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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

GLOBAL (RE)ENTRY
A UTOPIAN INTERVENTION IN THE US IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

Mohamadreza Babae Tamirdash

June 2022

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2022

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ABSTRACT

Global (re)Entry A Utopian Intervention in the US Immigration System

By Mohamadreza Babae Tamirdash

Global (re)Entry is a 2D game and video/sound installation that takes a critical and parodic look at the Global Entry program designed by the US Customs and Border Protection agency. While players can play the game to learn more about unfair border control strategies and oppressive state policies targeting immigrants, they can also fictionally redesign discriminatory US immigration forms and generate pro-immigrant, antiracist manifestos. In this thesis, I argue that *Global (re)Entry* moves beyond a representational goal and instead facilitates a critical intervention in the failing US immigration system. Borrowing from pertinent discourses on activist art, new media, queer of color critique, and critical surveillance studies, I contend the project actively encourages a closer look at systems through which social, political, and civic ostracization of immigrants is perpetuated. Moreover, *Global (re)Entry* invites players to formulate a utopian vision of society based in equality, fairness, and inclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis project results from my continuing critical and creative investigation of the US immigration system in the past two years. In my journey, I was supported and assisted by many teachers, colleagues, and friends, whose investment in my project was an incredible force behind my success. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge that *Global (re)Entry* is a project made in collaboration with Madeline Grass Doss (music and sound), Fion Kwok (2D and UI design), and Avery Weibel (Unity programming). This project could not go further than abstract ideas without their critical labor and passionate contributions.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee and their continuing support. Thank you to Dr. micha cárdenas, whose inspiring passion for social justice has left a lasting impact on all my academic and artistic endeavors. Your generous and insightful advising was a guiding light in my voyage into the realm of digital arts. Moreover, thank you to Dr. Michael Chemers and Professor Marianne Weems for providing me with invaluable feedback and suggestions throughout the thesis process. Similarly, I am thankful to Assistant Professor Elizabeth Swensen for facilitating the artist recruitment for this project. Likewise, I am thankful to DANM program manager Bennett Williamson and DANM technical coordinator Colleen Jennings for their relentless support of all DANM students. I am also grateful for Stephanie Layton and Swan Dive Media for, respectively, cataloging and documenting my project.

I would like to use this space to also thank my peers in the DANM MFA program, particularly Forest Reid, Laura Boutros, Dave Crellin, and dani wright. A special thanks also to Dr. Dennis Sloan, Jarod Mariani, Kathryn Fahl, JP Olsen, and especially my loving family. Lastly, a special treat for my puppy, Day-G, who never failed to cheer me up with her smile. Want to go for a walk?

Introduction

Global (re)Entry is a 2D game and video/sound installation that takes a critical and parodic look at the Global Entry program designed by the US Customs and Border Protection agency. Similar to other Trusted Traveler programs, Global Entry allows “low-risk” US citizens and permanent residents to use an automated machine to receive their clearance for crossing international borders. The conditions through which Global Entry considers a traveler as low risk are not disclosed publicly and are open to interpretation and bias. My project borrows textual and visual assets from the US Department of Homeland Security (and the associated agencies) website to simulate and repurpose the traveler screening program. The player needs to answer several questions in the game to receive their travel clearance card. However, their resistance to participating in state-sponsored security theatres unlocks a new gameplay path that leads the player to a utopian path of reimagining the US immigration system.

I invite the participants to play the game inside a room minimally reconfigured as an airport terminal. The room is lit by natural daylight and features a glass wall similar to many US airports. As participants sit behind a desk to play the game on a computer, a CCTV camera captures their live image, which is subsequently projected on a screen suspended in front of them. Additionally, the ambient recording of an airport terminal plays in the background throughout the installation. While players can play the game to learn more about unfair border control strategies and oppressive state policies targeting immigrants, they can also fictionally redesign discriminatory US immigration forms and generate pro-immigrant, antiracist manifestos.

In this thesis, I argue that *Global (re)Entry* moves beyond a representational goal and instead facilitates a critical intervention in the failing US immigration system. By

incorporating a practice-based research methodology, I contend that the project actively encourages a closer look at systems through which social, political, and civic ostracization of immigrants is perpetuated. Moreover, *Global (re)Entry* invites players to formulate a utopian vision of society based in equality, fairness, and inclusion. This project invites the participants to critically reflect on the US border surveillance policies and explore how their personal choices can intentionally and inadvertently influence the border-crossing practices of immigrants locally and globally.

My argument about *Global (re)Entry*'s utopian, interventionist function seeks to address a plethora of research questions, including: Can digital art offer glimpses of utopia, and is that a way for the work to do more than representation? In what ways does *Global (re)Entry* build upon and depart from core tenets of interventionist art? How does this project use digital art to produce an interactive critique of surveillance technologies? I borrow from related scholarship on interventionist art, tactical media, and racializing surveillance to explore similar questions throughout this thesis paper.

I begin this study with a review of utopian critical thinking and the ways in which such philosophies may lead to a practical reimagination of the future. After presenting some arguments in favor of and against utopian thinking in life and art, I move to an examination of interventionist art practices that seek to meddle with instantiations of systematic oppression. Lastly, I use the pertinent literature on utopian critique and interventionist art to discuss how my project intervenes in racializing border surveillance initiatives of the Department of Homeland Security and helps the participants envisage a utopian alternative to the current US immigration system. I conclude this thesis by delineating the creative itinerary through which *Global (re)Entry* came to be, particularly as an example of creative ensemble and collective artmaking.

Utopian Game Design

At a time when anti-immigrant policies and brazen racist rhetoric remain ever-present on national and transnational levels,¹ many artists may use their art to take on the responsibility of creating dialogues around the impact of oppression on minoritarian people. While such critical discussions are crucial to understanding injustice on a structural level, they can also remain limited to either understanding injustice without seeing a way out of it or finding a solution embedded in the same structures those artists seek to dismantle. Performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz, writing on the contemporary politics of queer of color critique, believes that individuals can find themselves in such a conundrum by failing to imagine their lives beyond what he calls the “quagmire of the present.”² It is the present-focused thinking that, according to Muñoz, stops the oppressed from imagining a better future outside the contemporary tyranny of systems. Muñoz proposes a “utopian modality” in which feelings, thoughts, and actions follow a utopian function for “fragmenting darkness” and illuminating a “world that should be, that could be, and that will be.”³ Muñoz, however, warns against future-oriented thoughts that are disconnected from the past and seek to advance capitalist, hetero- and homonormative agendas in ahistorical, fantastic ways. Borrowing from German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, Muñoz refers to such future-oriented attitudes as examples of “abstract utopias” that are simply “untethered from any historical consciousness” and are similar to “banal optimism.”⁴ On the other hand, Muñoz advocates for “concrete” ideas of utopia that “are relational to historically situated struggles,

¹ Independent Socialist Group, “Biden Administration Continues Anti-Immigrant Policies,” *Independent Socialist Group*, June 18, 2021, <https://independentsocialistgroup.org/2021/06/18/biden-administration-continues-anti-immigrant-policies/>.

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 64.

⁴ Muñoz, 3.

a collectivity that is actualized or potential.”⁵ According to Muñoz, abstract notions of utopia (that typically remain limited to the realm of fantasy) are, in fact, dead-end, antiutopian wishes that are bound to reaffirm current structures that systematically sustain the ostracization of those who stand outside the hegemonic majority. In contrast, concrete utopias involve a better future that could be and should be, a future that invokes a “not-yet-conscious” potentiality, presenting the collective wish of a group that looks back at the “no-longer-conscious” past and renders hopeful “potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility.”⁶

An example of utopian artwork infused with the idea of a different tomorrow is Chico MacMurtrie’s *Biomorphic Wall* (2015).⁷ In this project, MacMurtrie constructs a robotic border wall that is both transparent and movable. The walls are made of translucent fabric, and audiences can move through them. Contradicting the conservative standards of security walls as stable and impenetrable obstacles, MacMurtrie’s walls are vulnerable to human interventions and organic in structure. These walls certainly fail a security state’s ideal of impenetrable borders, but they easily fit into an artist’s imagination of a world in which borders dance to human interventions.

