

BUILDING A SERIOUS GAME THROUGH REFUGEE TESTIMONIES.

CONSTRUYENDO UN JUEGO SERIO A TRAVÉS DE TESTIMONIOS DE REFUGIADOS.

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## RESUMEN

Refugeoly es un juego serio cuyo objetivo principal no es solo jugar por diversión, sino jugar para comprender una crisis humanitaria. Este juego de mesa está diseñado para experimentar el dramático viaje de los refugiados que intentan ingresar a un país que les puede dar asilo. Jugar a Refugeoly convierte al jugador en un refugiado y se vuelve consciente de las circunstancias reales que un refugiado tiene que atravesar en su viaje hacia la seguridad. Ref-ugeoly se ha construido en un juego con los testimonios de refugiados y voluntarios de ONG en campos de refugiados de Grecia, Turquía, España y Francia y con información de diferentes organizaciones. Este documento tiene como objetivo explicar el proceso de diseño, la mecánica del juego, los diferentes formatos de juego probados, los comentarios del público en general, académicos y estudiantes que lo han jugado y su desarrollo futuro.

## ABSTRACT

*Refugeoly is a Serious Game which its primary purpose is not just playing for fun but playing to understand a humanitarian crisis. This board game is designed to experience the dramatic journey of refugees trying to get into a country that can give them asylum. Playing Refugeoly turns the player into a refugee and becomes conscious of the real circumstances that a refugee has to go through in the journey to safety. Refugeoly has been built into a game with the testimonies of refugees and NGO volunteers in refugee camps of Greece, Turkey, Spain and France and with information from different organisations. This paper aims to explain the design process, the game mechanics, the different tested game formats, the feedback from the general public, academics and students that have played it and its future development.*

## Palabras claves:

Refugiado,  
Diseño de juegos,  
ONG,  
Mafia,  
Dinero,  
Juegos serios.

## Keywords:

Refugee,  
Game design,  
NGO,  
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Money,  
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## INTRODUCTION:

Refugeoly is the title of a serious game that I have designed to create awareness of refugees trying to make their way into a safe European country. Refugeoly is a word created by combining Refugee and Monopoly. The topic of the game is the refugee situation and how to communicate the dramatic circumstances that they must face on their journey. It is important to clarify in this paper that I am not a game designer as such. I am an artist and a multidisciplinary designer; thus, designing Refugeoly was a real challenge, especially to learn the mechanics and dynamics that involves creating a game. The first version of Refugeoly was designed as the response to a brief ("Turn a complaint into action") during my Masters of Arts in Information Experience Design at the Royal College of Art in London. At that precise moment, early 2016, the number of refugees resulting from the Syrian war and reaching the European coasts became dramatic. All media channels were inundated with pictures and footage of people on sinking boats, coastguards and NGO workers rescuing refugees from the freezing waters. These images, despite their impact, became desensitised for the majority of us in a matter of days; however, the refugee drama carried on and carried on. During my design research process and to respond to the above-mentioned brief, I decided to work on a design product that could make the user somehow experience the refugee journey from a country in conflict or of someone in personal prosecution (whatever the reason would be) to a safe country in Europe. What this product could be I did not know at that moment, but I embarked myself in a research journey about the conditions in refugee camps and any other information that I could outsource from the main source of the issue; the refugees and NGO workers and volunteers working in camps. I contacted Gonzalo Horh, a good friend for many years and a photographer that works in the field of refugees and war conflicts around the world. Gonzalo, in that precise moment, was covering the refugee exodus between Idomeni and Pireo camps. We had several Skype conversations about the situation of the refugees, and he was able to put me in touch with NGO volunteers and also with refugees that were in those camps. There is when I started to run interviews via Skype and to collect the testimonies of the journey of refugees and the stories happening in the camps. Stories of deportations, brutality at war, broken families, robberies, killed people, and of course of the Mafia, eternally present from beginning to the end of the refugee journey.

