Second-Person Surveillance: Politics of User Implication in Digital Documentaries

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes digital documentaries that utilize second-person address and roleplay to make users feel implicated in contemporary refugee crises, mass incarceration in the U.S., and state and corporate surveillances. Digital documentaries are seemingly more interactive and participatory than linear film and video documentary as they are comprised of a variety of auditory, visual, and written media, utilize networked technologies, and turn the documentary audience into a documentary user. I draw on scholarship from documentary, game, new media, and surveillance studies to analyze how second-person address in digital documentaries is configured through user positioning and direct address within the works themselves, in how organizations and creators frame their productions, and in how users and players respond in reviews, discussion forums, and Let’s Plays. I build on Michael Rothberg’s theorization of the implicated subject to explore how these digital documentaries bring the user into complicated relationality with national and international crises. Visually and experientially implying that users bear responsibility to the subjects and subject matter, these works can, on the one hand, replicate modes of liberal empathy for suffering, distant “others” and, on the other, simulate one’s own surveillant modes of observation or behavior to mirror it back to users and open up one’s offline thoughts and actions as a site of critique.

This dissertation charts how second-person address shapes and limits the political potentialities of documentary projects and connects them to a lineage of direct address from educational and propaganda films, museum exhibits, and serious games. By centralizing the user’s individual experience, the interventions that second-person digital documentaries can make into social discourse change from public, institution-based education to more privatized forms of sentimental education geared toward personal edification and self-realization. Unless tied to larger initiatives or movements, I argue that digital documentaries reaffirm a neoliberal politics of individual self-regulation and governance instead of public education or collective, social intervention.

Chapter one focuses on 360-degree virtual reality (VR) documentaries that utilize the feeling of presence to position users as if among refugees and as witnesses to refugee experiences in camps outside of Europe and various dwellings in European cities. My analysis of Clouds Over Sidra (Gabo Arora and Chris Milk 2015) and The Displaced (Imraan Ismail and Ben C. Solomon 2015) shows how these VR documentaries utilize observational realism to make believable and immersive their representations of already empathetic refugees. The empathetic refugee is often young, vulnerable, depoliticized and dehistoricized and is a well-known trope in other forms of humanitarian media that continues into VR documentaries. Forced to Flee (Zahra Rasool 2017), I am Rohingya (Zahra Rasool 2017), So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin (Berliner Morgenpost 2017), and Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum (Shehani Fernando 2017) disrupt easy immersions into realistic-looking VR experiences of stereotyped representations and user identifications and, instead, can reflect back the user’s political inaction and surveillant modes of looking.

Chapter two analyzes web- and social media messenger-based documentaries that position users as outsiders to U.S. mass incarceration. Users are noir-style co-investigators into the crime of the prison-industrial complex in Fremont County, Colorado in Prison Valley: The Prison Industry
(David Dufresne and Philippe Brault 2009) and co-riders on a bus transporting prison inmates’ loved ones for visitations to correctional facilities in Upstate New York in *A Temporary Contact* (Nirit Peled and Sara Kolster 2017). Both projects construct an experience of carceral constraint for users to reinscribe seeming “outside” places, people, and experiences as within the continuation of the racialized and classed politics of state control through mass incarceration. These projects utilize interfaces that create a tension between replicating an exploitative hierarchy between non-incarcerated users and those subject to mass incarceration while also de-immersing users in these experiences to mirror back the user’s supposed distance from this mode of state regulation.

Chapter three investigates a type of digital game I term dataveillance simulation games, which position users as surveillance agents in ambiguously dystopian nation-states and force users to use their own critical thinking and judgment to construct the criminality of state-sanctioned surveillance targets. *Project Perfect Citizen* (Bad Cop Studios 2016), *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (Osmotic Studios 2016), and *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope 2013) all create a dual empathy: players empathize with bureaucratic surveillance agents while empathizing with surveillance targets whose emails, text messages, documents, and social media profiles reveal them to be “normal” people. I argue that while these games show criminality to be a construct, they also utilize a racialized fear of the loss of one’s individual privacy to make players feel like they too could be surveillance targets.

Chapter four examines personalized digital documentaries that turn users and their data into the subject matter. *Do Not Track* (Brett Gaylor 2015), *A Week with Wanda* (Joe Derry Hall 2019), *Stealing Ur Feelings* (Noah Levenson 2019), *Alfred Premium* (Joël Ronez, Pierre Corbinais, and Émilie F. Grenier 2019), *How They Watch You* (Nick Briz 2021), and *Fairly Intelligent™* (A.M. Darke 2021) track, monitor, and confront users with their own online behavior to reflect back a corporate surveillance that collects, analyzes, and exploits user data for profit. These digital documentaries utilize emotional fear- and humor-based appeals to persuade users that these technologies are controlling them, shaping their desires and needs, and dehumanizing them through algorithmic surveillance.
SECOND-PERSON SURVEILLANCE: POLITICS OF USER IMPLICATION IN DIGITAL DOCUMENTARIES

by

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Syracuse University
May 2023
Acknowledgments

Thank you to all who have supported me on this long road from the initial ideation of this dissertation through to its conclusion.

I first need to thank my dissertation committee and, especially, my advisor Roger Hallas. Roger’s continued support of me, my teaching, and my research has allowed me to get here. I remember times of coming to Roger’s office with lists of my disparate interests and being pushed towards a larger, better, stronger framework under which to expand and explore my ideas. Thank you to Roger for challenging me to think more and deeper about documentary, technology, politics, and their interrelationships and for empowering me to feel more assured of my abilities and eventual success. My most sincere thanks are due to Carol Fadda and Chris Hanson, whose feedback and support from coursework to prospectus to dissertation pushed me to plunge depths of knowledges deeper than I thought I could go. My appreciation also goes to Kendall Phillips for stepping in to chair my defense committee. I value the time and effort you all have expended to help me reach this point. There is no dissertation without you.

Thank you to Evan Hixon, who helped me pick the most superior sentences out of a million possible iterations. I would not have made it here, there, or anywhere without your ever-ready willingness to supply cute cat videos, receive Big Brother rants, issue quality assurances, and proofread the parts and the wholes of this very document.

Thank you to my friends, colleagues, mentors, and former professors, within and outside of Spokane, Seattle, Bellingham, Syracuse, and wherever else life has taken you, who have supported and guided me, offered friendship and communities of care, shared in the triumphs and struggles of knowledge creation and syllabus construction, and have, otherwise, just been available for a nice chat. My immense thanks to my teaching and TA mentors, Coran Klaver, Will Scheibel, Tony Tiongson, and Meina Yates-Richard, who inspired my teaching and helped me through some tricky situations. To Chris Forster and Wil Marple, for sharing their interests in critical theory relevant to their own research and beyond. To Patty Roylance, for helming Write Now and holding a weekly space and time to write and commune. To Chris Eng, who advised me to write with the authority and confidence that I did not yet possess. To my grad student mentor, Chris Barnes, and mentees, Simon Vangle and Molly Cavannaugh, who left indelible marks on my time in the program. To those I have thought, chatted, relaxed, and trivia’d around grad office, committee, dinner, and brewery tables with: Max Cassity, Vicky Cheng, Kaitlyn Conrath, Rhyse Curtis, Haejoo Kim, Athena Mandros, Aley O’Mara, Andrea Swanson, and Melissa Welshans. Nat Barr, Jessica Crockett, Sarah Daugherty, Justin Ericksen, and Lee Olsen, I would not have made it (enjoyably) through our M.A. program at WWU without you. Monica Brashears, Natalie El-Eid + Chester, Dan Peck, and Mikayla Thomas + Sunny, thank you for sharing with me your greatness, your successes, and your companion animals.

I would like to express my eternal gratitude to the wonderful Terri Zollo, whose experience and generosity truly knows no bounds.

My final thanks go to my parents John Gleesing, Kate Sorensen, and Rob Sorensen, without your continuous support I would never have made it this far, in life or in academia.
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Introduction

Since 2016, Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary has hosted an interactive exhibit titled *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration.* Once seen as the first “modern” penitentiary touting “moderate, rational” punishment (Manion 2015: 11) including quiet reflection in solitude (Holt 2017), Eastern State closed its doors as a prison in 1971 and re-opened them over two decades later as a museum that historicizes its punishment methods, hosts incarceration-related art exhibits and lectures, and allows visitors to walk through and experience the radial architecture of this prison said to be inspired by Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon.1 Eastern State’s webpage about the *Prisons Today* exhibit gives an idea of its purpose, noting that how the U.S. become the country with the world’s highest incarceration rate is “nearly invisible to many Americans” and suggesting that this exhibit “elicits personal connections to recent historic changes in the U.S. criminal justice system, encourages reflection, supports dialogue, and suggests steps that visitors can take to help shape the evolution of the American criminal justice system moving forward.”2 In his review, Phillip Seitz (2017) agrees and positions Eastern State “as an agent of change” that is attempting to “nurture public reflection” (132). This exhibit has won numerous awards, including the 2017 Excellence in Exhibition, where one judge observed that the exhibit challenges “the audience’s privilege, incoming views on criminal justice, and who is a criminal” (qtd. in Frankhouser 2017). This challenge to the audience is important, it signals a shift in how museums consider the historical narratives they communicate as debatable, open-ended, and political. It shows a museum working to engage the audience in meaning making rather than telling the audience a contained historical lesson (a goal of New Museology, which I further discuss in a later section). Paying particular attention to how this exhibit tries to provoke reflection and critical thinking helps to clarify changes one can see in
person and in the virtual 3D tour of *Prisons Today*, where anyone with internet access can click through, see the exhibit, and ponder the questions it asks visitors.³

I turn, initially, to *Prisons Today* for how it attempts to show visitors their relationality to the U.S. criminal justice system and blur the boundary between those who are incarcerated and those who are not, with this latter group seemingly being the intended audience. What attendees take away in terms of meaning is premised in the life experiences one enters with, though the framing of the exhibit suggests it caters to someone who has not been incarcerated and those for whom the racialized and classed premises of mass incarceration in the U.S are “nearly invisible” (to quote again from the project’s website). This dissertation analyzes digital documentaries, not museum exhibits, but we can see similar attempts to position a seemingly distanced or unaware audience in relation to the subject matter in many digital documentaries. The digital documentaries I analyze in this dissertation, like *Prisons Today*, are all premised on distance. Something is hard to see, feel, or know because it is happening elsewhere, to or with someone else, or has been purposefully hidden from view.

When I visited Eastern State in July 2017, the *Prisons Today* exhibit served as a welcome counter to the tension between Eastern State’s ability to aid in a city’s reflection on their own carceral past and the commercialized aspects of the museum, like the replica of Al Capone’s prison cell or the gift shop which sells a variety of goods adorned with the mugshot of Pep, a dog jokingly “incarcerated” there in 1924 for murdering a cat.⁴ The tone shifted for me when I entered *Prisons Today*, located in an annex adjacent to the older prison ruins. This tonal shift was a jarring reminder of the world outside of the regulated and curated tour of Eastern State, a tour that, at times, minimizes the somber realities of the prison to sell, sometimes literally, a certain version of its history. Entering the *Prisons Today* exhibit, museum attendees are greeted with a
question that will determine which side of the exhibit you move on to: Have you ever broken the law? You are asked to consider a range of activities from shoplifting and assault to underage drinking, drug use, and insurance fraud before answering either yes or no. While you are free to move around the rest of Eastern State, exploring the panoptic layout of the prison, its small, degraded cells, contextual stories of who was in them and what their incarceration experience was like, paired with a guided, linear audio tour, the rest of this tour does not ask much of you beyond looking and learning. This first question in Prisons Today, however, immediately requires your engagement and for you to move one way or the other, depending on your experience, and under the watchful gaze of other museum attendees, as if you are being subjected to an imaginary process of criminal surveillance, an interpolation into the system that this exhibit wishes to demystify.

If the visitor answers yes to this initial question, they move to the left and find a new series of questions—did you get caught? why or why not? does this make you a “criminal?”—before being led towards information about methods of punishment from various countries and “The Criminal Us.” “The Criminal Us” provides visitors with a confession desk, where they can sit and write out a confession for their crime and visitors can see a wall of undifferentiated written confessions from exhibit visitors and those who were convicted of their crimes, both of which work to collapse some distinctions between incarcerated and non-incarcerated people.

Mary Rizzo (2017) states that the inclusion of these interactives allow museum curators to “insert individual stories, including our own, into the exhibition” which “complicates the simplistic and divisive ‘us vs. them’ narrative of much law-and-order rhetoric” and has the effect of “implicat[ing] the visitor in the criminal justice system” (94). By contrast, if a visitor answers no to the initial question, a sign will state “You’re very unusual” and the visitor is directed to
question why if 70% of U.S. adults have done something illegal, most illegal acts do not lead to prosecution, before attendees are directed towards information on the cost of prisons and private prisons. The two sides merge for the rest of exhibit, moving through video, sound, and images attesting to the experiences of incarceration, who is often incarcerated, and learning about million-dollar blocks before arriving to a final section about prison reform where visitors are urged to “make your voice heard” and told that prison reform organizations will “welcome your participation.”

I start with *Prisons Today* because it relates well what I analyze in the rest of my dissertation: this is an exhibit that utilizes second-person address and forces you to think about your own relationship to incarceration. In some ways, then, this project helps to illuminate one of the uses of digital documentaries which appropriate a similar style of address in provoking users to think about their own relationality to the subject matter. *Prisons Today* asks, what is it about you—race, ethnicity, class, or just luck—that allowed you to escape the criminal justice system when millions of others have not? What I hope the discussion of this project also indicates is that we should question the “newness” of digital documentaries that are often thought to be on the cutting-edge of documentary and new media and capable of achieving their goals better or differently than other media and other linear film and video documentaries. By opening with an exhibit that does some of what a digital documentary utilizing second-person address can do (helps one to position themselves in relation to the topic), I hope to make clear that I question these claims that digital documentary creators and scholars often forward and, instead, seek to think about the uses and limitations of these kinds of digital documentaries as well as their historical antecedents. Digital documentaries draw on the techniques and larger history of not only interactive museum exhibits but also serious games and education films to ask “you,” as the
user, to think about your own relation to the subject matter and bring in your own experiences and positionality when asking questions similar to *Prisons Today*’s “Have you ever broken the law?” My dissertation asks, in what ways does this make “you” another subject of the documentary and how does this prime “you” to interact with the documentary in a specific role? And in what ways does this type of positioning and mode of address diverge from past documentary film and video positionality and how does it change the type of impact that a documentary project might have and intervention into social discourse that a documentary could make?

Digital documentaries are often said to have better capabilities than other media because of their digital-ness. It is often taken as a truism now that “every sector of the documentary film industry has been affected by this post-digital shift” (Canet, Odorico, and Soengas 2020: 170). The scope of documentary media has expanded beyond film, video, photography, and artworks to incorporate web-based, digital texts operating based on algorithms that often utilize computer game mechanics. Interactive digital documentaries span technologies and platforms and include web- and application-based documentaries, simulation games, and 360-degree virtual reality videos and contain mixes of media forms: audio-visual and written materials, virtual and augmented reality, video databases, hyperlinked information, discussion forums, gamified elements, and user-submitted content. Though the forms of documentary media are greater and users are interacting with them in ways different than they might with a linear documentary, these works still attempt to treat reality creatively, to draw on John Grierson’s broad designation.

Digital documentaries incorporating interactive and participatory elements do create new challenges and opportunities for articulating the relationship between a filmmaker, their subject/s, and the audience and create new uses and limitations for the interventions these works
can mount against contemporary problems and crises. While digital documentaries are not wholly new, better, or more immersive media, one of the core changes they have brought to documentary is in how they position the audience. The audience, in digital documentaries, is turned into a user and potential co-constructor of meaning, as they need to navigate the interface of different projects and bring more effort into moving one’s body, clicking through content, or adding in one’s own thoughts to progress through a documentary. To examine this change, this dissertation focuses on how an important segment of digital documentaries use simulation and second-person roleplay to position users and players as part of the subject matter in ambiguous ways. I show that there is a shift in documentary address, from a subjective first-person or a seemingly objective third-person to an ambiguous second-person address. This subset of digital documentaries is distinct from first-person media and third-person media. Users do not inhabit the role of a clearly defined protagonist like in a first-person shooter game, for instance, nor are the works I analyze autobiographical or allowing users to inhabit the mindset of a defined other person’s own singular experiences. And, while a third-person perspective is not wholly excised, these works move beyond merely showing or discussing the experiences of other people to incorporate the user as “you,” another person with an ambiguous role within the work. Users are hailed as “you” explicitly and implicitly through verbal and written direct address and given specific roles to play, blurring the boundaries between fiction/nonfiction, user/role, and “you”/“I.” I argue that this creates a user identification that is split and users are called on to play a role within digital documentaries that they otherwise are unfamiliar with while also approaching these works as themselves, with their offline, “real” identities, behaviors, and feelings. This split identification for users is important because as documentary works digital documentaries often seek to intervene in the social world, so, users are addressed as capable
social actors at the same time as they are asked to inhabit this, perhaps, fictional role to learn more about the subject matter through experiencing it.

My thinking on the split identification of users is informed by games and virtual reality (VR) scholarship. In simulation games, the you-but-not-you identity has been thought of as a “double-consciousness,” an awareness that one’s actions have both a real-world referent and, at the same time, are part of a constructed game world (Salen and Zimmerman 2014: 449). When designing VR experiences, immersive journalist Nonny de la Peña (2017) refers to a somewhat similar “there but not there” process as the “duality of presence” (209). Users feel present and embodied in a virtual scene while remaining aware that they are sitting, standing, or moving in another physical location. The address and positionality in digital documentaries offer a fundamental difference from these contexts. Unlike how a game avatar might be seen as “a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate” (Salen and Zimmerman 2014: 453), users usually approach documentary and nonfiction works as themselves, not expecting to play through another character. As Bill Nichols (1991) suggests, rather than entering “a world” through a fictional text, “we are offered access to the world” created through the idea of a “shared, historical construct” (109). When addressed through the second person, users occupy a role in the works, a “you,” but this “you” and how users experience it is still informed by the offline “you.” The use of second person intentionally blurs and confuses boundaries between users, subjects, and subject matter. By establishing a “you” in the nonfiction text and maintaining connection to the “you” participating in the work, this split identification remains unresolved but is related to the kind of intervention these works intend to make and how they intend to change the user’s relationship to the subject matter.
Situating users “as if” involved in contemporary crises through second-person address and roleplay, my dissertation argues that users become experientially and empathetically implicated in the surveillant subject matter. In this use of implication, I draw on Michael Rothberg’s (2019) theorization of “the implicated subject.” Rothberg aims to expand our vocabulary beyond victim and perpetrator, complicit and non-complicit by suggesting another category of relation and benefit, someone who is implicated in a system or process. Rather than a legally culpable perpetrator, an implicated subject, according to Rothberg, is someone “aligned with power and privilege,” who might “contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes” (1). Someone implicated through social positionality or action or lack thereof, under this framework, can still be thought of as perpetuating “the legacies of historical violence and prop[ping] up the structures of inequality that mar the present” (1) even if they did not directly cause the violence or are not directly harmed by it. This is a messier, more tenuous form of relation that speaks to one’s involvement in receiving benefit from or reproducing the harms of a system and how hard it can be to locate one’s relation to other people, to historical injustices, and to ongoing processes using a standard victim-perpetrator model. I argue that through the use of second-person address and roleplay in digital documentaries, we see an attempt by creators to delineate how a user might be implicated in surveillant, systemic violences, even if they are not themselves displaced, incarcerated, or surveilled and targeted by a state or corporate entity. Through forcing users to play “as if” in certain roles, I analyze how users become implicated in larger processes of humanizing and empathizing with socially or politically marginalized people or groups (in chapter one), sustaining mass incarceration (in chapter two), producing criminality (in chapter three), and participating in corporate and state surveillance (in chapters three and four). Visually and
experientially implying that users bear some responsibility to the subjects and subject matter, these works can, on the one hand, replicate modes of liberal empathy for suffering, distant “others” and, on the other, simulate one’s own surveillant modes of observation or behavior in order to mirror it back to users and open up one’s offline thoughts and actions as a site of critique.

My analysis shows that this shift to experiential and interactive digital documentaries has several important consequences. Incorporating the user as a “you” and giving them a role suggests all one need do to understand a person or subject better is to “put yourself in their place,” to practice a liberal empathy long the hallmark of a cosmopolitan, sentimental education. Michael Chanan (2007) argues, for instance, that while fiction “addresses the viewer as a private individual” and “speaks to the interior life of feelings, sentiments and secret desires,” documentary as a nonfiction, often goal-oriented genre “addresses the viewer primarily as a citizen” (vi). In the subset of digital documentaries that I analyze, we will see a breakdown between the distinctions between fiction/nonfiction and private/public. Users are addressed as global “citizens” who are presumed to have worldly concerns and interest in the suffering and oppression of others, migration and prison reform, and the reach of mass surveillance. And users are addressed individually, where, unless one attends a communal performance of someone engaging with a digital documentary publicly for an audience, one interacts with these works singularly and, likely, alone. The “interior life” that Chanan speaks to is part of the experiential knowledge that digital documentaries work to create, where a user’s experience and their feelings and sentiments like fear, sympathy, amusement, unease, and irony become a form of evidence or knowledge that users can take away from their engagement with a project. As Lisa Nakamura (2020) states of VR documentaries, they are a “medium that not only needs to be felt
to be believed, but cannot be doubted once it is felt” (53). Nakamura, here, levels a powerful critique of how a “white male [tech] industry” (51) creates VR technologies and the genre of refugee VR documentaries to feel and feel differently about groups of people whose own words and experiences do not seem to carry weight on their own. This critique is valid, and I explore it further in my first chapter which also focuses on these projects. Nakamura’s assessment also speaks to what happens broadly in a subset of digital documentaries where user experience and user feelings become a form of evidence, to varied outcomes. The use of direct address in digital documentaries, as I argue, is drawn from educational and propaganda films, museum exhibits, and serious games, which have used direct address both to create and critique liberal empathy, to bolster public institutions and to undermine them. Unless tied to something else, a specific community or larger initiative, for instance, digital documentaries risk creating individualized, private experiences instead of the collective, public education or, at least, discussion of social issues. Alexandra Juhasz (2014) affirms this need to connect digital documentaries to “a place, a person, a demand, and an ethical practice of being together” (47), otherwise, according to Juhasz, creators can easily become “complicit” to the unequal gains of large corporations that distribute the technologies often used to create digital documentaries and that often profit from the data and engagement that these works generate.

These more individual experiences that digital documentaries offer, especially if they position users as co-participants, can intensify existing hierarchies between users and subjects where the user’s experience of the subject matter is emphasized over and above that of the (other) subjects, further disempowering documentary subjects from control over their own representation and experiences. This is part of the problem that Nakamura notes in her analysis of VR documentaries. Like linear documentaries, many digital documentaries operate in what
Bill Nichols (2017) terms the “I speak about them to you” mode of filmmaker-subject-audience relationship (42), where a filmmaker films subjects from a certain community they are not a part of for an audience that is not part of that group either. Without a carefully delineated ethical and collaborative process, this configuration creates an unequal relationship where the filmmaker controls the means of representation and can silence or keep subjects from representing themselves. This can turn subjects into “victims” to be gazed upon and made a spectacle of (Winston 1988) and often has in documentary and news media practices. There is a real fear, then, that by giving an audience more power over how they engage with the stories of subjects or the subject matter, it will further intensify these unequal relationships and maintain a hierarchical distribution of power. As I discuss in the next section, some scholars are hopeful for a more collaborative future for digital creation that does not replicate exploitative documentary practices.

Additionally, the ability for someone to engage with digital documentaries trying to intervene into social problems and issues can shift digital documentaries from being only a “discourse of sobriety” with world transforming potential (Nichols 1991: 3) to also a discourse of sentimentality with the power to change an individual’s thoughts about themselves and their relationships to other people in society. This change brings with it a host of assumptions about who or what type of people get to receive this education and whom or whose lives serve as the content of it. I analyze this at length in chapter one of my dissertation which looks at how VR documentaries are said to create empathy in users, but we will see how users are empowered to use their own critical thinking or engage with the subject matter in various ways through the different roles they inhabit throughout each chapter. One of the uses brought about by this change is, that by centralizing the user’s experience and positioning the user as an active
participant, digital documentaries have the opportunity to make visible and experiential the
distance between user and subject matter, something left unseen in many—though not all—linear
film and video documentaries. This aids in making visible the mediated and potentially
surveillant relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience and reveals that this
relationship is and always was a technological construct. My dissertation thus joins
contemporary discussions of how identities and politics are shaped by being online,
interconnected, and (theoretically) global, questioning the “new” of new media and showing how
even works utilizing the affordances of newer technologies draw on earlier representations and
tropes of subjects and subject matter.

**Continuities with and Divergences from Documentary**

Digital documentaries are seen as part of an emerging and not-yet-solidified media practice. Kate
Nash, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes (2014) phrase this perspective well when they
state that “as new media technologies and new forms of communication emerge, contemporary
documentary makers are engaging in a continual process of reworking the documentary project”
(1). The use of digital technologies to create nonfiction new media works has occasioned the
rethinking of documentary, as Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes suggest, and over the last decade
scholars have started to articulate how digital documentaries are formally and institutionally
different from linear film and video documentaries. No longer are audience members considered
passive, for instance, when engaging with digital documentaries. Indeed, Patricia Aufderheide
(2015) states many scholars see in digital documentaries a “profound break with the passive
experience of media reception” (71) because they require some level of input from a user more
so than pushing play and sitting back to watch a film or video created through the vision of
Digital documentaries have been suggested to decentralize the creators’ control of the work and accord more agency to users and to even shift the agency from human creators or audiences to algorithms (Uricchio 2017), where digital documentaries require a collaboration between human and machine in order to make meaning (Hight 2017). As many documentary and new media scholars have noted, increasing a documentary user’s agency might come at expense of the agency of the documentary subject, as the user’s experience of engaging with a digital documentary is prioritized over the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the subject’s lives or the subject matter (Nash 2018), potentially turning the user into an “ironic spectator” who ends up re-focused back on their own experience and engagement (Chouliaraki 2013).

Sandra Gaudenzi (2013) was one of the first to put in writing the argument that digital documentaries are “not the extension of linear documentary into digital media” but “something else” (72). For Gaudenzi, this “something else” is a “living” non-fixed media form whose meaning is generated collaboratively and continuously as the coming together of technology, subject matter, creator/s, and audience (ibid). Importantly, Tom Perlmutter also declared digital documentaries to be a “new art form” (Aufderheide 2015). Perlmutter was head of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) from 2007-2013 and is often credited with taking a Canadian public institution that “was fading into irrelevance” and transforming it into “a global new-media player” by digitizing the NFB’s documentary film catalogue and heavily investing in the creation of new media, digital documentaries (Taylor 2013). In 2014, he penned “The Interactive Documentary: A Transformative Art Form” which articulates his vision for digital documentaries to immerse users, wrestle creative control from linear documentary and film creators, and simultaneously aggregate and present important information to users. He argues for
interactive works as “the artwork of our age,” ones that can, he hopes, create a “collective consciousness.” His article carves out some of the defining features of digital documentaries while also playing into utopian hopes of Web 2.0 where greater participation means greater voice and political agency, bringing people together through social media is akin to or even better than bringing people together offline, and technological progress precipitates radical social change. The lack of stability for the form and hope for the future have structured how many scholars have theorized and analyzed digital documentaries thus far. On the one hand, because this is a form that requires at least some engagement on the part of the user—even if that means clicking the next video in a sequence—it has been thought that the audience can be “doers” who are more easily engaged in activism, as Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi (2012: 132) suggest. It is meaningful, however, that in the same article Aston and Gaudenzi caution that the creator’s control is “not necessarily being replaced by a logic of shared participation” (132). Just because people are able to engage differently than they did with linear film and video documentaries, that does not mean that filmmakers, coders, and producers have ceded control. Instead, along with creators and the technology, the audience too has a part of play in what Stefano Odorico (2011) calls the “construction of ‘reality’” (243) and what Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) call the “negotiation of ‘reality’” (126). The quotation marks around reality in both quotes is indicative of this too being part of the debate, where scholas are asking, what kinds of meanings can these works suggest through the fracturing of authorship and what kinds of realities are produced through plural, co-created meanings?

In addition to these negotiations between who (or what) creates or controls meaning in a digital documentary, scholars have turned to thinking about how these works are useful in and of themselves for what they can do in the world. Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico (2018) posit the
use of digital documentaries as an “interventionist form” (2), where digital documentaries become a method to intervene into specific communities and spaces, and for means of knowledge creation, which harkens back to Third Cinema’s use documentary film for decolonial protest and the NFB’s 1967-80 Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle program.⁶ There is hope for digital documentaries to be able to further the promise of communal collaboration and co-creation through capitalizing on the movement away from a singular authorial point of view (Gaudenzi 2017: 121) and potentially putting power into the hands of marginalized communities to use these technologies to have more determining power over their own narratives and social changes they want to see (Rose 2017, Aston and Odorico 2018, Zimmerman and De Michiel 2018). As Zimmerman and De Michiel (2018) argue with their concept open space new media documentary, “documentary is no longer exclusively representational; instead, it constitutes one element within a larger media practice that expands the public commons” (xi). This move away from documentary as a representational form suggests the need to see these works as about the collaborative process of creation rather than distribution or exhibition of the finished product (Aston, Gaudenzi, and Rose 2017).

This dissertation is attentive to the collaborative nature of the subset of digital documentaries being focused on, especially in how they are often co-productions between creators and different types of public and private organizations but argues against dismissing analysis of digital documentaries as representational vehicles. The relationship between content and form in digital documentaries is communicative and one might miss the uses and limitations of a certain kind of intervention by overlooking these works as more-or-less finished products. Additionally, it matters how users interact with the works; not every interface has the same set of affordances. Users understand and approach a social media messenger-based project differently
than a simulation game, for instance, and how users engage with the interfaces of different works will matter to the meaning they can generate and how they suggest users operate in the world post-engagement. While many argue for seeing these works as a new form, what I have found is that they offer many ties to the legacy of the documentary traditions, especially in their content and how it is enabled by the formal properties of each work. What this dissertation additionally helps to pinpoint is how aesthetics and logics of surveillance are a part of many digital documentaries, which, I argue, can help us continue to see and understand the relationship between documentary and surveillance, even beyond the obvious relationship between ethnographic and observational filmmaking styles to voyeurism or the state’s interest in classification, monitoring, and regulation of people.

Many scholars do still draw on documentary theorizations and the traditions of documentary to think through digital nonfiction, and my work adds to this scholarship. Ersan Ocak (2014) and Kate Nash (2017) both point to a continuation of social and political intervention for interactive and digital documentaries, where viewers are situated as persuadable audiences and citizens with the power to become aware of an issue and effect change. The digital documentaries that I analyze are mostly not what would be considered activist works or coming from a tradition of anti-institutional media. Rather, they are mounting attempts to intervene into social problems and often doing so with the backing of public institutions or through content-determining platforms. Jon Dovey’s (2017) work on articulating the industrial base for digital documentaries is illuminating in this regard. As he notes, though digital documentaries have been part of major documentary and film festivals for about a decade, there is a lack of clear funding or institutional housing for digital documentary creation and exhibition. “With the notable exceptions of NFB and ARTE,” as Dovey states, “projects struggle to find champions or
budgets,” and this leads to an environment where knowledge about how to fund, create, and exhibit digital documentaries is “patchy, unreliable and inconsistent” (274).

While some digital documentaries are individually created, many are co-produced, as Dovey mentions, with state media institutions like Canada’s NFB and Franco-German media channel ARTE, two of the major consistent funders of the creation of digital documentaries. As the print platforms for news organizations like *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* were reduced, they too have turned to digital creation for other ways to investigate or tell a story or try to grow their online presence and digital audience. Through analyzing digital documentaries, we can also see how digital platforms, organizations, and companies are contributing to the creation of public service media and working to foster public debate. Creators release projects through large platforms like Steam or on messaging services like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger and technology companies like Alphabet, Mozilla, and the Open Data Institute co-create or fund digital documentaries, sometimes ones that ask questions about their own relationships to digital surveillance.

Because I situate these works as coming from institutions (not from people or groups, for instance, oppressed or marginalized within them), this dissertation explores a boundary of counter-surveillance that has remained undertheorized. Rather than disciplinary surveillance, where states impose surveillance on individuals and groups through surveillance from “above” and rather than resistive sousveillance, loosely theorized as a kind of counter-surveillance from “below” or “under,” through the projects that I analyze we can see institutions surveilling institutions for purposes of liberal reform and accountability. This type of counter-surveillance is dependent upon who creates these works, how they are distributed, and how users are positioned through direct address as I further articulate across the next sections.
Direct Address and User Participation

In positioning users through direct address, this subset of digital documentaries engages in a varied set of politics. As part of their politics, digital documentaries utilizing second-person address draw on and appropriate the direct address and methods of performative and participatory engagement from educational and propaganda films, interactive museum exhibits, and serious games. These films, games, and exhibits have all been used to uphold liberal governance and institutions, being used in schools, vocations, and/or militaries, and for purposes of training and education. While all have been conscripted into efforts to educate and train citizens in liberal democracy, in most cases, there have also been anti-institutional and anti-imperial resistances within these media, as well.

Educational and propaganda films are two documentary subgenres that aim to teach and even create behavior in specific groups of people. Educational films, in particular, were originally part of a socially progressive agenda to use the visual medium of film to engage viewers and construct appropriate behavior regarding a range of topics including health, citizenship, driving, and sexual education (Smith 1999, Orgeron et al. 2012). Many of these films incorporate direct address in the titles and the voiceover narration, prompting viewers to assess their own behavior against the actions of the films’ characters. One such film is You and Your Family (1946), a popular U.S. educational film that asks viewers how they would react when faced with situations like teen dances, bad table manners, and teens coming home late. While educational films often targeted specific groups and advocated norms around certain behaviors, state-created propaganda films have been used to galvanize a public towards a social issue, as
with *Housing Problems* (1935) in the UK, or to unite a national public against “common” enemies, as in the *Why We Fight* series (1942-45) in the U.S.

Other strains of revolutionary propaganda and agitprop filmmaking have, by contrast, sought more politically revolutionary ends. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, for instance, strived to use film to create “kinopravda” that would revolutionize spectators and work against the ideologically suspect films coming out of the U.S. and Western Europe. And the practitioners of Third Cinema similarly turned to documentary as a mode of anti-imperialist filmmaking practice. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1970/2021) would suggest, for instance, that creating and, crucially, exhibiting documentary films is an action with the power to turn entertainment spectators into participants in the decolonial project. They write of the power to create temporary time-and-space specific moments of liberation through film exhibition. The audience transformation, moving from a watcher to a doer, is something we see in scholarship on digital documentary, especially as other scholars too want to make this link back to Third Cinema.

Crucially, what seems missing in digital documentaries one interacts with individually is the second half of Solanas and Getino’s ideal use of documentary, where communally watching and discussing these films would create temporary spaces of liberation. Of course, there is hope that using digital documentaries as collaborative interventions into specific communities can have a similar liberatory and action-oriented impact, though those are not the projects that I analyze here. Because second-person address brings an individual user in, the projects I analyze draw on the attempt to educate and agitate users to action or self-knowledge but lack the specific group intervention that both pro-institution educational and anti-institution revolutionary filmmaking practices utilize. This missing targeted exhibition does blunt the political intervention and reform
efforts of the projects I analyze, where prioritizing the user’s experience ends up moving an individual’s thoughts and feelings at the expense of creating a space or moment for group action.

Interactive museum exhibits have a similar desire to engage groups and educate through participation, as we saw in my discussion of the Prisons Today exhibit in the beginning of this introduction. The type of address that digital documentaries borrow from museums is related to the changes that New Museology would bring starting in the 1970s, where there would be greater attention paid to the visitor experience, accessibility, and a reflexive rethinking of what museums are and what they should do (Ross 2004). Today, there are a range of ways in which museum-goers might be asked to engage with interactive exhibits, such as partaking in “hands-on” experiences, adopting a historical role, or comparing one’s own life experiences to those detailed at the museum. One goal for the incorporation of what are often called interactives into museums is to engage a younger, more media-oriented visitor. Beyond utilizing newer technologies or appealing to younger museum attendees, experience-based exhibits are thought of as potentially able to push back against what Andrea Witcomb (2003) calls “strong linear narratives,” those historical narratives controlled by the museum or a curator. While nonlinearity does not mean anti-imperial or anti-hegemonic (see Aarseth 1997, for example), in museum exhibits linearity often relates to teleological progress narratives and to “master narratives” of colonialism and imperialism, in particular (Witcomb 2003). In ways similar to how changes to documentary media have been discussed, in opening up meaning to museum visitors, the visitors become co-creators and the control of the exhibit curator or museum seemingly lessens, often with the goal of including more marginalized histories and experiences into museum spaces. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) argues that this shift in museum culture shows a shift in how public institutions like the museum teach democracy. Museums have changed from a “pedagogic” type
of learning which seeks to produce rational, liberal citizens to a “performative” type that incorporates the lived experiences and identities of those who have been impacted by the histories.

Similar to educational films geared toward liberal citizen-making, serious games first arose out of analogous institutional contexts aiming to use simulation games to train and educate in schools, the military, and other vocational and political sectors of society (Abt 1970). This is a broad category that can incorporate both a game like *America’s Army* (2002), a first-person shooter created by the U.S. Army to train and recruit soldiers, and the popular educational game *The Oregon Trail* (Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium 1971), where players act as 19th century settlers and make choices on their way across the U.S. Due to their institutional nature, serious games, like educational films, have been critiqued for an apparent inability to make meaning outside of institutional parameters, even when part of socially progressive agendas, as educational serious games often are (Bogost 2007). Due to this, scholars and game designers use other monikers as well like persuasive games and games for change. In these games, too, there is often a desire to challenge institutions and social norms. *Wired* magazine models how Somali pirates target ships to maximize profit in their game *Cutthroat Capitalism* (2009) challenging notions that Somali pirates are simply brutal, not business-minded, for instance, and *September 12th: A Toy World* (2010) models how an approach of killing “terrorists” creates more “terrorists,” pushing back against ideas of military success through the “war on terrorism.”

In a similar way as to how these films, exhibits, and games have been used both to support and to critique institutional norms, there are few unambiguous, uncomplicated positionings in digital documentaries. Some seek to complicate state or media narratives around
the experiences of displaced people or incarceration, while others seek to further socially progressive aspects of liberal democracy by, for instance, arguing for the need for stronger government control of the internet as a public utility. This is, however, what linear documentary has done, as well. By suggesting users are implicated in systemic issues and have a role to play, digital documentaries attempt to entangle individual users, rather than specific targeted groups, in learning about, caring for, or otherwise interacting with the subject matter. For the type of interaction we are dealing with here it is useful to turn to Clark C. Abt’s designation of serious games as simulation games that blend the knowledges of science and the humanities and “offer [players] a rich field for a risk-free, active exploration of serious intellectual and social problems” (1970: 13), a type of play that can also be called “critical play,” Mary Flanagan’s (2009) term for resistive play which allows for critique, examination, and rethinking of socio-political issues. This type of exploration and play is similarly incorporated in interactive museum exhibits and educational and propaganda films in attempts to provoke new ways of thinking about oneself or the world. And, this is a type of simulated exploration we can see being attempted in digital documentaries, as well, where users can roleplay and think through “serious intellectual and social problems,” though, it bears repeating, within ostensibly nonfiction media where it is not “risk-free” to play around with other people’s experiences or subject matter that might be distant from the user’s everyday life.

Control, Agency, and Surveillance in Digital Documentaries

While direct address suggests a need to account for how viewers and participants have been hailed and had their experiences regulated by media, thinking through this form of user address in digital works also means contending with the capabilities of networked technologies. Artists,
game designers, journalists, and documentarians respond to newer technologies and platforms for their work by exploiting, utilizing, and sometimes resisting the appeals of these new media technologies. Digital documentaries rely on the affordances of the internet, which includes networked connectivity and web- and platform-based applications. Some of the most important ideals of internet affordances are a potential for greater openness, transparency, and communication through networked connectivity (Marwick 2013). Though these appeals are often framed positively, Wendy Chun (2006) notes that newer digitally networked technologies are conceived of as operating across the seemingly opposing poles of freedom and control. These technologies are freeing in the sense that they appear to offer the ability to connect with others over vast distances and to transcend of bodily identity markers, while, at the same time, people fear these technologies as mechanisms of control and systems of surveillance over identity and behavior.

For documentary media scholars, these same ideals are sometimes broadly understood to connote positive, anti-authorial and anti-hegemonic meanings. For instance, scholarship on digital documentaries has focused on the local, community-related potential of these projects alongside the greater ability for polyphony and polyvocality when not tied to a single creator, one medium, or linear progression (Aston and Odorico 2018, Zimmerman and De Michiel 2018). The idea that linearity, however, is an authoritarian form of textual organization whereas nonlinearity is always politically radical has long been seen as deeply suspect (Aarseth 1997: 47). Further, new media studies has pointed to how the utopian desires for openness and social connection through Web 2.0 have been largely overtaken by concerns about the centralization of platforms (van Dijck 2013), and it has been reported that 57% of all internet traffic worldwide in 2021 flows through Big Tech companies (Apple, Amazon, Meta’s Facebook, Alphabet’s Google,
and Microsoft) and video streaming platform Netflix (Fitri 2022). That most web traffic flows through a small number of platforms, reflects “a culture dominated by commercial interest,” according to Alice Marwick (2013: 5), and a neoliberal ethics of deregulation and privatization. It is meaningful then that digital documentary creators are utilizing the affordances of Web 2.0, sometimes co-producing with tech companies (Alphabet’s Google News Lab would, especially, help further legacy print organizations’ transition to digital creation), and occasionally even releasing works through applications like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or Instagram, all owned by Meta.

In shifting some of the onus of meaning-making to the user and using second-person address to hail a user, digital documentaries use and exploit the central participatory nature of networked connectivity that Ulises Ali Mejias (2013) too identifies as part of a larger capitalist project: the network relies on our voluntary participation leading to our own exploitation and the furtherance of social inequalities. The logic underlying Web 2.0 platforms is such that users and creators have to deal with the “double-edged sword to empowerment” where user agency is twinned with platform agency (van Dijck and Poell 2013: 11). Both users and platforms have agency, and they end up constraining each other, neither becoming the dominant party. This same “double-edged” nature also characterizes the relationship between how users approach digital, internet-based works—with a sense of being involved and needing to interact—and how the works’ affordances enable them to do so. This creates a situation where we need to pay attention to the types of platforms and medium affordances creators utilize within their works.

Along with changes to how scholars approach common internet affordances, surveillance studies too has noted similar transitions to a contemporary surveillance that can be difficult to understand because much of it remains unseen, electronic, and digital (Lyon 1994). No longer is
the dominant theory of surveillance focused exclusively around targeted, normalizing, institutional power as theorized by Michel Foucault, rather, the rise of networked “big data” has moved scholarship towards theorizations of passive digital surveillance or dataveillance, where the focus is on the vast amount of digital data captured and stored to be used in pre-emptive, predictive, and speculative targeting by state entities and corporations, largely out of the control of individual people, citizens, or consumers (Andrejevic and Gates 2014). Cell phone and computer applications are recognized as modes of surveillance, where corporations engage in behavioral profiling by mining user data for profit, an economic system that Shoshana Zuboff (2015) terms surveillance capitalism.

The logics and aesthetics of surveillance impacts all topics within this dissertation and allow for a re-thinking of the relationship between documentary studies and surveillance studies. The links between the kind of watching and, even more importantly, the kind of investigating and “looking back” at power that is also a part of many video and film documentaries is underexplored in its relationship to surveillance. As Elizabeth Cowie (2015) suggests in introducing an anthology section on surveillance and documentary, surveillance is more than just looking or observing, it is type of watching with a goal, “observation but with the implication of vigilance, whether guarding a prison, or to be on one’s guard for oneself, or for a community as a night watchman” (559). This is a type of observation most associated with journalism, which can serve as a “fourth estate” holding powerful institutions accountable and is a type of observation that has been part of the public and educational function of documentary. What we can see in digital documentaries is a vigilant observation that moves beyond optical modes of watching towards the function of surveillance as a form of social control and discipline, where individuals and groups are tracked, monitored, or otherwise “watched.” Digital documentaries can and do
reveal surveillance to users and, as such, I argue that they perform counter-surveillance and that documentary media similarly illuminating the contours of state and institutional control and management do so as well.