Utopian artmaking practices seen in such projects as *Biomorphic Wall* inform my art. *Global (re)Entry* invites reflections on the oppressive structures of migration and surveillance in the US. In this invitation, however, I make room for utopian desires to break up reality and imagine a more hopeful, inclusive future. The game starts with an image of the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) logo (FIG. 1), inviting the players to acquire their clearance

⁵ Muñoz, 3.

⁶ Muñoz, 22, 25, 97.

⁷ Chico MacMurtrie, “Biomorphic Wall,” accessed April 27, 2022, <http://amorphicrobotworks.org/biomorphic-wall>.

cards by submitting their personal data to the Global Entry network. The visuals and audio are designed to replicate a somewhat accurate feeling of monitoring software designed by these agencies. For this purpose, the images and (most) texts in the game's early stages are borrowed from the official websites of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Department of Homeland Security, Custom and Immigration Services, and Transportation Security Administration. After reviewing CBP's mission statement, players are asked to create an account and add their profile to the database. Here, players have two choices: either accept and click on "REGISTER" or "REFUSE" to submit their name to the system. If players click



FIG. 1: Opening screen, *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

on "REGISTER," they are taken to a screen that informs them that they need to wait more several years for their account to get processed. In the meantime, players are asked to review important articles to prepare for their in-person interview. The articles range from "Preparing for Your Interview with CBP" to right-wing, conservative items, including "The Peril of Illegal Immigrants to US Economy."

Up to this point, it might seem that I have simply redesigned the bureaucratic structure of the US immigration system. While I want my audience to experience the frustration of dealing with an obscure process of immigration, I also want them to realize the futility of the current US immigration system. In fact, if players choose to register in the system, they are trapped in a failure scenario; they will never receive a message informing them it is their turn to procure their clearance cards. Instead, all they are left with is the option of reviewing the articles on the screen or simply clicking on “Start Again?” (FIG. 2). If players click on any of the articles, they soon realize that the documents’ content does not match their title. For instance, clicking on the “The Peril of Illegal Immigrants to US Economy” link opens an article explaining undocumented immigrants’ rights. I have made

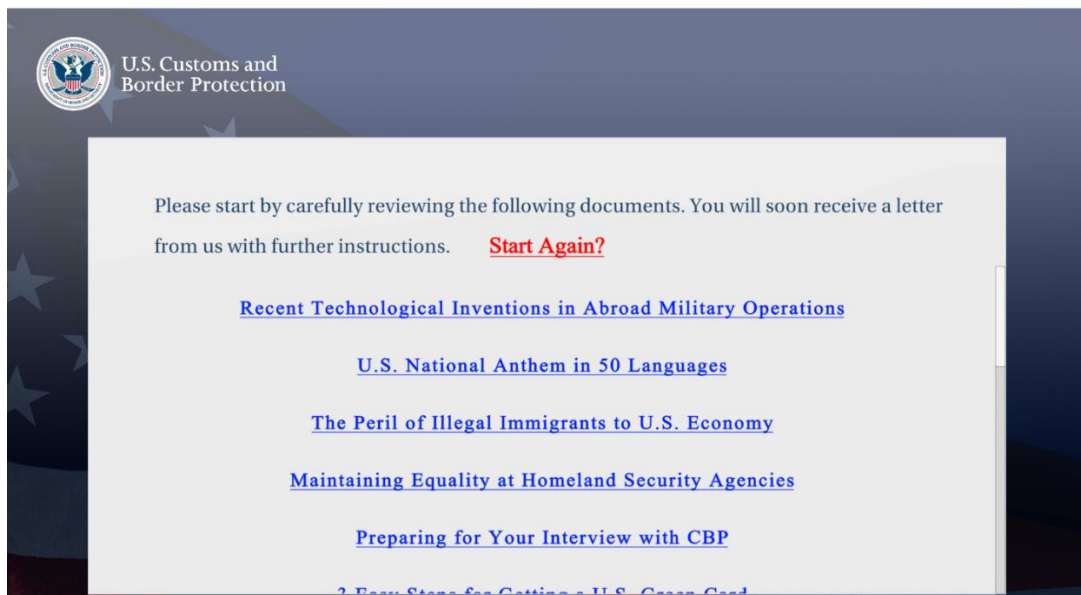


FIG. 2: When players accept registering in the database, they are taken to this screen. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

these choices to prevent a pro-system reading of my game. In other words, players fail if they choose to follow the software’s instructions. However, if they refuse to register in the system, they are gradually taken to a screen that reveals the true intent of the game. When players

refuse and resist the software's instructions, they encounter a message left by the game designers (FIG. 3). In short, I thank the players for their resistance and ask them to examine the US immigration system critically. Then, the scripted objective for the players shifts from participating in a xenophobic, anti-immigrant system to joining a network of activists who plan to replace the current US immigration system with a pro-immigrant network of people who believe all humans are equal. Players are subsequently asked to examine a list of

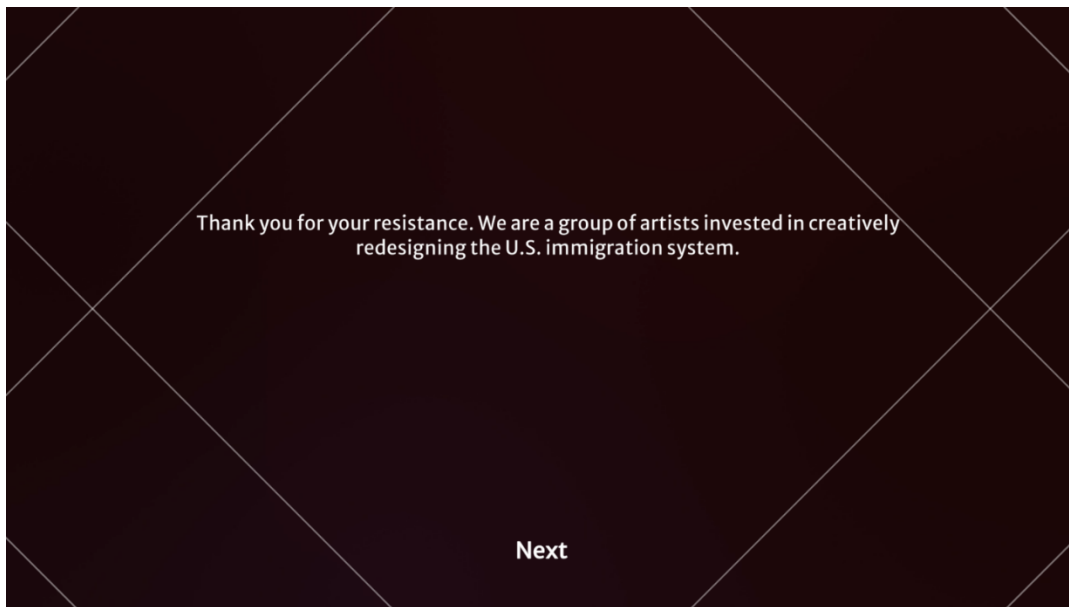


FIG. 3: When players refuse to register in the database, they are taken to a secret screen that reveals the true intent behind the game. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

questions taken from current US immigration forms, and redesign them by using a “Cosmic Ray Tool,” a utopian tool that automatically changes intrusive questions into pro-immigrant, antiracist, feminist messages. The utopian feature of *Global (re)Entry* lies here: instead of imagining how one might improve the US immigration system (an abstract idea of utopia still invested in institutionalized power distribution), I ask players to imagine a future in which a network of people collectively advocate for free movement of immigrants across borders. While the game starts with a mechanic that automatically redesigns a US immigration form

