Lessons in Failing Well: Building Hyper-Migration—a postcolonial, digital, feminist game with refugee youth in Toronto

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Abstract

"Hyper-Migration" is an experimental collaborative project with refugee youth in Toronto that investigates how storytelling might be employed in a digital platform to meet the needs of this community, addressing issues such as displacement, social marginalisation and a lack of access to educational and job opportunities. This paper reviews our process of elaborating, vetting and instituting a method combining praxis and participatory-action research, informed by feminist, postcolonial, trauma and refugee studies. In an experimental art-based approach that aspires to design failure (Halberstam), the project shifts in strategy and objective as the refugee youth iteratively test and redesign a social action game. This paper explores this process and how critical theory and in-situ game play worked as techniques, driving a focus on local problems and needs, ultimately establishing analogue practices that took on affordances normally ascribed to the digital. As well, the project demonstrates the deep critical abilities of refugee youth to drive critical game design addressing their concerns, and to target key structural, policy and social issues affecting refugee communities that require social change.

Introduction

[1]   The project described here is inspired by the current unprecedented levels of refugees experiencing displacement globally. Refugee youth, as key supports in their family's integration in Canada, experience struggles distinct from other family members. In this project, we have sought to co-create, via participatory and action methods, a multimedia experience that serves the needs of our refugee youth partners in Toronto related to employment and education. The project draws on refugee studies, postcolonial feminist theory, migration, trauma and mobility studies, targeting concepts that might enable a deep intersectional understanding of refugee realities to ground our action approach. This paper outlines our attempt to bind key critical digital concepts from critical, feminist refugees, trauma and postcolonial studies with a praxis approach, to employ these in a participatory action method, and to illuminate the struggles and benefits of this interdisciplinary practice. In blending feminist and digital approaches, the paper attempts to construct an innovative storytelling form aided by the distinct affordances of digital and mobile technologies. It shows how feminist postcolonial principles of shared and distributed knowledges can work effectively with participatory action approaches, particularly principles that prioritize local knowledges and infuse the process with ongoing reflexivity. Most importantly, the paper discusses the ethical benefits of our shared

knowledge approach, which instigated a complete reframing of our objectives to reflect participant priorities.

Background: Refugee Challenges in Canada

[2]   According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), 59.5 million individuals were displaced globally in 2014, due to persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, resulting in the highest forced displacement on record ("Global Trends"). Canada has accepted between 23,000 and 35,500 refugees annually over the past ten years (Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) "Facts and figures") in government-assisted and privately sponsored programs (CIC "The refugee system"). Canada's population of refugees and asylum seekers was 165,000 individuals in 2015 (UNHCR "Mid-year trends 2015"), and is rising, pointing to the imperative to address refugees' challenges to resettle and thrive.[i]

[3]   Refugees face many barriers, including social isolation, exclusion, and marginalization; conflicts between cultural expectations and Canadian institutions; role changes and identity crises; language difficulties; and discrimination (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants - OCASI; Lamba and Krahn, 336). These barriers reduce access to employment (Jackson and Bauder, 362 and 364), healthcare (Edge, Newbold and McKeary, 35), and education (OCASI), and demonstrate intersecting sites of discrimination based on race, appearance, newcomer status, and language

proficiency (Edge, Newbold and McKeary, 37). Viewed with hostility by residents (Esses et al.), refugees may be ascribed characteristics of "bad immigrants" (Jackson and Bauder, 364), are subject to employer discrimination (Jackson and Bauder 361), and refugee youth are often barred from K-12 education (OCASI). Post-secondary education can also be largely inaccessible. Adding onto these layers of challenges, Clark-Kazak identifies a "vulnerability framework" saturating official discourses surrounding refugee work, constructing refugees, particularly youth (Clark-Kazak, 1), as dependent and helpless (Lamba and Krahn, 336).

[4] Refugee youth, then, suffer challenges at personal, social, employment, and education levels as a result on ongoing displacement, poverty, and social and economic vulnerability. Migrants are steered to occupy particular geographic spaces to occupy (Hyndman "Introduction", 454), and non-immigrants often ascribe to colonizing notions assuming that migrants should be either displaced or contained (Hyndman *Managing Displacement*, 85). Hyndman ("Introduction", 136) shows that the interstice of gender and refugee status leads to distinct types of movement proscriptions; racialized refugee women fear walking alone at night, while racialized men are profiled as mischief makers. Issues of racial, ethnic, class and gender bias create distinct biases that impact refugee youth mobility-- where they may or may not move, delimiting their education and

employment, and constraining their agency and ability to integrate into life in Canada.

