Migration and Interactive Narrative in Video Games: Scale, Ethics, and Experience

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Abstract

A number of contemporary video games (and particularly independently developed or "indie" games) explore migration in ways that are designed to elicit productive discomfort in Western audiences. In this article, I build on a combination of games research, narrative theory, and migration studies to examine how these games enrich and complicate the cultural representation of migration. My focus is on how different scales of migration converge in game experiences (and in the narratives bound up with those experiences), immersing the player in moral dilemmas that have no clear solution or ideal outcome. I study four indie games that deploy this conceptual and emotional dynamic within different genres: *Papers, Please* (2013), *Bury Me, My Love* (2017), *Frostpunk* (2018), and *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (2018). By putting the player in touch with a variety of fictional migrants, these games walk a fine line between empathy for individual migrants and understanding of the large-scale factors that shape the lived experience of migration and the discourse surrounding it. Games thus mirror the real-world complexity of migration but also afford opportunities for more critical, or distanced, reflection than is possible in engaging with, for example, factual representation in the media.

Introduction

This article examines how the ethical dilemmas surrounding migration are negotiated through video games. I focus on independently developed ("indie") games that ask Western audience to strike a balance between direct engagement with migrants' experiences and a more distanced understanding of the factors and scales shaping migration.[1] Recent work in migration studies has drawn attention to the ethical tensions that traverse migration discourse and policy on several scales, from the difficulties experienced by NGO workers in the Mediterranean (Mann & Mourão Permoser 2022) to the larger geopolitical issues involved in refugee protection (Aleinikoff & Owen 2022). Influenced by work on the persuasive potential of video games (e.g., Bogost 2007), my article theorizes about the role that game experiences can play in shaping and complexifying the public perception of these ethical dilemmas.

The games I will explore in this article challenge the simplified narratives proposed by news outlets, enriching and complicating the stereotypical views of migration circulating in contemporary Western culture. Talk about migration triggers associations with border control, multiple global crises, and the imperative to integrate new migrants—concepts that tend to impose a narrow framing on migration, as a problem to be managed through targeted political and social interventions. Games can go beyond this framing of migration discourse by juxtaposing the personal scale of the migrants' experiences and the larger scales of political, historical, and material factors determining migrant flows.[2] Players are immersed, uncomfortably, in tensions between these scales, so that their involvement in gameplay (including the decisions required by gameplay) proves challenging but also ethically stimulating. This ethical impact is enabled in large part by the safe distance created by fictionality and gameplay: as I play games such as *Bury Me, My Love* (The Pixel Hunt 2017), the first

of my case studies, I am aware that the situations I engage with are fictional and yet also complexly connected to the life of real-world individuals who went through similar experiences. That awareness creates room for imaginative experimentation and ethical interrogation that are uncommon in engaging with media representations of migration. Equally important is the fact that the games I study here are not "serious," educational games designed to get an ideological message across.[3] While the games are clearly not ideologically neutral, they are also not a simple mechanism for delivering a particular political view; on the contrary, they ask players to work through their unease and imagine in-game situations and quandaries without rushing to ideological conclusions. The open-endedness of the games' meanings contributes to creating spaces for ethical reflection. This reflection is of course not exclusive to the games I discuss here: Miguel Sicart (2009; 2013) has already offered important observations on how games can foreground challenging ethical questions. In parallel, scholars like Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar (2018) have examined the ways in which games address colonial and postcolonial themes that emerge in many migration-focused games. Moreover, Ian Bogost's discussion of video games' procedural rhetoric can help contextualize my claims on how video games lend nuance and complexity to media representations: as Bogost speculates in *Persuasive Games*, the rhetorical power of games can "disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change" (2007, ix). One of these changes might involve creating deeper understanding of the challenges surrounding migration, on the level of both the migrants' day-to-day experience and the large-scale factors shaping this experience.[4] My article aims to bring games' engagement with migration into sharper focus, also with a view to establishing more sustained dialogue between migration studies and games research.

In the first section, I start by offering an autoethnographic account of *Bury Me, My Love*, which illustrates the tensions emerging when a Syrian refugee's experiences are conveyed through gameplay, but also the ethical stimulation this type of game can provide. The autoethnographic method (Adams et al. 2015) brings out emotionally salient features of game design as well as the ethical dilemmas developers and players in the Global North (including this commentator) face when they approach migration from the Global South. As I will explain, these dilemmas have to do with entitlement (who has the right to tell stories of migration) but also with the peculiar mix of complicity and discomfort that emerges when things don't go as planned as a result of the player's seemingly well-meaning choices. In the course of this discussion I also introduce contemporary debates on the ethics of video games. In the second section, I shift from my own experience to an analysis of the design choices (on the level of both narrative and gameplay) that create ethical uncertainty in indie games about migration.[5] Autoethnography thus serves as a heuristic method for generating ideas that are later discussed through more systematic game analyses. My starting point is the multiscalar nature of migration—how migration as an individual and collective experience is shaped by forces on regional, national, and global scales.[6] I discuss this multiscalarity as the source of considerable ethical tensions in two independent games, *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Frostpunk* (11 Bit Studios 2018). Finally, in the last section I turn to a game—*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge 2018)—in which mobility is performed by the player-character, by migrant subjects, and also crucially by narrative itself, which keeps spreading and evolving as the game progresses. I read *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* as a game charting, in an ethically fine-grained way, the plurality of stories surrounding migration and thus critiquing the simplistic narratives that can be found in media discourse.