(FIG. 4), players are soon given an “Edit Tool” that enables them to write their own alternative immigration application questions (FIG. 5). In *Global (re)Entry*, I present my

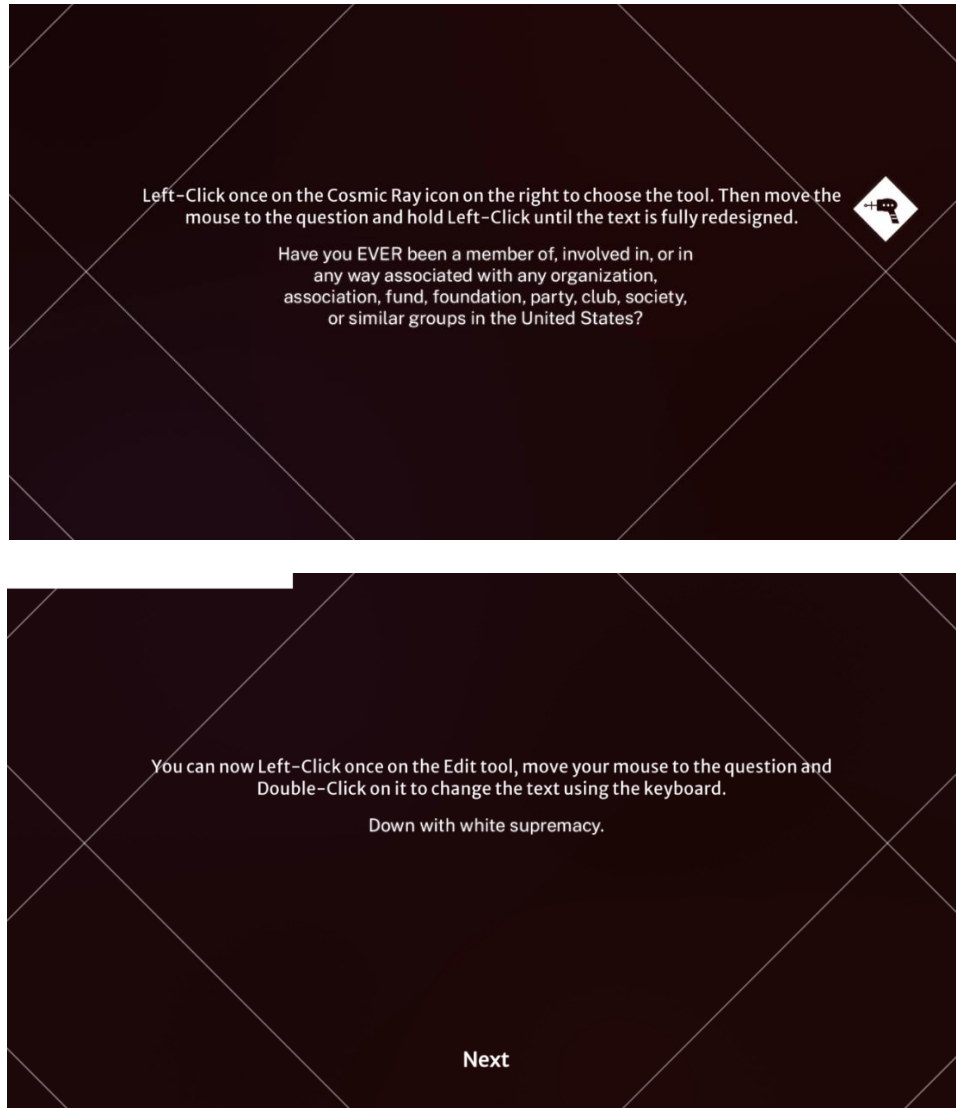


FIG. 4: When players see the question (top image), they can click on the Cosmic Ray Tool on the right to automatically change the question to an alternative text (bottom image). *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

audiences with a list of questions that are taken from current US immigration forms and voluntary testimonies of my friends who had to undergo a thorough in-person interview as a required part of their US VISA application process. While audiences get to know about the

xenophobic assumptions embedded in these questions, I give them an in-game ability to change those questions into antiracist, pro-immigrant texts. Here, the utopian strategy involves not only a critical look at the history of the US immigration system but also the

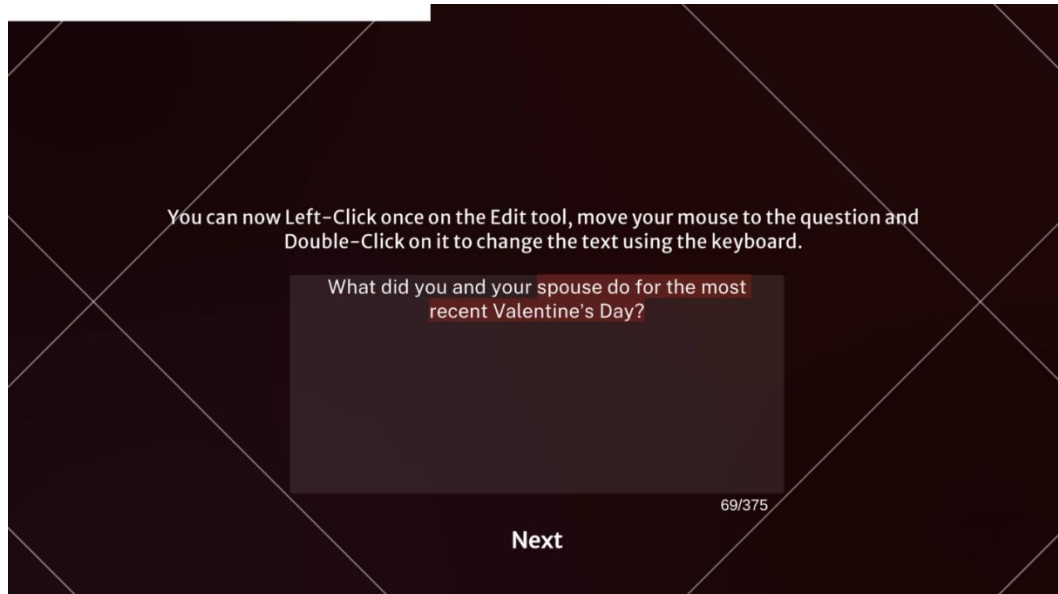


FIG. 5: Players will eventually unlock an “Edit” tool to write their own responses. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

ability to imagine a future in which border control institutions are replaced by a network of activist immigrants who unequivocally believe in equality of all humans. *Global (re)Entry*, therefore, represents what Claudia Costa Pederson calls “utopian ludology,” a critical-creative perspective that considers games as “places of the radical imagination,” sites that take playfulness as “enabling interactions that afford the necessary freedom to generate new kinds of thinking, feeling, and empowerment to concretize a future that dominant culture renders unthinkable.”⁸ Games imbued by concrete ideas of utopia, Pederson asserts, can be “tools of persuasion,” which “open up the question of alternatives” and “reject the mimetic

⁸ Claudia Costa Pederson, *Gaming Utopia: Ludic Worlds in Art, Design, and Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 6.

ideals... and commodity models of the video game industry.”⁹ While I hesitate to label *Global (re)Entry* as merely a “persuasive game,” I am inspired by persuasive game designers who use video games for “cultural and social change” and “do so in recognition of the persuasive power of the medium, which is based on its appeal to fantasy and imagination.”¹⁰

Utopian Interventions

While a utopian reimagination undergirds how I conceive my thesis project on a more theoretical level, I take inspiration from interventionist and tactical media artists in designing *Global (re)Entry* in practical ways. Interventionist art refers to a body of art practices that “establishes its purpose and form through the social exchanges and altered behaviors that arise as a result of its disruption of quotidian patterns of social experience in public spaces.”¹¹ Having roots in dada ideas of the early twentieth century, interventionist artists create a “body of work that trespasses into the everyday world—art that critiques, lampoons, interrupts, and co-opts, art that acts subtly or with riotous fanfare, and art that agitates for social change using magic tricks, faux fashion, and jacked-up lawn mowers.”¹² Perhaps best exemplified in Mass MoCA’s *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* (2005), interventionist artists, for instance, create tents and vehicles for homeless populations to not only draw attention to the ubiquitous lack of stable and secure housing for thousands of people, but they also interrupt the quotidian condition of homelessness by providing housing

⁹ Pederson, *Gaming Utopia*, 184.

