

Reframing Refugee Characters

Empathy and Agency in Interactive Narratives

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Abstract

By allowing viewers to interact with stories, interactive films have revolutionized how viewers engage with social issues and events. The emergence of immersive technologies and interactive storytelling has transformed traditional storytelling forms and methods. These technological advances have rendered interactive storytelling more complex by challenging users to reexamine understandings of the mediated world. Consequently, basic media literacy skills are necessary to benefit from these projects dealing with refugees' stories.

Although interactive storytelling creates new forms of social engagement, the question of which social issues or subjects are most effectively addressed through interactive narratives remains. How do refugee stories and discourses contribute to interactive engagement? This essay analyzes a series of interactive projects focusing on refugees' storytelling, politics, and aesthetics in order to examine their socio-political engagement and their unique attributes. Refugee stories hold a strong

emotional appeal, positioning them as ideal for interactive narratives. How do unique refugee experiences of displacement and disarray engage creators and viewers/users/players?

This essay argues that refugee storytelling interactivity contributes significantly to viewers' engagement with social issues and characters. While creating empathy and responsibility, these projects allow users to connect with people far removed from their own lived experiences. Characters with well-known and reliable stories make users feel closer in the position of moral concern to their situation and can instigate political accountability for their future. In interactive narratives, refugee characters redefine agency and storytelling. They offer the ability to recreate history, engender a change in the world, or revise a topic with a sense of justice toward dependable and trustworthy characters.

Keywords

social engagement, interactivity, interactive web documentary, refugees

1. Introduction

Interactive films have revolutionized the ways in which audiences can engage with social issues and events. Filmmakers have explored the potential of interactive films to enhance storytelling and elaborate the point of view of characters. This essay focuses on refugee storytelling engagement in interactive films. It raises critical questions

about the nature of interactivity in the context of refugees.

The definition of interactivity is significant when analyzing refugee characters. Aston (2016) argues that interactive documentaries offer a 'framework of possibilities.' What specific possibilities for refugee narratives can be found in interactive projects that cannot be achieved through traditional linear forms? How can refugees engage with the rhizomatic, fragmented, and open-ended stories of interactive media?

This essay explores the possibilities of interactive refugee projects not achievable through traditional cinematic linear narratives. It analyses several interactive films, including documentaries, multimedia, virtual reality projects, and games. Over the last decade, numerous interactive films have featured refugees. However, most could be categorized as modes of documentary.

Interactive films about refugees provide a first-hand experience of real-life-threatening situations. These films capture the characters' emotions, provoke the audience's compassion, and encourage decisions based on what they have seen, such as the game *Papers, Please* (2013) and the augmented reality project *Terminal 3* (2018). Other interactive projects, such as *Living Los Sures* (2014), provide a more intimate, individual portrayal of characters. *The Shore Line* (2017) utilizes different media and texts to provide better and more complete knowledge through a first-hand approach and analysis. These projects aim to provoke debate and dialogue; they encourage users to get involved and help those in need. In contrast, other interactive films such as *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (2016) and *Refugee Republic* (2012) reinforce the idea that each refugee is unique with their own history. These films instill a sense of unity. They utilize a multimedia approach with hand-drawn and interactive maps, sketches, photographs, and brief video impressions.

Why do interactive and immersive practitioners find refugee characters so captivating? Why do they create engaging narratives around them? How are refugee stories unique and appealing to viewers, users, and players? How do these narratives contribute to social and political

engagement? Do these films promote a sense of "becoming otherness" or merely entertain through moments of "awareness"?

In interactive narratives, refugee characters not only redefine agency and rewrite traditional film storytelling tropes, but they also recreate their history/fate. Refugee stories can refashion the world with a sense of justice through dependable, vulnerable, and trustful characters. These works explore the moral concern and political responsibility of the viewer/user/player towards refugee characters and their futures. Refugees' storytelling, politics, and aesthetics require analysis to understand the potential of interactive films to engage audiences with social issues and events and to promote political engagement and activism.

2. Displacement and Vulnerability: Reframing a Character's Storyline

The decision to leave one's homeland is a difficult and heart-wrenching choice. Refugees flee their home countries for a variety of reasons, such as war, persecution, or economic hardship, all of which have made their lives unsafe. Their life on the other side of the border may also be fraught with danger and suffering. The risk of death, loss, and trauma is high. The uncertainty of the future adds to their overwhelming situation.