As Maru et al. put it, "Migration is a multi-dimensional (social, spatial, temporal) process that develops in non-linear ways, with several transit phases and places that can also involve moments of being 'suspended,' both physically (because 'stuck' in a place) and legally (because having an

‘irregular’ status)” (2022 p. 5). Media representations of migration rarely attempt to capture this complexity. The video games I consider here are able to package complexity in a way that is conceptually, ethically, and emotionally challenging for the player. They do so while working with profoundly different genre conventions, and indeed diversity of genres was the main criterion guiding my selection. While all the games I consider are relatively small-budget, indie productions, their belonging to different genres ensures variety in terms of both gameplay and audiences. In this way, I show how video games’ interrogation of the ethical questions surrounding migration isn’t limited to a specific genre but traverses the landscape of indie gaming, and increasingly (though I cannot fully flesh out this point here) makes its way into AAA games as well.[7]

Bury Me, My Love is a text-based adventure originally developed for mobile platforms. Here gameplay and narrative are closely bound up: advancing the narrative is the main gameplay challenge the player faces. *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* is also a narrative adventure game, but it places a much stronger emphasis on spatial exploration and builds on a decentralized structure involving multiple storylines (instead of the single protagonist of *Bury Me, My Love*).[8] *Papers, Please* is a puzzle game about bureaucracy: the plot unfolds as the game presents the player with a number of puzzles deriving from increasingly complex administrative rules. *Frostpunk* is a city-building game that asks the player to make a large number of strategic decisions, many of which influence the narrative’s overall trajectory. Storytelling and gameplay thus converge in different ways in these games; significantly, they all foreground the ethical stakes of this convergence and thus offer an opportunity for complicating public discourse on migration.

Delay and Discomfort

Bury Me, My Love is a game that stages the 2015 migrant crisis in Europe by interrogating multiple levels of mobility. It features a mobile protagonist, a refugee, and it was developed for mobile phones by Paris-based studio The Pixel Hunt. The game is set in late 2015 and focuses on a Syrian asylum seeker’s perilous journey to Europe. What is unique about the game is the means through which it delivers this story—which, while largely fictional, mirrors the real-life experience of many migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean. The interface is made to look and feel like a messaging app such as WhatsApp or iMessage (see Figure 1). The story unfolds as a text conversation between the Syrian woman, whose name is Nour, and her husband, Majd, who is still in Syria taking care of elderly relatives. The player’s role is to select some of the messages written by Majd, typically by choosing between a limited number of conversation options: Majd can recommend a certain course of action, effectively deciding what Nour will do next; or he can ask questions about her situation or simply send an emoticon to show support.

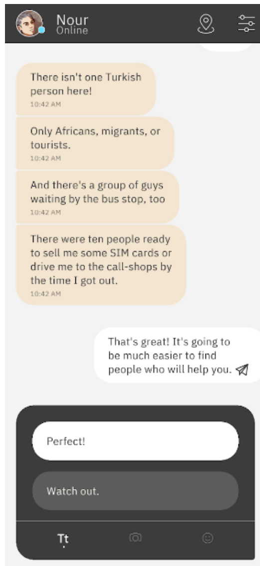

Figure 1 The messaging app-like interface of *Bury Me, My Love* (The Pixel Hunt 2017).

In this way, the conversation accompanies Nour's journey to Europe, with Germany as her intended destination, following a number of possible routes. There are almost twenty different endings, with widely diverging outcomes, not all of them happy: Nour makes it to Germany; Nour settles down in Austria; Nour is stuck in Bulgaria where she is forced to apply for asylum, never making it into the Schengen area; Nour is arrested by the Italian police; Nour dies at sea.[9] While the journey itself is fraught with danger and menace, the game manages to create moments of intimacy and even humor that enliven Nour's conversation with Majd. This unfolding exchange encapsulates the strength of their bond, but also its fragility as Nour's life is buffeted by war, violence, physical exhaustion, and the mind-numbing tedium of bureaucracy or camp life. The game thus explores aspects of migration that are typically overlooked by media accounts: not only the sensational, life-or-death moments, but also the mundaneness of daily life as a migrant. This focus on the everyday contributes to a sense of personal connection between the player and Nour, although as we will see that connection is complicated by a number of distancing strategies. Nour's depiction is supported by strong, pithy writing. The short form of the text message is periodically accompanied by pictures—presented as drawings in the game—and voice messages to mark the most dramatic moments of Nour's life.

Bury Me, My Love isn't just presented as a text exchange on the player's phone, but it behaves like a real messaging app: when a new message from Nour arrives, the player gets a notification that lives alongside their real-life notifications. They read the new messages from her, choose what Majd says next, then they must wait minutes or even hours for Nour's following messages to arrive. When the player manually opens the app during these intervals, all they see is a prompt saying "Nour is busy" or "Nour is offline." This isn't the first game to make use of the phone's notification system and real-time updates: as Florent Maurin, the lead developer of *Bury Me, My Love*, acknowledges, he was influenced by an earlier, science-fiction mobile game series titled *Lifeline* (3 Minute Games 2015).[10] In that series, the player is in touch with an astronaut stranded on a distant planet, this conversation being the protagonist's only lifeline while trying to survive as a space-age Robinson Crusoe.