Counter-surveillance turns a surveillant eye onto surveillance itself (Marx 2003: 384) and is often framed as a move that looks back or watches surveillance apparatuses and the people or institutions that control them. The experiential counter-surveillance in the digital documentaries I analyze has users roleplay as and simulate a type of counter-surveillance within these works and reveal their own implication within systems of surveillance. As previously discussed, surveillance is often theorized as split between theorizing surveillance from above, where one group seeks to control a person, group, or collective of people, and a countering of that surveillance from below, also sometimes called *sousveillance* to emphasize that it comes from *below* or *under* a surveillance that is usually organized oversight of specific populations. While surveillance from above is a disciplinary project that serves the interest of dominant social groups, surveillance from below involves those being surveilled attempting to take back some of the power of a controlling gaze by tactically resisting, disrupting, or destroying surveillance. The projects I analyze are, however, neither offering a gaze from above or from below, instead, I argue that the experiential counter-surveillance users engage in with these projects sits somewhere more ambiguously in the middle. This dissertation makes a case for needing to further theorize modes of counter-surveillance to account for different levels of media creation and types of surveillance and to recognize forms of vigilant, investigatory documentary observation as counter-surveillance, even when the word “surveillance” is not invoked in the content summary of the documentary.
For the type of second-person, institutional surveillance I am discussing, it is important to point out who is “watching the watchers,” in this case, journalists, documentarians, visual artists, coders, and game designers. Through the mode of second-person address, these groups, generally, do not aim to replicate the positionality of raced, classed, gendered, or otherwise marginalized groups most commonly controlled through state and corporate surveillance. I do analyze how some VR documentaries attempt this kind of positioning for greater user impact in my first chapter, but my first chapter also shows how users are positioned as witnesses to the suffering of and surveillance on displaced people and how the user’s own gaze and surveillant behavior can be revealed through one’s engagement with VR documentaries. Digital documentaries that reveal the life experiences and knowledges of people who are disproportionately impacted by surveillance do exist, but these works often adopt first- or third-person address. Utilizing second-person address limits the subject matter, as I will analyze especially in my third and fourth chapters, where the boundaries of state and corporate surveillance need to remain broad in order to incorporate the user’s experiences and feelings. And my second chapter will look at what happens when this generalized “you” misfires and a more specific audience fails to see their own experiences being taken into account when I analyze the discussion forums of the webdocumentary *Prison Valley*. The different projects I analyze will tell us something about how creators make arguments using users’ and players’ experiences of simulated roleplay to connect users to the subject matter and change their thoughts and feelings on systemic issues and their relationship to them.

Chapter Breakdown
Chapter One, “Voyeuristic Presence: User as Refugee and Witness,” explores 360-degree virtual reality (VR) documentaries created by the United Nations and news organizations that position users among displaced people and as witnesses to forced migration and its impacts. I argue that these works draw on the legacy of observational film and video by utilizing or resisting what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) terms an “aesthetic of objectivity” in placing users in roles as witnesses to or participants in the suffering of displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers. VR appeals to an idealized version of user immersion into an interactive scene where users can experience a feeling of presence in a virtual space (Steuer 1992). In VR documentaries, this feeling of presence is bolstered by the seeming creation of the 360-degree world where panoramic long takes of everyday spaces in refugee camps are stitched together and synched with atmospheric sound in order to present the illusion of objective reality and the idea that users can co-experience this alongside the (other) subjects of these VR documentaries. Users are also addressed as witnesses, as in Contrast VR’s *I am Rohingya* (Zahra Rasool 2017) when Jamalida Begum says “I want to talk to you” about her violent displacement from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

The first half of this chapter focuses on VR documentaries like The United Nation’s *Clouds Over Sidra* (Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman 2015), *The New York Times’ The Displaced* (Imraan Ismail and Ben C. Solomon 2015), and *I am Rohingya* that exploit these appeals of objective and immersive presence by virtually placing the user among displaced people and allowing “you” to watch and observe in a 360-degree observational video with naturalistic sound. While users are physically placed as among displaced people, these works also use first-person narration from a displaced person (often a woman or child) to address the user and use visual direct address to place the user as a witness. While the goal of the creators is to bring users
nearer to the subjects and generate empathy (and, often, aid) for the displaced subjects, these works end up enacting and revealing surveillance—the monitoring and classification of displaced people—while allowing users to experience something more akin to virtual tourism.

In order to explicate further how looking and watching operate in VR documentaries, this chapter compares these works to two that are critical of how displaced people are integrated into (or, more accurately, segregated from) European countries: *Berliner Morgenpost’s So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin/This is How Refugees Live in Berlin* (2016) and *The Guardian’s Limbo* (2016) (both co-produced by Google News Lab). Both works shift the address slightly so that instead of being witnesses to the suffering of others, users occupy perspectives as if they too are displaced. Analyzing these two works together and in comparison to the previous works reveals a critique of the surveillant European state gaze shared by both *So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin* and *Limbo*. By presenting the VR documentaries from the perspectives of displaced people, these news organizations push users to see the surveillance infrastructure surrounding displaced people and how the user might be implicated in surveillant behaviors and monitoring of displaced people both in their home communities and abroad.

Chapter Two, “Counter-Surveillant Constraint: User as Outsider,” looks at digital documentaries on incarceration that force users to roleplay from the perspective of an outsider, unfamiliar with the subject matter. These documentaries exaggerate this outsider positioning to clarify the often unspoken subject-audience relationship in documentary. Though mass incarceration is systemic in the United States, there are still many people who only “experience” the prison system through media consumption, creating what Michelle Brown (2009) calls a “distanced citizen, a penal spectator” who can “exercise exclusionary judgment from afar” (8). The projects in this chapter turn away from the common spectacle of the incarcerated person to
implicate the user in a reinscription of the people, places, and institutions seemingly on the outside of a prison as part of the carceral system.

French journalist David Dufresne and Canadian photographer Philippe Brault’s webdocumentary *Prison Valley: The Prison Industry* (2009) positions users as film noir-style investigators who watch interviews and read through documents on a quest to find the truth of Cañon City, Colorado, “a prison town,” according to *Prison Valley*’s website, “where even those living on the outside live on the inside.” Dutch-Israeli filmmaker Nirit Peled and Dutch digital designer Sara Kolster’s mobile phone messenger documentary *A Temporary Contact* (2017) entreats users to “join the ride” on a bus alongside the family and friends of inmates as they travel from New York City to five different prisons in Upstate New York. Once users start this journey through either WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, they receive real-time text and video updates about the journey, the prison visitations, and the return to New York City. By placing users in an ambiguous position as investigators of the towns around a series of prisons or as someone embarking on their first prison inmate visitation, users become part of the project but remain distanced from the stories or voices of the inmates themselves. Additionally, I examine the constraints of idealized online participation through the *Prison Valley* discussion forums as residents from Cañon City and neighboring towns speak back to the project and challenge its outsider perspective, which shows both the use of this project in revealing what is unseen in the local environment as well as the limitations of its ability to persuade or communicate its perspective depending on one’s positionality in the world outside of *Prison Valley*. *Prison Valley* and *A Temporary Contact* constrain the user’s perspective through second-person roleplay, but it is a productive constraint that shows the user that they too have a role to play as a documentary audience and in the U.S. carceral system.
Chapter Three, “Doing Surveillance: User as Agent,” focuses on dataveillance simulation games where players become surveillance agents who must target certain individuals to uncover or stop supposed crimes. Created in the wake of Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations of mass interlocking surveillance systems across the Global North, these simulation-based games realistically mimic everyday technologies and interfaces and position players as surveillance bureaucrats, aiding in ever-expanding targeted state surveillance of individuals. Not only do these games deal with how everyday technologies (phones, computers, applications, identity documents) are part of the apparatus of mass surveillance but users experience the bureaucratic systemization of surveillance to deconstruct criminalization, as these games suggest that “anyone” can be found guilty of something if they come into the prefabricated frame of suspicion. While players are directly complicit in surveillance in these fictional games, I argue that this is intended to create the feeling of being implicated in systemic surveillance in the Global North.

This chapter focuses on three games: *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), *Orwell* (Osmotic Studios, 2016), and *Project Perfect Citizen* (Bad Cop Studies, 2016), all of which position players as bureaucratic surveillance agents working at the behest of different state interests from electronic policing to border control. *Project Perfect Citizen* and *Orwell* are both reading-heavy storytelling games that ask users to go through potential suspects’ computer files and messages in order to find evidence of wrongdoing for the state; both also include specific critiques of the state as suspects speak back to the player and make it clear that they know they are being surveilled and so too is the player. Analysis of *Papers Please* offers a contrast to these games. Though *Papers Please* places players into what seems to be a position of power—a border agent tasked with deciding who enters a country—players are relatively low in the
bureaucratic hierarchy and the game consistently thwarts the player’s ability to make any government-altering heroic choices, allowing players to experience surveillance as a system that transcends individual agency. Fully opting out of what is quickly discovered to be a dehumanizing amount of surveillance would end one’s play of Papers Please initially, whereas Project Perfect Citizen and Orwell each have end points where players can choose to sacrifice their own avatar’s privacy and security in order to help bring down the system. Ultimately, players are configured as among the potential “victims” of state surveillance in these games as they utilize an appeal to the fear of ubiquitous surveillance and collapse the player’s almost non-existent in-game character into the player themselves. Along with analyzing the mechanics of the games, I turn to Let’s Plays to show how players need to use their own judgment and critical thinking to further their progress in these games and decide whether they will advance the aims of what is coded as an unjust surveillance state or try to resist the role of state agent.11

Chapter Four, “Seeing Double: User as Data,” analyzes digital documentaries that turn the individual user into the subject of the work and show the user how they are turned into data. Like previous chapters, this one analyzes how users are implicated in systems of surveillance, here, corporate surveillance algorithms underlying a website, application, or platform. Through experiential counter-surveillance, one’s own engagement with these projects should perform a “looking back” at algorithmic surveillance and the platforms and corporations that utilize it to profit off their users’ data. In focusing on the more corporate and capitalist side of surveillance, this chapter is also analyzing one of Web 2.0’s most tantalizing promises, that users can have a digital experience perfectly tailored to their unique tastes and interests.

By utilizing similar scripts and algorithms used by technology companies, these digital documentaries mimic how corporations monitor and profile the user. Users are tracked, profiled,
and shown evidence of their “data double” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000), a digital “you” based on things like browsing history, keystrokes or cursor movement, operating system configuration, and anything else that might generate data that corporations and advertisers can use to show specific content or sell specific goods to an individual user. What users see in this “data double” however, is not a digital version of themselves, rather, it is often an identity distortion, creating a similar split identification as we see in the other chapters. Users will be shown how they can be tracked and monitored online in the personalized web series Do Not Track (Brett Gaylor 2015), augmented reality documentary Stealing Ur Feelings (Noah Levenson 2019), and hypermedia essay How They Watch You (Nick Briz 2021); how user’s own desires for AI digital assistants leave us disempowered and at the mercy of algorithms in works like the Facebook Messenger “documentary account of the future of e-commerce” Alfred Premium (Joël Ronez, Pierre Corbinais, and Émilie F. Grenier 2019) and web-based game A Week with Wanda (Joe Derry Hall 2019). Users will even go through a digital assessment of their fitness to change the system from within in speculative algorithm Fairly Intelligent™ (A.M. Darke 2021).

What undergirds these projects is a logic similar to that employed by developers and game studios creating dataveillance simulation games, if users can see how they are a part of the corporate surveillance system, this will move users towards greater understanding and individual or collective action. These projects do seem to offer a break from linear documentaries of the past in their ability to incorporate individuals and their data as the subjects and subject matter. My analysis shows, however, that individual incorporation often blunts the critiques of the disproportionate harms that algorithmic surveillance has on marginalized people and communities. What I find as I analyze both dataveillance simulation games and personalized digital documentaries is that they need to make more general appeals to ubiquitous privacy when
allowing a generic user or player to roleplay as a surveillance agent or surveillance data. These
appeals to the ubiquity of surveillance as a threat to individual privacy end up, ironically,
broadening the subject matter in order to incorporate almost any individual who uses the internet.
In needing to show the user how they are implicated in surveillance, this prevents these projects
from fully elucidating how state and corporate surveillance currently works and results in
projects that warn about an even darker future for all if “we” do not step in to enact changes, in
the form of accountability for state surveillance and regulation of corporate surveillance.
Chapter One – Voyeuristic Presence: User as Refugee and Witness

In the early November 2016 launch of “The Daily 360,” The New York Times touted the ability of 360-degree virtual reality documentary videos to “offer a new way to experience the journalism of The New York Times” and to place users “at the center of the scene, allowing you to look left, right, up, down and behind” (“Introducing The Daily 360” 2016). Their first 360-degree video, embedded on this same introductory webpage is descriptively titled “In the Rubble of an Airstrike in Yemen.” This video places the user inside a destroyed rubble and debris-strewn reception hall in Sana, Yemen, where users learn that a funeral was being held when a Saudi Arabian airstrike mistakenly targeted the hall in October, killing more than one hundred funeral attendees. It is both shorter than the average 360-degree video at only one minute and ten seconds and simpler than most, comprised of only three shots. If users are unsure of how to approach this new type of video that requires either their physical movement (if wearing a head-mounted display) or effort to click and drag a video, halfway through the video cuts to a Yemeni man standing in the middle of the bombed-out reception hall, right under a hole in the ceiling, looking around. In fact, for about ten seconds of this video, users can watch him look “left, right, up, down and behind,” mirroring the limited capabilities of 360-degree virtual reality.

That The New York Times would launch their immersive journalism project with a video tele-transporting users to Yemen to witness the aftermath of an airstrike for which there is little additional context is important. “War and conflict”-related videos are the largest category of virtual reality documentary, showing a belief on the part of producers that this content is important enough to warrant focus but also interesting enough to engage a user.12 That this 360-degree video would offer the user both the ability to explore this destroyed reception hall visually while centering another person’s visual exploration halfway through the video is also
important. What we can see in this video is the main type of interaction for 360-degree virtual reality, the ability to look around a scene and feel as if one is alongside the video’s subjects. Here, one might feel positioned as if they too were in the same location as the Yemeni men surveying the damage in the video. 360-degree video borrows from a kind of fly-on-the-wall observational style of documentary but with a difference, the difference being that the user is ambiguously positioned as both a passive observer and as someone invited to interact, to control some of what is seen and how it is seen, to feel as if one occupies the same physical space as any other onscreen subjects of the work. It is this nexus, between visual exploration, control, and user participation, that this chapter further explores in relation to 360-degree virtual reality.

While “In the Rubble of an Airstrike in Yemen” gives users a small window into the physical devastation of an airstrike, it does not try to communicate a narrative about this particular event or tell users how to feel during this experience. That is reserved for longer 360-degree virtual reality (VR) documentaries, which present users with contained stories and experiences, that make arguments about what is important and why users should care about their subject matter. This chapter analyzes the interplay between how refugees are visualized in 360-degree VR documentaries and how users are positioned among groups and individual subjects, as if users themselves are refugees, while also being positioned as witnesses to the experiences of refugees.13 Refugee-focused VR videos are one of the largest subcategories of VR documentary and offer a window into how producers address the contemporary and ongoing refugee crises with virtual reality, a technology seen as still new and emerging.14 What we don’t see in The New York Times’ brief foray into VR that I began this chapter with, is what we will see in these longer, self-contained documentaries: how the producers construct ways to interpret their refugee subjects within readymade tropes of individuals in need of outside help and how producers can
centralize the user’s experience to show the user something about their own potentially surveillant behaviors.

At the end of 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (more commonly known as the UN Refugee Agency or UNHCR) counted 89.3 million forcibly displaced people, which includes people internally displaced within their countries of origin, as well as externally displaced refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless peoples. While refugee crises are, unfortunately, not new in the post-WWII period, international news media focus on refugees ramped up as a result of the Syrian Civil War where a majority of the population would end up fleeing or being displaced internally within Syria. In response, the United Nations, corporations, and news organizations would separately, and sometimes together, use VR technologies to produce short documentaries, exploiting a technology that was sold to them and their audiences as more immersive and more interactive, as better able to transport users across distance so that they could sit face-to-face with someone who had been violently displaced and hear their personal appeal for help. As Liisa Malkki (1996) notes, speechlessness and silence have been key to how refugees have been visually constructed in both humanitarian aid communications and news media. Refugees have been represented as “helpless victims [who] need protection, need someone to speak for them” (388). VR promises to let refugees speak for themselves and speak to “you,” as the user. If one can hear from a refugee or see and experience a refugee camp with one’s own eyes, this logic suggests that one would be moved to help.

In reality, 360-degree VR documentaries often became another vehicle for intensifying hierarchies between audiences in the Global North and subjects from the Global South. As my analysis in this chapter will suggest, these works were produced under a rhetoric of empathy and they use realist documentary aesthetics to create individuals as empathetic. In other words,
whereas empathy is theorized as a feeling generated by a reader, viewer, or user from engaging with another’s life experiences, what we see in many VR documentaries is that subjects are constructed as able-to-be-empathized-with, as young, vulnerable, depoliticized victims in need of saving. Latching onto concepts of interactive and participatory media, these VR projects hail users through the second-person “you” within the videos and in relevant secondary materials (accompanying articles, for example). They center the user’s experience as it is only individual users who are able to view or engage with 360-degree videos using individual headsets. In centering the user’s experience, these projects risk overshadowing the experiences on any on-screen subjects, and they do. On the one hand, we see varied experiences of refugees being collapsed into singular experiences and refugee subjects constructed to fit into representational tropes that do not trouble user-subject, us-them, here-there distinctions. On the other hand, producers of VR documentaries can make user centralization and the user’s experience more productive, challenging users to think about their own agency and role in engaging with these experiences. While VR deprioritizes the experiences of onscreen subjects in favor of the user’s experience, one of the key potential affordances of these VR documentaries is in implicating the user in modes of state surveillance and provoking the user towards self-questioning.

Most refugee-focused VR documentaries are journalistic and/or humanitarian endeavors, produced by organizations with a history of covering and addressing refugee crises over the past decades. That the United Nations or The Guardian, for example, should turn to new technologies and new media is not surprising given the UN’s need to raise funds for their initiatives and news media’s desire to secure continued readership amidst a decline in audiences receiving news from traditional print or even broadcast news. VR would seem like a way to expand one’s audience and, to recall the wording from The New York Times’ introduction of “The Daily 360,” offer “a
new way to experience” pressing world events. This turn towards VR allows us to question the affordances of this seemingly new medium and how it was utilized in these more mainstay humanitarian and journalistic endeavors. Along with this newer use of technology, are we also seeing new kinds of images and representational practices? Or do these works carry forward continuities from previous modes of representation that similarly silence the voices of refugees? What does it mean to position users, those able to take up or put down the experience, as and alongside refugees, asylum seekers, and/or displaced people?

In her own coming to terms with her documentary practices and how to negotiate questions of agency with her subjects, Mieke Bal (2015) challenges herself to take seriously the question, “what do documentaries document?”, finding that they document what she calls a “double relationality” between the documentary and the subjects and circumstances which are documented (125). Similar to Stella Bruzzi (2000) defining documentary as the coming together of subjects and the moment of filming, this kind of “relationality” forces us to think through relationships on- and off-camera alongside the text created through this negotiation. This chapter too takes seriously this question of relationality by thinking through the relationship between producer, subject, and user. What is often documented in refugee-focused 360-degree VR documentaries is how humanitarian and news organizations utilize the idea of empathy to create the user as a witness and as someone whose experience seeing as and near refugees should communicate evidence of a crisis or problem to be addressed. In calling to the user as “you,” this chapter argues that a split identification is created where the “you” becomes a protagonist at the same time that a distance is maintained from the “other” protagonists. Instead of being unintentional, this is a split identification that, in many ways, producers seem to desire. Producers want users to experience the situation as if refugees to gain empathy for the “other”
subjects and, to do this, they create situations where users can “put yourself in the place” or “walk in the shoes of” refugees in a seemingly more realistic way than other media by exploiting the effect of virtual reality “presence.” Organizations producing these works, however, also want users to remain agents who exist outside of these experiences who can potentially help to resolve the issues seen in these videos through policy changes, fundraising, raising awareness, and other forms of action and discussion. Because this insider-outsider split identification does not resolve, and, indeed, remains open and desired, it can lead to unintended and mixed outcomes. A user can become a witness to spectacles of distress, but one who is also a virtual tourist, fed stereotyped representations of what it means to be a refugee. Alternatively, this split can be exploited by creators to heighten a feeling of self-alienation and distance that can lead to reevaluating who or what is being watched and how.

Many of these works, from humanitarian organizations like the UN and news organizations like The New York Times rely on standard humanitarian tropes of vulnerable, innocent children to sell their audiences on caring about refugees and displaced people and sell them on continued engagement with their organizations. Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) reminds us that “humanitarianism has traditionally been founded on a theatrical arrangement that separates safe spectators from vulnerable others and communicates its moral message through the staging of spectacles of suffering” (27). Chouliaraki, here, levels a criticism at the kind of distance created between “spectators” and “others,” which can rely on the exploitation of certain groups for the entertainment of those who remain distant and “safe.” This is a criticism that could also be leveled at a medium where users are enticed into experiencing what others are going through by a mix of observation and the feeling of “presence” (elaborated on in the following section). These “safe spectators” that Chouliaraki identifies as an audience for humanitarian works are
also hailed by a contemporary journalism that seeks to report objectively while attempting to maintain broad appeal and unify people by “present[ing] a common reality” (Muhlmann 2008: 9; italics in original). This common reality resonates with documentary media, where rather than entering “a world” purported to be fictional, “we are offered access to the world” created through the idea of a “shared, historical construct” (Nichols 1991: 109). How this common reality is depicted, however, intensifies a binary, us/them dynamic, where the decisionmakers and those with agency from the Global North create images of a marginalized “them” that seems knowable only through stereotypical tropes of the innocent and/or resilient child, which is one particular construction of refugeeness exploited by both the United Nations and The New York Times.17 On the other hand, liberal and oppositional news organizations like The Guardian and Al Jazeera, both of which suggest their news is geared towards giving a voice to the voiceless, have used VR documentaries on refugees to critique government inaction and state surveillance. We can see this especially in works that move away from child subjects to focus on adults and their living situations in UNHCR-run refugee camps and government-sponsored dwellings in European cities.

While VR documentaries do center the experiences of their users, this chapter is interested in elaborating why this is and what kind of experiences or education this can create. I will start by discussing the relationship between VR, empathy, and distance, pointing to continuities between how the cultivation of an “empathetic imaginative identification,” where users should overcome a feeling of difference from another through empathy, is encouraged by creators of VR documentaries and is related to cultivating a liberal, sentimental education for users. This type of empathetic education often creates an us/them hierarchy that leaves liberal “citizens” from the Global North feeling safe and secure as they hear stories of suffering “others”
for personal, individual entertainment. As my analysis will show, these VR documentaries draw on a legacy of observational documentary techniques to construct or resist constructing a stereotyped version of what the creators see as an empathetic refugee in works from the United Nations and *The New York Times*. The empathetic refugee is often a depoliticized, decontextualized child or a woman who speaks directly to a viewer from a refugee camp; I critique this way of narrowly framing varied refugee experiences of displacement. My analysis will additionally turn to VR documentaries focused on the failures of integrating refugees into Europe, where, looking at projects from the *Berliner Morgenpost* and *The Guardian* we see dehumanizing aspects of non-welcoming cultures and surveillance, where refugees and asylum seekers engage in self-surveillance while dealing with state surveillance and surveillance from those in the Global North. This final section shows how users in the Global North can be implicated in a “domestic surveillance” that makes public the privates spaces of refugees that Lisa Nakamura (2020) finds in many VR documentaries where users take on roles of people of color, disabled people, and trans folx, but we will also see a resistive attention to state surveillance and how some VR documentaries offer ways to look back at and counter-surveil domestic and state surveillance.

**The Virtual Reality “Empathy Machine” and the Subject of Distance**

Writing about his experience interacting with *The New York Times’s The Displaced* (2015), business and technology writer Rick Broida (2015) shares what can be seen as an ideal response to VR documentaries. This 360-degree VR documentary positions users alongside three displaced youths as they go through typical days after fleeing violence. In his review, Broida relates, “I’m sure I’m not alone in feeling a bit inured to the plights of refugees—like they are
someone else’s faraway problem. After watching the movie in VR—or in other words, after traveling to these regions and seeing these children up close and personal—I’m moved. I want to help. Right. Now.” Broida’s response is premised on feeling distant from the violence that people are fleeing, and from those who are displaced, who are refugees or migrants fleeing political, economic, and/or climate-related conflicts. In the beginnings of the emergence of 360-degree consumer VR, the loudest voices from creators and the media championed what Broida seems to experience here, the ability for VR to not only transport users virtually but to make them feel for onscreen subjects. Many creators touted the empathy-generating potentials of this technology, including two of its most important early producers, Nonny de la Peña and Chris Milk, both of whom turned to VR in an attempt to escape the confines of their respective fields, journalism and video production.\textsuperscript{18} Immersive journalist de la Peña aimed to move beyond print-based journalism, suggesting that the VR user is “afforded unprecedented access to sights and sounds” (de la Peña et al. 2010: 292) and that VR can make users “feel something physical” and experiential in order to connect them to news stories, while still incorporating standard journalistic tenants of truth, objectivity, and ethics (de la Peña 2015).\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, Milk (2015) suggests he found a way to move beyond film and video, to “put all of you inside the frame” as opposed to looking at the frame or at a screen to experience others’ humanity. He famously termed VR “the ultimate empathy machine,” a claim which has resonated widely with creators, media reporters, and audiences even as it receives scholarly pushback.\textsuperscript{20} From these perspectives VR is a medium that can do what journalism and film does while also going beyond mere representation to encourage more investment and engagement from users. Broida’s experience of simulated travel across distances allows him to observe, to sit down with, and feel present in what are videos of actual people in places that would otherwise be hard for him to access. And
these appeals—of overcoming distance between people and places, of getting close to a subject to see more and know more—apparently work on Broida. Broida feels emotionally moved immediately after engaging with this work, a feeling that humanitarian organizations, news organizations, technology companies, and independent producers are eager to exploit through adopting this new technology. The appeals of VR, however, are not new and have never been able to be fully realized. Broida’s response shows the potential for the emotional power of VR while showing some of the dangers, that users of VR might be more easily sold a certain version of reality or stereotypes of someone else’s experience due to the seemingly enticing affordances of the medium. VR can bring together the look of realism, where real people are in real places going about their real lives, with the feeling that the user is right there alongside them.

VR offers the technologically mediated experience of bodily “presence” in a virtual environment (Steuer 1992: 75-76). With presence, it is suggested that users can feel as if they inhabit a place that they are not actually in. De la Peña (2017) modifies Steuer’s premise slightly to suggest that rather than users only experiencing presence, users experience a “duality of presence” (209), feeling present in a virtual scene while remaining aware that they are embodied in another physical location. That there is a duality here is important to consider in VR documentary, and especially those projects which seem to demand users carry their messages beyond the confines of a 360-degree video. Though long-promised, VR is still seen as an emerging medium, one that needs further differentiation based on whether a project uses 360-degree video cameras, volumetric, 3D capture technologies, or CGI (Murray 2016, Urrichio 2016, Rose 2018). The majority of VR documentaries created thus far utilize 360-degree cameras, likely due to how accessible this type of VR is (Urrichio 2016, Rose 2018). All that is required for someone to engage with a 360-degree video is a smartphone or a headset. Unlike the
more interactive varieties of VR, 360-degree video allows for an observation-heavy viewing experience, aided by the fact that this style involves multiple camera views stitched together to create a 360-degree panoramic view for the user. Devon Dolan and Michael Parets (2016) argue that while the user “takes the wheel” in VR where users talk to characters, pick up objects, and move around in a world, in 360-degree video the user becomes “a passenger in the storyteller’s world.” Though VR, broadly, promises the user agency and seems to offer a more direct form of contact with the subject/s or subject matter, users cannot interact with the environment and can only experience the subject matter through the creator’s visual representation in 360-degree video (Fisher 2017). Indeed, 360-degree video looks like other visual forms of documentary media like film, video, and photography, so when users approach this form, they are poised to bring their knowledge of the norms and operating procedures from other types of documentary media along with them.

De la Peña’s 2012 release of the CGI-based VR documentary project *Hunger in America* augured in a brief age of proliferation of nonfiction VR. From about 2012-2018, companies and organizations small and large forwarded the idea of creating empathy for others through this new and emerging technology, while desiring to meet fundraising and financial goals. The United Nations would raise 3.8 billion dollars at the Third International Humanitarian Appeal for Syria in Kuwait in 2015 which they’ve linked to showing donors their VR documentary, *Clouds Over Sidra* (analyzed here in a later section). This fundraising success would inspire the UN to create further VR works to see if they could also be “a tool for peace-building,” according to Gabo Arora, the Creative Director for United Nations Virtual Realty (Watercutter 2016). Differently, news organizations would turn to VR in an attempt to reinvigorate their businesses in light of the industry’s decline, where it was thought that digital media and new technologies could increase
audience engagement and generate ad revenue (Usher 2014). This period of intense creation of 360-degree videos peaked in 2016 and we have now entered a “period of rationalisation” where early adopters of VR have given way to serious creators who continue to define and control the medium (Bevan et al. 2019). Though some of the largest adopters and producers of VR have stopped creating with 360-degree VR, it is still worth looking at the hundreds of projects generated through this period of nonfiction VR creation. These videos range from brief forays into extreme sports like mountain climbing, skiing, or skydiving or bringing VR users face-to-face with wild animals to self-contained short documentaries with a distinct perspective, narrative, and message about our shared world.

It is especially noteworthy that the United Nations, Google, and major news organizations with international reach all poured time, resources, and energy into developing self-contained 360-degree VR documentaries, often co-producing and working together to do so. Al Jazeera, the BBC, The Guardian, and The New York Times all developed their own VR wings (Contrast VR, BBC VR Hub, Guardian VR, and NYT VR, respectively). Google News Labs ventured into VR with the goal of “driv[ing] innovation in news” (as stated on their webpage), and Google, until the end of 2019, had been working on developing consumer VR headsets and platforms. The United Nations (as UNVR) collaborated with individuals, news organizations, NGO’s and tech companies to create VR works as part of their Sustainable Development Goals Action Campaign, a campaign that urges action, “no matter how great or small,” to implement the UN’s Agenda 2030 focused on sustainably eradicating global poverty and achieving world peace. While UNVR’s aims seem more specific in being linked to their SDGs, Gabo Arora also suggests that the UN started to develop VR “to get hip with the times” and out of a desire “to work with new influencers, new technologies, and in new ways to hit our target base of people”
(O’Neill 2005). Arora’s suggestion resonates with reasoning given by other organizations and points to a goal of tapping into something “new” to bolster an organization’s ongoing humanitarian or political work. Though working towards different ends, as I will discuss in later sections, the organizations that created the most VR documentaries during the height of this period all did so with the idea that they were experimenting with something “new” to create something “new,” a rhetoric of innovation that continues to characterize anything even remotely different in tech today. And, at the time, one of the things that seemed “new” about VR was its apparent ability to generate empathy in a more powerful way than other media.

When creators like Milk and de la Peña forward the idea that experiencing others’ stories will create an empathetic response in users, they are tapping into long-standing and ongoing conversations about liberal, humanistic modes of education. Though VR documentaries are positioned by their creators as new and different, they are duplicating the hierarchical relationship in other media like literature and documentary film and video, where the creators with the most resources can produce works that exploit other peoples’ pain and experiences for the use and pleasure of an audience. What we see in the content of some VR documentaries is that they aesthetically position users in a potentially surveillant way and construct empathetic refugees rather than opening up spaces to listen to the experiences of other people on their own terms. Contemporary discussions of empathy draw on a legacy of sympathy for others and the cultivation of sentimental feelings associated with Victorian education and reading practices (Burdett 2011). Philosophers Richard Rorty (1993) and Martha Nussbaum (1997) have both argued for the use of storytelling and liberal education to inculcate a correct attitude toward others “we” might otherwise reject as too foreign; where the “we” are the educated peoples of the Global North, like Rorty and Nussbaum. For Rorty, this attitude depends on creating a
sameness between an “us” and a “them,” for Nussbaum, it is about developing a sense of compassion and understanding of another and their needs. Jane Lydon (2016) describes this type of empathy, where readers and viewers identify with an “other” by overcoming supposed differences, as “empathetic imaginative identification” (5). This empathetic imaginative identification has been critiqued for its explicit and implicit views of how an educated, liberal elite are positioned as readers and viewers, against another broad group of unenlightened, downtrodden folks who lack the same security and sympathy that their opposites seem to possess (as Rorty suggests) and who should provide “endless stocks of sad and sentimental stories” (Slaughter 2009: 105). This creates an uncomplicated monolith of both audiences and subjects, something I seek to question. While empathy as Western benevolence has been critiqued for decades, that has not stopped VR producers from replicating the same kind of logics in what stories they choose to tell and how they choose to tell them.

Media scholars too have critiqued this basic view of empathy as always positive and desirable, complicating the idea that one experiences empathy by simply seeing through another’s eyes or seeming to inhabit a body like theirs in VR documentaries. The scholarship published on refugee-focused VR documentaries shows both the desire for empathy and questions over potential ethical risks. Lisa Nakamura (2020) is the most stringent in her critique of VR documentaries, which she labels “virtuous VR.” Nakamura argues that appeals to empathy in these works are in service of an attempt to rehabilitate the image of tech companies like Meta and Alphabet (parent companies of Facebook and Google, respectively) without leading to any structural change in the lives of the populations that they exploit. And she does see these “virtuous VR” documentaries like Clouds Over Sidra as highly exploitative, where “‘seeing as’ a refugee, a Black man living in the Jim Crow south, or a prisoner in solitary confinement, lets the
user have it both ways – immersed in virtue as well as pleasurable pain” (53). Janet Murray (2016), Joshua Fisher (2017), and Kors et al. (2018) are also critical of the technological and storytelling ability of current VR technology and, especially, 360-degree VR documentaries’ ability to create empathetic experiences, but they leave room for the future creation of a kind of true or real empathy. As Murray states in her prescriptive article “Not a Film and Not an Empathy Machine,” “Empathy in great literature or journalism comes from well-chosen and highly specific stories, insightful interpretation, and strong compositional skills within a mature medium of communication. A VR headset is not a mature medium—it is only a platform, and an unstable and uncomfortable one at that.” For these scholars, empathy is an as-yet-unrealized goal where the “uncomfortable” nature of many of these early VR works centers on the inability to interact with the environment and the limited visual interaction they do enable. The real issue here is not that users and viewers of media can never or should never experience sympathy, compassion, anxiety, pleasure, or other feelings when interacting with, reading through, or viewing media, rather, it is in fixing a user’s position in a virtual space as always related to empathy, constructing onscreen subjects as stereotyped individuals deserving of this empathy, and suggesting that all forms of being placed near a group or individual experiencing a traumatic situation produce empathy.

While the ability to imagine an “other” as a human is something common to literary, photographic, and filmic media, the experiential aspect of VR documentaries is what makes this medium seem as if it could be better at fostering empathy. The experiential aspect of VR, however, brings its own risks, as VR attempts to create a closer relationship between subject and user by placing users visually in an environment and seeming to collapse the difference between user and subject through pretending to collapse the physical distance between them. The
experiential aspects of VR documentaries risk falsely conflating user’s and subject’s experiences (Gregory 2016, Nash 2018), creating an “improper distance” between the user and the subject (Nash 2018: 120). These calls for and against empathy are tied directly to the relationship between those producing VR documentaries, those whose experiences are centralized as the “content,” and users who watch, interact with, or otherwise engage with these works. The experiential gaps that we saw in Nussbaum and Rorty’s discussions of empathy are gaps that documentary media, broadly, still struggles with, as many documentarians make works focused on subjects from groups of which they are not a part and subject matter for which they lack experience. Though there is no critical consensus on exactly what makes an ethical documentary nor are there a set of institutional standards for documentary filmmakers to draw on like there are in journalism (Aufderheide, Jaszi, and Chandra 2009), a fact also true of those working in VR or interactive digital media (Rose 2020), documentary studies has a long history of questioning the ethics of, as Bill Nichols (2017) puts it, “What do we do with people when we make a documentary?” (31). One of the implication of Nichols’ question here is that media representations can do things to and with their subjects that are exploitative. Indeed, there is hope that by lessening the control of one central author of a work and working collaboratively, documentaries utilizing new media have a chance to give subjects more agency and voice in the process of meaning-making. 360-degree VR does not, however, challenge authorial control, rather it risks making users feel present in a more tightly controlled “reality” than one might feel just watching a linear, non-3D documentary.

Works intending to create empathy for those in distress often replicate the distinction between us/them or “safe spectators” and “vulnerable others,” especially in humanitarian works intending to aid those in need (Chouliaraki 2013). Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) argues that we are
living in an age of post-humanitarianism, where the collapse between the experience of the “other” and that of a spectator is facilitated by the convergence in humanitarian campaigns of appeals to the public good and those to private emotions. She analyzes the immersive potential of new media to draw in and engage users, suggesting that even more so than the literature and news reports that Nussbaum and Rorty refer to, digital new media texts can “rende[r] the West both the actor and spectator of its own performance,” rather than allow people from oppressed and marginalized groups to speak or control their own image, Chouliaraki has found that digital media allows instead for a “a narcissistic indulgence in the authenticity of the self” (18). Works that hail individual users to engage emotionally carry the risk of overshadowing subjects and important issues as users gain a personalized feeling of self-empowerment, of the sort that Nakamura finds with “virtuous VR.” Chouliaraki calls this the creation of an “improper distance” between subject and user, one that potentially creates an “ironic spectatorship,” where though a text aims to focus on a distant “other,” it, ironically, ends up centering back on the spectator and their own engagement. Pamela Scorzin (2010) adds concerns related to migration-focused media and the creation of a hierarchical relationship between “them, the others, and us” where the “us” part of the hierarchy has “the power and tools to create and control images” and “the others”/the “them” remain “powerless and passive objects of that fatal image-taking process” (105). Here, we can see “improper distance” in the concerns of one side having more agency and control at the expense of the other, while simultaneously being told that engaging with this media is for the public good of generating benevolent empathy for the “powerless and passive” peoples around the world. The potential for a hierarchical relationship between subjects and users needs to be considered with an emerging medium that promises agency to users and an ability for users to enter and be a part of what is in the frame rather than just watch from the
outside. These us/them and safe/vulnerable distinctions tap into what Luc Boltanski (1999), drawing on Hannah Arendt, calls a “politics of pity,” which relies on maintaining a distance between the group suffering violence and those watching it. The pity, the empathy, the empathetic imaginative identification involved only ever goes one way and solidifies distinctions between groups, rather than troubling them. VR, in all forms, often attempts to overcome these distinctions through overcoming distance, as if distance, and not structural inequalities, were the root of the problem.

Not all creators unknowing replicate this framework, as some media producers are similarly addressing questions of who gets to be in the frame and who gets to control the frame. Zahra Rasool (2018), Editorial Lead of Al Jazeera’s AJ Contrast, for instance, questions whose voices are included before and during the production of these types of immersive documentaries. She also finds that there is an audience/subject gap in most documentary VR projects that are developed and undertaken where the projects are created for a white audience in the Global North though they usually take place in so-called “developing countries” and focus on experiences of people of color. It should be noted that Rasool states that AJ Contrast is working to overcome this audience/subject gap in their own virtual and augmented reality documentary projects (two of her projects are analyzed in the next section). Sonya Childress (2017), Firelight Media’s Director of Partnerships and Engagement, has expressed similar concerns focused specifically on the desire for empathy in relation to this audience/subject gap.26 Childress suggests that underpinning the desire to create empathy is “the assumption that subjects of documentary films are so foreign to the audience that they must be transported into the world of this person or culture in order to empathize with their plight,” something that Richard Rorty advocates for and that one can also read into Rick Broida’s reaction to *The Displaced* from the
beginning of this section. Childress calls this a kind of “othering” that “is fraught with old notions of the colonial gaze” where subjects need to be represented as “less foreign, less threatening, and […] more relatable to white Americans.” Taking into account what Rasool and Childress are arguing against means being critical of the desire to create situations where certain groups are called to experience “empathy” towards other groups and individuals. In framing VR as an “empathy machine” or for empathy, does this not continue to exacerbate an audience/subject gap, positioning the subjects as always foreign to the potential user? Alternatively, how are subjects made more relatable and less foreign in order to guarantee an empathetic response from a Global North audience? These questions are especially germane to refugee-focused works from the United Nations and The New York Times, which are more actively engaged in the push to create an empathetic imaginative identification between user and subject and, thereby, end up constructing empathetic individuals with whom users should identify. Not all refugee-focused VR documentaries attempt to create empathy, necessarily. How, then, do these works utilize presence for different purposes and ends? Rasool’s own refugee-focused works for Al Jazeera’s AJ Contrast are one site we can turn to in order to analyze anti-empathetic uses of this type of VR that try to implicate users in a political call to action on behalf of the subjects and use presence in a way to bring users face-to-face with the failures of governments to provide protection, care, and adequate housing to people fleeing from violence.

Beyond the hierarchy that VR can create between users and subjects, when users are visually dropped someplace and positioned near others they cannot interact with, this can create a feeling of voyeurism. Users can watch, watch what they what, and do so for their own pleasure or edification, like tourists. Kate Nash (2018) and Mandy Rose (2018) are both critical of how
visual practices and user positioning in VR documentaries can intensify this voyeuristic relationship. Nash builds on Roger Silverstone’s (2007) concept of proper distance and Chouliaraki’s concept of ironic spectatorship to locate these risks in VR documentaries and, specifically, those moments where users become more like tourists, prioritizing their own experiences of presence in a space that one can visually explore over hearing from or learning from the subject/s of the work. She cites here the well-known moment in the United Nations’ *Clouds Over Sidra* where users are positioned face-to-face with the subject, 12-year-old Syrian refugee Sidra. During this seeming face-to-face encounter, Nash argues that users simultaneously have the option to listen to Sidra or visually explore the space, turning away from her in the process (128). In her work, Mandy Rose (2018) places 360-degree videos within the longer history of sight and visual practices. Given the visual opportunities promised a user versus the limited affordances in 360-degree video (look/not look; or “left, right, up, down and behind” to recall “In the Rubble of an Airstrike in Yemen”), Rose argues that these works can have a “surveillance logic” to them, where the user appears to be in the scene “invisibly looking on at people from the social world” (140), in a way that is reminiscent of panoptic viewing. John Gilliom and Torin Monahan (2013) remind us that surveillance is “not just looking around” (131); instead, surveillance is a type of biopolitical and necropolitical power used to manage and control the lives and deaths of individuals and groups. The surveillance logic in 360-degree VR documentaries translates not just to looking around, as Rose suggests, or not just voyeurism, but also to exploitation of the subjects through a potential duplication of a surveillant gaze that is afforded through the effect of presence. Here, this gaze is one that is searching (and finding) refugees to empathize with in *Clouds Over Sidra* and *The Displaced* and looking for liberal
values and “true” evidence-based data from refugees and asylum seekers in European countries in *So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin* and *Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum*.

Beyond exploiting subjects for the understanding and entertainment of a user, 360-degree VR documentaries on refugees, especially, show the effects of surveillance while allowing for the potential of duplicating the classificatory, controlling gaze of the state. Myria Georgiou (2018) calls this type of gaze, often leveled indiscriminately at those who otherwise might be labeled “migrants,” a kind of “bordering power” (46). In Georgiou’s conception of bordering power, we see claims similar to Scorzin’s about the creation of a “hierarchical ordering of Europeans’ and migrants’ humanity that subjects migrants to danger, controlled mobility, and conditional recognition” (46). As explored in the next section, part of this “conditional recognition” is related to the creation and utilization of stereotypes for whom one can empathize with and how this empathy can be achieved. As is also a function of bordering power, refugees are subject to surveillance, especially when spatially segregated into refugee camps. These are camps which Liisa Malkki (1995) points out became “a productive device of power” in the post-WW2 period when refugees started to be considered less of a military “problem” and more of a social and humanitarian one (500). So, not only is there a risk that the user’s own experience and engagement is privileged over that of the subject in humanitarian works, but there is a further risk that the user is positioned to duplicate a classificatory state or a non- or intergovernmental organization gaze onto the subjects leaving organizational agency unchallenged and disempowering the people at the center of these videos. By bringing together issues of looking, agency, access, constraint, and power, we can question how much this type of VR duplicates surveillance and control over disempowered populations but, also, how much it reveals and
forwards a critique of “surveillance logic” and power dynamics within refugee camps in Jordan and Bangladesh and corollary modes of housing of housing in Germany and the UK.

**Creating Empathetic Refugees and Empowering Users as Voyeurs of and Witnesses to Distress**

While VR technology has progressed in recent years, it is hardly a new phenomenon for people to come to know refugees and suffering, distant “others” through visual representations. VR technologies and imaging practices enter into a longer history of documentary photography, film, and video representations. Though there is a long history of visually imaging the “other,” there might not necessarily be a giant upheaval in representation strategies. Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (2015) point out, for example, that humanitarian photography has remained static over the past century. Human rights organizations and campaigns deploy what they call “tried-and-true tropes” of suffering victims and/or resilient aid recipients (16). Documentary media too has partaken in a history of representing subjects as victims, which can especially happen when there is a power differential between who is filming and who is being filmed. Brian Winston (1988), for instance, has famously suggested, “the victim of society is ready and waiting to be the media’s ‘victim’ too” (764) and though Winston suggested the need for greater efforts to define consent, the type of social problem documentary he is writing about remains a staple of contemporary documentary output.

Remaining cognizant of how contemporary digital documentaries might replicate these visual tropes is important, so too is being aware of the representational history of refugees, in particular. Liisa Malkki (1996) argues that images of refugees have operated as a “singularly translatable and mobile mode of knowledge” over other forms of representation and that
equating images of with knowledge about refugees has been spurred on by a “vigorous, transnational, largely philanthropic traffic in images and visual signs of refugeeness” (386). “Images ‘go before’” refugees, as WJT Mitchell suggests (2010) and often become the first form of knowledge that one has about refugees, having the effect of creating “stereotypes, search templates, tales of classification, and patterns of recognition” (14). Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s conception of the order of appearance, Philip Nyers (2006) determines that these stereotypical and classificatory visual representations of refugees often turn them into a kind of anti-citizen. Refugees are characterized through tropes of “speechlessness, invisibility, passivity” (xiv), all qualities that exist in opposition to the citizen, who is visible, active, and capable of politically meaningful speech. Even when visible, however, Myria Georgiou (2018) points to a problem with the type of visibility that refugees and migrants receive in news media where they are hyper-visible yet denied a political voice (47). Wrapped up in issues of voice and visibility, there is often a radical dehistoricization involved in photographic and filmic representations of refugees, where aid workers and the news media purposefully position refugees as nonpolitical (Burman 1994, Malkki 1996). This happens especially with child and woman refugees, the favored subjects of humanitarian representations of vulnerable peoples.

