

13. Playful identity politics: How refugee games affect the player's identity

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Contemporary computer games are increasingly being used both to entertain people as well as to “educate, train, and inform” them (Michael and Chen 2006). Refugee games belong to this so-called genre of “serious games”: these games frame refugee issues by letting the player taste life as a refugee. Refugee games have the potential to convince players of the veracity of a certain point of view or the necessity of a behavioral change. But they also help non-profit organizations (such as the United Nations and Free Press Unlimited) and commercial enterprises (such as Reebok, the music channel MTV, Microsoft, and Konami) to reinvent activism and political engagement for the Internet generation. During the last few decades, refugee games have addressed all kinds of political problems. *Against All Odds* (2005), *Food Force* (2005, 2011), *Darfur is Dying* (2006), and *On the Ground Reporter: Darfur* (2010) were used as educational tools to teach people about what it is like to be a refugee, about famine and humanitarian aid, and the hostilities and genocide in Darfur.¹

In this chapter I examine how serious games frame refugee issues in ways that are specific to the medium. My analysis is primarily theoretical: it aims at a conceptual clarification of how (playing) these kinds of games can affect the player's identity.² The starting point of my investigation is the conceptual framework of cognitive scientist and linguist George Lakoff who theorized how issues such as the environment, poverty, education, health care, and social change, which are today addressed in serious games, constitute a politics of identity. Though he provides a productive framework for understanding how those issues are intimately tied to one's identity, both personal and cultural, he does not address the question of how the form of a specific medium embeds itself in the message. Referring to three different modes of participation – reconstruction, deconstruction, and construction – I will further develop Lakoff's framework in order to turn it into an analytical toolkit in the domain of Computer Game Studies.

In the first section of this chapter, I analyze the ways in which the field of serious games defines the “seriousness” of these games and their effect on the forming of identity. In the second section, I will introduce Lakoff's concepts of “metaphor” and “framing” in order to be able to analyze *Food*

Force (2005, 2011) and *Darfur is Dying* (2006) from “a family-value” perspective in Lakoff’s sense of the term. I suggest that players “play their identity” on the basis of who they are and how they understand themselves. In the third section, I focus on the medium-specificity of these games, arguing that they not only represent refugee issues, but that they also invite the player to interact with them. Both representations and interactions are designed according to ideologically motivated rules the player has to master in order to win the game. I will evaluate whether the games’ potential as educational tools lies in strengthening or changing the basic dimensions of human experience: knowing, feeling, and acting.

The impact of serious games

When we take into account the ways in which the field of serious games – practical as well as theoretical – defines the “seriousness” of these games, we can develop the following provisional definition: Serious games are games that are designed and used with the intention or purpose to address the most pressing contemporary issues and to have real-life consequences, for the world outside the magic circle of the game as well as for the player of the game, during and after playing. In this definition, five elements play a crucial role: 1. The intention or purpose with which these games are designed; 2. The intention or purpose with which they are used in a specific context; 3. The issues addressed by these games; 4. Their possible real-life effects on the outside world; and 5. Their impact on the player.

The first element is part of Michael and Chen’s definition of serious games. Serious games “have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational *purpose* and are not *intended* to be played primarily for amusement [...] there is another purpose, an ulterior motive in a very real sense” (2006, 21; my italics). The Serious Games Initiative (SGI) aims at helping to organize and accelerate the adoption of computer games for a variety of challenges facing the world today. It emphasizes the second element, the serious *use* of games. On their website, SGI writes that they focus on the use of games in education, training, health, and public policy. Not only non-entertainment games especially designed for such a serious use, but also many commercial games are already in use for purposes other than entertainment. Titles such as *SimCity*, *Civilization*, *Hidden Agenda*, and others have been used as learning tools in schools and universities across the globe. The third element – the “seriousness” of the *issues* addressed by these games – can be found on the website of Games for Change (G4C). G4C facilitates the

creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. These games are worlds constructed from particular viewpoints and expressing particular ideas. The fourth element – a focus on real-life *effects* – can be found on the sites of Games for Health (GfH) and the Serious Games Initiative. GfH's mission is to foster awareness of, education about, and development of games that have a positive impact on the health of communities and health care. SGI wants to solve problems in areas as diverse as education, health care, national defense, homeland security, corporate management, and more. The impact of serious games on the *player* – the fifth element – becomes clear when we have a look at the persuasive power of these games. These games are designed to engage and manipulate the players' identity in specific ways. This is illustrated best in the following description: “[serious games] attempt through their content and social practices to recruit people to think, act, interact, value, and feel in certain specific ways” (Gee 2003, 44).³