As someone who has played both *Lifeline* and *Bury Me, My Love* and suffers from a mild phone addiction, I enjoyed how the trickle of messages from Nour mixed with messages from real friends and colleagues. The messages had a tendency to arrive at an inconvenient time, when I had to put Nour—this fictional refugee trying to make her way to Germany—on hold while teaching or engaged

in conversation.[11] I found myself waiting for Nour's next message, opening the app as if to check if I missed anything, with a slight apprehension that is distantly related to what I feel when I am in touch with a real person I care about, a person who I know might be in trouble.[12] This conversation with Nour, which stretched out over almost a week in my first playthrough, created unexpected closeness as a result of its slow build-up and suspenseful pauses. The game's focus on the day-to-day particulars of a migrant's experience, which are typically sidelined by media representations of refugees, also contributed to my sense of closeness to Nour.[13]

At the same time, I felt a certain unease while playing the game. A game about a Syrian woman realized by a team of mostly white French men is bound to raise eyebrows. The game is inspired by a web project launched by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, in which we are "immersed in the telephone of a Syrian migrant," as the website has it.[14] Here we follow, over the course of more than ten days, the WhatsApp group of a real migrant, in anonymized form, with only minor edits and redactions. The game's title comes from this exchange, and the woman who agreed to have her messages published on the *Le Monde* website also participated in the creation of the game: she was consulted throughout and approved the English version.[15] This is an example of what Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer (2023) call "vicarious storytelling," or telling a story on behalf of someone else. This vicariousness raises thorny ethical questions when it involves asymmetrical power relations, such as a team of European game developers telling the story of a Syrian refugee. Amy Shuman (2005) has discussed the ethical complexity of this type of narrative, how it is caught in a tension between entitlement (who has the right to tell a certain story) and the demands of empathy (bridging the gap between first-person experience and alterity). More recently, Ana Belén Martínez García (2021) has studied how this dynamic plays out in stories revolving around migration. Martínez García's example, *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* by Melissa Fleming (2017), is particularly relevant in this context: Fleming is another white author, a former UNHCR spokesperson, writing on behalf of a Syrian refugee, Doaa Al Zamel.

Of course, *Bury Me, My Love* is presented as a fictional game, not a nonfictional account building on a migrant's testimony—but the asymmetry between the French studio and the migrant whose story inspired the game made me uncomfortable. This discomfort might well be part of the game's intended effect, though. Take, for example, the player's positioning within the intimate relationship between Nour and Majd. One might be tempted to say that the player controls what Majd says, and this is already an intriguing departure from the situation of the *Le Monde* website: here we are "immersed in the telephone of a Syrian migrant" only at a remove. In fact, a more accurate description of the game would be to say that we are "immersed in the telephone" of someone who is in touch with a Syrian migrant, not the migrant herself. This being a mobile game about someone's mobility, that design choice stands out, because the character whose actions we can determine directly is not going anywhere: he is staying in war-torn Syria. It could be argued, of course, that Majd's primary gameplay function is to allow the player to guide Nour, telling her what to do at every step of her arduous journey, and while playing the game I was aware of the problematic gender dimension of that relationship. However, even saying that we control Nour via Majd would be a simplification, given that Nour often goes her own way, no matter what the player advises her to do through Majd. Often in my playthrough I was not even fully in control of Majd's remarks: some of his lines appeared automatically, and I had to read them just as I read Nour's replies, which considerably reduced my agency in shaping this conversation.

Moreover, some of the choices I was presented with while playing the game are far from ideal. For example, when Nour arrives in Istanbul, she describes a busy square, with street vendors aggressively hawking SIM cards. Here I found myself without good dialogue options. The first option

in response to her account was evidently false: "That's great! It's going to be much easier to find people who will help you" (see again Figure 1). The second was evidently racist: "Watch out! A lot of the Africans are thieves!" I didn't like either option, and yet I had to choose one. Even more importantly, many of the choices I made for Nour had unintended and tragic consequences: some of them got her into trouble. That unpredictability of choice and consequence also reduced or challenged my agency as the "controlling" player.

The significance of this device can be understood by drawing on Sicart's (2013 p. 106) discussion of ethics in video games. Sicart is interested in "ethical gameplay"—a mode of engagement with games that foregrounds the ethical stakes of the situations experienced by players, resulting in heightened awareness of the values that players bring to bear on a game. One might think that the ethical value of video games is all about making choices, weighing pros and cons of various courses of action; but in fact, as Sicart suggests, games might be at their most ethically productive when they *undermine* the player's sense of agency, immersing them in situations—wicked problems, as Sicart puts it—that resist our moral calculus.[16] Put otherwise, ethical gameplay can be fostered by situations in which the player is made complicit in outcomes that are far from ethically ideal or desirable.[17] The discomfort elicited by these situations, argues Sicart, prompts reflection, unlike games that provide players with ethically satisfying courses of action (endings, etc.).

