

Sinking Strangers No More: Playing “Climate Refugees” in Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Media representations of global warming repeatedly paint a grim picture of our collective future on a climate changed planet. As sea levels rise, temperatures become unbearable, and extreme weather events occur more often, tens of millions of people could seek refuge in the Global North. Current research highlights how the media representations of so-called “climate refugees” often rely on simplified, apolitical, and overly emotional narratives about why people leave the area they were born and the possible solutions to the “climate refugee crisis” (Bettini 2013; Hartmann 2010). Moreover, dominant discourses on climate mobilities often feed into the same long-debunked narrative of the climate migrant as both a victim of global warming and a threat to western societies.

The underlying hypothesis of this study is that video games, through their multimodal design, can challenge the uncontextualized narratives that dominate in other media and contribute to alternative climate imaginaries. Previous research in game studies has so far focused solely on representations of “climate refugees” in educational games by small game studios (Sou 2018; Plewe and Fürsich 2018; Navarro-Remesal and Zapata 2019). However, the reach and prominence of these games is evidently limited (Abraham and Jayemanne 2017). My analysis will instead focus on three games for popular consumption, each of which has sold millions of copies: *No Man’s Sky* (hereafter *NMS*) (Hello Games 2016), *Battlefield 2042 (BF2042)* (DICE 2021), and *Frostpunk (FP)* (11 Bit Studios 2018).

The objective of this study is to deconstruct the multi-faceted representations of ludofictional climate mobilities as well as their limitations through the lens of mobility theory and multimodal game studies. How does the procedural, visual, and narrative design of the games depict and simulate the “climate refugee”? How does the ludic discourse on “climate refugees” differ from other media? And what future is imaged for those subjected to climate induced migration in these games? Paying attention to the diverse representations of “climate refugees,” their production and circulation through different (popular) media is vital, as they contribute to one imaginary or other and determine how we cope with ecological risks.

In all three cases a sense of community is at the center of the ludic experience of climate migration. In *FP*, the player takes on the role of a leader of a group of climate refugees

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from London in an alternative Victorian era, in which the world has become a frosty dystopia. The player experiences the hardships of climate migrants not only as statistical information or through linear storytelling but through the multimodal layers of the game. Unlike in other city building simulation games, the player is not so much concerned with the construction of a prosperous city but with trying to cope with the catastrophic environmental circumstances and being present within their community of survivors for whom they are responsible. Their fellow refugees are not faceless and voiceless automatons but rather comment on all important decisions and demand changes if they disagree with them. In *BF2042*, the players find themselves in a semi-near future in which global warming has not only changed the entire geopolitical landscape of the world but has also led to an unprecedented refugee crisis. Stateless “climate refugees” fight in pointless wars waged by the US and Russia, the last remaining “superpowers.” Both games create alternative climate imaginaries and present the players with the terror of losing our (European and North American) environmental privilege. However, the shift from I to we in these cases does not mean that the games portray “climate refugees” as “sinking strangers” (Høeg and Tulloch 2019), lacking any individualizing features or presenting them as an endless tide of people who will inevitably become a threat to society. By creating the ludic experience of actively playing “climate refugees” the games foreground the refugee’s agency and dignity without exaggerating their suffering.

NMS, on the other hand, presents a unique case as climate mobilities are not part of the procedural and narrative design of the game. Instead, a software update changed the topographies and climates of the procedural planets in the virtual universe over night without warning, forcing a large part of the player community to conduct a climate induced mass migration (Reinhard 2021). *NMS* therefore offers game scholars an exciting research opportunity to study virtual migration patterns and practices. Players held farewell parties, left messages for others to find, in which they reminisce about their once lush planets, and discussed online how the migration to other, more welcoming parts of the universe may be carried out in a way that is feasible for all members of their respective communities.

However, while all three case studies challenge the dominant discourse on climate induced migration, they are not without their limitations. In *BF2042*, for example, many of the game’s mechanics revolve around using environmental disasters to the player’s advantage, thus presenting environmental destruction as just another opportunity for the crafty to profit from. And *FP* presents the arrival of a large group of refugees as yet another threat to the fragile infrastructure of the city and the survival of its citizenry. While they extend the range of sentiments usually associated with “mainstream” environmentalism such as guilt, shame, and blame, they do not consider the intersectionality of identity and how factors such as race, gender, sexuality, or disability affect a person’s climate im/mobility. The games therefore highlight the inherent “messiness” and ambiguity of our current environmental discourses and may even be read as cases of “bad environmentalism” (Seymour 2018).

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