Though refugees are often the focus of humanitarian and news media representations, changes in technology have allowed for a seemingly more democratized image-making practice such that self-imaging practices are now more possible than in the past. For instance, Stefanie Van De Peer (2019), writing on the aesthetics of fiction films and documentaries on and by refugees from North Africa and Syria, argues for the use of cell phone videography as “a tool for subjective self-curation” and a way refugees can resist how they are typically framed (50). While some have recently swung toward looking at practices of self-curation and citizen journalism
with cell phones, the flip side of these changes is that non-refugee journalists, documentarians, and humanitarian organizations also exploit technological changes in their efforts to communicate information about and experiences of refugees, and this is what we can see in VR documentaries on refugees. Beyond the circulation of images and construction of refugees and refugeeeness through newspapers, printed communications from aid organizations, and film festivals, visual representations of refugees are now part of the larger digital image culture alongside other forms of factual and entertainment media. The same humanitarian and legacy media organizations might be in the forefront, but the spaces and platforms which utilize visual representations of refugees or construct refugeeeness have multiplied, leading both to continuities in how subjects and subject matter are shown and audiences are addressed as well as potentials for shifts and breaks from these standard documentary representations and audience roles.

In this section, I will analyze how the United Nations and The New York Times create constructions of refugeeeness, though differently and for different ends. To be a refugee in VR works created by the UN and The New York Times, one should be young, vulnerable, but ultimately resilient, offering a symbol of hope not only for the larger community from which you hail, but also potential users, policymakers, subscribers, or donors. By offering narrowly conscripted views of refugees, these organizations construct the appropriate look and behavior of a refugee so that they can be understood as empathetic. The lure of empathy is often paired with moments of direct address and a fleeting voiceover narration style that leaves these works open to the type of voyeuristic gaze that can read as “improper.”

The VR documentaries in this section, as most do, utilize a documentary “aesthetic of objectivity” to make the argument to users that what is shown and how it is shown is real and truthful. This term comes from the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha (1984, 1993), who criticizes how
filmmakers use filmic techniques that appear neutral and objective, without acknowledging how the constructed nature of authenticity imposes meaning onto the images and voices of those “captured,” as she suggests, within this framework. Trinh’s long-standing challenge to documentary asks for a serious reconsideration of how filmic techniques are used to create what seems to be a coherent “reality,” while masking what is often a biased viewpoint of a group to which the filmmaker themselves does not belong. Techniques that Trinh (1993) identifies as an “aesthetic of objectivity” (94) include the long take, wide-angle lens, hand-held camera, synchronized sound, omniscient commentary, and non-beautiful, anti-“aesthetic” images, techniques that are still a vital part of contemporary documentary media and that we see in many VR documentaries. 360-degree VR documentaries often stitch together panoramic long takes of the everyday living situations of subjects, a kind of panoramic imaging that draws from painting and photography (Urrichio 2016). The appropriate atmospheric sounds are also present alongside these panoramic images to make the video look, sound, and feel like the user is in a certain space. The only difference from Trinh’s list of techniques is that many VR documentaries do not include third person, omniscient narration, preferring direct address and voiceover narration from subjects themselves to lend added weight to the construction of seemingly authentic emplaced experiences for users. It should not be taken as a given, necessarily, that voiceover means greater control over the subject matter or how one is represented, especially when many VR documentaries on displaced people centralize children and teens.

These filmic techniques have a history of being seen as markers of authenticity and greater realism. André Bazin (1960), for instance, argues that photography and cinema are much nearer reality and more objective due to the mechanical nature of the camera. Bazin (1958) states that “the cinema is objectivity in time” (14), an idea he will extend into his discussion of the use
of deep focus which has a “more realistic” structure than montage or continuity editing as it “brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality” (35). Trinh’s challenge to documentary is a reminder that there are humans who come in to select these images, decide their duration, and edit them together into specific perspectives on the subject matter. Cameras may record whatever reality they are set in front of, but, as Trinh suggests, far too often documentarians use this as reasoning for a neutral objectivity that does not exist within the constructed realities and conditional truths of documentary media. If Bazin’s language looks familiar to us, it is because VR too is associated with bringing the user closer to people and situations with which they might otherwise be unfamiliar. We can see photorealistic, 360-degree VR tapping into modes of observational realism, where in a 360-degree panoramic image with synchronized sound, users can observe and hear people and their surroundings, often in long takes, and become lured into feeling that these images are authentic and real. This lure helps to naturalize the representations of refugeeness presented to users. The images in these works are constructed so that users feel a part of a “real” place, a place that hasn’t been “prettied up” for the user, full of people with sad stories seemingly in need of empathy. At the same time as these aesthetic choices are luring users into feeling a part of a place, and therefore better able to “walk in the shoes” of another person, panoramic long takes allow users agency over their ability to look, to look selectively, and to visually tour the experiences of others, an experience that is all too often conflated with a great understanding of an unnuanced reality. Location and scale are two of the biggest motivating factors in these “other”-focused works, where journalists, humanitarian aid workers, and documentary filmmakers are leaving their—often European or American—home countries to film in Syria, Yemen, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Jordan. The focus on location points to the appeal of “exotic” foreign places, an appeal that can move easily
from users being positioned as witnesses to users being given the opportunity to visually tour refugee camps.

Many humanitarian and news organizations use the “aesthetic of objectivity” to create empathetic responses in users, though often under the guise of giving refugees themselves a greater voice. This is true of how the United Nations used VR, for instance. The United Nations’ UNVR, one the largest former producers of VR documentaries, released twenty-one different short VR documentaries from 2015-2019. Most of their videos are co-productions and many are targeted for use in certain campaigns, like *Born into Exile* (2016), about the medical care of two pregnant women in Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, which was released for the United Nations Population Fund’s Safe Birth Even Here campaign. As an introduction to their collection of VR projects, the “VR Film” page on UNVR’s website states their desire to “us[e] the power of immersive storytelling to inspire viewers towards increased empathy, action and positive social change,” while also suggesting that VR is part of how the UN is working towards their 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is no SDG related to displaced people, in particular, though they are alluding to goal sixteen, which aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” While UNVR suggests its goal is to use VR to create change, it is unclear what this change would look like in this context, who is the changemaker (the subjects themselves? the users?) or how change should be accomplished, outside of inspiring specific UN policymakers to care or directing people to donate to fundraisers on the behalf of their subjects.

It might, indeed, be that their goal here is to inspire people who the UN sees as having power to care about the situation enough to advocate for specific policy changes or usages of
funds, given that UNVR’s target audience is those working for and on behalf of the UN, like
delegates, policymakers, and donors. On their “About” page, UNVR states the desire to “pus[h]
the bounds of empathy” and use VR to “amplify the voices of those who are often unheard” by
putting them into contact with others who have the power to change their lives. This does
initially suggest that subjects of their VR documentaries have no agency and situates them as at
the behest and control of delegates to the UN’s own organizations and others powerful enough to
make decisions that will directly impact the lives of refugees. Rather than being a way to
empower refugees, these VR documentaries offer ways to show donors where their funds are
going and make donors feel like their donations are necessary and impactful (CBC News 2015).

One can see how the UN’s ideal audience configuration plays out in their discussions of
how their VR documentaries circulate and are viewed. One of the last posts to UNVR’s website
relates the experience of delegates of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and
Development’s Temporary Working Group on Refugees and Migration being “invited” to “go
beyond normative discussions and to experience the individual stories, personal interests and
lived experiences of refugees” by visiting the “Refugee Realities” exhibition (UN SDG Action
Campaign 2017). This exhibition included photography and VR headsets equipped with Clouds
Over Sidra (Arora & Milk 2015), one of the most well-known VR documentaries, where users
tour Za’atari refugee camp guided by narration from a young girl, Sidra. That these specific
delegates and others like them are the primary audience for Clouds Over Sidra, is restated its co-
director and UNVR’s Creative Director Gabo Arora, who wants this and other VR videos to
“influence decision makers” and those who “control the lives and destinies of other people”
(O’Neill 2015). More broadly, Arora has also expressed a desire for UNVR to shift the “power
dynamic” between subjects and users: “what I find fascinating is the power dynamic between
Sidra and her audience. Usually she would have to compete for your attention. And now, because she associated [sic] with a new tech and something cool, people are running after her!” This language, where users are “running after” Sidra portrays her less as an empowered agent (indeed, Arora has already said that those engaging with this work are the ones who “control the lives” of its subjects), than it does a commodity, another “cool” thing that users could watch or even own. Rather than changing a power dynamic such that Sidra would have power over her voice, her story, her life, and her decisions, VR as discussed and described by UNVR can only magnify the difference between Sidra and someone who interacts with *Clouds Over Sidra*.

While UNVR makes gestures toward respecting the views and experiences of refugees, almost according them the status of political entities through suggesting their voices will part of the discussion, these VR documentaries cannot provide their subjects an actual “seat at the table” to co-determine their own fates as much as they can hope to sway UN delegates who do hold that power. The same article on the “Refugee Realities” exhibition, for instance, states that *Clouds Over Sidra* is many delegates “first ‘visit’ to a refugee camp,” one where the outcome is that “listening to Sidra’s voice was an important reminder of the hopes and desires of refugees, which are often lost in public narratives and may not always be present in policy spaces.” It is concerning to learn that those making policy decisions for the UN’s refugee programs lack knowledge of the living conditions and experiences of refugees. It is further concerning that one would walk away from *Clouds Over Sidra* thinking they had heard Sidra’s “voice” or that listening to a 12-year-old’s decontextualized, depoliticized “hopes and desires” in a nine-minute documentary could stand in for the views of all Syrian refugees. This is the power of the “aesthetic of objectivity,” where the filmic reality can ostensibly stand in (and perhaps even overshadow) the reality of meeting with people outside of a constructed media experience.
Clouds Over Sidra is UNVR’s first VR documentary and it is also the most well-traveled and most impactful. Shortly after its release in 2015, it had already spread to at least 40 countries and been translated into 15 languages (Bierend 2015). It has been shown to positive acclaim at film festivals, fundraising events, technology release parties, policy meetings, in classrooms and is available on the internet to view freely. This is a work that also convinced those inside and outside of the UN that VR is useful in fundraising efforts, as it reportedly doubled the number of expected donations at a fundraising event in Kuwait (Watercutter 2016). In his review, Mike Butcher (2015) summarizes the experience of engaging with this project through an Oculus Rift headset:

A young girl, a Syrian refugee, suddenly appears before you, sitting on the floor of a cramped room. She describes her family, and takes you on a journey through the refugee camp in which she lives. You sit beside her in her makeshift school classroom and watch children tramp through the muddy streets in the encampment. You feel as if you can smell the bread being baked in front of you at the camp’s bakery.

Butcher’s account shows the dual nature of positioning within this work. The work appeals to “you,” as someone who “sit[s] on the floor” with or near Sidra while also going “on a journey” and “watch[ing]” what children are doing in the camp; users act both as participants who are alongside Sidra and as witnesses to the images we are shown. Butcher’s article also contains a video of him wearing the headset, verbally narrating his experience, which he punctuates repeatedly with “incredible” and “amazing.” His expressions of surprise do not refer to anything related to Sidra’s life or her experience, rather, they refer to the technology’s ability to simulate presence so realistically.

Butcher is not alone in his experience, in fact, his article and video are reminiscent of how others respond to this work. In a short YouTube video released by the UN Human Rights Council (2016), delegates to Human Rights Council 33 are interviewed about engaging with
Clouds Over Sidra. All the delegates interviewed are women and all express being moved. One of the first interviewed suggests she “really felt I was one of them,” another references a scene where children rush and surround the camera in a circle, saying, “I want to take them with me.” In this desire to “take them with me” one can see an uncomfortable replication of racializing and gendered colonial logics that underpin the desire for European countries or the U.S. to save or rescue women and children. This narrative of rescue, where Sidra and the other children in Za’atari need outside help to be saved, reproduces similar logics that have been used as justification for or precursor to such political actions as the British colonization of India, French colonization of Algeria, and U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). Sidra herself does not, for instance, express a desire to keep or save certain users. As far as users can discern, Sidra is not shown getting a thrill out of experiencing VR in this way. Instead, we should see that Sidra’s translation into an empathetic refugee child is related to a politics that positions European and U.S. interests and agency above those of Syrians. Here, is where we can see an “improper distance” at work; the experience, desire, and worldview of the user is being prioritized above the attempt to put the user and the subject into contact or let the subject herself speak to her own needs and desires. Sidra becomes both the child one could save and the object (whose story) one can consume.

Many express awe, like Butcher, at the high-quality realism of Clouds Over Sidra, its use of panoramic long takes seeming to transport users to a place they otherwise would not be able to visit. These reactions point to a situation where the “viewer is momentarily fascinated by the virtual experience,” which Devon Dolan and Michael Parets (2016) suggest is indicative of an ongoing struggle to create engaging, long-lasting experiences. These responses also evidence Clouds Over Sidra’s successful ability to employ documentary’s “aesthetic of objectivity” and
VR’s presence to make users feel they are a part of Sidra’s world, urging users to see the refugee subjects as vulnerable others that users might “want to take” with them while also reeling in users through fascination with this new technology and new format for documentary realism. What we can see here also solidifies Sidra not as speaking agent, not just as child in need of a racializing and gendered form of saving, but also as a product. This expands the kind of ironic spectatorship that Chouliaraki conceptualizes as seemingly outward-facing works that Ironically end up allowing users to feel better about themselves to an enjoyment of technology and a reconfirmation of an us/them boundary along lines of consumers and consumable entertainment. As Lisa Nakamura (2020) suggests, users are “immersed in virtue” through these calls to empathize with the suffering of others, while being able to partake in “pleasurable pain” as a form of entertainment commodity (53). Sïdra’s voice is not “amplified” as Gabo Arora promises through this experience, it is overshadowed by the lure of a new technology and overshadowed by her construction as a child in need of saving by someone outside of Za’atari.

Even through treating a subject’s life as a consumable good, it seems that those who engage with this video are momentarily impacted, or, to recall Rick Broida’s viewing of The Displaced, users are “moved” and “want to help. Right. Now.” Paul Bloom (2016) questions the legitimacy of these immediate, in-the-moment reactions, pointing out that focusing on only specific individuals to create empathy can leave users “insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with” (9). Because the desire for empathy, as previously discussed, can involve taking someone or something that seems “foreign” and presenting it to readers and viewers as more like you than you realized, what Bloom points to is how empathy conceptualized as liberal sentimental education seems geared towards an intolerance of difference. Rather than respecting that one
might have different political, cultural, or religious practices or norms, these aspects of the lives of those in Za’atari refugee camp are not emphasized in favor of contextless experiences of eating together as a family, exercising, or playing soccer and video games, for instance. This is the use of illuminating the life and words of Sidra, the young Syrian refugee who is constructed as already empathetic. Much of this construction of Sidra as an empathetic individual is through her positioning as a vulnerable, depoliticized child, one whose central concerns are school, play, family, and missing Syria.

Sidra operates throughout this VR documentary as the user’s only base of knowledge and entry point into the refugee experience. *Clouds Over Sidra* opens with a wide, panoramic landscape shot of a desert strewn with mountains. Here users seem to be looking through one of Sidra’s memories, as Sidra narrates her family’s experience of walking for days through the Syrian steppe and her own loss of a kite that she hopes to regain, someday, back home. The complementary tones of nostalgia, loss, and hope for the future continue throughout as this first shot fades into a long shot of Sidra, sitting, ostensibly in her own bed, facing a camera that has been positioned at her height (see figure 1). Sidra speaks directly to users, telling us her name, her age, where she lived in Syria, and how long she has been in Za’atari refugee camp. The camera’s positioning, where we are at Sidra’s level, only a few feet away, allows us to make out her facial expressions and see her speaking. Here is where Gabo Arora might suggest we can see how VR changes the power dynamic between subjects and users, Sidra is telling us her story and we have to listen. Here is also where we can start to see the formation of an appeal to empathy where the first face we see, Sidra’s, becomes what Carl Plantinga (1999) calls the “scene of empathy.” Our face-to-face experience with Sidra is not only allowing us to see her responses to this situation but is also working to create a sympathetic response in users. Sidra is not overly
emotional here like the standard subjects of Plantinga’s analysis, instead, she is posited as an emotionally even-keeled narrator, whose rationality makes normal the emotional responses she does have (longing for home or having a laugh at the expense of out-of-shape men exercising, for example) and provides a contrast to the smiling, laughing children users will see as the documentary continues.

Figure 1. Screencapture from *Clouds Over Sidra*
Sidra introduces herself through direct address to the user.

After this initial face-to-face with Sidra, Sidra narrates some of her experiences and daily routines in the camp, and the focus shifts to shots of other children, looking directly at the camera, smiling, and to panoramic long shots of activities (baking bread, exercising, playing), giving the user more faces and children with whom to empathize while allowing users the freedom to look around and feel a part of these realistic, observational scenes. The use of children in these humanitarian aid campaigns has been critiqued for decades. McKenzie Wark (1995) bluntly states the value of children to these campaigns, saying, “dollar for dollar, pound for pound, adult refugees are nowhere near the value [of infants]. There’s always the suspicion
that they may be adulterated by impurities—such as politics” (40). As previously suggested, critiques by Burman (1994), Malkki (1996), and Nyers (2006) note how humanitarian representations depoliticize and dehistoricize refugees. This becomes especially true with representations of child refugees, given that Western conceptions of childhood often do not account for political being. “It is all too easy to strip children of their personhood,” suggests Malkki (2015), and in its place to imbue children “with a pure humanity and an unspoiled nature instead” (85). This removal of personhood, where children come to stand in as symbols, leaves children to become “innocent representatives of a common humanity, able to appeal—across the boundaries of race, culture, and nation—to an underlying, essential humanity many of us (at certain times) believe we all share” (Malkki 2015: 85). While there is this desire for child refugees to be politically neutral and located outside of a particular context or history, standing as representatives of a universal, essential humanity, Malkki reminds us that what is constructed as “universal” is itself local—it comes from certain countries (mainly in the Global North) during certain periods of time (after the creation of a historical childhood, for example).

As the subjects with whom we are asked to empathize, Sidra and the other children here who laugh, play, and go to school are represented in ways reminiscent of Erica Burman’s (1994) analysis of how aid organizations portray children “without markers of culture, history, or community,” as alone and therefore needing a kind of Western paternalism to step in save them (243). Sidra’s voiceover even relates, “sometimes I think we are the ones in charge,” suggesting an absence of adult authority which users are then invited to project themselves into, as those who might replace the lost authority figures. This is another aspect of empathetic imaginative identification, Western users come to identify themselves as nonpolitical adult figures who could rush in to save these children. For many users, in addition to the face-to-face scene with Sidra,
one of the more notable scenes is being surrounded by a group of smiling young children. Children’s laughs dominate the soundtrack above a somewhat melancholy musical score, as young girls and boys run in slow motion towards the camera/user from all sides, holding each other’s hands and surrounding the camera/user in a circle. After a few seconds, Sidra’s narration enters to state that “there are more kids in Za’atari than adults right now.” Instead of users “running after” Sidra as Arora suggests, this scene shows the opposite, children are literally “running after” and visibly surrounding the user, the potential UN delegate or donor who has the power to devote resources to Za’atari refugee camp. By placing the user within this obviously staged circle of smiling, laughing children, this scene visualizes how VR technology is conscripted to reiterate the kind of gendered and racializing power dynamic seen in earlier humanitarian appeals to aid that utilize specific individual children as the symbol of universal humanity. Ultimately, Clouds Over Sidra attempt at political neutrality renders invisible the realities of which countries and organizations are fighting a proxy war in Syria causing displacement of its citizens. The United Nation’s vague commitment to world peace cannot launch a meaningful political critique in this fight, as all the countries committing military power and aid to fighting for or against Bashar al-Assad’s regime are, indeed, UN member states who can levy power on different committees, including veto power as permanent members on the UN Security Council. That the UN itself cannot find a firm political ground to stand on in this work seems to result in them falling back on the “tried-and-true” tropes of humanitarian appeals.

Decontextualizing Sidra’s experiences leaves her positioned as a generalized innocent refugee child, rather than as a fully embodied subject able to voice her own experiences. Further, by placing users in realistic-looking and -sounding scenes alongside Sidra or watching over scenes in the camp, we see an appeal to the “put yourself in the place of” style of empathy. Users
being asked to empathize with a generalized experience of a child—one constructed as empathetic already—is also asking for a “gut” response that makes it hard to see how this work could increase understanding of the civil war in Syria or benefit refugees fleeing from violence in their cities in a substantial way or on a long-term basis. Instead, it taps into the kind of short-term “Right. Now.” effect of presence combined with witnessing potential harm to children constructed as innocent, helpless, and in need of a savior. Ultimately, this works to render invisible the actual politics underlying the Syrian Civil War. This does not, however, produce a politically neutral product, rather *Clouds Over Sidra*’s politics lie in how its uses an unqualified observational realism to make users believe they are consuming a realistic portrayal of an empathetic refugee, further empowering a non-refugee user, pre-defined as a decisionmaker with agency to change the lives of Syrian refugees.

*The New York Times*’ (as NYT VR) will also leverage displaced child protagonists in its first 360-degree VR documentary *The Displaced* (2015), though NYT VR’s work puts users into a slightly different relationship to the subject matter than UNVR’s works. Though *The New York Times* as an organization operates under different goals and politics than the UN, they, interestingly, borrow similar representational tropes within this VR documentary that end up also depoliticizing and decontextualizing its subjects and lacking a firm political argument other than to portray the truism that violence and war negatively impact children. It is only when looking at the larger scope of this as a transmedia project and investigative report that some of the necessary context for how the subjects became displaced and why is brought back into the picture.

*The Displaced* focuses on the daily lives and routines of three children, Hana, a Syrian refugee living in Lebanon, Chuol, internally displaced in South Sudan, and Oleg, formerly
displaced in Ukraine, now living back among the wreckage and ruins of his former home. It is part of a larger transmedia project that includes photojournalism and short, written profiles of the child protagonists. Similar to how Clouds Over Sidra is lauded for fundraising successes which led to further VR production, this work led to The New York Times’s most successful app launch, the NYT VR app, which then spurred the creation of more VR works.28 There seems to be a similar split purpose, too, in how The New York Times Magazine editor, Jake Silverstein, positions The Displaced as “the moment when VR went mainstream” (Welsh 2015), rather than as being particularly impactful for its content and focus on three displaced children. Silverstein has further emphasized the importance of combining this new technology with the continuation of print operations by legacy news organizations (Moynihan 2015), thus suggesting the importance of seeing a work like The Displaced less as a fully new innovation and more as a way to continue the reporting and investigative journalism that The New York Times has been doing.

NYT VR has more VR documentaries on social justice issues than UNVR, but also creates videos focused on tourism, “extreme” climbing and diving, and have even developed a “Great Performances” series where actors perform in front of a 360-degree camera. The Daily 360, referenced in the open pages of this chapter, not only releases war-related videos like “In the Rubble of an Airstrike in Yemen” but also short, funny VR bloopers, videos showing “new” wonders of the world, and other less serious VR videos. Though news media leans more into entertaining through VR, organizations like The New York Times also see VR as a way to do more “immersive” news. Sam Dolnick, an associate editor of The New York Times, stated during an event in 2016 profiling the organization’s work in VR that VR will “add a new dimension” to the news organization is already doing: “The next time that there’s a Ferguson, we’ll be there in virtual reality—and the next day we will be able to put you on the front lines” (Hiltner 2016).
Dolnick’s statement we see a different, more triangulated version of how VR audiences should relate to subjects. While the UN seems to see VR as a straight line from creation to engagement by an audience to new action, new donations, or new policies on behalf of the VR documentary subjects, *The New York Times* envisions VR as a way for reporters to report on an event, one they see themselves are not causing or a part of, to an audience who needs to be brought to it, “put” in front of it. In what Dolnick says, the agency of the user—as a news media consumer gaining visual access to “the front lines” of an ongoing racial conflict—is emphasized. These are works not created by or for their subjects, someone already “on the front lines,” for instance, is not Sam Dolnick’s target audience, it is others who are not in locations where important news is happening or who are not going through traumatic experiences who are the target audience for these VR documentaries.

Like *Clouds Over Sidra*, *The Displaced* utilizes an appeal to an overgeneralized, universalized child experience. In an article for *The New York Times Magazine* introducing readers to the entirety of *The Displaced* as a transmedia project, Silverstein (2015) emphasizes how children are resilient and act as hope for their communities: “That children, even under the worst of circumstances, are able to remain children supplies the world around them with the sense of a future, which is the equivalent of hope.” “Remaining children” to Silverstein means the ability to forget momentarily and play even when dealing with trauma, but it also means that children operate as a sort of community symbol. That children often become the vehicle through which VR users come to know refugee camps means that we too are asked to look at children as this kind of hope for the future, one that, apparently, cannot be created by adult refugees, who remain little seen and voiceless within these works. “Children remaining children” is reminiscent of the construction of a universal childhood, which one can see running through this work and
Clouds Over Sidra; Sidra, Hana, Chuol, and Oleg’s lives may have been disrupted by violence, but they are still innocent, pure, and worthy of international attention and aid.

The Displaced positions itself as a work of empathetic witnessing, one where, “You hear [the children’s] stories while walking alongside them in fields, sitting with them in rubble, and witnessing the frantic scramble to receive food dropped from aid planes” (Welsh 2015). One can see both a push to “walk in the shoes” of a refugee and gain an understanding of their lives and experiences, while also observing and, perhaps, listening to their stories. Here, too, there is ambiguity between the type of presence users are called on to enact, being positioned at once among those who have been displaced while also hailed through direct gazes and voiceover narration to watch as an outside witness. This work leaves even more room for the witness position to slide into the gaze of a tourist by switching locations frequently and allowing plenty of time for users to watch and observe the people and shifting, panoramic landscapes. In his review for Fortune magazine, where tech writer Rick Broida (2017) watches The Displaced, he confirms this, noting, “Although the children appear in many of the scenes, there’s not much of a narrative thread here, so at times you feel like a tourist, just looking around and gawking rather than watching a story unfold.” Indeed, this work starts with three scenes that introduce users to the subjects by situating them within the places each child lives, plays, and works. Oleg is in a bombed-out classroom in Nikishino, Ukraine, Chuol pushes a boat off a bank into marsh waters in South Sudan, and Hana surveys a refugee camp from a taller building in the Beqaa Valley region of Lebanon. All three scenes have no voiceover, purposefully leaving users to visually explore these scenes. After these opening scenes, users are reintroduced to the three subjects as they tell us a bit about their lives. It is not until the final shots of the work where the three child subjects stare directly at the camera, say their names and ages or where they are from, and speak
directly to viewers for the first time, as Sidra does from her bedroom floor. Though coming in the final shots, these moments of direct address seem to authorize users (retroactively) to engage with their lives. Prior to this, the children and other on-screen subjects do not interact with the camera, potentially allowing a user to see the scenes they are witnessing as “more real” and more like what these children would do every day. These moments of direct address break through the user’s ability to watch these children unseen and acknowledge that Hana, Chuol, and Oleg know they are being watched. Coming at the end of the video, this form of direct address might indicate a desire for the user to continue participating with their stories even after the VR documentary ends and users might be looped back into engaging with the video again or pushed toward other parts of this project, like the accompanying articles.

While withholding this form of direct address until the last shots leaves the user to explore different scenes visually, it also means that the work must find other means to engage the user through its “aesthetic of objectivity” and presence. One scene in particular has become a memorable moment in this regard, a scene which features a food airdrop. The airdrop occurs ostensibly during a section focused on 9-year-old Chuol, where users watch planes drop food sacks across an empty field for the displaced South Sudanese women, men, and children, who wait on the sidelines. Users seem to be part of the group but also slightly in front of the group, watching, firstly, the crowd of people waiting for the drop, and then, secondly, watching the sacks drop near and around us, giving users a momentary feeling of uncertainty as to whether a sack will drop near us. This experience of engaging in a potentially risky activity while simultaneously being safe and able to walk away from the experience (unlike the other subjects), further pushes this work towards enacting a very particular kind of game-like, quasi-humanitarian, empathetic tourism of displaced children’s distress.
This food airdrop scene has, however, been described positively by users as a moment of VR-generated empathy. After the sacks of food are dropped, we see two different women struggle to pick up the food sacks, sacks which are almost as long as their bodies. According to Fisher (2017), watching these women struggle should “trigger a reflexive emotional empathic response,” a response where we feel “the visceral impulse to reach into the virtual world and literally lend a hand” (241). The fact that we are unable to help these women lift these heavy sacks is what makes this an effective use of 360-degree VR’s limited affordances for Janet Murray (2016) who agrees with Fisher that this becomes a moment where our inability to help is transformed into “a dramatically experienced desire to be of assistance to the hungry refugees.”

Any desire to help is limited by the medium; one cannot interact with the environment in 360-degree videos and this technological limitation is utilized here for an emotional impact. That producers are attempting to highlight the difference and the distance between the user and the South Sudanese refugees creates a different kind of relationality than in Clouds Over Sidra, which worked to collapse this distance and this difference. Though both suggest that these children need help, The Displaced also argues that help will not come through watching a VR documentary, there are limits to the medium that cannot be overcome.

While Clouds Over Sidra is intended, in part, to help the UN meet their sustainable development goals, The Displaced is more explicitly part of a larger transmedia investigative report published in The New York Times Magazine that includes this VR documentary, as well as written profiles about the subjects by three different journalists, Andrew E. Kramer, Marc Santora, and Susan Dominus, and photography by photojournalist Lynsey Addario. The focus of the larger project is consistently on the children, though there is more contextualization (and limited historicization) of the civil wars in South Sudan and Syria and Russian attempts to seize
parts of Ukraine. The written profiles all emphasize loss and forgetting. Hana, we learn, “last saw her home three years ago, when she was 9 — so long ago, in the life of a girl her age, that she had forgotten as much as she remembered” (Dominus 2015). At 5, when South Sudan gained independence in 2011, Chuol was “not yet old enough to understand the hope and joy sweeping through the small East African country” (Santora 2015). Though Kramer (2015) describes Oleg’s family’s village, Nikishino, as having been “transformed into surreal scenes of destruction,” he also reports Oleg saying, “I already got used to it” and “I don’t think about it” when referring to the destruction of the town and his family’s home. The references to the incomplete memories of these children lead us to question the interest in focusing on children as subjects if they have only partial memories or weren’t old enough to understand what was happening. These profiles act as a form of further depoliticization where children are always neutral, always innocent, or could never understand the complexities of a civil war, for instance. In these written accounts, however, this kind of forgetting can also be used to create a before-after contrast that disrupts the idea of the refugee child as static symbol, permanently offering hope in the face of despair.

Hana’s profile, by far the longest and most detailed, gives readers a window into another kind of loss and forgetting that shows a more complicated childhood, one of transformation and change. We learn through Susan Dominus’s profile that Hana, once a child in Mabrouka, Syria, has become a field worker in Lebanon. We learn that two of her uncles, once a principal and a mayor are, in Lebanon, spit on as “ISIS scum.” Dominus’s profile focuses on the moments of discrimination faced by Hana and her family in Lebanon, even suggesting that Hana thinks herself “incapable of proving them wrong, and incapable of changing her circumstances: Not yet adult, she was among the most powerless of the powerless group of refugees her family had joined.” Instead of creating the static portraits users often receive in VR documentaries, in this
longer written profile readers miss out on the technologically mediated experience of presence, but receive a small look, facilitated by a journalist’s perspective, into how someone might become a refugee. Dominus sheds light on the rarely discussed transformation from child, adult, and person who might have claims to power into a “refugee,” both a “powerless group” and a category of person who is seen to exude refugeeness and denied agency, history, and viability. Within Dominus’s profile, one can see glimpses of reporting that pushes back against the universalized, innocent images of children, though this reporting is not carried out through the entirety of the project.

That both UNVR and NYT VR launched with a focus on refugees and children, in particular, shows the continued appeal of children in aid campaigns and in journalism that aims to pull at the heartstrings of its audience. These organizations work to utilize VR as a new medium to complement their humanitarian and investigative profiles. We can also see meaningful differences between how these organizations leverage the VR documentaries that they’ve created and that I have analyzed here. While UNVR’s Clouds Over Sidra turns Sidra into the ultimate empathetic refugee who is young, vulnerable and someone who users want to rush in and save, NYT VR’s transmedia project creates a more complicated picture. The Displaced, as a whole, does not aim to be a definitive text on displaced people or children and gives small glimpses that users are being pushed to realize the limitations of VR documentaries as a genre and what kinds of portraits VR realism can produce. As analyzed in the next section, Al Jazeera’s VR documentaries will offer a contrast and complement to those previous analyzed. Their VR documentaries allow for users to be witnesses and to act on what they see and hear, without creating a feeling of empathy for a stereotyped depiction of childhood. Their works, while still exploiting the appeal of access to a new, foreign place, more purposefully emphasize
the political distance between user and subject to make the user feel implicated in large-scale global neglect of Rohingya refugees.

**Disrupting Immersive VR Realism and Offering Counter-Narratives**

While in their refugee-focused media, both UNVR and NYT VR utilize depoliticized children as guides into universal experiences with which the user should empathize, Al Jazeera’s AJ Contrast creates 360-degree videos which, though as short as the others, work to contextualize and historicize the conflicts and violences from which the subjects are fleeing while more explicitly positioning the user as a witness and as someone who should be empowered to listen and to act. By looking at two different works on Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh from AJ Contrast, one can see that these works do not attempt to constructed mediated images of already empathetic individuals, necessarily, and they break away from strictly employing an “aesthetic of objectivity.” They utilize animation alongside observational realism and show evidence of more constructed and political texts, rather than works that try to slide into a zone of empathetic neutrality through the focus on depoliticized children. These more overtly constructed and political works attempt to make users feel individually and collectively implicated in the need to recognize what is happening to the Rohingya as a genocide and to hold Myanmar’s government and military accountable for it.

Al Jazeera is a Qatar-based news organization formed in the mid-1990s to rival 24-hour news broadcasters like the BBC and CNN. Their reporting style is in line with the standards of Western journalism but works to account for Arab and Middle Eastern interests and perspectives that are often overlooked by these other global broadcast news networks. Notably, Al Jazeera is funded by the Qatari government, though not a state-run news organization, which means that
while they have taken on topics that other state-run news might censor, scholars have noted the lack of criticism leveled at Qatar or its leadership (Byrd and Kawarabayashi 2003, Seib 2012, Sadig and Petcu 2019). Al Jazeera was formed to provide oppositional perspectives to news from the Global North and to be a “voice for the voiceless” (Sadig and Petcu 2019). What that means in this case is that their work can sometimes align with other news organizations discussed here (notably, The Guardian will have a similar stance) but they do not seem to take on the same imperatives to work within the tropes defined by humanistic aid organizations dominated by Global North perspectives, as we see with both UNVR and The New York Times.

Since 2017, Al Jazeera’s AJ Contrast (formerly, Contrast VR; hereafter just Contrast) has been threading together journalism, documentary filmmaking, and new technologies to create “immersive media” projects. Most of their works tackle the intersecting impacts of war, trauma, displacement, and environmental crises. I turn here to two paired projects, both directed by Contrast’s Editorial Lead Zahra Rasool, Forced to Flee (2017) and I am Rohingya (2017), focusing on Rohingya Muslim refugees in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. These two works allow for more complicated relationships to how users are positioned individually as “present” within the camp, while also configured within a critique of individual and global inaction in relation to this crisis. Both works challenge standard notions of expertise and empathy, “amplifying the voices” of the subjects (recalling wording from UNVR’s website) through making Rohingya refugees the experts on their own political and historical pasts while resisting the urge to collapse user experience into the experience of the Rohingya profiled.

I am Rohingya (2017), publicized by Al Jazeera as the first 360-degree documentary on the Rohingya refugee crisis (“Virtual Reality 360 Film Shows Rohingya’s Plight” 2017), focuses on Jamalida Begum, a new arrival to the Kutupalong refugee camp. In a video describing the
work for potential audiences, Al Jazeera English correspondent Kamahl Santamaria suggests that the sheer facts of this on-going crisis can be overwhelming but “putting yourself in the place of just one person makes it that much more understandable” (Al Jazeera English 2017). Using the familiar language of empathy, Santamaria does not say one should empathize with this work’s subject, Begum, rather, that it is easier to understand something like an ongoing genocide better when told through one person’s experience. What makes this work especially “understandable” is that it seeks to clarify the user’s position relative to Begum from the beginning. Instead of feeling what she feels, the user is explicitly welcomed to the video by Begum to act as a witness, one who is imagined as empowered to carry her story on to others.

This VR documentary allows Begum to narrate how she came to be in this camp with her two young sons, moving back and forth between her life in the present and the story of how she was beaten and raped by soldiers in Myanmar, shown in an animated sequence. The framing of this work, where one woman tells her story, allows for moments where Begum speaks directly to the user and where this user is figured both as an individual and as a collective. The first scene in I am Rohingya positions users as if sitting beside Begum and her two sons on a cart, as it is pulled through one of the camp’s dirt roads, while Begum says, “I want to talk to you. God has made this possible. I hope you will tell others about my story.” Here, we see the first indication of the link between individual (“you”) and collective (“others”). A link built upon this seemingly face-to-face encounter with Begum, where she relates her story to the user who is envisioned as a witness with the power to step away from the experience and relay her experiences to other people. Instead of accidentally replicating a hierarchical us/Them dynamic of which scholars like Scorzin and Georgiou warn, this first scene calls attention to the power dynamic between subject and user and exploits it to urge the user to comply with Begum’s request.
After a short scene that contextualizes why the Rohingya need to flee Myanmar, users are again brought face-to-face with Begum as she speaks directly to the camera in a medium shot where users can hear her voice, before the voiceover translation of her words begin. For a brief second users can hear her say “Assalam-u-alaikum” to greet and welcome users to her story, before the translation begins: “Peace be with you. I am Jamalida Begum.” She is not only speaking in front of the camera and directly addressing users at this moment, if users turn around and look behind, we see can a crowd of children and men who are figured doubly as an audience for Begum’s words and as a group of individuals who themselves might have stories to tell.

Having Begum voice her desire to tell her story in front of an audience who is both the user and an actual audience within the text, not only frames this VR documentary as geared towards a type of collective witnessing, but it also allows Rasool and Contrast to present her as a voluntary adult subject in control of her own voice. Her words, “I am Jamalida,” resonate strongly with the title, *I am Rohingya*, and allow Begum to claim the speaking position and the story as her own. Here, too, we can see a clearer articulation of the shifts in the power dynamic that Gabo Arora spoke of regarding *Clouds Over Sidra*, where there is less of a feeling that the subject is being exploited or even invisibly followed or watched. Users are welcomed, positioned as witnesses, and expected to listen actively. While these images are still constructed, they are constructed to present Begum as in control of a story that is both hers, in how it details her specific experiences, and is indicative of the historical and current persecution that Rohingya face in Myanmar. What Begum says to the camera should serve as a form of criminal evidence against Myanmar’s military rather than serving as evidence for the need for a user to rush in and remove vulnerable people from their already destabilized communities.
The second Contrast project focusing on the Rohingya, *Forced to Flee*, utilizes a similar type of user positioning where subjects tell their stories to an international audience, but magnifies it during key moments. While this VR documentary still distills the experiences of many people into the voices of the few for the purpose of understanding, as Santamaria suggests of *I am Rohingya*, visually, this work overwhelms users with the amount of people now in the camp. Indeed, Al Jazeera News reports that when filming *I am Rohingya*, there was the belief that the crisis “had reached its peak,” a belief shattered as the number of refugees tripled in size shortly thereafter (“Al Jazeera Releases Virtual Reality Project on Rohingya” 2017). It is likely due to these circumstances that Rasool has stated that she wants the scale of the Rohingya refugee crisis to have an impact on users in *Forced to Flee* (“Virtual Reality 360 Film Shows Rohingya’s Plight” 2017). *Forced to Flee* is a co-production between Contrast and Amnesty International that focuses on three different Rohingya, Laila Begum, Nur Begum, and Saidur Rahman and the traumas they have experienced at the hands of the Myanmar government and while trying to live in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. This work has a more unrelentingly negative tone in comparison to *I am Rohingya*, a tone which is turned into a moment of accusation at the end of this video. This tone is established from the beginning of the piece which pairs slightly high angle long shots of groups of Rohingya with statements spoken by the work’s subjects about watching their family members being murdered and raped, their villages burned, and how being in Kutupalong refugee camp continues or worsens the traumas they experienced in Myanmar.

Outside of some brief explanatory text overlays and interviews with Laila Begum and Nur Begum, Saidur Rahman provides voiceover throughout *Forced to Flee*. He tells users how he used to be a teacher as we watch him going about his new daily activities in the camp. His
voiceover not only tells his own story but positions him as a voice of authority, pushing against stereotypes of the nonpolitical, agentless refugee. His voiceover guides users through a four-screen view of how the Rohingya fled Myanmar and provides details on how villages were burned. His voiceover in this latter section is accompanied by overhead images of maps of three different villages—Chut Pyin, Inn Din, and Chein Karli—with animations that show towns before and after being burned by the Myanmar military. The village burnings, other forms of violence and brutality, and ongoing issues with requiring Rohingya to provide proof of citizenship to live in Myanmar or return from Bangladesh, are why Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the time, would call Myanmar’s actions a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” in September of 2017 (“UN Human Rights Chief” 2017). Though this might be a textbook example, that genocidal actions were taken has been denied repeatedly by the government (Beech 2017). Indeed, it is only recently that soldiers from Myanmar have come forward to give testimony that corroborates the violences alleged by the Rohingya (Beech, Nang, Simons 2020). This discrepancy between lived experiences and the official record is where animation comes into play. The use of animation in this VR documentary works to reiterate the absence of an official record of village burnings and ethnic cleansing, which is in line with how animation in documentary is often used to “convey subjects that are beyond the reach of live-action film” (Honess Roe 2014, 175). In this case, I take “beyond the reach” to mean there is an absence is the observable, visible record that needs to be countered and can be countered through animation. The use of animation to show both Jamalida Begum’s assault and the burning of villages suggests that these facts are missing in the official record of Myanmar’s actions against the Rohingya. Positioning Rahman as an authority figure undercuts both Myanmar’s denial of genocide and the feeling of exploitative voyeurism that is present to some
degree in works such as *Clouds Over Sidra* and *The Displaced*. Instead, the user’s understanding of the situation and interpretation of much of what we see is directly shaped by the knowledge that Rahman has of his own and other refugees’ experiences. Unlike child narrators in previous works, who are purposefully limited in what they can remember or are allowed to articulate, animation serves to counter the inaccurate official state record of genocide and Rahman is able to give a fuller contextualization for the Rohingya refugee experiences.

While the user’s experience of presence is downplayed in some of the contextual and historical parts of this work, there is a strong feeling of user implication and accusation that is heightened through the effect of presence in other sequences. *Clouds Over Sidra, The Displaced, and I am Rohingya* all incorporate subjects looking directly at the camera/user as a form of direct address to engage the users’ feelings of sympathy, compassion, and understanding. This work, too, utilizes this form of direct address in its interviews with Nur Begum and Laila Begum, but it also incorporates more emphasis on groups of people looking discontentedly at the camera. In an interview for Al Jazeera, Rasool revealed she wants these shots to reflect the sheer number of people impacted. “You hear three people’s stories,” she states, “but then you can turn around and see hundreds, if not, thousands [of] more people throughout the film and you can imagine that they each have their own awful experiences, just not told to us” (“Virtual Reality 360 Film Shows Rohingya’s Plight” 2017). Indeed, looking around the scenes of this work does not yield the same panoramic landscapes as many other 360-degree videos, instead users see groups of men and children standing, sitting, and moving around in the background of different shots. That users can feel a part of these scenes can also be overwhelming, an overwhelmingness which makes experiential the scale of the crisis and the number of Rohingya who fled from violence in Myanmar.
While focusing on groups of people can create or emphasize distance between viewers and subjects (Bleiker 2018), focusing on individuals has also been pointed out to be a limitation. Paul Bloom (2016) notes that often empathy works through singling out individuals and the use of children as universal objects of empathy and concern runs into the problem of eliding cultural differences and political and historical context. Much of the dehumanized otherness and collective exoticization of images of groups usually results from a seemingly unidirectional look. That is, where the person capturing the images and those looking at the images have power over the people in the images, people who are seen as passive before an objectifying camera. The nature of this type of looking in VR is changed when one is made to feel a part of a scene rather than just looking at an image. The face-to-face aspect of direct address, in the minds of producers, should be strengthened in one-on-one situations between the user and a subject. Recall Gabo Arora suggesting that Sidra can better captivate the user’s attention, forcing users to listen to her story because VR can imitate face-to-face interaction more so than other media. The nature of these looks also change with groups of people looking. In Forced to Flee, the feeling of presence felt by the user who is subject to direct looks by whole groups of people lends these looks a much stronger communication of emotion.

