

Factsheet



Migrancy, refugees and citizenship representations in video games

A problem of representation, a window of opportunity



In the media, migrants and refugees are often connotated negatively. The tendency is that of offering a simplified representation (conveyed by words and images) watering down the complexities of such phenomena.

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Discourses around border control, limitations to migration and rejection of the otherness in many countries not only gather a lot of attention in the media discourse but are also largely represented in video games.

Video games can become a medium through which digital citizens can approach ethical reflection about the topic, can shape their own critical thinking and can learn about the escape and resettlement of refugees and their personal stories.

Video games can spark **critical thinking** and valorise complexity: the variety of ways in which contemporary video games engage with narratives of migration and refugeedom offers many incentives to learn about the topic and foster **educational dialogue and reflection**.

A narrative is defined as 'a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief'. A narrative is larger than any particular story relating to a specific individual, event or situation.

Most commonly, negative migration narratives are about newcomers as threats to security, law and order, culture, national identity, the economy or public health.

Games addressing migrancy and refugeedom therefore represent a true “*window of opportunity*” to offer an alternative narrative, providing a means to encourage greater understanding of the historical, cultural, social and political relationships of our world, and addressing a somewhat different audience to that of other media outlets. Knowing about these games and using them in educational contexts open many possibilities to connect with such delicate and complex topics in new and unexpected ways.

Yet, a danger of **misrepresentation** and **simplification** exists in video games as well: it is then fundamental to incentivise digital experiences where stereotypes are dismantled, where the complexity of the situations and the characters are maintained, and where the point of view of migrants is respected by including them in the development of the game and of its narrative.

WHAT DOES “PROMOTING A POSITIVE VIDEO GAME CULTURE” MEAN?

Promoting a positive video game culture means generating **pedagogical reflection** around video games and thinking about them as a cultural tool capable of fostering many aspects of the lives of digital citizens: entertainment, education, well-being, and development. It also means considering video games worthy of study and accurate and careful analysis of their characteristics, mechanics, and languages.

The Council of Europe considers **Digital Citizenship Education** a key element to nurture a positive, inclusive and effective video game culture for tomorrow’s citizens. The more aware future generations are of the

economic models, structures, languages, risks and opportunities within video games, the more it will be possible to build a society that uses video games as a positive medium, benefits from them, and minimise the dangers that video games, as well as other media, inevitably have.

VIDEO GAMES TO RAISE EMPATHY

Video games are powerful media whose interactive elements can speak in unique ways to players’ emotions. In this sense, games that deal with refugees and migrants can offer **new perspectives on emotions** by focusing on under-discussed elements like the relationship between space and empathy in refugee experiences.



One example is a science fiction city-builder title called *Resilience: The Game*, where players are asked to manage an alien refugee camp on an imaginary futuristic planet. Two points of view are represented throughout the game: an aerial, cartographic view of the camp from above, and a first-person, ground level view of the camp from within it. The changing perspectives in this game allow for a reflection about how spatial representations relate to empathy, offering further evidence of how video games can enrich the plurality and complexity of our encounters with migration.

USEFUL LINKS

Council of Europe publication

[Video game culture: a map for teachers and parents](#)

Council of Europe publication

[Human rights guidelines for online game providers](#)

T. L. Hera, J. Jansz, J. Raessens, B. Schouten,

[Persuasive Gaming in Context \(2021\)](#)

Visit the Council of Europe webpage related to the work of the [Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration and Refugees](#) and to the [Action plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe \(2021-2025\)](#).

Council of Europe policy brief

[Migration and Integration - Which alternative narratives work and why](#)

Council of Europe Online training course

[Alternative narratives and inclusive communication](#)



To learn more about Digital Citizenship Education and its Video game Culture Working Group, go to: www.coe.int/dce