¹⁰ Pederson, 222.

¹¹ Jack Richardson, “Interventionist Art Education: Contingent Communities, Social Dialogue, and Public Collaboration,” *Studies in Art Education* 52, no. 1 (2010), 18.

¹² “The Interventionists: Arts in the Social Sphere,” *Mass MoCA*, May 29, 2004, <https://massmoca.org/event/the-interventionists-art-in-the-social-sphere/>.

solutions to people in need.¹³ Interventionist artists are not simply interested in issues of representing politics. Instead, art curator and critic Nato Thompson posits, “they place their work into the heart of the political situation itself ... Their projects are made to operate within and upon systems of power and trade using the techniques of art...”¹⁴ Nato contextualizes early-twenty-first century interventionist art within the historical backdrop of Situationist artists who used the two tactics of “detourné” (“rearranging of popular sign-systems in order to produce new meanings”) and “derive” (the effect of space and geography on individuals) to pursue “results beyond aesthetic pleasure.”¹⁵

Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab had a similar interventionist goal in mind when they decided to create a Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT) to help individuals crossing the border from Mexico to the US find hidden water caches. TBT was designed as a GPS-enabled application and would lead the users to the water caches in a desert environment, while playing back pre-recorded files of poetry in multiple languages. Although the increased security at the US-Mexico border prevented the artists from making their tool widely available to immigrants, the project nevertheless “succeeded in confounding systems of political control, creating a call to action that resonated internationally, and using poetry to ‘dissolve’ the US-Mexico border.”¹⁶

While artists use a plethora of methods to intervene in various social and political issues, I pay more attention to media interventions to orient this thesis toward discussions of

¹³ For instance, Gregory Kloehn, an artist based in Oakland, builds and gifts tiny houses to homeless populations in California. Look at Linda Federico-O’Murchu, “Tiny Houses: A Big Idea to End Homelessness,” *NBC News*, February 26, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/real-estate/tiny-houses-big-idea-end-homelessness-n39316>.

¹⁴ Nato Thompson, “Trespassing Relevance,” in *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, ed. Nato Thompson and Gregory Shollette (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁵ Thompson, “Trespassing Relevance,” 16, 21.

¹⁶ “Transborder Immigrant Tool,” *Net Art Anthropology*, 2007, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/transborder-immigrant-tool>.

digital art and new media. Perhaps most pertinent to this topic is tactical media, a series of disruptive methodologies such as reverse engineering, hacking, contestational robotics, and open-access software that digital art scholar Rita Raley considers a “mutable category.” Raley writes tactical media “signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible.”¹⁷ Media artists can use the “virtuality of their medium” to technologically and aesthetically penetrate rigid power structures and remodel them into subversive forms of opposition.¹⁸ A robust example of artists using tactical media to insurgent ends is the *HACKING/ MODDING/ REMIXING AS FEMINIST PROTEST* exhibition (2017) at Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University. Curated by Angela Washko and representing the works of more than twenty artists, the exhibition includes artistic interventions in technology for bringing “visibility to women’s perspectives and experiences that have been marginalized, ignored or dismissed.”¹⁹ For instance, the two-person art collective Soda_Jerk contributes to the exhibition by recoding a feminist manifesto using the 1990s instructional computer videos and designing a free-to-download cyberfeminist screensaver. Another example included in the exhibition is Addie Wagenknecht’s *Optimization of Parenting Part 2* (2012), in which robots carry out various parenthood tasks. Both Soda_Jerk’s and Wagenknecht’s works follow the exhibition’s theme of intervening in the dominance of technology industries by men and disrupting the exclusion of women in related fields. More importantly, the projects contribute to the significant body of radical

¹⁷ Rita Raley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6.

¹⁸ Raley, *Tactical Media*, 32, 151.

¹⁹ Angela Washko, “HACKING/MODDING/REMXING AS FEMINIST PROTEST,” Angela Washko, 2017, <https://angelawashko.com/section/452281-HACKING-MODDING-REMXING-As-Feminist-Protest.html>.

feminist works that, collectively, seek to dismantle white, heteronormative structures of patriarchy and help build a more equitable society in the US and beyond.

Mendi + Keith Obadike's *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002) is another project that demonstrates how digital artists use tactical media to intervene in systems of oppression. Part of the duo's Black Net.Art Actions series, *The Interaction of Coloreds* is a satirical color-check-system "billed as the world's first online skin-color verification system."²⁰ Advertised as "Hyper-Race® Based Solutions for the Discriminating e-Business," the project focuses on the ubiquity of racial classification in today's society, particularly in e-Commerce spaces. The color-check-system, designed as a website, invites the participants to upload 160x120 pixel, 300 DPI JPEG photos of their eyes, ears, elbows, fingernails, and palms to receive a so-called certified hexadecimal number. The number, the creators of the color-check software sarcastically claim, accurately represents the exact racial markup of the customers and helps businesses determine if they want to offer their services to those customers or not. "Wouldn't it be refreshing to get trustworthy color info like John Smith, #FFFFFF (read: true white) when you receive an email?," reads the colored-check website, "Then try the Interaction of Coloreds Color Check System® - the world's first online skin color verification system."²¹

The Interaction of Coloreds functions as a tactical media project that creatively intervenes in the ever-growing world of e-Commerce to make visible the discriminatory policies, structures, and strategies used to segregate people based on the color of their skin and other racial factors. The project troubles the naïve notion of the internet as "a space without prejudice, free from mediation through our physical appearance and therefore devoid

²⁰ "Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965–2018," *Whitney Museum of American Art*, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/programmed?section=6&subsection=3>.

²¹ Mendi + Keith Obadike, "The Interaction of Coloreds: Color Check System," *Black Net.Art*, accessed April 27, 2022, <http://www.blacknetart.com/IOCccs.html>.

of notions of race.”²² Mendi + Keith make explicit the racial discrimination at play in online enterprises and society writ large. Their color-check system invites the participants (framed as customers) to interact with a digital algorithmic tool that operates in secret and reduces individuals to six-digit codes. The codes are not mere numbers; they are to be construed as racial signifiers, a series of numbers that abstractly assign one customer to the white spectrum and another to the “colored” range.

While I take inspiration from interventionist and tactical media artists, I should acknowledge the limitations of such art practices. Prominent art critic Claire Bishop highlights the “social turn” in “participatory art” of the 1990s (a term that she uses to describe socially-engaged art, community-based art, dialogic art, and interventionist art) as a common theme that seeks to oppose capitalist imperatives and facilitate social change.²³ The social urgency such projects purport to address, Bishop contends, leads to “a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance,” regardless of their aesthetic quality.²⁴ In other words, participatory art projects (including interventionist projects) never fail as art because their “process-based” social objective elevates them to the realm of social, outside the jurisdiction of aesthetic analysis. Moreover, Bishop takes issue with the fact that the efficacy of the social change that participatory art aspires to create is rarely measured, particularly in comparison to actual social projects happening outside the art world. In effect, Bishop continues, art initiatives that seek to recruit participants under the promise of social change risk losing aesthetic value in the fallacious hope of achieving social gains. Bishop concludes by ascertaining that such an

²² “Programmed”

²³ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 12, 13.

²⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13.

attitude toward creating socially aware, process-based art only reinforces the “populist agendas of neoliberal governments” and their ongoing push for relieving the government of the burden of improving society and relegating that mandate to individual citizens.²⁵

While I understand Bishop’s critique of interventionist projects, I believe my project avoids falling into the traps that Bishop describes. First, I do not identify *Global (re)Entry* simply as an art project that follows the structure, patterns, and methodologies commonly seen in interventionist artworks. Instead, I am inspired by their activist ambition, their interest in disruption and disturbance, and, more importantly, their socially-situated agendas that go beyond representational concerns. That said, I am equally interested in representing immigrant experiences and intervening in unfair immigration policies. *Global (re)Entry*, a 2D game, is certainly a project that exists as a finished artwork, ready to be downloaded, experienced, and assessed. It includes a ludic component of participation, but overall, it is process-based inasmuch as all art, even a baroque painting on the wall. Therefore, not only do I have no intention of avoiding an aesthetic analysis, but I welcome it. In fact, it is my hope that the players, among other things, pay attention to the collective labor put behind making *Global (re)Entry* and assess the project through various artistic and aesthetic lenses.

But perhaps more importantly, while I encourage utopian imagination as a valuable interventionist tactic, I make no claim about the social efficacy of my activist inspiration for creating *Global (re)Entry*. Indeed, I purposely interrupt idealistic, abstract, fantasy-like assumptions about my game. After players redesign seven questions, they are offered an opportunity to read about an immigrant’s experience of crossing borders. Interjected as an animated, poetic text superimposed on a background image of a magical forest (FIG. 6), the “cutscene” includes the tale of a flying mare as well as the mundane narrative of an unnamed

²⁵ Bishop, 277.

character jogging on a white birch trail. Loosely based on my personal experience of living in the US as a queer immigrant of color, the cutscene is presented as a disruptive moment, breaking the illusion of achieving real change by just playing a game about US immigration reform. I include the cutscene inside the game with the hope of inspiring players to ask themselves, “What am I doing to achieve a utopian image of the US immigration system other than playing a game?” I do not mean to chastise my players for playing the game. Instead, I want them to understand the limitations of social change if their decisions are only limited to a 2D game.

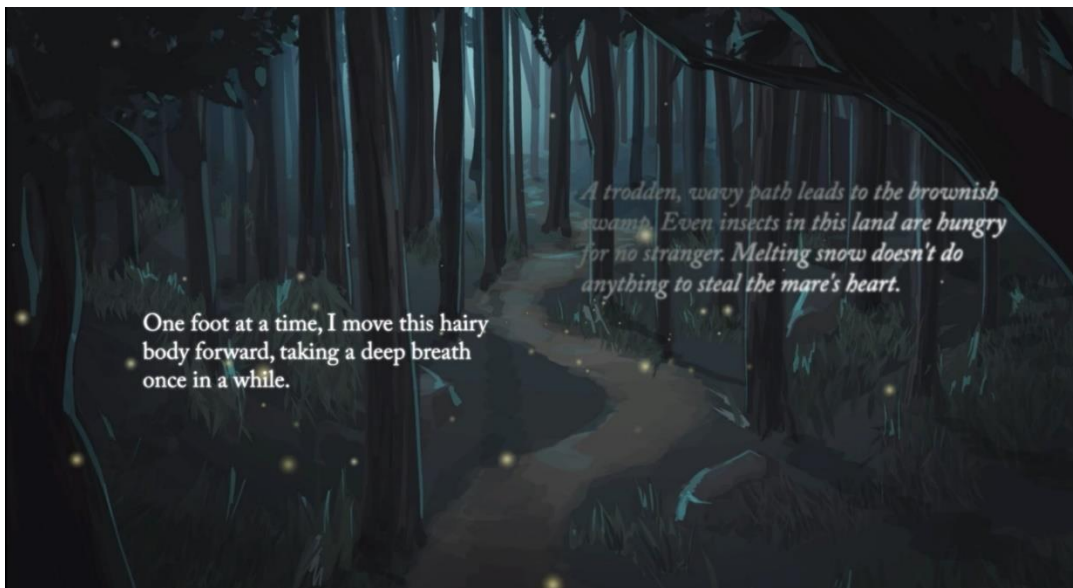


FIG. 6: The forest cutscene. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

Global (re)Entry is inspired by interventionist art and tactical media to interject into and criticize the discriminatory nature of the US immigration system, particularly manifested at airport borderlands. The project invites the participants to reflect on how everyday practices of border crossing involve imbalanced negotiations of borders in severe tension with the state’s desire to protect its white supremacist structure. That said, I am fully aware that my project is equally concerned with issues of representation. Indeed, representing

immigration experiences is an important goal of this project. Therefore, I join many immigrant activist artists who seek to draw more attention to diasporic discourses and nomadic identities. However, I combine my representational concerns with an interventionist methodology that emphasizes utopian imagination as a tactic for critically investigating power structures and proposing subversive alternatives. Tantamount to my art philosophy as a sustainable method of creating social change is a personal understanding that all changes begin with a daring image of a better future. Utopian imagination, as theorized by Muñoz, is not a fantasy established within the ubiquitously capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and homonormative world. Utopian imagination is a proactive investigation of systems of power informed by radical histories of insurgencies, uprisings, and resistance. *Global (re)Entry* could be limited to introducing nonimmigrant players to the hardship of applying for a US VISA. My project, however, goes a step further. I invite the players to ask the imperative question of what does change look like and what could their role be in substantiating the audacious task of building a hopeful utopia?

Surveillance Interpretations

Global (re)Entry is a creative critique of the US immigration system and the necessary surveillance and border crossing policies and practices that sustain the xenophobic and anti-immigrant structure of the US nation-state. The development and enforcement of various trusted traveler programs in international ports of entry is simply a ruse for easy screening of travelers and separating them into potential suspects and trustworthy users.²⁶ Since Homeland Security agencies are exempted from racial profiling rules,²⁷ race plays a

²⁶ See Matthew Longo, *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁷ See Nicole Nguyen, *Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

vital role in designing and implementing border surveillance strategies. Writing on the surveillance of Blackness in the US, African and African diaspora studies scholar Simone Browne uses “racializing surveillance” as a term to describe systematic moments “when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race, and where the outcome of this is often discriminatory and violent treatment.”²⁸ Browne contends that racializing surveillance is a “technology of social control” and suggests “how things get ordered racially by way of surveillance depends on space and time and is subject to change, but most often upholds negating strategies that first accompanied European colonial expansion and transatlantic slavery that sought to structure social relations and institutions in ways that privilege whiteness.”²⁹ Expanding her analysis into the racialized practices of surveillance at US airports, Browne uses the concept of “racial baggage” to identify situations in which certain acts and certain looks at the airport weigh down some travelers, while others travel lightly.³⁰ Trusted traveler programs, Browne continues, are clear evidence of how racializing surveillance is practiced at airports to identify, separate, pat down, and investigate the racial baggage some travelers carry across borders.³¹ In the racializing matrix of airports, questions of privacy become contested. The state watches travelers, but in that watching, not all travelers are equally suspect. As women’s and gender studies scholar Jasbir Puar delineates, “the right to privacy is not even on the radar screen for many sectors of society, unfathomable for whom being surveilled is a way of life...the private is a racialized and nationalized construct, insofar as it is granted not only to heterosexuals but to certain citizens

²⁸ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 8.

²⁹ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 16, 17.

³⁰ Browne, 132.

