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Simulation games, popular factual media and civic engagement: an audience study of *Asylum Exit Australia*

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Abstract

Asylum: Exit Australia is a first person simulation game that puts the player in the shoes of an asylum seeker. Produced to accompany the television series *Go Back to Where You Came From* (SBS, 2011) it seeks to make a new kind of intervention in a divisive social debate. This paper considers simulation games in terms of their ability to foster civic engagement. Locating simulation games within the broad field of popular factual media several strands of continuity are identified, while attention is also paid to the specific characteristics of simulation games, particularly the relationship they establish between player and text. Audience responses to *Asylum* provide insight into the experience of play and the ways in which audiences relate this experience to the asylum seeker debate.

Keywords: simulation, civic engagement, popular media, documentary, video games, audiences

Imagine this: Your nation is in turmoil; the government has been overthrown and the streets have become spaces of violence and destruction. You and your family are no longer safe; scapegoats for economic, social, and political decline your safety can no longer be assured. This is the scenario players of the documentary simulation game *Asylum Exit Australia* (SBS, 2011) are asked to contemplate. *Asylum* is a first-person procedural simulation where the player is challenged to get out of Australia by gathering information from non-player characters and making decisions. Technically simple the game is text-based, offering players simple multiple-choice options. The narrative is developed through 'cut' scenes between moments of player interaction. Game elements such as a health status, food and water reserves and money structure the experience of play.

Asylum Exit Australia was commissioned by Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and launched to coincide with the broadcast of series one of the reality TV series *Go Back To Where you Came From* in June 2011. *Go Back* followed the 'reverse refugee journey' of six 'ordinary' Australians, who (with one exception) shared strong negative views on asylum seekers. The series' mandate was to 'offer something novel in a public space crowded with loud opinions – to make a cultural intervention and start a "public conversation" about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers' (Douglas and Graham, 2013:124). The series succeeded in generating not only a sizable audience for SBS, but also significant online discussion both on the show's website and social media (Cover, 2013). Like *Go Back*, *Asylum* also attempts to make a new contribution to the asylum seeker debate. But whereas the TV series focuses on the experience and,

ultimately the 'conversion' of the six participants, *Asylum* seeks to simulate aspects of the refugee journey for the player. Attempting to put the player 'in the shoes of an asylum seeker', *Asylum* creates an experience that in some ways parallels that of the television series' participants.

This paper aims to locate *Asylum* with reference to popular factual television, contributing to debates about the civic potential of popular media through an analysis of audience interaction and response. Audiences are at the centre of the ongoing transformation of factual media. As Hill (2007: 14) argues in the television context, audience reception practices 'are evidence of civic cultures in the making'. Like popular factual television, simulation games generate anxiety for fostering playful engagement with serious issues. At the same time there are reasons for thinking that they offer new ways of understanding and engaging with the world. I begin with an analysis of the civic functions of popular factual media before considering how the specific characteristics of simulation games might contribute to civic engagement. A study of audience responses to *Asylum* provides an opportunity to explore these ideas in context.

The ongoing restyling of factual media

It is possible to locate *Asylum* within a rapidly expanding field of interactive factual media. Documentary and journalism are currently important sites of formal, aesthetic and technological experimentation, leading to new forms of interactive factual media. Interactive journalism projects like *Snow Fall* (New

York Times) and *Fire Storm* (The Guardian) combine traditional forms of written and audio-visual journalism in an interactive interface. Documentary games such as *Fort McMoney* address significant social issues (in this case the development of the Canadian oil sands) through play that includes searching for clues, debate and voting and the collection of 'influence points'. Immersive journalism, see for example *Project Syria* by Nonny de La Peña¹ is still in many respects an experimental form, but it's goal is to bring the immediacy of virtual reality to journalism. Interactive documentaries like the *Highrise* series of projects combine interactivity, a database of media elements and various forms of participation (the ability to upload user-generated content), bringing multiple perspectives to the issues surrounding highrise living.

