

(DIS)CONNECTED LIVES: MEDIATED INTIMACY AND TRANSNATIONAL VULNERABILITY IN *BURY ME, MY LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

In an era of forced migration and fragmented geographies of care, digital games have become important platforms for representing the emotional and structural conditions of transnational life. This article examines *Bury Me, My Love*, an interactive fiction game that simulates the mediated communication between Nour, a Syrian refugee, and her husband Majd. Through a smartphone interface that reproduces real-time messaging, the game makes visible the emotional labour, temporal uncertainty, and constrained agency that shape long-distance caregiving under displacement. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that integrates ludonarrative analysis, document analysis of a collaborative player-generated walkthrough, and thematic analysis of multilingual user reviews, the study investigates how the game constructs transnational vulnerability through its mechanics, narrative design, and reception. Findings show that *Bury Me, My Love* represents vulnerability procedurally, through delayed communication, limited choices, and unpredictable consequences, and affectively, through its portrayal of mediated intimacy and emotional strain. By connecting game design, player documentation, and public reception, the article demonstrates how digital games can articulate cultures of vulnerability and provide participatory spaces for ethical reflection, empathy, and critical engagement with the realities of displacement.

KEYWORDS

transnational vulnerability, digital game analysis, mediated intimacy,
participatory storytelling, forced migration

VIDAS (DES)CONECTADAS: INTIMIDADE MEDIATIZADA E VULNERABILIDADE TRANSNACIONAL EM *BURY ME, MY LOVE*

RESUMO

Num contexto de migração forçada e de geografias de cuidado fragmentadas, os jogos digitais tornaram-se plataformas relevantes para representar as condições emocionais e estruturais da vida transnacional. Este artigo analisa *Bury Me, My Love*, um jogo de ficção interativa que simula a comunicação mediada entre Nour, uma refugiada síria, e o seu marido Majd. Através de uma interface de *smartphone* que reproduz mensagens em tempo real, o jogo torna visível o trabalho emocional, a incerteza temporal e a agência limitada que caracterizam o cuidado à distância em situações de deslocamento. Com base numa metodologia qualitativa que integra análise ludonarrativa, análise documental de um *walkthrough* (instruções passo a passo) colaborativo criado por jogadores e análise temática de críticas multilíngues de utilizadores, o estudo investiga como o jogo constrói vulnerabilidade transnacional através das suas mecânicas, do seu design narrativo e da sua receção. Os resultados mostram que *Bury Me, My Love* representa a vulnerabilidade de forma procedimental, através de atrasos na comunicação, escolhas limitadas e consequências

imprevisíveis, e de forma afetiva, através da representação da intimidade mediada e da carga emocional associada. Ao articular o design do jogo, a documentação dos jogadores e a receção pública, o artigo demonstra como os jogos digitais podem expressar culturas de vulnerabilidade e criar espaços participativos para reflexão ética, empatia e envolvimento crítico com as realidades do deslocamento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

vulnerabilidade transnacional, análise de jogos digitais, intimidade
mediatizada, narrativa participativa, migração forçada

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital games have emerged as powerful platforms for representing complex social realities, including migration, displacement, and transnational family life. Far from being mere entertainment, games increasingly operate as expressive systems that combine narrative, mechanics, and player agency to engage with pressing global issues (Raessens, 2010; Shliakhovchuk, 2024). Within this context, the representation of refugee experiences in games has gained scholarly attention for its potential to foster empathy, raise awareness, and challenge dominant media narratives (Caracciolo, 2023; Chin & Golding, 2016).

Bury Me, My Love (The Pixel Hunt, 2017) is an interactive fiction game available on multiple platforms, including mobile devices, Nintendo Switch, and PC. It tells the story of Nour, a Syrian woman fleeing to Europe, and her husband Majd, who remains in Syria. The game unfolds through a simulated smartphone interface that mimics real-time text messaging between the couple. This design foregrounds the emotional labor of displacement and the mediated nature of care, trust, and uncertainty across borders. As players assume the role of Majd, they navigate the affective and ethical complexities of separation, decision-making, and hope under conditions shaped by structural constraints and mobility-related risks.

The game's narrative structure exemplifies what scholars describe as ludonarrative representation: the interplay between mechanics and story that enables meaning through action (Bogost, 2007; Juul, 2005). In *Bury Me, My Love*, this interplay is particularly significant: limited player agency, asynchronous communication, and emotionally charged decision-making mirror the constrained autonomy and moral ambiguity faced by displaced individuals. Moreover, the game's branching structure positions it within the realm of participatory storytelling, where narrative unfolds through interaction and co-creation (Jenkins, 2006; Raessens, 2010).

At the same time, the game can be read through the lens of discursive and mediated intimacy, concepts that describe how digital communication technologies sustain emotional connection across distance. Pertierra (2005) uses the notion of discursive

intimacy to capture how mobile phones foster closeness through everyday textual exchanges, pauses, and shared digital rituals. Building on this, scholars such as Madianou and Miller (2012), and Alinejad (2019) extend these ideas to explore mediated intimacy in transnational contexts, where mobile communication becomes central to the emotional maintenance of family life. In contexts of forced migration, such devices act as lifelines for connection, care, and survival (Horst, 2006; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Through its interface and narrative design, *Bury Me, My Love* simulates these affective textures of digital communication, inviting players to inhabit the role of a distant caregiver navigating uncertainty and emotional strain.