Problematizing collaboration methods

[5]   With this in mind, my interdisciplinary team (with expertise in critical humanities research, game and user interaction design, and creative coding) sought to develop collaborative methods of storytelling that would blend together our expertise with refugee knowledges. In a combined PAR (participatory and action research) approach, researchers 'relinquish their unilateral control' practices (Whyte, 241), and work with an empowered community of participants, employing their local knowledge and desires; researchers share their informed theoretical abilities to produce actionable goals as determined by local individuals and theory useful to other researchers (McIntyre, 2 and 5). Concerned that our fluency with praxis and creative practice might undermine power-sharing if left unchecked, we sought out postcolonial feminist ethics that advise to constantly apprise power-sharing. Drawing from experimental art-based practices, we integrated aims of radical collaboration, risk taking and failure to encourage creative use of diverse knowledges (Gardner, Shea and Davila). Finally, to educate ourselves, we scanned relevant research to produce a blueprint for our team's processes and methods and to expose our assumptions and objectives. We sought to offer this review and our experience as researchers

and creators as a starting point, and not as foregone facts, objectives, methods or goals.

From Literature Scan to Praxis Approach

[6]   We recognized and named our assumptions, and composed a conceptual blueprint for our praxis-based approach drawing on key conceptual work from scholarship on refugee issues, mobility, trauma, digital platform affordances and postcolonial feminism. As we started out on this conceptualization work, we recognized that we were assuming, first, that youth might be interested in co-developing a digital media project to obtain digital and media skills that might assist their educational and employment mobility. We assumed as well that the malleability and accessibility afforded by digital media could work in service to our objectives that would be set by refugee youth in flexible and evolving ways.

[7]   The literature suggests that issues key to refugee experiences include traumatic experience, nonlinearity, and storytelling, which are concepts we fit together conceptually. Members of refugee communities will often have experienced trauma in varied forms—likely –as a direct event, through witnessing, or in displacement (Root). Trauma incapacitates coping mechanisms (van der Kolk and Fisler, 506), creating a sense of lost control and connection (Herman, 33 and 47) or unavailable experience (Caruth, 61). In recognizing this, we prioritized mechanisms that might enhance our youth

collaborators' power and agency over the storytelling process, while assuming storytelling might serve as a means to make sense out of the insensible experiences of trauma (van der Kolk, Hopper and Osterman, 19).

[8]   Digital interfaces allow for nonlinear storytelling, and is therefore well-suited to convey traumatic memory because these memories are often experienced as incoherent, and visually complex. Nonlinear storytelling can illustrate the "borders" that refugees encounter, such as structural or ethnic barriers to education or work, which often prohibit access but can also be employed as spaces to critique and create opportunity. For Rosi Braidotti (*Nomadic Subjects*, 128), borders, though founded with colonial aims, can be productive --a view that undercuts the vulnerability framework of refugeehood. In borders, postcolonial feminist scholars Gloria Anzaldua (22) and Chela Sandoval (10) see spaces where hybrid individuals (such as *mestiza*) gain oppositional consciousness to colonizing forces. Gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity can be critiqued as "borders" where power functions-- where refugees experience barriers to education, work, positions of social power and experience cultural bias. In a mobile approach, we hoped refugees might name and confront these borders to take power- to celebrate their different (non-dominant) and hybrid identities, to insist on inclusive social, education and work spaces, and to demand their knowledges are valued in those spaces. Migrant subjects seeking to move beyond scripted performances as refugees (Hyndman "Introduction", 458) might perform, for

example ethnic or sexual difference. Enacting their agency in this way, refugees may then be further empowered to build affinities among themselves and with allies, in a spirit we liken to Hyndman's call for transnational collaborations (Hyndman "Introduction", 457). Moreover, and in accordance with a postcolonial model, the privileged faced with these assertions from refugees are called on to manifest accountability for normative forms of embodiment and collective existence, by connecting with "others" in border spaces. (Braidotti *The Posthuman*, 49 and 52). This model of inclusive cosmopolitanism, where we thrive at borders, can be built by refugees and allies as situated, context-specific interactions (Benhabib, 18). It is based on these concepts that we imagined that a storytelling interface could invite refugees to perform difference, build agency, and educate privileged populations to serve practices that embrace refugee experiences and knowledges.

[9]   Digital feminist approaches facilitate the ability to thrive in hybrid refugee identities because these approaches recognize diverse experiences as instructive sites of knowledge. Where knowledge conventionally flows in a unidirectional from elite/central source to recipient, privileging expert sources, feminist cyber scholars (Hayles, 291; Haraway, 149) employ a distributed or integrated network model—where interfaces are mutating and flexible—to move data across networks, producing diversified knowledges. Models drawing on mobile, distributed, and networked models signal

feminist, postcolonial intents and objectives; crucially, these are grounded by third world feminisms demanding intersectional approaches and situated, local plans of action (Sandoval, 163). These polyvalent networks are resilient precisely because they "reappoint, continually, space, boundaries and power" (Sandoval, 163), or adapt to local needs and power dynamics.

