Life*, it was a piece of critical play, a way to turn the original *Half-Life* roles of hero and villain upside-down and point to the politics inherent in seemingly apolitical works of science fiction.[iv] In *Woomera*, the Australian politicians controlling immigration policy take the place of the aliens who try to prevent Gordon Freeman from escaping the Black Mesa facility, while Mustafa and the other refugees in detainment become *Half-Life*'s brave underdogs. By flipping the roles and setting the docugame in a real-world location rather than the fictionalized futuristic New Mexico of *Half-Life*, the game reads clearly as political commentary, thus reminding the player that *Half-Life*, too, is political.

For an example of the inverse – a game that takes an explicitly political stance but was modded in an effort to remove the politics – look to Owlchemy Labs' 2012 physics-based driving platformer *Smuggle Truck*. In the game, players drive a truck over perilous desert landscapes, attempting to deliver as many of their passengers as possible, as quickly as possible. Each level is quite short (30 seconds for an adept player) and the landscapes grow progressively more difficult to traverse. *Smuggle Truck* originally featured a truckload of cartoon migrants as passengers, with the clear implication that the player's purpose is to transport immigrants across the Texas/Mexico border. However, after the game was rejected from Apple's App Store, Owlchemy remade the game with plush stuffed animal toys as passengers instead and renamed it *Snuggle Truck*.

Owlchemy's (2009) website claims that their game

> "was inspired by the frustration our friends have experienced in trying to immigrate to the United States. With such a troublesome issue being largely avoided in popular media, especially video games, we felt the best way to

criticize it was with an interactive satire [...] we worked to maintain a light and humorous representation of a subject that is normally avoided. With a satirical angle on a real issue, we want to create a game that is fun to play but also stirs up discussion on ways to improve the problematic immigration system in the United States".

In essence, they are arguing that a conventional notion of fun must be maintained and, simultaneously, that video games are a valid and trustworthy art form for serious discussion of political issues.

But the insensitivity of the modification – including the fact that the migrants are the main aesthetic element that seems to change between the two versions of the game – undercuts the success of Owlchemy's critique of the US immigration system. The cartoonishly violent physics, the near impossibility of delivering all the passengers safely, and the callousness with which their bodies are transported all convey a disrespect towards immigrants as human beings. Nor is the system that victimizes them really satirized or even critiqued. The smuggled humans are treated as inconvenient objects, which the mod makes abundantly clear by remaking them as literal objects (plush toys). With every bump in the landscape, the passengers fly out of the cargo bed, and the game's reward system encourages the player not to care very much, since players can progress to the next level even if they lose a few passengers. In other words, *Smuggle/Snuggle Truck* does not use the techniques of critical play to highlight the injustices of US immigration policy, but rather reinforces the notion of immigrants as laughable objects on whom violence can be enacted for amusement.

As the developers have argued that their intentions were to create discussion around the topic of immigration, their struggle to do so highlights the real difficulty of creating serious games. Done poorly, serious games quickly become

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"dull and didactic, or entertaining but hollow. In the worst case, the results are both dull and hollow" (Flanagan 2009, 249). In an effort to be entertaining above all else – a responsibility taken more seriously in ludic genres than in art, literature, music, etc. – it can be incredibly challenging to bring critical attention to a sensitive issue. *Smuggle Truck* focuses thematically on immigration, but its gameplay works like any driving platformer and does not take the subject or what it is attempting to critique enough into consideration. Owlchemy's remaking of *Smuggle Truck* into *Snuggle Truck* was a subversive critique (the original version is titled *uncensored* in some contexts), but what it primarily critiques is the App store's squeamishness about explicit politics in games. As the earlier example in this section shows, gamer culture's blindness towards the politics of seemingly unmarked, supposedly *apolitical* works is well worth critiquing. But *Snuggle Truck*'s irreverent subversion delivers its punch at the expense of cartoon migrants falling out of a cargo bed.