These themes resonate with broader discussions in migration and family studies about the emotional geographies of transnational life, where belonging and vulnerability are negotiated through technologically mediated interactions (Amelina & Lutz, 2020; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Scholars have emphasized how transnational families navigate entangled inequalities and (im)mobility regimes (Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023), often under conditions of institutional fragility and emotional precarity (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). This article adopts “transnational vulnerability” as its primary analytical concept. Following Amelina and Lutz (2020) and Cienfuegos-Illanes and Brandhorst (2023), the term refers to the intersecting emotional, material, and institutional uncertainties that shape family life across borders. It highlights how mobility regimes, distance, and technological mediation produce layered forms of fragility in transnational contexts. Related concepts, such as transnational precarity and migrant precarity, are used in the migration literature to emphasize socio-economic insecurity and structurally induced instability (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), while cross-border vulnerability foregrounds exposure to risk within border infrastructures and legal regimes (Schrooten, 2021). Although these terms overlap, they differ in emphasis: precarity focuses on structural insecurity; cross-border vulnerability on risks tied to mobility regimes; and transnational vulnerability integrates structural, relational, affective, and mediated dimensions.

These conceptual distinctions also have implications for how refugee experiences are represented in digital games. Because design decisions shape how players encounter care, risk, uncertainty, and constrained agency, the representation of vulnerability in *Bury Me, My Love* holds ethical significance. By foregrounding the tensions between autonomy, dependence, and systemic constraint, the game participates in wider discussions on how digital media frame migration, influence public imaginaries, and invite players to engage with the moral and emotional complexity of displacement.

Despite growing interest in refugee-themed games, few studies have examined how game design, player documentation, and public reception collectively reflect and negotiate the affective and structural conditions of transnational family life. This article addresses that gap through a triangulated qualitative approach combining: (1) ludonarrative analysis of the game’s design and mechanics; (2) document analysis of a

collaborative, player-generated walkthrough mapping the game's branching moral and emotional decisions; and (3) thematic analysis of multilingual user reviews from major platforms (Steam, Metacritic, Apple App Store, and Google Play Store).

In light of this investigative gap, the article is guided by three research questions: (1) how does *Bury Me, My Love* represent mediated intimacy and transnational vulnerability through its narrative and mechanics? (2) In what ways do players interpret and respond to the emotional, ethical and systemic dimensions of the game? (3) How do participatory and procedural elements shape reception and meaning making around refugee experiences?

The article is structured as follows: section 2 presents the theoretical framework, focusing on ludonarrative representation, participatory storytelling, and mediated intimacy, section 3 outlines the methodological design and data sources, section 4 reports the findings of the three analytical components, and section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for ethics, game design, and migration discourse.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. LUDONARRATIVE REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATORY STORYTELLING

Ludonarratives refer to the processes through which meaning is produced at the intersection of narrative elements and gameplay mechanics (the rule-based systems and interactive structures through which players act and make decisions), highlighting how stories in games are co-constructed through action, rules, and player interaction. Digital games have increasingly been recognized as cultural texts capable of representing complex social realities through the interplay of narrative and gameplay. This dual structure where story and mechanics co-exist and interact throughout time and space is central to the concept of “ludonarrative representation” defined as the process through which meaning is produced not only by what is told but also by what is played (Meakin, 2024; Raessens, 2010). Unlike linear media, games invite players to become active participants who engage emotionally and ethically with virtual systems. Through their actions, players navigate dilemmas, tensions, and constraints that mirror real-world structures of power and precarity, including a limited margin of autonomy within systems and decision-making processes that are fraught with moral ambiguity, and interactions between actors that are mediated by unequally distributed risks and responsibilities.

A key issue within this framework is ludonarrative dissonance, the tension between what a game asks players to do and what its story claims to value (Hocking, 2009). While often viewed as a design flaw, recent scholarship interprets dissonance as a reflective moment that exposes the contradictions of moral and institutional systems (Grabarczyk & Walther, 2022). In contrast, serious and affective games often seek ludonarrative alignment, understood as a coherent relationship between mechanics and narrative in which

player actions support, rather than undermine, the ethical and emotional stakes of the story. This alignment is particularly relevant in games that address migration, displacement, or humanitarian crises, allowing players to experience constrained agency and systemic fragility in procedural form (Szatkowska et al., 2025).

A growing *corpus* of games, which includes games such as the newsgame *Syrian Journey* (2015), the autobiographical *Path Out* (2017), or *Papers, Please* (2013), illustrates how interactive storytelling can represent border regimes, bureaucratic violence, and moral fatigue that characterizes migratory experiences. *Bury Me, My Love* extends this trend through its smartphone interface and emotionally charged decision-making. Inhabiting the role of Majd, the player negotiates ethical dilemmas, waits for messages, and witnesses delayed consequences, such as missed transport connections, unexpected detours, or sudden shifts in Nour's safety, actions that simulate the emotional uncertainty of long-distance caregiving, where communication gaps, silence, and fragmented information intensify anxiety and limit the capacity to act.

