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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of selfies in narrative-driven interface games, that is games that place the narrative within fictionalized interfaces resembling those of computers or smartphones, as methods of creating intimacy between the characters and the player, while simultaneously maintaining the player's separateness as a witness of personal stories, rather than their active actor. The article analyses how inter-character and player-character intimacy and emotional distance can be negotiated through the implementation of selfies into the narrative within interface games. The inherent intimacy of such games, which often tell personal stories of people of marginalized identities, is juxtaposed with the constrictions on the player's agency—both in the overall gameplay and in their inability to take the selfies themselves. Three games are discussed according to three frameworks used to discuss selfies as noted by Gabriel Faimau (2020): a dramaturgic lens (the selfie as self-presentation), a sociosemiotic approach (the selfie as an art of communication), and a dialectical framework (selfie as a social critique).

Keywords

Intimacy; consent; selfies; interface games

Although several scholars have already discussed the practices of taking photographs in videogames in terms of their aesthetics and ontology (Carita, 2010; Gerling, 2018; Giddings, 2013; Möring & de Mutiis, 2019), as well as their documentary function (Urban, 2023) and function in archaeogaming (Reinhard, 2018), less attention has been placed on the use of selfies within the gameplay and narrative—mostly due to the surprising scarcity of utilization of selfies within games in a way that is meaningful to the player experience and/or the narrative. Considering the large body of work focused on the meaning of selfie-taking and sharing on social

media in terms of self-empowerment, taking agency over one's image, and their significance in retaking one's narrative and visibility, especially for marginalized persons, this article focuses on the use of selfies in interface games: games which incorporate hypermediated and overemphasized interfaces, and which are notorious for deeply personal and (auto)biographical stories (Gallagher, 2019b; Kubiński, 2021).

In the analytical part of the article, three instances of selfie use are discussed within interface games, which are understood as a specific genre of narrative-driven and mostly independent digital games that frame the majority of their narrative and gameplay within the fictional interface that mimics interfaces of real-life personal computers, smartphone systems, or of specific apps (especially instant messengers). I have chosen three interface games as case studies, in correspondence with three different frameworks for understanding selfie use in social media, as identified by Gabriel Faimau (2020): *Cibele* (Star Maid Games, 2015) as an example of how selfies can be used as self-presentation; *Bury me, my Love* (The Pixel Hunt, Figs, & ARTE France, 2019) to discuss the use of selfie as a means of communication; and *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens, 2016) to provide an example of selfie use that sparks a social critique.

Selfies as carriers of intimacy

A *selfie* refers to a photograph of oneself, usually taken with a smartphone or webcam, which is typically later uploaded to social media websites or shared in private conversations via instant messaging applications, forums, etc. The rise of selfies is emblematic of a culture that has become visibly visual and that is fascinated with display and visibility (Attwood, 2011). However, it is important to remember that selfies are more than just images: they construct narratives about one's body in association with tags and descriptions (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017, p. 3). For Amparo Lasén, selfies need to be considered as a:

photographic genre that was almost exclusively artistic, inherited from painting, [that] becomes part of everyday photography. It is a banal and playful activity that produces new habits and gestures: like taking pictures in front of a mirror ... or outstretching the arm to take a snapshot (2015, p. 62)

The uniqueness of the culture arose around the practice of taking selfies is closely connected to the importance of social media and the current omnipresence of screens in daily lives.

The researchers note the influence of selfies on the evolution of (personal) photography, understanding them as not only "a type of image but also and mainly a new practice" (Pastor, 2017, para. 1, own translation). As Paul Frosh notes:

Where aesthetic developments are foregrounded, they too appear to be driven by device functions not principally concerned with image production or design. Hence the immediacy, ephemerality, and incessant performativity of contemporary everyday photographs are primarily explained with reference to the combined ubiquity, mobility, and connectivity of smartphone devices. (2015, p. 1608)

Edgar Gómez Cruz and Eric Meyer note that “photography theory has worked traditionally within two epistemological axes” (2012). On the one hand, photography needs to be understood as “a powerful technology for representation of reality”, while on the other it needs to be understood “not as representation, technology, or object, but as the agency that takes place when a set of technologies, meanings, uses, and practices align” (2012, p. 204). By understanding photography as a socio-technical network, they emphasize the importance of considering the larger sociocultural and technological contexts in which photographs are taken, meaning a wide range of elements from the very technology and the companies behind them and the culture of selfie-taking arose around specific social media platforms to, finally, the object of the selfie itself. In this sense, the selfie becomes metareferential in its own right, requiring the viewer to “make inferences about the nondepictive technocultural conditions in which the image was made” (Frosh, 2015, p. 1608), or, in other words, to understand *what* a selfie is, one needs to know specifically that a particular picture is ‘a selfie’ rather than just a photograph of one’s body.

Similarly, Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym note that although the selfie signifies “a sense of human agency (i.e., it is a photograph one knowingly takes of oneself, often shown to other humans), selfies are created, displayed, distributed, tracked, and monetized through an assemblage of nonhuman agents” (2015, p. 1589). The consequences of that are dire, juxtaposing individual agency with the broader politics. Regardless of the agency over the taking of the selfie, once it’s uploaded into the “infrastructure of the digital superpublic” (2015, p. 1589), one loses control over its meaning, shaped and affected by the policing discourses dictating one’s self-expression and, more importantly, how they are supposed to feel about their own body, how it should be displayed and appreciated—or whether it should not be displayed at all, if it does not meet the standards of beauty decided by the given public.