Both *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* adhere to all of these five conditions. They are serious games, because they are designed (element 1) and used (element 2) on their website and in classrooms with the intention and purpose of engaging players and raising their awareness (element 5) in order to have a real-world impact on (element 4) the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and food crises all around the world, respectively (element 3).

One thing needs to be emphasized here. From the perspective of medium-specificity that I advocate in this chapter, both intentionality and purpose have to be related to the ways in which different modes of player participation are designed as part of the game. The three modes of player participation (re/de/construction) that I propose in this chapter add to the “if” and “how” of a game becoming a serious play experience. In other words, it is insufficient, though helpful, to find out what the intentions or purposes behind a game's design are by asking the game director of *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, for example) or by studying annual reports of the organization which commissioned the game (the WFP, for example). Intentionality and purpose always (also) have to be analyzed in relation to how these modes of participation are embedded in the game design itself, as we will see in the third section of this chapter.

Refugee games: Playing your identity

Games for Change (G4C) was established in 2004 as a sub-group of the Serious Games Initiative. Two games that perfectly fit the framework of the

G4C-initiative are *Darfur is Dying* (2005) and *Food Force* (2005; 2011). *Food Force* is a social networking game that was released by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). It builds on the success of the downloadable PC version that was played by over 10 million users worldwide since its release in 2005.⁴ The 2005 original tells the story of a food crisis on the fictitious island of Sheylan. The free downloadable game provides players with information about the outside world: "In the world today hundreds of millions of people suffer from chronic hunger and malnutrition". Furthermore, players can learn about WFP's mission to fight hunger worldwide and learn how they can actively support the WFP activities (cf. WFP 2006, 43). The 2011 sequel takes players online as part of Facebook and connects players with their friends to deliver humanitarian aid across the globe and impact the real world. On the games' website, you can also play two additional educational games *Freerice* and *Hunger IQ* that have real-world consequences. After people play these games, sponsors donate rice and warm meals to the WFP.

Darfur is Dying was the winner of the Darfur Digital Activist Contest launched by the music channel MTV in partnership with the Reebok Human Rights Foundation and the International Crisis Group during the G4C-conference in October 2005. The goal of the student contest was to design a computer game that raises awareness about the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan where civilians run the risk of being killed or raped by militias backed by the Sudanese government. By playing the game the player becomes involved in this world. The game was released in March 2006 at the *Darfur is Dying* website where it can still be played for free. The website describes the game as "a narrative based simulation where the user, from the perspective of a displaced Darfurian, negotiates forces that threaten the survival of his or her refugee camp". On the game's website, the player can play the game ("Help stop the crisis in Darfur. Start your experience") and can receive background information about the crisis in Darfur ("In the Darfur region of western Sudan, a genocide is occurring") and the different ways in which he can try to stop the crisis ("Take action. Do something now to stop the crisis in Darfur"). Players can contribute toward stopping the crisis in Darfur by sending a message to the US President, by asking their representatives to support funding for African Union peacekeepers, and by beginning a divestment movement on their college campus.

Lakoff's concepts of "metaphor" and "framing" allow me to analyze the political rhetoric of these kinds of refugee games. The emerging body of research on framing has signaled the latest paradigm shift in political-communication research (cf. Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 10). The most recent stage of research into political effects can be situated in the 1980s

and early 90s: “The term ‘framing’ refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience” (ibid., 12). According to Lakoff, metaphors frame our understanding of the world: “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature [...] *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 3, 5). According to Lakoff:

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing *is* social change (2004, xv).