[10] The digital space can help to achieve an ethic of reflexive positionality (Behar, 13) where we can hear speakers' located vantage points and multiple voices. Here, refugees tell stories of belonging become drivers of the terms by which they narrate, and self- identify differences in power (Kumsa, 248). Digital environments support diegesis, where stories can have origins and where narrative drives (Ryan, 22), even when boundaries are tentative or reconstituted and support interactive, networked, modular, and multi-mediated narratives that move against causality and sequencing (Hayles, 29). Digital storytelling can be visual, fragmentary, and non-verbal, responsive to trauma and displacement where users can interact with others' self-representations (Aston).[ii] The digital, then, provides affordances for flexible and nonlinear storytelling and places the power of storytelling in participants' hands: this was an approach to storytelling we assumed refugee communities might prefer.

[11] Based on this literature scan, we propose a networked, postcolonial and digital approach in our collaboration with the refugee youth to evolve our project from local refugee situations and power dynamics, considering refugee realities, including traumatic experience, mobility issues, and border opportunities. Our aims were to create a useful social project, and to test and reflect upon the model, to consider how it might work effectively in future partnership collaborations with other populations constrained by issues of cultural and ethnic difference. We brought these conceptual ideas to our refugee youth partners in a process explained in detail below. In these next sections, I discuss our attempts to apply our method, the ways in which many of our assumptions were upended, and how this practice evolved in a productive way to manifest a project driven by the refugee youth participants.

Meet Up 1

[12] A Toronto refugee organization invited us to their space to discuss the potential for collaboration. We entered during a youth group exercise where they spoke of their imagined, ideal futures; this gave our team a clear view of their most pressing concerns, which regarded security and how to gain access to education and meaningful employment. My team then offered our vision to co-design a project to meet their objectives: we discussed our ethical commitments to confidentiality, our intention to compensate their

time and travel, our goal to pursue a participatory approach that honored their local and experiential expertise that would engage them in the high-level work of ideating the problems, imagining design elements and the attributes of the web-based platform, designing game scenarios, testing prototypes and analysing their potentials. Recognizing their desires for learning opportunities, we offered them free workshops in desired design and editing software tools.[iii] On that day, six youth (ages 22-28, from Central America, the Caribbean and northwest Africa) volunteered, and they worked with us continually for the subsequent five months to ideate and develop this project.

Meet Up 2: Why a Story, Why a Map

[13] Our next meeting was held at Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU), where our academic team introduced to the refugee youth the experimental method of brainstorming and considered a multimedia storytelling platform concept as a starting point in order to generate further creative ideas. First, we discussed the praxis approach, suggesting key, linked concepts (from our research) as tools to begin fleshing out their particular struggles, including post-colonial and participatory action concerns regarding agency, intersectional bias, mobility versus containment, the ongoing state of limbo in refugee life, nonlinear traumatic memory, and tenuous refugee relations to the "border." Together, we reviewed the idea of the digital as facilitating non-linear, anticolonial, and

visually informative content. Remarkably, these youth, by virtue of their work with the Centre, were fluent with these concepts and invested in praxis, enabling us to pursue this method with great effect. As fuel for the brainstorm, we proposed a platform enabling the sharing of displacement stories, agreeing to test out, via play, project premises and goals. We discussed committing to failure as method, which means resisting judgement and the goal of "success" in order to fearlessly seek to understand ways of playing that felt valuable to our team and our work (Halberstam; Le Feuvre).