### MONEY

The format of the Refugeoly game board is a template from the famous Monopoly<sup>1</sup>. The reason for using this game's board as inspiration comes from its clockwise navigation and usage of money to play it, and also for its original principle as a game, learn and create awareness. Before being called Monopoly, this one name was 'The Landlords Game'<sup>2</sup>. This game was intended as an educational tool to illustrate the negative aspects of concentrating land in private monopolies. During my interviews

with the refugees based at the camps of Greece, in every single conversation, the word money was present. If you become a refugee, you need a huge amount of money to leave the country in conflict, and this money is essential to pay the Mafia that will guide you in your journey to a safe country, and they will be in control of the refugee all the way through. How the Mafia will treat the refugee along the journey depends very much on the amount of money paid somehow, it is like hiring an illegal tour operator to whom you cannot complain or get your money back. According to the interviewed refugees coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, the average amount to get into a port of Greece or Italy is around \$10000. However, this amount is just an indication, and there are too many aspects of the journey that are impossible to be quantified with clarity, and also, the Mafia does not obey any established rules; therefore, the amounts can shift at any time. Taking the mentioned average amount as a general guide for a refugee to get to a southern European port, what does this smuggling package include? What does the refugee get once he has paid that money to a Mafia?

According to a report for the EU commission<sup>3</sup> as of November 2013, The Daily Telegraph reported that the price for being smuggled from Lebanon to Europe could reach 10,000 British pounds (around 13,000 Euros). A travel agent based in Beirut reportedly provides fake passports and European visas for the desperado buyers. There are also many other expenses that the refugee has to pay for, and the Mafia provides. The Mafia is the one and only supplier of all things that you will need along the journey. Important things like a life vest for the always uncertain boat trip in the mediterranean sea. Also, food, water, petrol or a tent and a sleeping bag if you are so fortunate to reach the EU coast. There are all kinds of pay tolls arranged by the Mafia, and as a refugee, you certainly have a very remote chance to get into Europe without their services. The above facts, plus a number of special circumstances like weather, sickness, deportation, etc, are the key pieces of information that I have used to design Refugeoly, and they are part of the game for the simple reason that those are real and unpredictable situations that will affect the journey, and refugees have to deal with them. All the mentioned facts are the complications that refugees normally find on their way, and some of these circumstances are seriously bad. During the early stages of the design process, I wanted to highlight specific and hard aspects of the journey; however, I fully avoided including in the game extreme situations like rape, prostitution or terrorism, among other ones as tough, from appearing in the game, as a matter of respect.

### GAME STRUCTURE

The structure of the Refugeoly board is basically the template of the classic Monopoly. The boxes are numbered from 0 to 39, and the game is played clockwise. This simply square structure helps to build the different situations happening to the refugee's journey chronologically. In each box of the board, there is an icon that informs of the circumstance or event that the player has to

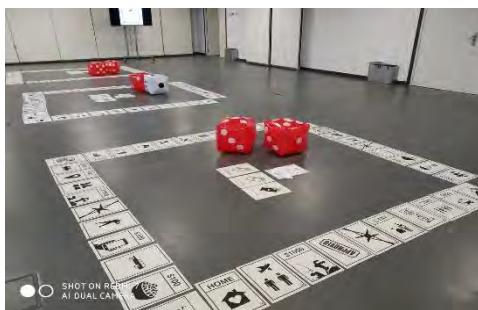
<sup>1</sup>[http://www.henrygeorge.org/dodson\\_on\\_monopoly.htm](http://www.henrygeorge.org/dodson_on_monopoly.htm)  
<sup>2</sup><https://patents.google.com/patent/US748626>

<sup>3</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/case\\_study\\_1\\_syria/lebanon\\_-\\_egypt\\_-\\_italy.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/case_study_1_syria/lebanon_-_egypt_-_italy.pdf)

go through. Also, this format was chosen in order to have a free blank space in the middle of the board, in which the main rules are placed, and also the logo. Outside the board boxes, on the right-hand side, there is a space for the bank boxes. There are three Banks in the game: Player's Expenses, where the players put the money that they spend along the way, for instance, money spent on food. The second bank is the Mafia. It is in this one in which most of the players' money ends by paying for a space on a boat to cross the Mediterranean, an illegal bus journey or for accelerating the asylum seeker paperwork. The third bank is the NGO. This bank is the only way to gain some money for the players. If a player rolls the dice and lands on the box no. 20 (NGO Help) will receive \$1000 support for the journey. To win Refugeoly, the players must reach box 39 (New Home. You are finally accepted). Also, in box 36 (Asylum seeker application approved), the players win. The idea behind this simple design is to create a layout that can contain all the needed information required to play the game; thus, the board can be printed in one single file in A4, A3 and even bigger, if downloaded from its website.