³¹ Browne, 135.

and withheld from many others and from noncitizens.”³² Furthermore, Puar uses the Foucauldian notion of “panopticon” to suggest that the ever present surveillance technologies throughout borderlands forcefully encourage self-regulation of a sort that is “less an internalization of norms and more about constant monitoring of oneself and others, watching, waiting, listening, ordering, positioning, calculating.”³³ Performance, communication, and feminist studies scholar Rachel Hall similarly focuses on the notion of self-regulation at airports to frame airport security as a “collaborative cultural performance” that requires some passengers to continuously perform “voluntary transparency.”³⁴ Transparency, in Hall’s critical opinion, is a privilege, the “new white,” that if performed successfully, will grant the traveler with a moment of innocence.³⁵ However, Hall continues, not all travelers are given equal access to such privilege; within the post-9/11 context, military and security experts design “mediated spectacles of diabolical opacity” to produce “the stubbornly noncompliant, noncitizen suspects in the war on terror.”³⁶

In sum, there is a clear connection between how the state surveils populations and creates racial categories. Surveillance at airports is a racializing act that seeks to produce transparent travelers and suspect figures of the national adversary. The ubiquitous implementation of surveillance technologies at airports regulates self-monitoring practices requiring travelers to disclose their information voluntarily. Those who successfully perform their transparency might achieve a temporary moment of innocence, but travelers with racial

³² Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 10th ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 125.

³³ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 156.

³⁴ Rachel Hall, *The Transparent Traveler: The Performance and Culture of Airport Security* (Duke University Press, 2015), 12.

³⁵ Hall, *The Transparent Traveler*, 14.

³⁶ Hall, 46.

baggage need to struggle against a racist state that considers them likely perpetrators of violence.

A significant number of Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American artists produce critical works to address the racializing practices of state surveillance in the US. Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal, for instance, created *Domestic Tension* (2007) to generate a critical discussion of the post-9/11 surveillance of Muslim and Brown bodies and the gamification of modern warfare in the wake of the invasion of Iraq by the USA. In May 2007, Bilal spent thirty days inside a small room at the FlatFile Gallery (Chicago) while streaming the live footage of his stay online. While audiences could go to the project's website and surveil Bilal's every movement, they could also remotely control a paintball gun installed inside the room and shoot at the artist. With *Domestic Tension*, Bilal sought to "raise awareness of virtual war and privacy, or lack thereof, in the digital age."³⁷ "*Domestic Tension*," writes Bilal, "will depict the suffering of war not through human displays of dramatic emotion, but rather through engaging people in the sort of playful interactive video game with which they are familiar."³⁸ Moreover, Bilal's game-based project "inserts the real into the virtual to speak similarly to the function of mainstream video games as tools of xenophobic and militarist propaganda."³⁹

Hasan Elahi is another artist whose work on surveillance is influential to my art. Well-known for his sousveillance⁴⁰ projects, Elahi creates voluntary footage of self-monitoring to comment on surveillance, migration, and citizenship issues. In *Tracking*

³⁷ Wafaa Bilal, "Domestic Tension," Wafaa Bilal, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://wafaabilal.com/domestic-tension/>.

³⁸ Bilal, "Domestic Tension."

³⁹ Pederson, 160.

⁴⁰ Sousveillance is a term coined by professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering Steve Mann to refer to practices of "inverse surveillance," a looking from under that disrupts the unilateral direction of surveillance. For more look at: Steve Mann, "Sousveillance, Not Just Surveillance, in Response to Terrorism," *Metal and Flesh* 6, no. 1 (2002): 1–8.

Transience (2008 – ongoing), Elahi voluntarily shares every moment of his life on an online website. The images, representing mundane moments of a Brown American man’s life, reveal details about Elahi’s exact locations and activities. Elahi decided to create *Tracking Transience* after an inaccurate tip led the FBI to investigate the artist as a terrorist suspect. While Elahi has published thousands of images depicting his everyday life, he does so to critique the inaccuracy of surveillance data procured by the state. In an article accompanying his TED Talk, Elahi asserts that the plethora of images only reveals a carefully selected portion of his life. What Elahi actually does in his life remains mostly hidden from the visitors of his website. In this way, Elahi designs a creative, critical commentary on state-sponsored surveillance that, in synthesis with racial profiling strategies, produces suspect images of individuals that can be completely inaccurate.⁴¹

With *Global (re)Entry*, I aspire to join the body of diverse Middle Eastern artists who use art to produce critical interventions in state-sponsored surveillance, particularly in connection to the US immigration system. The game fictionally simulates and repurposes the Global Entry trusted traveling program to (on top of encouraging utopian thinking) draw attention to intrusive methodologies that the Homeland Security agencies incorporate to produce prejudiced surveillance data, specifically about immigrants of color. For this purpose, I decided to exhibit the project as a video and sound installation. When players enter the room (lit by natural daylight), they see a desk and chair inside an empty room (FIG. 7). I chose the Light Lab in the Digital Arts Research Center (UCSC) mainly for the large window/glass wall on the southern part of the room. The room’s minimal architecture loosely represents a common scene in US airport terminals, where travelers can look at arriving and

⁴¹ Hasan Elahi, “I Share Everything. Or Do I?,” *ideas.ted.com*, July 1, 2014, <https://ideas.ted.com/i-share-everything-or-do-i/>.

departing airplanes. To emphasize the airport atmosphere inside the room, I played an ambient sound of an airport terminal (recorded by the project's sound artist Madeline Grass Doss) in the background. Lastly, I installed a CCTV camera on the ceiling to project the live footage of the participants onto a screen suspended in front of the desk. The projected image inside the brightly lit room is not clear and easily visible. I made that artistic choice for two



FIG. 7: *Global (re)Entry*, UCSC DANM 2022 Exhibition, the Light Lab, Digital Arts Research Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, April 22, 2022. Photo by author.

reasons: first, surveillance technologies, as Browne, Puar, Hall, Elahi, and Bilal argue, create inaccurate images of individuals that are highly susceptible to biased interpretations. Therefore, I wanted to emphasize the distorted quality of surveillance data. However, I was not simply interested in recreating an oppressive surveillance matrix. Another reason I chose to exhibit *Global (re)Entry* inside the Light Lab was the view of the ocean visible through the window. While the CCTV camera functions as a surveillance tool to reduce the participants

to distorted two-dimensional images, I wanted my participants to look beyond the screen and instead take in the natural beauty (i.e., the ocean) in juxtaposition with their live surveilled imagery.

Global (re)Entry takes from critical surveillance studies scholarship and creative practice to artistically replicate the common surveillance matrix seen in a typical US airport. More importantly, however, this project envisions a utopian probability in which a radical network of immigrants replaces the current US immigration system. Furthermore, *Global (re)Entry* incorporates the participant's surveillance representation to only deconstruct its validity and visibility by blending that distorted image in a serene background of the Pacific Ocean and the possibilities bodies of water offer to immigrants as essential ports of entry.

Ideation to Exhibition

Global (re)Entry follows my ongoing scholarly and creative exploration of the US immigration system and diasporic experiences. As a first-year MFA student, I began experimenting with playable media to find an effective way to communicate my critical thoughts on the subject. While taking DANM 250E – Collaborative Research Project in winter 2021), I started experimenting with incorporating documentary surveillance contents inside 3D-rendered environments. After creating several prototypes, I found more clarity in my vision: what if I design a game that allows players to interact with and deconstruct a border surveillance tool? Being particularly interested in airport security, which signals my privileged background as a jet-setter immigrant, I decided to make a game about TSA's body scanner machines.

My first step toward making the game was writing several short narratives that I intended to include in the game. I enrolled in an independent studies class on creative writing offered by Assistant Professor of Digital Arts and New Media Elizabeth Swensen to

conceptualize the game’s plot, narrative structure, and characters. After several weeks, I had written several vignettes that seemingly had no connection to each other. One was about a group of children growing up in a military camp. Another was about a jogger who eventually flies into the sun. I could not develop a narrative structure until later, in the summer of 2021. The short script told the story of a TSA agent with an aptitude for conflating reality and dreams. Inside the game, I wanted the players to take control of the TSA agent, use a body scanner to examine travelers, and decide if they could pass the security gate.⁴² I had an ambitious design idea for the game; therefore, I reached out to several undergraduate students to inquire about their interest in collaborating with me on this project. Soon, I recruited three artists: Madeline Grass Doss, a UCSC alum, composer, and sound artist; Fion Kowk, a UCSC Arts & Games: Playable Media senior student, and 2D and UI artist; and Avery Weibel, a UCSC Computational Media senior student, and programmer and unity developer.