[14] My team had developed a storytelling prototype that layered, atop stories, the causes of refugee displaced and corresponding affective experience of refugees. The prototype visually illustrated layers of displacement (geographic, familial, social) and crises (sexual violence, regional security) and finally affective responses (fear, anger, regret, etc.). The objectives of this game were to create empathy and foster community with non-refugees and to build the ability to name affective experiences among the youth. We imagined story elements might be layered on cards, to record moments as messy collections, rather than as tidy, linear stories. We proposed this prototype as a technique to foster discussion about strategies and objectives, that might eventually yield preferences for the multimedia platform.
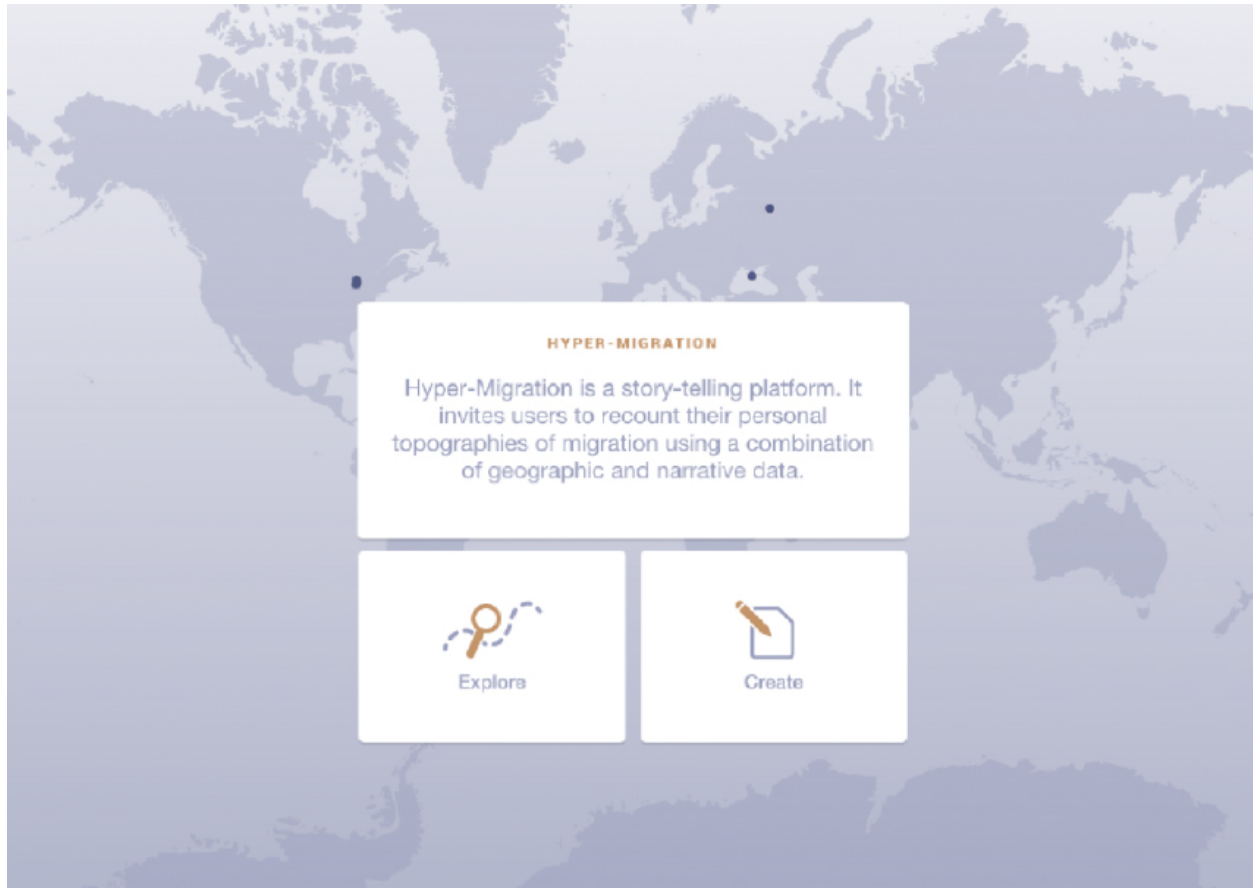
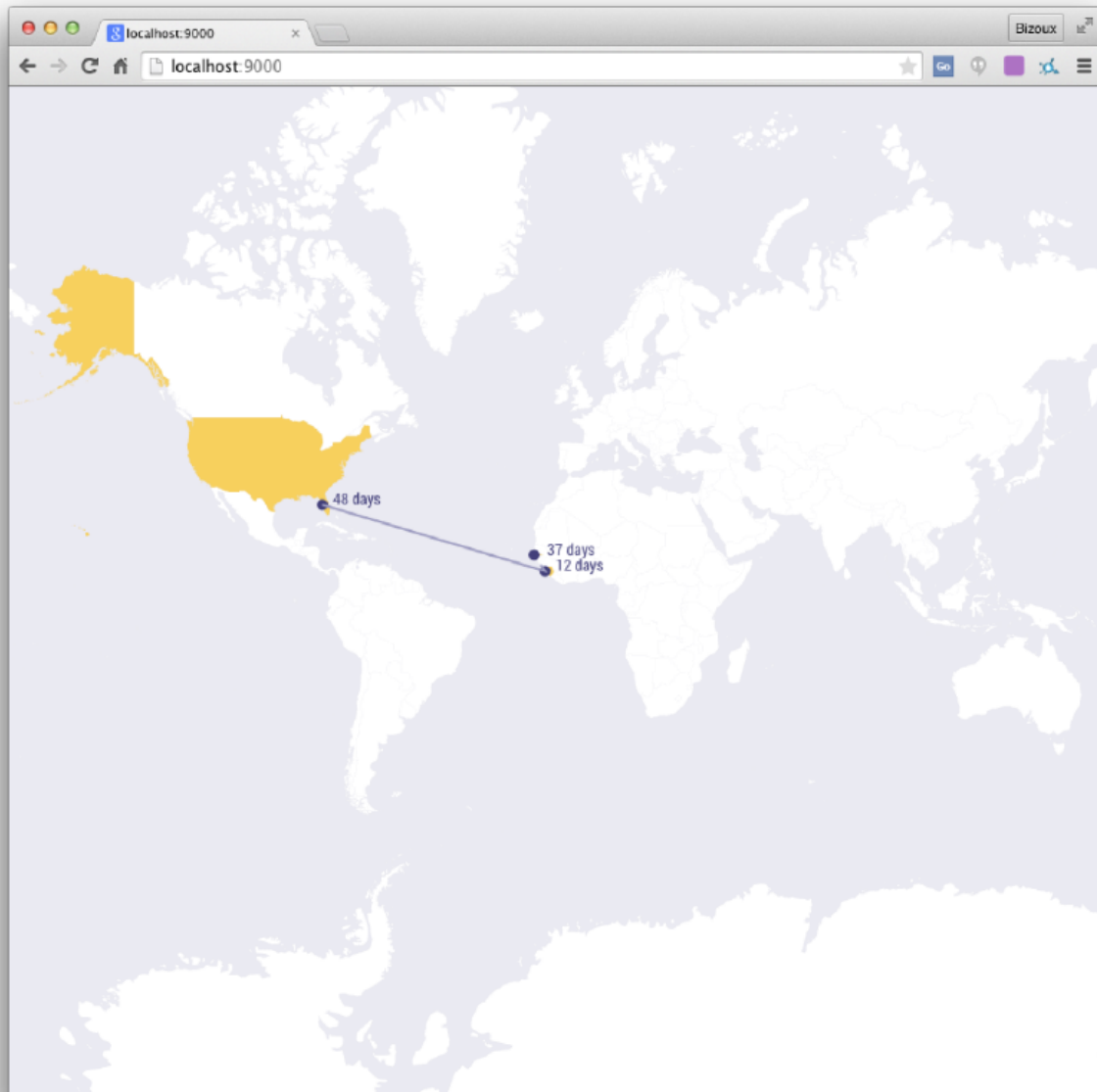*Figure 1. Interface splash page prototype, (Designer: R. Nason Scott; Gardner et. al. Hyper-Migration)*