These new forms of factual media are emerging at a time in which there is significant ambivalence about the ability of the media in general, particularly documentary and journalism, to play a civic role. Describing the rise of factual entertainment. Corner (2002) charts the rise of a 'postdocumentary' culture, in which the civic value of factual media is challenged by the drive to entertain, with its focus on the playful, contrived, and the subjective. Interactive factual media similarly privilege play, subjectivity and affect and a blurring of fact and fiction. It's potential for popularizing traditionally 'worthy genres' such as documentary has been noted (see for example Raessens 2006: 223) An exploration of the relationship between popular factual television and simulation

¹ See <http://www.immersivejournalism.com/> for further information about La Peña's work

therefore provides a context for considering the role of the latter in relation to the traditional 'public knowledge' (Corner, 2009) functions of factual media.

There are three key parallels between simulation games and popular factual television: the construction of artificial frameworks, a focus on experience and emotion, and playful engagement with the subject matter. In terms of the relationship to established genres, particularly documentary, the use of completely contrived scenarios and constructed scenes marks a significant change in representational method. Corner (2002:256) describes a shift from 'field naturalism' as a way of conceptualizing documentary production to the 'managed artificiality' of the social experiment. Bruzzi (2006: 144) similarly highlights this connection, noting that many programs sell themselves as 'unique social experiments'. Dovey (2008) provides a comparative analysis of reality television and computer simulation. *Big Brother*, he argues (252) offers viewers a 'social psychology experiment redesigned for mass entertainment consumption', modeling human interaction as a computer might model a natural system. The 'system' being modeled in the case of *UK Celebrity Big Brother* included complex race relationships that typically elude representation. The social experiment is, of course, highly constructed with producers shaping the outcomes through the design of the scenario and the selection of participants (Kilborn, 2003: 74).

The desired outcome is highly performative and emotional, focusing on the personal and experiential. While factual media have always told personal stories, what has changed is the extent to which these stories make explicit the

connections to the broader social issues at stake. As Corner (2002: 256) argues: 'The documentary foreground has frequently become a highly defined narrative of localized feelings and experiences presented against what is often a merely sketchy if not entirely token background of social setting.' Dovey (2000) describes this as a shift to 'first person media', arguing that rather than marking a move away from civic concern it reflects a postmodern cultural ecology in which objective reporting is problematized and individual experience emerges as a secure foundation for knowledge. In this context the bodily responses of reality TV participants, their tears and anxiety, becomes evidence of authenticity (Aslama and Pantti 2006).

Go Back clearly reflects the representational logic of popular factual formats. As a 'social experiment' show (Kilborn, 2003) it simulates the refugee experience for the six Australian participants with the implicit hypothesis that this will change their views on asylum seekers. Douglas and Graham (2013) note that *Go Back* strongly signaled its serious status through the use of informational voice-over, news footage and 'expert' host Dr. David Corlett. Like other philanthropic reality shows the program worked to construct an imagined community of viewers that are encouraged to identify as concerned participants. Douglas and Graham suggest that in spite of this serious orientation *Go Back's* focus on performance, confession and sensation effectively produce a simplistic narrative of conversion that foregrounds shock and entertainment. While the program makes space for the faces and stories of asylum seekers they are overshadowed by experiences of the Australian 'stars' whose conversion is the real focus of attention.

Alternatively, Cover (2013) views the transformation of the Australian participants from an ethical perspective, arguing that they model ethical responsiveness to the Other. Cover's analysis, drawing on Butler's ethics, highlights links between subjectivity and the performance of attitude. The disruption of subjectivity that accompanies the physical vulnerability of enacting the refugee journey opens up a space for recognition of the refugee as worthy of recognition. While Cover does not suggest that *Go Back* provides a means for Australia to achieve a collective ethical stance in relation to refugees, his analysis highlights the value of personal narratives and the disruption of subjectivity in expanding ethical discourse.