As a transdisciplinary artist with a theatre and performance background, I gravitate toward collaborative art and teamwork. In my ensemble artmaking philosophy and practice, I am inspired by Grant H. Kester’s ideas pertaining to the significance of collaborative endeavors in contemporary art. Collaborative art practices, in Kester’s opinion, offer an aesthetic experience that can “transform our perceptions of difference” and “open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions.”⁴³ Writing particularly about art projects that encourage audience participation (an artmaking model that Kester calls “dialogical art”), Kester asserts that collaborative art practices render the collaborative exchange as an opportunity for self-reflection and consider “the exchange itself

⁴² I later found out that my idea had some resemblance to Lucas Pope’s video game *Paper, Please* (2013).

⁴³ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 11.

as creative praxis.”⁴⁴ Kester continues by ascertaining that collaborative art is “generative, not simply symbolic, improvisationally responsive rather than scripted, and in which the distribution of agency is more reciprocal.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, in a collaborative project, “the locus of creative production is displaced from the level of independent ideation on the part of the artist to an indeterminate, collectively authored exchange among multiple interlocutors.”⁴⁶

When I approached my collaborators, I acted upon the values that Kester identifies in collaborative art. I facilitated an ensemble structure for our meetings, during which all artists were encouraged to challenge design ideas and contribute to the formation of the project’s overall structure, scope, aesthetics, and mechanics. For instance, when we officially began our collaboration in fall 2021, I quickly realized that the game’s narrative-heavy structure did not match my newfound interest in interventionist art and tactical media practices. Therefore, I proposed a design change to the group: what if we simulate the Global Entry program and allow players to redesign US immigration forms? I premised my proposal by acknowledging the dramatic shift in the project. As such, I asked my collaborators to vote on the new design idea and express whether they would be interested in continuing working on the project. Luckily, the result was unanimously positive. However, in the spirit of observing a democratic, collaborative practice, I was ready to accept the majority vote, regardless of the outcome. I acknowledge that *Global (re)Entry* is, nevertheless, my MFA thesis project, and therefore, that inevitably puts me in a place of authority. However, I continuously ensured that my collaborators could freely exercise their agency, bring their ideas to the weekly meetings, and express their approval or dissatisfaction with a design decision. The result was a genuinely collaborative experience that validated each team member as a talented artist.

⁴⁴ Kester, *The One and the Many*, 28.

⁴⁵ Kester, 76.

⁴⁶ Kester, 114.

I adopted a playcentric approach⁴⁷ to game design in making *Global (re)Entry*. The overall goal was to have a new prototype every other week. We individually and collectively

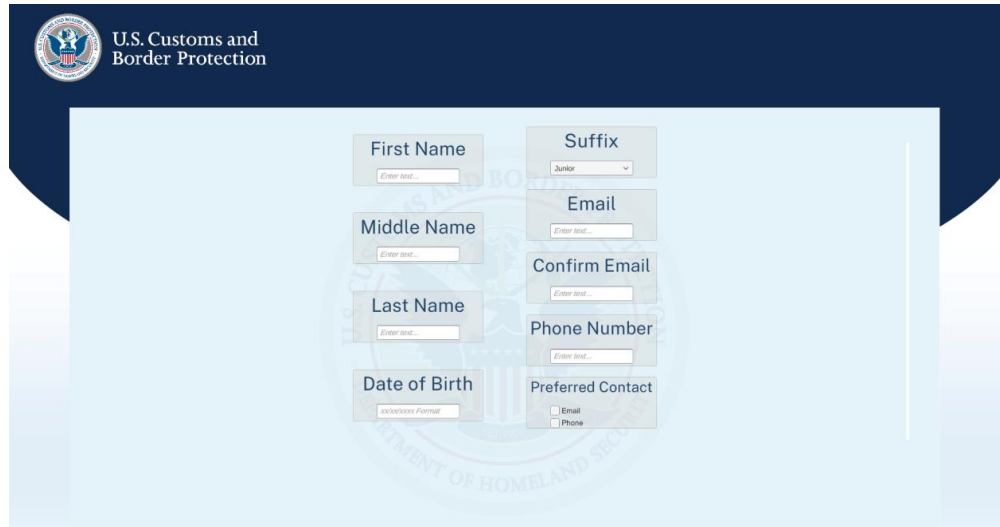


FIG. 8: Screenshot from an early prototype. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.



FIG. 9: Screenshot from an early prototype. Players could scan the fictional travelers' IDs, but by doing so, they would cause physical harm to them. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

⁴⁷ Playcentric game design involves frequent prototyping and playtesting at every step of the game design. For more, look at Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, 4th ed. (CRC Press, 2018).

played the prototypes and asked our friends and colleagues to do the same. Every playtesting feedback was taken into consideration for making the next prototype. At first, the game roughly represented a US government website and included a standard questionnaire asking players to disclose their biographical information (FIG. 8). After multiple discussions, we decided to use some visual assets found on Homeland Security websites to add to the game's verisimilitude to a common government software. As we continued exploring various gameplay mechanics, Avery Weibel (the project's programmer) suggested a mechanic through which players could automatically change immigration form questions. The idea came from an early prototype in which players were acting as a TSA officer, scanning travelers and, by doing so, physically hurting them (FIG. 9). However, we later decided to forgo that feature as we had no interest in creating a ludic mechanic for brutalizing fictional immigrants. Therefore, the team welcomed Weibel's suggestion for using a similar mechanic that empowered players to deconstruct the US immigration system fictionally. I called the mechanic "Cosmic Ray Tool 3.0," a term that signals my cosmic (read: utopian) philosophy in art. Furthermore, we decided to design an "Edit Tool" that would allow players to write their responses (as opposed to an automatic alternative text generated by the Cosmic Tool). In this way, I could encourage the players to think critically about the US immigration system and consider what their plan would involve for replacing it.

I originally envisioned implementing a game feature that allowed players to receive an electronic copy of their responses as a made-up immigration form. However, after discussing the idea with the team, I realized we did not have enough time and resources to implement that feature into the game. Instead, after receiving some feedback from the project's advisor, Assistant Professor of Digital Arts and New Media Dr. micha cárdenas, Avery Weibel added the ability for players to review and change their responses at the end of

the game. I was especially interested in the idea because I was curious about how incorporating the “forest cutscene” might influence players’ choices.

Our initial plan was to end the game after players redesigned ten questions and the Customs and Border Protection logo, the sponsoring agency behind Global Entry (FIG. 10). However, I was also interested in expressing my immigrant experience through the game.