Together, the concepts of “ludonarrative representation” and “participatory storytelling” provide a critical framework for understanding how digital games transform social realities into playable experiences. They reveal how interactivity can convey the affective labor, moral ambiguity, and temporal fragmentation that characterize transnational displacement, themes that intersect closely with mediated intimacy and cultures of vulnerability. At the same time, this framework foregrounds the ethical implications of representing constrained agency, moral decision-making, and emotional uncertainty through procedural systems. It highlights how design choices determine the vantage point from which players engage with questions of care, responsibility, and risk. By making these tensions playable, such games also contribute to broader migration discourse, influencing how publics imagine mobility, border regimes, and the lived realities of displacement.

2.2. MEDIATED INTIMACY AND CULTURES OF TRANSNATIONAL VULNERABILITY

In transnational family contexts, emotional closeness is increasingly sustained through digital technologies that mediate care, presence, and moral responsibility across distance. Pertierra (2005) introduced the notion of “discursive intimacy” to describe that mobile communication fosters emotional closeness through everyday rituals of texting, calling, and silence. Building on this reality, Madianou and Miller (2012) developed the concept of “mediated intimacy”, emphasizing that digital media not only connect individuals but also reshape the emotional labor of care among transnational members living apart. Authors' theory of polymedia situates communicative choice within moral and relational frameworks: selecting how, when, and through which platform to connect becomes part of the negotiation of love, obligation, and dependency, transforming ordinary communication into ethically and emotionally charged practice.

Subsequent research has situated mediated intimacy within broader analyses of care ethics and emotional geographies. Tronto (1993) and Held (2005) conceptualize “care” as a moral orientation grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness; qualities that become especially fraught in transnational contexts, where physical absence and technological mediation intersect with systemic precarity. Baldassar (2008) and Bryceson (2019) expand this framework by examining transnational care chains, in which digital communication compensates for the absence of physical proximity while simultaneously reproducing gendered inequalities in emotional labor and reinforcing asymmetrical dependencies. More recently, Guerra and Barros (2026) and Schrooten (2021) describe these dynamics as part of cultures of vulnerability, where institutional fragility, bureaucratic opacity, and socio-technical mediation shape the affective infrastructures of belonging and relational survival.

Within this perspective, technologies of connection, such as mobile phones, messaging apps, and social platforms, operate simultaneously as channels through which care circulates, as tools that enable monitoring and coordination, and as sources of moral and emotional strain shaped by distance and unequal power relations. Alinejad (2019) introduces the concept of “careful co-presence” to capture how migrants manage visibility, emotion, and timing in digital exchanges, strategically negotiating attention, affective labor, and risk. Cabalquinto and Hu (2023) similarly highlight how communicative practices are embedded in mobility regimes and material inequalities, producing uneven intimacies and sometimes, amplifying precarity or dependence. These perspectives underscore that transnational care is never purely affective, but is deeply entangled with socio-political structures, technological mediation, and the moral economies that shape obligations, dependency, and autonomy across borders.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this article approaches *Bury Me, My Love* as a site of affective mediation, where digital interaction and emotional care intersect with systemic constraint and procedural representation. The game’s interface replicates the temporal rhythms, affective textures, and moral tensions of migrant contact: waiting for messages, negotiating trust, interpreting silences, making ethically fraught choices, and experiencing delayed or uncertain consequences, patterns widely documented in research on digitally mediated transnational communication (Alinejad, 2019; Baldassar, 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012). By placing players in Majd’s position, the game foregrounds how transnational vulnerability is experienced through limited influence over critical decisions, fragmented information, and the emotional burden of caring at a distance, reflecting the relational and systemic pressures faced by many displaced families.

3. METHOD

This section presents the methodological strategy adopted in the study, outlining the overall research design, the empirical sources analyzed, and the analytical

procedures used to examine the game's structure, player-generated documentation, and user reception.

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs a qualitative multi-method design that combines ludonarrative analysis, document analysis of a collaborative walkthrough, and thematic analysis of multilingual user reviews. This triangulated design enables the examination of *Bury Me, My Love* as a procedural, narrative, and participatory artefact, aligned with the research questions. The combined approach makes it possible to analyze how design, interaction, and reception contribute to the representation of mediated intimacy and transnational vulnerability.

3.2. *BURY ME, MY LOVE*: CASE CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL RELEVANCE

Bury Me, My Love is a narrative-driven game developed by The Pixel Hunt in collaboration with Figs, and published by ARTE France, Plug In Digital, and Playdius Entertainment. It was first released for Android and iOS in October 2017, and later made available for Nintendo Switch and Windows in January 2019. The game is inspired by a real-life story published by *Le Monde* journalist, Lucie Soullier, chronicling the journey of a Syrian woman named Dana who fled to Germany. It has received critical acclaim and was nominated for several awards, including Best Mobile Game and Game Beyond Entertainment at the British Academy Games Awards (2018), and Games for Impact at The Game Awards (2018).

