

Close-Playing War Trauma: The Tension Between Agency and Inevitability in *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love*

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a formalist comparative analysis of *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love*, two narrative games that depict experiences of war trauma and displacement through distinct design strategies. Drawing on close reading, it examines how mechanics, interface structures, narrative progression, and player-character relationships shape emotional resonance and ethical engagement. While both games foreground the tension between agency and inevitability, *My Child Lebensborn* conveys this through intimate caregiving routines constrained by historical prejudice, whereas *Bury Me, My Love* embeds it within mediated communication and the precariousness of a refugee journey. Through these contrasts, the analysis demonstrates how formal design choices direct emotional investment, position the player as a relational participant-witness, and shape the expressive potential of games to represent trauma with nuance and depth.

Keywords

war trauma, formalist analysis, player agency, narrative game design

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have increasingly become important sites for the representation and mediation of war trauma. Rather than relying solely on audiovisual storytelling, games construct meaning through systems, rules, and interaction. Bogost's (2007) articulation of procedural rhetoric positions games as expressive models that communicate through their computational structures, while Isbister (2016) argues that designed interactions shape the emotional and interpersonal dynamics experienced by players. These perspectives suggest that the formal organization of a

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game has significant influence on how players encounter and interpret representations of suffering, vulnerability, and displacement.

Despite this expressive potential, most existing scholarship has examined such games individually. What remains underexplored is how games that address similar themes may nevertheless produce different emotional and ethical effects through divergent design choices. Investigating such differences is crucial for understanding not only what is represented, but how formal structures mediate player engagement and moral positioning. This research therefore intends to address the gap by adopting a comparative approach. It focuses on two independently developed narrative games that engage directly with themes of displacement and historical trauma: *Bury Me, My Love* (The Pixel Hunt, 2017) and *My Child Lebensborn*¹ (Teknopilot and Sarepta Studio, 2023). This shared aim of humanizing marginalized figures in the aftermath of war makes them well-suited for comparative analysis (McMillan, Jayemanne, and Donald 2020).

To understand how game designs construct meaning and shape effects on players, the paper adopts a formalist framework informed by Russian Formalism's concept of the dominant and the methodological model of close playing developed by Mitchell and van Vught (2023). By centering the structural principles that organize each game, the analysis traces how game interfaces and narrative branches produce particular emotional and ethical effects. Rather than evaluating the accuracy of historical or contemporary representation, the study focuses on how the games themselves orchestrate patterns of agency, limitation, and inevitability in ways that shape the player's position as caregiver or participant-witness.

Through this comparative reading, the paper demonstrates that formal design choices are not neutral vessels for conveying narrative content but active components that structure how games articulate trauma. In particular, the analysis shows how divergent design choices differentiate the player's emotional investment, position the player as a participant-witness to the characters' suffering, and determine each game's expressive capacity to represent war trauma with nuance and depth. This differentiation invites reconsideration of how pleasure operates within trauma-centered games. Through framing emotional involvement shaped by uncertainty, trauma representation may generate a form of troubling pleasure in which attachment and discomfort coexist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review synthesizes key scholarly perspectives that ground this analysis. It draws on research examining the challenges and possibilities of depicting war trauma in games, as well as scholarship that conceptualizes game design as an emotional and ethical architecture.

Representing War Trauma in Games

As games are culturally associated with play as a free, absorbing, and pleasurable activity, their capacity in representing war trauma is often questioned. Classic play theory frames play as a "voluntary activity" (Huizinga [1938] 1950, 28) and set apart from ordinary life (Caillois 1961). Against this backdrop, critics warn that rendering war as play can trivialize suffering or fold it into commodified spectacle, particularly within market logics tied to "military entertainment" (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter

2009; Mirrlees 2019, 243). Parallel debates in psychology and media-effects research amplify public skepticism by arguing that violent games may elevate aggression (Anderson & Bushman 2001; Anderson et al. 2010), though other meta-analyses and professional statements dispute the magnitude and certainty of such effects, cautioning against strong causal claims (Ferguson, Copenhaver, and Markey 2020). Given these critiques, this raises the question: how can games be used to represent war trauma?