That this kind of direct address by a group can be figured as an accusation is suggested by the final shots of Forced to Flee which enact a reverse of the opening shot of I am Rohingya. By accusation, what I mean here is that these direct looks toward the user implicate the user in feeling accountable for the lack of rights the Rohingya have, in- and outside of Myanmar, and also challenge the user to do something. Here, the 360-degree camera has been placed on a cart a bit lower than eye-level, pulled by a young man through crowds lined up on either side of the cart’s path as women and more children follow behind (see figure 2). Given that the feeling of
embodied presence is created through the camera’s view, not only does the camera move through the crowd, but the user does as well. As people look at the camera, they look at the user, and, in one case, even seem to reach out towards the camera and the user. During these final shots, Rahman’s voice, again, is our authoritative guide, forcefully stating, “I want to ask the world how they will secure our basic human rights. How will they ensure the rights of the Rohingya people?” Here the user becomes “the world,” the “they” who must figure out how to end this genocide. This positioning as part of a larger group that need act, however, is still grounded in the individualized feeling of presence. These looks of accusation become a moment where it feels like the individual user is being looked at and being watched even though, according to Rahman, we are collectively being watched to see what our response and action will be. Unlike the direct address in works focusing on children which feels like a doubling of a humanitarian visual trope of children in need of aid, being looked at here feels more political and purposeful and by the end of this video the feeling of presence is mobilized into a question: “So what?” This is a question that this work does not and cannot answer in its five-minute run time. I would argue that this ending better aligns with what Sam Gregory (2016), Director of Programs, Strategy, and Innovation for WITNESS, a non-profit dedicated to teaching people how to use technology to document human rights violations, questions about the exclusive focus of media creators, producers, and audiences on empathy when one could make media geared toward “understanding, compassion, solidarity, or action.” As users, we have witnessed this refugee camp, heard about these peoples’ lives, and now we are being asked by the subjects to do something about it, to turn this experience into something beyond being entertained by feeling bad about others’ traumatic experiences.
Figure 2. Screencapture from *Forced to Flee*

The 3D camera is positioned on a cart being pulled alongside a line of men and boys with Rahman’s voiceover.

What *Forced to Flee* lacks is an appeal to an empathy that has predetermined who the empathetic individuals will be. Users are addressed as themselves and encouraged to play and inhabit the role of the distant witness. It might even be suggested that the final scene of the camera being confronted by groups of Rohingya further distances users from the Rohingya. It is, indeed, a scene reminiscent of the spectacles of public shaming (though, notably, without a true threat of violence or experience of *public* shame on the part of the user), intended to jolt users into action, but without activating the type of pity one can see in UNVR and NYT VR’s child-focused works. This is because the spectacle is the inaction of the user and “the world” who have failed to hold Myanmar’s government and military accountable for their actions against this religious and ethnic minority. If users get a taste of the limits of VR and their inability to help lift a heavy sack of food in *The Displaced*, here, that moment is visualized as group accusation for our collective inaction and inattention to the Rohingya’s subjugation both in Myanmar and in refugee camps in Bangladesh. It is no longer about looking at Rohingya refugees with a gaze full
of distanced pity for their circumstances, users and our own inaction becomes the subject as we are led through a gauntlet of shame, being stared down by the Rohingya.

This challenges the traditional subject of social problem documentaries through its framing and positioning of the users as objects of a Rohingya gaze, the audience (and the camera as audience corollary) is the one to be looked at and problematized. Instead of allowing for empathetic imaginative identification, this works opts for what Dominick LaCapra (2004) calls a kind of virtual identification, where users can “walk in the shoes of another” while maintaining difference from a suffering victim instead of collapsing and silencing the people experiencing trauma. It is a kind of identification that we will see in the VR documentary *Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum* in the next section, as well. LaCapra ties this notion of virtual identification to an “empathetic unsettlement” that challenges a kind of empathy and identification born of objective-seeming narratives that contain and constrain their subjects in unified narratives. Empathetic unsettlement “inhibits or prevents unmodulated, neopositivistic objectification, unmediated identification, and harmonizing narratives,” this type of “unsettlement” is more performative and uncontainable and can even challenge “disciplinary protocols of representation” (136). That suddenly the user can see their own shame at a lack of action is one of these “unsettling” moments in a VR documentary that also tries to push against official state accounts of what has happened to the Rohingya. Identification is still mediated, as all images are carefully constructed and curated, though there is no sense of “harmonizing” resolve to be found in these works that along cannot resolve an ongoing genocide.

As discussed in this section, these VR documentaries on people and places configured as spatially distant from their intended audience/s, where producers travel to different refugee camps and shoot on location, tend to create the user as a witness, but one who should also “feel”
similar to a refugee—in the sense of creating spaces for the user to appear to sit or stand with other refugees, to have concrete experiences like being near a food drop and maybe to even experience slightly more abstract things like distance or the desire for home. When the location moves to “home” for VR producers, one could ask whether we see these same appeals and constructions of refugees and their experiences. The next section analyzes VR documentaries focused on European spaces of integration and segregation of refugees and asylum seekers. These are projects that will attempt to defamiliarize common spaces in Europe and point to a continuation of population management and surveillance that one can see in the other works in this chapter.

**Watching Surveillance and Being Surveilled as Refugees in the UK and Germany**

Most of the scholarly and media attention given to refugee-focused VR documentaries has centered on works that bring distant users into the presence of refugees and into refugee camps or other sites of displacement, as previously analyzed in this chapter. In this section, I turn toward works focused on revealing how people coming to Europe seeking asylum and refugee status are integrated into cities in Germany and the UK, *So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin/This is How Refugees Live in Berlin* (Berliner Morgenpost 2017) and *Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum* (Guardian VR 2017), both of which were created in collaboration with Google News Lab. These works do not purport to transport users across distance, instead they shed light on how displaced people are integrated into the producers’ “home” sphere, one that might be shared by VR users, as well. When refugees are not positioned as “over there” or somewhere distant from producers and users, what changes in the image practices surrounding showing refugees? And, are users brought into a different producer-subject-audience
configuration than in those works that have the most apparent spatial and experiential gaps between producers, subjects, and the audience? What becomes clear when turning to these works, is that they are more firmly positioned within a kind of journalism that is seeking to reveal government failures and state surveillance. The user’s gaze becomes even more of a problem in these works, as we see or hear from refugees and asylum seekers who feel surveilled, who self-surveil, and who become hyper-visible in certain European cities due to an anti-migrant media-fueled moral panic that frames incoming migrants as a threat (Rea et al. 2019), “as a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean,” to quote former British Prime Minister David Cameron (BBC 2015). These works from The Guardian and Berliner Morgenpost do not replay the dehumanization and illegalization of people coming to Europe fleeing violence or seeking better economic opportunities, rather, they cast state control, surveillance, and housing as a threat to viability of refugees and asylum seekers.

The pull of surveillance in the previously analyzed works focused on positioning users as outside observers who sometimes watch the subjects in modes of voyeuristic looking, taking pleasure in an experience that one could easily step away from, the turn to the “home” sphere foregrounds surveillant gazes from the state and those in European cities. Berliner Morgenpost’s So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin/This is How Refugees Live in Berlin, reporting on how refugees and asylum seekers are housed in Berlin, grants users access to the domestic spaces of refugees and asylum seekers in five different housing arrangements and shows how one’s viability in Germany is tied to one’s housing. The Guardian’s Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum focuses on the experiences of those seeking asylum and going through the asylum interview process and anonymizes its location and interviewees and rejects observational realism, creating a work that tries to communicate some of the emotional bounds of the
experience of dislocation and state surveillance, while also centering on and in government housing. By rejecting a realist, objective aesthetic in favor of lidar 3D scans, Limbo creates a tension around contemporary experiences of bodily invisibility and the hyper-visibility of data that purposefully turns the subjects and the users into passive objects of the medium of virtual reality.

So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin/This is How Refugees Live in Berlin (2017) is an interactive co-production by Google News Labs and the German newspaper Berliner Morgenpost, a newspaper in Berlin that focuses heavily on city and regional issues. Germany is the European country that has taken in the most refugees in recent years, with the numbers of people coming in as refugees or seeking asylum status peaking in 2015-16 due to the Syrian Civil War. Berlin itself is one of the cities in Germany with the most resettled refugees and asylum seekers and Germany’s UNHCR headquarters is located in Berlin. In 2015, at least, scholars have pointed to a “hegemonic atmosphere of welcome” (also termed Willkommenskultur, culture of welcome or welcoming culture) for incoming refugees and asylum seekers, where the government, news media, and people in Germany seemed temporarily aligned in expressing desire that refugees be inviting into Germany (Hamann and Karakayali 2016). The atmosphere in the country would not stay welcoming, however, as Germany’s policies of welcoming in refugees and asylum seekers would also result in anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-European Union political party Alternativ für Deutschland winning seats in the country’s parliament (Oltermann 2016). Berliner Morgenpost’s investigative work is geared toward shedding a light on the results of the German culture of welcome and how refugees and asylum seekers have been differently integrated into and segregated from Germany society through housing.
Instead of being a fully immersive, standalone 360-degree VR documentary, *So Leben Flüchtlinge* is a mixed VR project that utilizes 360-degree video and photography alongside short profiles of individual refugees and asylum seekers. As in investigative report, it looks into how the government houses refugees and asylum seekers in five different types of living arrangements in Berlin, including such varied places as converted gyms, hotels, and town hall buildings as well as private student residences and rooms in a “container village” (housing made from shipping containers). The project combines a visual investigation of the living spaces through 360-degree photography and video with a written interview and profile of one individual per living arrangement, focusing on how the subject’s experience is shaped by where they live. While this project is Berlin-specific and for a Berlin audience, it also speaks to the mix of housing arrangements for refugees and asylum seekers in Germany, broadly, and exposes the lived realities of a so-called culture of welcome.

The visual practices within *So Leben Flüchtlinge* are in line with Christine Bischoff, Francesca Falk, and Sylvia Kafehsy’s (2010) argument that “images can bring the violence inherent in illegalization out into the open and thereby shed a critical light on governmental politics of labour mobility” (8). Here, their argument is not that people or migrants of all sorts are “illegal,” but that migrant mobility is subject to curtailment, containment, and control and leads to groups and individuals being made illegal (i.e. “illegalization”). While they write of the experience of migration, the process of illegalization is something to which refugees are also subjected and it is part of how European media stoked fears about migrants coming to Europe over the “long summer of migration” in 2015 through describing them similarly to “illegal immigrants” (Rea et al. 2019). *So Lebel Flüchtlinge* shows this illegalization from the
perspective of its refugee and asylum seeker subjects, where it looks like fear to show one’s face, go outside, or be around other Germans.

Similar to projects already analyzed, this work visually positions users in and amongst refugees, as if sitting around a table with men drinking tea or students chatting or living alongside different men and women in their bedrooms and living rooms, while users are also called on to be witnesses to their living situations and positioned as outsiders in the written profiles. Because this is a project that utilizes both 360-degree photography and looping video, watching becomes particularly excessive and noticeable to the user. Indeed, watching and who is seen and for what purposes are a theme of this work, as it communicates the hyper-visibility of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany. For instance, the first profile one encounters is of Fawaz, a Syrian refugee who lives with 180 others in a converted gym. Unlike in other profiles, Fawaz does not physically appear in any of the 360-degree material. So, instead of users gaining insight into Fawaz’s individual experience through the visual material, users gain a sense of the lack of humanity in this type of living arrangement and how those living in this converted gym might be subject to a process of illegalization, where they are seen as or treated as a threat to social order. Users are able to click around an observational 360-degree looping video of makeshift bunkbeds, with the atmospheric sounds of coughing and men moving and talking in the background. Or users can change the view to a 360-degree photograph that has no sound and less of a feeling of a living and lived-in place, but gives a greater sense of the scale, showing rows upon rows of bunkbeds with unused basketball backboards in the background. As users engage with the material in this section, one sees images and video of men crammed into this gym, sharing bunkbeds, and trying to create makeshift forms of privacy by hanging towels from the bedposts. As intended, the space becomes integral to the meaning of the project, which, here,
shows the state’s desire to manage large populations efficiently and the unwillingness to create livable housing for the people Germany agreed to take in.

The impact of this type of housing is emphasized in Fawaz’s profile. Though not in the 360-degree photographs or video, Fawaz is photographed from behind for his profile; his profile features a medium shot of the back of his head, as he chooses to conceal his identity for fear of being recognized and further harassed by security around the building. This is the only profile where someone’s face is obscured in this way and Fawaz is the only person interviewed to speak of harassment by security forces, furthering a connection between this type of emergency housing arrangement and how one becomes hyper-visible as a problem to be solved and as part of a group to be policed. By denying users an individual face to empathize with as the “scene of empathy,” the scale of this particular type of mass housing comes into clearer focus and recalls other post-disaster conversions of gyms, arenas, and other large public use buildings. Indeed, these images are reminiscent of refugee camps and their configuration of space, allowing one to see a visual continuity between the space of an arrangement called a “camp” and that which is here labeled differently but serves the same purpose. As an investigative report, Berliner Morgenpost is focused less on offering users a sign of hope for the future or a way to act on behalf of those profiled than on revealing aspects of the government’s population management schemes and inability to provide viable housing for all refugees and asylum seekers.

While this work does suggest the need to label camp-like housing as dehumanizing, this project also creates models of appropriate refugee behavior, similar to how other VR documentaries create an ideal empathetic refugee. Bischoff, Falk, and Kafehsy also remind us that while it is important to represent violences visually, “showing what is hidden may sometimes lead to new forms of oppression” (8). So Leben Flüchtlinge can be seen to counter
negative stereotypes of refugees and asylum seekers as unassimilable “foreigners.” This project comes after the widely reported incidents of sexual assault and robbery in Cologne on New Year’s Eve in 2016. Though international coverage was more negative than that inside Germany (see Bau 2016, for instance), these incidents were reported as being related to Germany’s policy of accepting more asylum seekers and attributed to men “of Arab and north African origin,” as one reporter inelegantly stated (Connolly 2016). Though the refugees and asylum seekers profiled in Berliner Morgenpost’s projects do not correspond to negative portrayals of lawless, violent racial, ethnic, and religious “others,” it does not explicitly address or fully dismantle these portrayals either. Instead, it positions its subjects within another narrow frame of recognizability, as being the “good” refugee, who is willing to take on state-sanctioned economic and social integration.

We can see this construction especially in the third profile of the work, which puts users in 31-year-old Syrian refugee Ahmad’s room in a converted town hall building. Users here are positioned as a kind of fourth person seated around a table with three men, including Ahmad, as they drink tea and talk. Looking around Ahmad’s room, users can see that he has different words labeled in German and Arabic, learning aids from his German language course. Germany’s Federal Office for Migration and Refugees/Bundesamt für Migration and Flüchtlinge (BAMF) funds “integration” courses for immigrants as well as refugees and their website advises that if you want to live in Germany, you should learn German and learn about German history, culture, and laws. These courses, and other support by BAMF, are part of the Willkommenskultur. We can see this policy reflected in Ahmad’s profile, which notes he has put a handwritten sign on his door saying “surely” and “gladly” in both Arabic and German. Ahmad also has signs and different objects hanging on his wall that say “love” and “liberty” in English. That Ahmad’s
profile points to these details, in particular, is important. How he is written about and shown encourages users to see him as willing to assimilate. Fawaz too is learning German, his profile tells us, in hopes of getting a job and moving out of the converted gym. The fifth and final profile of 20-year-old Syrian refugee Sharfan, who lives in a rectangular single room in a container village, reveals he is also taking a German language course, with the goal of becoming a police officer in Germany. This kind of framing, of Ahmad, Fawaz, Sharfan, and others profiled in this work, characterizes them as non-threatening and non-threatening because they are willing to learn German and perhaps shed their seeming “foreignness” through a process of assimilation. While *So Leben Flüchtlinge* reveals the reality of population management in Berlin to its audience, it also presents its subjects as willing to assimilate and be part of “normal” German society, even, in Sharfan’s case, to join some of the very same surveillance operations to which he and other refugees are subject.

Though this work engages in a kind of disciplinary monitoring and regulation of refugee behavior and living, it also works to train and remind the non-refugee user of their own need to self-monitor for intolerant behaviors and to fulfill on the promise of a welcoming culture. Some of the user’s training is, perhaps, a knock-on effect where the observation of others makes the user more inclined towards self-surveillance. There is a way, however, that one can see a more direct intentionality involved here. Sharfan’s section of the project is the final profile of the work. As much as users watch and monitor Sharfan, his representation as an apprehensive yet tolerant new arrival to Germany stands as a model for how the audience should also act. Sharfan’s 360-degree looping video shows only one continuous action, he enters his room, walks directly over to his window, obtrusively passing the camera (and, therefore, the user) on his way, and then looks out his window. Users can then watch him looking out his window until the
looped action restarts (see figure 3). In his profile, one sees that his opening quote is “only some neighbors are a bit Nazi-like,” so, when users watch Sharfan stare out of his window, there is an implication that he is observing his intolerant neighbors, or, that he is observing his neighbors for signs of intolerance. This is a small moment where the subject of surveillance expands, as not only do users watch refugees and observe their living situations, we also watch a refugee look back in a moment of potential counter-surveillance: he watches those who are watching and surveilling him. This hints at the larger outside to documentary media, where the traditional “victim” of documentary can look back and gain a measure of agency by doing so, perhaps in ways similar to what users can see and experience at the end of Forced to Flee. Here, it is not refugees one has to watch, monitor, and segregate from society this project argues, it is one’s neighbors who might display intolerant, and, therefore, intolerable views. Sharfan and other refugees are watching their neighbors, other Berliners, for signs of intolerance, and you, as a user and reader of Berliner Morgenpost, should not display anti-refugee, anti-foreigner, anti-welcoming behaviors either.

![Figure 3. Screencapture from So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin](image)

In a looping, 360-degree video, Sharfan walks past the user to look back and forth out of his window.
As much as this work puts refugees on full display to reveal the truths of their living conditions and how this impacts their lives in Berlin, this work also puts liberal, humanitarian values on full display so that the user can embody and mime them outside of this VR experience. This is different than the empathetic imaginative identification advocated by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty. While there are individual experiences here that attempt to tug at the heartstrings of users, users are also called to self-question, to be or even become the better liberal citizens that often remain an unspoken ideal in many works that call for empathy.

Besides “immersing” users in a feeling of presence through VR technology, *So Leben Flüchtlinge* recommends behaving like a socially integrated refugee. Be Sharfan. Be Ahmad. Be Bashir, a 20-year-old Afghani refugee who users see seamlessly blending in with his two young, German housemates. These interdictions are noticeably absent in a similarly focused work from *The Guardian, Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum* (2017), which also creates explicit links between state housing and livability. *Limbo*, however, digs deeper into the potentially dehumanizing experiences awaiting those navigating the bureaucratic asylum system. *Limbo* exploits the idea of the hyper-visible refugee and turns it experiential. Users of this work experience state surveillance as an asylum seeker in the UK and the UK’s surveillant infrastructure is visually made clear to users in a way that cannot be recuperated to monitor asylum seekers for evidence of their worthiness to be granted asylum. Revealing state surveillance is in line with *The Guardian*’s politics, as one of the more left-leaning daily newspapers in the UK (Smith 2017). Users visiting *The Guardian*’s online “About” page will see that their stated goals are “giving a voice to the powerless and holding power to account.” These sentiments are drawn from Katharine Viner (2017), *The Guardian*’s current editor-in-chief, who would write a mission statement arguing for the need to uphold liberal values and
maintain public trust in news media as an institution by listening to public concerns and taking “facts are sacred” as their motto. These statements are reminiscent of how Al Jazeera describes itself as wanting to be attentive to marginalized voices and to itself be a voice of opposition to a more dominant media rivals. Here, however, The Guardian is not looking to disrupt a Global North/Global South hierarchical flow of information and news media dominance, rather they seek to disrupt a British mainstream media seen as overly conservative.

From 2016-2018, The Guardian, as Guardian VR, developed a considerable output of high-quality 360-degree VR experiences. Compared to the other news organizations, Guardian VR’s output is geared toward creating singular user experiences, ranging in topic from war and displacement to more exploratory, playful works like Celestial Motion (2018) described as “a virtual dance experience.” Their VR works position users as explorers and experiencers, as one can see in their first 360-degree VR documentary Underworld: A Virtual Experience of the London Sewers (2016), which takes users under London and is representative of their aim to utilize VR to bring new sights to users and give users access to new places, people, and experiences. Many of their projects—like Limbo (2017), 6X9 (2016) about the experience of solitary confinement, and Beat the Hustler (2017), where users play a shell game against a professional con artist—have been released as individual, downloadable apps, though largely, their works reveal an additional desire and commitment for The Guardian to, like the other news organizations discussed here, incorporate new media into their reporting in an entertaining and engaging way.

Limbo is one of thirteen projects released by Guardian VR, and one of two focused specifically on war and displacement. The other project, Sea Prayer (2017), a fictional 360-degree video written by Khaled Hosseini and co-produced with the United Nations, uses Google
Tiltbrush to animate the story of one father’s recollection of trying to flee Homs with his wife and son during the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. By contrast, *Limbo* focuses more specifically on the experience of seeking asylum in the UK and how the asylum-seeking system impacts people psychologically. As in *So Leben Flüchtlinge*, there is a relationship between space and one’s experience. Users start out on a busy street, float towards an apartment building, enter and move up the stairs, and spend the rest of the documentary in one small bedroom with a bed, desk, and chair, a room that dissolves into a similarly small-sized asylum interview room and then back into a bedroom. This VR documentary is based on interviews with those seeking asylum and lawyers and aid workers who know the asylum process, though it focuses on no one individual story and provides no specific person with whom users are called to identify or empathize. Users hear from asylum seekers in short voiceover segments as they speak to their feelings of being disconnected from both British society and their families, going through the asylum interview process, and awaiting a verdict. The work itself eschews documentary’s observational realism for an image track composed of black-and-white lidar 3D scans, which, though resembling animation to some, is a form of laser scanning that turns all photographed material into points of data. Here an “aesthetic of objectivity” becomes an aesthetic of subjectivity, where resistance to documentary realism upends the ability for users to mistake this for a coherent singular experience. Unlike in other works, there is no singular “refugee experience” communicated here, rather, this work communicates the feelings of waiting, disconnect, surveillance, and, broadly, alienation itself.

*Limbo* takes the attributes of 360-degree VR that others have criticized—they lack interactivity, seem voyeuristic, create situations that risk “improper distance,” and emphasize the user’s experience at the expense of the subject—and exploits these so that they become a vital
part of the text and its meaning. By appropriating the style, tone, and narration of film noir, *Limbo* creates an experience where users feel passive, invisible, and stuck, as if “in limbo,” while also feeling like hyper-visible data through the creation of a surveillance aesthetic. Film noir is associated with a style of Hollywood crime films from the 1940s that used particularly dark, sometimes chiaroscuro lighting effects, and often had morally ambiguous characters operating outside of the law and the bounds of society. While it has been debated within film studies whether noir is a genre or a style, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (1955) argue that what unites films from that time period is an “emotional effect: *that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed*” (25; italics in original). With no stable moral center and visual and narrative ambiguity, Borde and Chaumeton argue that film noir creates a feeling of alienation in the viewer. This psychological alienation, combined with ways that noir pushed the boundaries of filmic form through subjective camera use and voiceover narration sometimes delivered to an unknown second person, is why J.P. Telotte (1989) suggests that noir is subversive—the audience is pushed to think through and examine their own reality after watching a noir film play with medium and critique social institutions.

Similar to the use of animation in *Forced to Flee* and *I am Rohingya*, the lidar-created aesthetic of *Limbo* suggests that the truths of the asylum system are hard to grasp fully from official, state narratives or observational realism. What is different here is that the realism *Limbo* pursues is more psychological than indexical. In a short write-up of *Limbo*, Fernando et al. (2017) suggest the use of 3D lidar scans creates a “monochrome sketch-like aesthetic [which] has the quality of a dream or nightmare where worlds are transparent and fragmented.” Often used in architecture, lidar scanning creates this look of transparency by making every material object visible and see-through. This is a medium that ScanLAB Projects founders, William Shaw
and William Trossell, label as a “form of machine vision.” In a statement reminiscent of Dziga Vertov’s (1923) description of the machine truths of the kino-eye/camera-eye that can see more perfectly than the human eye, Shaw and Trossell argue that the “electronic eye” of the 3D camera allows for a different view of people and places than a regular camera. Notable within Limbo is that humans are also scanned, lending to the dream/nightmare look but also creating the look of actualized data and surveillance. Limbo visually replicates a hyper-visible but voiceless representation of refugees (Georgiou 2018) and does so to create an experience based on how this could feel. In fact, the work mobilizes and actively exploits the tension between everything and everyone being transparent, seeming to lack materiality, while being simultaneously hyper-visible as data points within a complex system of bureaucratic population management. Limbo asks the user to experience the invisibility of humanity alongside a feeling of hyper-visibility as data under surveillance, allowing one to reflexively question the visual politics of the medium of VR.

Limbo appropriates film noir in order to create this feeling of alienation, renamed “limbo” within this VR documentary, and prompt a critical rethinking of the contemporary bureaucratic landscape of the asylum process alongside the experience of seeking refuge in a distant elsewhere. The split identification of the user is more explicit in this work than the others analyzed in this chapter and is important in this work’s specific appropriation of film noir. Within Limbo there are splits and ambiguities between the roles of user and the identities of the asylum seekers, between being around others and remaining distant from them, and between being subject to a political system while forcefully kept outside of society. Utilizing second-person address in both on-screen text and voiceover narration, Limbo cites noir narration’s tone and ambiguity. Not all noir films utilize voiceover narration but in those that do, it is known for
being “romantic,” tonally moody, hopeless, and nostalgic (Schrader 1972) and often involves a protagonist speaking to a silent witness. In *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944), for instance, protagonist Walter Neff narrates how he becomes involved in a murder-for-insurance-money scheme to a “you” that remains unidentified until the end of the film. The ambiguous framing in noir—is the “you” of the narration a character or (somehow) the film’s viewer?—is heightened by the less frequent but still notable use of subjective camera in film noir. Noir is known for experimenting with aligning the viewer’s perspective with that of one of the characters, attempted most fully by *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery 1947), where viewers see through the eyes of the main protagonist.

Playing off of the voiceover and subjective camera in film noir, *Limbo* asks users to occupy the role of silent witness and first-person protagonist simultaneously. According to voiceover narration, on-screen text, and camera positioning, the user must identify as both an outside learner and an asylum seeker. The first on-screen text users encounter positions users as asylum seekers: “You are one of the 36,846 people who applied for asylum over the last year.” Here, users are hailed using second-person address to play the role of one of many asylum seekers, a role users will also occupy through the use of the subjective camera. This is immediately followed by text positioning users as outsiders to the asylum-seeking experience: “You’ll hear the voices of real asylum seekers throughout this piece.” These two lines of on-screen text create a similar split identification as the other VR documentaries discussed throughout this chapter, where users both play a role and put on an experience while also standing outside of and apart from it. That the distance between the user and subject is played up in this work recalls the food airdrop from *The Displaced* and the public shaming of the user at
the end of *Forced to Flee*, though the split identification is much more explicit in *Limbo* and carried throughout the entire VR documentary.

Similar to the bifurcated use of on-screen texts—situating users sometimes as asylum seekers and at other times as outside learners—this work has two voiceover tracks. The first voiceover users hear comes from British actor Juliet Stevenson who uses second-person address to situate the user as someone seeking asylum: “You left behind your home, where your life was in danger. And you’ve arrived in a city where your life cannot start. You’re an asylum seeker.” Her voiceover works to re-position the user in the asylum seeker role and acts as a voice of authority that sets a noir-like ominous tone of danger and uncertainty for the rest of the work. Similar to the dual positioning in the on-screen text that opens this VR documentary, Stevenson’s narration is joined by voiceovers from adult male asylum seekers speaking to their own experiences in first-person address: “I was really scared, I will never return to my country,” one man attests. The voices of these men come in to guide and shape the user’s experience, emphasizing the feelings that arise from being stuck in this holding pattern of awaiting their asylum decision, dislocated from their loved ones. Instead of collapsing the asylum seeker’s identity into that of the user’s, the user engages in LaCapra’s virtual identification, where we experience the situation as if as an asylum seeker, while remaining attentive to the fact that there are “real” asylum seekers whose experiences lie outside of this VR documentary and whose experiences cannot be communicated fully through one documentary or in one medium.

More so than other VR documentaries, *Limbo* includes reflexive references to looking and documenting that make users question virtual reality and our own positioning. When users are being floated around a nameless city’s streets in the beginning of the work, Stevenson’s voiceover directs users to “Look around,” and states, “you are invisible.” The reference to
invisibility refers to how asylum seekers feel invisible in a large, urban city where people are too busy to be concerned about their individual lives. This comment also alludes to what is often seen as the main limitation in 360-degree VR: users cannot act or effect the scene in any meaningful way, that they are passive “passengers” (Dolan and Parets 2016) to another’s active experience. The “surveillance logic” that Rose (2018) critiques in the 360-degree type of VR is made literal here due to the transparent aesthetic of the 3D lidar scans. As users move through a shared apartment, we are able to see through the walls and watch other anonymous asylum seekers clean, eat, lie down, and go about their daily lives all while remaining invisible. This work also contains hints that it is questioning what constitutes documentary. During a scene mimicking the asylum interview process, the male interviewer bears down upon the interviewee/user in a low angle shot, asking whether they/we “have any documentary evidence” of the happenings that caused the subjects/us to flee in the first place (see figure 4). That this work lets that question stand without attempting to offer an answer suggests that users should start questioning the uses and meanings of “documentary evidence,” something that this work does by eschewing the observational realism of most other 360-degree VR documentaries. It is also important to note that this work is comprised of visible data points so that evidence of material, physical reality surrounds the user from all angles. The kind of evidence suggested by the 3D lidar scans is the evidence of being physically in a location and the evidence of experience, evidence that Limbo suggests might not be available in more realist modes of documentary.
Figure 4. Screencapture from *Limbo*
Low angle shot of the interviewer questioning the user/asylum seeker.

That the user is expected to both identify and disidentify with this work simultaneously also speaks to a mirroring of the modern experience of social alienation and the emerging impact of dataveillance. Dataveillance is the use of computer-based technologies to surveil people’s “actions and communications” (Clarke 1988). Rather than individually surveilling people through dataveillance, more often data about individuals are collected and then used to create patterns of behavior for larger groups. The uses of data collected this way is often not predetermined, as Rita Raley (2013) suggests, and the value of the data remains “unknown or uncertain until it is converted into the currency of information” (123). The use of an aesthetic that mirrors a collection of “unknown” and “uncertain” data points reflects doubly on both the type of documentary evidence this work is trying to foreground and the experience of being stuck in a system that is not programmed to recognize individual circumstances and humanity. *Limbo,* indeed, reveals some of the dehumanizing bureaucracy of the asylum-seeking process, as asylum seekers are treated as if they have machine-like memories and are able to remember detailed facts about their own lives and experiences with relevant dates and times. This is an
experience that is presented to users as a point cloud “pattern” of state surveillance, one that is anonymous at the same time that it feels ubiquitous, turning all people, places, and situations transparent and hyper-visible, not just other asylum seekers. While this work utilizes the voices of asylum seekers and tries to replicate the experience of seeking asylum in a European country, it also presents a plausible look into a state surveillance infrastructure which increasingly relies on forms of dataveillance over forms of panoptic-like visual surveillance and how it disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable populations. *Limbo* can also allow users to see something about themselves, their mode of monitoring others and/or about the depth of surveillance in their society, where surveillance targets not only asylum seekers but others living in the UK. London, for instance, is one of the most surveilled cities in the world, with about one closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera for every fourteen residents (Keegan 2020). While *Limbo* is specific, in many ways, to the experience of waiting through the long process of applying for asylum, attending multiple asylum interviews, and living disconnected from one’s loved ones who might be in another country, it also speaks to a broad loss of control of one’s data, one’s identity, and how one is “read” by surveillant technologies.

In her analysis of the role of the news media in being able to foster and challenge too-narrow representations identification and community, Shani Orgad (2011) suggests that the use of estrangement and defamiliarization, where we could “se[e] ourselves as others” (402), could be a necessary corollary to depictions of “the other.” This can be a type of “decentering” journalism that Géraldine Muhlmann (2008) indicates challenges the “unifying” mission of contemporary journalism. This type of journalism, instead of trying to build an acceptable consensus in its reporting strategies, pushes against constructions of “the other” and the national “self” to challenge an us/them dichotomy that most scholars agree pervades the landscape of
humanitarian news media and documentary representations. *Limbo* taps into this mode of estrangement through its aesthetics and the way it merges roles of asylum seeker and outsider to show users the reach of contemporary surveillance and how users too could be implicated within it. This should recall Sharfan’s counter-surveillance of his potential Nazi-like neighbors, in *Berliner Morgenpost*’s *So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin*, which is another moment that can challenge the user to think about their own surveillance practices, questioning whether they are truly “welcoming” to those seeking asylum and refuge in Germany. In *Limbo*, one sees a further challenge to the idea of “documentary evidence” that proves a refugee fits in a desired mold in order to stay, live, and work in a European country. This challenge to observational realism is also present in AJ Contrast’s *I am Rohingya* and *Forced to Flee*, which use animation to visualize the lack of physical evidence and to counter Myanmar’s official narrative about the ongoing genocide against the Rohingya.

It is notable that the projects set in Europe seem more self-consciously attentive to surveillance of refugees and asylum seekers. That NYT VR and UNVR’s projects seem less aware of the refugee camp as a site of surveillance is concerning and this lack of awareness can translate into a feeling that the user is imposing upon the lives of the subjects in a voyeuristic way, observing from a distance for the user’s own pleasure. Here, one can see an attempt to make users comfortable with what they already know, where vulnerable children lead users through their daily lives and reconfirm that children are resilient innocents, symbols of hope devoid of a political being of their own. *Forced to Flee, I am Rohingya, Limbo*, and *So Leben Flüchtlinge in Berlin* all attempt to make the distance between user and subject known and useful. Users can be asked to use their distance and agency to the advantage of the Rohingya refugees, rather than for the user’s own engagement and entertainment in *I am Rohingya* and
Forced to Flee, or asked to think about how one is implicated in watching and watching out for the behavior of refugees and asylum seekers in *Limbo* and *So Leben Flüchtlinge*. As such, by centering the user as a participant, some VR documentaries point to the user and their behavior as a problem that needs correcting along with addressing ongoing refugee crises.

The ability of different creators to construct situations where users are placed into surveillant spaces and asked to enact surveillance is something that will continue throughout my next three chapters, where we will see an even stronger link between the utilization of digital technologies to position users in roles that force them to see, experience, or enact surveillance. How do the representations of the subject/s and the user’s relationship to the subject/s or the subject matter change through the manipulation of technologies and interfaces and across different media, which place users into different relationships of action, reaction, and inaction?
Chapter Two – Counter-Surveillant Constraint: User as Outsider

Everyday Incarceration (@everydayincarceration) is a collaborative Instagram account that seeks to answer the question, “What does the legacy of mass incarceration look like?” by posting current and archival photography and video (Pickens 2016). Started in late 2014 by photo editor and visual producer Zara Katz and journalist Lisa Riordan Seville, the premise of Everyday Incarceration was inspired by Everyday Africa (@everydayafrica), an Instagram account created by photojournalist Peter DiCampo and journalist Austin Merrill to intervene in how Africa is portrayed by photojournalists and seen by non-African audiences. With Everyday Africa, DiCampo wanted to create “something more experiential,” a social media “stream” that mimics the everyday act of walking around and seeing the mundane rather than the stereotypical or reductive photographs of Africans, from the perspective of a non-African person in DiCampo’s case (Jacobs 2016: 94). Katz and Riordan Seville’s Everyday Incarceration intercedes similarly in the photographic record of mass incarceration, expanding beyond the normative cell interiors to create a social media “stream” of everyday experiences of those in jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers, a “stream” that can similarly intercede in the normative uses of Instagram, a social media platform known more for cultivating an aesthetic than educating other users.

Everyday Incarceration’s Instagram feed, as co-creator Zara Katz suggests, affords Instagram users a way to see images and stories “anew and also in a space where you’re not necessarily expecting to see” these people or experiences (Riordan Seville and Katz 2016). Katz herself saw a problem in how distanced she seemed from mass incarceration, especially considering that 1 in 40 adult U.S. residents are either incarcerated or subject to some form of carceral supervision (Minton, Beatty, and Zeng 2021), a statistic that does not account for the
families and communities impacted by someone’s incarceration. Everyday Incarceration tries to bridge this distance by “visualiz[ing] the issues and impacts of incarceration through a plurality of voices and lenses” extending beyond a finite prison sentence and visually responding to questions like, “What does it look like when a person reenters society and can’t find housing or a job? What are the stories of the women and men on the outside that are affected daily by the emotional and financial responsibilities of supporting a loved one in the system?” (Everyday Incarceration 2015). Everyday Incarceration follows a kind of nonlinear and nonhierarchical “database logic” (Manovich 2001) where the narrative link between photographs and projects becomes a function of a willing user who is able to see and make throughlines between the disparate projects posted. Links between different projects on this feed are connected through hashtags, which can operate as an intimate form of network-building as hashtags are “ways that things in the world touch other things in world” (Rambukkana 2015: 5) and depending on a hashtag’s use, can create the ability for singular hashtag uses to “coalesce into a larger collective storytelling” (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020: xxx). This method of collective storytelling can be seen in Everyday Incarceration’s hashtags related to places and prisons like #philly or #rikers, specific themes or experiences, like #aginginprison for projects about growing old and dealing with medical complications while serving long, often life sentences, or #wedotimetoo for projects featuring loved ones of those who are incarcerated, to Everyday Incarceration’s most frequently used hashtags, #everydayincarceration, #prisonphotography, #massincarceration, #legacyofmassincarceration and #everydayeverywhere. This final hashtag connects this project back to the Everyday Projects, including Everyday Africa and others that have come about in its wake.
What we can see in Everyday Incarceration’s project is the use of social media to attempt to bridge physical and digital distances and to connect people across these distances through hashtags. There are multiple layers of technological and relational distances to unpack here. Technologically, there are distances between recording equipment that captures the stories of one group and the digital mediation through which another group, distant in both space and time, receives these stories. Relationally, there are distances between people in cells and behind bars, their loved ones and community members stigmatized within the “long shadow” of the criminal justice system (Combessie 2002), documentarians who come into communities to record and report others’ experiences, and audiences that may or may not seem to have any connection to either the people who are incarcerated or mass incarceration. For Everyday Incarceration, there is an attempt to bring together the experiential “stream” of Instagram, different voices through hyperlinked hashtags, and the willingness of users scrolling through their personal social media feeds to stop and look. The issue of distance and how digital documentaries on incarceration position an audience assumed to be outside of the criminal justice system is also the focus of this chapter. Many digital documentaries on incarceration start from an assumption similar to that of Everyday Incarceration’s co-creator Zara Katz, that users are or feel distant from mass incarceration in the U.S. and these projects can and should change that. Unlike the “stream” of Instagram that Katz and Riordan Seville tap into to create a sense of connection or collectivity, many digital documentaries—especially those that utilize second-person positioning—are more self-contained and are often single-user experiences. This chapter asks how this change in reach and user experience might alter the attempt of digital documentaries to bring users closer to mass incarceration in the U.S. and whether second-person positioning is a limitation to these projects that reifies us/them boundaries along lines of race and class rather than complicating them.
Unlike Everyday Incarceration, the projects I analyze in this chapter give users specific roles and try to situate users more individually in relation to mass incarceration in the U.S. Users are positioned as fellow riders on a bus taking prison inmates’ loved ones for visitations to correctional facilities in Upstate New York in *A Temporary Contact* (Peled and Kolster 2017) and users act as co-investigators into the prison-centered economy of Fremont County, Colorado in *Prison Valley: The Prison Industry* (Dufresne and Brault 2009). Both digital documentaries turn away from the stereotyped spectacle of the prison inmate or the prison interior and turn towards what is seen as outside of the prison walls, the experiences of the loved ones of incarcerated individuals and the towns that grow up around prisons and whose economies are tied to prisons. Rather than reaffirm an inside/outside binary in these works, they endeavor to show how the people and places outside of jails and prisons are a part of mass incarceration and both works simultaneously bring users in as participants while keeping users at a slight remove from both those who are incarcerated and those on the outside who are the subjects of the documentaries.

In constraining the user’s ability to access fully the knowledges and worldviews of the works’ subjects, these digital documentaries draw on and change documentary’s “most classic [filmmaker-subject-audience] formulation”: I speak about them to you (Nichols 2017: 42). In this configuration, there are meaningful distances between filmmakers, subjects, and audiences. Here, a filmmaker from outside of the subject’s community creates a film addressed to an audience that is also not part of that community (and potentially also distant from the filmmaker). The filmmaker is in the speaking position, the “I,” and can retain control of the filmmaking tools and of the images, sounds, and representations that result. This is not a formula for instant exploitation, rather, when filmmakers actively seek out marginalized social groups to
make documentaries about, the result can be further marginalization and disempowerment for the subjects. In the digital counterpoint of this formulation, it is important that the audience’s position changes; no longer do we only receive the filmmaker’s representation, we are now positioned as users with potentially more agency to navigate and interact with a work’s digital interface. By introducing second-person address into the mix, the digital documentaries analyzed here bring in another layer of complexity. Users sit ambiguously between being hailed as co-subjects through roleplay and second-person address and being positioned as co-authors with the ability to dictate some of their own terms of engagement.

The high rate of incarceration in the United States means that millions of peoples’ lives and everyday experiences are directly informed by mass incarceration. As Michelle Brown (2009) argues, however, there is “a privileged group of [U.S.] citizens who do not know this experience” (7) of either being incarcerated or having a friend or loved one who is or has been incarcerated. Thus, someone within this privileged group, a group often determined by race and class in the U.S., becomes a “distanced citizen, a penal spectator” (8), someone with the ability and choice to access information about incarceration or turn away, to make judgments that determine which groups in society should be punished, how much jails, detention centers, or prisons are funded, or not engage in these conversations at all. In their work on the pornographic and ethnographic gazes in documentary, Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols (1991) similarly suggest that distance has been seen as “requisite for sight, realism, desire, and power” (223). Indeed, there is an overlap in Brown’s analysis of the “distanced citizen” and “penal spectator” and audience positioning in ethnographic, observational documentary, a mode of documentary which allows the audience to “experience the thrill of strangeness and the apprehension of an [o]ther while also providing the distance from the [o]ther that assures safety.
The effect of realism is to allow the spectator to dominate the other vicariously without openly acknowledging complicity with the very apparatus and tactics of domination” (ibid). This is certainly a hallmark of some observational documentaries, where the audience “observe[s] the people in the film without being seen, assured that they can make no claims upon us” (MacDougall 1975: 121). As articulated in chapter one, a central contention over the use of realism and what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) identifies as an “aesthetic of objectivity” in documentary is the creation of a seemingly stable, omniscient viewpoint that masks the filmmaker’s perspective. Here, we might also add that observational realism masks how observation serves a desiring audience, an audience who, within this framework, is given power through the ability to navigate an interface and to observe and have their desire to see and know others fulfilled. Digital documentaries on incarceration are largely created by people who have never been incarcerated and are geared toward this outsider audience who might otherwise lack knowledge and/or experience with the criminal justice system. This is an audience that is assumed not to know about practices of solitary confinement or the look and feeling of being inside a prison cell, who is assumed to be distant from the spaces and experiences of incarceration and, correspondingly, has not experienced how the prison-industrial complex marks the people, spaces, and landscapes outside of prisons and so, perhaps, lacks insight into how they might exist in relation to this system or be the “distanced” spectator-citizen that Michelle Brown theorizes.

Similar to chapter one, this chapter tackles issues of who controls the means of representation and how this might change if the technology also changes. Discussed in this chapter, however, are documentary media often considered more interactive than something like a 360-degree virtual reality video that only allows users to look around and selectively pay
attention to different aspects of visual and auditory media. By contrast, these digital documentaries can include mixes of photography, video, text, and sound, navigating a larger platform, hyperlinks to further information, discussion forums, and/or user-uploaded content. Additionally, they often attempt to move users more towards being active interactants with the content or project’s platform, in some form, rather than just witnesses to another’s experiences. More so than physically moving one’s head or body, these types of works allow for a kind of control over the subject matter and ability to chart one’s own path to an extent that might potentially violate the ethics of a “proper distance” where one should listen to and recognize another person (Silverstone 2007), analyzed in chapter one. This chapter takes as one of its core questions whether users of these projects align with Brown’s “distanced citizens” and “penal spectators,” or whether these projects can reframe or change the user’s relationship to mass incarceration.