In order to increase our understanding of how both these games frame political issues, it may be insightful to approach them from a “family values” perspective. According to Lakoff, “we all have a metaphor for the nation as a family [...] because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small ones, like families or communities” (ibid., 5). Contemporary American political discourse is divided into “two different models of the family: a [Republican, conservative] strict father family and a [Democratic, progressive] nurturant parent family model” (ibid., 6). According to the metaphor of the nurturant parent, “in foreign policy the role of the nation should be to promote cooperation and extend these values to the world” and to focus on “international institutions and strong defensive and peacekeeping forces” (ibid., 40, 63). This metaphor differs from the metaphor of the strict father that, in foreign affairs, leads to the following: “The government should maintain its sovereignty and impose its moral authority everywhere it can, while seeking its self-interest (the economic self-interest of corporations and military strength)” (ibid., 41).

An example of a political discussion where these two models collide is the attitude of the United States towards the United Nations. According to Lakoff, “most of the United Nations consists of developing and underdeveloped countries. That means they are metaphorically children” (ibid., 11). Having displayed its aversion to the United Nations time and again, the Bush administration opted for the strict father worldview. Because in *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* the United Nations Peace Operations and the United Nations World Food Programme are represented as organizations that are

able to – literally – “nurture” their family members, both games express the values of the nurturant parent family model.

The Democrat Lakoff favors a foreign policy based more upon nurturant parent values, such as protection from harm, community building, caring, and responsibility. His descriptions of these values resonates in the goals of both games: protection from harm equals “an effective military for defense and peacekeeping”. Building and maintaining a strong community equals “building and maintaining strong alliances and engaging in effective diplomacy”. Caring and responsibility equals “caring about and acting responsibility for the world’s people; world health, hunger, poverty [...] rights for women, children [...] refugees, and ethnic minorities” (ibid., 92).

Because of their ideological focus, serious games such as *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* constitute what Lakoff calls “a politics of identity” (Lakoff 2002, 289). The player of these kind of games generally (as we will see in the next section) accepts the purposes, the goals, and the very mode of life of the game. The actions during the game strengthen the very identity of players, reinforcing the values they have and the values they want to live by. What Lakoff writes about voting, I would argue, also applies to playing serious games. People do not only “vote” for their identity (Lakoff 2004, 19), they also “play” their identity: people play their values, they play the games they identify with, they play on the basis of who they are, how they understand themselves, what values they have, and who and what they admire. *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* both reinforce the nurturant parent values from – as Lakoff calls it – a Democratic, progressive point of view.

Before I analyze in more detail how both *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* involve players in these nurturant parent values in a medium-specific way, it is important to show that the United Nations strongly adheres to these values. James T. Morris, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, refers to “the United Nations family” and “the whole UN family” (WFP 2006, 5-6). In *The WFP Mission Statement* and in its *Annual Report 2005*, the World Food Programme describes the responsibility the international community has for primary health care, access to clean water, proper hygiene; it emphasizes the fact that food aid is essential for social and humanitarian protection; and it stresses the importance of helping people survive and rebuild their lives. In their *Mission Statement* and their *New Challenges, New horizons. Year in review 2006*, the United Nations Peace Operations also refer to “the United Nations family” (UNPO 2007, 24); to the international community’s “duty of care”; to its responsibility to support health care missions; to the protection of community and minority rights; and to the protection of human rights. And on its news blog, the WFP describes how

Food Force (2011) works: “Money spent by players goes to fund WFP school meals projects in the real world. These projects provide daily meals to 20 million children every year, helping to keep them in school while providing them with the energy they need to learn”.⁵

The medium-specificity of computer games

Computer games rely on rule-based interactions as their core mode of signification:

A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Juul 2003, 35; see also Juul 2005, 6-7).