In response to such doubts, a growing body of independent game titles demonstrates that games can move beyond trivialization to represent war trauma with nuance and affective weight. Rather than reinforcing militaristic frameworks of heroism and national pride (Smicker 2010), these games focus on civilian suffering, psychological scars, and postwar afterlives. They center marginalized voices and everyday experiences of conflict, offering what Hammer (2016) terms “counter-hegemonic commemorative play” that challenges official or sanitized portrayals. For example, *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) invites players to navigate survival under siege, depicting trauma not as a single event but as an enduring condition shaped by hunger, illness, and guilt (Nekumanesh 2017). Such games complicate war representation by emphasizing ethical ambiguity, affective labor, and noncombatant perspectives. Darvasi (2016) argues that mechanics can compel players to make uncomfortable moral decisions grounded not in photorealism but in emotional plausibility. Similarly, Jørgensen (2016) introduces the concept of “positive discomfort,” suggesting that unease and ethical tension can deepen engagement rather than diminish it. Rather than undermining pleasure, discomfort may become a meaningful and reflective mode of play. These strategies resonate with trauma studies’ emphasis on latency, repetition, and disrupted temporality (Berger 1997), indicating that games can uniquely capture trauma’s ongoing, often invisible presence.

Game Design as Emotional Architecture

The use of games to represent war trauma is further supported by scholars who argue that digital design deliberately orchestrates a spectrum of “phasic psychological responses”, such as fear, excitement and tenderness, to stage emotions with nuance (Isbister 2016; Ravaja et al. 2006, 361). Building on broader work in digital narrativity, interactivity functions as a semiotic resource that works alongside audiovisual modes to guide emotions. Experiences are thus co-constructed, as creators, systems, and audiences collectively narrate and enact stories in participatory contexts (Chew and Mitchell 2019). This dimension ensures that emotional resonance is shaped within a communal space, where design structures extend beyond individual reflection to enable shared acts of remembering and witnessing. It mirrors how societies portray war as collective memories (Drozdowski, Waterton, and Sumartojo 2019).

Turning to games specifically, treating design as emotional architecture clarifies how mechanics and narrative structures shape moral tension and ethical reflection. Narrative games place players in emotionally charged, consequential roles deepen immersion by granting them influence over outcomes, thereby intensifying emotional investment (Qin, Rau, and Salvendy 2009; Bachen, Hernández-Ramos, and Raphael 2012). Ethical tension also becomes a central mode of engagement when agency is exercised within systems that formalize moral dilemmas. As Sicart (2009) argues, titles such as *DEFCON* (Introversion Software 2006) embed ethical ambiguity into their rule-bound frameworks, requiring players to confront responsibility under sanctioned conditions of destruction. These structured choices render ethical reflection an

experiential demand rather than a purely thematic gesture. Immersive mechanics further sustain this ethical involvement through what Calleja (2011, 169) terms “incorporation,” a state in which players are both absorbed into the world and act through the avatar. When design elements cohere with a game’s moral themes, emotional resonance becomes embedded in play itself rather than superimposed from outside.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Informed by scholarly discussions of emotional engagement and persuasive design in games, this analysis centers on *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love*, both of which depict war trauma through carefully crafted game elements.

The development of *My Child Lebensborn* is rooted in a documentary impulse. Conceived by journalist Elin Festøy through her work on the lives of Lebensborn children (i.e., offspring of Norwegian mothers and German soldiers ostracized after World War II), the project sought to reach younger audiences with this underrepresented history (Hilton 2023). Festøy collaborated with Catharina Bøhler to create a narrative game designed to evoke empathy through interactive caregiving (Campbell 2017). Players inhabit the role of an adoptive parent navigating postwar prejudice caring for their adopted Lebensborn child, and as Parkin (2018) observes, the design combines caregiving simulation with emotionally weighted choices to foster a personal engagement with historical trauma.

In contrast, *Bury Me, My Love* addresses contemporary geopolitical crises. Developed by The Pixel Hunt, it is the result of extensive research into the experiences of refugees displaced by the Syrian War (Games for Learning 2019). The game recounts the fictionalized yet reality-based journey of Nour, a Syrian refugee, who communicates with her husband Majd via text messages while attempting to reach Europe (F 2019). Its mobile messaging aesthetic blurs the boundary between player and character, creating an illusion of immediacy and presence (Gach 2017; Byrd 2019).

Interestingly, the games’ receptions diverge sharply. *My Child Lebensborn* generated USD 150,000 in Steam revenue compared to *Bury Me, My Love*’s USD 10,000 (Games-Stats.com 2025a; 2025b) and received 949 reviews versus 109 reviews (Steam Store 2025a; 2025b) as of September 2025. While these statistics cannot fully capture the impact of the games, they do suggest broader engagement with *My Child Lebensborn*.

Given these parallels in thematic focus but divergences in reception, it is valuable to consider whether the differences in reception arise from the games’ design. This motivates a close reading to examine how the two games construct distinct player experiences. Accordingly, this study asks: How do the formal designs of *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love* differ in representing the shared theme of war trauma, and how do these formal differences shape the resulting player experience?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a formalist approach to examine how the design structures of *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love* construct meaning. Drawing on Russian Formalism, the analysis focuses on two key concepts: the dominant, understood as the organizing principle that coordinates a work’s aesthetic system (Erlich 1980), and defamiliarization, which Shklovsky (1965, 26) describes as a technique that renews

perception by disrupting habitual interpretation. Formalist game studies further emphasize the interplay of rules, mechanics, interface, and procedural structure in shaping meaning (Juul 2005; Vella 2019).