**REFUGEOLY IN LARGE FORMAT**

During the development of Refugeoly and once the first board game was ready to be played, I sent a proposal to take part in Hirikilabs, a cultural section inside Tabakalera Art Centre in San Sebastian (Spain). My project was accepted, and the organisers and the public invited became collaborators of the selected projects. Everyone together worked in developing and testing the proposed ideas. Taking part in Hirikilabs was absolutely crucial for the game to be played many times and to improve its dynamics, and also to test different formats. Apart from the Refugeoly board format, we came across the Refugeoly Large format that can be played on the floor. Basically, each box on the game was printed in an A4 sheet (0 to 39 boxes) plus the three bank boxes, and those ones were placed in a square shape of about 3x3 square metres. The rules that are normally in the middle of the board were displayed on a large TV screen. This format (picture no.1) allowed the players to carry their money with them (printed in A4 sheets) and embody the refugee. By experimenting with this new layout, we discovered that the large format was more exciting, experiential and participative. The last format development of Refugeoly has been when printed in one single vinyl sheet for the exhibition 'Impasse' (picture no.2) at Baluarte de San Roque in Cadiz (Spain). The result is an excellent material for the players to play onto, and this format includes the game rules, and the player's money is managed on a blackboard.



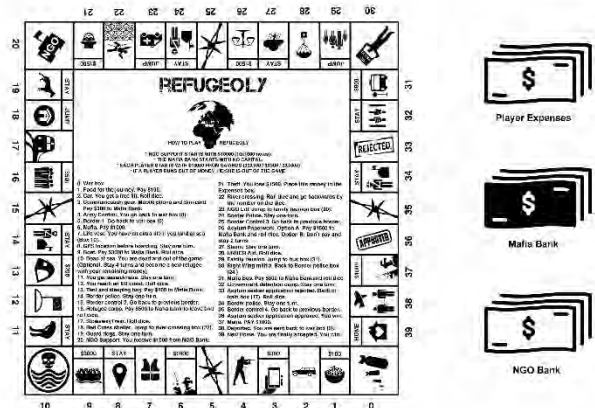
Picture 1



Picture 2

**REFUGEOLY VISUAL DESIGN**

The visual design of the Refugeoly board (picture no.3) has been constrained by the requisite of making a game that can be printed and downloaded under a free commons license (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License). The aim of Refugeoly has been since the beginning of the project to design the game available and free for anyone in order to spread awareness about the refugee situation. This is the reason why I outsourced copyright free icons for designing the board, that their visual message could be easily recognised and understood by anyone at a glance. This part of the design process has been one of the most important decisions to be taken before launching the Refugeoly website (<https://www.refugeoly.org/>). As an artist and designer, I would have been pleased to create my own illustrations for each box on the board; however, this option seemed to me that it would have complicated or detoured the concept of the game away from the main pedagogical purpose of this one; learning and creating awareness of the refugee situation. An excess of personality in the game design (by using new images to inform of the circumstances behind each box) would have been a way to make the game too artistic and personal, rather than a black & white, neutral design that guides the players directly into the shoes of a refugee.



Picture 3.

**37. Mafia. Pay 1000\$ to Mafia Bank.** Specialised Refugee Mafias have spread dramatically in the last few years. These ones have an enormous power in countries like Turkey, Afghanistan or Libya. It is almost impossible to reach Europe without paying the Mafia.

**38. Deported. You are sent back to war box (0).** Deportation, legally speaking (UK) is the enforced removal of someone "for the public good", usually after serving a criminal sentence in the UK. Removals and deportations are usually carried out either on a commercial airline (one person being removed/deported, usually escorted by security guards, and the other passengers are the public travelling for holiday or business) or by private charter flight (usually lots of people being removed/deported to the same country at the same time).