Figure 2. Interface global to local prototype (Designer: R. Nason Scott; Gardner et. al. Hyper-Migration)

[15] As we workshopped this prototype, we challenged ourselves to assess whether the complexity of refugee life (constant displacement; mobility and access challenges; financial, economic, and legal insecurity) could be well communicated via cards and visualisations. Together we discussed

prototyped sketches (below) that mapped the stressors impacting a refugee's life and considered how a map might make a path seem too manageable or linear, how to visualise complex travels, and how to communication the feeling of displacement aesthetically. Our sketches were inspired by artist-created maps,[iv] that sought to demonstrate how mobility creates confinement and using colour and texture to illustrate displacement. We attempted to "unflatten" our maps, by engaging active perception and unfixing viewpoints via visualisations connecting ideas in nonlinear fashion (Sousanis). To show the various common migration pathways and the scale of displacement, the sketches layered personal migration stories atop of global migration patterns.

[16] In this workshop, the youth responded immediately with their desires for a different objective: to critically reflect on their local stressors and situations, and not global refugee flows. They ably examined their limited mobility and boundaries, and the emotional impact of stressors upon them personally. The youth noted their preference to prioritize affective labeling in their storytelling, enabling them to tackle their lack of security, access, mobility and other power-based problems. As a result, they reframed the storytelling platform as a game that refugee youth would play to develop affective knowledge that would then address impediments to mobility, security, accessing options, and well-being.

[17] Through an approach binding critical ethnography and participatory approaches (Gardner 215), we identified key media platforms used by the youth to designate a gaming platform users would embrace. In this exercise, we scanned the youth's everyday practices with media to predict tools they would be most likely to use to support a storytelling game. Recognizing the extensive time spent telling exchanging stories on social media, the youth affirmed their preference for telling stories in snippets and visually, confirming that game "cards" could be an effective medium for our storytelling game.