In order to answer the question of how both *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* frame refugee issues and thereby strengthen or change the basic dimensions of human experience, we will have to focus on the six different game features distinguished by Juul. These features include: 1. What are the rules of these games? 2. What are their possible outcomes (related to the game’s goal)? 3. Are the outcomes positive or negative? 4. Does the player influence the outcomes by reconstructing the preprogrammed possibilities of these games while playing according to the rules (reconstruction), by discovering how the software is put together while demystifying the rules (deconstruction), or by modifying these games while playing with the rules themselves (construction)? 5. Is the player happy with a positive outcome (winning the game) and unhappy with a negative outcome (losing the game)? 6. Are there any real-life consequences? Because of the important role of interactivity, or participation as I prefer to call it, as a factor which distinguishes computer games from most other media forms, I will organize my answers around the three modes of participation as mentioned earlier in this chapter: reconstruction, deconstruction, and construction.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction is the dominant mode of participation in *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force*. Reconstruction consists of “the exploration of the unknown, in the computer game represented worlds” and the selection of “objects and

actions from a fixed set of system-internal possibilities” (Raessens 2005, 380). At the beginning of *Darfur is Dying* the player selects one out of eight Darfuri avatars to represent the refugee camp. The game has a simple two-level structure. On the first level, the player has to explore the area outside the refugee camp to forage for water. The avatar has to provide water for the community, but because the well is five kilometers from the refugee camp, he runs the risk of being captured and possibly killed by the militias. The player can move his or her avatar by using the arrow keys of the keyboard and the spacebar to hide from the militias. After having reached the well and returned to the camp, the player can decide to go foraging again (as long as there are avatars left to do so) or to enter the second level inside the refugee camp. Here the player has a *SimCity*-style top-down view of the camp. The player has to explore the camp and select urgent tasks, such as obtaining food, building shelter, and staying healthy.

The basic rule of the game is clearly an ideologically motivated one: players can win the game by supporting Darfuri civilians. The goal of the game is to safeguard the refugee camp, keep it up and running for seven days, and protect as many adults and children from being killed by the Janjaweed militias. At the end of the game, players can put their name on a high score list on the game’s website. When the avatar successfully brings water to his family and community, a screen with “Goal Accomplished” pops up. The message of the game is communicated most clearly in its rhetoric of failure. If captured by the militias, the avatar faces “real-life” consequences: “You will likely become one of the hundreds of thousands of people already lost to this humanitarian crisis”. When a girl avatar is captured the consequences are heartbreaking: she faces “abuse, rape and kidnapping by the Janjaweed”. The game is programmed in such a way that players are not only unhappy with a negative outcome, but also with a positive one. When players succeed in accomplishing the goal of the game, they are informed that this will not end the real conflict: “The men, women, and children of Darfur have been living under harrowing conditions since 2003”. Although the game does not have real-life consequences for the players, it does have consequences for the Darfuri avatars of the player. Because players identify with the onscreen avatar, some of them have become engaged in the problems of Darfur through of the game.

In the virtual world of *Food Force* (2005), the player’s engagement does not come from identification with an onscreen avatar, but from a first-person perspective. For the player of the game, its protagonist is a young rookie who is briefed on a humanitarian crisis on the fictitious island Sheylan in the Indian Ocean. It is the player’s mission to deliver food as quickly as

possible to the residents of Sheylan. Guided by a team of experts, in a race against the clock, the player has to accomplish six missions or mini-games in a linear order, all aimed at delivering food to an area in crisis. In the Air Surveillance mission, for example, the player has to explore the crisis area by helicopter and count the number of people who need help by selecting one of the preprogrammed actions: fly to the right, left, up or down. The 2011 sequel of *Food Force* is a kind of *FarmVille* for do-gooders. The game puts players at the head of a virtual humanitarian aid agency with the goal of eliminating hunger in different parts of the world. The game consists of three levels: The game welcomes you first to your WFP farm where you grow crops à la *FarmVille* to fight hunger; in the factory you can then process and package the crops; finally, in the Operations Center you can organize the food distribution (by plane or ship), conduct awareness campaigns, and raise food donations from countries around the world. Here you can invite your Facebook friends to join and help you fight world hunger. Players must interact with each other in order to get ahead, which they can also do by buying crops, equipment and other virtual goods. Money spent by players goes to fund WFP school meals projects in the real world.