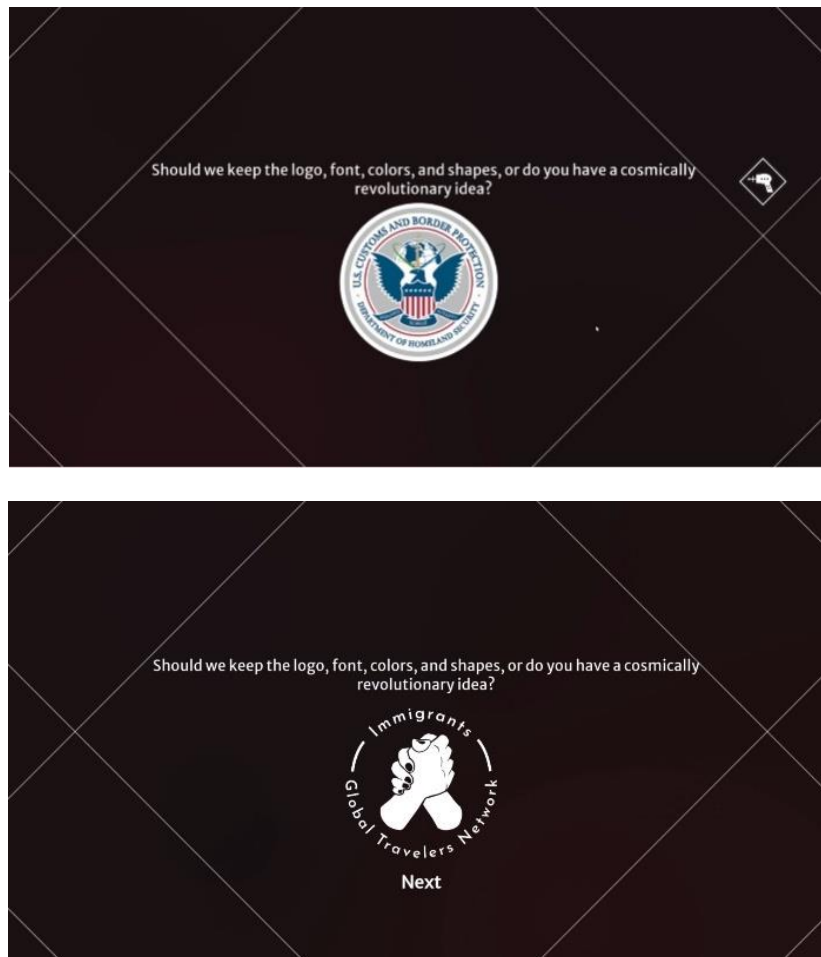


FIG. 10: The original (left) and redesigned (right) logo. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

After a discussion with my collaborators, we decided to create a cutscene that used some of my early writing for this project. We made two versions of the cutscene. The first version was

only about a jogger on a snowy trail with a blue sky and two suns (FIG. 11). After rewriting the cutscene text, we decided that a dark forest with moving fireflies could more effectively communicate the intended borderland feeling of living between two worlds. While Avery Weibel and Fion Kowk (2D and UI artist) worked on the visuals, Madeline Grass Doss (composer) created an ambient soundtrack with a melancholic hint of melody. Aesthetically, we wanted the cutscene to stand in complete contrast with the rest of the game. The result was a poetic video that I personally believe elevated the project from a simple 2D game to a heartfelt artwork. After adding the cutscene to the game, we considered *Global (re)Entry* to be in a stable, exhibition-ready shape. That ended a collaborative process between four artists that lasted more than six months.

UCSC DANM MFA Exhibition 2022 opened on April 22, 2022. Watching different participants playing *Global (re)Entry* was a valuable experience, particularly for identifying

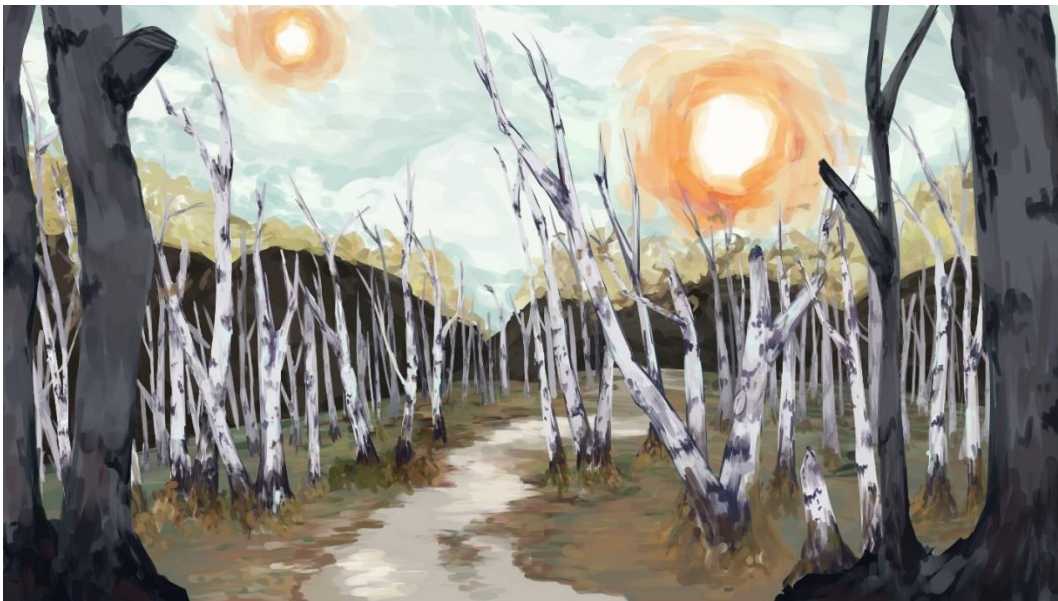


FIG. 11: A screenshot from the first iteration of the cutscene. *Global (re)Entry*, 2D video game, 2022.

bugs and points of improvement for future builds. More importantly, I was grateful for the participants' feedback, as they certainly would help me envision the project's future. A common denominator among that feedback was a specific interest in the cutscene. In combination with the visuals and audio, many players found the text emotionally moving. A suggestion that I received from multiple players, including Professor of Digital Arts and New Media Marianne Weems, was to make the cutscene a necessary component of the game and not an option that players could easily skip. Combined with similar feedback that I received from my advisor, the suggestions have inspired me to create two additional cutscenes that frame the game at the beginning and end (as opposed to having only one cutscene in the middle of the game). Additionally, during the exhibition, I noticed that most players who chose to register in the Global Entry program assumed registration was the only option inside the game. As such, they stopped playing the game without trying a different path. This clearly shows that I need to do a better job of clarifying how choosing to register in the network leads the players to a fail state and, therefore, they should choose differently. Lastly, I want to explore some ideas about how I can remake this game inside an entirely 3D environment. What if the players could walk in a forest, chasing a mare, and find various evidence of border crossing, immigrant experiences, and utopian social change? This is certainly a design idea that I will pursue in the future.

Similarly, *Global (re)Entry* has helped me think more about creative projects that can be useful to my audiences. For instance, in line with my exploration of border surveillance tools, I have been wondering about the possibility of physically remaking a TSA body scanner that, instead of producing abstract 2D images, is used as a free portrait photo printing machine. These ideas are mere concepts at this point. Nonetheless, I hope my MFA learning can lead me to find ways to turn those ideas into reality.

Conclusion

Global (re)Entry started as an examination of US border surveillance policies and technologies. While I was initially interested in using digital art to highlight immigrant experiences and produce more diasporic representation in the US art scene, I soon became enticed by a more ambitious goal: What if my art can do more than representation? I did not intend to downplay the importance of having diverse representations. I was simply curious about the usefulness of art and the efficacy of creative endeavors. Pursuing my inquiry within the queer of color critique led me to a concrete understanding of utopian thinking that was separate from pure fantasy. As I have explored in this paper, concrete utopias are a not-yet-conscious certainty, a future that is to come, a probability framed within the sociohistorical realities of a collective. Empowering the audience with utopian hope is to equip them with a practical tool for working toward building a better future separate from today's oppressive structures of power. That said, my project differs from the interventionist projects I describe in this thesis. I am inspired by the ambitious goal of social interruption and change that most interventionist artists pursue (however debatable the efficacy of their pursuit might remain), but I hesitate to describe my project as a purely interventionist art as I acknowledge the limitations of *Global (re)Entry* as a 2D video game. Instead of claiming that my project practically intervenes in the US immigration system, I follow an artistic mission that draws from the power of representation to enable utopian thinking as a necessary first step toward creating change in society. Therefore, I offer *Global (re)Entry* as a utopian intervention that welcomes creative and critical thoughts about a different, better future.

The utopian thinking that *Global (re)Entry* encourages is my intervention in the ongoing ostracization, surveillance, deportation, incarceration, and murdering of immigrants that state forces commit at US borders. In the face of such destructive realities, my project

does not ask for social populist solutions for improving the US immigration system. Instead, *Global (re)Entry* dares to ask the audience to muster the radical audacity, subversive creativity, and insurgent hopes necessary for entirely disabling a killing machine cloaked as the US immigration system.

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