These differences of opinion echo broader debates about the civic value of popular factual entertainment. From one perspective the focus on entertainment seems to be at odds with the public knowledge role of factual media, from another it can alternatively be seen to open up more 'inclusive, productively messy and interactive modes of display and portrayal' (Corner, 2009: 146; see also Ouellette, 2010). This latter perspective aligns with a reexamination of the role of entertainment media in political and civic communication. Focusing on links between popular culture, civic engagement and participation Dahlgren's (2009; 2005) notion of civic cultures draws attention to various ways in which the media support civic engagement. Arguing that citizenship involves the cultivation of a civic identity and skills for meaningful participation, he identifies five interconnected dimensions of civic cultures: knowledge, shared democratic values, trust, communicative spaces and practices. From this perspective *Go Back* provides new ways of understanding the refugee experience, creates discursive

spaces that provide an opportunity for civic talk contributes to knowledge creation, agency and skill development, has the potential to enter into the formal political realm and contributes to the development of individuals' civic identities.

These observations about the potential for popular factual content to promote new forms of knowledge and civic talk are supported to some extent by audience research. Hill (2007; 2005) demonstrates audiences' multiple layers of engagement with popular factual content. Drawing on Corner (2005) she argues that audiences both 'look at' and 'look through' factual texts, simultaneously immersed in the text and critically evaluating it in terms of truth, genre, and knowledge. Significantly, her research suggests that popular factual genres do provide audiences with different kinds of knowledge and communicative spaces that support civic cultures. Hill shows that factual programs have the potential to establish subjective modes of viewing that are associated with forms of self-knowledge. Watching others go through challenges can foster emotional engagement in which audiences talk about learning through the intensity of the participant's experience (see Hill, 2007:161-2). Audiences learn different things from factual media depending on their personal connection to the subject matter. Hill's research also emphasizes the value of reality television in generating community cohesion by providing subjects for discussion.

On simulation²

² In this analysis I am specifically discussing media simulations as distinct from scientific or professional simulations see Bogost (2006: 98). While they have much in common and, as Wolf (1999) suggests, the growing status of

As digital platforms become an increasingly important for both entertainment and information, media producers face ongoing pressure to find successful communicative 'recipes' (Corner, 2009: 145). Although *Asylum* owes much to popular factual television, it nevertheless differs formally and in the relationship it establishes with its audiences, who necessarily become both player and principal character. Understanding simulation as part of the broad field of factual media means engaging with questions of how simulations communicate, the nature of interaction and the experience of play, as well as the ways in which players make meaning from this experience in specific contexts. Like reality television, simulation tends to provoke a degree of anxiety around its social impacts. What scope is there for 'sober' reflection in the experience of immersion and play?

An obvious difference between reality TV and simulation is that while the former provides audiences with a fixed narrative, simulation demands some form of interaction, with the result that the 'text' can be significantly different depending on player actions. Simulations therefore have the characteristics of a cybertext: dynamic texts that are produced in response to player input (Aarseth, 1997). Frasca (2003:223) defines simulation as 'the modeling of a (source) system through a different system, which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system'. Simulations are dynamic models of complex systems with which players interact (usually repeatedly) gradually coming to

professional simulation provides an important context for their media use, they differ significantly in terms of audience, expression and purpose.

understand how the system 'works'. Bogost (2006: 96) describes audiences as working to produce a 'mental map' of the simulation through interaction, drawing on reason and their unique set of values and understandings to gain understanding. Interaction changes the relationship between the viewer and text such that interaction shapes representation, thus promoting a distinct form of engagement involving player interrogation of their subjective response to the game.

Interaction and play open up new experiential possibilities. As Frasca (2003: 224) notes, the experience of playing soccer can't be compared to that of watching. Raessens (2006) makes a case for the importance of experience in understanding the link between reality and play. He describes this as an historical sublime, an experiential engagement that is neither objective nor subjective. Poremba (2013) takes the experience of play as a starting point for understanding her response to the simulation game *Escape from Woomera*. Describing the experience as a kind of performative inquiry, she suggests (356) that the simulation works 'less by immersing players in a physical space, or by revealing truths about the logic of Woomera and detainee strategy, and more in crafting insight into the enacted subjectivity of Woomera refugees, read through the player's embodied gameplay experience'. Poremba theorises this embodied experience as a kind of documentary 'third space' in which the experience of play serves to vivify the documentary content, allowing the player to simultaneously apprehend world and self. There are parallels between Poremba's account and Baudrillard's claim that simulation is productive. Describing the difference between a feigned illness and a simulated illness (1983: 5) Baudrillard notes that

while someone pretending to be ill might go to bed and make believe, someone 'who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms'. The emotions produced through game play constitute a kind of hyper-reality that marks a shift away from traditional forms of representation Lister *et al* (2009: 38-41).