The basic rule of *Food Force* is also an ideologically motivated one: players win the 2005 game by completing the six missions and in doing so, they help to fight hunger. The goal of the game is directly conveyed to the player: "You can learn to fight hunger [...] Millions of people are now depending on you for help. This is more than just a game. Good luck!" Players receive positive feedback on their performance from team members if their missions are successful. If the outcome of the mission is less successful, then the player is encouraged to try again. After playing the game, a player can submit his or her final score to a worldwide high score list on the game's website. In the 2011 sequel, players win the game when they grow and process crops and distribute the food around the world to fight hunger. In this case, the goal of the game is also directly conveyed to the player: "Grow food, distribute it around the virtual globe and change the lives of hungry children". Although both versions do not have real-life consequences for the player, players are constantly reminded of the fact that in real life the WFP missions have huge consequences for these hungry people.

Deconstruction

Looking through and exposing the hidden, naturalized, ideologically pre-supposed rules of a medium is an important aspect of media knowledge and literacy or "media wisdom" (cf. Dutch Council for Culture 2005; mediawijzer.

net). As mentioned above, I call this form of exposing “deconstruction” (Raessens 2005, 376-8). Talking about the process of deconstruction, Friedman, who calls this process “demystification”, states:

Learning and winning [...] or “reaching one’s goals at” a computer game is a process of demystification [deconstruction]: One succeeds by discovering how the software is put together. The player molds his or her strategy through trial-and-error experimentation to see “what works” – which actions are rewarded and which are punished (Friedman 1995, 82).

According to Friedman, “computer games reveal their own constructedness to a much greater extent than more traditional texts” (ibid., 82). *Darfur is Dying* rests on the premise that the United Nations Security Council has the right and the duty to authorize military intervention to stop severe abuses of human rights in regions all over the world. *Food Force* rests on the premise that fighting hunger is a responsibility of the international community.⁶ The “baseline ideological assumptions that determine which strategies will win and which will lose” (Friedman 1999, 144) become apparent through actually playing the game. That is why Friedman claims that “to win [...] you have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game” (ibid., 136). This is because a computer game, as opposed to, for example, a film, is played over and over again until all of the game’s secrets have been discovered.

Friedman’s claim is problematic because he overlooks the fact that the effects of computer games are always ambiguous and never just one-way traffic. From a framing perspective, games – like all media texts – are polysemic and, therefore, open to multiple readings or “playings”. Game players may activate three interpretative strategies as a reaction to what Turkle calls the “seduction of simulation” (Turkle 1996, 71): players can either surrender to the seduction of *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* by interpreting the game more or less according to the encoded UN ideological frames (simulation resignation); they can understand these frames by demystifying them (as Friedman claims) or by deconstructing the assumptions or frames that are built into the simulation (simulation understanding); or they can completely disavow the social and political importance of these kinds of games (simulation denial).

These three strategies do, indeed, determine the reactions to both these games by players and critics. On the Water Cooler Games forum, for example, game critic and forum editor Gonzalo Frasca writes about *Food Force* (2005): “Finally! An educational game that rocks! Informative, well produced and very enjoyable to play with. Go United Nations! [...] Overall,

I am extremely happy for this game, it is an excellent example of the way edutainment should be.”⁷ Most of the comments on this forum reflect this view: “This was a wonderful game [...] successful at teaching the player about a few things, such as what foods are important, where investment is more valuable, etc. Great stuff!” and “Very nice game indeed”. On the Gamezebo website, a critic writes about *Food Force* (2011): “An inspired way to educate Facebook gamers about world hunger. Solid gameplay formula. Attractive presentation.”⁸ This “simulation resignation” is also the dominant reaction towards *Darfur is Dying*: “Fortunately, this game is refreshingly smart about its subject and effective in its delivery”.⁹ The game “is perhaps the first true survival-horror game in which players experience life as a Sudanese living in Darfur in 2006, fighting to stay alive not from the threat of Space Invader aliens but from real world bullets and sun-cracked soil” (Parkin 2006). “Having a game about Darfur reaches out to lots of young people out there who are clueless about what’s going on” (Vargas 2006). From this “simulation resignation” perspective, playing *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* in both cases affects the three basic dimensions of human experience: knowing, feeling, and acting. In other words, these games affect what players know and how they feel about current issues and suggest what they can do to act accordingly both inside and outside the game.