The game simulates real-time text messaging between Nour, a Syrian woman fleeing to Europe, and her husband Majd, who remains in Syria. As Chin and Golding (2016) note, such games cultivate transcultural understanding by immersing players in the affective and ethical complexities of migration. Its participatory structure invites players to co-author Nour's journey, making it a compelling site for analyzing how digital media represent and negotiate vulnerability. In this sense, is evident in the way the game's design aligns with what Caracciolo (2023) describes as "interactive narrative ethics", where player agency is embedded within moral ambiguity and systemic precarity. Unlike more traditional representations of migration, *Bury Me, My Love* offers a procedural narrative that simulates the fragmented temporality and emotional uncertainty experienced by transnational families. *Bury Me, My Love* was selected as a case study due to its unique design and thematic focus on refugee migration and transnational family separation.

3.3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research design operationalizes the study's objectives through a qualitative triangulation of the game's systemic, participatory, and interpretive layers. This

combination makes it possible to examine the procedural, affective, and discursive dimensions of the game's representation of transnational vulnerability without redundancy (Braidai, 2018; Caracciolo, 2023; Chin & Golding, 2016).

Ludonarrative analysis, conducted using an adapted version of Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) framework, focuses on how narrative and mechanics interact, paying particular attention to player agency, branching structures, temporal pacing, interface constraints, and the emotional or ethical consequences produced through gameplay. This allows a close reading of how vulnerability and mediated intimacy are encoded procedurally.

Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of the collaborative walkthrough, treated as a participatory paratext (Consalvo, 2007), traces how players collectively interpret ethical dilemmas, negotiate constraints, and make sense of the game's affective texture, providing access to moral and structural dynamics that exceed individual playthroughs.

The thematic analysis of user reviews, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, examines how players describe emotional engagement, ethical reflection, procedural frustration, and sociocultural interpretation in response to the game. This addresses how audiences make meaning of its representation of migration.

These methods enable a multi-layered analysis that connects game design, participatory documentation, and player reception while avoiding repetition of conceptual material developed in the theoretical framework.

3.4. DATA SOURCES AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The empirical dataset for this study comprises three complementary sources that together provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing how *Bury Me, My Love* represents mediated intimacy and transnational vulnerability. First, multiple playthroughs of the game were conducted on mobile platforms to document its branching narrative structure, key decision points, temporal rhythms, and systemic constraints. Conducting several playthroughs made it possible to capture different narrative trajectories and moral dilemmas, ensuring that the analysis reflected the game's procedural variability rather than a single experiential path.

Second, a collaborative player-authored walkthrough hosted on Steam was analyzed as a participatory paratext (Consalvo, 2007). This document records a wide range of choices, consequences, and narrative routes, offering access to systemic configurations and decision outcomes that may not arise in individual play sessions. Its inclusion provides a broader interpretive layer, capturing how players collectively map, narrativize, and evaluate the game's moral and affective tensions.

Third, a *corpus* of 232 user reviews was compiled from Steam, the App Store, Google Play, and Metacritic. Reviews were included when they engaged substantively with narrative experience, emotional or ethical responses, or perceptions of the game's

representation of migration. Reviews focused exclusively on technical performance were excluded. The selection followed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure thematic relevance, linguistic diversity (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese), and platform representation.

These data sources capture the designed, participatory, and interpretive dimensions of the game: multiple playthroughs reveal its procedural structure; the walk-through provides insight into collective sense-making; and user reviews illuminate how players perceive, evaluate, and emotionally respond to the game's portrayal of displacement. This triangulated *corpus* enables a coherent and multi-layered examination of mediated care, ethical decision-making, and emotional labor in digital representations of forced migration.

3.5. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section details the analytical procedures employed in the study, including sampling criteria, coding strategies and the reflexive practices that guided the interpretation of the datasets.

The *corpus* of user reviews comprises texts published between 2017 and 2024 across Steam, the App Store, Google Play and Metacritic. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure thematic relevance, linguistic diversity and platform representation. Reviews were included when they engaged substantively with narrative experience, emotional response, ethical dilemmas or perceptions of the game's representation of migration. All data was publicly accessible and anonymized in accordance with ethical guidelines for digital research. The analytical process combined qualitative thematic analysis with iterative close reading. Coding was conducted manually, following an inductive-deductive approach inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated through open reading and subsequently refined into broader thematic categories aligned with the study's analytical focus, including mediated intimacy, affective engagement, systemic precarity and constrained agency. Coding decisions were reviewed across subsets to ensure interpretive coherence and conceptual consistency.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher engaged in systematic memo-writing to document analytical decisions, examine potential biases and trace the evolution of interpretive insights across methods. Rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, the study prioritizes analytical depth, transparency and contextual sensitivity, acknowledging the situated nature of qualitative interpretation.

All data used in this study were publicly available, and no personal identifying information is disclosed. The analysis adheres fully to ethical guidelines for digital research contexts.