For this reason, unsurprisingly, a large body of research has focused on the selfie as a tool of feminist activism in the rising awareness of sexual abuse and trauma (Saraswati, 2021) and as a mode of resistance aimed at reclaiming the vulnerability and expressions of femininity as “generative, connective, and political” (Schwartz, 2022), but also more broadly as a tool of self-identification and self-representation (Busetta & Coladonato, 2015; Fournier, 2018).

Within this research, the focus is often placed on vulnerability and intimacy as parts of the experience of taking and sharing selfies. Where vulnerability can be understood as a type of openness and fragility to harm on the corporeal, emotional, or

social level that is innate to human nature (Mackenzie et al., 2013), the Cartesian mind–body binary that emphasizes the superiority of the mind over the body has initiated the belief, prevalent in the Western thought, that vulnerability means weakness, and should therefore be associated with femininity. Whereas masculinity has become associated with independence and lack of excessive emotions (with the common omission of anger, which has been conveniently excluded from the popular understanding as emotion and so remains acceptable for men to express), the expression of emotions is not only considered feminine (often in the derogatory meaning of the word), but also frowned upon when considered to be in excess. In a world that constantly polices bodies which do not present within the perceived gendered and beauty norms, taking selfies can be seen as an exercise in (the networked) vanity (Pham, 2015) and thus become a way of reclaiming agency over one’s self-representation. Despite the negative connotations of vanity and the critique of social media and online practices surrounding them as narcissistic, some authors such as Claire Tanner, JaneMaree Maher, and Suzanne Fraser comment on the “emergent notion of twenty-first century vanity ... in which self regard is intertwined with relationality and responsiveness to others” (2013, p. 153). Minh-Ha T. Pham notes that although “networked vanity is particular to the age of social media” (2015, p. 225), excessive fashion and self-presentation, shunned as vulgar, narcissistic and overpronounced, has always been a tool of activism and self-presentation for oppressed groups with a campaign such as #feministselfie aiming at retaking the agency to self-represent and reveal the prejudice and assumption behind the expectations of humility and lack of excess.

The question of how selfies negotiate intimacy is a particularly interesting one due to the seeming contradiction between the privacy of intimacy and the publicness of the selfie and social media. In the research on the self-representation of masculinities on Instagram and Grindr, Begonya Enguix and Erick Gómez-Narváez state, after conducting interviews with users:

Intimacy still exists, but it has been strongly reconfigured not only in making the private public (such as in selfies of genitalia or one’s body) but also in assuming that some things are hidden or that what is shown is just a ‘character’: one’s ‘true’ essence is still kept invisible and remains ‘intimate’. (2017, p. 10)

Since privacy is a “contextual concept” (Miguel 2016, p. 2), most tend to have an expectation that some information about themselves will remain private—Tom Gerety has called this “intimacies of personal identity” (1977). These intimacies include information about “close relationships, sexual orientation, alcohol intake, dietary habits, ethnic origin, political beliefs, features of the body and bodily functions, the definitions of self, and religious and spiritual beliefs and practices” (Nissenbaum, 2009, p. 123). As Amparo Lasén notes, “digital selfportraits performances are choreographic in the sense that they are highly relational and interactive, involving mutual

attunement and resonance, sometimes even dialogical sequences of call and response" (2015, p. 65), pointing to the fact that one's presence on social media often includes a network of relationships of various levels of trust and closeness, thus allowing for the structuring of intimacy.

The research on the construction of intimacy through the practice of sharing pictures points out that profiles on social media:

are good examples of online settings where intimate storytelling is practiced, as people tell intimate stories about their family, their travels, or their parenting experiences. ... the use of social media has become everyday activity that opens space for intimacy practices, especially *intimacy at a distance*. (Miguel, 2016, p. 1)

Anthony Elliott and John Urry use the term *intimacy at-a-distance* to define transformed intimacies enacted through the mobile phone use as "intimacy in conditions of intensive mobilities become flexible, transformable and negotiable. Mobile intimacy is fluid in both emotional and interpersonal terms" (2010, p. 90). Thus, these "photographs are forms of online presentation in front of a mixed audience of strangers, acquaintances and friends. They are gendered personal and public representations and performances of the self for oneself and for the others" (Lasén, 2015, p. 64).

In order to summarize the most common approaches used in the analysis of selfies, Gabriel Faimau (2020) notes the following three: a dramaturgic lens (the selfie as self-presentation), a sociosemiotic approach (the selfie as an art of communication), and a dialectical framework (selfie as a social critique). Each is described in more detail in the second part of this article in which the case studies are presented.

Interface games as the "most intimate genre"

Although the research on intimacy in digital games is mostly conducted in the context of in-game representations of sex and sexual practices, it is important not to narrow the scope of that research too much, understanding that intimacy is a much broader concept. Intimacy, after all, can denote a wide range of experiences of closeness and vulnerability between a person and assemblages of objects, places, animals, and other people. For Nancy Yousef, intimacy "crystalizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities" (2013, p. 15). Intimacy then can be described by the sense of tension between privacy and publicness. For Kaelan Doyle-Myerscough, intimate affect can be understood as "orientation in the present, made pleasurable and terrifying by the sensation of nakedness or revealing of oneself. It is fragile; the threat of embarrassment or humiliation or disappointment lingers at its edges" (2019, p. 5). This understanding of intimacy is particularly interesting in terms of selfies, which are characterized by their dual character: while, on the one hand, they can become tools for creating synchronous

intimacy between the person who shares and those who receive it, but, on the other, due to their online longevity they scatter the intimacy between countless, anonymous receivers. While that—as any act of vulnerability—can come with its own dangers, it also shows how the online presence might need new understandings of intimacy, not as a relationship between a few, selected individuals, but an act that allows for intimacy with strangers. This has been emphasized in the #feministselfie hashtag campaign, in which the selfie has been emphasized as a means of showing representation to marginalized people, and in which the intimate act of sharing the selfie touches a person the creator might not know about.