The methodological process is guided by Mitchell and van Vught's (2023) close-playing framework. The analysis begins with the critic's impressions as a player, then identifies foregrounded devices such as interface patterns, mechanics, and narrative structures. It next examines how these devices interact to produce tensions or harmonies that shape emotional and ethical engagement. The final step isolates each game's dominant to understand how its formal organization frames the representation of trauma.

Throughout this process, I (the first author)² reflected on my own positionality as a player. Since I primarily engage with games in Chinese, playing these European and Middle Eastern narratives in 2025 introduces cultural and temporal distance that may influence interpretation. Recognizing this positionality clarifies that the analysis foregrounds the games' formal affordances rather than generalizing audience reception.

MY CHILD LEBENSBORN: ENDURANCE IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

I played *My Child Lebensborn* on Steam for Windows. Although originally developed for mobile platforms, the PC version retains the same core mechanics and narrative structure. The game applies a cartoon visual style, emphasizing the "gameness" of the experience.

What initially intrigued me as a player was the game's emphasis on seemingly mundane yet emotionally resonant routines, such as drawing, cooking, reading bedtime stories, or spending time with the adopted child. These tasks gradually cultivate intimacy with the child, transforming everyday tasks into sites of emotional investment. The intimacy is accompanied by the presence of a resource management system that requires players to balance time and money between work and caregiving, a mechanic common in raising-simulation games such as *Princess Maker 2* (1993). The constraints introduce a layer of realism that mirrors the pressures of survival, emphasizing that care is always bound up with scarcity and compromise. Finally, the integration of real Lebensborn testimonies at the game's conclusion reframes the entire experience. Altogether, from first impression as a fictionalized caregiving simulation to the final documentary materials, the game confronts me with its basis in historical trauma, deepening its emotional impact on me as a player.

The contexts of production, narrative and consumption are examined prior to playing the game as a critic. In terms of production, *My Child Lebensborn* was developed with the ambition of raising awareness of a little-known history concerning the children born from the Nazi Lebensborn program. For the narrative context, the game draws on documentary practices and oral testimonies to situate the player in postwar Norway as an adoptive parent raising a child, Klaus or Karin, who suffers from bullying, discrimination, and social exclusion. The narrative unfolds through everyday caregiving tasks and conversations that evoke the historical atmosphere of Norway in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Rather than providing a conventional win state, the mechanics are structured around persistence and emotional endurance, which underscores both the limits and the necessity of care. This design decision reflects the developers' respect for the real Lebensborn children whose stories informed the

game and explains why the remastered version preserved the original narrative without alteration. The absence of a conventional win state also aligns with the context of consumption, as the game addresses historical events that are long past to invite players to engage reflectively rather than present a challenge to be conquered.

Foregrounded Devices: Caregiving and Illusory Agency

Three main devices are foregrounded, including the dynamics between player and non-player characters, the structuring of the user interface, and story progression.

The bond between the player and the child (I chose the girl, Karin) is foregrounded through intimate interactions such as feeding, bathing, storytelling, and even the possibility of touching her face. This closeness is juxtaposed with distance from other characters. Most non-player figures are never encountered in person; when they appear, they are often rendered in shadow. The exception is Mr. Berg, who is represented in color and physically interacts with Karin, reinforcing his role as a supportive figure. Karin's perception of others, conveyed through her conversations with the player, further mediates the player's understanding of the wider community as discriminating against the family.

Caregiving tasks are introduced incrementally, familiarizing me with the rhythm of care while emphasizing its mechanical regularity (see Figures 1 and 2). By embedding these mechanics within the user interface as a set of metrics to be managed, the game frames care as a systemic and quantifiable process rather than as a purely expressive or relational act. This design choice introduces a distinctly game-like quality into otherwise ordinary domestic routines, enhancing player engagement by providing clear quantitative feedback and thus reducing cognitive load. Meanwhile, a resource management system as represented in the user interface (see Figure 3) requires the player to balance time and money between employment and caregiving. This device is a powerful example of procedural rhetoric that shapes my experience; its rules of scarcity and compromise forced me to internalize the pressures of survival inherent in the act of caregiving.



Figure 1: Bathing is activated and introduced after Karin prompts with, "You promised to help me take a bath."



Figure 2: Eating is activated and introduced after Karin expresses that she is hungry.