The global refugee crisis has resulted in many changes in national asylum laws, sheltering, and border control measures. As a result, applying for refugee status has become increasingly complex and lengthy, with asylum seekers subject to compulsory stays in overcrowded and poorly equipped refugee camps, remote locations, and detention centers (Kreichauf 10). Despite their differences worldwide, these camps and shelters create dangerous vulnerabilities due to a lack of security, privacy, protection, poor living conditions, inadequate healthcare, and necessities such as food and water.

Giorgio Agamben argues that the vulnerability of refugees results in their loss of citizenship and agency, fundamental to human existence. He contends that nation-states see human beings as "naked life" in the political order. Without citizenship, individuals cannot exist in the contemporary world. Agamben elaborates on being stripped of citizenship in concentration camps in Nazi Germany, which he analyzes serve as spaces of control and denationalization (93). He highlights the plight of refugees who have lost all rights and protection. Asylum seekers are forced to abandon their homes, families, and communities, denied the basic human right to protection and dignity. Their lack of identity and citizenship creates a profound sense of loss and disconnection, leaving them traumatized, frightened for the future, and vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization.

Hannah Arendt draws attention to the struggles of stateless refugees who have lost all rights and protection in "We Refugees." Arendt's perspective differs from Agamben's: she emphasizes the importance of assimilation and integration into new communities rather than solely focusing on the loss of citizenship. Arendt argues that refugees should be allowed to rebuild their lives and become active members of their new societies. As a newcomer, Arendt had no hope or desire to be assimilated into any new country (Agamben 90). Although speaking to only one individual's experience, this idea represents the mass phenomenon of alienable human rights (Agamben 92). Refugees live in the most profound difficulties where they are completely deprived of belonging and forego the protection of their homeland.

From a humanitarian perspective, refugee camps provide shelter and security for displaced individuals and help maintain family and community connections. But from a political perspective, camps control people's mobility and privacy through surveillance and physical barriers (Kandylis 13). Isolating refugees in these spaces contributes to a lack of insight and understanding

about their experiences, perpetuating their vulnerability and societal alienation.

In these protected yet isolated spaces, society ignores their inhumane living conditions: harsh rules and lack of privacy and mobility that refugees are forced to reside in for long durations (Kandylis 18). This "other displacement" leaves newcomers vulnerable yet again while distancing them from society. This practice alienates the outside populations about human suffering.

3. Promoting Engagement and Empathy through Multimedia Storytelling

The interactive documentary format offers a unique and powerful way to tell stories about marginalized communities and social issues. By providing a highly engaging immersive experience, i-docs offers the audience the chance to experience the stories of migrants and displaced people on a more personal and intimate level. Unlike traditional documentaries, which often rely on a single voiceover or interviewees, i-docs incorporate multiple perspectives, multimedia elements, and interactive features. As a result of this heterogeneity, they create a more comprehensive and emotionally resonant narrative. One strength of the i-doc format resides in its ability to present information in various ways through videos, images, games, text, and audio recordings. This multimedia approach mobilizes engagement with the material on multiple levels to create a more sensory and immersive experience.

In the webdoc *Refugee Republic* (2012), the creators use video to give faces and voices to refugees, creating intimacy and connection. The camera focuses on the individuals' faces, centring them in the frame to emphasize their individuality and to break down the idea of refugees as a mass. Each person is introduced with a unique musical tune. A wide range of narratives is explored, further emphasizing their individuality. Various media formats explore the project "routes" (fig. 1),

from video interviews to hand-drawn illustrations. This strategy creates a layered, nuanced portrayal of refugees' experiences. The "Camp Smart Route" starts with a picture of a woman named Kurd singing in her language. She expresses that she is homeless and a refugee. She says she cannot live far from her love of her mother. Poet and educator Alan Esber chose to impart his knowledge to the camp's youth as a volunteer teacher. He persisted even without pay instead of waiting for assistance from relief organizations.

The “Camp Construction Route” portrays the story of Firas Al-Khatib. During the war, Firas was forced to flee to Iraq. He left a well-paying job behind. Facing inadequate shelter conditions in the camp, Firas sold building materials to improve living conditions. As his business thrived, the overseeing organization shut it down, deeming it harmful to their reputation. These depictions humanize refugees. They give a voice and face to a frequently marginalized population.