In *Bury Me, My Love*, this type of complicity started from my engagement with the protagonists. I was involved in an intimate exchange between two characters, but the fact that I could only choose Majd's lines tended to align my perspective with that character rather than Nour. However, the undesirability of many of Majd's messages, along with the fact that in many cases Majd added remarks that I could not control, made it difficult for me to identify with him fully. Similarly, I felt sympathy for Nour but the game situation prevented me from empathizing with her: it kept me from developing the illusion that I could feel what Nour feels. Instead, the refugee's traumatic experiences were kept at a respectful distance. Sure, there was sympathy for Nour's plight, and Majd can be said to serve as a "bridge character," to adopt Erin James's (2019) terminology—a fictional intermediary who facilitates connection between the audience and the protagonist, even if full-fledged access to the protagonist's mind is denied. Thus, Majd brought me in contact with Nour, and with an experience (a refugee's journey) I am familiar with through media representations. The game helped me imagine that experience in close and uncomfortable detail. But because of how my agency kept failing when it came to determining Majd's lines (or their consequences), I was something like a third wheel in this dramatic relationship. I was implicated in a situation that I could not fully control—and that, together with the voyeuristic aspect of my interactions with Nour and Majd, also created ethical discomfort.

The distance that *Bury Me, My Love* introduces between its audiences and the mobile, migrant subject evokes the problematic coexistence of different scales in thinking about migration, especially the clash between individual experience, national or international policy, and larger historical dynamics. Questions about scale emerge occasionally in *Bury Me, My Love*, but my examples in the rest of this article explore scale in much more detail. I will first consider two games (*Papers, Please* and *Frostpunk*) in which migration is integrated thematically or by way of specific game mechanics while the player-character is unable to move, like Majd in *Bury Me, My Love*.[18] This constraint, as we will see, generates considerable ethical tensions: the impossibility of physical movement also correlates with the impasse experienced by the player as they make decisions that go against their moral judgments. In the section that follows, I examine a game—*Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*—in which mobility is directly performed by the player. Here physical mobility goes hand in

hand with a sense of ethical difficulty emerging from the player's inability to change the characters' stories.

Scalar Differences and Ethical Traps

The concept of mobility, as argued by Tim Cresswell (2006), stretches from the microcosm of the human body to migration patterns on a planetary level. Narrative is often what bridges the gap between these scales; in Cresswell's words, "stories about mobility . . . connect blood cells to street patterns, reproduction to space travel" (2006 p. 6). In migration studies, the multiscalarity of migration is also widely recognized. For instance, Sophie Craston and Karine Duplan write that recent "migration research has shifted a focus away from migrants and their experiences to exploring how mobility is both facilitated and prevented at meso and macroscales" (2023 p. 2). This implies that the experience of migration on the ground (personal scale) is shaped by local and regional factors (mesoscale) as well as by larger national and geopolitical trends (macroscale).

The multiscalar nature of mobility is at the root of numerous ethical challenges. *Bury Me, My Love* explores the ethical dimension of scale by situating the player within a romantic relationship shaped by global forces: war, bureaucracy, international migration policy. The scale of the individual—Nour and Majd—is entangled with these larger phenomena that determine mobility on a global scale, and the game is designed to bring out the injustice of this entanglement. The tension between personal and geopolitical scales is related to what Derek Woods (2014), in a discussion of climate change, calls "scale variance": when we move across scales of reality, phenomena that don't seem to matter on a local level suddenly become more important—and, vice versa, other elements become backgrounded. For instance, a migrant's imagination of a better or safer future is a centerpiece of their personal experience of migration; but when we shift the focus to migration as a geopolitical phenomenon, economic factors and international trends are likely to be more significant than individual experiences and aspirations. This scale variance gives rise to numerous ethical dilemmas in migration policy and discourse; it is also implicated in our unease when playing games that stage the complexity of migration.

If games are capable of probing this complexity, it is largely through the interaction of storytelling and gameplay, which brings me to one of the main tenets of game studies: video games are, in Marie-Laure Ryan's phrase, "an art of compromise between narrative and gameplay" (2006 p. 198). Story depends on authorial control, which largely signals a top-down stance: it is something scripted into the game beforehand, typically through the creation of a number of branching paths, multiple endings, and so on. By contrast, gameplay emerges from the player's decision-making process in response to the challenges created by the game designers. The result is that gameplay unfolds in a dynamic, spontaneous, bottom-up way, which clashes with the pre-determined nature of narrative outcomes. We see this in *Bury Me, My Love* in the tug-of-war between the limited story paths that have been carefully laid down for us by the developers and our strategic decisions when we pick Majd's dialogue options—often with limited understanding of the consequences of our choices. From the top-down perspective of the narrative's authorial design, there is nothing unpredictable about our interactions with the game; but in the uncertainty of gameplay things can and frequently do go wrong, forcing us to backtrack, change approach, and so on.

It is also important to note that, if story in general tends to revolve around individuals—specific characters like Nour—game rules are typically more abstract: they shape the player's interaction with the game system regardless of whether it centers on a Syrian refugee or a spaceman, as in *Lifeline*. This coexistence of rule-based play and storytelling makes it possible for games to explore scales of reality that are harder to foreground in non-interactive narrative genres such as news

articles, novels, or films. Narrative practices are biased towards the human scale, because stories involving well fleshed-out individuals (such as Nour and Majd) are inherently interesting and "tellable," in narratological parlance.[19] This also implies that narrative is an effective means of eliciting empathy for individual characters, but it struggles to convey more abstract phenomena, such as global processes.[20] The rules of gameplay can make up for this limitation by confronting audiences with the systemic factors shaping a given phenomenon. In the case of games exploring migration, scale variance—that is, discontinuities between personal experience and larger scales—can be evoked by gameplay to entangle players in ethical dilemmas.