### 1.5. Refugeoly Mechanics and Dynamics

The game mechanics are designed to be straightforward. Refugeoly directly places the player in the role of a refugee; there is here already a great but subtle sense of emotions on the player, simply because we all have a sense of pity for refugees and somehow we all know more or less that being a refugee must be dramatic, and now you become one. The emotions in the players keep growing as the game starts. From the beginning, there are boxes that can take the player back to the country of conflict, or the player's money is stolen in a camp, or the player dies in the Mediterranean. All these emotions are provoked by the meaning of the box in which the player lands and especially because they start to figure out that the information on the box (the rules) are all based on real facts. Through my experience playing Refugeoly with different people from different countries, social classes, and several ages, I can say that the players' behaviour changes during the game, especially when they start to feel that the refugee journey is extremely hard and realise that this journey is a matter of life and death too. The main game rules are found in the middle of the board; however, in the website, there is a 'Refugeoly Booklet' (fragment of the booklet in picture no.4) to be printed together with the board and the players' money. In this one, there is a brief explanation of why Refugeoly exists, the main rules of the game, and then a list with the rule numbers (as in the game) and next to each number, there is a piece of the real information or fact that informs and that box is part of the game. Refugeoly has many components that make the game very visceral, especially when the players are reading the annexed information that accompanies each rule. The access to the information in a raw and direct way affects the players' emotions, the behaviour shifts from frustration when going backwards or being deported (box 38) to hilarity when the players get a lift from the NGO volunteers (box 23) or meet his / her family (box 29). Refugeoly is extremely engaging because it is simple to understand, its clockwise direction (being the goal to finish the game), and because the rules are on the board, there is no need to have extra cards or any other information to understand that the game is very similar to the reality experienced by refugees. There is a considerable number of hours of playing and outsourcing feedback from players to make the game be dynamic and fast. However, this does not mean that the game ends quickly, chance is basically the engine of the game. It all depends on lucky numbers and getting in the right box in order to drive to a safe country or not, or stay in a loop between to border controls (5, 15, 25 & 35).

Picture 4

#### REFUGEOLY AT LA CASA ENCENDIDA

So far, the most interesting experience in terms of feedback playing Refugeoly was in January 2020 at La Casa Encendida Art & Education Centre from the Madrid Regional Government. I was invited to run a number of Refugeoly sessions with students between 16 and 19 y/o. In these sessions, I introduced a presentation of Refugeoly for 30 minutes and then the game was ready to be played on the floor in a large format by using A4 printed paper sheets for the game boxes. The players' money was also printed in A4 sheets, and the game rules were displayed in a TV monitor. The Refugeoly booklet, where the rules come accompanied by the factual information and facts that justify the presence of the boxes on the board, was read out loud by a volunteer student from beginning to end of the game. The session had 30 participants each, so we used three large-format games with ten players each. The students mainly came from public schools, and around 70% were immigrants or Spanish born from immigrant parents, including some of them being actual asylum seekers. The students become engaged immediately when they have to throw the giant dice and start to find the difficulties to progress in the game and also to pay the Mafia. Many students became frustrated in a matter of minutes, as these ones got stuck in between two country borders or were sent to the conflict zone (box no.0), which makes the player go up and forth on a section of the board and they are not really progressing. The lucky ones got into boxes that can take the player into different transport systems and, with a lucky number, end up in the Home box (no.39) or in Asylum Papers Approved (box no.36).

An exciting interaction happened in one of the game sessions, which is important to add to this paper, as it is very significant because it demonstrates how Refugeoly affects the behaviour actions in some players. One of the students playing was losing her money very fast since the beginning of the game and decided to take some money from the Mafia Bank (essentially the money that the other players have paid to the Mafia) on the board when no one was paying attention. Of course, this act was a joke from the student as she was trying to tease her peers; however, this action shows how in real life a refugee might be forced or tempted to work for the Mafia in a moment of desperation. Different emotional responses came along the play. Some of the students were very talkative and really concerned about refugees, asking different questions about the situation of refugees and offered me some interesting ideas to incorporate new boxes to the board, like a medicine kit box or a fake passport box.

## PARTICIPANTS SURVEY

At the end of the game sessions, these participants were given a survey with the following questions:

*What do you think about Refugeoly?*

*Which box (s) in the game has made the strongest impression on you?*

*Which social topic would you like to turn into a Serious Game?*

Out of 120 surveys, the most repeated word (60 times) to define Refugeoly was Amusing. Followed by Interesting (35 times), and the third one was Learning (7 times).

For question number 2, (Which box (s) in the game has made the strongest impression on you?), the figures are very clear:

Box no.38 (You are deported. Go back to box no.o) was mentioned 27 times.

Box no.10 (Death at Sea) 13 times. Box no.6 & 37 (Pay Mafia \$1000) 12 times.

Box no.7 (Death in the sea) 7 times. Box no.36 (Asylum Seeker Permission granted. You win) 6 times.

Box no. 39 (Home. You win) 5 times. Box no.32 (Detention camp. Stay one turn) 3 times.