Intimacy outside of strictly sexual or romantic relationships has been discussed in various areas of video game research: from the discussion of the dancing games which function “as engines of humor, shame, trust, and intimacy, urging playing to dance like nobody’s watching—while being tracked by motion-sensing interfaces” (Miller, 2017, blurb), to the intimacy of the haptic mobile games (Richardson & Hjorth, 2017; Hjorth & Richardson, 2020; Richardson, 2020), and to the intimacy of the stories seen in the interface games (Kubiński 2021).

The term *interface games* describes a group of digital games that frame the entirety or vast majority of their narrative within the fictional interface that mimics real-life interfaces—most commonly of computers or mobile phones (Gallagher, 2019b). Due to their emphasis on the software and hardware used in the experience of play and the hypermediacy of the interfaces, the interface games are necessarily self-reflexive and, thus, meta. Through the framing of the structures and networks that are familiar to the player, they offer metacommentary of the prevalence and significance of these devices in the player’s life. Furthermore, as Rob Gallagher argues, the development of the genre is a response to the increased focus placed on the inequality and racism of the algorithmic systems, which “have pushed questions of data capture and storage, privacy and identity to the forefront of the popular conversation” (2019b, p. 759). As meta texts, they “can be read as an implicit critique of datafication ... [asking] players to engage with digital biographical archives [and] imagine how personal information might be captured, shared, stored, and mobilized” (2019b, p. 759). Thus, they not only offer commentary on the technological context in which digital games necessarily are located but also, through the emphasis on hypermediated interfaces, they force the player to consider the software and the hardware. In this way, they rely on a paradox: they do not represent the interfaces truthfully or they insert them in the situations where they are not expected (e.g., in the clearly fictionalized game) but it is precisely their fictionality that requires a deeper insight into the game structure and which reveals the preconceptions about them, which the player brings into the game experience.

Hence, in their broadest understanding, interface games can be divided into (computer) desktop and phone simulators with further differences relating to the degree to which they mimic existing interfaces. While some of the interface games belong to the ‘lost phone’ type, in which the player character is equated with the real player,

who presumably found the phone in the real world and is trying to solve the mystery of its owner's identity (Navarro-Remesal & Pérez Zapata, 2019), others have the player assume the role of the fictional protagonist.

Setting the game's narrative within the interface can serve two purposes. On the one hand, it draws the attention of the player to the very thing that usually is designed in such a way to be transparent and unnoticeable, thus immediately reframing the player's attention. On the other hand, it juxtaposes the player's experiences of intimacy with their phone or personal computer onto the in-game narrative.

The former is a quality that arguably allows one to categorize this genre as meta games, that is games that continuously and purposefully self-reference their game-ness. To understand the peculiarity of what takes place in interface games through the engagement of the interfaces—that is, something that usually is meant to be transparent, invisible to the characters and unobtrusive to the players—it will be useful to discuss frame analysis (Goffman, 1974). Especially useful is the simplified model consisting of three levels of meaning proposed by Gary Alan Fine, which include: 1) the “primary framework” of real people and worlds, 2) game contexts of rules that are enacted by the players, and 3) the gaming world, in which characters operate (1983, p. 186). Following the criticism and commentary of the model in the context of digital games (Deterding, 2013; Jørgensen, 2013), I use the following terminology: 1) extra-fictional (denoting the level inhabited by real-life players), 2) non-diegetic (the level of game rules, usually invisible to the characters), and 3) fictional (the level inhabited by the characters). Most commonly, these three levels remain separated from each other, apart from meta games in which the boundaries are blurred. For example, by bringing the action to the almost literal forefront in the interface games, the boundary between non-diegetic and fictional levels ceases to be as distinctive as it otherwise might be. At the same time, by proxy, the player and the character, who are usually separated by the uncrossable boundary set by the non-diegetic interfaces, are brought much closer together—so close, in fact, that the various levels collapse in on each other, consequently negotiating and transgressing the placement of the fourth-wall, that is the border separating the fiction from extra-fictional levels of meaning, which usually (until broken or moved) prevents characters from interacting with the players (Waszkiewicz 2020).

All three games discussed in the paper provide different examples of how the protagonist and player characters can be equated in order to increase the sense of immersion by inclusion of what can be referred to as a *shell character* which Trena Lee and Alex Mitchell (2018) define as a character devoid of any specific characteristics such as name, gender, race, or appearance, in order to insert the player into the game and partially eliminate the dissonance stemming from differences between the player's and the character's choices and preferences.

However, the goal of this article is not to focus on the fourth-wall-breaking mechanics of interface games but rather to showcase their ability to construct intimacy between the character and the players. Piotr Kubiński (2021) emphasizes that the in-game representation of these devices emphasizes what a crucial position these technologies have in the lives of their users, having replaced the traditional diaries and journals as one's most intimate possessions. This function of personal technology in this capacity is heavily emphasized by each of the three games discussed in this paper, showing how they are used to store intimate moments and photographs, conversations, and important memories, truly becoming an extension of one's body. This additionally closely relates to research on the emotional entanglement of human-computer interactions which constitute a crucial part of the studies focused on humans' interactions with various technologies. These can vary from the variety of parasocial interactions with digital game characters (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015; Blom, 2020) to investigations on the affective impact and effectiveness of medium interfaces on the user engagement on social media, the ability of technology to recognize and adapt to the human emotional responses in what Rosalind Picard calls "affective computing" (1995). Especially relevant is the research on the use of mobile phones and their influence on the formation of social relationships, as well as their role within the private and public domains of life.

