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Bury Me, My Love: An Introduction to Social Impact Games

Damian Gałuszka
AGH University of Kraków, Poland
dagal@agh.edu.pl

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Abstract

Bury Me, My Love (2017, Playdius Entertainment) is an intriguing project addressing a significant social issue: the phenomenon of displacement and refugees. This game serves as an example to illustrate the potential of digital games as a medium for commenting on and interpreting existing realities, showcasing their critical, educational, and even transformative value—concepts collectively described as "social impact gaming". This game, along with other titles mentioned in the article, represents a production that is relatively simple to implement: inexpensive, straightforward, and not demanding in terms of hardware requirements. Yet it simultaneously offers insights into the mechanisms underlying the emergence of significant social issues, thereby holding an advantage over both AAA games and traditional media. A detailed examination of specific elements of this game (case study) will help identify possible strategies for its application in contexts beyond entertainment, which is a critical aspect of "social impact gaming".

Keywords: video games, refugees, social impact games, serious games

1. Introduction

Bury me, my Love is a multiplatform narrative video game that can be classified as a serious game. This production illustrates one of the most vital contemporary social issues—the phenomenon of forced migration—which constitutes the foundation of socially engaged games, also referred to as social impact games. Originally released in 2017 for mobile devices running Android and iOS, the game is a collaborative work by The Pixel Hunt, Figs, and ARTE France. In

2019, editions for the Nintendo Switch handheld console and personal computers were introduced to the market—the latter being available via the digital distribution platforms Steam and itch.io.

Bury me, my Love exemplifies a relatively accessible game due to its low price point (averaging approximately $5) and broad availability across various hardware platforms. It is also user-friendly, due to its simplified mechanics and the use of a touch-based interface. At the same time, the production offers insight into complex and nuanced social mechanisms. This juxtaposition of simplicity and depth of message distinguishes the title both in comparison to other major AAA (Triple-A) games and to traditional media.

Although *Bury me, my Love* does not introduce a novel subject, it stands out through its form and approach to the central theme. It is also a game in which the developers employ rarely used design solutions, such as the integration of interfaces (hardware and software) and notification mechanics that extend beyond the game world. These features—mentioned here and discussed in detail below—are valuable from the perspective of practical implementations and educational interventions. Therefore, this title merits in-depth analysis in the form of a case study.

2. Literature review

The origin for the creation of *Bury me, my Love* was the encounter between the game's author, Florent Maurin, and Dana—a Syrian refugee who survived the journey from Damascus to Europe. Through a series of meetings, the core design principle was developed: to faithfully recreate the way refugees use mobile messaging apps on their smartphones to stay in touch with friends and family (GDC, 2018). This approach to gameplay aligns with the type of play that French philosopher and sociologist Roger Caillois termed as *mimicry*, in which players imitate and assume roles, co-creating a virtual world and thereby shaping their attitudes based on observation and a sense of immersion (Słomczyński, 2014).

According to the developers, *Bury me, my Love* is a reality-inspired game, based on actual events (GDC, 2018). It is one of many games that originate from a reflection on social issues. This entanglement with social themes and the attempt to influence audiences are characteristic of socially engaged games (Ruggiero, 2013), which, in a broader context, are reflected in initiatives such as *Games for Change* or *Games for Impact* (Ashton, 2007). The starting point for such projects is usually the personal views or experiences of authors, which are then elaborated upon using collected materials and transformed into the form of a digital game. This approach is typical of serious games—productions in which the primary aim is not entertainment, but rather education and awareness-raising through gameplay (Michael, Chen, 2005, p. 21; Charsky, 2010, p. 179). In this context, "social impact games" may be understood as at least

partially overlapping with serious games, as they are titles that address social challenges by fostering empathy, influencing behaviour, or promoting collective change (Grace, 2023). The sense of engagement (immersion) in the observed or reenacted events can enhance the educational potential of a given production (Gee, 2003; Charsky, 2010).

