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Writeup: Introducing Serious Games

"The Waiting Game" is a newsgame developed by non-profit newsroom ProPublica that follows the day-to-day journey of five unnamed immigrants from Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Eritrea, and Nepal; each story represents one of the five criteria for refugee status under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention: "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Wei).

The newsgame effectively simulates the existential desperation of America's asylum process by employing a "choose-your-own-adventure" video game model and almost excessive duration. And by forcing viewers to endure "each day" with their chosen character and click through individual frames with no indication of a nearing end, viewers begin to understand what endless uncertainty looks and feels like. The broader metagame operationalizes the viewer's sense of frustration into inspired protest and action by immediately showcasing after the game ends website material about America's asylum process and relevant organizations to volunteer or donate to. ProPublica successfully harnesses the ability of games to build an augmented experience for viewers to tell compelling, emotional, and real news about asylum seekers in America.

By analyzing "The Waiting Game" through the MDAO framework, we can see how ProPublica successfully builds an augmented, game-like experience for viewers to depict the journeys of asylum seekers.

The game begins once players pick one of the five characters; afterwards, players are confronted with a loading screen. As the game slowly loads, there are short, almost taunting messages for each frame (fig. 1). At 75%, it reads, "You can fast-forward through the game, but you have to give up first." And at 95%: "Try not to give up though!" (Wei). The loading screen introduces the central mechanics of the game — waiting and, optionally, quitting. This also introduces the game's emotional dynamics: players are likely to experience emotions akin to those of real asylum seekers, such as anxiety and frustration, enhancing empathy and understanding.

Loading: 12%

Have patience. You'll need lots of it to play The Waiting Game.

Once the game loads, players begin to click through their chosen character's backstory, introducing the game's "narrative" aesthetics. Players are engrossed in the initial cloak-and-dagger storyline, where their characters either flee from abusive partners or from their tyrannous countries. Only two days into the domestic violence survivor's story, players read a suspenseful and uneasy narration: "the trunk of the car is open, and you and your son climb in [...] you hope that they do as they promise, and doesn't take you to your husband instead" (fig. 2). A soundtrack of ominous background noises like lights flickering in a dark room or large transportation vehicles surrounds the player, who can now envision themselves hiding and traveling with their character. The game offers an experienced-based play and gives off the guise of an escape mission, seemingly setting the mood and dynamics of the storyline.

Running Away

You hear a car pulling in outside. The man is late, but you try not to let that worry you. You wake your son and carry him out of the house. The trunk of the car is open, and you and your son climb in. The car drives away. You've always known that men like this are called coyotes. They're supposed take you to the border. As you lay in the trunk, you hope this one does as he promises, and doesn't take you to your husband instead.

[🔇]   [Give up] [Keep going >]

Fig. 2: Second frame of the El Salvadorian domestic violence survivor's storyline

Next, the games mechanics and dynamics become even more apparent once the character arrives on American soil. From then on, everything screeches to a halt as they wait for what feels like forever to be let in. Frames start to repeat and bleed together; for ninety-six "days", the player sees virtually identical frames titled, "Inside a Detention Center in the U.S.", causing the player to feel trapped in the simulation. No matter how many times you click to the next day, the frames keep repeating. However, players may recall the taunting introduction that bets against the player's tenacity and capacity to wait; this may give players a sense of determination to prove the developers wrong, outcompete other players, and win the waiting game. Therefore, we can appropriately describe the aesthetics of this game as a "challenge"; in other words, the game offers a competitive play.