Poremba's notion of documentary third space is also significant in challenging the idea that simulations make distinct kinds of truth claims. Wolf (1999) argues that simulation marks a shift from perceptual to the conceptual representation, making subjunctive 'what if' claims. In other words, simulations blur fact and fiction, representing what *could be* rather than *what is*. In a similar vein, writing about historical simulation games, Uricchio (2005: 333) argues that they produce speculative or conditional representations. The scenario presented by the creators of *Asylum* is fictitious but not intended to be interpreted subjunctively. In explaining his goals in creating *Asylum* producer Frank Verheggen directly links the experience of play to a particular form of emotional understanding: 'That emotion, the understanding of how terrible it is, what people have to leave, is what we wanted to achieve' (pers. comm. 3/2/2014). The experience of play is clearly intended to provoke factual engagement with the asylum seeker debate. This suggests that attention needs to be paid to the way in which players frame their experience of play, particularly the relationship between game play and different kinds of factual engagement.

Thinking about simulation in terms of civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2009) it is possible to see opportunities for new forms of knowledge, active engagement

and participation. The process of constructing a 'mental map' through interaction resonates with constructivist theories of knowledge and the experience of play raises the possibility of embodied, emotional and enacted learning about the world and the self. Interactivity may also foster the development of civic identity by positioning the player as a decision maker/participant and by providing opportunities for action based on knowledge and values. With many simulations, including *Asylum*, providing opportunities for links to social networks there is also the possibility of different kinds of civic talk. While simulation offers many possibilities for civic engagement, whether it achieves this in practice will depend on how players engage with and make sense of these media texts.

Subjectivity, interaction, affect and meaning³

From the outset *Asylum* establishes a strong subjective frame of reference as it develops its hypothetical scenario. The player is told that the simulation 'puts you in the shoes of an asylum seeker'. The goal, which players are told will not be easy: 'to find a safe place for you and your family'. An initial framing scene presents images and sounds of violence with text providing additional details, such as the fact that the player is no longer safe. The play experience starts in a

³ The following analysis is based on audience research conducted in a public library in Hobart, Tasmania in 2013. N= 22 with 14 women and 8 men. While not a representative sample attempts were made to ensure diversity in terms of age and occupation. Participants were invited to engage with *Asylum* for as long as it interested them. User interaction was captured using Silverback screen capture software for subsequent analysis. A semi structured interview explored ideas of genre, interaction and reception.

'community centre'. Here the player is prompted to give various forms of personal information age, occupation and the name of a family member.

For *Asylum*'s creators, the direct address established in this opening scene was a key element in the kind of affective experience they wanted the player to have.

'We wanted our audience to understand that anyone can be put in a situation where they have no choice but to leave everything behind. People do not choose to become asylum seekers. In order to achieve this we started our users from their own situation, in what they know as safety and security, and then took that safety away from them. We wanted to show the path of impossibilities and catch 22's once you are fleeing your country. The normal conditions in which our audience applies for a document and travels to other countries won't work when you are in this situation. It was also important for people to realize how incredibly long the process is, and how it can drive anyone crazy, especially if you had to leave your most loved ones behind.'

(Frank Verheggen, pers. comm 3/2/2014)

The invitation to players to enter personal information, particularly the name of their most significant family member, links the player to the hypothetical scenario. This link is frequently reinforced with messages from the named family member (if a name is given) punctuating the interactive scenes.

The impact of the first person perspective is evident in participants' interaction. *Asylum* presents players with a series of simple, text based choices. After entering their age and occupation, players are asked who they will miss most and asked to select either their partner, parents, child, other family member or friend. At this point in the simulation the majority of players spend several seconds hovering over the list. Some, like participant 6 (female, student 30), spend a long time (around twelve seconds) moving the mouse over two options before finally making a decision. Having nominated someone, players are then prompted to enter their name with the following text: 'Maybe you should give me their name, just in case I need to contact them on your behalf'. Only five of the twenty-two participants chose to give a name – with others choosing 'I'd rather not'.