Figure 3: Resource and Time Management UI as displayed across the top of the game.

The narrative unfolds across six chapters, each delineated by a thematic title accompanied by a date: *Change (Aug 17)*, *Loneliness (Sep 11)*, *Trust (Dec 11)*, *Coping (Feb 13)*, *Connection (May 5)*, and *Hope (May 25)*. This chapter-based progression establishes a linear framework that guides me through a predetermined emotional and developmental trajectory. While the game incorporates interactive dialogue options and decision points, these elements primarily serve to provide me with the perception of agency. Choices affect Karin's emotional and behavioral responses, yet they do not generate branching storylines or fundamentally alter the narrative structure. For instance, the game concludes with one of two endings, in which Karin either becomes emotionally withdrawn or retains a fragile hope, contingent on the ending of moving to another town. Over multiple playthroughs, I gradually recognized that these choices do not fundamentally alter the story, thereby foregrounding the dialogue trees as mechanisms that generate the illusion of agency, which in turn enhances the immersion (see Figures 4 and 5).

Since agency is often seen as the natural outcome of interactivity, players generally find satisfaction in performing meaningful actions (Murray 1997). However, in this case, my emotional attachment intensified despite, or perhaps because of, this lack of agency, as I developed a growing relational and emotional investment in the child I adopted over multiple playthroughs. The user interface further reinforces this illusion of agency through text prompts at the top of the screen that provide feedback on individual decisions (see Figure 6). These prompts acknowledge the immediate consequences of actions to let me think my decisions bring real impact on the child. In this sense, the design choice appears intentional, positioning the player as a caregiver who can provide emotional support yet remains powerless to alter the structural conditions underlying the child's suffering. Hence, the varying conversation details, paired with a fixed ending, serve to foreground my experience as a caregiver, inviting imagination and interpretation.



Figure 4: Karin being passive about the world.



Figure 5: Karin has some hope about the world.



Figure 6: The text on interface to provide feedback for player's choices.

Identifying the Dominant: Agency vs. Inevitability

When considered together, certain devices are foregrounded and interact to generate aesthetic tensions that shape my experience. I was given localized agency in moment-to-moment caregiving yet denied global agency to change the narrative progression which represents the structural discrimination that defines Karin's suffering. This juxtaposition highlights the limits of individual care in the face of systemic prejudice. In the player-NPC dynamics, intimacy with Karin contrasts with the social distance from other characters. I became emotionally close to the child but remained excluded from broader community interactions, mirroring Karin's isolation and reinforcing the theme of constrained agency. Through the user interface, acts of care are simultaneously personalized and abstracted: the responsive quantifiable metrics and text hints to show the impact of my behavior give me a sense of emotional agency in

the short term while emphasizing that no amount of optimization can overcome the child's marginalization in the face of discrimination by the wider community.

These tensions therefore lead to the dominant – agency vs. inevitability. The game positions the player as an active caregiver whose choices affect Karin's immediate responses, yet it also insists that the broader trajectory of discrimination and trauma cannot be undone. By juxtaposing moments of intimacy with structural constraint, *My Child Lebensborn* frames care as an act of endurance rather than resolution. In doing so, it foregrounds inevitability as its governing principle, transforming the player's role into that of a relational participant-witness, simultaneously engaged in local acts of care while confronted with structural limits beyond their control.

BURY ME, MY LOVE: CHOICES IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

I played *Bury Me, My Love* on Steam for Windows. Similar to its original mobile version, the game is presented as a WhatsApp-style messaging app, where I take on the role of the husband Majd, communicating with Nour, a Syrian migrant trying to reach Europe. The game applies a realistic visual style, which forgoes stylized art in favor of authentic renderings of its characters and settings. This choice grounds Nour's fictional journey in the tangible, documented reality of the crisis.

What intrigued me most was how the game uses its core mechanic of limited and predefined dialogue choices to build emotional attachment. Through conversation, Nour shares details about her journey, asks for my suggestions, and occasionally sends photos she has taken. One key difference from the mobile version is that the PC version includes a changing background image. These changes are triggered only when I click on Nour's photos, adding a subtle but immersive visual layer to the storytelling (see Figure 7). This further adds a sense of realism. As in real life, information that is received but ignored leaves no lasting impression; conversely, actively engaging with the information allows it to linger in one's awareness, a process simulated in the game through the background imagery.