Interface games have been recognized by many developers and scholars as uniquely suited to represent the experiences of people of marginalized and oppressed identities (Gallagher, 2019a, 2019b; Kubiński, 2021). For this reason, in the discussion of the use of interface games in the representation of the experiences of refugees, Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Beatriz Pérez Zapata (2019) replace the concept of *empathy*, which has been deemed problematic by several game scholars (see: Ruberg, 2020; Schrier & Farber, 2021) and instead write about *compassionate play* (or "games for compassion"). As "the emotion that could potentially bring about change" (2019, p. 6), compassion refers to the concern for the well-being of other people. As such, it has the potential to transform the passive act of voyeuristically witnessing others' narratives into a more engaged and attentive play. Arguably, all three case studies structure the play so they facilitate this compassionate response from the player with the recognition that the experiences of the characters represented in these games might not be the same as that of many of the players.

Although initially diagnosed by Sigmund Freud as an act of looking solely for the purpose of achieving sexual excitement, the concept of *voyeurism* has been since broadened as an "urge to gaze at the alien and the intimate" (Calvert, 2000, p. 2). In this way, the term has been applied to media studies where it describes and understands the practice of looking as:

[The] consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse,

through the means of the mass media and the internet. (Calvert, 2000, pp. 2-3)

Furthermore, this enabling of a voyeuristic perspective leads to the objectification of the character within the game. As Laurie Rudman and Kris Mescher's (2012) research shows, objectification of others is crucial in understanding one's tendency to devalue and assert control over others. Digital games have thus been discussed in terms of the voyeuristic pleasure they give to the player. For example, Anh-Thu Nguyen offers an analysis of games such as *The Sims 4* (Maxis, 2014), pointing out that their uniqueness lies in the fact that:

On top of the voyeuristic gaze, the player may choose to completely remove themselves from the active position of the player and become a voyeur instead. As each sim can act of its own free will, they are able to make decisions autonomously. (2019, p. 67)

Thus, since this game does not require the player to control every movement of the characters but rather assign them actions that they then carry out themselves, it allows the player to easily shift between being the active agent of the game and the passive observer.

Selfie as self-presentation in *Cibele*

The most common framework through which selfies are discussed is the dramaturgy of self-presentation. There, "the interpretation of the selfie is centered around subjectivity, self-presentation, and self-performativity" (Faimau, 2020, p. 3). In this understanding, self-presentation is a type of social performance that is influenced by the context and expectations of others, and in the case of social media, more or less anonymous viewers and interlocutors.

The role of a selfie seen as a tool of crafting and maintaining one's image is an important, albeit rarely discussed, element of *Cibele*. Developed by Nina Freeman¹ and released under the Star Maid Games studio in 2015, *Cibele* is one of the creator's several autobiographical games recounting various stages of her life from childhood (*how do you Do It?* and *Ladylike* released in 2014), adolescence (*Lost Memories Dot Net*, 2017) to young adulthood (*Cibele* and *Freshman Year*, 2015). The game focuses on eighteen-year-old Nina's experience of falling in love with Blake, a 23-year-old man whom she encountered through the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (Squaresoft, 2002), which in *Cibele* is signified by the much simpler embedded game titled *Valtameri*. *Cibele* is divided into three main acts with gameplay featuring both the first-person

¹ In order to differentiate between the character and the extra-fictional developer, after Gallagher (2019a) I use the name Nina to refer to the former and Freeman to refer to the latter.

desktop simulation and the third-person *Valtameri* embedded game. The following analysis discusses the innovativeness of *Cibele's* structure as an interface game, and analyzes the manipulation of the player-character relationship and the commentary it offers on the player's position as the voyeur through the incorporation of the in-game selfies.

Despite the game's first-person perspective, which has been traditionally associated with an increased player immersion (Thon, 2008; Denisova & Cairns, 2015), and which puts the player in Nina's shoes, there are several ways in which the game ensures the distance between the player and the character. Through the exploration of Nina's personal computer, the player learns about her developing relationship with Blake. Thus, even though one needs to progress in *Valtameri* to unlock further interactions between the two characters, the player is not able to influence the events in any way. As the game progresses, the two play together, chat, and exchange text messages until they meet in person to have sex. However, after the meeting Blake cuts all contact with Nina and breaks their relationship off, stating that the meeting was a mistake and he was not in love with her after all. Although some criticized game for its lack of satisfying resolution, abrupt ending, and the lack of player agency over the events, these elements can be easily justified, considering that the primary goal of the game is for its creator to tell her own story.

The game starts after a short full-motion video (FMV) cinematic in which Nina, played by Freeman herself, is seen in front of her computer. Afterward, the player is immediately given access to her desktop, the fictionality of which is emphasized by its soft pink hue that dominates the game, separating it from the default visuals of real-life operating systems. Having found themselves in control of the fictional computer's mouse, the player can browse the files stored on it.