The digital documentaries in this chapter attempt to counter a distanced spectator positioning by bringing users closer to their subject matter and making them constrained participants in it. These digital documentaries not only further make clear the spread of mass incarceration, but they also implicate users within socially invisible “carceral spaces” by eroding the already porous boundary between inside and outside of the walls of prisons, jails, and detention centers. While this is not unique to digital documentaries, their attempts to place users into specific roles relative to the subjects and subject matter is particular to their technological constraints.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Prison Valley} and \textit{A Temporary Contact} utilize the constraints of their different digital interfaces to mimic temporally and spatially the kinds of constraints experienced by those more disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration. \textit{Prison Valley} spatially traps users in a hotel room interface and within the construct of an ongoing but never-ending investigation
whereas *A Temporary Contact* uses “parallel time” to position users on a highly structured and routinized bus ride with women going to visit their loved ones who are incarcerated. Both projects play off of an ambiguity between inside/outside prison boundaries by replicating the look and feel of the carceral inside on the outside, revealing these outside spaces to be “carceral spaces,” spaces that are more indicative of an “interpenetration rather than a demarcation and separation” (Moran, Gill, and Conlon 2013: 239). It is important that these works focus on “interpenetration” in order to push against what Jennifer Turner (2016) notes as a state-defined project of carving out “a defined pocket of space” to house specific groups of people categorized as “undesirables” (31). This is a form of racializing and classed state control, control that desires to maintain a boundary between “us” and “them” and that is bolstered by the illusion that prisons are bounded and separated from the rest of society. That these projects actively seek to push against a defined boundary between prison and society is meaningful, as they work to reinscribe everyday spaces and relationships on the outside of prisons as also carceral and deeply connected to prisons and the people incarcerated within them. Users, positioned through second-person address and roleplay as participants and implicated subjects, are forced to see and experience these expansive boundaries of mass incarceration.

By giving users a role within the work, by suggesting they too are participating in it, can this counteract a user-subject hierarchy where the user remains at a privileged distance and the subject is made to represent for the user? No, not entirely. Indeed, these projects cannot overcome this hierarchy and by largely turning away from showing or engaging with anyone incarcerated, they do not try to, necessarily. What they can do is make more clear to the users that they might be operating in this privileged positioned. User positioning, as in chapter one, becomes important to thinking through the distances charted throughout this chapter. These
projects attempt to maintain and trouble a classed and racialized hierarchy between users and subjects and replicates some of the potentially exploitative elements of the “I speak about them to you” configuration. We will see this especially with *A Temporary Contact* where users observe and read about the experiences of primarily Black women from New York City on their 30-hour bus ride to visit incarcerated loved ones in disparate rural correctional facilities Upstate. This work uses observational realism to situation users on a bus, with these women, along with text messages that situate “you” are a co-rider and -experiencer. These women’s experiences are made observable for a user who is framed as not from this community, but we are also kept purposefully distant from the totality of these women’s experiences, an enforced distance that can make apparent that the user is not one of the subjects and needs to respect the differences and distances between user and subject. By contrast, *Prison Valley* forcefully keeps users locked into a position as a film noir-style investigator; someone who is a skeptical outsider and must accumulate clues and follow leads in order to figure out the truth behind the prison-city relationship in Fremont County. As we will see in my analysis of *Prison Valley*’s discussion forums, when a user’s identity does not align with that of being an “outsider,” it can lead to a rejection of not only the work’s user positioning but also its goals and the knowledge it attempts to create. When not rejected outright, however, explicitly positioning the user as an outsider can create the potential in second-person digital documentaries to clarify the oft-unspoken and usually unseen relationship between the “you” (users/audience members) and the “them” (the subjects). In other words, instead of collapsing user-subject roles, as virtual reality projects often attempt, for instance, these projects can maintain and accentuate the distance between documentary subjects and users in order to make users aware of this distance. Making users
aware that they are outside of but, if in the U.S., still implicated within mass incarceration is the outcome of interacting with these digital documentaries on incarceration.

If users are given access to spaces seemingly “over there” or unknown to them with the projects analyzed in chapter one, this chapter reverses that gaze, working to defamiliarize what social discourse has rendered normal about mass incarceration. These works attempt to show how strange it is to take specific racialized and classed groups of people out of their communities and transport them to whiter and often more rural landscapes, to use their prison labor to construct towns and manufacture objects for everyday use out of prisons, and to even see oneself as distant from a carceral system that bolsters the economies and narratives of everyday life in so many places. Through experiential counter-surveillance that shows how the carceral system permeates the everyday in the U.S., the outsider role that users are positioned within will be revealed to have a larger place within the system. Thinking alongside Michel Foucault, Michael Welch (2011) points to two moves that counter-surveillance, or what he terms counterveillance, often makes to counter panoptic prison surveillance: “turn the prison inside out” and “watch the watchers” (304). The counter-surveillance in the projects analyzed here does not “turn the prison inside out.” Instead, what we see in these projects is an attempt to turn the outside into the prison visually and experientially. Both projects present space and time outside of the prison as carceral and allow users to experience this in order to lay bare how the U.S. carceral system is not isolated within particular spaces of incarceration, but rather has a reach that impacts the daily lives of everyone in the U.S., as argued by these projects. Indeed, meaningful opportunities for resistance to surveillance or mass incarceration do not exist within the logic of A Temporary Contact and Prison Valley. While there is an interventionist logic in these projects, rather than being from radical or community-minded documentary practices of co-creation that prioritize
knowledges and experiences from marginalized populations, these interventions are from liberal documentary-focused institutions, such as Franco-German network ARTE and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Both ARTE and the NFB are heavily invested in documentary, digital production, and humanitarian social justice initiatives that signal the kinds of communities and nations they want to create and build, and both produce documentaries that draw on institutionalized methods of observational and participatory documentary filmmaking. These are organizations that occupy a middle ground of production between government-created works and independent works, and the experiential counter-surveillance they offer is of institutional surveillance that is imbedded within privileged media institutions itself. In this way, these projects differentiate themselves from the much-lauded radical potentials for digital documentaries, where recent scholarship suggests there is more potential for collaboration and co-creation as part of the process, even over and above any kind of “finalized” project. As we will see, this limits what they can show and whose experiences are prioritized within the projects.

While this chapter analyzes the role of the user and its importance to the creation of an experiential counter-surveillance in these works, I question what is new or different about the ways in which these projects position users, the types of knowledges they aim to create, and even their form and style. Through my analysis of the incorporation of the observational documentary style in A Temporary Contact and the noir-style forced positioning and framing in Prison Valley, I argue that though the element of roleplay that users engage in is important to these works, there are strong continuities between digital documentaries on incarceration and seemingly more “traditional” styles of documentary and film associated with linear media. These continuities in style, form, and how users and filmmakers are positioned relative to the subjects and subject
matter suggest a need to think of digital documentaries as evolving from the documentary
tradition.

In contrast to the “invisible” or masked role of the filmmaker and audience in
observational filmmaking, positioning users as quasi-protagonists at least makes clear the once
invisible audience. This chapter articulates the need to address how users can be given roles
within nonfiction media, while at the same time kept from modes of participation that amount to
collaboration, co-creation, or co-authorship, which has been the focus of most scholarship on the
topic of user positioning in digital documentary media. This chapter analyzes two digital
documentaries where the user’s constrained role is brought to the forefront and the user themself
will have to take on the burden of being a non-participant protagonist. The ability to stand
outside of a carceral system and know it through these digital projects and not one’s own
experience is a function of race and class privilege; thus, I argue that these projects do not
resolve the issues of distance that Brown illuminates in her theorization of the relationship
between those who watch from a safe distance and those who are watched. My analysis of these
projects will elucidate some of the limitations of attempting to immerse users using
observational, quasi-interactive means. While these projects cannot transcend distances and the
attempt to do so remains questionable, the second-person roleplay within them can clarify
without collapsing the hierarchies between subjects, audiences, filmmakers and, now, digital
interfaces.

In the following section, I will contextualize my analysis within theorizations of mass
incarceration and the spread of the carceral system in the U.S. beyond the walls of a seemingly
enclosed prison, before discussing some of the problems and issues surrounding attempts to
visualize incarceration in documentary media. When users are confronted with a broadened
carceral system rather than taken “behind the scenes” into a prison seemingly separated from the rest of society, what and who is surveilled shifts. An aspect of this, as we will see in my analysis of *A Temporary Contact*, is that the prison inmate’s loved ones become subject to a process of “secondary prisonization” (Comfort 2003), a process that users join along with from a distance through this mobile messenger application documentary. Another aspect of the shift in what and who is surveilled is how the carceral system becomes fundamentally linked with industry and my analysis will show that *Prison Valley* makes clear how U.S. cities grow around and are marked by the prison-industrial complex. While *A Temporary Contact* is an individual experience, *Prison Valley* was a project to be interacted with individually and also shared with others, allowing for engagement across discussion forums and through social media. I will turn to these discussion forums to analyze the backlash to the constrained positioning within the documentary, asking whether *Prison Valley* “failed” if so many of its users rejected their outsider positioning and reacted against the counter-surveillant moves it makes as a documentary.

**Mass Incarceration in the United States**

The U.S. has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with 565 per 100,000 adult U.S. residents incarcerated (Sawyer and Wagner 2023). According to the most recent reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the number of prison and jail inmates has trended downwards over the last decade (Carson 2020, Minton, Beatty, and Zeng 2021, Zeng and Minton 2021, Carson 2022, Zeng 2022). While rates of incarceration have fallen most for Black men and women, the BJS reports that Black people are, overall, the most imprisoned population in the U.S. (Carson 2022) and are jailed at a rate of 3.4 times that of white people (Zeng 2022). Even with the downward trends in some of these statistics, incarceration in the U.S. remains highly
racialized and “no other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities” (Alexander 2012: 6). Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit prison reform organization, further qualifies the recent downward trend in incarceration by noting that most changes are only in a few states, are not substantive enough, and do not adequately address necessary policy reforms like shifting from incarceration to fines, community service, and the implementation of new social services (Wagner 2018). Often, when states do decrease their incarceration rates, as in California and New York, they end up shifting people from state- and federal-run prisons to city- and country-run jails or relying on systems of probation and monitoring on the outside, still leaving people ensnared in the criminal justice system (Story 2019).

While some might feel that U.S. rates of incarceration must be high due to a correspondingly high crime rate, this idea has been thoroughly challenged by scholars who point to how incarceration is an industry in the U.S. According to Angela Davis (2003), the intent of mobilizing the term prison-industrial complex is to push back against this all-too-common idea of causality whereby an increase in crime equals an increase in incarceration. Davis instead argues that “prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” (84) more so than an earnest desire to solve crime-related problems.45 Indeed, as Michelle Alexander (2012) convincingly argues in her grand re-historicization of incarceration as an extension of slavery, rates of incarceration in the U.S. started to increase dramatically in the 1970s with President Richard Nixon’s “war on drugs” campaign. And even as nothing much changed in terms of crime rates or drug use, incarceration rates would continue to increase through the decades due to a series of laws changing what constitutes a crime and increasing the length of sentences, alongside the growth in funding to the FBI and police forces that led directly to increased growth
in incarceration. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) puts it, “Prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis” (26). Prisons and jails are often used to house people that the state sees as unwanted or as a threat, to, as Loïc Wacquant (2009) suggests, disappear the “supernumerary factions” of lower-class people who “rebel” against their lot by not conforming to social subjugation (xvi).

I follow Michelle Alexander’s (2012) conceptualization of mass incarceration as that which encompasses the larger system beyond just the walls of a jail or prison and beyond the period of incarceration: “a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship” (12-13). Alexander terms mass incarceration “the new Jim Crow,” which she argues is a “stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control” (4). Mass incarceration is not only a way to mark people as social “outsiders” due to having been incarcerated “inside” of a prison (Turner 2016: 48), but it pervades U.S. legal institutions and practices, as Alexander elaborates, “ranging from racial profiling to biased sentencing politics, political disenfranchisement, and legalized employment discrimination” (184). Mass incarceration becomes a way to mark specific populations as deviant and to control them, their lives, and their life outcomes both in- and outside of correctional facilities.\textsuperscript{46} The system of mass incarceration is so pervasive that even reform efforts end up enacting a kind of “carceral humanism” (Kilgore 2014), which includes efforts to monitor people after incarceration, through probation or electronic monitoring, for instance, as well as branding jails and prisons focused on gender, mental health, and addiction as social justice reform (Kilgore 2014, Schept 2014). As I will discuss, Alexander’s “virtual bars and virtual walls” of mass
incarceration are ones that the projects analyzed within this chapter undertake to expose and make more visible, showing how mass incarceration builds towns and communities and turns inmate’s family members into quasi-inmates.

Digital projects focusing on incarceration are nothing new, indeed, for at least the past twenty years, incarceration has been a focus of digital works from data-driven infographics and webdocumentaries to 360-degree virtual reality documentaries and interactive transmedia web projects. These projects have all developed their own strategies for how to deal with the multiple distances between people who are incarcerated, their loved ones on the outside, post-incarceration experiences that look similar to what was experienced during a prison sentence, and users and audiences who may not be familiar with the experiences of being incarcerated, this final group being the primary audience for these projects. *360 Degrees: Perspectives on the US Criminal Justice System* (Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson 2001) was perhaps the first in a long line of digital documentaries on incarceration. Existing as an interactive website, it promised a “360 degree” view of incarceration and centered the stories of eight men and women who were incarcerated at the time.47 In a review for *The Village Voice*, Francine Russo (2001) declared, “It’s a knockout, taking debate about incarceration out of the egghead realm and making it visceral” by incorporating audio interviews, photography, and other data about incarceration. The ability to “mak[e] it visceral” feeds into the idea that technological innovation moves us closer and closer to reality and emphasizes the desire of users for a real, material, felt connection to someone or something. Here, specifically, this desire is twinned with one for non-incarcerated users to have this “visceral” experience (as the experience of incarceration is already very visceral and lived for those who are or who have been incarcerated).
In the years since this project was first developed, digital representations of incarceration have multiplied. Given issues of access to highly controlled areas of jails and prisons, these projects have had to get creative with how or whether to visualize the insides of these spaces and how to convey the experiences of their incarcerated subjects. Similar to Everyday Incarceration on Instagram, many digital documentaries contend with how to visualize a system which knows no strict spatial and temporal boundaries. Sharon Daniel’s *Public Secrets* (2007) is an “interactive testimonial” database documentary that removes the specter of the criminalized individual who is incarcerated in favor of a text and audio-only interface. Users listen to the words of the incarcerated women in California whom Daniel interviewed for this project while clicking through the text-based interface to hear more testimonies along thematic, overlapping categories. This project performs and visualizes how these women are caught between inside and outside, bare-life and human-life, and the public secret of mass incarceration and a utopia of prison abolition. Another work with an interface that challenges inside/outside boundaries is *The Deeper They Bury Me* (Angad Singh Bhalla and Ted Biggs 2015), a webdocumentary on Herman Wallace, who spent decades in solitary confinement after being suspected of murdering a prison guard. Users are positioned as if receiving a 20-minute call from Wallace during which one can interact with an animated panorama, clicking on different spaces to hear about Wallace’s life experiences and learn about aspects of the larger socio-political circumstances of racial segregation and the need for resistance movements like the Black Panther Party. Along similar lines, some prison reform and abolition advocacy groups use data visualization to reveal a system that disappears people, can itself seem invisible, and is highly normalized as a valid method of punishment in society. The Prison Policy Initiative, for instance, places data-driven approaches at the center of their activism, using data analysis coupled with graphics to
communicate the often-inaccessible nature of federal and state data (“About the Prison Policy Initiative”).

Even more incarceration-focused digital documentaries evince a desire that I analyzed in my first chapter: the desire to see and experience seemingly forbidden or off-limits places using the affordances of newer technologies like consumer-level virtual reality (VR). 2015-2017 saw the release of three 360-degree VR documentaries on solitary confinement: RYOT Film’s *Confinement* (Matthew Cooke 2015), Guardian VR’s *6X9: A Virtual Experience of Solitary Confinement* (Francesca Panetta and Lindsay Poulton 2016) and Emblematic Group and Frontline’s co-produced *After Solitary* (Cassandra Herrman and Lauren Mucciolo 2017). These three VR documentaries were released during a period of heightened media attention around the impacts of solitary confinement (Clifford and White 2020), where President Barack Obama (2016) even penned an editorial in *The Washington Post* urging the reconsideration of this type of punishment and detailing his actions as president to curb its use. UK newspaper *The Guardian* produced the most notable of these, *6X9*. The webpage for *6X9* greets users thusly: “Welcome to your cell. You’ll be here 23 hours day. Can you handle it?” Using second-person address to beckon and challenge users, this work promises users the ability to experience what it is like in solitary confinement. If users accept the challenge, they will find that the carnivalesque appeal fades away, as *6X9* offers a harrowing window into the psychological toll that solitary confinement takes on the people forced to endure it. VR documentaries show how creators can visualize solitary confinement without video and photographic access to the interior spaces of incarceration and in a way that doesn’t replicate a repressive function of photography that criminalizes the subject. VR documentaries attempt to overcome a gap in knowledge and distance between those who have experienced solitary confinement and those who have not by
exploiting the VR-created feeling of presence where the user, their body, and their emotional reactions become a stand-in for an incarcerated person.

Every digital documentary on incarceration contends, in some way, with the apparent inside/outside boundary between the prison and those incarcerated within it and everything and everyone on the outside. Though there still seems to exist a commonplace idea that there is a well-defined separation between “criminals” on the inside and “law-abiding citizens” on the outside, scholars have pointed to a much more permeable and ambiguous border. In her analysis, Jennifer Turner (2016) argues that the idea of this separation allows the distinctions in geography (i.e. rural prisons often house people from more populous cities) and social location (criminals are imprisoned and law-abiding citizens are free) to be “ideological obfuscations that serve to hide the crucial role of prisons in current society” (28). Here, Turner refers simultaneously to the use of prisons as a mechanism of racialized and classed social control and to the ways in which the prison-industrial complex is central to the U.S. economy. This insider-outsider binary is purposefully exploited by state and media representations, for Turner, to bolter state control and erase the racial violence of this form of control by making it seem natural and normal. Christopher Barnes (2020) adds that one of the effects of this is that it “naturalizes the physical and imagined spatial distance between those in prison and those on the outside” such that it is hard for incarcerated people on the “inside” to build solidarity with nonincarcerated people on the “outside” (64). While most scholarly work on incarceration affirms that lack of stable boundaries between prisons and the rest of society or those who are incarcerated and those who are not, this discourse persists and helps to maintain state control over the narratives of crime and punishment in society.
As we will see in the next section, just showing spaces of incarceration is not enough to overcome the idea of an inside/outside binary. When something is hidden and obscured, documentarians often respond by attempting to reveal it visually and make people aware of its existence. The next section will discuss the ways in which standard film and TV representations of incarcerated people often end up re-criminalizing someone “behind bars” or humanizing and creating empathetic individuals out of certain specific people. These are representations created and circulated widely through documentary media which digital documentaries often work against, including the ones analyzed later in this chapter. Gaining access to prison interiors, through prison tours or permitted filming problematizes the myth of transparency; prisons are bureaucratic institutions where regulation is as tightly controlled as the meanings that can be generated from images created under these circumstances. The problems of transparency and access give further weight and importance to the need to look around places of incarceration and seek out the effects of incarceration on people and landscapes on the “outside,” where one can see a struggle between normative and alternative narratives of criminalization and incarceration.

**Challenges to Representing Incarceration in Documentary Media**

Before moving into my analysis of *A Temporary Contact* and *Prison Valley*, this section provides context for how incarceration is most often represented in documentary media and the problems of stereotypical depictions that reiterate boundaries between the spectacle of the “criminal” and the viewer who watches from a distance. Contrary to Michel Foucault’s (1977) pronouncement in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that the public spectacle of punishment has shifted to an internalized, institutionalized obedience to norms, most scholars suggest there is a consistent history of fiction and nonfiction media publicly showing
punishment, crime, and incarceration. Thomas Mathiesen (1997) even contends that we are living in a “viewer society” where the many can watch the few, the stakes of this “viewer society” become particularly important in the context of Brown’s “distanced citizens” watching and judging people who have been or are incarcerated. As Gina Dent argues, “The history of film has always been wedded to the representation of incarceration” and filmic images have aided in producing the prison as a “naturalized part of our social landscape” (qtd. in Davis 2003: 17).

Similar to how filmic images have helped to naturalize the prison and prison-as-punishment in U.S. society, they have also help to construct tropes of imprisonment that carry throughout film and television: “prison stripes or jumpsuits, bars and wire fences, aimless bodies moving in an exercise yard or assembled in mess halls” (Griffith 2016: 7).

It is not only historical representations of incarceration on film that are at play here, but incarceration has also become even more visible on television over the last twenty years (Cheliotis 2010). Television is where many scholars locate the ubiquity of “images of criminality” (Fuggle 2015: 223), images often “dominated by the infotainment-type programming popularized during the twenty-first century” (Cecil 2015: 102). Dawn K. Cecil (2015) particularly pinpoints the popularity of reality TV prison documentaries pioneered by the MSNBC show Lockup (2005-2016), which Cecil has called the birth of “the modern prison documentary series” (86). The popularity of this network cable series would lead to a variety of networks, like truTV, Discovery Channel and Animal Planet, to create their own series, often under the guise of going “behind” bars and giving viewers an “inside look” into the usually unseen interiors of jails and prisons.

To an extent, these media representations do make visible a group of people that are often rendered invisible within larger U.S. culture. As discussed, incarceration has been a way for
cities to “solve” their social and economic problems “by extensively and repeatedly removing people from disordered, and deindustrialized milieus and depositing them somewhere else” (Gilmore 2007: 14), often a rural “somewhere else” far distant from their relatives, friends, and other community members. When people who are incarcerated do show up in most popular media, however, these representations are often narrow and stereotypical. Reality TV representations, for instance, tend to overemphasize larger penal institutions and focus on inmates convicted of violent crimes or who have gang affiliations (Cecil and Leitner 2009). This narrow focus on specific types of people who are incarcerated creates and maintains a norm for depictions of prison inmates and these stereotyped depictions end up affirming stark distinctions between violent, gang-affiliated “criminals” on-screen and those watching them on television. John Riofrio (2012) calls these types of shows “spectacles of incarceration” for their treatment of the people in prison that allow viewers to “fulfill particular voyeuristic fantasies” about primarily Black and brown people as “others” (151). This is an othering that is, then, not only highly racialized but also serves to marginalize these physically restrained groups even further while constructing a boundary between a non-incarcerated viewer who is able to consume these images and the people who are in the images but unable to control their own depictions.

More images of the inside of prisons or jails or different types of incarcerated people, however, are not appropriate solutions to countering the stereotyping of incarcerated people and the common tropes of incarceration. These images and representations, even if supposedly well-intentioned, often do not interrogate the logics of punishment and criminalization underlying mass incarceration. “Conceiving of the solution to the invisibility of incarceration and the disappearance of prisoners as simply a matter of exposing the prison’s internal scenery does little,” according to Brett Story (2019), “to denaturalize the prison as a reified fact on the ground
of modern capitalist life, nor does it upset the carceral order as a legitimate system of social
differentiation” (xiii). Having the visual evidence of the system “exposed” as one can see in TV
shows like MSNBC’s Lockup, Discovery Channel’s Behind Bars (2010), or A&E’s Behind Bars:
Rookie Year (2015-2016) often fails to make clear how incarceration operates as a racialized
system of social classification and punishment, instead serving to naturalize and legitimize the
distinction between the classes of people who are imprisoned and classes of viewers who are
“free.”

The question of access and whether it can overcome distance comes to the fore with the
prison tour. Prison tours are not entirely divorced from the conversation of media
representations, as movies and TV often frame their purposes through the language of tourism, as
in the idea of going “behind” walls and bars in the titles of some popular reality TV documentary
series, for instance. Dominique Moran (2015) situates Prison Valley, analyzed later in this
chapter, as an “online tour” of Cañon City, Colorado (144) and Cecil (2015) refers to MSNBC’s
Lockup as a “televised prison tour” (88). One might think that someone able to interact with an
actual place of incarceration, who has gone behind, inside, or beyond the walls, would be privy
to the inner workings of incarceration. These tours, however, can reaffirm the distanced, “penal
spectatorship” of which Michelle Brown writes, especially considering that many fall into the
category of “dark tourism,” or, tourism of sites of death and disaster often with historical links to
state violence (Lennon and Foley 2000). Like the voyeurism of prison representations on
television, tours of spaces formerly used as prisons often present both the spaces and stories of
former prisoners for the consumption and personal knowledge of the visitor (Chartrand 2017)
which allows visitors to believe they are different from those who were incarcerated (Walby and
Piché 2011). Additionally, sites of former prisons tend to situate the brutalities of incarceration
as in the past through a narrative of reform (ibid). Touring active prisons also does not seem to offer much more clarity, as visitors are shown a strict, sanitized narrative from the perspective of the penal institution itself that elides the actual experiences of incarceration (Piché and Walby 2010).

It seems especially true that what looks like full access and full transparency can create a false façade of mindful rehabilitation. This is the effect of the Canadian government-produced Beyond the Fence: A Virtual Tour of a Canadian Penitentiary (Correctional Service Canada 2015). This tour affords users the ability to move virtually through some of the different spaces within a prison by navigating around 360-degree panoramic photographs. Guided by an older man’s voiceover narration, users on this tour click through different sections to move from outside of the prison, up through mock-ups of different floors and levels of security, to a workshop where inmates can learn a trade. This virtual tour hails non-incarcerated users through a desire to know a seemingly forbidden site, asking those potentially interested, “Have you ever wondered what a federal institution looks like?” before suggesting users can “see beyond the fence” in this work. Initially, the tour creates a stark contrast between the user and a probable inmate of this prison. Users are positioned as distant enough from the probability of incarceration that they can desire seeing inside, rather than being forced to serve time inside. Once users are taken inside, it is clear that Vicki Chartrand’s (2017) assessment rings true: Beyond the Fence “provides visitors with a cleansed view of prisons in Canada” (679). Most of the areas look brand new, even the cells that ostensibly show prisoners’ personal belongings look uninhabited and users see no humans or human-like avatars in any part of the interior spaces. Instead, there is a strong emphasis throughout on an inmate’s orderly movement from entering as a criminal to exiting as a responsible member of society who has received job training and education during
their time of incarceration. This prison tour refers to the prison as “the institution” or an “institution,” so it makes sense that viewers would be shown 360-degree images of a classroom or health facilities as the prison is configured as just another institution for social welfare in the logic of this tour. Ultimately, incarceration is rendered light, bright, and normal in a way that brings to mind Foucault’s (1977) rhetorical question: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (228).

While many portrayals of incarceration can be spectacular and voyeuristic like reality TV shows or bright and sanitized like a prison tour, another common strain are those that humanize a selective group or one particular person who is incarcerated. Alexandra Juhasz (2004) calls these types of representations “victim documentaries” and Brett Story (2017) has termed documentaries that attempt to humanize one or only a few incarcerated people “humanizing prison cinema.” The intention in these types of works, as indicated by Story’s use of “humanizing,” is to produce portrayals of sympathetic individuals for the supposedly non-incarcerated viewers to understand and feel for. Juhasz, however, makes clear that these documentaries exploit and further exaggerate the power dynamics already at play within many documentaries. This is a common problem of documentary itself as many documentaries are produced by those with ability, capital, and a level of comparative security about those whose voices are often marginalized for viewers who themselves are also distant from the subject/s or who come to see themselves as distanced through victimization of the subject/s.48 Onto this concern, Story adds that many prison-related documentaries replicate the power structures and ideologies of imprisonment, by, for instance, showing people detained and behind bars and asking questions of innocence and guilt, even when not overtly trying to exploit people for “infotainment.” Similar to the limited information attained from a prison tour, if left unquestioned, the
structures set up by penal institutions themselves do not allow documentarians or viewers to break away from the “logics that reinforce and reproduce the carceral order” in order to envision a different, decarceral future (455).

The terrain changes when shifting away from questions of how to make visible those who are incarcerated into attempting to create images of the system of incarceration or, rather, mass incarceration. In her article reflecting on the difficulties of visually recording the underseen and underdiscussed experiences of women in prison, Ruby C. Tapia (2008) generalizes the challenges of realistically visualizing mass incarceration: “The structural, geographic, and institutional properties of the prison elude visualization in material ways. Because the prison and its populations are largely invisible, because they are made to exist only in the jettisoned reaches of our society’s landscapes, the possibilities of knowing them through seeing are foreclosed” (687). In recognition of the difficulty of adequately imaging something that is “mass,” systemic, and often historical, scholars, activists, and artists turn towards methods like counter-visuality which can partially illuminate the very “jettisoned reaches of our society’s landscapes” that Tapia argues are beyond vision and seeing. A purveyor of counter-visual ethnography of prisons, Judah Schept (2014), suggests this kind of method can disrupt the invisible and normalized system of mass incarceration by “look[ing] for what is not ‘there’”, chasing down “the ghosts of racialized regimes past, the sediment of dirty industry that seeps into and imbues the present, and the trans-historical and trans-local circulation of carceral logics and epistemologies that structure the contemporary empirical realities we observe, record, and analyze” (203). What this looks like in Schept’s own work is a written and photographic ethnography of a town, its history, its people, and industry, and how these are all imbued with and entangled within the system of mass incarceration. Unable to photograph the interiors of prisons in Kentucky, Schept uses this
method to chart the visible but often normalized aspects of mass incarceration on the outside. This disentangling of what seems normal serves as a method of counter-surveillance in its attempt to pinpoint the boundaries of state power and the extent of carcerality in daily life outside and around Kentucky’s prisons.

By focusing on these borders and boundaries, then, one might be able to make perceptible normalized aspects of mass incarceration that are often invisible in social discourse. The focus of looking back at the system of mass incarceration and attempting to make it clearer is what this chapter tackles. The interactive works discussed in the rest of this chapter do risk reaffirming distanced, safe “penal spectators” (Brown 2009), reinforced by the movement that users can exercise and the ability of the user to craft their own narrative as an agent. We will see these risks in my analyses of *A Temporary Contact* and *Prison Valley* in the next two sections. Both projects do come from creators and institutions that are distant from the subjects and subject matter of incarceration. My analysis shows how these projects attempt to maintain and overcome distance simultaneously by using second-person address and positioning users as neophytes and investigators. As I will analyze in the next sections of this chapter, these projects utilize spatial and temporal constraints in order to position users as outsiders to experiences of incarceration. While users are positioned as outsiders, this boundary too is troubled as it is revealed that the outsider position and daily life on the “outside” of prisons are also part of mass incarceration. Through this revelation, users are able to experience a counter-surveillance that looks back and “turns the outside into the prison,” returning to my borrowed re-framing of Welch’s (2011) articulation of counter-surveillance.

**A Temporary Contact and Prison Valley: Interfaces of Connection and Constraint**
What differentiates *Prison Valley* and *A Temporary Contact* from many other prison-focused digital documentaries is shifting focus away from the people who are incarcerated and turning towards how the expanse of mass incarceration has worked its way into the everyday lives of those outside of the prison walls. Both center people and experiences that are seemingly on the outside to reinscribe urban and rural landscapes as carceral and show how the outside has always been inside, has always been a “carceral space,” a space more indicative of an “interpenetration rather than a demarcation and separation” (Moran, Gill, and Conlon 2013: 239). As digital projects, they seek to communicate experientially this interpenetration and implicate the user as also within and a part of this carceral space. In both works, users are hailed as participants through the use of second-person address, “you,” and each offers interfaces and experiences that turn out to be recursive, unending, and ongoing. How users are positioned within these works creates a split identification whereby users should simultaneously roleplay “as if” a fellow bus rider in *A Temporary Contact* and a co-investigator in *Prison Valley*, while remaining distanced so as to witness the experiences of the documentaries’ subjects. This split positioning implicates users in the system of mass incarceration in the U.S. and makes visible that users are the “distanced citizens” and “penal spectators” that Michelle Brown (2009) theorizes as removed from the realities and violences of incarceration.

The move away from trying to impart an insider’s perspective on incarceration bears a somewhat tangential relationship to the fact that these are projects created by European and Canadian documentarians, journalists, and visual artists with funding from two state-funded organizations with heavy investments in documentary media, Association relative à la télévision européenne (ARTE) and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). In her study of the NFB, Zoë Druick (2007) suggests that documentary filmmaking has been “a privileged site of
production in Canadian culture” and a “way of seeing the nation” (9). The NFB’s focus on representing Canada and Canadians through documentary film stems from the organization’s government mandate to create film from Canadian perspectives for Canadians and international audiences. While their mandate has not been formally updated since 1950, the NFB has maintained a high-level of documentary production and is at the forefront of digital short- and longform animation and documentary.49

Being at the forefront of digital documentaries has interesting implications for the NFB’s mandate, the perspectives from which they create their works, and their prospective audiences. Indeed, Tom Perlmutter, former NFB chairperson, would boldly state that “traditional notions of national identity are out the window” in relation to digital documentaries. In place of national identity, he forwards the need to create a more transnational cultural identity “anchored in common democratic values” (qtd. in Taylor 2013). What we can see in Perlmutter’s words here is an idea that digital documentaries from Canada can speak to a broader global community or help to create that community, rather than only speaking to Canadian concerns. Perlmutter’s optimism is in line with hopes that the internet would enable a broad and global “participatory culture,” a term which José van Dijck (2013) calls a “buzzword” that “connoted the Web’s potential to nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy” (4). Digital documentaries do not, however, necessarily reflect global cultural values, especially undefined is this way, rather, they can help to shape what is seen as culturally valued and important through the works that they produce. We will see how Prison Valley attempts to create a participatory work but ends up “nurture[ing] connections” between people who feel attacked by the content. While the Perlmutter might have started out with these strong ideals, when it comes to creation and circulation of their projects, the NFB’s audiences and interventions are usually more limited.
Loc Dao, co-founder of the NFB Digital Studio and current Chief Digital Officer at the NFB, has stated, for instance, that the NFB has “primary and secondary audiences” in mind for their digital works (Dao and Sweeney 2013). By way of an example, he suggests that the primary audience for much lauded webdocumentary *Bear 71* (Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes, 2012), about the encroachment of humans into the habitat of grizzly bears in Banff National Park, is international in scope while the secondary audience is more topic specific, those interested in the environment and climate change. Dao further suggests this international audience is different from those who enjoy Hollywood films and runs “counter to the mainstream.” Here, Dao places these productions in a similar lineage as earlier NFB productions which, according to Gary Evans (1991), “den[y] the concept of a mass-consumer audience” (ix), largely due to their state-funded nature and goals. Neither of these suggested primary and secondary audiences are strictly Canadian though *Bear 71* itself is, which is not necessarily true of every digital project the NFB produces or co-produces and one such project with no discernable ties back to Canada is the mobile documentary *A Temporary Contact*. Instead, this project, discussed further below, is created by European women about the impact of mass incarceration on the loved ones of people incarcerated in the U.S. Instead of being able to point to this work as strictly about Canada or from Canada, one can see it as still serving Canadian interests in that it aids in the cultivation of a larger national and international humanitarian audience who is conceived of as sharing the same values and ideals (and who can watch and interact with the NFB’s digital documentaries even if they are not Canadian). This is not only a Canadian venture, rather, the NFB’s goals are aligned with those of other large media producers in the Global North.

Similar to the NFB, ARTE, also known as the European culture channel, produces a high volume of documentaries and now, digital documentaries, animated works, and games.50 Born
out of a treaty between France and Germany to start dual language broadcasts, ARTE too has seen itself as working in opposition to mainstream commercial entertainment (Realscreen Staff 1997). ARTE’s general goal has been to unite Europe through shared cultural investments, though scholars have critiqued their attempts at pan-European culture as too rooted in French and German national cultures, being overly nostalgic of an ideal past, and lacking a clear definition of what “European” culture or identity means or looks like (Rothenberger 2012; Hartemann 2014). As I will discuss later in this chapter, ARTE-produced webdocumentary *Prison Valley: The Prison Industry* will be critiqued for being “too French” and from an outsider’s perspective.

With both the NFB and ARTE, one can question what it means for these nationally based and funded organizations to turn to the topic of mass incarceration in the U.S. as told from the perspectives of European creators for limited, potentially topic-specific national, multinational, and international audiences. ARTE and the NFB both use digital projects to create and affirm their national interests and to suggest that they and their viewers are part of a larger global community. In creating these works on mass incarceration in the U.S., it becomes a topic upon which Canadians or Europeans should have a perspective and about which Canadians or Europeans should be concerned. Focusing on this topic is also a way to create cultural contrasts, “we” do not act as people in the U.S. do, as well as to build connections between similar systems of incarceration (as *Prison Valley* will do by comparing French prisons to U.S. prisons) arguing for a need to take national incarceration more seriously through comparison to incarceration in a country known globally for its formidable system of incarceration. Indeed, as Loïc Wacquant (2009) suggests, the United States’ “grand American experiment of the ‘War on crime’” has served as an example “for all the governments of the First world” (xiii) and with increased international media attention to U.S. policy decisions and the push toward establishing private
prisons internationally, the U.S. system has undoubtedly impacted incarceration around the world (Mauer 1999), thus making it both a topic of concern internationally and one that can tie into a production company’s own national interests.

In both of these works, we will once again see that they address the user as “you” and speak to users as participants, offering interfaces and experiences that users initially start themselves but which are ultimately positioned either as recursive, as in the bus ride taken to visit one’s incarcerated partner, relative, or friend that runs every weekend in *A Temporary Contact*, or, as unending and ongoing, as in the investigation into the prison industrial complex in Fremont County, Colorado in *Prison Valley*. *Prison Valley* uses noir-style visuals and voiceover narration to push against genre and form across video clips, interactive elements, and discussion boards ostensibly to create something “to understand how things worked, to listen to everyone, to judge no one” (according to the narrator) while also operating as a play on the “semi-documentary” *Canon City* (Crane Wilbur 1948). Similarly, *A Temporary Contact* plays with both the idea that technology can bridge gaps between different people and places while inviting users into an experience that is inactive, one-sided, and highly structured as users become witness to their fellow bus riders’ “secondary prisonization” (Comfort 2003). In their attempts to make users participate or feel like participants in these works, both trap users in roles as outsiders to U.S. mass incarceration that is revealed to be diffuse across the people, places, and landscapes outside of the prison walls in the U.S.

**Temporal Constraints and Connections in *A Temporary Contact***

*A Temporary Contact* (2017) is a mobile documentary that users experience through WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. It is a collaboration between Israeli artist and filmmaker Nirit Peled and
Dutch interactive director Sara Kolster that was part of *Very Very Short*, a loose collection of ten digital shorts themed around mobility funded by ARTE and the NFB. *A Temporary Contact* takes users on a roughly 30-hour bus ride starting from New York City with women and children visiting their incarcerated loved ones at five different correction centers in Upstate New York. This documentary functions through a temporal constraint, it happens in “parallel time,” meaning that users receive messages at the same time that something happens on the journey; when the bus stops at a facility at 6:28am, for instance, the user receives messages at 6:28am. This structure, marked by time, routine, and the closed space of the bus serves as an entry point into seeing parallels between “doing time” in prison and an inmate’s loved ones being given an analogous sentence. The project itself is a mix of text messages that position users within and among the bus riders and videos that loosely follow one 20-year-old Black Brooklynite, Amanda, as she travels Upstate to visit her incarcerated brother. In the video messages, users can see that the bus riders are mostly Black women and children, the occasional “they” the text messages refer to who are on the physical bus journey. While in many ways this project emphasizes the long bus ride and the fleeting relationships that form between the riders, it becomes clear that users are distantly “participating” in a highly structured experience for these riders. And this is an experience that will follow these women beyond just the temporary contact of this particular bus ride, as *A Temporary Contact* shows some of the ways in which their lives are bounded and structured by the violence of mass incarceration in ways similar to but not the same as their incarcerated loved ones.

Like many digital documentaries, this one too suggests that if users could experience a sort of constraint through the project’s interface, they will learn more about the experience of those who take this bus ride. Instead of trying to “immerse” users in the experiences of one or
more of the women on this bus, however, users are also kept at a remove, never fully a part of their world or experiences, and are positioned more as observers than participants. This does replicate a very obvious split, where the women one sees and learns about in the project are occupying a familiar documentary subject role for a generalized user. The user, however, though positioned as a co-rider on this bus, is kept at a distance and kept distant from the experience that lies at the heart of the bus ride for these women, the actual visitation with their incarcerated loved ones. User interaction is limited, and once users start the project, there is nothing else to do other than read through text messages or watch videos on either WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. This experiential constraint is an integral element of the project and how it positions users. “You don't need to do anything. Just be here and watch,” the second text message instructs users. “Just be here and watch” constructs this move as a potential way to witness and respect the experience of these women but, alongside the suggested role of witness-rider, this instruction doubles as a way to let users know that this is a low interactivity work. That users are observers is underscored in the fly-on-the-wall observational style video messages, where, with only a few exceptions, the camera observes women talking to each other on and off the bus or observes the bus and its journey from urban to rural spaces. This level of inaction is reminiscent of what was discussed in chapter one regarding 360-degree video’s low level of interactivity, where users become “a passenger in the storyteller’s world” (Dolan and Parets 2016). The passenger metaphor is literalized here as users are positioned as co-passengers, though ones whose role is not to interact or participate but ride along, watching actual bus riders interact with another. True to the observational style, the (other) riders mostly ignore the camera and the person behind it, even though much of the camerawork is shot in close proximity and could read as if we are supposed to be inhabiting the view of another, silent, unseen rider. Unlike in VR documentaries,
however, there is no risk here that user’s own experience of the topic or technology will override that of the subjects because users are given only limited information and limited views. This observational constraint and forced inactivity in an otherwise interactive social media application communicates to users that they are not of this world—a detail that can be overlooked in digital and analog documentaries—at the same time as it allows users to witness and see the contours of mass incarceration from a distance.

The inability to control messages combined with content that is about how this bus ride is structured and regulated is part of how this parallel time project mimics the structured time and constraints to which those on the bus are subject. The constraint on users is couched in language welcoming users to the project, stating, “for the next 30 hours you will be on a journey” but one for which users “don’t need to do anything” other than “just be here and watch.” Users will then receive a friendly imperative to “join the ride 😊 [smiley face emoji] 🚌 [bus emoji],” positioning users as fellow bus riders. After these first messages, the work enters its parallel time mode, starting at 9:30pm on the day the user initiates the work after which the project will go through the next day, driving women Upstate to facilities, dropping them off, picking them back up, and then driving everyone back to New York City. The final parallel time message comes on the third day at 8am in the morning when the bus journey is over, and Amanda is back at her apartment. The content of these messages and how users receive them create a dual journey, one users digitally undertake at a distance and one that the (other) subjects physically undertake.

The short, descriptive text messages users receive aid in the ambiguous positioning of users within this work, as it is never clear exactly where they are coming from (Amanda? Another bus rider? Peled herself?). After initially addressing the user through second-person address, the text messages move back and forth between removing the subject (12:43am: “Rest
stop. Last chance to buy food and get coins. In the prisons is nothing, only vending machines”) and referring to individual women like Amanda, Diamond, and Latoya who share their stories with each other, depart for various facilities, and show newly acquired prison photographs when they reembark. These messages evince a kind of mixed subjectivity, where the descriptive nature presents this experience as something that is familiar and normal but also “as if” happening for the first time, every time. The prisons never have food outside of vending machines, the trip is always long, women will always exit the bus, and always get back on to return home. The recursive and descriptive nature of these messages also positions the user as on this bus for the first time, a neophyte who is learning the way things go in this new situation. These messages reveal that part of this journey is a routinization of a system for prison visitation that is re-explained to everyone, every time, even those who take this same bus every weekend. This is especially apparent during stopovers at rest stops or at the five different correctional facilities. In a video message from 5:28am, for instance, users watch Amanda waking up to the sound of a woman who runs the bus rides letting people know they have arrived at Clinton Annex and they should “get ready.” This same woman can be heard in other clips instructing and reminding riders to disembark quickly, stating when riders can use the bathroom, or declaring that the bus will be picking up more people at certain points. Indicative of the observational style of filmmaking, these are aspects of the video messages that do not explicitly cater to the camera on the bus or the user watching; it is clear that this woman or a similar person says these same lines or similar lines, regardless of how many times one takes this journey.

It is the loose subject of this work, Amanda, whose videos and voiceovers are the most suggestive of the everyday experience of being over-policed as a young Black woman and how mass incarceration can extend far beyond the walls of a state correctional facility. The focus on
Amanda never coalesces so strongly that she becomes a centralized, humanized “victim” whose experiences are made to stand in for a larger group, necessarily. Rather, the shifting focus on Amanda and others provides a partial structure to what can feel like a collection of disparate instances and moments in time. Users are initially introduced to Amanda outside of the bus, along with another never-named woman. What these two women say sets the tone of the entire work, as Amanda suggests that “everybody in their lifetime knows somebody in jail, especially here” and the other woman adds, “it’s a way of life in this community, you know?” She continues, echoing Amanda’s statement, “it affects everybody and I think it’s harder on the family sometimes than it is on the people that are in jail.” The “it” here is never defined, but is likely the prison sentence, the emotional labor one has to perform to maintain contact with someone incarcerated, or even mass incarceration itself. In her own field work on prison buses running from New York City to Attica, Brett Story (2019) similarly finds that “riding the bus represents a spatial and temporal experience analogous to ‘doing one’s time’ alongside incarcerated loved ones, as its mostly female ridership also bears the violence of the carceral state” (134). From the beginning, *A Temporary Contact* sets up the idea of parallel experiences, not only between users and riders connected through a social media application but also between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones who are ostensibly on the outside though still live with the consequences of incarceration.