3.5.1. LUDONARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The ludonarrative analysis followed an adapted version of Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) qualitative game analysis framework, expanded into six analytical dimensions that encompass emotional, ethical and procedural aspects of gameplay. This approach enabled a detailed examination of how narrative events and mechanical structures intersect to generate forms of vulnerability, limited agency and affective tension. Each dimension identifies specific mechanics, their interpretive significance and their relationship to broader dynamics of transnational vulnerability, as summarized in Table 1. This structured lens made it possible to analyze how the game's design stages moral dilemmas, emotional labor, and patterns of constrained decision-making.

ANALYTICAL DIMENSION	FOCUS OF ANALYSIS	EXAMPLE MECHANIC OR MOMENT	INTERPRETIVE INSIGHT	RELEVANCE TO TRANSNATIONAL VULNERABILITY
Affective Object Inventory	Emotionally significant items	Bunny carried and lost; hidden money lost in sea crossing	Objects as emotional anchors and survival tools	Symbolize care, memory, and fragility of survival strategies
Moral Interaction Map	Ethical decision-making	Amputation decision; trusting smugglers	High-stakes moral dilemmas simulate emotional burden	Reflects moral precarity and systemic risk
Interface as Mediated Intimacy	Communication constraints	Missed bus due to oversleeping; delayed messages	Real-time pacing simulates helplessness and emotional strain	Highlights emotional toll of asynchronous caregiving
Temporal Gameplay Log	Real-time pacing and delays	Missed flights; mugging due to delay	Time-based consequences mirror uncertainty in refugee travel	Captures fragility of plans and cascading disruptions
Narrative-Mechanic Alignment	Constrained agency	Limited options with smugglers; deportation after asylum request	Mechanics reinforce structural disempowerment	Demonstrates systemic limitations on refugee autonomy
Participatory Storytelling	Player agency and branching narrative	Multiple endings shaped by player choices	Players co-author Nour's journey through decision-making and moral navigation	Reflects emotional and ethical complexity of displacement and constrained autonomy

Table 1. Ludonarrative analysis framework

3.5.2. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The collaborative walkthrough was treated as a participatory paratext, reflecting how players collectively navigate the game's branching narrative and document decisions. The walkthrough's geographically organized structure (Syria — Turkey — Balkans — Western Europe) enabled systematic identification of key decision points, which were annotated with contextual variables including location, choice, outcome, and in-game status (morale, money, relationship).

Each decision node was then coded along two complementary layers. The structural layer classified decisions as logistical (L), ethical (E), relational (R), or survival (S), while the interpretive layer aligned moments with theoretical categories including systemic precarity, mediated intimacy, ethical navigation, temporal fragility, affective fatigue, solidarity encounter, gendered vulnerability, and constrained autonomy. This dual coding facilitated the identification of patterns linking procedural, affective, and moral dimensions across the journey.

Decision nodes were further clustered by region, allowing for analysis of spatial and structural variations in vulnerability and agency. The resulting dataset transformed the walkthrough into a structured representation of the game's narrative architecture, supporting systematic comparison of decision dynamics without reproducing text verbatim. Table 2 illustrates the coding schema and typical annotations used to operationalize the analysis.

LOCATION/ STAGE	DECISION NODE	OUTCOME/ CONSEQUENCE	NARRATIVE FUNCTION	VARIABLES AFFECTED	STRUCTURAL CODE	INTERPRETIVE CODE
Homs	Negotiate cab fare (accept or refuse)	Route options contingent on payment	Logistical choice under resource constraint	Money	L	Systemic precarity
Aleppo	Assist injured woman	Introduces caregiving responsibility	Moral/ethical engagement	Relationship, Morale	E	Mediated intimacy
Istanbul	Accept smuggler to Edirne	Secures route, incurs cost	Logistical and risk-based choice	Money	L	Systemic precarity
Bulgaria border	Choose guide (Emmanuel/Nahid)	Companion affects crossing outcome	Moral-relational decision	Relationship	R	Ethical navigation
Austria – Seeboden	Take hotel alone or hitchhike	Rest vs. exposure to risk	Fatigue and pacing decision	Money	L	Affective fatigue

Table 2. Document analysis coding schema (illustrative)

This framework transforms the walkthrough into a structured dataset, linking narrative, ethical, and procedural elements in a systematic manner without preempting interpretive results.

3.5.3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

User reviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The coding process was documented in detail, with illustrative quotes and subtheme distinctions supporting the thematic structure. Table 3 presents a synthesis of the thematic analysis phase.

PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Familiarization	Immersion in 232 multilingual user reviews across platforms.
Initial Coding	Codes: emotional impact, gameplay frustration, lack of realism, awareness raising, ethical reflection.
Theme Generation	Grouped into four themes: empathy and emotional engagement, frustrated interactivity, ethical concerns, social impact.
Theme Review	Iterative refinement for coherence and distinctiveness.
Theme Definition	Final themes defined: empathy and emotional engagement, frustrated interactivity and game design limitations, ethical concerns and representational challenges, social impact and awareness.
Reporting	Themes integrated into findings with contextual interpretation.