Fig. 1: *Refugee Republic's* routes.

The interactive documentary format reverses the roles of the audience and the migrants. In *Roxham* (2017), the audience is forced to assume the position of onlookers as the migrants take the lead in telling their stories to the Canadian police. The virtual reality component of the documentary immerses the user into the experience by digitally recreating Roxham Road, a significant location on the Canadian American border. This reenactment is accentuated by the migrants' dissonant voices and the haunting, discordant music, mirroring the uncertainties asylum seekers face while

attempting to cross the Canadian border. The audio intensifies the user's experience by personalizing the migrants' stories and opens up an understanding of their challenges.

In these immersive experiences, the viewer/user/player is thrust into the heart of the stories, able to hear the raw emotions and desperate pleas of the individuals involved (fig. 2). One such experience places the audience alongside a pregnant Nigerian woman attempting to cross the border with her suitcase. Her anguished cries and desperate entreaties to the officers resonate, only to be met with the harsh reality that she will be arrested if she crosses. The subsequent sounds of her arrest and the car driving her away underscore the enormity of the officers' lack of compassion. They appear to see her only as a consequence of their duty, focused solely on arresting border-crossers.

Another poignant account features a man struggling to repeat his rights back to an officer, revealing his likely inability to comprehend the information provided. The palpable fear and confusion in his voice are striking. In a different story, a family pleads with officers for help, explaining the danger they face back home. Heart-wrenching sounds of a baby crying in the background of another story amplify the tension as officers arrest a bewildered and frightened family. In yet another account, a man determined to cross the border admits he is undeterred by the legality, his voice quivering with embarrassment and unease. Although the officers seem empathetic, their hands are tied, highlighting the need for policy and legal reform.

Many migrants face these harrowing situations, confronting unfamiliar officers and enduring months of uncertainty about their fate. These experiences allow viewers/users/players to truly hear the voices of those involved, bringing to life the urgency and complexity of these border-crossing narratives.



Fig. 2: *Roxham Road*'s immersive interfaces use blankets to protect the migrant's identity.

This format presents potential problems to users' continued engagement with interacting with the project. Constant changes in the flow of information and stories require user input which can be challenging for those with shorter attention spans or preferences for quick concise information. Social media and other new media outlets have conditioned users to expect immediate gratification, which is not always possible in interactive documentaries. Interested users may not delve deep into the issue, limiting understanding and the overall effectiveness of the documentary. To overcome these barriers, interactive documentaries can deploy innovative engagement techniques such as incorporating gamification elements, adding clear navigation, and providing information summaries to facilitate learning.

Although interactive documentaries may lack the wide reach of viral videos or photos, their interactivity is a powerful tool for raising awareness about important issues. For example, in

Borderland (2014), the audio component can be commented on and shared to allow interested individuals to spread the word about the plight of migrants and involve others in the cause. This optional resource allows for sharing different perspectives, adding to the authenticity, immediacy, and impact of the project.

In *Bruderland* (2014), the director interviewed various immigrants from the German Democratic Republic, such as contract workers, students, and politicians, in order to capture their experiences in their new society. The documentary's interactive format allows users to choose which interviewee to listen to, a more personalized credible account of immigration history. The interviews focus on the racial marginalization and discrimination interviewees face as a result of strict surveillance of their living quarters, lack of privacy and freedom, and limited opportunities for socializing due to strict rules and racial barriers. This variety of videos, however, might lose the attention of users who prefer quick, easy-to-digest information.

Bruderland strengthens the agency of *postmigrants* by portraying them as self-determined individuals who proactively address challenges and devise solutions. Weber (2023) asserts that the variety of portraits contributes to the development of intricate *postmigrant* narratives. The author emphasizes the importance of constructing complexity in web documentaries, which plays a vital role in empowering migrants by facilitating the sharing of their stories. By fostering relational complexity in participatory web documentaries, multifaceted and polyphonic perspectives can be generated, ultimately promoting self-empowerment and enhancing communication with a wider audience.

The Shore Line (2017) assembles first-person accounts to foster empathy and understanding toward those affected by climate insecurities. Through individual interviews, the documentary humanizes the struggles of migrants, refugees,

and first-generation children, rendering their experiences more accessible to a broader audience. It highlights the disproportionate impact of climate change on individuals living in rural areas and with lower socioeconomic status.