What these initial messages indicate is that these women are being pulled into the “long shadow” of the criminal justice system (Combessie 2002). This “long shadow” is a kind of “stigma” that “diffuse[s] and enshroud[s] all those who come in direct or indirect contact with inmates” (ibid: 545). *A Temporary Contact* expands upon this idea of the stigma that an inmate’s loved ones face as users hear from the riders who speak to this fact and see the carceral aesthetics
of the bus, rural landscapes, and city streets touched by this long shadow. In the final video message users receive, for instance, the camera stays with Amanda after the bus ride is over as she takes the subway to her stop in midtown and walks back home. Amanda moves past a building reflecting flashing red and blue police lights as she narrates, “Even if I don’t go there every day, I feel like I’m in jail every day.” While users watch her enter her apartment, we hear, “we just are consumed by it, that’s the normal for us,” further establishing the feeling of incarceration that extends beyond the walls of the prison, here as not only a stigma but a sign of over-policing and criminalization of Black neighborhoods. This is not a stigma that ever falls back onto the user, it must be noted, letting us know that we remain safe and distant from this experience, in comparison to Amanda and the women making the long and costly journey to visit their incarcerated loved ones who have been strategically dispersed away from their homes in New York City.

While the messages and Amanda’s narration illustrate how the stigma of a loved one’s prison sentence clings to someone in their daily life, this work also visually marks the bus and the journey itself as carceral. When all of the riders have exited for their visitations, for instance, the camera turns toward the empty bus to show rows upon rows of uniformly positioned seats. This should be a familiar sight to anyone who has seen the inside of a bus, but, here, Amanda narrates over these images about her experiences that users do not see. “You hear the railings of the jails closing behind,” when visiting someone in prison, “That’s the only scary part.” As Amanda narrates, users can start to see the uniform, unyielding rows of seats surrounded by the equally partitioned bus windows (see figure 5). A sad, mournful musical score plays as Amanda continues, her narration shifting to how happy the experience can be in the visiting room itself, “It’s just a lot of family, a lot of love” which motivates a cut to a sign on the bus stating “this sit
is TAKEN [sic],” serving as a reminder that the women will soon be back in their places, their seats, on this bus, separated from their loved ones, and on the precipice of having to restart the journey next weekend or sometime later. At other points, the camera is drawn towards the windows, showing bar-like markings left by rain (see figure 6) or focusing on the rural landscape through the window frames. Amanda’s narration again reinforces these visual cues, “Sometimes you look out a window, like, damn I’m about to go to a facility.” What users can start to see here is the often invisible “government-organized and -funded dispersal of marginalized people from urban to rural locations” (Gilmore 2007: 11), a prison and population management scheme in which the bus ride becomes another kind of organized dispersal, albeit a temporary one. The pairing of narration with visual strategies in these messages serves to mark the space of the bus and the landscape outside as potentially carceral, a visual strategy we will see in Prison Valley, as well.

Figure 5. Screencapture from A Temporary Contact
The interior of the bus after all riders have disembarked, with Amanda’s narration subtitled.
What is also important in these sequences is that the user’s distance from what these women are experiencing is made visually apparent. Users see the empty space and seats inside the bus which reinforces the experiential limitations of this project, as it suggests that there are experiences that lie beyond the confines of this bus and this project to which we are not privy, unless we have already experienced them. Though there are many parts of the videos that read as the observational style of documentary in how the camera watches the on-screen subjects closely but seemingly without being seen or noticed, the video of the empty bus and others with women exiting and reentering facilities mark the user’s distance and show it back to the user. Pairing this emptiness and distance with Amanda’s first-person narration helps to de-immerse the user and de-conflate the user’s experience with the experiences of the other bus riders. These moments tell us that this experience is Amanda’s and we can only know it through her and through how she is willing to describe it for this project.

What users do not experience here is the more literal way that Amanda speaks to feeling like a prison inmate on these visits. When Amanda disembarks the bus at the facility where her brother is incarcerated, the camera watches her enter Franklin Corrections Facility as she narrates, “they treat you like inmates,” by regulating what visitors can wear, for instance, or
taking a photograph of visitors for identification purposes. Megan Comfort’s (2003) ethnographic study of visiting rooms at San Quentin State Prison in California confirms this, as she argues that “the correctional facility extends its penal reach to women through the regulation of their time and bodies” during these prison visitations (81). These regulations, for the women in A Temporary Contact and the visitors at San Quentin relate to the timing of the visiting hours, how one can enter the facility, and what one can bring and wear. Similar to Philippe Combessie’s (2002) argument that those who are not themselves imprisoned but come in contact with prisons experience a stigma due to the “long shadow” of the carceral system, Comfort argues that this constitutes a “secondary prisonization.” In Comfort’s study, she finds that for many women visitors to San Quentin, their “personal, domestic, and social worlds” became fundamentally altered, both when visiting their incarcerated loved ones and in dealing with the resulting social, communal, and economic “punishment” from one’s family member, especially a partner, being imprisoned (79-80). She defines secondary prisonization as “a weakened but still compelling version” of being forced to submit to regulations, surveillance, and even physical confinement similar to, though not exactly replicating, what one’s incarcerated loved one experiences (101). It is, as users who engage with this project will be able to see for themselves, often women of color who “assume the peculiar status of quasi-inmates” through this secondary prisonization (103). While Amanda’s experience is not exactly like that of her incarcerated brother, the concept of secondary prisonization helps us to think about the continuities of racialized violence the underly both the over-incarceration of Black men in the U.S. and the criminalization of and policing of Blackness as deviance to which we have seen that Amanda is also subject.

A Temporary Contact does additionally try to create a distance-bridging connection between the user and other on-screen subjects like Amanda through social media. This work
exhorts users to “join the ride,” operates in parallel time, and situates users as among the other riders through second-person address, which creates an even more apparent juxtaposition between the freedom that users have to pick up their phone and engage socially (or not) with this project and the inability of both those incarcerated and their loved ones to fully control their own time, their own bodies, and whether or not they are policed. And it might even seem inherently suspect that *A Temporary Contact* piggybacks off of social media messaging applications that have been centralized in the discussion of digital surveillance leaks and lynch-mobs. There is an increasing recognition that social media platforms enact surveillance on their users and “have become information-gathering devices, harboring millions of peoples’ personal information” (Jaeger 2014: 393-94). Both Facebook and WhatsApp are frequently criticized for facilitating the spread of “fake news” and dangerous rumors. WhatsApp is often blamed for spreading rumors that result in lynchings, particularly in India, WhatsApp’s largest market, where rumors on social media have been blamed for violence as far back as 2012 (Arun 2019). While users likely bring awareness of these issues to the project’s messaging platforms, engaging with *A Temporary Contact* does not allow for any back-and-forth type of communication and does not require users to post anything, potentially lessening some of the feeling that this project should be seen through the lens of these specific concerns. Given that *A Temporary Contact* is also concerned with surveillance, it might even afford a kind of double-meaning where users engage with a project that looks back at state surveillance through a platform criticized for corporate surveillance.

It is unlikely that Peled and Kolster had the Cambridge Analytica scandal, fake news, or lynchings in mind when conceiving of this project. Instead, *A Temporary Contact* utilizes what can feel like a more intimate form of communication to bridge though not collapse, the distance
between users and the women in this project. Indeed, maintaining this distance, as I have argued, has its uses in preventing users from getting or feeling too close. Peled and Kolster are less interested in interrupting user’s social media feed than they are in integrating these riders and their experiences into users’ already formed communities. Indeed, in an interview, Kolster (2017) indicates that WhatsApp is useful not only for the range of media it can include—audio, video, picture, and text—but also for its ubiquity as a form of social media. And while it is true that this then might replicate a kind of humanization for the visual subjects of this work, by attempting to use a form of commonplace social media that the user is assumed to already be using regularly, this suggests that the urge is less to see these subjects as “victims” in need of distanced sympathy and more as a part of one’s larger community. A Temporary Contact cannot, however, create this community itself even if the social media that it uses can have this function.

Beyond the use of second-person address in the text messages, there is a deeper sense that this project attempts to play off of the potential intimacy of social media and messaging applications. Researchers have found that WhatsApp often affords users a continuation of existent social relationships (O’Hara et al. 2014) and is used more with one’s immediate social circle (Church and de Oliveira 2013), and that WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger have the ability to forge connections and even micro-communities with distant others through the real-time sharing of text, audio, and image-based messages (Karapanos, Teixeira, and Gouveia 2016). “It is togetherness and intimacy,” O’Hara et al. (2014) suggest, “enacted through small, continuous traces of narrative, of tellings and tidbits, noticings and thoughts, shared images and lingering pauses” that one can see through the use of WhatsApp and that exceeds the boundaries of a messaging application into users’ everyday lives (1141). Florent Maurin, founder of video game production studio The Pixel Hunt, has suggested that he too has used the intimacy and
“special mindset” people enter into when communicating via smartphone in his own creations. As Maurin relates, “There’s this special relationship you have with this little piece of technology that is always with you, it’s the first thing you look at in the morning and the last thing before you go to bed” (qtd. in Valentine 2018). The Pixel Hunt produces games inspired by reality, including the messaging application simulation game, *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) where players are tasked with aiding Nour, a Syrian woman, through text messages as she tries to escape Homs, Syria for somewhere seemingly safer in Europe. Maurin is suggesting that designers and developers can utilize this “special relationship” to simulate an intimacy between, for Maurin, players and characters. Intimacy becomes another part of what Peled and Kolster are looking to simulate between users and subjects, like Amanda, through this work’s constraints.

The idea of intimacy and community is apparent in the language of “joining” the ride or following along with Amanda, which is reiterated in how the project is described on its website (temporarycontact.com). The project’s website suggests that “experiencing such a reality through an intimate and constant flow of information will give you a chance to really spend time with Amanda and the other women on the bus, and understand the consequences of their situation.” While Peled and Kolster here indicate the attempt to exploit social media’s seeming intimacy, there is a conflation here between receiving information and spending time with other people. This project actively impedes the user’s ability to spend time with its women subjects, in some ways, by cutting off the user’s ability to control the messages, control the information, or see and experience everything they might want to. And, as I am arguing, this has the productive use of denying users full agency and allowing users to feel like the distanced spectators that this project is aimed at and, perhaps, think about the privilege that this affords them of feeling like one’s time and movement is one’s own. That what users briefly experience through engaging with this
project is “their situation” and not the user’s creates a split identification that digital documentaries often generate through the use of second-person address. *A Temporary Contact* offers a window into how routine, recursion, uniformity, and segmentation are lesser-seen and socially normalized aspects of mass incarceration. This project aims to reorient users to the ordinariness of incarceration and everyday experiences of secondary prisonization and show how the outside becomes like a prison from specific perspectives and these are perspectives that the user might not have been attuned to before. This way of making hard-to-see aspects of mass incarceration visible allows us to position *A Temporary Contact* as a work of counter-surveillance, one that illuminates a small amount of the constraints experienced by those living in and through the “long shadow” of the prison.

*A Temporary Contact* profiles a specific group of Black women who visit their incarcerated loved ones on these weekend bus rides, a group the user is ambiguously positioned within though not a part of, and the video messages show a push-and-pull between observational, fly-on-the-wall filmmaking and a more participatory mode and can be linked back to the long history of documentary use of and engagement with ethnographic filmmaking. While Peled and Kolster do not intend to reaffirm a hierarchy between the user and these regular riders, even seeming to desire to use social media to transcend a boundary between “us” and “them,” *A Temporary Contact* ultimately does leave this hierarchy and boundary intact, even as it more successfully visually to erode the spatial boundary between prison and the rest of society. This work and how it represents its Black women subjects’ experiences, calls on the user to witness, to empathize, to place oneself in the position of this other group, and “burden[s] us with a prefabricated [o]ther no matter how lovingly this [o]ther is observed” (Nichols 1991: 228). The project does attempt to complicate this construction, presenting text messages seemingly not
from the women riders alongside videos, but there is still one racialized and classed group to which the subjects seem to belong and, potentially, another to which users might belong. The split positioning of the inactive user, however, allows users to also see themselves as distanced and outside of the full experiences of the work’s subjects, rather than to be “immersed” as full participants. If there is a use in the failure to overcome a distance between users and bus riders, it is in the making clear of the relationship between these groups, this is “their situation” that users are in limited contact with temporarily.

Spatial Constraint, Forced Perspective, and Participant Responses in *Prison Valley*

Though both projects constrain users’ experiences, *A Temporary Contact*’s efforts to take an everyday technology and exploit its community-building potentials contrasts with how David Dufresne and Philippe Brault’s *Prison Valley: The Prison Industry* (2009) utilizes the affordances of digital technology. With content spread across multiple platforms, *Prison Valley*’s goal is a multi-layered conversation on the economics of incarceration and the city-prison relationship, in Fremont County, Colorado, similar U.S. cities, and globally. This award-winning co-production from ARTE and Upian has French investigative journalist David Dufresne and Canadian photographer Philippe Brault travelling to Fremont County, Colorado, a region of the United States with thirteen prisons, including a high security administrative maximum or “supermax” facility (Fremont County 2020). Fremont County’s economy is tied to prisons; half of all jobs in the county are prison-related and about 38% of the county’s population is incarcerated (Glionna 2015, Fremont County 2020). It is facts like these, rather than an attempt to communicate the experience of incarceration, that are the impetus for this project that largely
turns away from prison interiors and the people incarcerated within them to illuminate the relationship between the area, its people, and the carceral system.

*Prison Valley* brings together film noir style and narration with documentary media to elucidate the hidden prison-city relationship, mark the people and spaces “outside” the prison walls as criminal, and force the user into a counter-surveillant investigation to reveal how Fremont County and its residents are “inside” and central to the economics of mass incarceration in the area. While the stated goal for this project was to stage a conversation on the industry of incarceration in Fremont County, the forced second-person framing of this work that implicates all users in uncovering the crimes of the industry of incarceration constrains how open this conversation can be and whose perspectives it takes into account. The first part of my analysis shows how *Prison Valley* inverts the standard prison-city relationship. Users are positioned as outside investigators, neither related to those incarcerated nor part of the town’s prison economy, who are investigating an ambiguous crime. What is wrong in Fremont County? The clues that users will uncover urge users to see that the problem is that everything (from roads to license plates to businesses) is carceral and the non-incarcerated residents of Fremont County, past and present, are the “criminals” who have caused this diffuse carcerality. The second part of my analysis turns to the project’s discussion forums to analyze the backlash to this user positioning from Fremont County residents who failed to see themselves or their town rendered truthfully and took offense to the counter-surveillant moves that *Prison Valley* attempts.

When created, this transmedia project was designed to be a linear documentary video broadcast on ARTE, a webdocumentary, a physical book, a Facebook group, and an iPhone application. The webdocumentary itself is quite complex. Users access different parts of the webdocumentary through an interface styled after a motel room with options to “leave room”
and watch segments of the linear documentary, explore “clues” accrued through watching the video clips, read up on the project’s interviewees in the “notebook” and, at the time of the project’s release, engage with others and the creators themselves in different topic-specific discussion forums (see figure 7). Leaving the room to watch the linear documentary takes users to a map interface, where users will find the linear documentary cut up into segments, each of which is associated with a place in Fremont County, Colorado. At the end of each video segment, users have an option to interact with something by clicking through a slideshow, taking a quiz, or even, in one instance, uploading one’s own video about fear. Watching the videos and interacting with the different components earns users bonus material, the clues users see in the motel room that provide access to further interviews, information about other places in Fremont County not covered in the linear documentary, and even so-called “souvenirs” like a downloadable soundtrack of the musical score. Much of the experience of this webdocumentary is toggling back and forth between the motel room, its interactive elements, and the map interface where users watch the linear documentary as clips. The webdocumentary is where the project most firmly positions users in the role of co-investigator through the motel room interface, its clues, and a citation of film noir style and tone, and, as such, it is the focus of most of my analysis.

Figure 7. Screencapture from Prison Valley: The Prison Industry
This is a composite image of what a user can pan right and left to see in the motel room interface. Leave room, rear window, clues, notebook, forums, desk, and news are all different interactive elements that the user can click on and engage with.
Prison Valley elides most direct experiences with incarceration, focusing more on Fremont County and its two largest cities Cañon City and Florence. The interviewees are not inmates themselves, rather they are people familiar with investigating or advocating for or against further incarceration in the area like journalists, activists, lawmakers, city and county officials, and former and current corrections officers. The closest users come to hearing from one of the area’s inmates, is hearing from Brenda, the wife of an inmate, who speaks to the judgement and stigmatization she faces in her interactions with the other townspeople. Early into watching the video clips, the male voiceover narrator states that Fremont County has “an entire economy where even those on the outside are on the inside.” This “outside” on the “inside” becomes a kind of methodology for the project, as the narrator declares that to truly understand this region of Colorado and its relationship to incarceration, “you have to get out of town, then, come back later.” As users, “our” position too is as an outsider who has come to investigate the area and its relationship to prisons.

By turning its cameras on the town and its economy, Prison Valley shifts the gaze from the spectacle of imprisonment towards Fremont County itself, suggesting this region and its residents are what need to be revealed, as if it is those who live near and derive a living from incarceration who have been rendered invisible in social discourse about incarceration. As previously discussed, the construction of prisons being on the margins, “over there,” or outside of the bounds of normal society is a way to mask the capitalistic economics underlying the growth of prisons. Smaller towns, like those in Fremont County, are sold prisons as a “clean industry” (as Dori Williams, a Florence City Hall clerk, states) and one that is recession-proof (as Ed Norden, Fremont County Commissioner, suggests). These economic underpinnings of incarceration are intimately tied to the creation of the us/them dynamic between non-
incarcerated, “law-abiding” townspeople and incarcerated, “criminal” prison inmates. This too is rendered visible as a state and federal government construct. Dori Williams, stated to be the longest-serving city clerk in Florence, relates that when city council members were approached by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in the 1980s about constructing a prison in the area, they raised concerns about how inmate families would bring crime to the area and be a drain on the city’s social services. In response, as Williams tells users, the BOP told the worried council members that they track both inmates and their families and if an inmate’s family tries to move to the region where they are incarcerated, the inmate will be moved to another facility. Here we see familiar stereotypes and criminalization of inmates’ families playing out; there is no crime in the small-town America city of Florence, a “normal” place that does not want to be corrupted and degraded by these “outside” influences, influences that can be contained only through imprisonment of the wrong kinds of people. It is these aspects of social discourse around prisons and how prisons relate to the cities they are constructed in and near—and the residents of those cities, who are loath to count the inmate residents as fellow townspeople—that Prison Valley illuminates and problematizes. Focused on making visible these normalized aspects of mass incarceration, Prison Valley creates a counter-surveillant game-like investigation into which users are conscripted as co-investigators of the crime of this extractive city-prison relationship. Users becoming involved in an ambiguous investigation is central to the kind of looking back that Dufresne and Brault’s webdocumentary produces, as Prison Valley appropriates noir tone and style to position users as protagonists who must go through the motions of this investigation alongside the voiceover narrator.

Even if users cannot identify that Prison Valley is citing film noir, aspects of the project will sound, look, and feel odd and in excess of objective reporting in the tone of the voiceover
narration, the music within the desaturated video clips, and the look of the cities and people profiled throughout the video clips. Scholars have long argued that film noir is not a genre, but a style shared among a series of crime films from Hollywood cinema in the 1940s and 1950s (Borde and Chaumeton 1955, Schrader 1972). In citing the style of noir, Dufresne and Brault intend to indicate to users that something is off here, something needs to be investigated or uncovered. Similar to my analysis of VR documentary Limbo in chapter one, the noir citation borrows what Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (1955) argue is the “emotional effect” that noir films create and pass on to viewers, which is a “state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed” (25; italics in original). “The moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity” along with the on-screen subjects, as Borde and Chaumeton argue (ibid). Whereas viewers of (and even protagonists in) these films might expect a kind of normalcy, in noir films they are greeted with “a paranoid world,” as Richard Maltby (1984) tells us, that is “a world thrown out of joint” (67) where there is visual and narrative ambiguity in place of a stable moral center. Dufresne and Brault position Fremont County as this “out of joint” world where something is wrong. The county’s residents and officials are hiding something, and “we” need to uncover the truth, together—through watching the videos, engaging with the interactive elements, and talking to others in the forums.

Prison Valley’s mobilization of the feeling of a noir-like “out of joint” world has a larger goal to shift the onus of continued and ongoing investigation onto the user as an unseen protagonist of the work. The user’s forced implication in this work resonates with J.P. Telotte’s (1989) claim that there is a subversive perspective in film noir, either through the use of subjective camerawork that can “implicat[e] the audience in onscreen events” (19) or through
how the subjective camerawork that many of these films experimented with can “transform” the viewer “from a simple consumer to an evaluator of the image” (20). Telotte’s ultimate suggestion here is that watching noir-style films could cause viewers to “evaluat[e]” not only what they see on-screen but to re-evaluate their own life from a new perspective. Not only is there a suggestion in *Prison Valley* that users can potentially re-see or re-view cities in the U.S. from a newly acquired perspective, but the use of second-person narration helps to secure the user as noir’s “silent witness.” This is a figure noted by Maltby (1984) who points out that noir narration often functions to tell “a story to a largely silent witness, who is intermittently referred to during the narration and who is also commonly the figure of redemption in the narration” (68).

Given that *Prison Valley* is an interactive webdocumentary, what does it mean to suggest that the user is the “silent witness” and “figure of redemption” in this work about prison as an industry in the United States? In *Prison Valley*, it means something more complicated than passive consumers of media becoming active participants in an interactive digital work and investigation. Redemption might look like U.S. users understanding how they and their cities are implicated within mass incarceration already and U.S. and non-U.S. users working to prevent the spread of private prisons outside of the U.S. and working towards a less carceral future. As French design studio Upian, who co-produced *Prison Valley* with ARTE, suggests on their webpage dedicated to *Prison Valley*, Cañon City functions as “the blueprint for the city of the future” and *Prison Valley* itself is “a journey into our future” (n.d. “Prison Valley, the Prison Industry”). This “our” is slippery in this context as Upian’s website is geared towards a non-U.S. audience, so, in this sense, *Prison Valley* functions to suggest that U.S. incarceration is a logical extension of a society that “has chosen imprisonment, repression, and control,” as this webpage explains, “rather than prevention and education” and the only kind of redemption left from this perspective
is to make sure that this future does not come to pass globally. While this holds up Cañon City as a spectacle for users in the Global North to fear and avoid, this exaggerated positioning of this place is one that we will see the non-silent “witnesses” from the region contest in the project’s discussion forums.

In order to create a feeling of co-experiencing this place and investigation, users are positioned as noir-style protagonists and co-investigators alongside an unseen male voiceover narrator. The investigation that “you,” the user, is entangled within renders Fremont County’s largest town, Cañon City, visible as a kind of shadow city, where what, at first, might seem like “normal” people, businesses, roads, and landscapes are part of this “world thrown out of joint” and are all touched, funded, or even created through mass incarceration. The investigation users embark upon should reveal the dark underbelly of economics at the expense of humanity that occurs in Cañon City and is implied to be happening all across the U.S. and even globally. As Brett Story (2019) argues, there is a need to “jettison[n] a popular narrative about prison expansion in which punitiveness is positioned as the guiding emotional logic of the carceral state” for the reality that prisons are primarily seen as sites of economic opportunity, especially in places going through periods of economic decline (81). *Prison Valley* makes clear, in quite a literal sense, that the “jettisoned reaches of our society’s landscapes” (Tapia 2008: 687) are closer than many people would like to believe, by illuminating some of the impacts of mass incarceration and how the prison industry can grow cities and communities.

Like other works that try to disrupt prison imagery, Dufresne and Brault’s initial focus on Fremont County rather than the experience of being incarcerated arose due to their inability to gain access to prison interiors. In the discussion forums and the linear documentary, Dufresne even shares his letter from the Federal Bureau of Prisons denying him access to the “supermax”
facility which they suggest is due to “security interests” given the nature of the “violent, disruptive and escape prone inmates” incarcerated therein. Dufresne and Brault (2010) discuss the issue of access in a post on Prison Valley’s blog titled “When Lots of Different Experiences Suddenly Come Together.” In this post, Dufresne takes on the role of interviewer, questioning Brault about their choice to incorporate minimal photography of people who are incarcerated or show only close shots of parts of bodies or inmates from a distance. In his response, Brault reveals that this choice received pushback from some prison inmates:

First, the choice sometimes ran contrary to what – some prisoners thought! Some prisoners absolutely wanted us to film or take photos of them. One of them told us, “Hey, I wanted to be a star in France!” We wanted to respect the prisoners’ anonymity come what may. We were also thinking of their families and friends. Showing only places, silhouettes or parts of people’s bodies left us time to hone what we wanted to say and, in the end, use all our footage without having to blur or blank out people’s faces.

In her article on the use of pixelation to obscure the identity of incarcerated informants in television documentaries, Sophie Fuggle (2015) reiterates not only the dehumanization of this kind of identity erasure but also the power dynamics involved. The ability to edit an image, whether by pixelation or “blur[ing] or blank[ing] out” faces, as Brault suggests, indicates an “access to the whole picture” that audience and the people incarcerated lack (227). In her understanding, the subject faces a dual threat from both the gaze of the audience and the gaze of those behind the camera that can use pixelation as a tool, one that produces “deliberately alienating and dehumanizing effects” (228). By avoiding photographing the faces of the inmates who are shown in the documentary, then, Dufresne and Brault also avoid an “alienating and dehumanizing” practice that likely would have been imposed on the documentary were they to include the inmates’ faces. It cannot be overlooked, however, that while they claim to “respect the prisoners’ anonymity,” this interview shows them directly going against the wishes of the people imprisoned who did want to be photographed. This push-and-pull between authorial
control and how people who could be portrayed in the project might have other desires will be more starkly on display in the discussion forums, where while Fremont County residents and officials originally welcomed Dufresne, Brault, and their crew, they too protested what was imaged or left unshown in the final version of the text.

To avoid having to obscure the faces of people who are incarcerated, in the brief scenes which do include images of people who are incarcerated, Brault photographs and films parts of bodies (hands, feet, and lower halves mainly) and prisoners facing away from the camera or at such a distance that their faces cannot be fully seen. This is a decision which Dufresne would further justify as a move that emphasizes the system of incarceration and a desire “not [to] judge anyone” (Brault 2010). It is unclear who exactly would be judged in this scenario, the inmates photographed in ways that repeat common tropes of imprisonment, “prison stripes or jumpsuits, bars and wire fences, aimless bodies moving in an exercise yard or assembled in mess halls” (Griffith 2016: 7), or the people like Sheriff James Beicker, who Dufresne and Brault follow into the county jail and who helped put the men and women we see there in these uniforms and behind these bars. In the same interview, Brault indicates in his previous photographic work in French prisons that he could feel the power dynamics at play in being the one photographing prisoners. He describes this as a kind of “violent act,” suggesting the coupling between losing power (via incarceration) and losing control of one’s image (being photographed, perhaps without giving permission). Brault’s concern here resonates with the previously discussed problems of visually representing people who are incarcerated as his concern is that this “violent act” might visually fix someone in a dehumanized and marginalized way. Concerns about replicating this clear visual hierarchy could be why incarcerated people appear only a few times and are quickly sidelined in favor of the surrounding area and its cast of “characters” (to borrow
how the voiceover narration refers to the interview subjects). While the voices and experiences of the people who are incarcerated in Fremont County’s jails and prisons are sidelined along with their faces in the webdocumentary, this allows Dufresne and Brault to avoid putting the user in the position of inaccurately attempting to feel “as if” they are a prison inmate or to replicate fully the gaze of the criminal justice system that judges the people it sees in cells and behind bars as criminals. Instead, turning the camera back towards the town and its inmates imparts the gaze of an outsider, the gaze of a journalist seeking to counter-surveil the prison-industrial complex and how it has marked and built the towns in Fremont County.

When the user initially begins their exploration of *Prison Valley*, they start off as a viewer who watches an introductory video sequence. This introductory sequence is filmed as a point-of-view shot through the window of a car driving along a mountain road so that the viewer appears to be coming into Cañon City, Colorado from the outside. As the viewer will find out later in the film, this road is Skyline Drive which overlooks the city, thus also positioning users above Cañon City and above some of the prisons below. The opening video introduces the viewer to the landscape of the prison-industrial complex through the physical landscape of Colorado itself, a landscape which users learn halfway through the webdocumentary was built by prison labor. Near the end of this introductory clip, the film transitions to another short clip, showing “our” arrival at the Riviera Inn Motel. The motel room is where, according to the male voiceover narrator, “we” put “our” bags. It is from this space that the user will navigate the webdocumentary from this point forward. This initial video sequence ends with users creating an account to login and return to *Prison Valley*, which is presented to users as if they are filling out a motel guest “registration card.” In her interview of David Dufresne (2012), Clàudia Prat points out that many users did not make it to the rest of the project because of the need to register.
Dufresne reframes this as a deliberate choice, users must choose whether to join the investigation and continue working through the project. By choosing to continue, the user becomes part of a “we,” joining Dufresne and Brault’s counter-surveillance investigation as they journey around Fremont County and interfacing with the project from a motel room based exactly on the one they roomed in while creating the project.

The never-seen narrator, who positions users as participants through second-person address, evinces an at-times overbearing noir influence. This particular narrator seems to have a sardonic comment for all aspects of Cañon City and almost every interview subject. When arriving at the Riviera Inn Motel initially, for example, the narrator states, “Everything about this place appealed to us. Its run-down feel. The garish orange. Real, old-time America.” The narrator slowly starts turning this place into an American stereotype as he enters a mode of storytelling reminiscent of noir: “There were problems that day at The Riviera. The Wi-Fi wasn’t working, the air conditioning had gone crazy, the vacancy sign was flashing, and some laundry was missing.” This summation ends with a statement that the owner of the motel, Halina Dabrowska, “was already playing cat-and-mouse with us,” though there is nothing users see, hear, or interact with that verifies this assessment. This narration has the effect of making us second guess what we see and hear, creating a situation where users should listen intensely to others’ stories and themselves put together the “truth” from the fragments of evidence.

Any entrance into Prison Valley after the initial login lands users in the motel room interface, where one can hear continuous ambient noise and have the ability to pan left and right to reveal different interactive elements, like discussion forums or a “rear window” option, which just shows a looping video of Dabrowska going into another building. To watch what the project calls the film (the linear video documentary, segmented into shorter clips), the user can
either click on the motel room door, which reads “Leave room: Back to Prison Valley” or click a blue “Back to Film” button which is outside of this motel room frame. The project tracks the individual user’s access so going “back” to the film will return the user to their next unwatched clip in the sequence. Once users enter this room and this experience, there is no obvious way to exit. Leaving through the motel room door, as already noted, takes you back to another component of the work itself, suggesting that users are trapped and need to finish the investigation on their own. The spatial constraint of the digital interface mimics the spatial constraint of incarceration: users are continuously brought back into a small motel room, allowed limited movement, and tracked throughout as they move through different video segments and interactive elements. While *Prison Valley* alienates users from the normal places and people of Cañon City, there are a few marked differences from the film noir tradition. *Prison Valley* deals with the historical world and not the fictional world of noir, it is interactive, and the project encourages users to continue investigating after the end of the filmic text, even trapping them in an interface to encourage further investigating.

This spatial constraint is similar to the type of temporal constraint users might experience through *A Temporary Contact* as both utilize the affordances of their different websites and platforms to trap users in counter-surveillant perspectives and experiences that implicate users in the reach of mass incarceration. As with *A Temporary Contact*, though there are small bits of simulated carceral experiences, users are never actually touched by incarceration in the same way that prison inmates or even their loved ones are. Instead, in *Prison Valley*, this spatial constraint has a dual effect of both maintaining that separation between users and inmates and continuously re-positioning the users as a co-investigator. One should not mistake being trapped in a hotel room or forced to investigate with incarceration, though one should understand that the
ideal user of this work should care enough about the investigation to stick with the topic, to be
the “figure of redemption” that aids out-of-project efforts to change the future of incarceration.

*Prison Valley* also shares with *A Temporary Contact* an aesthetics within the video clips
that seeks to reinscribe the landscape of Fremont County as carceral. Both projects attempt to
show how spaces and places outside of prisons are impacted by and even produced by mass
incarceration. While there are many places in *Prison Valley* that can be pointed to as suggestive
of Judah Schept’s (2014) hopes for counter-visibility’s ability to “illuminate[e] the invisible,
excavat[e] the underground, revea[l] the inscribed landscape, and rais[e] the ephemeral ghoulish
presence” of the specter of incarceration (218), there are two representative aspects of the *Prison
Valley* that deserve particular attention. Interviewees are deliberately framed in close-up shots
with the tops and bottoms of their heads cut out of the frame, creating an experience for the
viewer of watching people confined and closed in. Instead of allowing for an unobstructed view
of the landscape of Fremont County, Dufresne and Brault opt to bisect and even trisect the
landscape with black bars to deliberately mimic the prison-bar aesthetic. This both separates and
merges changing landscapes, suggesting landscapes are interchangeable and is reminiscent of the
obstructed views in *A Temporary Contact* when the camera films outside of bus windows (see
figure 8). The suggested interchangeability of landscapes forces users to view the world narrowly
and functions as the opposite of a panoptic and diffuse state gaze. Because many of these bi- and
trisected images contain footage from different parts of different cities, users cannot definitively
pinpoint where they are at any given moment and the entire landscape in, outside of, and around
Fremont County is made to seem as if it is part of the larger carceral system. Here, Dufresne and
Brault have made visually manifest that the Colorado landscape that has been “inscribed” by
mass incarceration, as Schept suggests, while also making a visual argument that the ways in
which people talk about crime, punishment, and incarceration can be narrow and confined as seen through the framing of the interview subjects. The confined framing of interview subjects and the obstructed views of the landscape relate to forced positioning that users will encounter through the narration and in the interactive elements as well.

In addition to mobilizing noir-style narration, *Prison Valley*’s voiceover narration is a deliberate citation of an earlier semi-documentary film *Canon City* [sic], also occasionally grouped with film noir. Crane Wilbur’s *Canon City* serves as an important intertext not only for its narration but also due to how clips from the film are used in *Prison Valley* and how this film, its trailer, and its history are centrally placed as one of the interactive clues that users can discover. Entering the clues section of the motel room interface, users will see a slightly torn “admit one” ticket stub over an image of red velvet curtains in the middle of the sea of Polaroid-like photographs and other ephemera. Clicking on this clue affords users the chance to go “back in time” where they can “meet John Wayne.” Initially, users will see the front of Skyline Theatre before learning it is the oldest cinema in Cañon City and is run by Roy Voss, who used to work in the prison industry. As users read that Cañon City had a “choice,” to become a center for
filmmaking or house jails and prisons, users also learn that Cañon City and the surrounding area have been used as locations in many Western films. While this additional material broadly frames film as central to the carceral city of Cañon City, the only film that receives particular attention is *Canon City*.

Wilbur’s *Canon City* is about an attempted prison break by twelve inmates of Colorado State Penitentiary in 1947 and follows the inmates (played by actors) from the planning and execution of their escape to interactions with the town’s residents once they have escaped and through to their eventual recapture or killing. It was filmed partially on-location in Cañon City at the Colorado State Penitentiary whose prison warden, Roy Best, has a minor role as himself in the film. Dufresne and Brault describe Best as “probably the prisoner director who made the greatest impression on the town” and as someone who “ruled the prison controversially, absolutely, for several decades.” 57 Outside of the clues section, users will encounter clips from *Canon City* halfway through the video segments in a section titled “The Prison Factory.” This section begins with a discussion of prisoners making license plates where we can see contemporary inmates, their backs facing the camera. Thirty seconds in, there is a cut to a brief black-and-white clip from *Canon City* which shows prison inmates also stamping out license plates and road signs with corresponding voiceover narration from Wilbur’s 1948 film describing how inmates are working in the prison’s stamping mill. Within “The Prison Factory,” this clip from *Canon City* acts as documentary evidence, coming in to confirm the history of inmate labor, and without knowing about this film or reading about it in the bonus materials, the user will likely think that it is a documentary on Cañon City and nothing more. This suggests that viewers should take parts of this fiction film seriously and take seriously how it frames the city’s relationship to the prison and prison inmates.
Like *Prison Valley*, *Canon City* too starts as a coming into town, but not one from Skyline Drive. Instead, viewers travel along with the camera going from “deep in the mountains of Colorado” which has been “tamed by the steepest tramway in the world” up to a suspension bridge at the top of the canyon that the narrator claims is “higher in the air than the topmost tip of the Empire State Building.” Viewers see this suspension bridge in a straight-on shot and then from below so as to be impressed by its height and the “tam[ing]” of the natural landscape. From here the film and its narrator introduce us to Cañon City, showing first the city banner (the same one that will appear in the introductory sequence of *Prison Valley*) and then an establishing shot of downtown, situating it as a peaceful, perhaps nostalgic, American “old west” town. After introducing both the city and relationship to Colorado’s landscape, the tone shifts as the narrator ominously states, “within this city, there is another city,” the “other” city of the prison. Within the film, this “other” city is a threat to the town when prison inmates escape and invade townspeople’s homes to avoid recapture. Here, we see a standard characterization of those within prisons as “enemies of the interior” (Combessie 553). Prison inmates act as an invasive force, they are not part of one’s communities, they are not your friends or neighbors and are a potential looming threat. This relates well to the fact that, as previously discussed, many prison inmates, who are overwhelming lower-class Black and brown men, are “remov[ed] from” their home communities and transported “somewhere else” (Gilmore 2007: 14). We can see this playing into narratives that crime and deviance are not only associated with certain racialized and classed others, but that crime is perpetrated by people who are foreign, outside of, and non-native to one’s safe, normal, middle-class, white community, which serves to mask the violence of racist laws and carceral policies.
While the narrative of *Canon City* fixates on how this “other city” (the prison and its inmates) is a threat to the safe, normal American town, the webdocumentary posits the opposite. It is the town itself that has thrived due to the prison’s influence and negatively impacted the people incarcerated within the town’s prisons by, for example, exploiting their labor to make license plates, termed prison “souvenirs” by *Prison Valley*’s narrator, and to construct many of the stone buildings in town, shown in the webdocumentary stamped with former warden Roy Best’s name. *Prison Valley* inverts this city-prison configuration arguing that the real city at the town’s center is the prison, while Cañon City is this shadowy, unknown, “other” city, an outgrowth of the prison itself. By reframing the outside-inside dynamics of Cañon City and its prisons, this work moves toward the kind of “interrogat[ion] and rethink[ing]” of the history of convict labor, much of it performed by men of color, for which Angela Davis (2003) argues. In her own coming to terms with this history, Davis points to other examples in the U.S. like the building of Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia, mining in Alabama, and utilizing low-cost prison labor to furnish universities in California (36). These examples strongly resonate with both the section clipped from *Canon City* and *Prison Valley*’s own sections on how prison labor builds buildings, roads, and landscapes of Cañon City, including Skyline Drive.

While I argue that Dufresne and Brault invert the “normal” prison-city relationship and position Cañon City as a dark, shadowy place that users need to investigate, this conflicts with the work as a transmedia project attempting to generate conversation about prison as an industry in the U.S. and globally. Similar to many other documentary projects, the urge here is towards action and making a difference, calling on users to transform their role and, as Paolo Favero (2013) suggests, to “engage with the physicality and socialness of everyday life, to immerse themselves in the ‘offline’” after engaging with the online texts (273). *Prison Valley* provides
something of a re-orientation to everyday objects, places, industries, and people while also
tapping into the “socialness of everyday life” through the ways that the work points outwards
towards communication with the subjects, creators, and other users in its discussion forums. This
webdocumentary, composed of footage taken in and around Fremont County, interviews with
people about the prison-industrial complex, text-based and video “extra” materials, hyperlinks,
and discussion forums is working in the vein of what Stella Bruzzi (2000) situates as a “collision
between apparatus and subject” (7). Apparatus, here, meaning not only the cameras and sound
equipment used to record but also Prison Valley’s digital platform, one that stands in direct
opposition to a purely observational filmmaking style but that nevertheless is part of a longer
tradition of documentary. Dufresne describes himself as a rule-breaking “punk” (Dufresne 2014),
which, perhaps, ironically, suggests a connection to the tradition of provocateur documentarians
working in the cinema verité mode of using the camera to create a kind of truth rather than just
film a preexisting event. The issue for Prison Valley is that the kind of truth they have created is
quite narrow in perspective, geared towards provoking those who support the industry of prisons
or come from cities like the one profiled, and prevents their stated goal of open-minded
conversation. While this mode of conversation need not be a goal of every documentary project
and works on incarceration that feign neutrality might end up supporting how incarceration is
used and discussed in the U.S., it is important that this was one of Prison Valley stated goals.
What is notable, however, is that the narrow positionality in which Prison Valley situates users,
as those who are outside of Fremont County and neither its residents nor former prison inmates,
has been actively contested by some of the project’s users.

The perspective and argument of this work is made most manifest in the forced
positioning of the user as a fellow investigator and outsider coming into this area of Colorado,
leaving little room for the views of the residents of Fremont County and those who support what this webdocumentary critiques including prison labor, the idea that prisons bring jobs for the community, and the use and export of private prisons by for-profit companies. I turn now to some of the reactions of Fremont County residents to show how *Prison Valley* fails to generate a conversation and open dialogue, a goal for which the constraints of this work do not allow.

Instead of appreciating that Dufresne and Brault purposefully distort and stage Fremont County itself as a prison and crime scene, the residents of Fremont County read this work as a distortion of the truth of the reality with which they are familiar. This reaction speaks to the uses and limitations of constraint and forced perspectives and opens up questions about how and when a project fails to meaningful communicate with one of its intended audiences. Indeed, the idea that to understand Cañon City “you have to get out of town, then, come back later,” as the voiceover narrator exhorts users, might seem particularly odd to a lifetime resident who presumably feels they know the city already.

Initially, *Prison Valley* received a lot of attention and interaction, garnering about 1000 views when it went live in April 2010 (Sheehan 2010). While the work has been reviewed positively, received numerous awards, and is seen as one of the first and best web-based documentaries, the *Prison Valley* forums still show traces of a vehemently negative response from those who live in and are familiar with Fremont County and Cañon City. The still existent forums contain interactions between offended residents of Cañon City, users sympathetic to the messages of *Prison Valley*, and even David Dufresne and Philippe Brault as they responded to or tried to quell the criticism.

The negative reactions span a wide-range of concerns from actual inaccuracies, phrases that residents had never heard in relation to the region (Cañon City is a “godforsaken place,” “a
clean version of hell,” or “Prison Valley”), the use of dark, noir-like images of run-down houses and back alleys, and the lack of interviews with residents highlighting how nice Cañon City is and how much they enjoy living and raising their family in the region. JessiDay’s (2010) post titled “Inaccuracies” from May 6 seems to be the first post to take issue with Prison Valley’s representation of Fremont County, its people, and the prison system. They start their post relating that they grew up in Florence, were interested in the work because it was about Florence, and that their father works in the prison industry. They continue:

minutes in and you guys have gotten major details wrong. No one calls it Prison Valley. No one. We call it a lot of names, but never have heard Prison Valley. Also, the Riviera [Motel] is in Florence. Florence is 11 miles from Canon City. Not 2 blocks away. Looking forward to watching the rest of it. I will update with anything else you got wrong! :) 

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JessiDay’s critiques here are mild and accurate, pointing to some of the distortions that Dufresne and Brault either added (like centralizing Cañon City when it is one town in Fremont County, albeit the largest) or are using to aid their argument without fully clarifying what they are doing, as with the nickname “Prison Valley.” The webdocumentary itself explains that this moniker comes to Dufresne and Brault from the wife of an inmate, which they then take as the title of the work. JessiDay’s thread becomes more contentious as user Chamber accuses the filmmakers of coming to Fremont County “under totally false misrepresentations,” a sentiment echoed in newspaper interviews with some participants, and continues on to say that the “information contained in this so-called documentary is so far from reality it’s almost criminal on their part.” Kikinscreammin accuses the webdocumentary of sensationalism, saying, “This project seems to take all the worst parts of the entire justice system, criminals, and society and blame it all on Canon City [sic].” JessiDay’s first thread is only one of many in a similar critical vein, like another user’s more combative “This is the most skewed, elitist piece of drivel I’ve ever
watched,” Canongurl’s “The real Canon City :]” and “Fremont Residents Reactions to Prison Valley,” started by gutnecklace as a comment about the negative reactions which swiftly garnered even more replies reiterating critiques of how the project portrays Fremont County.60

The negative reactions from residents were not isolated to the Prison Valley forums. Fremont County Commissioner Ed Norden spoke to regional newspaper, The Pueblo Chieftain, about regretting going “out of [his] way” to give the filmmakers an interview, saying they “missed it altogether, because they didn’t look” (qdt. in Harmon 2010). Susan Greene’s (2010) article for The Denver Post echoes Norden’s feelings of resentment, as she suggests that “local boosters” gave the filmmakers not only interviews but also tours of the town and free homecooked meals, not suspecting their efforts would result in what Greene calls a “smear job” by “French documentarians with big microphones, bigger cameras and even bigger assumptions about the prison-industrial complex.” These responses spilled over onto the (no-longer-existent) Denver Post’s Neighbors discussion forum and blogs like Prison Photography and Humane Exposures and compelled Dufresne and Brault to post a longer FAQ page: “Our Answers to the residents of Freemont County (FAQ)” (Dufresne 2010b), linked in the Prison Valley forums and in the comment section of Prison Photography’s review of the webdocumentary.

There is valid commentary that edges towards a discussion of the selective nature of truths in documentary media, reminiscent of Linda Williams’ (1993) suggestion that documentary films themselves are not truth, rather, documentaries are “a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (799). While there is much to say about the massive gulf between the critical scholarship on documentary truths versus a documentary audience’s desire for truth from what they see, hear, and interact with, that is not the topic of this chapter. Instead, here, we see how the conflict between creative vision, the
text/s of *Prison Valley* (the clips, the map interface, the hotel room interface, the forums, and so on), and the responses on the forums show a) a high level of user participation often idealized for these types of projects and b) a negative response and reaction against the “relative and contingent truths” of *Prison Valley*.