This opening section prompts both reflection and emotional engagement. Participant 6 (Male, 30 Student) focuses on this as distinguishing the simulation from film: 'If you're watching a movie, you might just passively let it go past and not spend that extra 30 seconds or 60 seconds thinking about, this is a big decision.' This moment of reflective engagement is an example of what Miles (2014: 78-80) describes as the affective moment of interactive documentary. Users view material and then make decisions that bring about changes within the work. Perception and action are separated by an affective moment – notice, decide, do – and it is in the stretching of this affective moment that the process of decision can become one of understanding. For many of the participants this moment of understanding was grounded in emotion:

One of the first people I was talking to was asking me 'what's the most important thing' was it friends, something or other, I didn't really look at the others because it struck me that it was my child and I answered the question honestly and he was like 'do you want to tell me their name' and being a parent I was really protective so I was like 'no I'd rather not' and just from that it got real personal because the rest of the story when they're talking about my family I just kept going back to my child so it became really personal – so as I was experiencing it I had my child in my mind. If I'd known that I might have chosen something else just so I didn't have that extra pressure, sort of, but I guess it wouldn't have been a real kind of experience (Participant 22, Male 31, Unemployed)

If I watched that five years ago before I met my husband and had my daughter, it'd probably be very different you know. It's one thing to hand out my details but when they're asking about your family's details it makes you feel extremely vulnerable. And you want to protect them but ultimately you can't ... I know now that I'll look at things differently from doing that' (Participant 2, Female 35, Police Officer).

Looking at how participants structured their interaction with *Asylum* several elements of the subjective frame become apparent. The majority of participants (twenty) referred to aspects of themselves or their personal situation to explain their interaction. From answering questions with reference to their own reality (Participant 13, (Female 53, Health Worker) talked about answering no to the question about having a passport because it occurred to her that she really

doesn't have a passport) to aspects of personality – Participant 9 (Female 40, Housewife) talked about making conservative choices 'I was being true to how I would do things' and Participant 14 (Male 33, Tour Guide) described his analytic personality as driving his interaction. Perhaps the most significant way in which subjectivity drove participants' interaction and experience is through reflection on their values. Most of the options in *Asylum* ultimately involve agreeing to go into 'family debt' in order to pay a people smuggler. While family debt alleviates the player's immediate financial stress, the cost is increased vulnerability for their family left behind. While participants were fairly equally divided in terms of whether they choose to go into family debt (12 did and 10 didn't) what is more interesting is that many felt that it challenged their values. As Participant 17 (Female 29, Disability Worker) put it 'I think you would have been forced into borrowing money, which does really sit well ... I didn't explore that option ... obviously they would have wanted their money back and you wonder how you would do that without doing something illegal.'

For Participant two (Female 35, Police Officer) the realization that the legal pathway was blocked was particularly challenging. She talked about trying to do things 'the right way' before coming to the realisation that she would have to do it 'the illegal way'. The experience was highly emotional (she was in tears when discussing her experience): 'it was horrible, but you have no choice. You just have to do it.' While most of the participants in the study described themselves as broadly supportive of asylum seekers being settled in Australia, Participant two had not previously considered herself sympathetic to asylum seekers. She described the experience of *Asylum* as making her feel a degree of empathy that

complicated her initial views: 'feeling empathy for the other people; I just thought it was so black and white, but it's not'.

Emotions such as frustration, fear, anxiety, sadness, and worry were at the forefront of participants' descriptions of *Asylum*. Several participants interestingly reported an uncharacteristic loss of trust.