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Waiting as Affect: *The Waiting Game* and *Bury Me, My Love*

In *A Casual Revolution*, Juul (2010, 2) describes the normalization of everyday gaming and the rediscovery of the 5-minute game: "new flexible designs are letting video games fit into the lives of players" and this flexibility enables the participation of alternative groups of players. Audiences who don not self-identify as *gamers* play mobile games, browser games, or *Minesweeper* on their computers as work, taking a few minutes' pause from busy lives to play a casual game. In gamer culture, casual games are opposed to hardcore games (which can take years of engagement in order to become sufficiently skilled), and the opposition between the two is gendered. Casual games are depicted as feminine, flighty, and shallow, whereas hardcore games are masculine, intense, and difficult (Vanderhoef 2013, Chess 2017, Kagen 2018).

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As Anable (2018) has recently pointed out in *Playing with Feelings*, the extent to which casual games are treated as silly or uncomplicated misidentifies their ability to express a complex of issues surrounding labor, gender, engagement, and affects less frequently associated with gaming – boredom, sadness, and guilt. She writes,

> "[d]espite their rich and affectively complicated relationship to gender and contemporary labor, attaching meaning and significance to casual games can seem like a frivolous activity. This dismissive attitude is to some extent attributable to the kinds of feelings—guilt, stress, shame, and boredom—that circulate around these types of games and their association with procrastination" (Anable 2018).

Where hardcore games have developed an aura of intensity and diegetic purposefulness – capture the castle, save the innocent, slay the enemies – casual games can feel like guilty pleasures, time stolen away from the obligations of capitalism and family. This distinction between purposeful and purposeless play is inaccurate, by traditional definitions of purposefulness – a player is no more purposeful in reality when completing a mission in *Call of Duty* (2003-2019) than when beating a level of *Bejeweled 2* (2004) – but the bias continues to color reception of casual games and their players.

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The two casual games I consider in this section – ProPublica's *The Waiting Game* and Pixel Hunt's *Bury Me, My Love* – weaponize this association between casual games and procrastination, boredom, and waiting in order to create meaning. The processes of applying for asylum or traveling as a refugee involve a lot of waiting. By explicitly turning that waiting into a game mechanic, both of these works make purposeful a mechanic and genre coded as purposeless.

ProPublica and Playmatic's *The Waiting Game* combines a narrative-heady browser game with an informative website (describing important political mechanisms that impact refugee experience, for instance, or offering an explanation on the difference between a refugee and an asylee). After picking one of five characters, players are confronted with a familiar loading screen, showing how long the player has to wait until the game is ready. Below the load percentage, messages appear – instructions to the player, connecting their experience to that of the characters they are soon to encounter. At 25%: "Have patience. You'll need lots of it to play *The Waiting Game*" (*The Waiting Game* 2018). At 40%: "The characters in this story are based on real asylum-seekers. They're not composites" (*The Waiting Game* 2018). At 75%: "You can fast-forward through the game, but you have to give up first" (*The Waiting Game* 2018). At 94%: "Try not to give up though!" (*The Waiting Game* 2018). This metaplay introduces the central tension of the game, in which the player's boredom and uncertainty is pitted against the subject matter.

Once the game loads, players begin to click through a monotonous storyline which is pervaded by a general aura of anxiety and, sometimes, outright terror. Each screen offers the option to "Give up" (*The Waiting Game* 2018) or "keep going" (*The Waiting Game* 2018) to the next day (See Figure 3). There is no record of how many days you have passed and no way to return to a previous screen. A soundtrack of ominous background noise keeps you on alert.
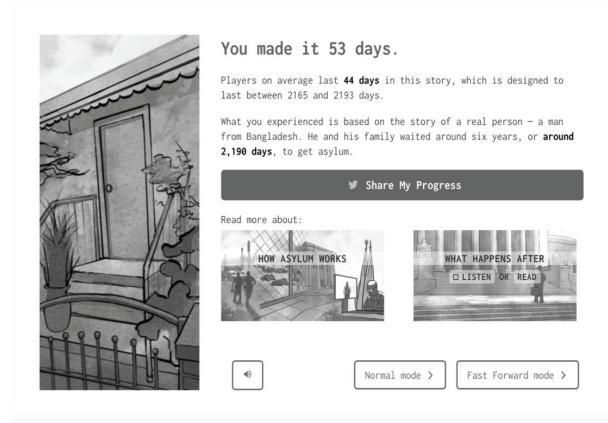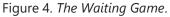
Figure 3. *The Waiting Game*.