The game *Papers, Please* is an excellent example of this clash of scales and how it generates ethically productive discomfort through the interaction of storytelling and game rules. A creation of video game auteur Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please* is frequently hailed as one of the most influential indie games of all time. A great deal of ink has been spilled on the game's focus on ethical difficulty (Formosa et al. 2016), how it traps the players in a moral dilemma with no ideal outcome—a "wicked problem" to use again Sicart's (2013) terminology. The "trap" metaphor is surprisingly apt here. *Papers, Please* is a game about mobility, since it foregrounds migration to a (fictional) Eastern European country. But just like *Bury Me, My Love*, *Papers, Please* creates a situation in which the player-controlled character cannot leave his office: we are cast in the role of a border guard who decides who is admitted and who is denied entry.

The game's interface is static and emphatically denies the possibility of movement (see Figure 2): the top half of the screen shows the border checkpoint, while the lower half is split between the immigrant's face and the documents they present to the player-controlled officer. The personal scale is thus evoked by the immigrant's appearance and by the abridged narratives they tell while the border officer examines their documents. The admission rules, by contrast, shift the focus away from the individual: they suggest state control over migration policy and how entangled it is with internal political trends and the geopolitical balance of power. Moreover, these rules become more and more complicated as the game progresses: we are asked to cross-check an increasing number of documents, with different regulations and conditions depending on the migrant's country of origin. If we make a mistake, the player-character pays the price. It doesn't matter if the mistake was an unintentional slip or a deliberate attempt to admit a migrant against the fundamentally unjust rules imposed by the authoritarian government: for every error detected by the authorities, a sum is deducted from the border officer's salary, which could lead to debt or to the protagonist's family not having enough to meet basic needs (resulting in the game ending prematurely, a "game over" situation).

A number of stories unfold alongside the basic gameplay loop of checking entry documents against increasingly complicated regulations. Some of these stories involve returning applicants, such as a character named Jorji Costava, an elderly man who appears in front of the booth several times before he has the correct paperwork. Other stories involve external events, such as an attack on the border checkpoint by a militant group. These events punctuate the player's experience and are meant to make the player's decisions, particularly denying entry, more and more challenging—not just mechanically but also ethically. We gain insight into the migrants' desperation and the factors driving their attempt to flee their home country. At the same time, though, government surveillance and the imperative to provide for the protagonist's own family keep us from acting on that knowledge—unless we want the game to be over.

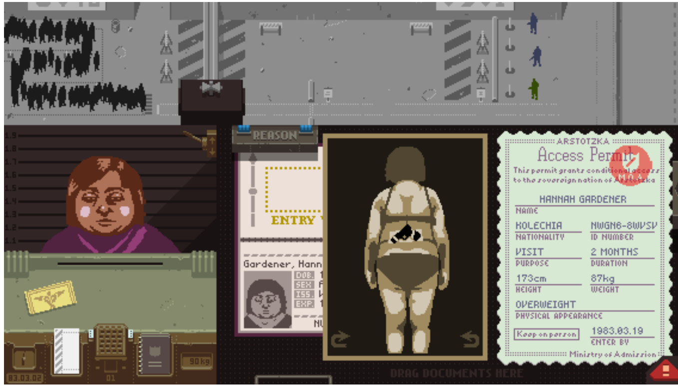

Figure 2 A screenshot from *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013), showing the game's main interface elements.

In essence, *Papers, Please* is an unwinnable game from a moral perspective, and one that is bound to create a fair share of productive discomfort through scale variance: on the one hand, we have the foregrounding of individual migrants' experiences; on the other, the player is forced to comply with the rule-governed nature of administration, which reflects the national and geopolitical framing of migration. The experience of migration is evoked through mini-stories that become the more moving and tense the more bureaucracy attempts to erase the characters' individuality. The anonymous protagonist is another unwilling bridge character, like Majd in *Bury Me, My Love*: his experience mediates between the players and the migrants, enabling sympathy but never giving in to the illusion that we can fully identify with the characters we meet. The game also evokes scales beyond the individual, foregrounding the systemic factors shaping the border inspector's strict adherence to fundamentally unjust rules. The player is caught or trapped in the tension between personal mobility and the more abstract systems that govern mobility on a national scale—and that tension, while irresolvable in gameplay terms, paves the way for what Sicart (2013) calls ethical gameplay.

Frostpunk is another indie game that highlights the multiscalar nature of migration. The game is set in an alternate version of the late nineteenth century; its premise is reminiscent of the graphic novel *Snowpiercer* (Lob & Rochette 1982): a new ice age descends upon the planet, forcing humanity to use Victorian-era technology to fend off the cold and ice. But whereas *Snowpiercer* is based on a fantasy of perpetual mobility (the train has to keep moving to produce heat), *Frostpunk* presents the player with a stubbornly static perspective. The game is, essentially, a city builder: various types of structures can be built to extract resources (mostly wood and coal), produce food, house the city's inhabitants and keep them healthy. Most important of all is that the giant steam-powered generator at the center of the city must be running at all times; if it doesn't, the city's population will quickly freeze to death. Like most city builders, the perspective is isometric and distanced (see Figure 3). However, the maps are uniquely small, with scant resources concentrated in a valley surrounded by impassable mountains; this compact size helps us keep an eye on the generator. The player is cast in the role of the city's mayor and asked to meet map-specific objectives while managing a number of scripted emergencies. These events are the main way in which the game introduces a branching-path narrative.