Arguably, this initial cutscene, rather than facilitating the identification with the fictionalized version of Freeman, creates a dissonance between the player and the character by reminding the former that Nina is based on the extra-fictional person and, thus, of the autobiographical character of the game. The player is then quickly coded as a voyeur, peeking into and looking through the most personal of her possessions. At first glance, the game substantially limits the player's agency by offering a linear narrative the outcome of which does not depend on their actions. This quality is important in Kagen's understanding of the archival adventure genre as "composed of ludic repositories of material, carefully arranged, which the player turns into a narrative adventure by the way in which they choose to navigate the given space" (2020, p. 1008). These games can be thought about in terms of archival research because the player is not responsible for shaping or facilitating the story's progression: what is more, at the beginning of the story, the events have already taken place in the past. This means that the main characters of the story, about whom the player is learning and to whom they become progressively more attached during the span of the game, might already be gone or deceased at the beginning of the game. Through this, these games can be compared to the epistolary novel

genre, where the distance between the reader and the characters is also constructed both spatially and temporarily. The immersive character of these games can be explained through the “hyperreal overlap between fictive and real” (Kagen, 2020, p. 1010). Due to the player’s closeness to the game’s narrative through the suspended fourth wall, the player becomes one of the performers inside the narrative. While the vast majority—if not all—of digital narrative games offer the pleasure of voyeuristic looking, especially in the moments that clearly differentiate between the player-controlled action and those pre-scripted cutscenes that show characters behaving in ways that are not necessarily consistent with the player’s choices and interpretation of the characters, certain genres and themes emphasize that role substantially more. Autobiographical interface games are one example of such games.

As Faimau notes in the discussion of the dramaturgic approach to studying selfies, “selfie cannot be separated from the online demands, presence, and interactions” (2020, p. 4) and *Cibele* definitely illustrates that the “online existence is inevitable” (2020, p. 4) and the intricacies of the selfie’s life after it has been shared. The game starts after Nina has posted a selfie of herself on the game’s forum. After she reveals her gender and appearance, others shift their behavior towards her in accordance with the misogynist stereotypes and biases they hold. This includes Blake, who reveals many of the attitudes and misogynist beliefs which are characteristic to some of the more masculinized gaming communities. These attitudes often result in patronizing behavior towards Nina and a constant downplaying of her abilities as a gamer due to her gender. When asked about her performance in *Valtameri*, Blake not only applies different expectations to Nina due to her gender, but also because of her attractiveness (“I’m not gonna yell at a cute girl”), and repeatedly emphasizes that her physicality is more important than her in-game abilities. As Gallagher notes:

Freeman shows Nina, Blake, and their fellow *Valtameri* players to be bound together in a metagame with its own complex economy. Here affirmation, titillation, trust, advice and gossip circulate alongside virtual and physical goods, and women are encouraged to attain leverage by sharing selfies that function as ‘bearers of ‘corporeal capital’. (2019a, p. 41)

The above illustrates another element of “the dramaturgic nature of self-presentation” which “also manifests through self-objectification”, understood as a way people treat themselves and how they are treated by others based on their appearance (Faimau, 2020, p. 4). As already stated, selfies can both become methods of reinforcing self-objectification as they place constant monitoring on the bodies, but also can become a tool of self-actualization. In *Cibele*, the use of the selfie has an additional meaning as a tool for influencing the player-game relationship. The player begins the game from the role of an observer, a witness to Freeman’s life as mediated through Nina’s eyes rather than an active agent with an ability to influence the events of the game. The ontological difference between Nina and Freeman becomes

the most significant in those moments in which the narrative is framed and told through the contents of her computer desktop. In the game, the player assumes the identity of Nina as they browse the files on her computer as her. However, Nina is visible in the third person in the FMV cutscene in which, rather than having Nina imagined as an animated character, she is played by Freeman. This has two consequences: it makes differentiating between Nina and Freeman additionally difficult, and it creates a distance between them and the player, whose position of voyeur is emphasized once more.

The focus on the computer desktop as the framing device through which Nina's life and personality are explored utilizes the text-based and visual elements of the software, which allows for the commentary on the importance of selfie-making and sharing in the formation of one's identity, especially in the context of the online relationships. In *Cibele*, photography-sharing serves at the same time as a means of constructing intimate relationships with other characters and showing one's vulnerability, as well as emphasizing the ways in which one's privacy can be infringed, both within the fiction (by the other members of the forum Nina frequents) and across the fictional/extra-fictional border. The latter can encompass a range of interactions between a game, the individual player, and any additional agents including, for example, persons that have been shown the screenshots and game content without playing it. While, of course, there is a substantial ethical difference between the transgressions that occurred between Freeman's real-life colleagues, Nina, and the other characters, and on the axis of developer-game-player, all point to the complexities of the reality of taking selfies.

The lack of a pronounced cathartic finale in *Cibele* has caused some to voice criticism of the game, but for Gallagher it is rather a sign of the game's autobiographical and honest character (2019a). He points out that the game offers "a counterpoint to narratives stressing the dangers facing young women who seek intimacy on the internet, [also questioning] framings of networked intimacy as a necessarily deficient substitute for the 'real thing'" (2019a, p. 33).