When, eventually, you are too bored to continue and you decide to click "give up," (*The Waiting Game* 2018) the game tells you how long you made it, how many days a player makes it on average, and how many days a person in that actual situation would need to wait to be granted asylum (about 50x the number of days the average player manages) (See Figure 4).

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Figure 4. *The Waiting Game*.

It seems like the only choice players make is *when* to give up (and that once they do, the game is over). But the metagame aspect offers a rich, multicursal opportunity. Once they have given up, players have the chance to read the website material, educate themselves more about the issues, volunteer to help, or give money to First Friends, an organization that offers a bridge between detention centers and getting a first job in the US (Wei, Fortugno, Surana, and Katz 2018). While the gameplay prevents conventional ludic action and agency, the metagame channels the player's frustration into protest action. The in-game mechanic is *boring*, but the broader metagame operationalizes that boredom. A precursor is the *Take Action Now* button in *Darfur Is Dying* (2006), which serves the same function of empowering players and motivating action beyond the game (Flanagan 2009, 246).

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Consider this approach as a way to capitalize on a Brechtian lesson, after the estrangement work has been done and players are eager to *do* something with the sense of unease the game has intentionally created. The Brechtian approach to serious play – in which a designer intends to confront the player with their own estrangement rather than allow them to immerse themselves comfortably in the game – harkens back to Frasca's *Videogames of the Oppressed* (2001). Schleiner (2017, 83) advocates it as a "tactical recipe for the activist simulation game," calling for the flow of games to be interrupted or sabotaged (in their design or by critical play) "thereby illuminating [their] operationality in a critical light". By going a step further and offering a metagame goal of fundraising, education, or community-building, the discomfort of the Brechtian confrontation becomes productive, and the waiting retroactively becomes purposeful.

In comparison, consider the experience delivered by *Bury Me, My Love*, another casual game about refugee experience with a mechanic that relies on forced waiting to deliver its message. The player character is Majd, a man whose wife, Nour, is trying to travel from Syria to Europe and who communicates solely through texts on your smart phone. She describes her circumstances, sends pictures, and asks for advice throughout her journey, and the player is then able to choose one of several responses. Often, none of the choices are ideal, and often, Nour will not follow the advice when it is given. The player is then left in a state of anxiety and suspense, sometimes for real hours, as Nour diegetically turns off her phone to conserve battery before eventually texting back with the next update. By connecting the player's phone with the phone of a fictional refugee, the game also centers refugees as users of digital technology, albeit ones whose technological practices are often obscured; Leung's (2018, 3) book *Technologies of Refuge and Displacement* points out many of the ways that refugees and migrants utilize and repurpose digital technologies,

despite their "not [being] represented or considered as users of technology". The anxiety the player feels at not being answered is thus tied directly to the non-fictional circumstance the game references.

The smallest nuance in the player's answers to Nour can change the entire course of the game. If she asks whether she should try to buy a place on an overcrowded boat and the player tells her that might be a bad idea, then she abandons the plan. If the player stays positive and encouraging, it keeps the romantic relationship strong but can be dangerous – for instance, if Nour stays in a refugee camp rather than moving on because the player told her it was okay to rest. But angrily telling Nour to move on quickly could get her killed just as easily – and then the player is left with the guilt of having given the wrong advice *and* of not offering her comfort when it was needed.