Table 3. *Thematic analysis*

3.5.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All sources were publicly available, and user identities were anonymized. The study reflects on the ethical complexities of analyzing representations of trauma and displacement in interactive media, balancing the risks of gamification with the potential for fostering empathy, civic awareness, and critical reflection.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the empirical findings generated by the three analytical components of the study. Each subsection outlines the key patterns revealed by the ludonarrative analysis, the collaborative walkthrough, and the thematic analysis of user reviews. A final integrative subsection demonstrates how these insights converge to illuminate the emotional, ethical, and systemic dimensions of transnational vulnerability in *Bury Me, My Love*.

4.1. LUDONARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The ludonarrative analysis shows how *Bury Me, My Love* operationalizes emotional strain, ethical tension, and systemic precarity by transforming standard messaging interface features into sites of procedural vulnerability. The game's design converts everyday communication cues into affective artefacts and temporal stressors that mirror the psychological experience of waiting for news in transit. By prioritizing moral ambiguity and unpredictable outcomes over ludic optimization, the mechanics force a confrontation with the constrained agency inherent in migration pathways. Table 4 synthesizes these representative instances, mapping specific mechanics to their interpretive insights and their broader relation to vulnerability.

ANALYTICAL FOCUS	IN-GAME INSTANCE	INTERPRETIVE INSIGHT	RELATION TO VULNERABILITY
Emotional artefacts	Emojis, selfies, voice notes	Support emotional connection amid uncertainty	Affective anchoring across distance
Interface temporality	Message delays, typing indicators	Generate tension and anticipation	Temporal fragility and emotional strain
Ethical decisions	Trusting guides; resource choices	Highlight uncertainty and moral ambiguity	Systemic precarity; constrained agency
Narrative–mechanic alignment	Limited choices; no rewind	Reinforce player's restricted influence	Structural constraints shaping migration

Table 4. *Selected ludonarrative instances and interpretive insights*

4.2. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF THE WALKTHROUGH

The collaborative walkthrough functions as a participatory paratext that documents the collective negotiation of the game's procedural constraints. Rather than a mere record of branching routes, this space captures a process of collective reasoning where players utilize symbolic objects and ethical dilemmas to map the landscape of vulnerability.

The affective weight of survival is evidenced by the way the community annotates objects such as the stuffed bunny or hidden money, elevating them from mere inventory items to markers of care, memory, and loss. This resignification extends to the discussion of moral dilemmas; by debating the material consequences of trusting unreliable guides or managing scarce resources, players demonstrate an acute awareness of the ethical ambiguity embedded in the game's structure.

This perception of precariousness is further intensified by the temporal disruptions highlighted throughout the walkthrough. Systemic failures, such as missed transport connections or sudden delays, are interpreted by the community not as ludic hurdles, but as motifs that mimic the fatigue and uncertainty of the migratory journey. This political reading of the actions becomes explicit when players link the game's administrative loops and asylum denials to real-world institutional pressures, treating procedural logic as a direct representation of systemic precarity.

Ultimately, by sharing strategies and comparing trajectories, users transform the walkthrough into a collaborative interpretive document. This process reveals that while vulnerability is encoded in the game's design, it is through community annotation and reflection that it is actively articulated and politicized.

4.3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF USER REVIEWS

The analysis of 232 multilingual user reviews revealed four overarching themes that characterize how players engaged with *Bury Me, My Love*. These themes reflect affective responses, perceptions of procedural design, ethical concerns regarding representation and

reflections on the game's broader social implications. Together, they offer insight into how players interpret the emotional, moral and structural dimensions of the narrative and how these interpretations resonate with wider understandings of transnational vulnerability.

Empathy and emotional engagement emerged as the most frequently cited theme. Players described strong emotional responses to the game, including anxiety, sadness, and hope. The minimalist interface and real-time pacing were cited as mechanisms that fostered intimacy and emotional investment. One player noted that they had “never been this eager to start over and over again”, refusing to consult a guide because they felt personally responsible for Nour's survival. Another described the experience as “heart-breaking”, emphasizing how the game's text-based format made them feel like they were “really texting someone who might not make it”. These responses reflect the game's capacity to simulate mediated intimacy and emotional labor. They align with the ludonarrative dimensions of affective object inventory and interface as mediated intimacy, demonstrating how symbolic artifacts and asynchronous communication foster emotional anchoring and relational tension.

Frustrated interactivity and game design limitations was the second most prominent theme. A substantial number of reviews expressed dissatisfaction with the game's pacing, lack of fast-forward or save options, and limited interactivity. These frustrations were often linked to the tension between narrative immersion and gameplay expectations. One reviewer remarked that “without a skip function, replaying becomes a chore”, while another described the experience as “emotionally powerful but technically exhausting”. This theme resonates with the ludonarrative dimension of narrative-mechanic alignment, where constrained agency is both a design choice and a source of procedural friction. It also reflects the interpretive code of affective fatigue, as emotional investment is undermined by technical limitations that hinder replayability and narrative exploration.