Depending on the type of serious game, this educational component may affect the player in different ways. It may involve an attempt to provoke a reaction or reflection through a high-quality aesthetic experience (art games), a critical commentary on current events (news games), a disruption of the boundary between the game world and the physical world (pervasive games), a mechanism of empathic identification (empathy games), or even shock (radical games). What is particularly interesting is that *Bury me, my Love* incorporates elements of several of these subtypes of serious games, which contributes to the uniqueness of this title. At the same time, adopting such a perspective entails the risk of an imbalance between entertainment and serious aspects, which in some cases results in games that fail to provide satisfying gameplay; this will be noted with regard to *Bury Me, My Love* later in the article.

3. Methodology

The following description of *Bury me, my Love,* is based on the mobile version of the game and, in order to avoid spoilers, does not include specific details about its narrative. The choice of this edition is primarily motivated by the developers' recommendation who suggest on the official website (www.burymemylove.arte.tv), that the game should be played on a smartphone as it offers the most immersive experience. The following analysis is based on the ontological model of game analysis developed by Espen Aarseth and Paweł Grabarczyk, which consists of four layers: physical, structural, communicational, and mental, each subdivided into three sublayers. The physical layer concerns the material aspects of the game; the structural layer addresses its mechanics, code, and economic model; the communicational layer pertains to the ways information is conveyed (including the interface); and the mental layer relates to the player's experiences and perceptions (Aarseth, Grabarczyk, 2018). The choice of mobile version is directly linked to the game's communicational layer, which—across its presentational (appearance, graphics, and sounds), semantic (all conveyed meanings and information, from simple commands to full narratives), and interface (non-diegetic information directed solely at the player) dimensions—is built around the metaphor of a smartphone and simulates information exchange via a mobile messaging app, which is a core design principle. In practice, this means the player performs simple operations on a touchscreen interface, such as receiving and sending messages in various forms—primarily textual, and less frequently symbolic (emoticons) or graphical (photos).

4. Results

A distinctive feature that sets the discussed game apart from others is its "desktop"-style interface. Based on the fundamental division into hardware and software interfaces, as well as input (which determines the scope and nature of information the user can transmit to the device) and output (which governs the form of feedback from the device to the user) interfaces (Celiński, 2011; Bomba, 2014, p. 82), we can assert that in this case, the software output interface presented in the game fully corresponds to the hardware input interface when using the Android or iOS version of *Bury me, my Love* that in a result "maps the temporal structures of refugee experience onto the lives of its players" (Nijdam, 2022). This is a highly uncommon situation, as interaction within virtual environments is typically mediated through hardware controllers (usually a keyboard, mouse, or a gamepad), which indirectly translate the player's physical actions into the game world. Certain exceptions include steering wheels or joysticks, which allow for more direct manipulation of vehicles in racing games or flight simulators.

It is also important to consider the software layer of the interface, which generally includes abstract elements superimposed on the represented world. These are typically various non-diegetic textual or visual messages accessible only to the player, such as HUDs displaying item attributes, maps, or health indicators (Iacovides et al. 2015, p. 13). In contrast, diegetic elements are those that constitute the game world and narrative, therefore are accessible to both the player and the character they control (ibid.). Launching *Bury me, my Love* on a smartphone creates a rare scenario in which the hardware interface (the smartphone) is identical to the communicative layer of the game—both in terms of diegetic and non-diegetic elements. In other words, the player observes the game world through the hardware output interface, i.e., the screen of their device, on which messages exchanged between the two main characters—Nour, fleeing Syria for Europe, and her husband Majd, who is forced to stay behind—are displayed.