By only focusing on the carceral aspects of Fremont County, many people in the forums argue that those outside of Fremont County, potential visitors, perhaps, miss the rest—the rest being what brings the nonincarcerated residents to the town and what they experience in their own everyday lives. As user tinmarcoo says in gutnecklace’s (2010) thread, “Yes we have many prisons [sic] here, but most of us don’t even pay attention to them anymore. They are tucked out of sight and out of mind.” In the same thread, another user agrees, “I dont [sic] feel like living is Canon [sic] is like being imprisoned as well. Canon is a beautiful town full of interesting people and ripe with history. The prisons are a part of Canon that I pass by and most of the time, dont [sic] even give a second thought to because im [sic] used to it.”

User djcellular1971 adds that “Fremont County isn’t that much different than any other small town.” What these users are saying speaks to their own experiences with the region and how normalized incarceration is in everyday life in these towns and many other small towns with prison-based economies in the U.S. In addition to relating their own lived experiences, we can see a resistance to the forced positioning of the project and a defensive reaction against its suggested implication of users. Some of this language—“out of sight and out of mind,” “’im used to” the prisons and “don’t even give a second thought to” them, and Fremont County is similar to “any other small town”—relates to what drives this project and its attempt to undue how normalized mass incarceration is in the small towns that disproportionately house the U.S.’s incarcerated populations. In taking offence to a perspective that is from the outside looking in at the prison-industrial complex in
one region of the U.S., there is a way in which these reactions prove the point that Dufresne and Brault are trying to make: prisons are not on the outskirts of society or divorced from normal everyday life in the U.S., they are central to it and you can find the mark of prisons and the industries that have grown up around them “hidden” in plain sight.

One of the interviewees from the webdocumentary, Allen Rexford, at the time the only current Correctional Officer that would consent to an interview, also posted in gutnecklace’s discussion thread. He advises angry residents to “[t]ake the documentary for exactly what it is...... an outside, different culture, foreign country’s look at our Prison system, and the community that supports it. Take an outside look and you’ll realize that many other people and countrys DON’T have the same view of prisons that Fremont County does.”

Towards the end of this 44-comment thread, by far the most comments of any on the Prison Valley forums, Philippe Brault starts responding to users and thanking them for their thoughts and engagement (which David Dufresne had also done in this thread and others). In trying to articulate the meaning of the “clean version of hell” comment, Brault elucidates one of the motivations for this webdocumentary. “What we found interesting about the expression,” he explains, “wasn’t the word ‘hell’ on its own; it was the juxtaposition of the words ‘clean’ and ‘hell’. It was the idea of a purified, sanitized world where more and more people are locked up.” Another way to think about this is the juxtaposition of a seemingly ordinary small towns, towns full of nice and honest people that many Fremont County residents claim inhabit their cities, against a concentrated mass of jails and prisons and an economy sustained by the U.S.’s high rate of incarceration. Cañon City is the “somewhere else” to which people have beentransported and where one can see that prisons represent economic livelihood and opportunity to the residents who have a fairly privileged position from which to state their experiences unlike the prison inmates who aid this
city’s economy. And, it is important to note that these residents might both be and not be Brown’s “distanced citizens, penal spectators;” they live and work in the heart of a prison-based economy, though this is something that the “out of sight, out of mind” responses in the forums suggests remains invisible to them and normalized in their lived experiences in Fremont County.

The outsized response of the residents stands in contrast to the lack of voices of people currently or formerly incarcerated within this webdocumentary. It is meaningful that this webdocumentary turns its camera lens onto Fremont County and its residents are able and willing to interact and respond, even if they mostly reject its framing and arguments. There is one person within the forums, shackzilla88, who identifies themselves as having been incarcerated in Cañon City’s Four Mile Correctional Center. Shackzilla88 responds to threads on Supermax, prison labor and prison construction of cells and relates their experience of being segregated for very minor offenses and working during incarceration only to be unemployable upon release, experiences that resonate with how other former inmates describe incarceration. In response to David Dufresne’s (2010a) post “Cell production in prison—background information,” which provides more details on high security cells and video-based visitation services, shackzilla88 states that no one could photograph prison inmates as they worked “side by side with civilian contractors” to build cells. They continue, “We saw the camera crews there but our guards (supervisors) always directed us to another part of the building to work so that they wouldn’t see us. I’m very surprised that this aspect was not covered in the film.” While the lack of access to prison sites, broadly, was part of the webdocumentary, there was no mention, as shackzilla88 suggests, of people being specifically kept away from any cameras in this way. This perspective too is excised from the webdocumentary. Shackzilla88’s comments resonate with
scholarship previously discussed where the reality of incarceration and who is in incarcerated remains invisible at the same time as “crime” and “criminals” are hyper-visible media spectacles.

It must also be said that while Brault and Dufresne were quite active in these forums, many of their responses were ineffective at engaging with the criticism and even angered users, who saw themselves being cast as “illiterate hick[s] who [are] blissfully unaware of a world outside of Canon,” as one user says in her response to the webdocumentary (JessiDay 2010). Their more thorough response to angry residents, “Our Answers to the residents of Freemont County (FAQ),” reads like a defensive justification of elements residents took offense to and incorporates many out-of-context links back to the webdocumentary itself in an attempt to counter and prove wrong the criticisms of the Fremont County residents. At no point do the creators admit that they might be exaggerating elements of reality for a particular effect or that there might be a tone that residents find insulting, instead, they stick to the literal transcription of words on a page. One can see this in their response to questions “About the security in the city.”

“Some blame us for giving a violent image of Cañon City. Our text says exactly the opposite,” Dufresne writes before quoting from the voiceover’s assessment of interviewee Dori Williams, “Every resident was like Dori—eager to reassure us. Cañon City was a safe town. We didn’t doubt that for a second. It was precisely their lack of concern that intrigued us.” What remains unsaid here is that the tone of the narrator’s voice suggests that Williams, and other interview subjects, are hiding something or being evasive, “playing cat-and-mouse” with users, as Riviera Motel owner Halina Dabrowska was so accused by the voiceover narrator.

David Dufresne (2012) both acknowledges the myths about democratized participation on the internet while saying it will be revolutionary, is necessary, and will demolish hierarchies of knowledge and between authors, subjects, and viewers. How Upian describes user
participation is similar, promising users they will be part of “an impassioned collective debate,” where they can talk to those involved with the webdocumentary and be “never alone” as users can see other users and engage with them as well (n.d. “Prison Valley, the Prison Industry”). What Upian, Dufresne, and Brault seem not to have expected was a negative reaction to the forced, constrained perspective within this work, a forced perspective that is integral to implicating the user in an investigation and in mass incarceration in the U.S. but that itself leaves little room for “collective debate.” The user positioning within the webdocumentary does not allow for empowered, revolutionary participation, it is indeed an outsider’s perspective that treats users as fellow detectives investigating the “crime” of a county that relies of prisons and prisons labor for economic purposes. This is a perspective that many residents of Fremont County profess to be in direct opposition to and would have a hard time inhabiting given that they live in the region being profiled. Just as Dufresne, Brault, and their crew went to Cañon City and “didn’t look” for and “missed” the resident’s more positive take on their city, to quote Ed Norden (qtd. in Harmon 2010), the residents cannot see from the flipped perspective that the webdocumentary advocates. These responses are a reminder that, as Zizi Papacharissi (2002) argued two decades ago, online communication is often a continuation of one’s offline partisan politics rather than being inherently more radical or empowering. While creators might be looking to stage conversations with participants, a limiting factor might be found in the affordances of their own work and users might not be open to those conversations, especially if they involve an active confrontation with their own experiences and worldviews.

The digital constraint and forced outsider perspective differentiates A Temporary Contact and Prison Valley from other digital documentaries on mass incarceration and the current mode of more collaborative methodologies for digital documentary creation. As Patricia R.
Zimmermann and Helen De Michiel (2018) suggest about what they term open space new media documentary, these are projects that are more collaborative in nature and “engage political issues on the micro-level in nonconfrontational ways […] invit[ing] human-centered dialogue rather than adversarial rhetoric […] In these small inviting spaces, designed encounters, and diverse polyphonic forms, people and communities tackle unresolved political, social, and environmental issues—aspire to common ground” (x-xi). In these works, the use of documentary as intervention is more important than a stable, finished product. This is similar to the NFB’s Challenge for Change or third cinema’s attempt to intervene politically through documentary, though updated to incorporate digital media. In contrast to this collaborative, interventionist methodology, what we can see happening with many digital documentaries is that their creators and producers adopt a rhetoric of openness, collaboration, conversation, and dialogue, even as the projects and texts themselves preclude this. Similar to chapter one’s analysis of empathy, this language is wielded almost as a marketing tool to tap into techno-utopian desires of new media. Neither of the works analyzed here invite open conversation within the bounds of their projects, though I would argue that this is not necessarily negative. Instead, both use the constraints of their interfaces to limit what users can do and what perspectives they can do it from. What is gained through this type of constraint is a perspective from within recognizable state institutions, where these projects do not shed light on the experience of being incarcerated or place users in positions to themselves experience secondary prisonization, rather, users come to uncover what outsiders should realize, that mass incarceration implicates those in the U.S. beyond the people most directly impacted or those within the reaches of the criminal justice system. Zimmermann and De Michiel’s concept of the open space new media documentary might work best to afford politically marginalized groups agency in the creative process, but the goal of Prison Valley and A Temporary Contact is
to reframe the way that seemingly distant non-participants see themselves in relation to mass incarceration.

In 1974, three years after the prison rebellion in Upstate New York’s Attica that killed 43 people, Michel Foucault toured the Attica prison. He was interviewed about this tour by John K. Simon (1991) who at one point tries to prod him into suggesting that the prison is exactly analogous to U.S. society. Foucault fails to take the bait, affirming that “it is true that we are caught in a system of continuous surveillance and punishment. But prison is not only punitive; it is also part of an eliminative process” (30). This feeds into his larger statement that Attica appears like “an immense machine” (26) designed specifically to break people down, excising them from society and rendering them unfit for anything other than further incarceration. I bring this point up now to suggest that while users are positioned as outsiders and protagonists in these digital documentaries, the constrained distance at which users are held is intentional, making users witnesses to—but not participants in—the cycle which Foucault describes as a “machine” and an industry that removes people from society, is cyclical, and knows no obvious end.

While no digital documentary is going to communicate the harsh realities of imprisonment or the full extent of mass incarceration, through their utilization of modes of constraint, *A Temporary Contact* and *Prison Valley* offer users an appreciation of the everyday nature of carceral spaces and how naturalized the landscapes of carcerality are in U.S. society. As seen and experienced in these projects, mass incarceration changes landscapes in rural Upstate New York and Fremont County, Colorado, is present in small commonplace objects like car license plates, and is reflected in the experiences of walking down a sidewalk in an over-policed neighborhood. In these ways, *A Temporary Contact* and *Prison Valley* make visible the distance between some users and those subjects more directly impacted by mass incarceration.
while arguing that users are deeply implicated in the normalization of the façade of the inside/outside boundary and the discursive erasure of the visible effects of mass incarceration.

The constraint of the filmmaker-subject-audience formulation, “I speak about them to you,” is essential to maintaining and exaggerating the distance between subjects and users while it goes through slight modifications due to the digital interface and roleplay. Digital documentaries demand that we contend with the agency of software and algorithms, alongside that of the filmmaker (Hight 2017, Uricchio 2017), such that the original triangular relationship becomes something more like filmmaker-interface-subject-audience. The configuration of filmmaker-interface-subject-audience necessitates the expansion of “I speak about them to you” into a wordier phrase, for example, “I speak about them through this digital interface to you about their lived experiences and your simulated experiences.” Adding more layers onto Nichols’ triangular articulation of how these groups relate to one another does not fundamentally change the relationships, though it might make them clearer, in a way, to articulate that other people have lived this and “you,” the user and audience member, are only simulating some aspects of it. Instead of transcending distances and digitally collapsing boundaries between users and subjects, what we can see in these digital documentaries on incarceration is a slight clarification of structures, the structure of mass incarceration and the structure of the filmmaker-interface-subject-audience relationship.

While users remain implicated outsiders ambiguously positioned as protagonists in these works, the third chapter of my dissertation involves users roleplaying more directly as surveillance agents. In chapter three, users enact surveillance and are government and security agents in charge of deciding what constitutes a crime and who is a criminal in dataveillance simulation games. As government agents, players participate in and experience the always
already surveillant nature of cell phones, computers, and applications, something that these
dataveillance simulation games argue players are subject to in their outside-of-the-game lives, as well.
Chapter Three – Doing Surveillance: User as Agent

Edward Snowden’s 2013 leaks augured in a broad awareness of what we now think of as ubiquitous or mass surveillance. Snowden worked for the United States’ National Security Administration (NSA) and was subcontracted out to work on information management at Booz Allen Hamilton when in 2013 he would reach out to various journalists to start informing a global public about the expansive reach of the NSA. How these leaks reached the public and the initial ramifications for Snowden are the focus of Laura Poitras’s documentary Citizenfour (2014). Poitras was one of the people that Snowden initially contacted about having copied classified NSA documents with the intent to disseminate parts of them as ethically as possible. In the documentary, Snowden appears in front of the camera as a calm, measured figure assuring Poitras and journalists Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAllister that he is resigned to whatever happens to him personally.64 Even so, Poitras’s camera focuses on him excessively during hotel room interviews and discussions. The camera often closes in on Snowden during tense moments, showing close-ups of half his face or his hands as he types messages to his girlfriend. While these shots reveal a desire from Poitras and the audience for more insight into Snowden, his experiences, and his decision to come forward, the camera cannot reveal what, exactly, he is going through, no matter how much or from what distance it films him.

In Citizenfour, these close shots of Snowden are mirrored in long shots of exterior environments where the NSA is constructing physical infrastructure to store data in Bluffdale, Utah, for instance, or where the Government Communications Headquarters in the UK has constructed undersea cables for their surveillance communications in Bude, contributed to the documentary by Trevor Paglen. Paglen himself has a longstanding interest in the visibility of the U.S. military, which can be seen in “Limit-Telephotography” and “The Other Night Sky,” two
projects where he attempts to photograph secret U.S. government sites and satellites, respectively. In *Citizenfour*’s landscape shots, viewers see the physical presence of infrastructure through an environment that is marked by what is often construed as invisible data collection and storage, while at the same time we and the camera are not granted access inside these facilities. These long shots suggest that the lack of visible transparency and access corresponds to the public’s inability to know the full scope of state surveillance. Paglen is, indeed, not trying to “mak[e] the invisible visible,” which he suggests is a mischaracterization of his work, stating that instead he is “showing what invisibility looks like” (qtd. in O’Grady 2017). Poitras’ camera too does not attempt to represent every facet of Snowden’s experience or the reach of the NSA’s surveillance. Instead, *Citizenfour* illustrates the limitations of knowledge and sight and how hard it is to hide oneself from state surveillance and to reveal it to the world simultaneously.

I start this chapter on digital games with the documentary *Citizenfour* not only because of its content’s relevance to this chapter but also for how it sets up the idea that there are limitations to what we can see and know. The over-reach of unseen state surveillance apparatuses is also the content of the digital games I analyze but, crucially, they will try to visualize and make experiential the work of this unseen form of state surveillance in ways that Poitras, Paglen, and their cameras, arguably, cannot. The terrain of concerns about surveillance takes a slightly different shape in digital games that simulate document and data surveillance, games that attempt to do what a camera cannot: to render experiential the bureaucratic collection of data through surveillance. What I am calling dataveillance simulation games (explained further in the following section) allow players to experience being a Snowden-like figure embedded in a state surveillance apparatus. Through placing players in roles “as if” surveilling others, dataveillance simulation video games attempt to communicate some of the interiority of state surveillance:
what is it like to have access to sensitive, quasi-legal personal data, data that can be used to make inferences about someone’s behavior or beliefs? And what kind of choices might you make if confronted with obvious governmental breaches of ethics?

These games, unlike Citizenfour, are played by individual players and their knowledge generation is experiential. This changes the kind of interventions dataveillance surveillance games can make into the discourse surrounding state surveillance and how these games will make their arguments to players. Player experience and emotion are what drive arguments against state surveillance in these games, rather than, for instance, learning new facts about the NSA’s surveillance programs or watching Snowden, Poitras, Greenwald, and MacAllister become targets of or try to evade surveillance. In Citizenfour, the arguments against state surveillance are externalized and visible on-screen, in how even attempting to report on Snowden or his revelations only broadens the scope of who is surveilled and can only provide a frustrated and incomplete picture. By contrast, dataveillance simulation games enter into a mode of privatized, sentimental education that we see in other second-person digital documentaries, where the individual player’s experience becomes a learning experience over and above any outside evidence of wrongs being committed. And here too, players are called on to exercise a liberal and literary style of empathy for the targets of state surveillance, which will eventually also include the player.

Dataveillance simulation games give players access to public and private communications and documents of different fictional people suspected of various crimes and ask players to project themselves into the role of a government agent or investigator who needs to make judgements about these people and these documents. In these simulation games, players engage in a kind of surveillance that bears a striking resemblance to an everyday use of
computers, smartphones, and social media, as players can enact, and sometimes even challenge, the normalizing gaze of state surveillance, as theorized by Michel Foucault, within these games. This normalizing gaze is part of the state’s disciplinary power over individuals, according to Foucault (1977), a surveillant gaze that “makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” and makes individuals visible and knowable in order to “differentiat[e] them and judg[e] them” (184). It is not only a watchful, classificatory gaze, but one that “produces reality” (194). Within these games, there is an active tension between who or what is producing and shaping the often dystopian reality—the player, the technology, or the state. Though tasked with surveilling other people and their data within the game and seemingly placed in a seat of judgment over and above “criminal” suspects, players are situated within larger bureaucratic systems, which can amount to feeling as if a cog in the machine during gameplay rather than an all-powerful actor. While players work within a bureaucratic system, that does not mean they can escape all-pervasive surveillance within these games. Torin Monahan (2018) argues that Snowden produced “a moment of rupture to dominant regimes of visuality, where suddenly the surveillance state was cast in a new light and individuals were momentarily afforded space to recognize the ways that they were marked as suspicious and their data indiscriminately included in state surveillance programs” (564). One of the core reoccurring elements of dataveillance simulation games is the revelation that players themselves are being surveilled by the state they are working for and the technology they are using, undercutting the player’s agency and control, and situating them under a similar normalizing state gaze as other nonplayable characters (NPCs). These games play upon the post-Snowden rupture, attempting to individualize Snowden’s warning for players who become “marked as suspicious” in and outside of these games.
Previous chapters have analyzed how users are positioned ambiguously at a distance from the subject matter, as witnesses to and participants in the lives of displaced peoples in chapter one and as witness-investigators into U.S. mass incarceration chapter two. By contrast, this chapter focuses on games that situate players on the inside, forced into positions of complicity in state surveillance. It is, of course, a fictionalized complicity. Players do not surveil “real” people and the power players have and meaningful choices they make remain within the game. That being said, dataveillance simulation games often include metatextual elements and some explicitly break the fourth wall, generating an ambiguity between the player/real person differentiation, and we do see a similar split identification with player positioning as we do with user positioning in other digital documentaries. Here, too, players occupy a role, but, beyond a description of what players should do, such as find targets and read through documents, these roles lack detail and characterization. Players must use their own “imagination to fill in the blanks” and project themselves into and onto these roles (qtd. in Alexander 2013), as Lucas Pope will suggest about his border surveillance simulation game Papers, Please (2013). Players are thrust into these games, addressed as “you” and made to adopt the role of a new surveillance agent, someone who will learn the requirements of their role on the job and during gameplay. The lack of playing as a discrete someone—either self-created or game provided—creates an ambiguity around whether the player should respond as would be appropriate to their role in the game or how they might outside of the “magic circle” of gameplay. As an NPC in Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You (Osmotic Studios 2016) says directly to players who are supposedly “outside investigators” in the game: “Do you really think that this system will help anyone? Did you think the government would not spy on you as well? Did you think you were… OUTSIDE the system?” Dataveillance simulation games incorporate moments of revelation where one’s
own surveillance is mirrored back as the games track players’ choices to evaluate “you” based on observational skills and trustworthiness (as Orwell does) or suggest they might be able to hack into a player’s own actual computer (as Bad Cop Studios’ 2016 game Project Perfect Citizen does).

Moments of surveillance metacommentary are coded into many of these games to push players to think through their complicity as surveillance agents within the games and to carry this feeling of complicity into their lives outside of the games as a feeling of implication through one’s interaction with similar technologies and similar state surveillance programs. Though players are positioned in roles with varying degrees of complicity in state surveillance in these games, players are positioned to leave the play experience with a sense of being “marked as suspicious” (Monahan 2018) and implicated as users of surveillant technologies and their potential victims in an expansive system of mass surveillance. Player implication in dataveillance simulation games relies on the over-worn rhetoric of surveillance as an invasion of privacy, rather than surveillance as a racial classificatory scheme or a state gaze that falls on specific marginalized groups to the benefit of other groups.

While surveillance has been “democratized” (Lyon, Haggerty, and Ball 2012) such that most people who use devices or applications connected to the internet will be tracked and monitored by corporations and/or state governments, not everyone equally bears the consequences of this mass surveillance. Privacy was never a “right” afforded to all and discriminatory state and corporate surveillance, whether digital or analog, harms people of color and the poor disproportionately (Lyon 2007, Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015, Eubanks 2017). The fantasy of losing privacy, however, is a major appeal in media from the Global North, like the dataveillance simulation games discussed here, where this fear becomes an entry point into a
critique of state surveillance and how players and the technologies we use might participate in it. Few of these games adequately deal with specifics of surveillance inequality and while some dataveillance simulation games do incorporate white supremacist groups as the villains like Monomyth Games’ *Need to Know* (2018), for instance, most are careful in their own narratives to make it clear that, as a government agent, one is surveilling white people only or white, Black, and brown people, seemingly equally. Eden Osucha (2009) elucidates how “The Right to Privacy” in the U.S. legal tradition is tied to the fear of new technologies (here, photography and its use in commercial culture) and how they can operate as modes of racialization for previously unseen, unmarked, and uncommodified white people and white bodies. We can see, in dataveillance simulation games, that this fear of the loss of privacy is the fear that someone previously unseen and uncontrolled by state surveillance can now fall under its purview and be made visible. While we see this racialized fear in these games, their non-specificity does not allow them to interrupt the continued links between whiteness, invisibility, and power. Susan Cahill (2019), for instance, points to how “Whiteness is often treated with safe invisibility” in “War on Terror” visual logics, “while Black and Indigenous folks and People of Colour (BIPOC) become the presumed and uncertain subjects made visible with the surveillant gaze” (355). Rather than working to overturn dominant racialized discourses of criminality and surveillance, these games exploit the “safe invisibility” of whiteness to treat white suspects as a universal: if these (white) people could be targeted, “anyone” could be a target, even “you.” This unacknowledged universal is how these games argue that all players are targets of surveillance and, perhaps, why many play off the fear of loss of one’s personal privacy. While dataveillance simulation games do not disrupt visual discourses of criminality, they do work to reveal criminalization as a construction and a process. These games mount a critique of the flawed data-
driven logics behind the need for surveillance to catch “criminals” as players end up using their own discretion to decide who is and is not guilty within these games. And as players use their own discretion, they end up empathizing with surveillance targets through reading their private and public communications and documents.

While in some sense we are past the early 2010’s fear about capitalist “social games” flooding the everyday gaming experience, causal games are a vital and still growing part of the global game and entertainment ecosystem. Recent gaming reports show that mobile gaming dominates the marketplace in the U.S. and globally and the most popular genres are casual games (Entertainment Software Association 2022, Newzoo 2022, NPD Group 2022), a grouping that NPD Group (2022) defines as “broadly appealing” and “highly accessible” and includes puzzle, casino, and arcade games. Digital game sales are dominated by distributors like Valve Corporation’s Steam for PCs, application stores like Google Play and the Apple App Store for mobile gaming (Hudson 2021), and region-specific social media applications like Tencent’s QQ or LINE (Yip 2019). It is important to note that dataveillance simulation games often circulate on platforms like these that moderate and control the content they host and distribute (Gillespie 2018) and might also be part of state and corporate surveillance, as revealed in Edward Snowden’s leaks. This is key to the critical intervention these games and their creators are pushing for, a rethinking of the everyday surveillant technologies used for entertainment and leisure, for work, and for surveillance. These games use second-person address combined with metatextual elements to break their fictional, alternate-day constructs and cast doubt on the ethics of who is being surveilled in order to cast doubt on the player’s own real-world positioning relative to state surveillance and surveillant technologies.
All the games analyzed in this chapter have document and technology-based interfaces and many replicate computer, smartphone, and social media applications. Though vast amounts of data are being collected through networked everyday objects, often the technologies and platforms seem neutral and objective and as if they are merely passively collecting data. The data collected are used as “raw material” to form the basis of algorithmic behavioral prediction (van Dijck 2014: 201), a process that John Cheney-Lippold (2017) calls the “appending of character to content,” where metadata is the content (167). Rita Raley (2013) notes that this is a “performative” function of data (128); how one understands these data creates and produces the desired subject position, here, players will create or affirm “criminal” targets. What van Dijck, Cheney-Lippold, and Raley describe is the central mechanic in many dataveillance simulation games, where private and public details about a person become “raw material” and “content” that players as agents of state use to pass judgment upon supposed suspects and potential “criminals” in the games. Here, the data is metadata (call logs, GPS locations, search histories and so on) as well as the actual content of passports, birth certificates, private messages, text files, pictures, and more. People become a kind of data, readable and therefore knowable in these games. Players find themselves positioned as distanced “outsiders,” at first, looking through a stranger’s phone, starting a new job as a government agent, or being assigned to surveil “suspects” in another country. As this supposed outsider, players have a privileged window into the private lives of specific targets, many of whom are revealed to be “normal” people through the process of surveillance, “normal” people with families and sympathetic backstories who do not have the right documents or who the state has decided are exceptional (usually for vague authoritarian reasons). At the same time, players are “insiders,” in positions of power, albeit usually on a lower rung within a larger bureaucratic surveillance system. Players are assumed to be familiar
with the minutia of the actual work involved through their outside-of-game use and awareness of computers, smartphones, social media, and identity documents. Fear of someone else snooping through your private life turns, in these games, into a revelation that those targeted for state surveillance are just like you, maybe even are you.

Similar to chapters one and two, player positioning within dataveillance simulation games produces empathy, though of a different sort than previously discussed. In their discussion of the empathetic possibilities in games, Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) suggest that games have the potential to be particularly adept at generating empathy because players adopt specific roles. As an example, they point to the game *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, 2006), where one plays as a male or female adult or child Darfuri who needs to escape the Janjaweed militia and help maintain their refugee camp by bringing water, growing food, and building shelter. “One can read about Darfuri refugees in the news,” Belman and Flanagan state, “but, in an admittedly limited sense, a game can allow one to be a Darfuri refugee” (5). Within this game, players can make some choices (or see the limitation of one’s choices) as a Darfuri in the War in Darfur and, according to the logic of empathetic roleplay, learn more about the human aspects of a genocide. This is a common way to discuss empathy as an immersive, role-playing experience in both games and virtual reality, and we have encountered it in previous chapters in this dissertation.

By contrast, within dataveillance simulation games, instead of fully empathizing with a particular other person whose experiences are foreign in comparison to your own, players empathize experientially with agents of surveillance while participating in a more literary style of liberal empathy for the NPCs who are surveilled. This is a dual empathy that is split, similar to the split identification that I have discussed throughout this dissertation. Dataveillance simulation
games are text-heavy and much of a player’s role is criminalizing and/or empathizing with NPCs as one reads documents and data that serve as “raw material” of someone’s personality and perspectives. How one presents oneself to the world through online profiles and blogs and in identity documents, private pictures, videos, and messages to others (or just to oneself) becomes a type of literary text through which, these games argue, one can learn and understand the interiority of another person, almost like a fragmented epistolary novel for the digital age. One’s interiority is externalized in a way reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) claim for media as extensions of our senses. Here, media as self-extension is literalized as someone’s rationales, reasonings, and belief systems are read into their documents, text messages, emails, and social media posts. Much like the works discussed in previous chapters, however, the bounds of empathy change to accommodate empathy based on roleplaying experience. While other chapters also analyzed the limits of experiential empathy, empathy remained a feeling tied to visual forms of direct address or navigating an interface mimicking someone else’s lived experiences. Here, players develop empathy through their own actions and for themselves in their role as a bureaucratic agent. In other words, through the process of doing surveillance, one can know something about how it feels to be a low-level surveillance worker, an Edward Snowden-type cog in the machine of a larger bureaucratic institution. The experiential empathy of being a surveillance agent who searches through documents in order to make decisions about others’ lives and intentions can follow players outside of the game through arguments that a) one can only know the truth of someone’s situation by reading their personal, diary-like messages or b) the kind of “raw material” players have been sifting through to construct another’s criminality is biased and partial and the meanings that players can draw from this content are pre-determined. Within these games, surveillance is dehumanizing and biased while simultaneously
a social, humanistic good, able to reveal the truth of someone’s behaviors and actions. This tension is never resolved. Even as criminality is turned into a knowable and flawed process, the potential to find truths through surveillance goes unchallenged, rather, these games ask whether we want to accept a total loss of privacy and living under the rule of a seemingly oppressive and all-knowing state for a small accumulation of knowledge.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the relationship between games, simulation, and surveillance, before detailing the empathetic ethics of dataveillance simulation games, and then offering an in-depth analysis of three dataveillance simulation games: *Project Perfect Citizen* (Bad Cop Studios 2016), *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (Osmotic Studios 2016), and *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope 2013). This chapter questions how and why games simulate systems of surveillance and position players in relationships of complicity to state surveillance. As Christoph Klimmt (2009) says of serious games, players are often positioned “as the center of events, as the driver of change and progress” (251). Players being “the center of events,” though a very familiar aspect of games, recalls Lilie Chouliaraki’s (2013) concerns about whose experiences are being emphasized and centered with interactive digital media. These concerns are central to my dissertation and this chapter, where we see how the player’s experience of simulating surveillance in these games is crucial to how they will understand the topic. At the same time, because the player’s experience is centralized here, this limits the perspectives and experiences that these games are able to take into account. Game designers want to empower players to make meaningful game choices and dataveillance simulation designers want to educate players about state surveillance. But, to what extent is it a limitation to design these playful educational experiences around individual, generalized players inhabiting vague roles? Does this then limit the type of change and progress for which these games and their designers
can argue? While the player is still an active agent in these single-player games, more often than not in surveillance games the player’s agency to behave voyeuristically is increased while their ability to effect meaningful change within the systems of surveillance and through everyday technologies like smartphones, social media applications, and computers is decreased, and players experience being caught in a system which does not align well with heroic, individualized gameplay.

**Dataveillance Simulation Games**

The relationship between games and government is hardly new. As Jennifer R. Whitson and Bart Simon (2014) state, “From dollhouses to polo, virtual worlds to first-person shooters, the persuasive power of play and games has been intertwined with governance projects” (311). Edward Snowden’s leak of classified NSA documents in 2013 is intimately related to contemporary surveillance games and the roles that players occupy as agents and investigators. Snowden’s leaks revealed that surveillance programs started under George W. Bush’s presidency, thought to have been shut down, continued into and even intensified during Barack Obama’s administration.67 “[F]or the first time,” Glenn Greenwald (2013) wrote in an article for *The Guardian*, “under the Obama administration the communication records of millions of U.S. citizens are being collected indiscriminately and in bulk—regardless of whether they are suspected of any wrongdoing.” Throughout 2013 and 2014, it would be revealed that the NSA, a U.S. government agency tasked with gathering “foreign” intelligence, could obtain metadata (a mix of sender, receiver, location, and date of a communication) and the content of messages with the aid of telecommunications companies through project Stellar Wind, and media corporations including Microsoft, Skype, YouTube, Google, Facebook, and Apple through PRISM. Snowden
would allege that these projects and others gave anyone working for the NSA access to communications such as personal emails and chat messages, mobile phone data, location data, purchase history, and internet search and website history. Snowden himself said he could “wiretap anyone, from you or your accountant, to a federal judge or even the president, if I had a personal email” (qtd. in Greenwald “XKeyscore” 2013). While much of the surprise of these leaked documents focused on the extensive collection of data outside the purview of the NSA’s mandate, the leaks also revealed extensive government surveillance sharing between the U.S. and other countries (especially the UK’s Government Communications Headquarters), surveillance on foreign embassies, diplomats, prime ministers, and presidents, and at international organization meetings. These revelations sparked journalists outside of the U.S. to investigate their country’s surveillance apparatuses, independent of the NSA leaks or joint surveillance programs, as when *Le Monde* revealed that the French government stores telephone and internet communications (Follorou and Jonannès 2013). General Keith B. Alexander, the NSA director from 2005-2014, is reported to have had a “collect it all” mindset to digital data (Nakashima and Warrick 2013), a mindset that forms the basis of the narratives of many dataveillance simulation games released after Snowden’s leaks and informed by the methodologies revealed in the NSA’s documents.

It is perhaps fitting that “collect it all” resembles the slogan of Pokémon, “Gotta catch ‘em all.” “Collect it all” motivates the mass surveillance within dataveillance simulation games, where players as agents have unlimited access to identity documents and personal files of supposed “suspects.” It is not a bold statement to suggest that there has been an increase in surveillance games in the post-9/11 period of amplified surveillance, border control, and population management and that even more have been developed in the period since Edward
Snowden’s leaks of classified NSA documents. There are, of course, examples of surveillance-related games prior to these two touchstone points. Steve Jackson Games’ *Hacker: The Computer Crime Card Game* (1992), for instance, a tabletop game developed in response to a U.S. government raid on their studio, comes to mind. The game materials themselves tell part of the story: “In 1990, Steve Jackson Games was raided by the U.S. Secret Service during a ‘hacker hunt’ that went disastrously out of control.” At the time, Steve Jackson Games was working on roleplaying game *GURPS Cyberpunk*, which the Secret Service believed to be a “handbook for computer crime.” According to a more detailed iteration of this story on sjgames.com, the government agents failed to distinguish “between a discussion of futuristic credit fraud, using equipment that doesn’t exist [because it was an in-game fabrication], and modern real-life credit card abuse. A repeated comment by the agents was ‘This is real.’” It was, in fact, not real, and a federal court would eventually rule in Steve Jackson Games’ favor a few years later. In this incident, one can see the power of the imaginary of games: hacking in a game can lead to hacking in real life, violence in a game can make one violent in real life. This “hypodermic needle” theory of media consumption where a work’s messages are uncritically accepted by or “injected” into a reader, watcher, or player, though debunked for other media forms, continues to haunt games.

Even when not the main focus of a game, surveillance, tracking, hacking, and other forms of espionage or clandestine behavior are essential to many video games (Albrechtslund, Anders, and Dubbeld 2005). Many single-player smartphone, tablet, and computer games incorporate surveillance, where players set up surveillance cameras to watch animals and people (like in *Do Not Feed the Monkeys* [Fictiorama Studios and Badland Games 2018] and *NUTS* [Joon, Pol, Muutsch, Char and Torfi 2021]), games where players are hackers (like *Uplink* [Introversion...
Software 2006] and Hacknet [Team Fractal Alligator 2015]), games which utilize audio surveillance (like Unheard [NEXT Studios 2019]), and games that play with surveillance and technology (like Hypnospace Outlaw [Tendershoot, Michael Lasch, and ThatWhichIs 2016]). And, of course, even when not explicitly about surveillance, a number of video games incorporate aspects of surveillance, espionage, hacking, wiretapping, and covert intelligence as central plot points or game mechanics across a wide variety of genres, like stealth games, tactical military shooters, puzzle games, and action adventure games, with examples ranging from myriad “Tom Clancy’s” brand franchises such as Rainbow Six (1998- ), Ghost Recon (2001- ), and Splinter Cell (2002-2013), action roleplaying franchise Deux Ex (2000-), and Hideo Kojima’s narratively-driven Metal Gear (1998- ) franchise to more open world exploration franchises such as UbiSoft’s Watch Dogs (2014- ), Eidos’ Hitman (2000- ), or Rocksteady’s Batman: Arkham (2009- ).

While many different types of video games incorporate aspects of surveillance, espionage, and other clandestine activities, this chapter looks less at blockbuster games and more at independent games from individuals and small development studios that are making simulation-based video games about surveillance and surveillant everyday technologies. Most of these games are reading heavy, some even self-identify as storytelling games or interactive narratives, and they procedurally represent surveillance as a central plot and game mechanic. There are quite a few games of this type released within the last ten years, including a plethora of found or lost phone games, such as SOMI’s Replica (2016), Kaigan Games’ SIM – Sara is Missing (2016), Simulacra (2017), and Simulacra 2 (2020), and Accidental Queens’ A Normal Lost Phone (2017) and Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story (2017). Found phone games are mystery or thriller games played exclusively through a smartphone interface, where players must
find out what happened to the phone’s owner by hacking into their password-protected phone applications and piecing together a narrative of who they are and what might have led a stranger—the player—to get ahold of their phone. While found phone games are often short, there are also longer state dataveillance simulation games playable on tablets and computers that have computer desktops, border booths, or surveillance software programs as central interfaces. They are often played as if players are sitting or standing at a desk, logged into a specific system within the world of the game, as in Lucas Pope’s Papers, Please (2013), Osmotic Studios’ Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You (2016) and Orwell: Ignorance is Strength (2018), Bad Cop Studios’ Project Perfect Citizen (2016), Rebelephant’s Mainlining (2017), and Monomyth Games’ Need to Know (2018).

The subgenre of video games that I am identifying as dataveillance simulation games: (a) are often dystopian and set in alternate-day realities of fictional or unnamed countries; (b) position players as agents working for the government; (c) address players through second-person address and include little to no characterization of player avatars; (d) are document and data heavy, where reading through documents and files and making subjective judgments about suspects’ criminality is the central game mechanic; (e) have mystery and thriller aspects, where players might need to stop crimes from happening by identifying suspects and players need to piece together what kind of government they are surveilling on behalf of. They all, as the name would imply, rely on simulation. Simulation is “a procedural representation of aspects of ‘reality’” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 423), here, reality is in quotes to communicate the fact that there is no one interpretation of reality and the relationship between reality and how it is represented in a game is as vexed and complicated as it is in any other form of representational media. These games realistically simulate everyday technologies, interfaces, and documents as
well as the bureaucratic systemization of surveillance. Osmotic Studios’ research process for
*Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (2016), for instance, turned to Edward Snowden’s NSA leaks,
and the game developers read through articles and watched documentaries to learn the modes of
surveillance used and think through the ethics of this type of surveillance (Böke 2016). What I
am identifying as dataveillance simulation games procedurally represent an everyday and
generalized experience of using technologies at the same time as they simulate the experience of
an Edward Snowden-type bureaucratic surveillance worker. Instead of leaving the interiority of
this type of surveillance worker opaque, these games suggest there is something to be learned
about surveillance and its ethics by playing this role and doing surveillance. Not only do these
games suggest that players will become more familiar with the bureaucracy of state surveillance
and how a worker within it might feel, but players also learn through gameplay that criminality is
not defined primarily by committing a crime, rather, it is an active process that is often biased
towards the discretion of the person or group in charge of the evidence.

Outside of gameplay, criminality is constructed and often detached from supposedly
illegal acts. Laws, law enforcement, and social and visual discourses produce what constitutes
crime, criminal behavior, and who is seen as a criminal and who is seen as a viable victim
have long written about how crime in the U.S., for example, is associated with Black and brown
people such that Black crime and criminality are assumed and naturalized (Davis 1997,
Alexander 2012, Muhammad 2019). Crime is heavily associated with certain acts and identities,
where the U.S. War on Drugs is heavily associated with Black people and crossing a border
becomes a political and sometimes “illegal” act. We can also see this in how some terms
associated with specific groups have their criminalization baked-in, as with “terrorist,” “enemy combatant,” or “illegal immigrant” (Volpp 2003).

In their study of law enforcement, McConville, Sanders, and Leng (1991) argue that police officer discretion is key to the production of criminals, victims, and the necessity to act/or not act on supposed behaviors that are seemingly illegal or legal. As they state, “the make-up of the convicted population is […] like the make-up of the suspect population: a police construction” (35) and one heavily based on suspicion, stereotypes, and norms about officer behavior, criminal behavior, and public decency. Dataveillance simulation games rely on the discretion of the player as a state agent and on the player’s own propensity to create this mode of suspicion and criminalization. These games compel players to take on roles where they are empowered to define logics of criminality and reify those logics through narrative and gameplay mechanics, largely, defining what counts as suspicious enough behavior and what counts as a “crime.” While players enact the production of criminality, this is not done subconsciously. These games make players aware of their own discretion and that they are themselves deciding what is and is not a crime, what constitutes suspicious behavior, and who is and is not a criminal.

Dataveillance simulation games show the construction of the criminal by humanizing potential targets within the game and by empowering players as state agents to use their discretion in who to suspect. Players learn how easy it is to interpret a discrepancy between documents or to turn an out-of-context phrase in a text message, phone call or email into evidence of a crime. Rather than revealing the ideologies of race and citizenship that often underlie criminality, demystification of the process of criminalization is one of the two elements that gear players themselves towards believing they could become suspects. The other way that players become suspects is through collapsing in- and out-of-game roles, technologies, and
player positioning, as I will discuss more in the next section on the various realities that these fiction games simulate.

**Realities of Simulation and Ethics of Gameplay**

None of the dataveillance simulation games I am discussing are strictly nonfiction or documentary. They do not attempt to represent historical events like some other documentary or docu-games, such as *The Cat and the Coup* (2011), Kurosh ValaNejad and Peter Brinson’s well-known documentary game where you play as former Prime Minister of Iran Mohammed Mossadegh’s cat and learn about the CIA-backed coup that overthrew his government in the early 1950s. Instead of drawing directly on historical events, dataveillance simulation games are in this in-between space, virtually simulating and fictionalizing everyday experiences of using smartphones, computers, and social media applications and of constructing and judging identities and potential criminality based on documents. In general, roleplaying games “stand betwixt and between the unreal and real” (188), as Sherry Turkle suggests after interviewing people whose play experiences show an overlap between fiction and nonfiction and avatar and player. Her interviewees make statements such as, “You are the character and you are not the character, both at the same time” and “you are who you pretend to be” (12). *The Sims* designer Will Wright (2001) similarly notes this phenomenon, stating that it happens “fluidly,” where players might think, “‘Oh, I’m this guy, and then I’m going to do x, y, and z.’ And then they can pop out and ‘Now I’m that person. I’m doing this that and the other. What’s he doing?’ And so now he’s a third person to me, even though he was me a moment ago” (italics in original). Indeed, many games scholars find that “real-world identities continually infor[m] the virtual
identities of avatars one plays in a game (Waggoner 2009: 1) and Turkle argues that this mash between game and non-game identity constructs “new selves” and identities (12).

Drawing on Erving Goffman’s work on frame analysis, Gary Alan Fine (1983) delineates how fantasy and roleplaying games operate through three different frameworks and levels of meaning. Players remain grounded within, firstly, a “commonsense understanding” of “the real world” outside of the game; secondly, the game’s own rule set and constraints; and, thirdly, players remain aware that they “not only manipulate characters; they are characters” with only the knowledges and skills allowed by their character’s role (186; italics in original). As such, for Fine, players are simultaneously the person outside of the game, the game player, and the character within the game. James Paul Gee (2003) too theorizes the working together of real world, virtual and projective identities in one’s gameplay. For Gee, one’s real-world identity is the person playing the game, the virtual identity is the character that one plays, and the projective identity is how the virtual character is a project for the player onto which the player also projects their own goals and interests. The interplay between these identities is both active and reflexive, according to Gee, in a way that allows for learning through action and reflection on oneself and one’s in-game identities. As an education scholar Gee’s goals are to think about how to use games for the purpose of education and his suggestion that role projection and inhabitation could allow for out-of-game reflection on the part of the player is useful for my own argument, where I suggest that dataveillance simulation games critique what they see in mass state surveillance in the Global North and these in-game critiques carry over as out-of-game implication for players. This coming together between action and reflection runs throughout my dissertation as a vital component of what second-person address aims to do in documentary media; to get you to
consider more actively how you might be implicated in the subject matter you see, hear, and experience.

With dataveillance simulation games, players are pushed to reflect on how everyday technologies are forms of ubiquitous, mass surveillance and to rethink their own role in criminalizing judgments based on the “raw data” of documents. These games follow what Alexander Galloway (2006) calls the “congruence requirement” for realism in games. Rather than defining realism by how “realistic” or verisimilitudinous the visual representations in a game are, Galloway argues that the combination of gameplay and the player’s own social context has the possibility to create “a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability of the game to mimic and extend that political reality” (83). This kind of congruence allows for elements of social critique of the players’ everyday socio-political realities. Indeed, while there are elements of verisimilitude due to a simulational congruence as dataveillance simulation games mimic everyday technologies, the moments of reflexivity within these games are where many try to make their intervention into the gamer’s own life.