Iteration 1: Play, Fail, Play

[18] The OCADU team members created categories with key storytelling elements—people, location, needs, events, and problems—in the first prototype deck of cards. We trialed the deck, applying recollected refugee stories and found that the storytelling and witnessing felt both uninspired and tedious. To address this, we tried new rules. The research team proposed that players be required to take a turn, using a card delivered blindly from each category, or alternatively, all players could tell a story based on the dealer's cards. Our session was a failure. We entered the following youth meeting expecting a second failure that might elicit ideas for new rules or card categories.
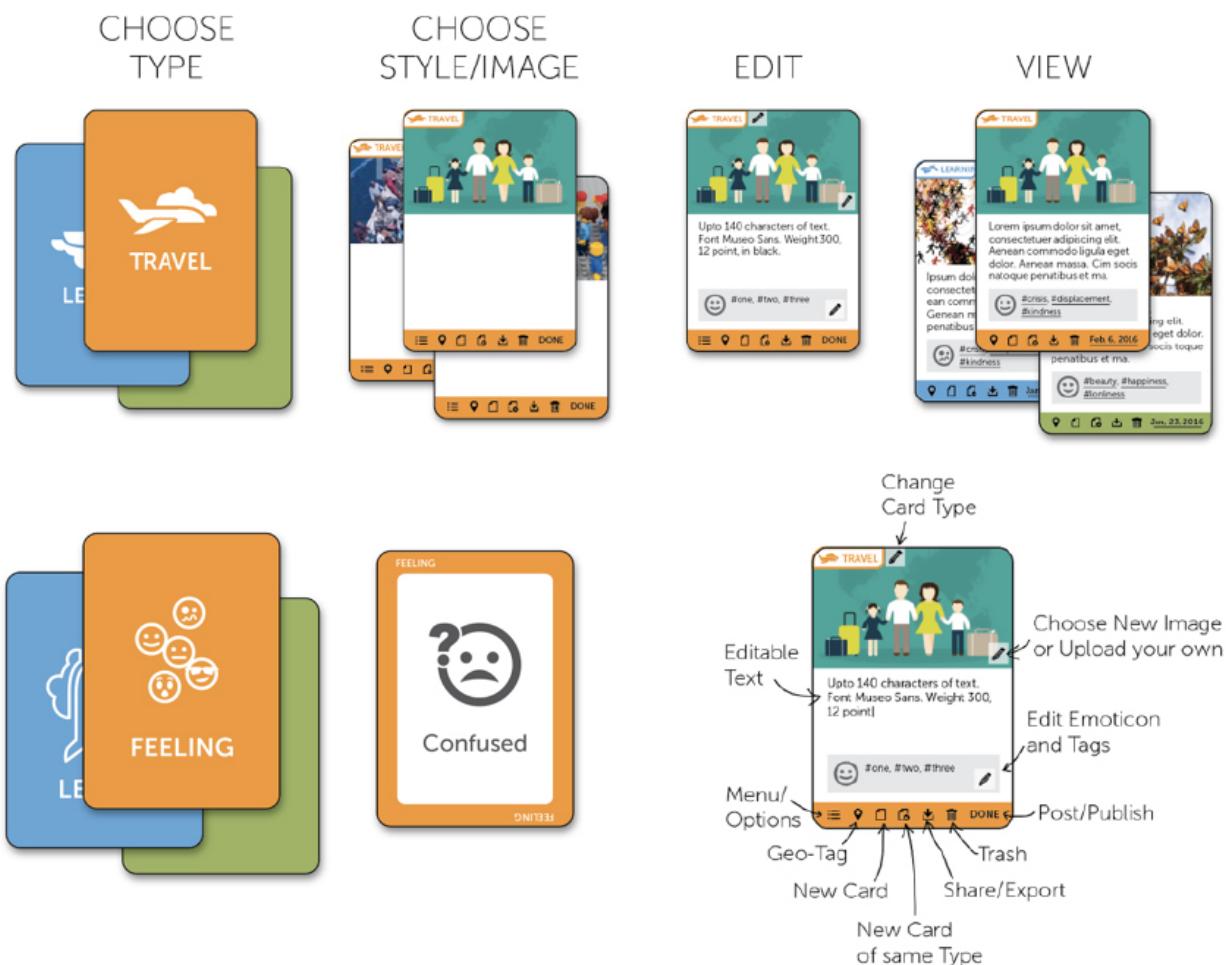
Figure 3. Early digital mock up card deck categories (designed by J. Smith; Gardner et. al. Hyper-Migration)

[19] During game play, it became clear that rules insisting players tell stories from dealt cards prohibited the objective-- which was for the youth to be able to tell their most relevant stories. To better understand how the approach failed, we played the game again with the youth. We dealt each player three cards (event, character, problem/emotion) and required they tell a story from the prompts and again agreed the game felt like drudgery. This failure, however, initiated the youth to break the rules—they began to

tell stories with dealt cards, and borrowed other players' cards to obtain needed prompts to continue their stories. Their circuitous stories thwarted linearity, linking streams of events in tales with tragic results and emotional distress. For example, migration led to limited educational opportunities, unsatisfying low paying work, racist verbal attacks, and feelings of hopelessness and fear. The youth pulled multiple emotion cards in their desire to articulate the complexity of their struggles. Their stories highlighted the delays, twists and inconclusive results that left them feeling in a constant state of waiting or pause. Other players joined onto and forked off those story threads to tell related stories or to offer solutions. This gameplay via rule-breaking practices felt collective and inspiring to them. It spoke to and from their local needs and notably had a non-standard game objective—to collectively solve the problems of others. We documented this crucial data to employ in the next iteration.

Iteration 2: Playing with Rules

[20] Maintaining our commitment to "failure," and brainstorming via play, with the youth leading, we confronted our next design problem: how to facilitate rule-breaking to allow play to include diverse storytelling forms, including the circuitous story-telling approach described earlier. We had to strike a balance because a deck with too few categories prompting generalized stories, while too many categories made it difficult to tell a story: if players simply chose cards, we lost the element of chance. Because

we favoured choice and rule breaking, but sought to ensure the game allowed for interesting strategies, we experimented with options allowing players to throw out rules and increase choices. Some ideas included to trade cards, add or discard cards, and to ignore a dealt card. We constructed various rule iterations, allowing players to complete others' stories, to retell stories with different solutions, and to eliminate or invent categories (e.g. character, location). As we played this version, the youth populated card categories with their experiences, adding characters (teachers, police officers), themes (politics, health, family), needs (shelter, time, money), events (object left behind, request for help), and new emotions (stuck, loved, neglected). They generated new strategies to obtain extra cards through trading and imaged endless new games.[v]