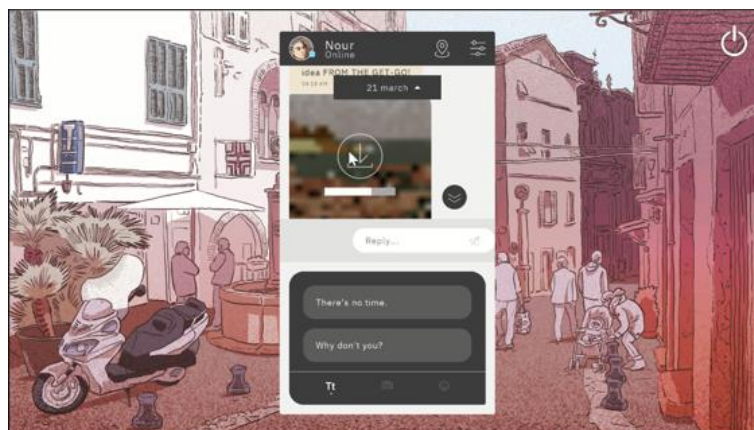


Figure 7: Background will not be changed if download is not successful.

The context of production reflects both its goals and its significance. *Bury Me, My Love* was developed through extensive research, including interviews and documentation, to ensure an authentic portrayal of the Syrian refugee experience. This ambition was supported by funding from organizations with political and cultural mandates, such as

ARTE France, which is partially controlled by the French state (ARTE 2024). Concurrently, the contexts of consumption and reception are equally significant. Released in 2017 while the Syrian war was ongoing, the game fostered empathy by offering an intimate and tangible perspective on the conflict. Its political significance was further reinforced by coverage in major news outlets such as *The Washington Post* (2019) and *BBC* (2018), both of which emphasized the game's role in educating audiences and addressing real-world issues.

Foregrounded Devices: Limited Agency but Multiple Outcomes

Firstly, the nature of my interaction with Nour is foregrounded. Unlike many games where I can immerse myself in fantastical simulated worlds, *Bury Me, My Love* limits me to a single, mundane screen to heighten realism. My agency is funneled into choosing from a restricted set of predefined dialogue responses (See Figure 8). This design choice is central to the game's thematic purpose, as it mirrors the real experience of trying to support a loved one who has begun a dangerous journey as a refugee. All information available to me is delivered through Nour's messages, and my role is limited to offering suggestions rather than directly assisting her. This makes me feel both close to her and painfully powerless, as I am stuck in the role of a distant spectator.

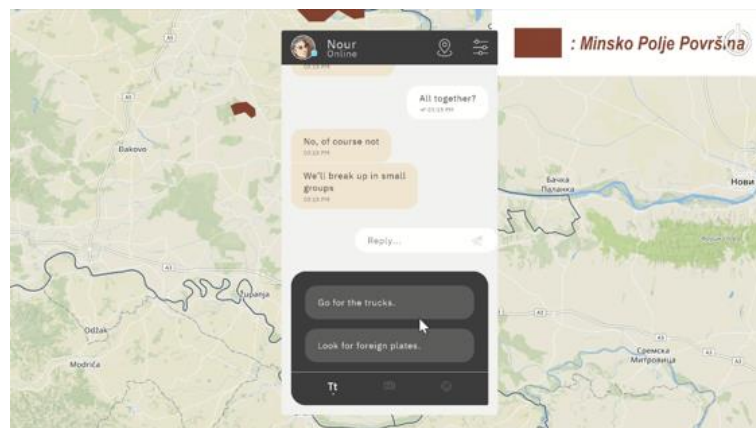


Figure 8: Limited Choices in Conversations.

This constrained interaction is not the only device foregrounded through the game's deliberately "non-gamey" design; the second is the mimetic user interface. The UI can be divided into two distinct conceptual zones. The part marked by a red square contains traditional gamey elements to exit the game (See Figure 9). In stark contrast, the central zone marked by a blue rectangle is a simulation of a commonplace smartphone messaging application. By mirroring a familiar everyday interface, the game successfully immersed me into the role of Majd and fostered an authentic emotional connection.



Figure 9: User Interface with In-Game Element (Blue) and UI Element (Red).

Thirdly, the game foregrounds the concluding devices with varied audio messages and a single unchanging ending sentence. Unlike many narrative games that resolve into defined good or bad endings, this game presents a spectrum of outcomes, from relative safety in Europe to the tragedy of death. Each outcome is accompanied by a tailored voice message that serves as my final contact with Nour, cutting through the text-based mediation with the raw emotion of her voice and turning the experience into a lived story of intimacy rather than an abstract exchange (see Figure 10). However, no matter which ending is reached, the same on-screen sentence appears (see Figure 11), further highlights that the game does not privilege one path as success or failure but instead invites the player to replay in the hope of reshaping Nour's fate. This design choice made me aware of my dual position, simultaneously immersed as a participant able to influence decisions and conscious of my position as a distant participant-witness navigating multiple possibilities.