Simulation understanding and denial are clearly less important in the games. On the Water Cooler Games forum, some players deny *Food Force*’s importance by criticizing the UN for spending money on computer game development while thousands are starving.¹⁰ And on BBC News, Ian Bogost “worries that MTV’s involvement makes the game seem more like a marketing tool” (Boyd 2006). Others criticize the built-in assumptions of *Food Force* because this game does not refer to forms of misconduct by UN personnel: “How much like the real UN is it?”¹¹, and raise the question whether the difficult work for the WFP lends itself well to mini-games: “It seems more like a[n] MMO (e.g. *Everquest*). Or a Sim where you control the WFP”.¹² On the games.com news blog, a critic wonders “if the game [*Food Force* 2011] is going to get enough people to play to really make a difference”. *Darfur is Dying* is criticized for the same reason: “It seems to trivialize the problem” (Vargas 2006), and Bogost “also wonders whether *Darfur is Dying* oversimplifies an incredibly complex conflict” (Boyd 2006).

Construction

The concept of “construction” may be understood as the modification of an existing game. A game modification is “an add-on to an existing game

engine that alters the original code or state of a computer game” (Schleiner 1999). Examples are the “customization of graphics, sound, game play, architecture or other attributes of the original computer game” (ibid.). In this sense both *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* lack a constructive mode. The gamers’ activities are better described as modes of reconstruction.

However, there is another definition of construction that refers to the making of new games as such. What is at stake here is the question who can participate in our culture. Whether we face a top-down culture in which a small number of computer game developers and publishers run the show, or whether we face a multitude of bottom-up cultures in which independent companies can (continue to) participate. We see these bottom-up cultures appear when independent games are developed and distributed. This is exactly G4C’s goal:

Founded in 2004, Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. Unlike the commercial gaming industry, we aim to leverage entertainment and engagement for social good. To further grow the field, Games for Change convenes multiple stakeholders, highlights best practices, incubates games, and helps create and direct investment into new projects.¹³

Darfur is Dying and *Food Force* have a clear political agenda, namely the dissemination of the United Nations’ nurturant parent frame through popular culture. In itself this can be considered an emancipating and liberating aspect of the construction of frames. When gamers (such as Susana Ruiz) become game programmers and directors and thus move from game to meta-game, players realize that reality is “open source” and they have “the ability to rethink and redesign our world using entirely new rule sets” (Rushkoff 2005, 421; 2012). Although commercial enterprises such as MTV and Reebok initiated the design of *Darfur is Dying*, profit or the provision of mere entertainment is not their main motive. As with *Food Force*, the goal of the game is to provide an engaging experience, to communicate a political message, and, ultimately, the realization of a certain change of knowing, feeling, and acting on the part of the player. The *Food Force* website asks players to become active outside the game world. Players can help by giving money to the WFP, by teaching others about famine, and by organizing fundraising activities at school or at home. “Joe’s blog” on the *Food Force* website links the game world with the outside reality in interesting ways. Joe Zake, the Sheylanese nutritionist character

of the game, asks website visitors “to spread the word about hunger using this blog: read, comment and link”. As I described earlier in this chapter, the *Darfur is Dying* website is organized in a similar way when it offers players different kinds of possibilities to become involved in the reality outside the game.

Conclusion

In understanding how the design of *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* helps to convince players of the veracity of the games’ point of view and the necessity of a behavioral change, we have to realize that a mere presentation of factual information about the situation in Darfur and global hunger is simply not good enough. In order “[t]o be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off” (Lakoff 2004, 17). It seems effective to frame these facts in multiple ways: within the context of two successful games; within the context of two accompanying websites; as part of the framework of the United Nations; in the context of the nurturant parent model. According to Lakoff, “we all have *both* models [nurturant parent and strict father] – either actively or passively” (ibid., 41). The goal of both games is to activate the nurturant parent values I described earlier in the minds of the players of these computer games, and to frame the issues of hunger and Darfur from their perspective.