Figure 3 A screenshot from *Frostpunk*, with the generator visible in the top left (11 Bit Studios 2018).

Visually, mobility is limited by the fixed spatial perspective and limited map. But emotionally and conceptually mobility is an important component of the game's systems, including its storytelling, in two ways. First, the player can send out scouts to search for additional resources outside of the city's immediate surroundings: this process involves switching to a different map, where the player can select the locations that the scouts should investigate. Second, the city regularly receives a large number of refugees from other parts of this frozen wasteland; it is up to the player to accept them or turn them away. Accepting them means boosting the city's workforce but also increasing the demand for housing and food, which requires a fast and decisive response from the player to prevent essential resources from running out. In one of the game's levels, titled "The Refugees," the player grapples with a constant inflow of migrants, which puts enormous pressure on our ability to manage resources but also, significantly, leads to tensions between the city's older and newer inhabitants. The narrative of "The Refugees" can take different paths depending on whether the player decides to admit a group of noblemen known as "the Lords": either way, there will be conflict and unrest, and finding a way out involves making painful moral compromises.

Frostpunk is another game that immerses the player in moral dilemmas, whereby the most ethically desirable course of action is also the most likely to result in the city's ruin. Mobility is both visually denied and entangled with challenging game mechanics; moreover, the player is asked to negotiate a difficult path between the necessarily vast scale of resource extraction and the lived experience of the citizens on the ground. All of the city's inhabitants are named and can be seen walking around the streets, busy with whatever task they received from the player. Periodically, they bring complaints or requests to the player. This set-up combines the top-down, managerial perspective typical of city builders with closeness to the citizens' plight: the player is often caught in this multiscalar set-up, as the game's narrative demands empathy for old and new survivors while the rules impose tough decisions that favor collective over individual wellbeing. The friction between scales, as well as between storytelling and gameplay, creates new understanding of the ethical tensions surrounding migration.

Storytelling in Flux

The games I have examined so far entangle the player in a sense of ethical difficulty emerging from the clash between gameplay (focused on systemic factors) and interactive storytelling (which foregrounds individual experiences). My last example, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge 2018), challenges the player's moral imagination by bringing together multiscalarity and insight into the multiplicity of the stories surrounding migration. Here the player is cast in the role of a witness to ethically fraught problems, including poverty and racial inequality,

that they have no means of addressing through in-game choices. The discomfort created by *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* thus derives from the player's inability to make a difference in the game world: the game involves collecting and pursuing a multiplicity of stories that we cannot directly influence. The passivity of the player's role clashes with the fact that, of the games examined in this article, this is the only one in which mobility can be directly performed: we are in control of an anonymous protagonist, known simply as The Traveler, who can move across a stylized map of the United States (see Figure 4). The silent protagonist is a fairly common device in games: this blank-canvas approach allows players to more easily project their own assumptions and aspirations and also eases their access to the game world (since that access isn't dependent on identification with a character who has a full-fledged personality and history).[21] In *Where the Water Tastes Like Wise*, this protagonist is visually modeled on the game's version of a tarot card, The Fool: a skeletal vagabond carrying a bindle. The player-controlled character is thus turned into an everyman figure of sorts; their vague backstory stands in stark contrast to the painstaking way in which the game reconstructs the non-player characters' background and socio-economic status.

The game is set during the Great Depression, and our task is to go from location to location to collect stories, which develop over time: we experience a strange event, we relate it in a nearby town, and later on, in a different town, we are told a version of the same story, now embellished and turned into a striking tall tale. For instance, a story known as "the anonymous grave" starts when the player-character visits a cemetery and realizes that all of the gravestones bear the word "unknown." Later, this turns into a grisly story of mass entombment; the story's final iteration centers on an "empty town where they found one hundred smoothly-faceless unknown corpses."[22]

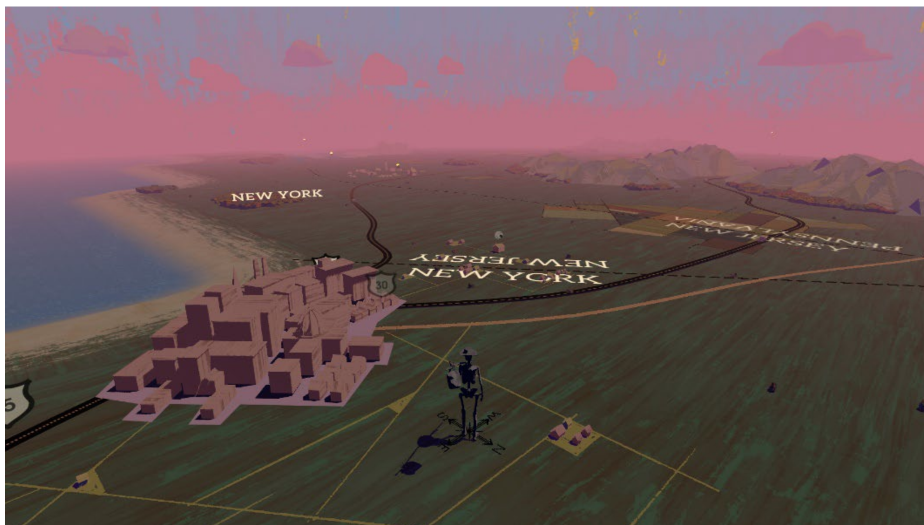

Figure 4 The main map of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge 2018), with the skeletal player-character visible in the foreground.