Fig. 3: Sagar Island Women's Collective, India

Through these personal stories, the chapter "Currents of Migration" illuminates the intersection of environmental and socio-economic issues. Ioane Teitiota and his family were forced to relocate from their sinking homeland of Kiribati to New Zealand, highlighting the crisis of climate refugees. Despite their desperate escape from relentless storms and rising waters, their plea for refugee status was denied, exposing the reluctance of governments to confront the impending influx of climate refugees. Amidst these adversities, a beacon of hope emerges in the Sagar Island Women's Collective (fig.3). They ingeniously preserve their crops from saltwater floods by pre-soaking rice grains in salt water, a practice gaining traction in other affected communities.

The Shore Line advocates for political and government action to combat climate change and protect citizens. It highlights the urgent need for climate refugee processes, governmental environmental policies, and public health measures. The documentary contributes to a critical conversation on climate change and its effects on communities worldwide by raising awareness through personal and grounded micro-stories which generate support for their struggles.

4. Redefining Agency and Morality through Player's Social Engagement

The emergence of refugee characters and their stories in contemporary media offers a new intervention into more traditional approaches to political storytelling. These characters and narratives are now presented in interactive forms, allowing users to engage more deeply and even impact their fate. This redefinition of agency offers a unique opportunity for users to explore complex political issues surrounding refugee communities in a more immersive and engaging manner. For example, the augmented reality project *Terminal 3* (2018) allows users to explore the stories of individuals passing through a fictional airport terminal, creating a powerful experience emphasizing border control policies' human impact. Similarly, the game *Papers, Please* (2013) puts users in the role of a border control officer (fig. 4) in a fictional dystopian country, forcing them to navigate complex moral decisions that highlight the challenges faced by refugees seeking safety and security. These innovative storytelling approaches demonstrate the media's potential to serve as a powerful tool for social change and advocacy.

The game *Papers, Please* portrays the fear of terrorism and illegal migration as justifications for strict immigration controls. The player's task is not only to screen out potential threats but also to exercise empathy and fairness towards characters who may be genuine refugees seeking asylum. The consequences of missing crucial information or making the wrong judgment are not limited to the game world but also affect the player's score and, ultimately, their chances of winning. The game goes beyond international politics or war to explore the complex interplay between individual morality and the institutional power of immigration control.

The playable character in the game is a border officer from the fictional communist country of Arstotzka. Throughout, the player encounters

various political figures such as border patrols, ranking military officers, and revolutionaries. As the player navigates through the game, various choices are offered: whether to help a revolutionary, serve their homeland, or escape the country. The characters who challenge the player's sense of morality are most prominent. These characters disrupt the monotony of the player's bureaucratic job and prompt them to consider the human consequences of their actions. Although the game's objective is to remain detached and unemotional, it continually tempts players to make decisions based on their emotions or values. The game's mechanics include accepting bribes or succumbing to emotional pleas. These test the player's moral compass and reveal the complexity of making ethical decisions in difficult situations. *Papers, Please* explores individual morality and systemic policies' impact on ordinary people's lives.



Fig. 4: *Papers, Please* game's interface.

Digital games possess significant potential to address social and political issues through embodiment and a critical documentary approach, as demonstrated by Cansu Nur Simsek's analysis of Abdullah Karam's autobiographical adventure game, *Path Out* (2017). This game chronicles Karam's harrowing escape from the Syrian Civil

War in 2014, skillfully intertwining reality and fantasy to deliver an immersive experience. Simsek (2023) highlights that by integrating video commentaries, interactions with non-player characters, and thoughtful game mechanics, *Path Out* effectively challenges prevailing narratives surrounding Syrian migrants and prompts players to critically engage with pressing global socio-political challenges.

Unknown people with well-known struggles and reliable stories make the viewer/user/player closer to the morality of the situation and spur thinking about how to be politically responsible for the future. These authentic stories of real people function as a powerful tool to create awareness and foster empathy, particularly when these lives are so far removed from the viewer's own lived reality. This connection with distant worlds calls attention to the limitations of traditional cinematic narratives that sometimes fail to capture the audience's attention. By immersing the audience in these unfamiliar challenging circumstances, interactive media offers a new way to experience the world and understand complex social and political issues. Through these narratives, viewers/users/players have the possibility to gain insight into the lives of others, build empathy, and be inspired to take action toward creating a more just and equitable world.