Other productions, such as *Her Story* (2015, Sam Barlow) or *SUPERHOT VR* (2016, SUPERHOT Team), also simulate fragments of the hardware input interface within the game world. In *Her Story*, this is a computer, while in *SUPERHOT VR*, it is a virtual reality (VR) headset. Choosing to play these games on the hardware platform suggested by the game's design unifies the gaming experience not only at the level of the game system, its rules, and the player's impressions and mental imagery, but also in terms of the specific physical actions required to continue gameplay (Nitsche, 2008, p. 15). Such game design can enhance the sense of sensory immersion in the observed virtual reality (Heim, 1993, pp. 154–155)—which reduces the cognitive distance between the displayed image and its viewer, between the virtual and physical worlds (Maj, 2015, p. 372). In *Bury me, my Love*, this results from the exceptionally strong

embedding of the game's communicative layer in the interface metaphor, making the player feel as though they are genuinely (almost physically) participating in the events. The player knows from the description and narrative that they are assuming the role of someone communicating via mobile phone—and they are indeed doing so, both in the game world and on their own device.

This phenomenon does not occur when *Bury me, my Love* is played on a personal computer or even on a Nintendo Switch console, which may reduce the enjoyment of gameplay for some users and, in extreme cases, lead to the opposite of immersion–emersion, which weakens the sense of direct participation in the game's events (Kubiński, 2016, pp. 69–70). Therefore, the developers' encouragement to experience their game on a mobile device is understandable. The impression of deepened engagement is further enhanced by the audiovisual design, which, while not extensive, has been crafted with attention to detail. The developers paid close attention to elements such as message reception animations and intricately drawn graphics that imitate photographs. In addition to the main view of the messaging interface, the game also features a menu, a map, and an integrated journal in which certain content—such as images received during the virtual conversation—is saved. At the same time, the game's sound layer has been reduced to a minimum, consisting of a notification sound, a few short recordings, and a single musical theme that plays at specific moments, such as when transitioning to the next day of the journey. Vibrations signalling incoming messages also contribute positively to the impression of participating in an authentic conversation.

Educational content can be embedded in the narrative, descriptions (of characters, tasks, or the game world), but also in the game mechanics themselves. The latter—an approach unique to games—is often referred to as procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). In the case of the discussed production, the game teaches through its core mechanics, raising awareness of the challenges involved in helping a loved one from a distance, particularly in a complex situation such as attempting to cross into another country. This stems from the fact that not every decision that seems appropriate from Majd's perspective—the main character controlled by the player—leads to a positive outcome for Nour, his partner and a refugee navigating a dangerous route to Europe, who is located in an entirely different place. For instance, suggesting that she hides money in her underwear results in a favourable outcome, as Nour avoids losing her funds during a search. However, encouraging her to apply for asylum proves detrimental, as it leads to her being stuck in a refugee camp for many months. As a result, the player is confronted with the consequences of their decisions—they are no longer passive observers of events but actively co-create them through the procedures (algorithms, mechanics) embedded in the game. Importantly, due to the ergodic nature of this medium, the player can restart the game multiple times and enact different versions of Nour and Majd's story, thereby gaining a completely different (holistic) perspective on the entire issue.

Bury me, my Love also serves as a specific commentary on the existing socio-political situation. Admittedly, the game lacks the temporal immediacy characteristic of typical news games, which are usually released shortly after the events they aim to comment on. However, the inspiration behind the game lies in the ongoing Syrian civil war, which has persisted since 2011, and the broader issue of migration—particularly forced displacement—remains highly relevant. The game engages with this ongoing discourse in a highly specific and previously unexplored manner. This is not merely a matter of addressing the topic itself. In the past, several serious games have tackled similar issues. What distinguishes *Bury me, my Love* from those earlier titles, however, is the unique form it adopts, as previously described, as well as the mechanics that will be discussed further.