However, despite the game's portrayal of how intimacy can be abused, the selfie as a tool of self-creation remains at its core. Although selfies do not constitute a major part of the game, their importance for the narrative as well as the negotiation of the player's distance from the game is worth acknowledging. The game lacks an in-game photography function and the player cannot influence the selfies that they find on Nina's computer. It is through access to them that the player learns more about Nina and can form opinions about her personality, but it is their location in her private files on her personal computer that changes the reading of them. The photographs shared by Nina with the other users of the forums were deliberately chosen by her as proven by the numerous folders containing rejected and unused selfies that the player can find on her computer. Despite Nina's claims to the contrary, the number and the naming of the folders reveal how careful and thorough the process of taking, categorizing, and selecting which ones to share (and to whom) and post (and in

what form) is. There are several folders containing her selfies, categorized according to their attractiveness levels and potential place of sharing, e.g., to be posted on the forum and shared with all users, shared only directly with Blake, or to be left on her computer not to be seen by anyone besides herself. As Amparo Lasén points out, the practices of taking self-portraits “extend the knowledge about your own body and ways of presenting it to other people” (2015, p. 66) and thus can be interpreted as feminist practices that remediate art and “vindicate the potentiality, energy, and liberation in the contemplation, performance, voluntary and defiant display of one’s body” (2015, p. 62).

This indirectly, (albeit clearly) pictures Nina as a person who is very self-aware in the way she crafts her online image, which remains the most important facet of the dramaturgic approach of understanding selfies according to Faimau. Nina’s selfies are tools of self-presentation and although she cannot always control the reading of her body from her selfies, they are the way through which she establishes how she wants to show her body and to whom, affecting both her interactions with other forum-users and how the player sees her. By allowing the player the access to the photographs that are considered by her as intimate and personal (not to be shared with others), the player’s voyeuristic role is emphasized, tipping the understanding of the power imbalance between the character and the player. However, the autobiographical character of the game and Freeman’s use of her own face and body in these selfies excuses the player’s peeking, implying that the consent was, in fact, given. This differentiates *Cibele* from the other two games discussed next.

Selfie as an art of communication in *Bury me, my Love*

The second framework described by Faimau, a sociosemiotic approach, discusses the selfie’s meaning-making function as an art of communication. Closely related to the previous framework, it emphasizes the selfie-taker’s agency over their own story, allowing them to negotiate “the interconnectedness between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in a social relation mode” (2020, p. 6). Although this approach again mostly emphasizes agency over creation of one’s image on social media, it is also worth considering the role of selfies in the communication between two agents—understood both as two characters and character and the player—and the ways in which it can create and convey intimacy between them.

Although the selfie in *Cibele* could also be read in terms of sociosemiotic approach, a more literal use of selfies as “a new communicative language” (Faimau, 2020, p. 6) comes from *The Pixel Hunt*, Fig and ARTE France’s 2019 text-based adventure game *Bury me, my Love*, which follows Nour, a Syrian woman fleeing the war-consumed country to Germany. It is not without significance that the game, although not autobiographical or directly biographical, is closely based on the experienced of Dana, a Syrian Migrant, whose story has been told by Lucie Soullier and Madjid Zerrouky in the article titled ‘Le Voyage d’une migrante Syrienne à travers son fil WhatsApp’ (‘The

Journey of a Syrian Migrant, as Told by her WhatsApp Messages'). Both women worked closely with the game development team to create a game with a strong "focus on a single story together with the use of a single-character focalization" (Navarro-Remesal & Pérez Zapata, p. 9).

Several scholars recognize *Bury me, my Love* as a first-person refugee game (Raessens 2015, Navarro-Remesal & Pérez Zapata, 2019). Joost Raessens characterized refugee games as:

belong[ing] to this so-called genre of "serious games": these games frame refugee issues by letting the player taste life as a refugee. Refugee games have the potential to convince the player of the veracity of a certain point of view or the necessity of a behavioral change. (2015, p. 245)

Navarro-Remesal and Pérez Zapata see interface games as particularly apt to present the point of view of refugees:

Although practical calls to action are often included, the general focus is on *performing the refugee*, living from their perspective for a brief time, and blurring the barriers between their world and ours. Our phones become their phones. They talk to us via (fake) streaming. We make choices as them. (2019, p. 15)

This is particularly relevant considering that "mobile phones have been identified as possible tools to aid in refugee integration into new countries" (Bacishoga et al., 2016, p. 1) and that they have potential to "offer refugees efficient ways for social engagement and societal participation" (Vuningoma et al., 2020, p. 586).

The entirety of the game takes place within a fictional instant-messaging mobile app resembling WhatsApp. The player assumes the role of Majd, Nour's husband, who stays behind in Syria to care for his mother and grandmother. Although he is a character with a fixed name, appearance, and personality, the focus is rarely on him; he becomes a shell character, meant to mediate the player's relationship with Nour. As she progresses across countries, Nour keeps in touch with him: while at times she asks for advice or help with finding out information about routes and locations, she makes her own decisions and often faces danger on her own, thus recognizing and subverting several digital game tropes.

The player does not have the ability to begin the conversation with Nour and can only answer once she reaches out to them. If played in the game's real-time mode, in which the messages from Nour are distributed in time, forcing the player to wait minutes or hours for the answer when Nour is busy or lacks the ability to charge her phone or lacks signal. These periods of waiting decrease the emotional distance between the player and Majd, letting them experience and share the same restlessness and worry.

Rarely, Majd can send a selfie, but it is mostly Nour who sends photographs to him. These are of two kinds: the photographs of her surrounding and the people she meets that have a more informative function, and selfies that usually show her in the middle of everyday activity, which aim to create a stronger bond and establish the intimacy between the couple. This illustrates well the communicative role of the selfie, which “allows the selfie-taker to tell his/her own stories through an in the taken selfies” (Faimau, 2020, p. 6). In this sense, of course, Nour uses selfies as both a mode of self-presentation but, arguably, mostly as a communicative device through which she constructs the narration about her situation. Through selfies she can influence his emotions, show him that she is okay and in better (emotional or physical) shape than he might otherwise worry.