These evolving and increasingly unlikely stories serve an important function. As we play the game, we encounter a number of main characters who are shown in hand-drawn tableaux. These characters represent a vast and diverse cast of individuals living precarious lives of forced displacement, marginalization, and oppression: a Mexican healer, a Black train worker, a native American woman, a World War I veteran, a Beat poet, and so on. These characters' physical mobility serves as an ironic counterpoint to their inability to attain social mobility. Their stories were penned by different writers: their styles differ widely but share a focus on the deep connection between historical or material conditions, individual identity, and mobility. These main characters' stories are in flux, too: the player's objective is to get to know them in a series of narrative-based encounters,

until their "true" stories are disclosed.[23] The main challenge here is that, in order to unlock these true stories, we need to have three successful encounters with the same character, and because the characters move to a new location after every encounter, we must keep moving too. An encounter is successful when we comply with the character's requests for stories of a certain kind: for that to happen, we need to have a sufficiently large repertoire of tall tales collected during our peregrinations, and we also need to know their emotional effect so that it matches the character's request (which is not always straightforward, given the stories' brevity and suggestiveness).

As we advance the game, we get to know these characters' stories in detail but we cannot influence them directly: the player is unable to intervene in or change the course of these characters' lives. All the player can do is listen to the characters, take in their struggles, and develop a relationship with them until they are ready to share their stories in full. The fact that storytelling is the only action allowed by the game is a source of significant ethical difficulty: if games like *Papers, Please* and *Frostpunk* work by constantly complicating the player's decision-making in relation to migration, it is the unavailability of alternatives that creates a moral impasse here. The player is caught between an empathetic desire to help the migrants and an imperative (enforced through game mechanics) to listen to them and do justice to their stories.

This dilemma is further amplified by the way in which the game's storytelling happens and evolves on multiple scales, from the micro-stories of fleeting situations and events (such as the tale of the anonymous grave) to the overarching life narratives that we experience over a number of encounters with the same characters. Mobility is key to unlocking these narratives, reflecting both the characters' homelessness and our own movement across the map of the United States.[24] But if the main stories demand attention to individual experience, the particularity of narrative is offset by the abstraction of the gameplay. The player-character is unlike all of the main characters in that they don't have a fleshed-out life story, which creates distance between the player and the skeletal persona we are controlling. It is perhaps the anonymity of the protagonist that turns them into an ideal bridge character, facilitating sympathy for the many life stories we encounter along the way. At the same time, the game foregrounds multilinearity and collectivity: it doesn't focus on a single mobile subject but on a range of diverse characters, and that also introduces a principle of abstraction, a large-scale perspective that sheds light on the variety of ways in which history and individual life stories can drive migration. This abstraction is of course visually underscored by the distanced, idealized, and map-like appearance of the game world we explore through physical movement.

This focus on the plurality of stories challenges the tendency, widespread in contemporary media discourse and politics, to think about migration through the lens of simplistic narratives based on binaries such as "us" vs. "them," "solidarity" vs. "control," and so on. In *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, people are mobile and multifaceted, often as a result of traumatic histories of violence and discrimination, but so are stories. Contextual, evolving, and irreducibly personal, the narratives told by the game's protagonists invite players to imagine migration as a multiscalar phenomenon crisscrossing individuals and groups in a deeply nonlinear way—a nonlinearity that is reflected in the characters' constant mobility across the map of the US. This set-up raises irresolvable questions as the player-character is denied the possibility of direct intervention and instead turned into an anonymous story collector. Ethical gameplay involves embracing the plurality and multiperspectivity of story as a window onto the complexity of migration. The constraints that the game places on the player's agency aren't politically disempowering, however; on the contrary, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* suggests that the ability to listen to a wide range of voices might be an essential prerequisite for decision-making.

Conclusion

This article has examined the ways in which contemporary independent games stage migration as a multiscalar phenomenon, with particular focus on how ethical questions emerge from scalar clashes and discontinuities ("scale variance," in Woods's terminology). I started from an autoethnographic discussion of *Bury Me, My Love*, a game that puts players in touch with a fictional refugee, with the migrant's husband serving as a bridge character. The triangulation between the two characters and the player is complicated and raises a number of questions that the game doesn't settle: the player frequently runs out of good dialogue options and is forced to follow narrative paths that seem hardly ideal in ethical terms. This kind of difficulty is used much more strategically and deliberately by my other case studies, in which the player is repeatedly caught in the crossfire of game mechanics and narrative representation.

These are games that problematize both mobility and direct empathy for migrant subjects. In *Papers, Please* and *Frostpunk*, mobility is emphatically denied: the player controls characters (a border officer, a mayor) who are tasked with managing and administering mobile subjects, but who aren't themselves mobile. If Majd was a relatively straightforward bridge character, our alter egos in these games are asked to make much tougher decisions, which creates productive discomfort as the player tries to juggle personal and systemic perspectives on migration. In *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, by contrast, mobility is performed by the (largely anonymous) player-controlled character in a dance with the game's main characters. Fully unlocking their stories requires patient traversal of the game world while assembling a large archive of evolving micro-narratives. Here a sense of ethical difficulty is bound up with our inability to impact the characters' narratives, which reflect structural oppression at a time of economic crisis. The spatial distribution of stories encourages the player to draw inspiration from the main characters' own mobility in space, which is a paradoxical counterpoint to their lack of *social* mobility. The closeness created by these repeated encounters isn't designed to elicit empathy for a single protagonist but yields insight into the precarity of existence across a large cast of marginalized individuals. The abstraction of the game's set-up, and of the player-controlled character, has a central role in cultivating a pluralistic imagination of migrant narratives.