[21] While these strategies made telling stories more game-like, the game needed a clear goal. Discussing the ethics of the project, we determined that winning should be achieved by collaborating, sharing and peer support, which could build self-esteem and agency. Rather than revealing distressing stories, the goal would be to mitigate roadblocks that paused the youth's stories and to offer solutions that empowered youth to make a different move to resolve problems at these various borders. We imagined that game strategies might include competing to offer best solutions or alternative endings, or collecting puzzle pieces to uncover a secret picture as a community. Winners could be the best problem-solvers, as decided through

assent. At the end, the game became a flexible game deck that could be played with different rules and strategies, but to very consistent ends of problem solving via community. The youth had become fully active co-designers, directing the development of game components, strategy and objectives. As well, the youth created word decks with cards enabling stories to be told about their distinct local stressors and borders. Finally, they created strategies that used affect to craft solutions to their distinct problems that paused their progress and thwarted their mobility.

From Failure to Design

[22] Through these critical, youth-led play sessions with the prototype, the project was reimagined in a manner to facilitate storytelling via card decks that would then be offered in printable digital formats in community- and school-based groups. As a group, we reframed the project as an analogue storytelling game played in face-to-face groups, whose goal was to enhance emotional acuity and critical thinking, enabling youth to cope and to solve their evolving problems, particularly with regard to their precarious status and lack of access to education and sustainable employment. The game would aim to serve individual needs and cultivate a cohesive refugee community and affinities with non-immigrants who wished to work as allies supporting refugee opportunities. The youth determined that a website should archive this game, along with community resources (jobs, educational opportunities) and a discussion board offering advice and

support. They decided the deck should have a snappy look and feel and that should include emoticons and tags to facilitate emotive storytelling. Our artist's mock-up of various designs that users can choose as deck borders are below.
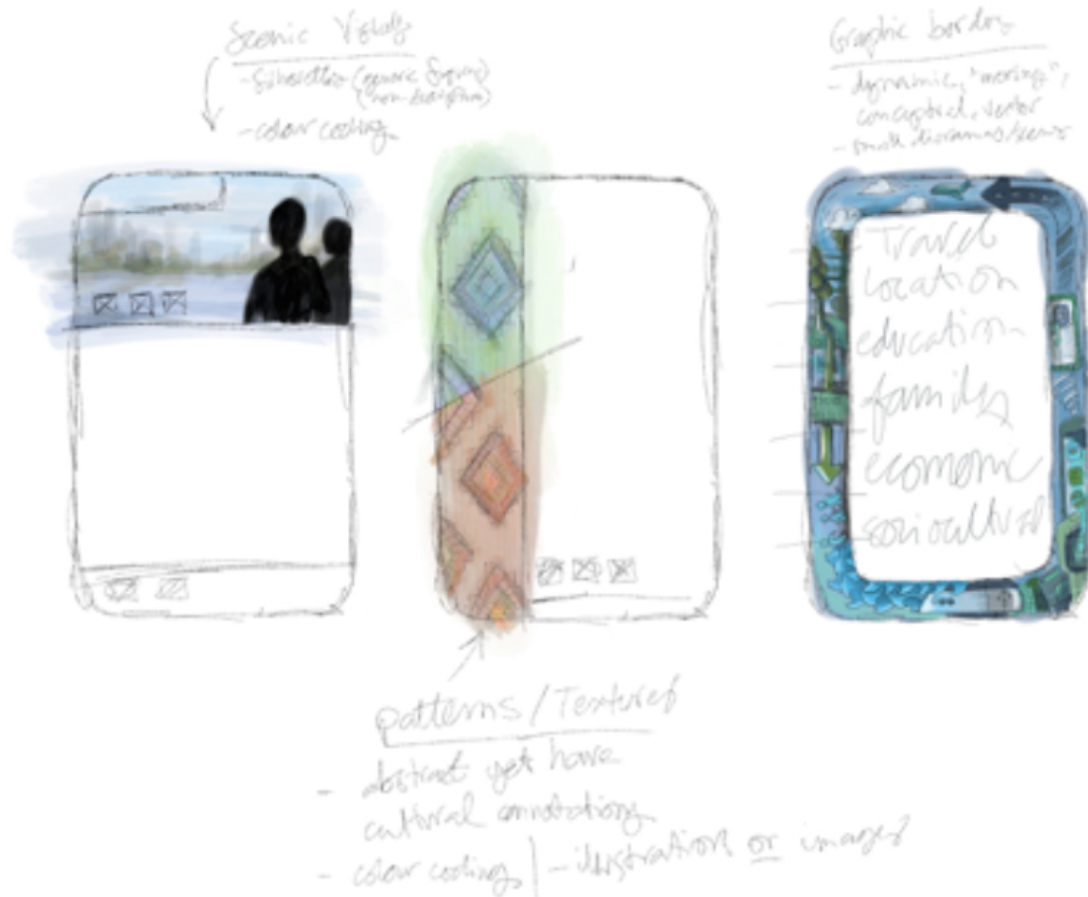

Figure 4. Mock ups of hand-drawn art for card decks that adds the mark of the human hand to the digital deck and would allow users to personalize by choosing from among our options or creating their own deck border. (Designer by J. Smith; Gardner et. al. Hyper-Migration)

Discussion and Take Aways

[23] To date, we have prototyped the deck and expansion decks with a range of games that can be played with more and less constrained rules,

various strategies, options for player choice, and encouragement for players to break the rules and add cards to the deck. These deck iterations will be available on our website (mobilelab.ca; search Hyper-Migration project) and we are seeking funding to continue development.