Bury Me, My Love, a casual game played on a mobile phone, hinges on its interference in the player's daily life and their frustration with their own lack of agency. Like *The Waiting Game*, it operationalizes the affect of boredom. Its constraints are time and access-based – players must wait to learn more of the story, and that waiting is itself part of the game. In other words, *Bury Me, My Love* and *The Waiting Game* explore affects of refugee experience and, through game mechanics, try to deliver some semblance of that experience to the player. The emotions provoked are similar to traditional video game affects – nervousness, concentration, alertness, stress – but the constant metagame delays and interruptions result in a more intimate gaming experience. The texts from Nour appear on a mobile phone screen almost identically to texts received from friends and loved ones. Nour is fictional, but her experiences pervade the player's daily life as though she were a beloved friend in trouble. Waiting for her to respond and fearing for her safety, the player is trapped in an oscillation between worry and boredom. By charging the

player's daily life with these affects, *Bury Me, My Love* takes the stereotypical player of casual games – a bored, procrastinating *non-gamer* who has five minutes to waste – and makes their play purposeful.

Conclusion

In *Playing with Feelings*, Anable (2018) argues against overvaluing what is possible for activist video games to do or change. Players are not obedient automatons who are subconsciously trained by games – neither good little soldiers for imperial capitalism, nor good little activists who want to help refugees. Instead, Anable (2018) writes, "Video games are ordinary [...] [they] are neither merely repressive nor liberatory but rather 'a whole way of life'". By focusing on critical play – from mods of commercial games, to designers who create games with critique in mind, to Let's Players who transgress the game's rule set – I have attempted in this article to consider border games as ordinary objects that can function as repression, liberation, neither, or both, depending on the day and the player. This multiplicity is key – the variety of responses, unplays, remixes, and mods of border games scape the idea of a border within the cultural imaginary. Playthroughs serve as paratexts (Mukherjee 2015), which Apperley (2018, 3) has theorized as a way in which players of history-based games create "counterfactual communities"; by playing critically, he argues, players negotiate resistance against historical narratives, a resistance that might not be evident in the game itself but *is* clear in the way that players remix it.

What is crucial is that possibility of resisting. The problem with games like *Liberty Belle's Immigration Nation* is that their authoritarian gameplay undermines the message of freedom and liberation. The problem with games like *Smuggle Truck* is that the goofiness undermines the point, at best, and, at worst, reinforces cruelty. But

border games designed with thought towards critical play and postcolonial *playing back* can deliver uniquely subversive experiences. As Aarseth (2007, 133) writes,

> "these wondrous acts of transgression are absolutely vital because they give us hope, true or false; they remind us that it is possible to regain control, however briefly, to dominate that which dominates us so completely".

Unplay, reskinning, rewriting, and metaplay of border games are ways of trying to play back against an authoritarian or colonialist system and, in so doing, find new methods for practicing critique and reimagining borders.

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ii See the interview between US Congressman John Lewis and Krista Tippett on practicing resistance during the civil rights movement as though rehearsing a theatrical drama: "Ms. Tippett: Well, this is something else I want to talk about: the study, the preparation, the discipline […] there was also really serious role-playing […] would you tell us a little bit about that, what you all did to prepare possibly to be beaten, to be imprisoned, possibly to be killed? Rep. Lewis: [B]efore we even discussed a possibility of a sit-in, we had role-playing. We had what we called "social drama." And we would act out. There would be black and white young people, students, an interracial group, playing the roles of African Americans, or an interracial group playing the roles of white. And we went through the motion of someone harassing you, calling you out of your name, pulling you out of your seat, pulling your chair from under you, someone kicking you or pretending to spit on you […] This was drama because we wanted to feel like they were in the actual situation, that this could happen […] So when the time came, we were ready. We were prepared" (Tippett 2013).

iii iCivics has recently updated the game to *Immigration Nation with Liberty Belle*, which omits certain characters (including Marta). The characters seeking US citizenship in the updated version offer stories without moral quandaries; the characters who are denied entry offer silly stories rather than heart-wrenching ones.

iv Note that Valve encouraged an active modding culture around *Half-Life* and released a software development kit to support mods by independent developers.