Right from the beginning I didn't feel that I could trust anyone. Whatever the first scene was, I can't remember, and he wanted to take my partner's name and I didn't want to give him my partner's name because he might be the wrong person. So I was suspicious of everyone from the beginning, which surprised me that I would be like that. (Participant 9, Female 40, Housewife)

She went on to describe her anxiety and while she was aware that it wasn't the same as 'if it was real', she described her interaction as driven by concern for her family. For another participant, repeated references to her family member heightened emotions: 'I was actually getting quite emotional in that, especially when Brady was ... I was finding these notes, these messages from Brady ... And yeah, I was sort of putting myself into, yeah that thing, as a parent, yeah how distressed I'd be' (Participant 13, Female 53, Health worker).

Participants found emotional engagement meaningful describing it as fostering empathy and providing a new way to think about the refugee experience.

Participant 16 (Male 37, Unemployed) talked about becoming aware of the

extent to which his options were limited. This led to feelings of frustration and stress that provided another way of understanding 'it was a little bit more frustrating to do it myself than it was to hear of people going through it.'

Participant 6 (Male 30, Student) was similarly aware of the extent to which the simulation presented limited options. He described the experience of play as 'being forced down the dodgy path', but at the same time viewed this as a realistic reflection of the refugee experience. For one participant, (Participant 9, Female 40, Housewife) empathy prompted a desire to act:

You can sympathise with people that you see on TV and think that it's a problem that needs to be fixed, but you don't have that empathy – maybe that's the right word - because I don't feel it, I don't feel it inside myself. I know some people really take it on and feel upset, but I look at it objectively, but this [*Asylum*] makes it more subjective ... So I guess now I've felt a bit of that tension 'what am I going to do in this situation?' and it's the emotional tension, I've got to do something, but I'm at a loss of what to do.

Factual games are frequently criticized for trivializing tragic events. Participants' engagement with *Asylum*, however, suggests that this is not the case. Several participants were very conscious of the game elements, but the experience of play was always tied to the broader issues faced by asylum seekers. Participant 22 (Male 31, Unemployed), for example, was very competitive in playing the game, expressing his desire to win, but it is still very much tied to the bigger picture.

I wanted to win. Yeah it's about survival but it's a simulation. But as I'm watching it I'm also realising that this is for a reason. It's not just a game, it's actually for to get me thinking about what people are going through, so as I'm going 'this really sucks, I don't have that many choices' I'm also going, yeah, it must suck to have to make that choice, or damn I was just trying to get home and I got beat up by a group of people (Participant 22 Male 31, Unemployed)

Participant 16 (Male 37, Unemployed) expressed concern about appropriateness of play in the absence of critical reflection. When asked about his own awareness of the gaming elements (health counter and money) he replied: 'I noticed that there was money that clicked up. I could imagine my little nephew planning his whole way about getting out without actually feeling anything, without feeling that situation'. In explaining his comment he acknowledges the complexities of play:

It's quite complex because it makes you think about yourself and your family it makes you feel a whole lot of things that you might not feel otherwise, but you also think that there's a distancing going on because it's only a game.

In contrast to many of the other participants, Participant 12 (Male 23, Kitchen Hand) talked about the game play elements as allowing him to retain a degree of distance from the reality of the situation: 'I am used to

this kind of situation. I play a lot of RPG games and they have a lot of similar situations. It's frustrating of course. Mostly I tried not to get myself too immersed then, probably I would feel like giving up'. For several other participants, focusing on the game was a response to aspects of the scenario.

On sharing (or not)

Asylum invites players to share various milestones in their journey on Facebook. None of the participants in this research chose to do that, but this is unsurprising given the 'experimental' context in which they engaged with the work. When asked whether they might share in other contexts, only three out of the twenty-two participants said that they would. Their reasons for sharing included: a commitment to the issue, and a sense that their friends would enjoy it. Most who said they wouldn't share described themselves as either not on the social networking service or relatively inactive. A small number described themselves as 'careful' about what they share and one participant (8 Female, 58 Retired) said that she would prefer to talk about it face-to-face with friends.

While these responses point to the potential for a simulation like *Asylum* to prompt political talk, disinclination to share also sheds light on the limitations of social media as a space for civic talk. Participant 14 (Male, 33 Tour Guide) explained his reluctance to share political content:

I come from a conservative family and I come from a family where my wife is from America and we've got a lot of friends who know and support the way we feel and we've got a lot of relatives and friends who may have a different point of view and we would choose not to shove it in their face so much. We all know each others' point of view and we'd definitely defend our own point of view but my view is my view and their view is their view.