[24] Pedagogically, this flexible deck offers gaming as peer mentorship and makes critical concepts accessible as problem-solving tools for refugee youth. Those who speak English as a second language and have gaps in formal education can benefit from the concept cards that offer terms to dissect structural, colonial, gendered and race-based issues. The affect cards enable youth to label emotional concerns and conceive of them as crucial linked issues with which to engage. In our efforts to employ feminist and postcolonial ethics to drive our combined experimental, praxis and collaborative method, we have learned that reflexivity is key--listening well and making spaces for participant's insights resulting in this game project, whose design and objectives are driven by the refugee youth.

[25] In many ways the new project design illustrates how conceptual borders distinguishing digital and material affordances are generally overstated. The analogue game is designed to be played in ways that demonstrate the affordances normally associated exclusively with the digital. This game reveals the many non-linear, diverse networks of economic, social and cultural stressors impacting the youth, and the play develops complex

pathways and manners to respond and rejects any sense that problems have a single problem-solution trajectory.

[26] The rules and strategies signal that this game uses porous processes while the spatial interface does not constrain or pause, but encourages rule-breaking and redevelopment via card and category creation. Its goal of collaborative problem solving is not an end in itself, but an ongoing process. The game functions as a tool for refugee communities—it meant be shared digitally and played in face-to-face groups, while the website platform links players in new group based activities. This project utilizes both analogue and digital capabilities and activates process itself as an interface. As such storytelling in this game is a process that changes with each gameplay, and across each diverse group, enabling players to accumulate and archive solutions to myriads of problems, that can then be taken up in community spaces.

[27] We plan to test this game deck in situ with youth in other community spaces and schools who have had less access to critical approaches to understand struggles with access or mobility. In the first version of the website we hope to offer the game, a resource database, and a discussion board, managed by the youth refugee participants with technical support from our university team members. The key concepts that our team together targeted continue to drive this work: we prioritized activating

collaboration, foregrounding local knowledges of youth and drawing out their critical insights, focusing on nuanced experiences of mobility and displacement, and identifying local solutions for effective social action. When given space, the refugee youth ably engaged critical concepts and maneuvered through hybrid territories where their material and digital practices intersected. The research has shown us that post-colonial, feminist ethics can infuse collaborative processes and outputs of participatory action research when guided by knowledge sharing, mutual teaching and the spirit of play and failure to achieve discovery. Most importantly, the refugee youth demonstrated to us their keen abilities to self-organize and to drive solutions to not only integrate within but to activate refugee communities. In their playing of the game, our refugee youth partners formulated key policy changes regarding structural and cultural access issues experienced by refugees in Ontario. These may be useful to educate privileged society on the value of incorporating the local, diverse expertise of refugee communities as part of the solution toward fair access and opportunities enabling refugee youth and communities to aspire to their potentials.

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[i] The Canadian government has addressed this crisis with a modest effort, resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in Canada by the close of 2015 and another 25,000 by February's end in 2016 (CIC "#WelcomeRefugees"). This effort has brought national attention to the pressing needs of refugees settling in Canada, but challenges remain for refugees in Canada.
[ii] It is notable that digital methods of visualizing and mapping the experiences of migrant and displaced populations are gaining ground in the Social Sciences (Ball and Gilligan; and see, e.g., Aston; Doerr), and the UNHCR (n.d.). The Refugee Project (n.d.) created dynamic visualizations of data, hosting interactive maps that graph historical refugee data country-by-country. Notably, various types of online digital

storytelling platforms exist (see, e.g., StoryCorps.me (a storytelling app), 18 Days in Egypt (a crowd sourced documentary, and Palestine Remix) that are textually or visually based.

[iii] Using action and participatory approaches always requires negotiation by the team, which is made up of researchers, clients and participants. Research ethics applications are excellent sites to consider our ethical obligations as researchers, but it is also incumbent upon researchers to negotiate the group's ethical approach throughout the research process to ensure participants receive benefits from their roles.

[iv] Excellent work has been published by artists and designers whose informative and aesthetically compelling maps of data portray deep context and encourage probing inquiries into data. See for example, Harmon, and Harmon and Clemans.

[v] At this time, colleagues introduced us to a card game deck entitled Grow a Game created by Mary Flanagan, which is meant to address problematics in work environments, by highlighting values and strategizing via game design to solve them. We subsequently consulted this flexible deck to consider new categories and cards that might suit this game.

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