5. Humanizing the Subject and Engaging the Audience

Thierry Benjamin (2021) argues that interactivity is evolving beyond a technical definition and taking on more social meaning. This shift in the concept of interactivity is not entirely new, as interpersonal communication has always been interactive. However, the increasing salience of moral and ethical decision-making in interactivity is significant. As users interact with social and human stories, their choices hold political implications and require careful consideration. As a result, it is important to understand the evolving nature of interactivity and its impact on the ethical

and political dimensions of media use. This means that the traditional view of interactivity as merely a technical feature is insufficient—we must now also consider its social and moral implications. Interactivity is not so simply reduced to a technical feature but now constitutes a central component undergirding the politics of engagement.



Fig. 5: *Jerusalem, We Are Here's* walk through past and present.

Jerusalem, We Are Here (2016) is a political i-doc that sheds light on the plight of Palestinians who were forced out of their homes during the Israel and Palestine nakba in 1948. The project employs a unique approach to web documentaries. It utilizes 360-degree shots that allow viewers to immerse themselves in the camera work as the documentary captures the city of Jerusalem and its remains before the crisis. Viewers can choose their own path, like a Google Maps experience, as they explore tours of certain old villages in Jerusalem and occupied Palestine (Fig. 5). The audio accompanying the visuals has a raw, live feel, as if the viewers were on a guided tour through these old neighbourhoods' streets.



Fig. 6: *Jerusalem, We Are Here's* creators.

To begin this interactive documentary, the creators introduce themselves and share their personal experiences in guiding the viewer through the journey (fig. 6). The documentary then delves into the oldest operating theatre in Jerusalem, owned by Palestinians until the Palestine-Israel conflict resulted in its transfer to Israeli ownership. From there, the tour explores several locations, including Dajani, Al Khalidi, Aweidah, Greek Club, Egyptian Consulate, Louisidis, Karmi, and St. Simeon Monastery. Each site is accompanied by historical information and multimedia. The narrators provide their own insights and personal experiences to bring these locations to life.

Beyond these technical innovations, the filmmakers convey the human element of the displaced Palestinians and their struggle for their rights and lives. They focus mainly on the events and locations that took place in Palestine before the Palestinian-Israeli conflict erupted. They discuss the sites and potential outcomes but do not address the events that led to the conflict. The project seeks to preserve the memory of a Jerusalem that no longer exists and celebrate the city's former multicultural vibrancy. It humanizes individuals who have lost everything. Regardless of where the audience's sympathies lie, the project does not seek to change minds or allegiances. Instead, the project's design strives to awaken empathy and compassion in viewers, urging them to see the Palestinians suffering a grave injustice. Through a real-time map experience, *Jerusalem, We Are Here* demonstrates the potential of technology to connect the viewers/users/players to distant places and people in order to foster a deeper understanding and connection to the past.

The webdoc *Living Los Sures* (2014) allows audiences to make choices while they explore the colourful multiethnic neighbourhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Viewers select the setting and subjects to control the pace of the stories. These choices render a more personalized and

engaging experience, fostering deeper connections to the community and its residents.

The *Shot-by-Shot* segment (fig. 7) serves as an intuitive, scroll-based database layout, enabling users to smoothly explore the 1984 documentary film *Living Los Sures*' collection of 326 shots. Distinct pages are allocated to each shot, exhibiting stories, images, and videos linked to the specific shot's content from 1984 to 2014. By employing a WordPress back-end and a sophisticated JavaScript front-end, an intermediary retrieves relevant data from the database, converting it into an engaging and interactive front-end experience for users.

The films are crafted with various cinematic techniques that enhance the storytelling and immerse viewers in the experience. The use of sound design creates an atmospheric and realistic soundscape, transporting viewers into the heart of the neighbourhood. The films incorporate stunning visual imagery, from close-up shots of food being prepared to aerial views of the bustling streets, sculpting a rich and authentic sense of place.

