

# Let's play the 'refugee crisis': a postcolonial deconstruction of the refugee in post-2015 European videogames

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## INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract proposes a postcolonial deconstruction of a set of European games about refugees, produced since 2015 under the cultural imaginary of the 'refugee crisis'. Across Europe, far-right ideology has steadily gained ground through an expanding grammar of hate speech based in migrant dehumanization (Malkki 2005; Bleiker et al. 2013). The paper departs from the observation that as cultural artefacts, games have responded to- and remediated the visual grammar of the 'refugee crisis' in two distinct ways. The first approach is marked by humanitarians, journalists and indie game makers increasingly looking to games as potential 'empathy machines'. Games like *Bury Me, My Love* (Playdius Entertainment, 2017), *Path Out* (Causa Creations, 2017) and *Salaam* (Junub Games, 2021) exemplify the desire to re-humanize refugees by playfully embodying their plight (Navarro-Remesal and Zapata 2019; Sou 2018; Shliakhovchuk 2024). Despite empathy-oriented design, a postcolonial reading complicates their politics, as rendering refugees as ludic objects in need of saving reproduces a colonial logic of pleasurable white heroic intervention while simultaneously allowing privileged players the ability to playfully peep into faraway worlds of suffering Others, recalling Orientalist assumptions that the Western gaze ought to be free to travel wherever it perceives there is work to be done (Pozo 2018; Mukherjee 2017).

While the first approach is marked by a politics of care, the second is marked by less overt depoliticized mode of play. European AAA games of the last decade remediate the visual grammar of the 'refugee crisis' by leaving morality to player-choice: *The Witcher III* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Horizon Forbidden West*

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(Guerilla Games, 2017 & 2022) portray refugees and camps as optional saviour-flavoured side quests, while *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian, 2024)'s core procedural logics of alignment and key narrative moments hinge upon saviourist or sadist play *vis-à-vis* the passive bodies of a group of refugees. These instances of saviourism/sadism playfully and pleurably engender the polarized European debate surrounding the need to care for refugees or fortify against them. This chapter contends that unlike so-called 'serious games' that pre-afford a particular moral positionality, these AAA productions present, on the surface, as politically neutral vessels. However, they procedurally offer highly ideologically remediations of the 'refugee crisis' wherein it is morality itself that becomes the object of play. As such, these games appeal to players across the political spectrum, positioning the refugee as a ludic object over whose passive bodies, by means of caring or dominating, players may pleurably play out their personal politics.

This paper's argument is that regardless of indie games' politics of care or AAA games' depoliticized mode of play, both ultimately come to reify the refugee as a passive morality object which functions as a mobile signifier for the European consciousness to altruistically redeem itself through or exert increasingly fascist fantasies of control over. Videogames function as persuasive ideological meaning-making machines through their visual interface as well as coded procedural limitations (Bogost 2007), and they negotiate power by means of constituting, for the player, "a theatre for asserting dominion over space through the player's mastery of gameplay" (Murray 143). The chapter thus approaches videogames as a site of political struggle, "through which forms of domination and subordination, inclusion and marginalization, and hierarchical relations are organized and ordered" (Clarke 2014, 1), with its aim to make this struggle visible within the representation of the figure of the refugee. The above-mentioned games will be analyzed for how they (dis)afford players the ability to respond to- and replay the visual grammar of the 'refugee crisis' and the particular ludonarrative catharsis to cultural anxieties on the 'refugee crisis' they offer. It aims to contribute to game studies by turning postcolonial methodologies to the question of European identity production by- and through European games under a decade of intensified far-right ideology hinging on the refugee as Europe's 21st century Subaltern.

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