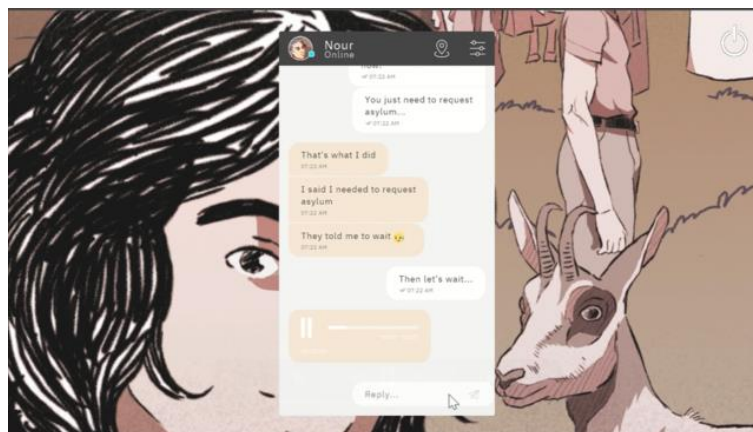


Figure 10: Ending-Specific Audio Creating a Sense of Emotion and Intimacy.

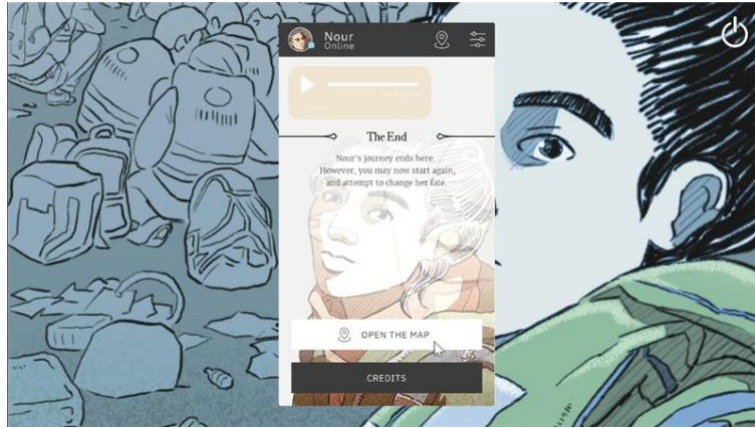


Figure 11: Identical Concluding Sentence and Invitation to Replay.

Finally, the game foregrounds the NPCs I am exposed to, contingent upon the distinct paths Nour follows and the encounters she experiences. These interactions are recorded on Steam's achievement board (See Figure 12), functioning not only as a log of progress but also as a signal that alternative routes and endings are possible. It therefore implies the player's agency in making meaningful decisions that affect outcomes.

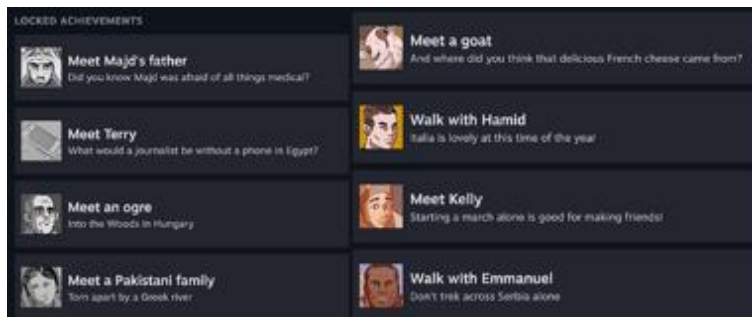


Figure 12: Achievement Board Signaling Alternative Routes and Endings.

Identifying the Dominant: Agency vs. Inevitability

When considered together, these devices interact to create tensions that shape my experience of *Bury Me, My Love*. Dialogue choices provide localized agency, allowing me to respond in moments of intimacy with Nour, yet the narrow range of predefined options underscores my inability to fully articulate my ideas. This tension between expressive choice and structural limitations reflects the precariousness of caregiving at a distance. The dialogue system therefore grants only limited local agency, which comes into further tension with a broader global agency where my choices shape the ending, but this larger impact becomes apparent only after at least two playthroughs.

The mimetic user interface deepens this contradiction by immersing me in the familiarity of a smartphone conversation while simultaneously reminding me of my mediated, powerless role. Similarly, the varied voice messages convey the emotional weight of specific outcomes and generate a sense of personal impact, but the invariant textual coda collapses these differences by reasserting the futility of control while simultaneously inviting replay.

Finally, NPC encounters and their tracking through achievements suggest a network of branching paths that expand possibilities, yet this meta-system also emphasizes that every route remains bounded within an inescapable structure of uncertainty and loss.