Darfur is Dying and *Food Force* frame Darfur and global hunger in ways that are specific to the medium. The players of both games mainly reconstruct the preprogrammed possibilities of these games according to their unambiguously motivated ideological rules. It seems that most of the critics and players surrender to the games’ baseline ideological assumptions. It is not easy to determine whether the oversimplification of the Darfur conflict turns the game into a United Nations propaganda vehicle. Or whether “it is an entryway into the crisis” (Boyd 2006) – in the words of game designer Susana Ruiz – which deals with the basic questions young people have. I tend to agree with Scheufele and Tewsbury’s definition of framing as “a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue” (2007, 12), given the constraints of the media in question. “Frames, in other words, become invaluable tools for presenting relatively complex issues [...] efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas” (ibid., 12).

As we have seen, the role that serious games play in the process of identity construction is an ambiguous one. This goes for the possible effects these

games might have, as well as for the question who is in control of this process. When we look at the impact these games have, we can, on the one hand, argue that people choose those games to play that are already in line with their identity, that they play their identity on the basis of how they understand themselves. This leaves unimpeded that, on the other hand, the playing of serious games seems to have the potential to strengthen specific mental frames and weaken others. Playing *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* has an impact on what players know, feel, and do about the issues addressed. Coming back to the question who is in control, we have seen that players may activate different interpretative strategies: they can either surrender to, try to understand, or deny the importance of these kinds of games (and their ideological frames). The fact that, unlike other media, computer games give players the sense that they are “co-creators” of the game – most of the time a “participatory illusion” – inclines me to see serious games as a forceful discursive space and practice, with real enough power to influence the terms in which people think, feel, and act.

One of the main constraints of refugee games is that the development and distribution of computer games is severely dominated by a few commercial companies who focus on entertainment games. Although organizations like G4C are very helpful in catalyzing social impact, the gaming industry as such lacks funding and business models for projects such as *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force*. It is a small miracle that these kinds of games exist and succeed in raising issues that the media does not always consider newsworthy, given that they do not aim for or make high profits while still requiring substantial production budgets.

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Notes

1. *Against All Odds*: www.playagainstallodds.com; *Food Force*: apps.facebook.com/foodforce; *Darfur is Dying*: www.darfurisdying.com; *On the Ground Reporter: Darfur*: www.radiodabanga.org/darfurgame.
2. Using games as a tool to encourage civic engagement is generally considered to be a promising avenue of research. To date, however, validation research in this domain is limited. One exception is Neys and Jansz (2010). To fill this gap, three contributors of this book – Jeroen Jansz, Ben Schouten, and Joost Raessens – started the research project “Persuasive gaming. From theory-based design to validation and back” (2013-17), funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, see www.persuasivegaming.nl.
3. For more info on SGI, G4C and GfH, see their websites: www.seriousgames.org, www.gamesforchange.org, and www.gamesforhealth.org.
4. The 2005 original could be downloaded on the *Food Force* website (www.food-force.com) until 2011. It is still possible to download the original game from sites such as www.download-free-games.com.
5. See www.wfp.org.
6. Both *Darfur is Dying* and *Food Force* build on the metaphor of the West as the helping parent and support the notion that emergencies in borderland zones have local, internal origins that need to be fixed and solved externally. They fall into what is called within Conflict Studies the *new wars frame*, which gained ground at the beginning of the 21st century and which has become prominent in both the humanitarian intervention and aid industry. For a critique, see Demmers and Raessens (forthcoming).
7. www.bogost.com/watercoolergames/archives/food_force.shtml.
8. www.gamezebo.com/games/food-force/review.
9. www.gameology.org/node/1013.
10. www.bogost.com/watercoolergames/archives/food_force.shtml.
11. See note 10.
12. MMO, or MMORPG, stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. A Sim is a Simulation game, like *SimCity*.
13. www.gamesforchange.org/about.

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