The four examples discussed in this article demonstrate the range and diversity of contemporary games' negotiation of migration across a wide variety of genres (interactive fiction, strategy games, and puzzle games). This selection isn't meant to be exhaustive but only to show that contemporary games, particularly in the independent gaming space, negotiate the ethical complexity of migration with considerable sophistication. These games' focus on personal experience enters a tension with the abstraction and top-down nature of game rules, immersing the player in moral dilemmas that cannot be resolved by the games themselves but are designed to stimulate ethical reflection during and after gameplay. The nuance introduced by these interactive narratives complicates and challenges the representations of migration that circulate in the news media, particularly as these representations struggle to capture both migrants' lived experience and the political and social challenges that are implicated in migration policy.

In that respect, the games I considered here offer far more than mere entertainment: they provide an object lesson on the experiential value of interactive storytelling in relation to one of the most pressing issues of our time. Of course, my argument foregrounds the formal dimension of game design and its possible effects on players, but it is important to stress that the ethical questions embedded in games also reflect the designers' ideological views—an aspect that I couldn't discuss here beyond my remarks on the positioning of the developers of *Bury Me, My Love*.[25] Another limitation on my discussion is its methodological commitment to autoethnography and formal

analysis. The logical next step would be to give this discussion a stronger empirical basis. But that is only possible after establishing the ethical *potential* of games about migration, which was the main task of this article.

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[1] Moreover, *Bury Me, My Love* illustrates the rhetorical structure of many independent games, particularly their emphasis on personal interactions as opposed to the anonymous corporate culture of mainstream gaming. Jesper Juul (2019 p. 9) calls this the “quest for authenticity” and sees it as the hallmark of indie gaming.
[2] I am using the term “negotiation” in a technical sense here: it refers to how narrative may bring up a certain cultural topic (in this case, migration) and explore or illuminate some aspects of that discussion. See Herman and Vervaeck (2017) for a fuller account.
[3] For more on serious gaming, see Rockwell and Kee (2011).
[4] Also relevant here is Stefano Gualeni’s (2022) discussion of “philosophical games,” which serve as a springboard for philosophical reflection (including reflection on ethical themes). *Papers, Please*, discussed below, is one of Gualeni’s examples.
[5] For an introduction to games research, including the various methodological options available to researchers, see Daneels et al. (2022).
[6] For further discussion of scale in relation to media accounts of migration, see Adinolfi and Caracciolo (under review).
[7] *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), which centers on the experiences of an illegal migrant from Eastern Europe to the United States, was perhaps one of the earliest AAA games to offer an in-depth view of migration.
[8] Through its foregrounding of movement, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* can also be read as a “walking simulator.” See Kagen (2017) for further discussion of this category.
[9] See this website for an overview of the game’s story lines and endings: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-u4gTrLDim4EVx73ZcqxV14I_d5swEgvOPuMOIVkCjc/edit.

[10] See Split/Screen Documentaries (2019) for a helpful "making-of" video, where Maurin also discusses *Lifeline* as a source of inspiration.
[11] The player of *Bury Me, My Love* can decide to switch off the delay, so that Nour's messages appear as soon as Majd says something, without any pause. The developers thus tried to cater to different play styles, including impatient players who don't want to wait for Nour's responses, but from the interview with Maurin (Split Screen Documentary 2019) there is little doubt that the game was designed with the delay in mind.
[12] Media psychologists discuss this type of closeness to fictional characters as a form of "para-social interaction." See, e.g., Giles (2002).
[13] The role that digital technologies play in the daily lives of migrants has been the subject of stimulating work in migration studies, see Ponzanesi and Leurs (2022) for an overview.
[14] https://www.lemonde.fr/international/visuel/2015/12/18/dans-le-telephone-d-une-migrante-syrienne_4834834_3210.html.
[15] For more on her involvement and how the game came about, see again Split/Screen Documentaries (2019).
[16] See Sicart (2013 pp. 98–106) and Bosman (2019) on wicked problems and game design.
[17] For more on the subject of complicity and political engagement in games, see also Schrank (2014 chap. 5).
[18] I define game mechanics as possibilities of interaction offered by the game as a designed system. See also Sicart's (2008) comprehensive discussion.
[19] This idea is also related to what Monika Fludernik (1996 p. 13) calls the "anthropomorphic bias" of narrative, which is also a bias towards the human-scale world. For more on tellability, see Baroni (2013).
[20] Rob Nixon (2011) influentially formulated a version of this argument in discussing environmental destruction in the Global South—a phenomenon that, due to its slow pace and gradual effects, tends to resist narrative representation.
[21] For discussion of the complexities surrounding the player-controlled character or avatar in games, see Vella (2013).
[22] See https://wherethewatertasteslikewine.fandom.com/wiki/The_anonymous_grave.
[23] Again, this is the emphasis on authenticity typical of indie games, according to Juul (2019).
[24] See also my analysis of environmental storytelling in *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* in Caracciolo (2022 chap. 7).
[25] See, on this topic, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissembaum's (2014) account, which is geared towards how developers can embed certain political or moral values in games.