Ethical concerns and representational challenges were raised by several players who questioned the ethics of gamifying refugee experiences. Reviews critiqued the realism of the narrative, the tone of the dialogue, and the appropriateness of using interactive media to depict trauma. One user wrote that the game “packages it in a much prettier box than reality”, while another argued that “trying to address social and political issues through video games can be harmful”. These critiques echo the interpretive codes of systemic precarity and constrained autonomy, highlighting the tension between representation and simulation. They underscore the moral ambiguity of participatory storytelling in contexts of real-world displacement, where the line between empathy and trivialization is difficult to navigate.

Social impact and awareness was a theme that highlighted the game's perceived educational value and its potential to raise awareness about refugee experiences. Despite gameplay limitations, many players described the game as a tool for civic reflection, empathy-building, and humanitarian engagement. One player stated that “this game was the reason I started supporting UNICEF”, while another emphasized its use

in classroom settings to teach about migration and global inequality. This theme aligns with the document analysis code of solidarity encounter, where moments of mutual aid and ethical reflection emerge through player interpretation. It reinforces the game's role in constructing "cultures of vulnerability" through participatory media, transforming play into a form of transnational empathy.

Together, these four themes offer a multifaceted view of how players interpret and respond to *Bury Me, My Love*. Table 5 synthesizes these findings by presenting the frequency of each theme and its interpretive relevance to the study's broader framework.

THEME	MENTIONS	INTERPRETIVE RELEVANCE
Empathy and Emotional Engagement	101	Simulates mediated intimacy and emotional labor
Frustrated Interactivity and Game Design Limitations	76	Highlights procedural constraints and affective fatigue
Ethical Concerns and Representational Challenges	40	Questions gamification of trauma and representational ethics
Social Impact and Awareness	65	Promotes civic reflection and transnational empathy

Table 5. Thematic analysis summary of user reviews

4.4. CROSS-ANALYSIS: MAPPING VULNERABILITY ACROSS METHODS

The cross-analysis of game design, player documentation and user reviews reveals a set of recurring patterns that underpin how *Bury Me, My Love* represents and invites players to experience displacement. Across the three analytical components, five motifs consistently emerge: emotional anchoring, constrained agency, temporal fragmentation, systemic precarity and participatory interpretation. These motifs show how the game constructs vulnerability not only as a narrative topic but as an experiential condition that players negotiate through interaction, decision-making and reflection.

In the game's design, vulnerability takes shape through actions that restrict the player's ability to intervene, such as delayed messaging, limited response options and the absence of rewind functions. These elements situate the player in a position of partial knowledge and limited control, mirroring Majd's inability to fully support Nour from a distance. In the collaborative walkthrough, players document how these constraints shape their navigation of ethical dilemmas, resource scarcity and shifting routes. Their annotations demonstrate that vulnerability consists of cumulative affective and logistical pressures that emerge from uncertainty, risk and the ongoing negotiation between opportunities and obstacles. User reviews reinforce this interpretation. Players describe emotional attachment, empathetic tension, frustration with limited agency, concerns about realism and reflections on the inequities revealed through procedural design. These responses illustrate that vulnerability is experienced as a mix of emotional strain, ethical uncertainty and awareness of structural barriers that affect movement, safety and decision-making.

Each method contributes distinct and complementary insights. The ludonarrative analysis shows how vulnerability is encoded through mechanics that stage emotional tension and ethical ambiguity. The walkthrough analysis highlights how players actively interpret and negotiate these tensions, reconstructing routes and documenting moments of uncertainty and fatigue. The thematic analysis demonstrates how these experiences resonate with broader audiences, prompting empathy, critique and reflection on structural inequality. Together, these perspectives form a layered understanding of how digital games can function as affective infrastructures. In such infrastructures, emotional labor, ethical deliberation, and systemic constraint are embedded in both design and reception.

Player responses also reveal that engagement with vulnerability is not uniform. While many describe deep emotional involvement and empathetic concern for Nour, others express distance, discomfort or skepticism. Some question the authenticity of the portrayal or resist the game's framing of migration as an intimate, individualized journey. These reactions highlight that mediated empathy is contingent and negotiated rather than automatic. Experiences of vulnerability are shaped by players' expectations, prior knowledge and interpretive stances, resulting in a spectrum of engagements that range from immersion to critical distance.

This integrative perspective underscores the value of multimethod analysis when examining complex social themes in digital games. It shows how meaning emerges through the interplay between design, interpretation and reception, and how vulnerability in *Bury Me, My Love* consists of constrained choices, emotional strain, disrupted temporality and exposure to structural inequalities that shape the possibilities and limits of transnational mobility.

5. DISCUSSION: PERFORMING VULNERABILITY THROUGH PLAY

The findings show that *Bury Me, My Love* performs vulnerability not merely as a narrative theme but as an experiential condition generated through play. Vulnerability in the game takes shape through four interconnected dimensions: limited agency, emotional strain, temporal fragmentation and exposure to systemic constraints. Rather than representing displacement from an observational distance, the game invites players to inhabit the affective and structural pressures that shape transnational mobility. This section discusses how these dynamics operate through the lenses of ludonarrative representation, mediated intimacy and cultures of vulnerability, and considers their implications for ethics, game design and public discourse on migration.