These tensions converge in the dominant – agency vs. inevitability. Agency is enacted through the decisions I make, which influence Nour’s responses and shape the immediate trajectory of her journey. Inevitability, however, is reinforced by the game’s structural constraints. The lack of visible feedback, restricted information, and limited dialogue options work with the narrative to present the unpredictable and uncertain challenges that Nour faces. These design choices cultivate a sense of powerlessness, positioning me as a participant-witness who keeps trying to participate in things beyond my control. Thus, it conveys the information that while players can exercise moment-to-moment influence, the broader trajectory of risk and uncertainty remains an inescapable part of the experience of a refugee.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

While both games are drawn from real-life scenarios, they differ in temporal orientation. *My Child Lebensborn* situates players in reflective engagement with historical events from World War II, whereas *Bury Me, My Love* immerses them in active, decision-driven participation in the contemporary Syrian conflict. Although both were played in 2025, after the Syrian war’s official end in December 2024 (Bland 2024), similar crises continue to unfold in regions such as Gaza, intensifying the resonance of *Bury Me, My Love*’s depiction of suffering in contemporary contexts (Mallinder 2025). By contrast, the temporal distance of World War II renders *My Child Lebensborn*’s historical events less immediate, reducing the likelihood of linking it to current affairs.

The construction of the player’s identity also differs. *My Child Lebensborn* employs a blank-slate player identity, offering no explicit social information. This openness enables direct emotional projection, as players fill interpretive gaps with their own perspectives, fostering a sense of genuine care toward the child. In contrast, *Bury Me, My Love* aligns more closely with what Lee and Mitchell (2018) term a “shell” playable character, in which the player’s identity is partially defined yet still open to interpretation. By positioning the player as Nour’s husband named Majd, the game provides a relational frame that anchors emotional context while maintaining ambiguity about personality and motivation. Thus, *My Child Lebensborn* elicits empathy through self-projection, whereas *Bury Me, My Love* does so through relational connection.

Both *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love* exemplify how interactive digital media can combine documentary research with narrative storytelling to evoke empathy and engagement. Following Isbister’s (2016) conception of game design as an “emotional architecture,” each game constructs emotional systems that sustain engagement with trauma through carefully designed mechanics and interfaces.

Firstly, the modes of player-NPC interaction further distinguish their emotional architectures. *My Child Lebensborn* employs direct, tactile caregiving actions mediated by an invisible hand and presented through a first-person perspective that fosters intimacy and immediacy. The child’s emotional state, however, depends largely on external social conditions such as bullying and community prejudice,

reminding players that care alone cannot resolve structural harm. This tension between personal effort and systemic constraint reinforces the game's emotional depth. Conversely, *Bury Me, My Love* restricts interaction to predefined text communication, emphasizing the distance and uncertainty of mediated connection. Despite limited dialogue input, Nour's emotions evolve in response to the player's messages, creating a dynamic in which her wellbeing and affect mirror the player's choices and timing. The game's restricted affordances create tension around the significance of the player's decisions, aligning with Qin, Rau, and Salvendy (2009) and Bachen, Hernández-Ramos, and Raphael (2012), who note that the structure of interactive affordances directly influences perceived agency and, consequently, emotional investment. Thus, *My Child Lebensborn* generates a sense of local agency through the player's freedom in arranging caregiving routines, whereas *Bury Me, My Love* transforms empathy into anxious attentiveness, culminating in a sense of global agency as it becomes clear after repeat playthroughs that the player's decisions do influence the overall trajectory of the narrative.

Additionally, the visual and interface designs reinforce these differing modes of emotional engagement. *My Child Lebensborn* adopts a cartoon aesthetic, using light and shadow to signal moral and emotional contrasts, supported by a game-like interface that makes progress, achievements, and resources visibly trackable. *Bury Me, My Love*, conversely, simulates the interface of a mobile messaging application, largely concealing its game structures to enhance documentary realism. Its visual realism, akin to political paintings, functions as a persuasive rhetorical device to underscore the gravity of contemporary displacement. Although visually realistic, it does not use actual photographs but instead employs stylized illustration to avoid strong ties to specific real-life settings, creating broader emotional resonance. This contrast aligns with McCloud's (1994) distinction between abstraction and realism: abstraction invites interpretive participation, while realism constrains ambiguity to emphasize immediacy and authenticity.

