

Play Ethics: : The Convergence of Art, Games and Politics

Title	Play Ethics:
Subtitle	The Convergence of Art, Games and Politics
Lead-in / Abstract	The refugee issue is one of the biggest issues facing human rights today. In Australia the situation is particularly caustic. One of the artistic responses to this has placed a refugee as the protagonist in an electronic game. Is this a successful ethical endeavour or a further media smokescreen?

Participants and speakers	Wilson, Laetitia (AU)
Short biography of participants	Based and working in Perth, Western Australia, (one of the most isolated cities in the world!) I have developed an interest in things electronic - music, art and culture. As a PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia, my research is focused on digital play, its cultural manifestations and social repercussions.
Full text	<p><i>How can you make an electronic action game out of a current, real-life refugee crisis?</i></p> <p>Rectangular concrete blocks ensconced in silver fencing, decorated by razor wire emerge from the red dust of the hot Australian desert; "...an image of another world: a landscape of the known, yet chillingly alien... the postcard familiarity of the Australian desert... is both affirmed and overturned. The outback as prison is a confined, sequestered, uncannily ordered space..."¹ This was the <i>Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre</i>; a site amongst many that became an icon for the so-called refugee crisis in Australia. This crisis unfolded when people arriving in Australia, seeking refuge, were militarily addressed; family members were separated, personal belongings removed and 'home' became a site of isolation and deprivations, uneasily positioned between prison and asylum. In such border 'zones of indistinction' detention is non-discriminatory; whole families are detained, sometimes for years at a time. This situation has caused some people to drink shampoo, whilst others sewed their lips together in a desperate attempt to draw attention to what was happening.</p> <p>Perhaps this is indicative of the gap between citizen and human being. The citizen may reside in a politically demarcated, determined and controlled sphere, human being as such, stripped bare of definitive contextual identity, detached from its sheathing, or ticket of citizenship, teeters on the edge of the nation. This plight of the refugee represents both a split between the concepts of human and citizen and a crisis in the concept of human rights. "The so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterise them as rights of the citizen of the state."² This understanding of the refugee is amplified in Australia; a country now renowned for its uncompromisingly harsh system of mandatory detention. Looked upon with a fearful and sceptical eye, the refugee in Australia is a prisoner of the desert, identified as a 'boat person' or 'non boat person', whose name is replaced by a number. Emotional public debate has dominated election campaigns and the toxic Australian media <i>mélange</i> has done little in the way of clarifying the issues. This situation is worsened by a general lack of access to the camps by independent critics. As a result, the refugee is predominantly framed as a threat; criminal, terrorist, illegal and invader. The question of how to effectively engage with the unfolding events is more than ever of critical importance.</p> <p>Now imagine you are the protagonist in a 3D action adventure <i>FPS</i>; whose context and concepts mirror the aforementioned reality. The concrete blocks (outside and in) and barren landscape are 3D rendered and the digital being of yourself and others around you is based on case-studies. You are invited to 'see the world through their eyes' - as a modern-day detainee. As you explore your desolate surroundings you must decide on the best possible course of action; decide on positive or negative outcomes for your character; make moral choices and face the consequences. An ergodic, open-ended structure promotes a gameplay based on work; on a rational, systematic approach to navigation through the game-sphere. The detention centre as your game world presents you with the familiar element of puzzles to challenge you to advance. Essentially, you are granted the electronic freedom and agency to navigate within a space otherwise inaccessible to the public.</p> <p>But questions already emerge, such as; how is the aforementioned reality and the game reconciled and, further; does it offer a new avenue for understanding the life experiences of refugees beyond the limited media depiction, or does it merely relegate them to yet another image on the over-familiar screen; thus presenting a <i>falsetto</i> of them by reducing the complexity of their lives?</p> <p>The makers of <i>EFW</i> maintain that;</p> <p><i>Escape from Woomera</i> will be an engine for mobilising experiences and situations otherwise inaccessible to a nation of disempowered onlookers. It will provide both a portal and a toolkit for reworking and engaging with what is otherwise an entirely mediated current affair.³</p> <p>This is a revealing commentary on the key polarities embodied within this game; it is both a political endeavor locating one in real-world issues and a means of play and immersion within a game realm. A portal implies traveling from one space/dimension and into another, whereas a toolkit evokes phenomenological notions of being-in-the-world. This quote both counters and confirms the proposal</p>

that the refugee and surrounding issues are distanced through the electronic-game medium (by the simulation of the events, individuals and context). There is precedence given to the idea that through playing with the events, rather than merely reading or observing them, we engage with the issues with a greater degree of intellectual involvement via interaction; "we seek to engage the player's minds – emotionally, ethically, intellectually – not just their trigger fingers"⁴ state the makers. The metaphor of tools further implies the need of a knowledge-base for useability/gameplay, characterized by thought-driven navigation through the game challenges. The 'portal', then, transports us to a very well defined and comfortable playspace, distinct from 'ordinary space', or actual space and the avatar as proxy becomes our vehicle through which to grasp an alternate perspective on the issues facing the refugee in detention. However, to my knowledge, mediation is not miraculously bypassed with this strategy; its form is merely shifted to the electronic game mode, which comes loaded with its own baggage even as it is perverted by the makers who morph it in the direction of a documentary/educative game.