From a ludonarrative perspective, vulnerability is enacted through mechanics that deliberately restrict the player's scope of action. Limited response options, the impossibility of reversing choices and delayed consequences position the player within conditions of uncertainty and partial knowledge. These mechanics do not simply reinforce

the narrative; they constitute it, operationalizing ethical and emotional ambiguity as part of gameplay. Such constraints reflect what Bogost (2007) terms “procedural rhetoric”, wherein systems communicate meaning through the constraints they impose. The walkthrough analysis shows that players frequently record hesitation, doubt or fear when faced with ambiguous decisions, indicating that vulnerability emerges as players navigate incomplete information and unpredictable outcomes. This aligns with Sicart’s (2013) view of play as an ethical practice grounded in the negotiation between player intention and system-generated limits.

The emotional dimension of vulnerability becomes visible through the framework of mediated intimacy. The WhatsApp-style interface, built on short messages, emojis, selfies, voice notes and asynchronous pacing, which simulates the affective work of caring at a distance. Waiting, advising and hoping become emotionally charged practices, echoing research on transnational communication where digital media mediate responsibility, reassurance and anxiety (Madianou & Miller, 2012). User reviews illustrate how players experienced tension and attachment through the interface, interpreting silence, message delays and abrupt updates as emotionally meaningful. These reactions resonate with Alinejad’s (2019) concept of “careful co-presence”, where migrants manage emotional expression and visibility in digital communication. In this sense, emotional vulnerability in the game consists of the strain produced by fragile communicative rhythms and the persistent uncertainty of remote caregiving.

At a structural level, the game models what scholars describe as cultures of vulnerability: contexts shaped by legal precarity, bureaucratic opacity and uneven access to mobility (Guerra & Barros, 2026; Schrooten, 2021). The ludonarrative and walkthrough analyses reveal recurring motifs of deportation loops, financial barriers, missed transport and sudden route closures. These elements are not isolated narrative incidents but procedural manifestations of institutional fragility. Through play, these pressures become experiential, requiring players to repeatedly adapt strategies, reassess risks and manage limited resources. This involves the “establishment” of procedures that replicate the ethics-of-care perspectives that emphasize the relational and institutional dimensions of care, responsibility and dependency under unstable conditions (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993).

The triangulated methodology shows that vulnerability is produced across design, interpretation and reception. While the game encodes vulnerability through mechanics and interface dynamics, players interpret and negotiate it via collaborative documentation, and reviewers emotionally process or critique it. Responses, however, are heterogeneous. Some players report empathy, emotional involvement and heightened awareness of migrant experiences; others express skepticism, discomfort or concerns about representation. This variation demonstrates that mediated empathy is not automatic. Instead, engagement is conditioned by players’ expectations, personal experiences and positions within broader migration discourses. This insight contributes to debates in media and communication studies about the limits and possibilities of empathy in digital storytelling.

The analysis points to several implications for ethics, game design and contemporary migration discourse. From an ethical perspective, the game illustrates how interactive media can support forms of ethical witnessing by engaging players affectively and procedurally with structural inequalities, rather than positioning them as passive observers. For designers, the study highlights how constrained agency, fragmented temporality and emotionally charged interfaces can be mobilized deliberately to model complex social realities without reducing them to simplified narrative arcs or gamified challenges. In relation to migration discourse, framing vulnerability as relational and experiential challenges dominant media representations that reduce mobility to crisis events or abstract statistics. By foregrounding the everyday negotiations, dependencies and uncertainties that shape transnational life, the game contributes to more nuanced mediated imaginaries that influence how audiences understand, empathize with or distance themselves from migrant experiences.

These considerations underline the broader relevance of *Bury Me, My Love* for understanding how digital games can operate as affective and ethical infrastructures. The game demonstrates that interactive media can represent and perform the complexities of displacement by embedding emotional labor, uncertainty and systemic constraint into the act of play itself. By emphasizing the interplay between design, interpretation and reception, it highlights the potential of digital games to enrich public and academic conversations about vulnerability, mobility and relational ethics. Rather than offering mastery or resolution, the game invites players to dwell in uncertainty and to reflect on the emotional and structural conditions that underpin contemporary experiences of migration.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to analyse how *Bury Me, My Love* represents and operationalises transnational vulnerability, focusing on the dynamics of mediated communication, emotional labour, and constrained agency that characterise contexts of forced displacement. By examining the simulation of communication between Nour and Majd, the article seeks to understand how transnational life is constructed through fragmented geographies of care and technologically mediated interactions. Throughout the methodological process, based on a qualitative approach combining ludonarrative analysis, document analysis of a collaborative walkthrough, and thematic analysis of player reception, the study demonstrates that vulnerability is produced both procedurally and affectively. The game's mechanics — structured around delayed communication, limited choices, and unpredictable consequences — generate an experience marked by temporal uncertainty, asymmetries of information, and restricted agency, while its narrative dimension foregrounds the emotional labour and mediated intimacy that sustain long-distance care.

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