These figures show us that definitely, the box in the game that made the strongest impression on these students is clearly box no. 38, once the player is only one box away from winning the game, and all of a sudden is taken back to the country in conflict (box no.o). The second box is no.10, Death at Sea. The third boxes are no. 6 & 37 (x2 in the game) is the Mafia. Quite significant is that box no.7, in which the player is given an extra life in case of landing in the Death at Sea box, had four mentions. The data of this survey can show that Refugeoly is a game that is amused and fun to play; however, it seems that the worst scenarios in the game, like the danger of dying and the injustice of having to pay the Mafia, leaves a strong impression on the players' memory, when asked.

For question number 3 (Which social topic would you like to turn into a Serious Game?), the survey offered a number of 20 topics:

Machism (14 times). Racism (13 times). Gender Violence. (8 times). Politics (4 times).

Religion (6 times). Bullying (3 times). Forced Warrior Children (2 times). Animal Welfare (2 times).

Feminism ((2 times). Children Poverty (2 times). War (2 times). Poverty (2 times). Homeless (2 times).

Homophobia (2 times). Education (2 times). Social-Media (1). Drug Abuse (1). Immigration (1).

Gender Stereotypes (1). Fake News (1).

In this list, we can see that Machism, Racism and Gender Violence are with a difference the top topics that these students would like to be turned into a serious game. This information shows us that the perception that Machism, Racism and Gender Violence as social problems is very present among teenagers of Madrid. It is important to add here that out of 120 students, around 80 were

female, and as mentioned before, around 70% of the total number of students were immigrants or Spanish born from immigrant parents.

## REFUGEOLY IN OTHER WEBSITES

During my time at Hirikilabs in Tabakalera Art Centre in San Sebastian, one of the persons collaborating in the improvement of the game was a member of Amnesty International Catalunya based in Barcelona. This person offered me the possibility of having Refugeoly available to be downloaded from their website (<http://www.amnistiacatalunya.org/edu/guia/es/p-tem-refugiados-2.html>).

Amnesty International has a number of serious games available on their website for any person that might want to use their pedagogical games for educational purposes. It is a great honour to have Refugeoly on their list and, in this case, in Spanish, which gives an opportunity to have a bigger exposure among the Spanish speaking audience.

## SERIOUS GAMES SOCIETY. 8TH GAME ALLIANCE FOR SERIOUS GAMES (GALA 2019)

Last November 2019, Refugeoly was invited to take part in the 8th GALA Conference on Serious Games in Athens (Greece). The experience was absolutely fantastic. Refugeoly was played at the Technopolis Exhibition Centre by the public attending the show. The feedback was very interesting, especially from some of the academics and members of the Serious Games Society attending the conferences. I would like to mention here the very important feedback given by Maria Rousseau (PhD, MFA, M.Sc Assistant Professor in Interactive Systems at the Dpt. of Informatics & Telecommunications at the National Kapodistrian University of Athens). Maria Roussou played the game, and her feedback about Refugeoly was that it is the 'Epitome' of a serious game. She asked me for a copy of the game that she would like to use for her teaching about serious game design at the university, and she kindly made a donation to the Refugeoly website. This great feedback and the knowledge that Refugeoly is in use at this university as an example for how to design a serious game demonstrates that the methodology used to build a game based on real facts by given testimonies is a design methodology that can be applied to any other topics that require to be understood through gamification.

## IMPASSE (REFUGEEES IN LIMBO) EXHIBITION IN CADIZ (SPAIN)

Refugeoly game had the opportunity to be played and exhibited at the Baluarte the San Roque gallery in June 2020, invited by the Gonzalo and Rafael Hohr. Gonzalo Hohr is a photographer specialised in refugee crisis and war conflicts photography reports. Rafael Hohr is a Graphic Editor with a long experience in graphic design and especially infographics. I was contacted by them to take part of Impasse Exhibition with Refugeoly. In order to present the game to the public of Cadiz and to be able to have the game ready to be played during the 2 months length of the exhibition I redesigned the format of the game. For this exhibition the printed money was avoided and replaced by a white board placed on a wall. The game was printed in a vinyl sticker of 2.5 by 2.5 meters, and stuck to the gallery wooden floor,

next to the white board. This fix format worked very well. With this smaller size small groups of visitors were able to play Refugeoly in a more intimate way but still experiencing the sense of being a refugee as each player had to follow the course of the game standing up, and one of the players or each one sometimes, were taking care of writing the loosing or earning money in the white board, so everyone could see the financial situation of each player.