Moreover, for every 25 waiting "days" are frames that include vivid depictions of family separation and flashbacks of violent persecution; these frames act as dynamics that encourages players to keep persisting so their character can successfully seek asylum. Unfortunately, this is not enough drive to step through even 45 simulated days for the average player (fig. 3). Once the player clicks on the conveniently placed "give up" button, the game tells you how long you made it, how many days players make it on average, and how many days a person in that actual scenario would need to wait to be granted asylum, which is around fifty times the number of days an average player manages (fig. 3).
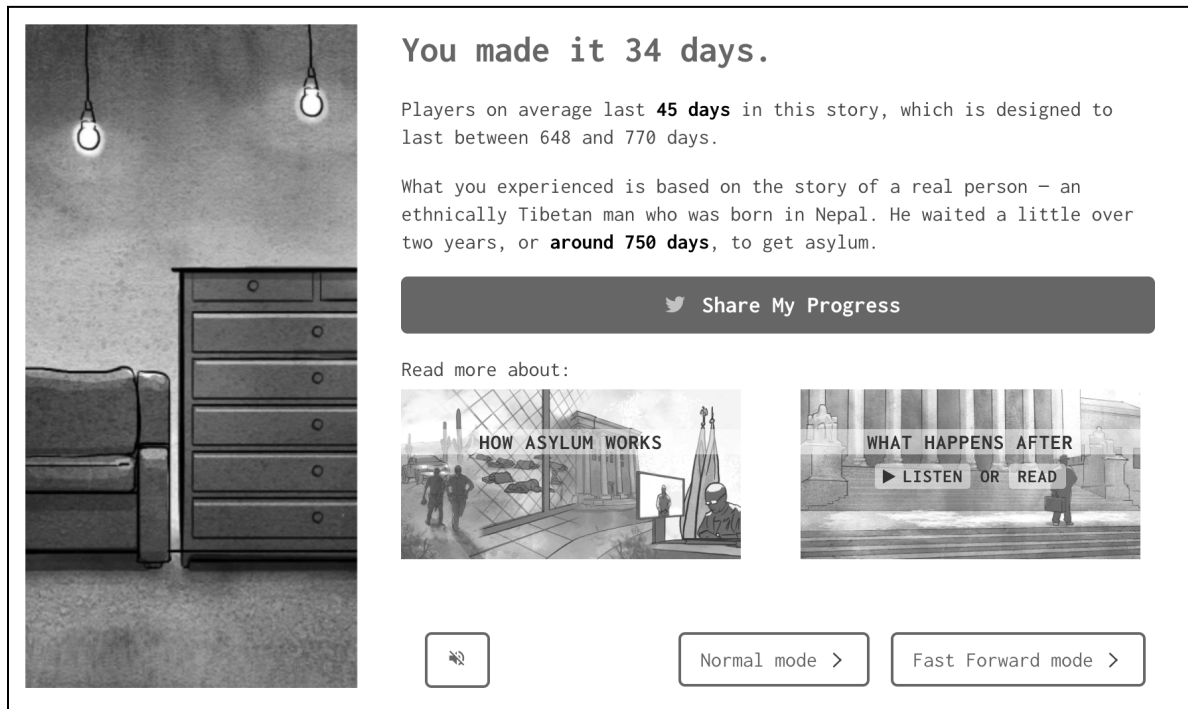
Fig. 3: The frame after players choose the "give up" button

It seems as though the only choice players can make is when to give up; however, the metagame aspect offers a rich, learning outcome. Once they have given up, players have the chance to read the website material (fig. 3), where they are first directed to Kavitha Surana's "How Asylum Works and Doesn't Work," which delves into the legal operation of receiving asylum in America. Surana expands on the deficiencies of the asylum system, whether that is the years-long waitlist for asylum seekers to appear in court or the inappropriately limited number of judges or lawyers that can be assigned to such cases. The article also contains multiple biddings to restart the newsgame with these new, relevant background details at hand; developers understand that their players develop an affinity with their character through the newsgame and therefore should feel more inclined to experience once more the simulated injustices of the asylum-seeking system. In the second linked article, "Now, Figure It Out," the author skillfully repositions the readers out of the asylees' vantage point and establishes their role as upstanders and allies. Asylum seekers do not have a "give up" button like the players do, so players should assume greater responsibility as advocates and confront dehumanizing neglect and injustices.

Works Cited

Wei, Sisi, Nick Fortugno, Kavitha Surana, and Matt Katz. "The Waiting Game." ProPublica,

Playmatics and WNYC, 23 Apr. 2018, www.projects.propublica.org/asylum/.