Of course, this game is not merely a straightforward, informative depiction of the relationship between two individuals gradually becoming geographically separated. While it does contain factual information—for instance, descriptions of cities visited by Nour, including population figures or explanations of why a given metropolis constitutes a key point along the refugee route—it also reveals the everyday struggles of a displaced person. These include lack of access to Wi-Fi or electricity, communication difficulties, harsh camp conditions, confusion over local legal intricacies, uncertainty about choosing the right route, and a range of fears concerning both personal safety and the fate of family members left behind in Syria. The game also incorporates elements designed to evoke a sense of empathy or emotional resonance in the player: illustrations of the protagonists' war-torn hometown streets, reports of the death of another acquaintance, or narrative fragments that portray the sorrow of the couple's separation. Together, these components create an authentic message that allows for a deeper understanding of stories familiar from TV screens—yet without the sensationalism often characteristic of televised representations.

This approach is also linked to the fact that *Bury me, my Love* offers the player multiple possible endings. As a result, Nour does not necessarily reach Germany; she may, for example, become stranded in a Bulgarian refugee camp. There are many such scenarios, and the final outcome depends on the suggestions the player sends to Nour through the "fingers" of her husband, Majd. Interestingly, Nour possesses her own independent and strong-willed personality and does not always follow the player's advice, which enhances the credibility of the experience and reinforces the realism of this unconventional gameplay.

However, this commentary is not always neutral and contains an ideological dimension that is not immediately apparent. As the player becomes immersed in the relationship between the two protagonists and learns more about it, a perspective on the refugee crisis—embedded by the developers—gradually emerges. For example, in the description of Berlin, the developers reference

Angela Merkel's famous 2015 statement about Europe's "wide opening" to refugees (Deja 2015). This directly informs Nour's destination: Germany. Furthermore, in the couple's conversations, certain expressions appear that convey not only evaluations of the events depicted in the game but also of exclusionary attitudes held by some Europeans. One illustrative example is a moment when Nour encounters difficulties crossing yet another border, prompting a dialogue with Majd in which two contrasting European attitudes toward refugees are juxtaposed: a negatively framed hostility and a more ambiguous, difficult-to-judge fear.

One element of *Bury me, my Love* that merits discussion, is the implementation of certain game mechanics. In this respect, too, the game is not particularly complex; however, one especially noteworthy feature is the notification system for unread messages. If the player grants the game the appropriate permissions on the mobile device, they will periodically receive notifications directly from the game. In this way, the production does not merely break the so-called "magic circle" of gameplay—it actively "intrudes" into the player's everyday life. Whether or not this is a deliberate design choice, the game reproduces contemporary models of communication, in which various actors—both human and non-human—compete for the limited attention of mobile device users (Hoffman, Novak, 1996, p. 53), sometimes resulting in the problem of information overload (Andrejevic, 2013, pp. 14–15). However, the point here is not simply to replicate this dynamic, but rather to offer a striking, even physical (measured in minutes or hours) reminder that not everything is within the player's control—especially when Nour's status is marked in red, indicating she is offline.

This unusual displacement of the player from the "pedestal" of agency is also present in another serious game, *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016, Numinous Games), in which players are deprived of any real influence over the fate of a dying child. In *Bury me, my Love,* waiting for the next notification produces unexpected effects: the player may feel impatience, anxiety over the lack of a response, or even fear of having missed something—an experience sometimes described as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Yet above all, what the player experiences is a profound sense of helplessness, which powerfully conveys the drama faced by fleeing refugees and their families—one of the declared aims of the discussed production (GDC 2018).

However, the reported reception of *Bury Me, My Love* is mixed. Some critics and players raised concerns that led to negative reviews. Based on public opinions on platforms such as itch.io (2025), Steam (2025), and Metacritic (2025), criticism centres on:

- Poor socio-cultural representation and lack of authenticity: misrepresentation of the refugee experience, trivialization of suffering, and perceived Western bias.

- Ethical and political issues: accusations of exploiting the subject matter, claims that the game undermines the appropriateness of games for addressing social issues, and oversimplification of the Syrian refugee crisis.
- Simplified characterization and storytelling: unrealistic behaviour attributeed to Nour and an emotional distance in the narrative.
- Gameplay and design limitations: absence of meaningful choices, low replayability, text overload, and bugs or errors (notably in some ports).