This collaboration with the photographs and infographics from the Hohr brothers was a very unique opportunity for the visitors to fully understand the complexity of the refugee drama. The photographs were showing different refugee camps in different parts of the world and classified by geographic areas, or specific camps. Next to each section an infographic poster was showing a timeline and data of the refugee situation of each single place. The visitors were able to walk around the gallery and see the emotive and sometimes dramatic photographs of refugees and also read and interpret the infographic information, thus, being able to understand the worldwide scale of the problem in great detail. Finally the visitors ended up in the top floor of the gallery where they can find Refugeoly game, and play it. The instructions were displayed in a TV monitor and the dice were placed next the floor format game.

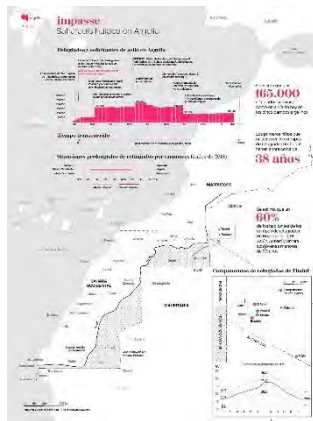


Picture 6

In picture number 4 there is an example of one of the infographic posters from Rafael Hohr. This one is specifically designed to visualise, though data, the Sahrawi refugees that had left the Sahara territory to Argelia due to the war conflict with the Moroccan government. The infographic does not only show the number of refugees but also the historical timeline of the conflict, and by doing this, the information flows as a chronological storytelling. All the information sources are from trustable organisations like, ACNUR, UN, Minurso, among others. In picture number 5 we can find the exhibition poster, designed by Gonzalo Hohr, the image was also part of the photographic show. The final image is the new floor format of Refugeoly. Some visitors are playing the game fix on the floor and writing on the white board the the amounts of money lost during the game. The exhibition was supported by the Culture Department of Cadiz Council. The exhibition was a great success among the Cadiz citizens.

**CONCLUSION**

Refugeoly is a successful serious game in many aspects. It is a storytelling game. It is a game that is accessible and simple to play. Being designed to be downloaded and printed for free makes the game to be able to be played at any moment and be shared. From my point of view, the most important feature about Refugeoly is that as soon as this one is played, it becomes a pedagogical tool to learn the real circumstances that refugees must face in their journey to safety, not only by the information provided by the game, also by the interaction of the players, that provide comments while playing it too. In regards to the navigation and mechanics of the game, this one can still be improved, for instance, by incorporating decision-making cards or boxes in the board that can give the player the possibility to change his/her destiny in the game. According to André Czauderna and Alexandra Budke (Cologne Game Lab and Institute for Geography Education, both in Cologne, Germany), “Decision-making must be understood as a process—rather than only the end result of a decision. Concept of “decision-making” is situated between two other concepts: “Judgments” and



Picture 4



Picture 5

"problem-solving."<sup>4</sup>. Thus in the case of Refugeoly incorporating a set of Lucky Cards, the player would have a 'Moral Decision Making' judgement responsibility. For instance, let's imagine a box or a card that the player has to take the decision of coming back to the conflict zone (boxo) or joining the Mafia to make the necessary money for the journey. Or having to choose from stealing the money of another player or stealing the life vest of another refugee before crossing the Mediterranean. The dilemma in decision making should be part of the next development of Refugeoly.

Dr Joseph Alexander Brown, in his paper 'A Focused Conversational Model for Game Design and Play-Tests', states: *In the development of a game, there is a balance. Rules create enjoyable games where players have choices of actions. Thus, there is fairness to the players, and players find a clear direction to make a reliable strategy*<sup>5</sup>. In order to improve the playing experience of Refugeoly and to give actual choices to the players, as at the moment, the rules don't provide room for creating strategy while playing, thus incorporating decision-making rules in the game is key.

A digital version of the game seems to be the next logical step to reach an online audience. If the game can be played on a free basis, just by registering and logging in, and with the possibility of playing with other people from around the world, it would give Refugeoly another dimension. This would also be an opportunity to arrange and obtain online feedback during and after the game, and also data (like tracking the patterns of the matches or players' moves, etc.) that can serve to improve the game. However, the sense of experience and embodiment that the analogue games provide cannot be replaced by the digital version.

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