We might interpret this as the social media equivalent of not talking politics at the table, an example of how the social rules governing political talk (Dahlgren 2009: 96) play out on social networks. Similarly, approaching Facebook as a site for self-expression, it reflects a desire to present an acceptable performance of self for diverse audiences. Social networks like Facebook provide new resources for self-presentation but social norms and an awareness of various audiences shapes this process (Papacharissi, 2011:307).

Genre Work

If *Asylum* is part of the ongoing exploration of factual media are audiences continuing to engage in 'genre work' (Hill 2007), building and modifying their genre maps across platforms? There is certainly some preliminary evidence from this study that audiences evaluate media products like *Asylum* with reference to a wide range of more established media forms. Participants compared it with videogames, visual novels, 'Choose Your Own Adventure' stories and simulation. Interestingly, none of the participants spontaneously

described *Asylum* as a documentary and, when asked directly if they thought of it as a documentary only two participants described it as having some documentary-like characteristics. Participant 12 (Male 23, Kitchen Hand) thought that it was documentary-like in making you experience something real and Participant 7 (Female 27, Unemployed) felt that bits of it were true so it both was and wasn't like a documentary. Participant 4 (Male 51, Teacher) felt that although it was a fiction, it was intended that you engage with it as factual and that, in this respect, it was documentary-like.

For most, the use of a fictional scenario precluded its categorization as documentary. Several participants felt that it wasn't documentary because 'there were characters in there rather than real people' (Participant 9, Female 40, Housewife). Three in particular felt that it wasn't a documentary because it was about them rather than someone else. Participants all engaged in a very active process of evaluating *Asylum* in terms of its truth claims. Cowie (1999) has argued that verisimilitude, the sense that the world presented is believable, is important to sustaining belief in documentary. In the case of *Asylum* players assess the experience of play in terms of their beliefs about the refugee experience. Participant 17 (Female 29, Disability Worker) typically worked through *Asylum's* truth claims: 'I'm sure they don't have the means financially to escape the country and I'm sure they don't have the means to escape with all the family members they'd want to, I'm sure'. With the exception of participant two, all players described themselves as generally supportive of refugee resettlement in Australia. For these players *Asylum* presents a believable account of the pressures facing refugees. Interestingly, however, when assessing the truth of

Asylum, Participant two (female 35, Police Officer) concluded that she has 'no doubt that that's what would go on'. This complex response suggests the need for further research on the impact of emotion and simulation on established beliefs.

Conclusions

Asylum: Exit Australia is just one example of ongoing change in the factual media landscape. As program makers explore new technologies and seek to take advantage of emerging media practices we are likely to see new forms of storytelling that promote new forms of audience engagement. Like popular factual television there is a focus on subjectivity, affect and playful engagement but interactivity and the affordances of networked communication mean that simulation differs in terms of potential civic engagement. *Asylum* seeks to contribute to a national debate and this research suggests that the subjective, affective and embodied perspective it fosters offers audiences new ways of understanding, engaging and potentially participating. This research suggests that audiences draw connections between their experience of play and broader issues, interpreting the simulation not as subjunctive but as reflective of the reality faced by asylum seekers. Audiences are also engaging in ongoing genre work and evaluating texts based on their understanding of both traditional factual genres and computerized media forms.

Like all forms of media, simulation offers distinct representational opportunities. In particular they have the ability to establish relationships with players that promote self-reflection. Participants in this research drew on self-reflection in

interacting, reflecting on their relationships, experiences and values. As the simulation's producers had hoped this resulted in an emotional experience that they then connected to the asylum seeker debate. The connection between emotion and empathy reported by participants is certainly worthy of further study. Participants' responses to sharing their experience on social media points to a complex understanding of communicative spaces and conscious management of civic discussion that reflects existing communicative norms. As new interactive factual projects are produced we will be better able to understand the connections between media forms, affordances and civic engagement.

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