There are thus several problems that stand in the way of the translation of this 'alternate perspective' and means of grappling with (or reworking) what are incredibly complex real-life issues. *EFW* is defined by strategies that unsettle the traditional understanding of the *FPS*; the position of the protagonist is inverted; satire is applied and conversation is contextual to the issues facing refugees in detention. *EFW* is initially a modification of the game *Half-Life* (later to be translated to open-source software); the aesthetics of the gameplay are - in accordance with *Half Life* - removed from the traditional symbolic imagery of the electronic game hero and morphed to call attention to the plight of a very different kind of individual as hero. Both the image of the hero and the conventional, normalised image of the refugee as weakened, impoverished and dispossessed individual are inverted and perverted through the game mechanics. Yet this strategy - along with the use of violence - risks upholding the stereotyped myth of the refugee as violent and dangerous (in other words, terrorist); feeding into dominant fears and misconceptions and, in turn, negating the cause. Or, contrarily, it risks idealising the refugee as an uncomplicated hero; (which still keeps us at a distance). Meanwhile, the use of satire is blatantly engineered in the caricature of Australian political leaders as 'boss-monsters' to be overcome. In school-yard prank style the Australian government and its processes are ridiculed. Then, the sobering strategy of conversation defines progress through the game and becomes a means of communicating issues specific to detainees. Insight into daily life is gleaned through the conversations had between detainees; amongst themselves and in interaction with the guards. Yet this strategy, too, risks falling into banality and triviality as the gravity and seriousness of the situation at hand is obstructed by the aim of escape and act of play (i.e. when conversations about the deplorable treatment of refugees are intercepted by conversations about the need to find pliers to escape). Each of these strategies – for better or for worse – do disrupt stereotypes and this is an important step in generating awareness contrary to the dominant misconceptions surrounding refugees. Yet the success of such dialogue, satire and character inversion – as a valuable contribution to the cause of refugees - remains to be seen.

A thought that is often articulated by the likes of theorists such as Gonzalo Frasca is that the "structural characteristics of video games prevent them from dealing with serious content."⁵ As players portalled to a virtual toolbox we probably wouldn't even blink an eye to the familiar binary architecture and elements of a score, an aim(s), levels, puzzles and the possibility of replayability (if things should go badly). Such basic game logic is often commented on as being one of the inherent difficulties in the path of the success of games as social commentary. Games are, generally speaking, structurally geared to operate according to a goal-orientated, win-lose logic. This internal architecture potentially detracts from the extra-gamespace actuality - signified by 'tools' - and enforces a conceptual – as well as virtual - distance from the events beyond the screen. The refugee, detained in the desert prison has no option for replayability, if caught in the act of escape. Thereby, if, as a game-player, we are immersed in the gameplay and focused on a specific goal, where is the space for reflection on, and awareness of these issues and; most importantly, the space for empathy? One of the key elements to the success of *EFW* would be its ability to generate empathy through the vehicle of virtual agency as a modern-day detainee. If we are unable to empathize with our avatar, if we are unable to put ourselves in the place of a person seeking refuge, imprisoned within a remote detention centre, then how can understanding even begin; how can we *really*, as the makers claim, "have access to and engage with this issue in an unprecedented and unique way"⁶ ?.

One of the greatest challenges of political art is the question of how events, such as the refugee crisis are to be symbolized in light of the already overbearing myth production surrounding them. *EFW* navigates within what is already a very complicated zone in terms of the politics of representation (amplified by its position as a project of convergence). For the makers, ethics are intertwined with game

structure and mobility through the game-space, they state their position;

"As game developers we do not pretend to offer a political or ethical solution to the plight of refugees in detention. Therefore we have chosen to steer away from a value-loaded, clear-cut set of outcomes representing 'winning' or 'losing'. Instead we aim to set up a simulated environment where players are empowered to explore the possibilities, to be confronted with dilemmas..."⁷

The makers may not offer a political or ethical solution, but they do maintain a position that offers a strategy for awareness; which, as we have seen, is a complicated endeavor. The application of an open-ended play logic is critical, if only insofar as it marks steps toward the resolution of the problem of the binary-structured, win-lose logic of electronic games. However, steering away from a 'value-loaded, clear cut set of outcomes' - attached to winning or losing - cannot prevent the vehicle from traversing highly value-laden terrain. When constructing a game based on a current reality, that is already so charged, one inevitably crosses dangerous ground. The *EFW* makers aim to challenge stereotypes; the refugee is humanized and information about the way they have been treated is translated. As such, the predominant framing and perpetuation of the idea of the refugee as terrorist, invader, queue-jumper, culture contaminant and usurper of resources, is unsettled. Yet these steps are walked on a controversial tight-rope, as they waver between trivialisation and didacticism and their success or fall remains to be seen in the final product. It remains to be seen whether this convergence will succeed as a cohesive mixture of playspace and thinkspace, portal and toolkit; access to a gaming audience and not solely preaching-to-the-converted. Finally, it is interesting that *EFW* has attracted opprobrium from both the Government and Refugee groups. Both of these group's concerns are essentially focused on the trivialization of serious issues by the electronic game medium. Perhaps then, the question should be; not how do you make an electronic game out of a current, real-life refugee crises, but rather, how do you play such a game...?

1. Suvendrini Perera, "What is a Camp...?", *Borderlands e-journal*, Volume 1 Number 1, 2002, http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol1no1_2002/perera_camp.html
2. Agamben Giorgio, "We Refugees", <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-we-refugees.html>
3. <http://www.escapefromwoomera.org/faq.htm>
4. Ibid
5. Frasca Gonzalo, "Ephemeral Games: is it Barbaric to Design Games after Auschwitz?", 2000, <http://www.ludology.org/articles/ephemeralFRASCA.pdf>
6. <http://www.escapefromwoomera.org/faq.htm>
7. Ibid