Additionally, the selfies serve at least a twofold function. On the one hand, from a more technical aspect, it helps the player immerse themselves in the world, introducing a visual element to the text-based game. On the other hand, it becomes an important tool of communication between Nour and Majd. For example, early on, Majd sends Nour a selfie featuring him lying in bed before falling asleep, meant to show her a glimpse of familiar domesticity and normalcy despite the danger in which she currently is. In other moments, selfies are meant to lift each other’s spirits, showing Majd that Nour is safe. Whereas the non-selfie photographs have a more documentarist character, showing the struggles of the refugee’s journey to safety, selfies tend to be charged emotionally. Through them, Nour tells Majd that she is alive, if not okay when she shows him her bruises; that she is persevering and maintaining a good mood, when she is sending a photo with herself over dinner with other friendly refugees; that she misses him and the intimacy between them when she is sending him photos on which she makes silly expressions; and finally, that she trusts him when she sends a photo only in her bra after having hid her money there, as advised by Majd/player.

The photographs of her body in these two instances stand in a striking juxtaposition to the selfies as means of self-presentation and regaining control over one’s social image as in the case of *Cibele*, as they are deprived of sexual or romantic subtext. They do not contain information that is crucial to the plot, but still manage to add meaningful context for both the characters and the players.

Because of this, I found this last photograph particularly striking, since it emphasized for me the difference between the relationship between the characters—a married couple—and the one I was forming with Nour, who became dear to me by the end of the game. Receiving the photograph of a half-undressed Nour surprised me and took me out of the immersion, making me acutely aware of the difference between me and the character I embodied. It was precisely the intimacy and trust behind the act of sending this photo that made me feel uncomfortable, since it confronted me with my own, enforced by the game, non-consensual voyeurism. Having been inserted into the role of Nour’s husband, without time to develop the relationship with her on my own, I clearly felt that the selfie was not meant for me. Where her state

of undress within the close relationship was completely normal, my outsideness and unfamiliarity made it inappropriate. Within the context of digital games' objectification of women's bodies, I was surprised by seeing this everyday intimacy. Once again, somewhat similarly to the voyeuristic act of looking through Nina's personal collection of selfies, in which, after all, she often poses in alike state of undress, being only in her underwear, they have become a tool for both engaging me into the story, but also for maintaining the distance in order perhaps to ensure that I do not become too familiar with a story that is clearly not my own.

Selfie as a social critique in *A Normal Lost Phone*

Finally, the dialectical approach is the last of the three on Faimau's list, in which the selfie is positioned as a social critique. Faimau notes that "there is a dichotomy between the idea of the sociotechnical element and the sociocultural aspect of the selfie. The dialectical approach to selfies bridges these streams" (6) by unpacking "the ethico-political dimension of the selfie as witnessing act that raises important questions of identity, voice and otherness in the digital media" (Chouliaraki, 2017, p. 81). This approach is used mostly when focusing on the issues of minorities and the activist and feminist use and significance of the selfie understood as a form of critique (Pham, 2015).

Chouliaraki talks specifically about how migrants use selfies, making *Bury me, my Love* an interesting example for analysis of the use of the social critique of the selfie. However, in this section, I want to discuss another game. *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens, 2017) is one of the best-known interface games, which gained substantial interest and critique from both game journalists and scholars (Gallagher, 2019a; Navarro-Remesal & Zapata, 2019; Kubiński, 2021). While, admittedly, selfie-use in the game is very limited, it arguably causes one of the more controversial and therefore interesting examples of the use of the dialectical approach of the selfie.

Like previously mentioned interface games, the game's narrative takes place entirely on the level of the phone's operating system (OS), including a text-messaging app, a fictional dating app called LoveBirds and several websites, most notably including a transgender forum called beyourforum.cov. The main protagonist of the game is Samira, often abbreviated as Sam, an eighteen-year-old bisexual transgender woman who runs away from home after being rejected by her family and friends.

Through the use of the first-person point of view and the familiarity of the device's interface that makes it easy to put oneself in Sam's proverbial shoes, the game seems to strive to offer a glimpse into what can be interpreted as representative of many young people's experiences with transphobia, thus fulfilling the criteria for a 'game for compassion'.

As revealed towards the end of the game, Sam did not lose her phone so much as purposefully disposed of it in order to completely cut ties with her family. Similarly

to *Cibele*, the game does not discuss the danger associated with online presence and vulnerability, but when juxtaposed with gameplay that permits continuous violations of the character's privacy, it strikes as naïve.

As a 'lost phone' game type, *A Normal Lost Phone* locates its gameplay entirely within the fictional interface of Sam's phone. There, the player can freely move around the apps and can explore the contents of the apps in random order, until they encounter content that is password-restricted. The non-diegetic interface is minimal, and the player once again is not provided instruction on how to play the game apart from a laconic message shown at the very beginning of the game: "You have just found a phone. Find out the truth." By limiting the non-diegetic messaging, the game dramatically decreases the distance between the extra-fictional and fictional levels of meaning, temporarily equating the player's personal phone with Sam's lost phone.