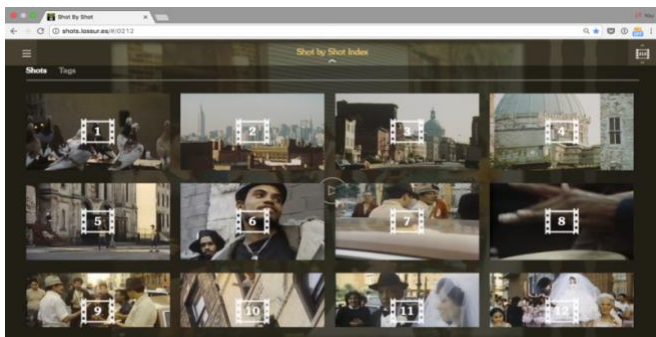


Fig. 7: Index of *Living Los Sures* segment *Shot by Shot*. Image by UnionDocs

One of the *Living Los Sures*' segments entitled *89 Steps* (fig. 8) introduces Marta Aviles, a 60-year-old woman who guides, narrates, and provides viewers with information about her neighbourhood. Users click and hold an icon to prompt Marta to climb the eighty-nine steps to her apartment or let go and rest. As Marta ascends the stairs, her laboured breathing

suggests she needs a break. This diegetic sound prompts viewers to determine the storytelling process based on the pace they want to set. If viewers choose to give Marta a break, they are rewarded with anecdotes about her childhood and philosophical reflections on family and aging, deepening understanding of her. This interactive element enhances immersion and offers a sense of agency in the storytelling process.

The project represents a prime example of how interactive documentaries can revolutionize experience and engagement with film. By actively allowing audiences to participate in the storytelling process, *Living Los Sures* provides a more intimate connection to the subject matter, ultimately creating a more meaningful and impactful viewing experience.

6. Conclusion: A Sense of Justice

Refugee characters and their stories have propelled interactive films to renovate their political storytelling and to provide the viewer/user/player with the power to recreate stories and explore the fate of the characters. The intense emotional connection created between the viewer/user/player and these displaced individuals who live worlds away from most audiences' lived realities challenges traditional cinematic narratives' failure to provoke genuine moral reactions.

Interactive narratives featuring refugee characters and their stories offer a fresh perspective on traditional cinematic forms of storytelling. These stories can inspire change and foster a sense of justice for refugees worldwide. Although these refugee characters may lack recognizable faces or names, their poignant stories allow viewers, users and players to connect with their moral and political plight, urging responsibility for the future.

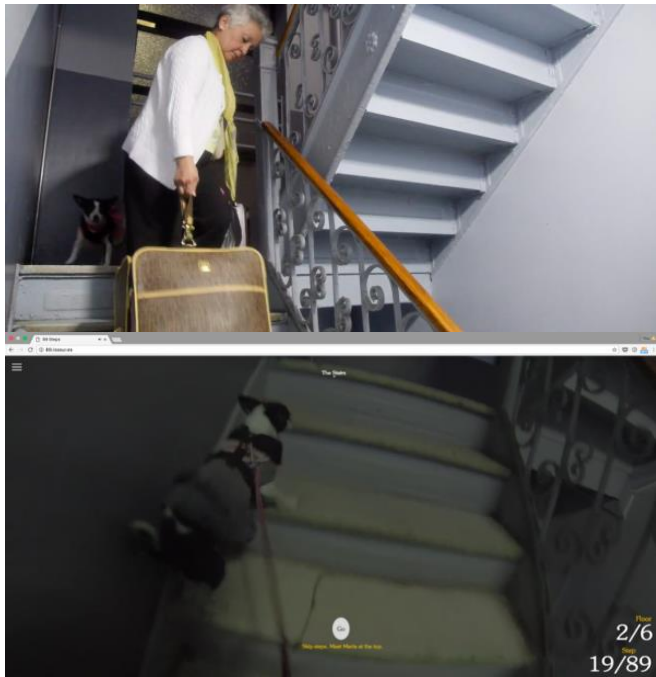


Fig. 8: Marta Aviles climbing the 89 steps to her apartment and the interactor's point of view.

As a sensorial medium, interactive films encourage active audience participation and engagement. As reliable and vulnerable characters, refugee stories establish powerful emotional audience connections that provide a unique opportunity to empathize with refugees' struggles and develop a deeper understanding of their experiences. Through making choices and experiencing the consequences, the audience can become invested in the narrative, leading to heightened story engagement and involvement. By situating the audience in the role of decision-makers, interactive films offer the possibility to challenge preconceived notions and encourage critical thinking. They can contribute to the development of care and fairness.

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