These observations suggest that *Bury Me, My Love* may not suit players expecting fast-paced, more dynamic gameplay, complex storytelling or vivid audiovisuals. At the same time, players with biographical or cultural ties to the subject matter may react less positive. Thus, such challenges should be addressed before exposing these groups to the game.

5. Discussion

Bury Me, My Love serves as a compelling example of a serious video game with significant potential for social impact. This title offers a distinctive interface, immersive experience, procedural structure, and core mechanics that effectively simulate complex social phenomena, such as the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the game is accessible due to its low cost and minimal hardware requirements, and it remains intuitive and user-friendly, even for individuals with limited gaming experience. These characteristics make it a potentially valuable tool in various educational settings and as an instrument for social intervention—particularly in contexts constrained by limited resources, such as insufficient educators' skills, tight budgets, or time restrictions.

The game exhibits features that are essential for any social impact game: assisting or guiding others (in this case, not other human players but an in-game companion), engaging with moral and ethical dilemmas (arising from the advice given and choices made), learning about societal issues (such as tensions between local populations and refugees), and gaining insight into broader social challenges (including civil wars and humanitarian crises) (Ruggiero, 2013). Therefore, potential applications include, but are not limited to:

- Self-education: tangential learning through gameplay and extension to other media (films, articles, etc.).
- Learning by doing: interactive messaging with a (virtual) refugee rather than passive watching or reading their stories.
- Collective discussion: conversations about the different paths Nour takes on her journey to Europe.

- Comparative analysis: examining varying European responses to refugees as depicted in the game.
- Peer assessment: evaluating alternative in-game decisions made by players.
- Retrospective learning: assessing historical circumstances depicted in the game by their real-world consequences (e.g., migration policies in the EU).
- Cross-curricular learning: integrating knowledge from different domains (e.g., culture with geography, law, or ethics).
- Empathy and perspective-taking: emotional processing of gameplay combined with reflection to foster understanding of people affected by migration crises.

Educators can also adopt a mixed approach. For example, raise awareness about the migration crisis by using the game as an interactive story and combining it with methods such as creative writing or journaling. Players might propose alternative endings, suggest upgraded mechanics, or write a journal from the protagonist's perspective.

At the same time, it is important to note that the proposed applications should be directed toward individuals with sufficient emotional maturity and sensitivity. This is necessary to avoid exposing younger audiences or those unprepared—due to personal trauma or difficult experiences—to the game's challenging content. The game is recommended for audiences between 15 and 18 years old (Gaming4skills, 2022). This is a potential limitation in the game's broader applicability. Anyone who intends to introduce *Bury Me, My Love* in any context should also consider the arguments of critically attituded players, especially when the game will be presented to people culturally or biographically related to its main theme.

Another limitation is the lack of robust empirical data regarding its actual effectiveness in educational interventions, which underscores the need for further research among player populations.

6. Conclusions

Digital games have become a significant medium in contemporary societies, particularly (but not only) among younger generations. This medium not only offers a comprehensible form of communication but, more importantly, provides an engaging and attractive mode of expression. As such, it holds the potential for more effective influence, especially when compared to traditional media. Within this framework, *Bury Me, My Love* emerges as a potentially valuable tool for shaping attitudes toward refugees.

Consequently, future initiatives and educational interventions addressing the broadly defined migration and refugee crisis should consider incorporating this—and similar–production. Their capacity to combine emotional engagement with experiential learning makes them promising assets in fostering empathy, critical reflection, and social awareness.

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Damian Gałuszka is a sociologist specializing in socio-technological dynamics, with a focus on digital ecosystems including video games, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. He serves as an assistant professor at the AGH University of Science and Technology and collaborates with EduVRGameLab on research related to immersive media. Author of several publications and active participant in international academic networks, he supports public, private, and NGO partners in designing research, producing analyses, and delivering expert lectures and workshops. He integrates practical gaming experience with scientific inquiry in both research and teaching. His personal website: www.grywrodzinie.pl