After entering the game, a pop-up message informs the player about the existence of four unread text messages. After reading them, one learns that Sam's father is worried because she did not come home the previous night. Through reading them, one learns about Sam's recent eighteenth birthday party, her struggle with coming to terms with her identity, and the lack of support and acceptance from the people around her. Through further investigation, the player is inevitably directed toward LoveBirds dating app and the forum for transgender persons. Only there Sam managed to find a supportive community both online and offline after she was invited to attend Transpride in another city, an event focused on celebrating transgender and nonbinary identities and promoting their social acceptance and legal rights. According to Faimau, "the dialectical approach has been used by researchers who focus on issues of minority groups to interrogate the underlying ethicopolitical dimension of selfies" (2020, p. 7), including, of course, how queer youths use livestreaming and selfie to create connective identity (Walsh & Baker, 2017). Similarly, in the game the importance of selfies for the creation of social identity and activism is emphasized.

One of the most significant conversations within the game takes place on the LoveBirds dating app with an openly bisexual, cisgender man, Phil. The conversation between the two of them is short as at the moment of Sam's escape they have not been talking with each other for long yet, but it is obvious that they have already started to trust each other. Their conversation becomes intimate almost immediately as they both allow themselves vulnerability and bond over difficulties with coming to terms with their sexualities, their experiences with homophobia and biphobia, and their experiences with finding support in the queer communities such as the LGBT center which Phil attended. The similarity of these experiences creates intimacy between them which allows Sam to confide in and come out about her gender identity and the lack of support she receives from her family.

The conversation with Phil is an important one because it is used to manipulate the distance with the player and raises important questions about the player's role as a

voyeur and the moral character of their impunity. Rather than just assuming the role of a passive voyeur with the ability to look into Sam's life, the game requires the player to actively violate Sam's privacy in the form of not only reading her messages, but also hacking into password-protected applications and, finally, temporarily assuming her identity. The most significant transgression, and possibly the most uncomfortable for the player, takes place when the player is required to briefly continue the conversation with Phil: although this activity is restricted to sending the drafted messages saved on the phone, it also requires the player to find and send a photograph of Sam.

This is where the game encounters its main ethical problem. As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that Sam left her family in distress to search for a better and happier life. Although at the beginning it is assumed that the reasons for infringing her privacy are noble—once having identified the phone's owner, it would be possible to return their lost possession—in the course of the player's investigation they infringe on Sam's privacy in a way that is deemed to make many players uncomfortable. Regardless of the fact that such events are common in digital games, the lack of acknowledgement of this by the game allows a suspicion of the accidental character of the situation.

In order to find out Sam's entire story, and despite the seemingly limited gameplay, the player is granted quite a lot of freedom. The puzzle aspect of the game forces the player to search for clues in different applications, gallery, and text messages history. For example, Sam's father's date of birth can be used to obtain a new, temporary password to the forum which provides information about Sam's current location. Other puzzles require the player to send messages that Sam typed but never sent—regardless of the reason behind it. One of the most explicit violations of Sam's privacy is committed within her conversation with Phil. At its very end, he shares a picture of himself, asking whether she would feel comfortable doing the same—he does not pressure her and assures her that it is her choice and that he will respect it either way. In order to progress the story, the player has to obtain this picture from the private trans forum and send it to Phil.

The act of sending the photograph is necessary to progress the narrative, and it concludes a longer puzzle in which the player recovers a password to the private forum dedicated to transgender persons. There, they obtain Sam's private photograph which she did not feel comfortable enough to keep on her phone in case it was found by her family members or friends. The entire sequence becomes then an act of transgression that is difficult to justify and which is additionally problematic considering that Sam is a Black or a Brown woman, situating her on the intersections of several axes of oppression: trans women are continuously reported experiencing violence "at higher rates than other LGBTIQ identity categories" (Noack-Lundberg et al., 2020, p. 646) with these statistics increased dramatically for People of Color (Stotzer, 2009).

Uncomfortable play experiences (Jørgensen 2019) can, of course, be an extremely powerful tool for game meaning-making. Many games force uncomfortable and difficult experiences on the players in order to make them engage in philosophical and moral disputes and more critical reading of the text. By implementing selfies into the narrative (or, potentially, gameplay), games can add to the discussion of both their self-empowering and self-actualizing potential and the possibilities of abusing the trust of others. There lies the unfulfilled potential of *A Normal Lost Phone*, which seems to miss the opportunity to emphasize the consequences of the player's actions in the context of selfie-use, compassion and respect towards strangers on the internet and their privacy, and the safety of trans women in the online spaces.

Conclusions

Selfies—both the practice and art of their taking and the context in which they are posted on social media—are inherently entangled in questions of power and agency. While the feminist practices that arose around the acts of taking and, more importantly, distributing and sharing selfies are undoubtedly fascinating, their research typically requires sociological tools. The aim of this paper was not to enrich the research of the actual uses of selfies on social media, but rather to show how interface games can make use of selfies in the creation and negotiation of intimacies, both between the in-game characters and them and the player.

Despite photography's significance as an art form and, specifically, the selfie's importance as a meaning-making and self-actualization tool, neither is a very common mechanic within digital games. It is not surprising that it is in the interface games that one can find various uses of selfies, considering the intimate character and the themes in the genre. From the selfie being central the story in *Cibele*, to part of world-building in *Bury me, my Love*, and to an almost separate, individual, yet powerful instance of selfie-use in *A Normal Lost Phone*, these examples showcase meaningful uses of selfies in narrative. Further, it would be interesting to examine in more detail the ludic significance of photography-taking in games, in which photography plays a more important role, engaging the player and granting them more agency, from narrative-driven games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) to the more recent *Pupperazzi* (Sundae Month, 2023), in which photography is the central mechanic. The question of agency is crucial here: these games that afford more agency to the player seem to create a more immersive experience while the interface games discussed in the article always maintain a certain emotional distance between the player and the characters even if, like in *Bury me, my Love*, it remains more subtle.

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