At a structural level, in line with Darvasi's (2016) argument that game mechanics themselves can stage emotional dilemmas, both games articulate the dominant of agency versus inevitability, though they realize this tension in distinct ways. In *My Child Lebensborn*, I initially experience an illusion of agency, as I can manage nearly every aspect of the child's daily life. However, multiple playthroughs reveal that the overarching narrative remains fundamentally linear, ending with the family's departure from the town regardless of my choices. Local agency persists in caregiving interactions, but global agency over the story's resolution is deliberately constrained. In contrast, *Bury Me, My Love* offers limited local agency. I can only select dialogue options and follow Nour's journey through fragmented text messages and photos, often confronted with sudden developments beyond my control. This design positions me less as an active participant and more as a distant observer navigating uncertainty. Yet, through repeated playthroughs, the game's branching structure becomes evident, providing genuine global agency as decisions yield distinct outcomes and thereby amplifying the ethical weight of each choice. While *My Child Lebensborn* conveys inevitability through a linear narrative, *Bury Me, My Love* conveys the same theme through the constant precariousness and dangers Nour faces, regardless of the path chosen. Thus, both games utilize Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric by designing rules balancing narrative progression and the weight of player dilemmas, persuading players by connecting the sufferings of the characters with affordances in the game.

Experientially, both generate what can be seen as troubling pleasure, in which engagement is sustained through discomfort. Drawing on Jørgensen's (2016) notion of "positive discomfort," these games structure affective investment through constraint. In *My Child Lebensborn*, repetitive caregiving routines foster intimacy, producing an endurance-based engagement. In *Bury Me, My Love*, limited dialogue and branching outcomes create anxious attentiveness and replay-driven hope. In both cases, attachment and limitation coexist, shaping ambivalent yet sustained engagement.

In both cases, interactivity functions as a mode of ethical witnessing rather than escapist play. The games respond to Smicker's (2010) critique of play as reinforcing national identity by foregrounding trauma through the experiences of marginalized civilians, aligning with Hammer's (2016) call for interactive systems that represent suffering through everyday endurance rather than spectacle. *My Child Lebensborn* localizes trauma within domestic routines, gradually revealing how systemic prejudice constrains agency and reframes caregiving as resistance. In contrast, *Bury Me, My Love* externalizes trauma through mediated distance, where restricted communication and unpredictable events reproduce the precariousness of displacement and the fragility of transnational connections.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that *My Child Lebensborn* and *Bury Me, My Love* employ divergent design strategies to articulate the dominant of agency vs. inevitability, thereby demonstrating the capacity of games to represent trauma as a site of ethical witnessing. Through formalist close reading, we have argued that *My Child Lebensborn* emphasizes endurance in the face of historical injustice through intimate routines of caregiving and fixed narrative progression, while *Bury Me, My Love* foregrounds both the precarious openness and inevitable uncertainty of contemporary refugee experiences through mediated communication and various endings. Together, these findings suggest that variations in formal design meaningfully shape how games convey the emotional weight of trauma and invite players into reflection on vulnerability, loss, and responsibility.

Importantly, by evoking troubling pleasure, in which attachment, limitation, and ethical reflection coexist, these games situate players as participant-witnesses who exercise localized influence while confronting structural constraints. Engagement is sustained not through resolution, but through ambivalent affective investment shaped by formal design.

These contrasting weightings of agency and inevitability reflect the realities each game seeks to simulate. Both frame suffering within constraints of social and structural power: *My Child Lebensborn* calls for remembrance, showing that history and prejudice cannot be undone, and that the player's care can endure but cannot alter an unchangeable past. In contrast, *Bury Me, My Love* gestures toward action, offering the hope of change. Yet, even with this agency, the danger of the refugee journey remains beyond control. The player can only help to shape the path, not eliminate its risks.

However, it is important to note that the interpretations presented here are necessarily limited by the first author's own socio-cultural background. Audience reception is shaped not only by media texts but also by prior knowledge, social

position, and cultural frameworks, making interpretation an interaction between encoded messages and culturally situated decodings (Hall 1980). In the context of games, Cerezo-Pizarro et al. (2023) demonstrate that games act as cultural transmitters, interacting with players' backgrounds to produce divergent receptions. As a Chinese player without direct exposure to the European theatre of WWII or to Middle Eastern refugee contexts, the first author's readings of these games might differ from those of players situated within those histories. Acknowledging this underscores the value of complementing close reading with attention to diverse player perspectives, thereby illuminating how social and cultural contexts mediate the reception of games.

Future research should therefore move beyond formal analysis to comparative reception studies examining how cultural background shapes players' engagement with historical games. Such work would enrich our understanding of how cultural frameworks mediate the relationship between formal design and interpretation, expanding the study toward a more culturally situated perspective.

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ENDNOTES

1 As the original 2018 release of *My Child Lebensborn* is no longer available on Steam, all mentions in this research pertain to the remastered edition.

2 While both authors played and discussed their experiences of the games, for coherence and to acknowledge that the findings largely draw from the first author’s play experiences, all descriptions of gameplay are presented in the first person.