Not only do the games and the gameplay allow for players to project themselves or their social realities into these games, the type of avatar one inhabits in these games facilitates player identification, as there is little to no avatar characterization in dataveillance simulation games. In the three games analyzed in this chapter, the most in-game avatar character that players receive is a picture and a name (in Orwell) and mention of one’s family members (in Papers, Please). This leaves these games open to players to determine characterization. These game avatars can be usefully categorized within a framework developed by Daniel Kromand (2007) as “central-open,” in that players are able to construct “a virtual self-image” and “personalized” avatar within the game, one with which they can come to identify emotionally (403). Emotional
identification is important because not only are players tasked with surveilling others in these games but they are often tasked with feeling for them or feeling for one’s simulated role, as well.

When a dataveillance simulation game calls attention to the player’s role, starts surveilling the player or reveals surveillance of the player/the player’s character, or even suggests the player has been playing as themselves all along, players are enabled to think critically about surveillance, the surveillance agent role in- and outside of the game, and one’s own use of surveillant technologies. The critical edge generated within these games positions them as educational serious games. For Clark C. Abt (1970), serious games are simulation games that allow for creative ways to learn critical thinking and applied knowledges. Serious games are designed with the intention to “do something with games” (Grace 2020: 34) and when games are created for educational uses, designers not only want to “do something” but to say something about a social problem. As gamification and pushes for educational gaming ramped up alongside the increasing use of smartphones, tablets, and computers, serious games have come under criticism. Their most vocal critic has been Ian Bogost (2007) who points to a false divide between serious and playful gaming implied by the moniker serious games. Indeed, Abt specifies that serious games “have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (9). There is a bit of ambiguity here in what Abt suggests in introducing serious games, while these games are intended to be useful beyond providing entertainment, he sees them as the coming together of science and the humanities, as games that “offer us a rich field for a risk-free, active exploration of serious intellectual and social problems” (13). Abt is less interested in suggesting no one can have fun playing these games than in offering simulation gameplay as a different way to approach social problems and issues compared to reading about them in a book or seeing them represented in an education
film, recalling a similar line of reasoning about creating empathy through gameplay from Belman and Flanagan (2010). While Bogost also critiques serious games for being ideologically impure as he argues that games created for, by, and in institutional settings cannot critique those institutions, and suggests “persuasive games” as a better categorical name, the logic undergirding both Abt’s serious games and Bogost’s persuasive games is similar: *doing* something can generate knowledge about it. Going through the process of trying to enact something oneself becomes “a way of ‘knowing’ through performance” (Flanagan 2002) and can create a different understanding of a topic, issue, or perspective and that is what dataveillance simulation games offer to players. By surveilling as a state agent, players will come to understand something about state surveillance, about how dataveillance’s “collect it all” mindset creates suspects out of “everyone,” and players can be implicated in this mass surveillance through our use of similar networked technologies.

The ability to act “as if” in a certain role is important, as is what players are asked to do in their roles. Ian Bogost argues for both the use of and recognition of “procedural rhetoric,” wherein a video game can “us[e] processes persuasively” (3). When players play through the processes of a system, in other words, they will be persuaded towards a cause or mode of critique. It is less that the narrative of the game itself is overtly critical, rather, playing the game *is* the critique—the game mechanics and one’s actions in the game make an argument in a seemingly more direct way than I have analyzed in previous chapters. In a limited way, the 360-degree virtual reality documentaries I analyzed in chapter one can model appropriate behavior of users as witnesses and listeners (make eye contact, do not turn away when someone is speaking) and the more self-aware VR documentaries can allow users to experience shame as, for instance, when users are surrounding by Rohingya Muslim refugees in Al Jazeera’s *Forced to Flee* (2017).
Similarly, as I analyzed in chapter two, users positioned as investigators in David Dufresne and Philippe Brault’s *Prison Valley* (2009) can experience some of the process of putting together clues and making a case for a certain perspective. These works evince a procedural rhetoric; users must engage with them and do things in them in order to experience the full meaning and understand the complete argument of the works.

Simulation games also offer an ability for players to explore concepts and ideas and to reason out the best solutions to the game problems with which they are confronted. Educator Jeremiah McCall (2012) suggests that simulation games let students engage with “problem spaces.” Here, meant to denote not only spaces, places, and topics about which students (and, for him, historians) might have questions but also a problem-solving approach used in many games, which he suggests offer microworlds wherein students need to reason out situations such as operating as a general in ancient Rome or engaging in resource management over the course of centuries. Mary Flanagan’s (2009) concept of “critical play” also addresses games that can create McCall’s problem spaces, but ones related less to historical enactment and problem solving and more to “a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes” (6). For Flanagan, critical play is a kind of avant-garde, radical play used to create games that operate “as alternative to popular play spaces” (6). The games analyzed in this chapter are not activist games, though many of their creators speak to concerns about needing to intervene in state surveillance. This might suggest that critical play, or, at least, the rhetoric of critical play, is starting to creep into “popular play spaces” and casual games, where even those intended more-or-less for noneducational play seek to convey messages of social critique and inspire critical thinking. Bogost’s argument about the need to rethink the false division between “serious” and “play” is correct but so too is a rethinking of “activist,” “critical,” “popular,” and
“entertainment” categories. Though none of the game developers who have created the games in this chapter define themselves as activists, many do have stated goals to generate empathy (like Accidental Queens) or critical thinking about surveillance (like Osmotic Studios and Bad Cop Studios) and all ask players to expand the perspectives with which they are familiar. These games encourage a form of critical play, one that broaches into some aspects of “popular play spaces” at the same time as it calls for critical awareness of state surveillance.

The critical awareness of surveillance generated in dataveillance simulation games is itself limited and ethically suspect, sometimes purposefully so and sometimes incidentally so. By positioning players as agents of the state, players are tasked with behaving in ways that might be, outside of the gameworld, unethical, like ignoring the pleas of people wanting to escape abuse or economic hardship by crossing into a new country or looking through someone’s personal files and documents unbeknownst to them. These potential ethical violations occur sometimes within the laws of a particular political regime that is coded as authoritarian and sometimes the player’s surveillance work is extrajudicial and involves looking through or even hacking into a character’s personal files. These games pose ethical questions along the way by making players conscious that their acts have consequences within the game world and by making it clear that the player is being watched, tracked, and assessed. It is necessary to bring in a more play- and player-centric rendering of ethics here. A game narrative or game mechanic might suggest or reward a certain kind of ethics, but ethics is ultimately related to the player and how players approach these games. Miguel Sicart (2009) makes clear that it is not necessarily unethical to steal something, kill someone, or even hack into someone else’s computer or smartphone within fictional worlds and doing any seemingly unethical acts within a game does not make one an
unethical person. Many games ask players to act unethically and Sicart counters the assumption that in-game actions say something about a player outside of a game.

In dataveillance simulation games, players are confronted with situations where they will have to decide their own ethics. Sicart’s arguments about ethics and ethical players offer a useful discussion of how games like these can pose ethical questions to players. He points to games that exploit a tension between players being confronted with unethical behaviors needed to win and these behaviors going against a player’s own socio-cultural norms or positionings. The game *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (Danny Ledonne 2005) becomes a prime example of this situation for him. In this game, you play as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two teenage shooters responsible for the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. To Sicart, this game allows players to think through what they are willing to do within a game to achieve a win, as players juggle the elements of recreation in the game and their own knowledge of the shootings from the larger cultural context. James Tregonning (2019) too suggests that playing “as if” a “criminal” within a game can create a useful tension between “the ludic structures of these games, which encourage uncritical obedience to an authoritarian regime, and the player’s own moral compass” (27). Tregonning’s own analysis turns to *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope 2013) and *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (Osmotic Studios 2016), both analyzed later in this chapter, where players work for the state in order to police and surveil others’ documents and communications. These are games where “criminality is not assumed […] but rather posed as a question” (29), as Tregonning suggests. This “posed as a question” nature of ethics illuminates Sicart’s arguments about ethics in games. Players, for Sicart, are moral beings who negotiate an in-game ethics during play. Dataveillance simulation games are not “serious” simulation games in the sense that they are training players for jobs with the NSA or utilizing
real-world verisimilitude to recreate specific recent historical events. Rather, these games exhibit a “social realism” (Galloway 2006) and by placing players in unethical and “criminal” roles—sanctioned and created by state governments—they pose “what if” questions about players’ relationships to surveillance, to technologies that surveil, and to seemingly humanistic reasons for surveilling others.

Before moving further into my analysis of dataveillance simulation games I turn now to a demonstrative example of how using invasive voyeurism as a game mechanic and mode of empathy can backfire. All dataveillance simulation games purposefully tap into the pleasure of voyeurism, the idea that you can unseen look through another person’s personal documents and maybe learn their deepest secrets. Most dataveillance simulation games, ultimately, move beyond this voyeuristic appeal and turn it back on the player, making their watching and reading seen and known, either to other state surveillance agents or to the NPCs who are the game’s surveillance targets. What happens, however, when a game uses voyeurism to appeal to players to feel empathy for people who have gone through traumatic experiences or who come from socially marginalized groups? French development studio Accidental Queens have run into ethical dilemmas in their two found phone games, both released in 2017, *A Normal Lost Phone* and *Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story*. It is useful to discuss some of the violations of consent that players have found in these games and how Accidental Queens addressed these concerns as a counterpoint to other dataveillance simulation games that use deliberate ethical violations rather than unintentional violations. Most found phone games are horror games where players find themselves in possession of a stranger’s phone and are tasked with unraveling the mystery surrounding the phone owner’s identity and death or disappearance. Accidental Queens games are not horror games, rather, they utilize the voyeuristic appeal of the found phone genre as an
explicitly empathetic and educational vehicle. Both of their found phone games involve players being in possession of another person’s phone but Accidental Queens’ games are designed to foster empathy for transgender folx in *A Normal Lost Phone* and women in abusive romantic relationships in *Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story*. Players have had mixed and negative reactions to generating empathy through voyeurism within these games. Diane Landais, co-founder of Accidental Queens, has acknowledged some of the violation involved here when she suggests that they originally considered using real photographs for characters in *A Normal Lost Phone* but found that that would make the experience of going through this phone and putting together this story “too creepy,” so they decided to draw images instead (Valentine 2018).

At the more positive end of player experience, in his review of *A Normal Lost Phone*, Jeff Ramos (2017) “felt icky” about going through a stranger’s phone, even while experiencing an ethical imperative to “keep going” to unravel the mystery of what happened to the phone’s owner. Heather Alexandra’s (2017) review for *Kotaku* more bluntly asserts that Sam, a young transgender girl struggling with coming out to her family and the phone’s owner in *A Normal Lost Phone*, “has no agency. She is absent, unable to consent or comment on your personal invasion. She is an object to be analyzed. She is also a damsel to save and protect.” While this game in its entirety involves reading through Sam’s personal documents and social media profiles in order to find out what happened to her, most of Alexandra’s critique focuses on one specific point in the game where players read through Sam’s two dating profiles on the fictional dating application Lovebirds. To move the game forward, players must send a photo of Sam to a user named Phil-free, her closest contact on Lovebirds. The worry here is that players can send any photo in Sam’s phone to Phil-free, including male-presenting ones from before she transitioned or photos of other people who are not her. This is a concern, especially when
considering how game mechanics can position players unethically in relation to a subject. This
game does allow players to enact their own transphobia and send an image of Sam as a boy to
Phil-free, but to continue progressing through the game, players are forced to send the one
correct photo that matches how Sam has described herself to him: a girl with blue eyes, who is
alone and in a photorealistic picture.

While this game is premised on a violation of consent (as are all found phone games), it
also forces players to stay on particular trajectories to achieve the one end point. Players must
send the one correct photo to Phil-free and to end the game players must read through an email
exchange between Sam and her close friend Alice. In these emails, Sam expresses concerns that
someone might find this phone and read through it, so, like other dataveillance simulation games,
this one too makes the player aware of their own voyeuristic actions, albeit, at the very end.
Alice responds by stating that the only ethical option for anyone who finds the phone is erasing
the phone’s data to prevent it from getting back to Sam’s family. Once players erase the phone’s
data, the end credits are triggered. Erasing the phone’s data at any other point will just return
players back to the beginning, prompting them to find out the truth of why Sam has gone
missing. Ultimately, Alexandra’s review suggests *A Normal Lost Phone* is “exploitative,
fetishizing a deeply personal struggle and turning it into emotional tourism.” The comments on
this *Kotaku* article are almost unanimous in agreeing that the entire premise of looking through a
stranger’s phone is off-putting and having the ability to play-act as a trans teen is unethical.

Elizabeth Maler, another of Accidental Queens’ co-founders, has alluded to the violation
of consent around players needing to pretend to be Sam, and indicates they sought to correct this
in their second game, *Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story* (Farokhmanesh 2017). Along with
directing users to “find out the truth” about what happened to Laura, as in their first game, there
is a disclaimer stating that the story is fictional though based on realistic domestic abuse situations, followed by a cautionary statement: “Searching through the content of another person’s phone is a violation of the owner’s privacy. You are about to enter the private life of a fictional character, but do not repeat these actions in situations outside the parameters of the game without the consent of people involved.” This disclaimer seems premised on the idea that players might transplant the game mechanics directly into their lives outside of the game. It also suggests to players that they should approach the game from a standpoint of possibility and empathy. Players should adopt the “focused empathetic posture” that Belman and Flanagan (2010: 9) suggest is necessary to generate empathy through gameplay and a posture of possibility, an “as if” posture not meant to be exactly replicated outside of the game.

In addition to this disclaimer, there are in-game “fixes” to some of the issues of consent violation from the first game. The phone players find has no SIM card and players are no longer able to “talk” to any of Laura’s contacts or pretend to be her to move forward in the game. Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story utilizes similar mechanics and players must crack passwords to different applications to find out the reality behind Laura’s disappearance. This game, however, ends with Laura emailing the player directly. Laura’s email transforms the player from a voyeur into a potential benevolent stranger for whom Laura left her phone, hoping they would find it, learn the truth of her situation, and offer to assist her in one small way. The player’s second-to-last game action is to help Laura escape her abusive ex-boyfriend by turning on the phone’s GPS. Using the password she provides, players can turn the on the GPS to lead Laura’s ex-boyfriend away from her, as we learn Laura has escaped the relationship and found a safe place to hide in another city. After this, players are once again directed to erase the phone’s data, a final act that triggers the game’s end credits.
Found phone games themselves are premised on a violation of consent and most of the other games in this subgenre exploit this, rather than trying to narrativize it away as Accidental Queens does in *Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story*. As Christian Valentin (2017) points out, found phone games “rel[y] on the inherent sense of invaded privacy and voyeurism to impart a feeling of wrongness.” Many reviewers like Valentin suggest the point of this subgenre is to play off of the fears of new technologies and surveillance and to exploit the player’s discomfort (TheOvermatt 2019, Screenlifer n.d.). These games have the dual power of exploiting player discomfort with voyeurism and making one think about their own relationship to social media, smartphones, and surveillance, as the game mechanics are often those that players are intimately familiar with, as seen in The Movie God’s (2019) review where they caution, “you may have to remind yourself that you are in fact playing a game.” It is the bringing together of the intimacy of someone’s relationship with their own phone and the ability to look through someone’s private messages that undergirds the pleasure of found phone games and make the most meaningful and memorable social interventions. In an interview, The Pixel Hunt’s founder Florent Maurin speaks to his decision to turn the story of a Syrian refugee woman into a phone game in the style of WhatsApp messenger in *Bury Me, My Love* (2018), “[I]mmmediately when you have your smartphone in your hands, you are in this special mindset. There’s this special relationship you have with this little piece of technology that is always with you, it’s the first thing you look at in the morning and the last thing before you go to bed.” From this perspective, it is easy to imagine violations of this “special relationship,” imagining that someone has your phone, is able to look through it, and can hack into various password-protected apps will make someone uncomfortable but can also drive a mystery-based plot forward.
The problem that Accidental Queens runs into is working against the horror-mystery underpinning of this subgenre and using consent-violating voyeurism to generate empathy. There is an obvious incompatibility between the goal and the method in these two games where there is a lack of questioning whether this “raw material,” to recall how José van Dijck (2014) refers to uses of data, that users come into contact with is biased or truthful. There seems to be no questioning of how utilizing invasive voyeurism so that players can “learn an important lesson” about a trans teen or a domestic abuse victim validates surveillance and targeted surveillance of trans folx and women, in these cases. I bring up these games as a counterexample to the kinds of games that I will analyze in the following sections of this chapter. Dataveillance simulation games usually deal with state surveillance and these games prod players to question surveillance, to question what they are doing in the game and their ability to make good, ethical decisions through surveilling others. In these games, players also have multiple roles and, thus, their ability to occupy a singular perspective or role is split, where players cannot quite access the full perspective of the state that authorizes surveillance and are, at first, not the target of surveillance (seemingly). Players should act within their role as this in-between agent, but, given that details about the character one plays range from vague to nonexistent. also maybe act as they would in this situation outside of the game. While A Normal Lost Phone and Another Lost Phone: Laura’s Story do not involve state surveillance, they do illustrate an attempt to utilize something that looks like surveillance to build empathy for a stranger’s situation. The ethics of validating voyeurism and surveillance as modes to understand someone else’s situation remain an open question for dataveillance simulation games, as well. Dataveillance simulation games employ similar mechanics as these found phone games and similar calls to humanize and empathize with the watched, targeted, or surveilled individuals. In the following sections, I will analyze
dataveillance simulation games that more directly make players complicit in state surveillance, knowingly positioning the player as the “bad guy” to facilitate a more critical attitude toward state control and surveillance.

While found phone games position the player as a neutral outsider with no specific agenda, longer dataveillance simulation games explicitly force players to enact state surveillance. Most of these games have similar-style interfaces and gameplay to found phone games: the interface is a limited amount of technology (computers and computer programs, phones, a rule book), they lack a third-person perspective, there is rarely a defined character avatar onscreen, and the game’s interface is the technology itself. In the next sections, I will analyze Project Perfect Citizen, Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You, and Papers, Please. In each, players are new state surveillance agents tasked with monitoring state borders in Papers, Please or finding incriminating evidence against state-defined targets in Project Perfect Citizen and Orwell. By positioning players as directly involved and complicit in state surveillance, these games test the ethical reasoning of the player and their loyalty to the objectives of their role and to state regimes and mandates. Players are tested through the revelation that the targets of surveillance are often arbitrary, and players have a hand in constructing the criminality of these targets, many of whom will become humanized through the process of reading their diaries or messages, listening to their conversations, or hearing their pleas directly. All three games offer players the ability to work with and against government demands to varying degrees of success as they question whether individuals can impact large surveillance systems or whether the state will always win out in the end.

“Admit[ting] Your Guilt” in Project Perfect Citizen
The next two sections focus on *Project Perfect Citizen* and *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*, both games aiming for what Mary Flanagan has termed critical play and a critical rethinking of state surveillance and the player’s role in it. In these games, players roleplay as government investigators given access to computer desktops and smartphones of state-defined “targets” and must reason through who is at fault for certain crimes, which shifts the boundaries of traditional empathy-generating narratives. As previously discussed, Flanagan and Belman (2010) argue that playing as someone else can generate empathy for another person’s experience. The next two sections show a less traditional approach to empathizing with “the other.” While these reading-heavy games will humanize the targets of surveillance, players also empathize with their own in-game actions, actions that do not align them with any marginalized group and do not humanize another person or group. Players instead should come to recognizing one’s own in-game complicity in state surveillance and policing through this perspective that they inhabit. Both games create a distinction between the player and other characters only to erode it as it is revealed that the surveillance programs are also targeting the player and, perhaps, even their non-player offline identity too. These are games that place players in positions of power, becoming the eyes and ears of a vaguely defined state surveillance program, and are similar to Accidental Queens’ found phone games in that they end up suggesting that there is a discoverable truth in the data that suspects generate. The real “problem” that they want to point to through roleplay and blurring distinctions between roles is not that someone might be judged from fragmented personal and public texts, but rather that state surveillance entails a loss of individual privacy and left unchecked, everyone equally becomes a target.

The focus on individual loss of privacy is a fairly commonplace argument against mass surveillance: whereas, it is sometimes said, in the past people were able to recede from the public
sphere, to live their lives without the intrusive gaze of anyone else, now our everyday lives are public. This is the message of Ondi Timoner’s aptly named documentary *WE LIVE IN PUBLIC* (2009), which profiles Josh Harris, an early internet entrepreneur who was one of the first to stream his own life and the lives of others on the internet and who would leave the public eye after losing his money when the Web 1.0 dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s. Timoner herself states, at the end of her documentary, “you, me, all of us, we live in public.” Personal privacy seems to be at an all-time low due to global networked connectivity, big data (wherein ever more material possessions are connected to the internet), and social media that facilitates users uploading aspects of their lives for public consumption. Fernanda Bruno (2012) affirms the double-edged dynamic of Web 2.0, where the technologies and platforms we use to connect with each other online “have become potential surveillance and control instruments,” where even though there is an idea that one can operate anonymously or create a new identity behind a different username, these technologies have also “proved to be efficient instruments of identification” (343). For decades now, scholars have theorized that we are living in a surveillance society, one where surveillance is an invisible aspect of our everyday interfaces with technologies, in classrooms and workplaces, public and private spheres (Lyon 1994). And while it might feel like everyone is surveilled equally, the reality is more complicated. The surveillance society as a concept demarcates not an equality of surveillance but rather a “democratization of surveillance” (Lyon, Haggerty, and Ball 2012: 3). Surveillance has expanded substantially, though that does not mean that everyone equally bears the consequences—surveillance may aid some even as it disproportionally targets others. Loss of individual privacy, a fear drummed up especially in media accounts of surveillance, is “not the major risk,” as David Lyon (2007) states, in comparison to discriminatory forms of state and corporate surveillance (184). In their
own intervention into surveillance studies, Rachel Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet (2015) affirm that privacy “is a right not granted to all” (4) and has never been. The fear of losing one’s privacy, when left vague enough to apply to “anyone,” is more indicative of the fear that a previously unmarked group of people could become seen and regulated through state surveillance. What we see in these games is that fantasy of privacy loss is a major appeal in media from the Global North, like Project Perfect Citizen and Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You, where the fear of this racialized moment of losing one’s privacy is used as an entry point into critiquing state surveillance and how players and the technologies we use participate in it.

There is little sense that certain groups of people are disproportionately targeted in these games, rather, game studios Bad Cop and Osmotic use this generalized fear of losing privacy to appeal to potential players and to mobilize arguments against surveillance. Project Perfect Citizen’s trailer (2016) is a great example of this. The trailer begins when an unseen person plays a video seemingly clipped from a real news broadcast as a news anchor relays that a “security agency will now monitor online activity in a massive ongoing program with the creepy name Perfect Citizen.” In the trailer, this clip is digitally rendered to look as if it is being played on a VHS tape, the image is fuzzy and pixelated, and the sound distorts ominously when the white male anchor says “Perfect Citizen.” There is some basis in reality for this program, the clip cuts the anchor off so that we do not hear that he is about to indicate that this program would be run by the NSA. The game gives no indication that it is set in the U.S. or a specific country, necessarily, but the NSA did reportedly create this program to monitor critical U.S. infrastructure and utilities against cyberattacks (Gorman 2010). The NSA denied claims that Perfect Citizen will monitor communications, countering that it will only assess risks (Singel 2010). The news clip in this trailer plays off of Snowden’s NSA leaks and intends to make viewers feel like the
NSA has yet another program that will collect their data and track them through their private communications, even though the program itself seems to have little to do with monitoring peoples’ communications in the U.S. like Stellar Wind and PRISM.

Beyond the initial attempt to market the game within the context of the Snowden leaks, Project Perfect Citizen’s trailer then shifts into something more like what players will actually see and do in this game. An unseen person starts “booting” into the desktop of a target, Douglass J. Kaufman, and viewers watch as someone clicks through various files on Kaufman’s Windows 95-era computer desktop, hearing voiceover ostensibly from Kaufman confessing a past transgression to his daughter. The trailer cuts to and zooms in on various documents that a never-seen investigator clicks through offering clues to potential transgressions: newspaper clippings about home invasions, emails about a friend’s wrongful death that allude to Kaufman’s former life as a “criminal,” financial documents and charts, and mirror selfies and chats with younger women implying marital infidelity. The father-daughter conversation viewers overhear vaguely references wrongdoing, though it remains unclear exactly what Kaufman is confessing to and, at the end of the trailer, the investigator’s cursor hovers over choices to “confirm” or “cancel” in response to a pop-up asking, “Are you sure you want to submit these files?” This on-screen question is twinned with Kaufman asking his daughter, “Given everything you’ve heard, can you forgive me?” Both questions allude to what players do in this game, look through various documents to decide if targets are guilty and submit varying amounts of evidence (including none) of ostensibly criminal acts they find in a person’s personal computer files to allow other (unseen) agents to apprehend them, charge them, or prosecute them. After players submit files in the game, what happens next is determined offscreen and only relayed through a post-case message. The final shot of this trailer is someone typing out the game’s title and adding the
descriptor “a surveillance storytelling game.” That *Project Perfect Citizen* is a storytelling game means it is less about scoring points or completing levels and more about the player’s own moral reasoning, where players must question whether they think a target committed a crime and, if they did, whether they deserve harsher or softer legal ramifications for their actions.

This trailer sells dataveillance simulation games on a dual dynamic of gaining pleasure by snooping through someone else’s personal documents twinned with the fear of something similar happening in one’s own life. The implication of marital infidelity is probably not part of the evidence that a player would submit to build a legal case against this person, though these details might sway a player to view a someone positively or negatively and therefore contribute to the player’s own construction of that target’s character. Instead of being a direct part of Kaufman’s legal culpability in home invasion, financial fraud, or a friend’s wrongful death, the evidence of marital infidelity appeals to the common fear of privacy invasion, that someone will rummage through one’s personal effects and find information that is embarrassing, perhaps even sexual, rather than criminal. The image in the trailer of Kaufman’s desktop is important to constructing this fear, his background shows what appears to be a smiling family portrait where Kaufman beams in the middle surrounded on his left by his wife an on his right by his daughter, a portrait that connotes middle to upper-middle class normalcy (see figure 9). Here too there is a double meaning. On the one hand, this is part of the mystery aspect of this game where normalcy hides something dark that players need to uncover and snooping through someone’s desktop is the best way to do that. On the other, who is in this portrait matters. *Project Perfect Citizen* wants players to think about what it would be like not only to gain access to someone’s personal chats, emails, documents, records, and pictures, but to believe this could happen to anyone, *even you*, and it is important that this trailer puts a middle-to-upper class white man, a “family man,”
perhaps, as the norm behind which secrets are hidden. This resonates with what David Lyon (1994) suggested decades ago, there is a broad “feeling” of being surveilled even if that feeling is not borne out in reality where surveillance continues to affect the same groups negatively based on race, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality, class, ability, legal status, and past criminal record. Project Perfect Citizen’s trailer sets up the twin problematic of player positionality in dataveillance simulation games: players are agents who gain ludic pleasure hacking into people’s devices and reading through their personal files while creating an in-game ethics to determine what constitutes a crime and how many seemingly unethical mandates passed down from their superior (Janelle Pax, here) players will perform before turning against the system of surveillance.

![Figure 9. Screencapture from Project Perfect Citizen's trailer](image)

The desktop of “target” Douglass J. Kaufman. Players can click “My Files” and “Email” to go through Kaufman’s documents.

It is important, further, that players create this in-game ethics individually and alone, rather than as one person playing a multi-player game or as someone connected in other ways to other players, as one might be when playing simulation games in educational or vocational settings. This individualization of ethical reasoning puts this game and the others in this chapter
into conversation with the rest of the digital documentaries that I analyze throughout my dissertation. These works utilize their second-person address and individual roleplay to walk users through privatized, experiential, and sentimental modes of education rather than placing the player within more public discursive spaces. Through individual gameplay, players are prevented from joining any larger game communities, communities which some games scholars have suggested can better facilitate learning and the cultivation of a system of “shared values” (Shaffer et al. 2005: 107). Some of the individualization of experience can be overcome, however, through the use of Let’s Plays, recorded or livestreamed videos of individual or group gameplay, which can facilitate communal ties among gamers and normalize modes of gameplay. As we will see in Let’s Plays analyzed throughout this chapter, many players do take a reflective stance on what these games have to say about state surveillance and how it has impacted their own lives.

While *Project Perfect Citizen’s* trailer sets up a pleasure-fear appeal that is apparent in the game, the gameplay differs from how it is portrayed in this trailer. Created by a small team out of California, Bad Cop Studios’ *Project Perfect Citizen* is set in a fictional, pre-9/11 past, where, according to the description on the game’s website, “the player takes on the role of a no-name employee at the Department of Cyber Police and Security [DCPS].” As text files within the game will relay to players when they begin, Project Perfect Citizen is a government surveillance program run by DCPS “tasked with the job of detecting and eradicating cyber criminal threats within our great nation’s network.” DCPS uses an application called the SecureNetwork that performs Pipeline Extractions, “extracting” target’s computer desktop and files, so that DCPS agents can go through them. Bad Cop Studios has stated that this game is meant to “encourag[e] people to think critically about privacy and security” (LoryCraft 2016), a suggestion that
resonates with the idea the game could facilitate critical play. Much of this desire to question mass surveillance happens through the inclusion of two different cases where suspects talk directly to agents and question the ethics of the Project Perfect Citizen program and the fourth-wall breaking ending where the distinction between the player and their role in the game is collapsed. This potential for critical play is undercut by the game’s text only vaguely motioning towards a nonspecific state surveillance and falling back on ideas of invasion of privacy rather than bringing in the reality of systemic monitoring and classification of certain kinds of people and groups.

During the game, players receive directives by email from their superior, Janelle Pax, addressed only to “You.” The beginning of this dataveillance simulation game is a two-part work simulation where players, now DCPS agents, need to practice using the system to create connections between potential targets and identify the “center” or person with the most suspicious conversations and then work through a practice case involving submitting easy-to-find evidence of “terrorism” in Germany, the only named country in this game. This training introduces you to Floppy, an anthropomorphic floppy disk icon similar to Microsoft Word’s Clippy, who helps you through the training with helpful hints. This practice case includes an email titled “Precision Bombing Technique” about bombing an embassy and a file folder labeled “Terrorism.” Most of the files are related to guns, blueprints for guns and images of guns, even a portrait titled “Sexy.jpg” of the probable suspect holding a small handgun (see figure 10). For this simulation, Floppy tells players to look for folders that seem suspicious and players need to click on “Terrorism,” the only password-protected folder. Finding the password for this folder is no challenge, as players need only open another non-password protected document with a list of passwords to find that the password is “Germany.” Within this folder, players find text
documents like “The_plan.txt” which outlines the plan to place and then detonate a bomb and uses fake German-sounding street and place names like “Mecklarstrasse” or “Oberibach.” Floppy will suggest what players should find suspicious here, like a detailed schematics of where the bomb should be planted, and players are instructed to submit suspicious evidence once they are ready. After players confirm the files they want to submit, players receive a message about the simulation’s Dummy target being “busted” (apprehended) or “not busted” (never caught). If players follow Floppy’s instructions, it is more-than-likely they will easily submit the correct documents but either way players will move on and receive their first “real” case. While the trailer plays off of fears of generalized privacy loss, this brief case plays off post-9/11 fears of domestic terrorism, where people of color visually coded as “foreign” might carry out bombing with seemingly no justification. Here, it seems to be a love of guns and violence that provide rationale for this bombing, as when one clicks on a folder title “The_Babes,” players find more images of guns. While targets in the other case files will be humanized, will give their thoughts on and reasons for their actions, it is notable that this supposed terrorism-related case is about simplistic wrongdoing. In presenting players with this basic training case, the game delineates a black-and-white worldview of bad, gun-loving terrorists (with poor password security habits) versus an all-seeing state who can easily find them, with the player’s help, and prevent their attacks. In providing such an uncomplicated case, one can also see that this game is not trying to intervene in who is seen as a “terrorist” or who might be the target of actual state surveillance, rather, its aims are geared towards the generalized fears about surveillance and new technologies. What might it mean to you, a generic player of this game who might not have come under a state gaze, to be surveilled based on text messages, emails, and images in password-protected folders?
This training case and the first “real” case will lure players into the mindset that there are bad actors who need to be caught, maybe by any means necessary.

![Image](image.jpg)  

Figure 10. Screencapture from *Project Perfect Citizen*  
The only image of a person from this training case is labeled Sexy.jpg and shows a man in a headshot posing with a small handgun.

After this training run, the game presents players with a series of ethical dilemmas over the course of three cases (out of a total of four cases; the second case players receive depends on the outcome of the first case). Going through these cases, players sort through text and image files on targets’ computers for suspicious evidence of any criminal activity. Suspect characters will receive different punishments based on the amount and type of evidence players choose to submit—if players think they deserve harsh punishment, they can submit more incriminating evidence, if they think the character deserves leniency, they can submit fewer pieces or less actionable evidence. Though much of this goes unsaid through this short game, *Project Perfect Citizen* operates with an idea that humans, not AI, are the best judge of who is truly guilty and seems to suggest that what should sway an investigator is personal and emotional investment in the case rather than objectivity and neutrality.
The attempt to gear the game toward players’ emotional investment is apparent in the variety of evidence that players need to read through for each case including personal emails, chats, and journal entries as well as the outcomes that are revealed to players after they submit evidence against a suspect. The player’s first case involves Murphy Goodwin, an English teacher who has been struggling with pedophilia. Players learn from his computer files and messages that he was sexually abused by his father and has looked at pictures of children, recently found and deleted by his wife. He has also reached out for help from an organization called the “Virtual Community,” expressing a desire to change. What happens to Goodwin will depend on the amount of evidence players choose to submit and how incriminating that evidence is. If players choose to submit three pieces of incriminating evidence, with no indication that he has sought help or exhibited a change in behavior, Goodwin’s case file will be updated to state that players gave the prosecutor “ample evidence” to sway the judge in his case, who is “disgusted” by Goodwin’s behavior and refuses to allow visitation with his young daughter and Goodwin commits suicide in jail before his trial reaches a verdict.

In Let’s Plays, players receiving this ending express that this is quite heavy subject matter and show a shared reaction against the potential crime at the heart of this first case. YouTube gamer Jim (2016) affirms, “Yes, it probably wasn’t safe to keep him on the job” as an English teacher, before saying “this is difficult,” and falling back on his game role, reasoning that he was “just doing my job” in submitting evidence against Goodwin. Kyle Penguin (2016) seems more genuinely disturbed by this game, saying multiple times “that was disgusting” in reference to Goodwin and the case, adding, “As a parent, I hope that never happens to my kids, holy cow.” Jim and Kyle Penguin’s responses replicate what Janelle Pax, the player’s in-game superior, will say in a post-case email to players: “You see, it is important to go through people [sic]
so we can get scum like those [sic] out of reach of our children!” which affirms a normative consensus view of pedophilia and universalizes the need to criminalize pedophilia for the sake of “our children.”

Replaying or playing the game differently reveals that the amount of evidence the player submits directly impacts Goodwin and the outcome of his case. Submitting only a couple pieces of incriminating evidence or evidence that he is receiving help and players will receive the “lighter” and seemingly more humane ending to this case where Goodwin receives a prison sentence of fifteen years, is allowed visitation with family, and does not end his life. Even this lighter ending receives a “wow, okay, that was heavy stuff, man” from SecondEraOfMoles (2016) in his Let’s Play. Players can also submit no incriminating evidence, to which Janelle Pax will respond, “Well I guess this is another glitch in the flagging algorithm. For every bad accusation, our system gets little bit [sic] smarter.”

Opening the game with a moral situation in which, for some, there is little room for debate primes players to accept their role as a surveillance agent. One can see some of Goodwin’s humanity in text documents that reveal he struggles with the trauma of his own childhood abuse as well as his replication of it in his life and that he has actively sought help. These humanizing documents are ones that players can either accept or reject as it might not change his “disgusting” thoughts or behavior, as noted in a response like Kyle Penguin’s. Players might enter the game with some skepticism about looking through someone’s personal files, but this first case is more likely to win the player over, “it wasn’t safe” to allow Goodwin to remain out of prison (or alive), as Jim says in his Let’s Play. The serious subject matter of this case and the training simulation primes the player to take their role seriously and even submit to the unethical premise of this game.
The other cases are more ethically ambiguous and force the player to think through less clear-cut reasons for guilt and for surveillance. Players receive one of two possible cases after Goodwin’s. If players submit viable evidence against Goodwin, they receive a case targeting a politician, where, similar to the situation in the trailer, there are a few potential crimes to consider: election fraud, a car crash that killed his wife, and even a mother who lobotomized his sister without her consent. On the other hand, if players fail to submit evidence against Goodwin, they receive a case where they have to weigh a character’s personal life story of hardship against the crime they intend to commit, blowing up a bank. This second option incorporates deliberate moments of surveillance commentary as the suspect, David Finley, writes directly to the investigator in text files titled “Notes to Voyeur” as Finley knows an investigator “will comb through my personal data.” Finley’s initial note speaks to his belief that the DCPS’s “algorithms will have flagged me as a threat” and that “everyone is indexed these days” so there is no use trying to hide his plans or personal information. The five text file notes addressed to the “voyeur”/DCPS agent are Finley’s confession that explains how he grew up poor, in homeless shelters, as his mother worked numerous jobs but could not pay their bills or keep their house. These notes are an obvious way to indicate that the game wants players to think about surveillance and they tell a first-person story that shows the suspect is a victim of circumstances beyond his control, who is now willing to end his own life blowing up a bank that refused his mother a loan. This case is geared towards forcing players to submit incriminating evidence—Finley clearly confesses his plans and only the player as a DCPS agent can stop him from carrying them out—while also giving players more humanizing moments within the game, moments players who submit no evidence against Goodwin might be inclined to want. This case almost mounts a critique of class-based surveillance but falls back on the generic privacy
concern that “everyone is indexed these days” and continues to play into the fear and pleasure of voyeurism, where players might think they are the unseen agent looking through these documents, but they are not as invisible as they seem to be.

The final case expands upon the voyeuristic aspects of David Finley’s case and extends them in an attempt to show the player the outcome of this type of state surveillance, to force the player to enact complicity in surveillance, and to suggest that the player themselves is a target. The third case involves a rogue ex-DCPS agent, Isaac Durov, leading players through a series of confessional text files that culminates in the revelation that he has hacked the system and giving players a choice to either upload the documents that will alert DCPS to this hack or not. In his confessional text files, Durov relates being assigned to “foreign ops,” feeling all-powerful for a while and exploiting his access to others’ desktop files. In his story, there is a turning point when Durov joins a new domestic surveillance program and “some jackass whistleblower wannabe decides to leak the whole thing,” agents end up having to plant evidence in innocent peoples’ files, and Durov’s family seems to be murdered to keep him quiet. Unlike previous cases, to read through Durov’s files players do not have to do much guess work to open password protected folders as he has created passwords that force players to parrot back lines about trusting him or being corrupt. To enter one folder, for instance, the password recovery hint directs players to “admit you are unjust” and players must type “I am unjust” to access the folder and progress the game forward. Many of the password recovery hints are similar imperatives—admit your guilt, admit your corruption, mean it this time, tell me you love me—where players are directed to enter something that, at this point, they might believe, or, if not, they can at least pretend and answer “as if” they do. This final case becomes a kind of metacommentary on roleplaying and performance in simulations. Players might experience some amount of guilt about the
consequences meted out to previous surveillance suspects but, even if they don’t, they still must perform admissions of guilt anyway and perform “as if” they are corrupt to appease this hacker and his password-protection scheme.

There are two potential endings to this case and the game, both of which reroute back to player’s own computer desktop and collapse the distinction between the player and the role they have been playing. If players choose to upload the incriminating files on Durov, the system announces a “breach alert” and players are ordered to wait for further instructions before the game ends itself and you land back on your own desktop. Even in this ending, Bad Cop Studios tries to blur the distinction between adopting the role of a DCPS agent and the player themselves by exiting onto the player’s own desktop with the idea that they will be contacted at a later point to resume their government work. Alternatively, there is an ending that blurs these boundaries even more. If the player chooses not to upload the evidence against Durov, perhaps because they were swayed by his backstory or the indications that the system itself is too invasive, the system loads another desktop extraction but with the player’s own out-of-game location and IP address before the game exits onto your own desktop. The implication here is that players are the next target, though it is unclear whether we are now supposed to investigate ourselves or whether this means an investigation has just been launched into our potential wrongdoing.

Both endings have been received by players as a game crash, as evidenced in Let’s Plays and on the discussion forum of Project Perfect Citizen’s webpage. SecondEraOfMoles initially received the “breach alert” ending and responded only by questioning “what the fuck man?” before attempting to restart the game and log back in, thinking the game had crashed rather than ended (“We Have A Mole” 2016). He comes back in another Let’s Play to state he’s done some research and tries the ending again. This time he submits no evidence and then appears surprised
as he reads the location for the Pipeline Extraction, “ooh location Leigh-on-sea” and as the game exits, he trails off, “wait that’s my…” as he ends up looking at his own computer desktop (“The Choice” 2016). The developers themselves were initially active in the game’s forum, addressing player confusion about these game endings and clarifying that they are the real endings, not a glitch or a crash. When asked whether they were going to change the endings, Bad Cop Studios replied, “The end is unfortunately in a state where the player has this really cool ‘whoa’ moment if they understand what just happened, or terrible ‘uhhh, what just happened?’ moment if they don’t” (Blinddoctor 2016). If understood, the exit to the player’s desktop is designed so that the role players were performing in the game becomes blurred with their offline use of computers and digitally networked technologies and players feel implicated within and by the system of mass government surveillance. While the gameplay itself makes players complicit in their surveillance investigator role, this should carry over as a sense of implication, a vague idea that this could happen to the player, that they could become the next target and would have little agency to stop it from happening. While the ending does reveal the lack of agency on the player’s part (regardless of whether the ending is viewed as a crash or not, players are powerless to control the game exiting to their own desktop), the game remains premised on vague assertions that everyone is equally capable of being surveilled, something that players also encounter in the game Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You. The premise of Orwell also taps into general social discourse on surveillance that forwards unnuanced ideas about who is being surveilled and how. Like Project Perfect Citizen, “terrorism” will be a part of the player’s idea of who should be surveilled, but also like this game, Orwell shies away from any specifics about who is categorized as a “terrorist” or working to interrogate this kind of classification in any meaningful way. Orwell, however, will provide a more detailed rendering of the process of
criminalization where players will have more opportunities to weigh the benefits of submitting conversational details or public data in pursuit of placing blame for a series of bombings in a fictional city and nation. Additionally, while Let’s Plays of *Project Perfect Citizen* show more of an emotional reaction and investment in the game’s cases, Let’s Plays of *Orwell* will provide more reflective responses on the ethics and experience of being a surveillance agent, in particular.

“**That’s right. I’m talking to YOU**” in *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*

Osmotic Studios’ *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (2016) shares many similarities with *Project Perfect Citizen*, including player positioning and metatextual elements that call attention to the player’s role in surveillance. *Orwell* was developed by German company Osmotic Studios, co-founded by Melanie Taylor, Daniel Marx, and Michael Kluge. Osmotic presents itself on their website (osmoticstudios.com) as a studio dedicated to creating “persuasively narrative games” that “challenge players to reflect on the world around them” (qtd. in Böke 2016) which is exactly the intervention they are making with *Orwell*. Like Bad Cop Studios, Osmotic frames itself as a game studio interested in creating games for critical play and here, a critical rethinking of state surveillance and the player’s implication within it. Initially, *Orwell*’s five chapters were released one chapter at a time over the course of five weeks. During this original release, new players could enter their email address to receive “updates on your case” from the Orwell system. These email “updates” blurred the boundary between the game and one’s out-of-game digital experience, which is something that *Orwell* will do in the final chapter of the game, as well. Since its original release, *Orwell* now exists as a single gameplay experience with five chapters and Osmotic have released a sequel, *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength* (2018).
*Orwell* is a storytelling game set in a country called The Nation that seems to be an amalgamation of Germany, the UK, and the U.S. and is only slightly more dystopian than present-day countries in the Global North. As YouTube gamer Materwelonz says in an introduction to her Let’s Play of the game, “I think this game brings attention to some topics that I feel like a lot of people these days might not necessarily care too much about, namely, privacy. And I really really think that this is a topic that people should pay more attention to so, we’re going to see what the consequences of not caring about your privacy is going to be like in this game” (“Episode 1” 2016). Players in *Orwell* are the “eyes that must see without being seen” that Michel Foucault (1977: 171) situates as part of a normalizing, judgmental state gaze. Indeed, this is a selling point for Osmotic as they state on their website, “Big Brother has arrived—and it’s you,” a suggestion that imbues the player’s role and position within the game with power and authority. Herein lies the moral crux of this game, as Osmotic co-founder Melanie Taylor states, “[T]he more you find out about the people you’re investigating, the more you start to wonder, ‘Do I have a right to know about their children, or their romantic lives, or who they’re in contact with?’” (qtd. in Grayson 2017). Daniel Marx, another co-founder of Osmotic Studios, suggests that *Orwell* asks, “How do good people get caught up in the machinery of corruption?” (qtd. in Grayson 2017). Instead of providing an answer, *Orwell* places players within this machinery and starts, much like *Project Perfect Citizen*, with a premise that encourages players to adopt their role: The Nation’s capital city Bonton has been bombed, and players need to find the bomber and stop them from committing further bombings. But, as players locate suspects and read through their documents to unravel the mystery of this fictional attack, players much enact increasingly suspect forms of surveillance and use their judgment to decide what information to pass on and how to interact with the surveillance system Orwell. “[D]ata is often very ambiguous,” states
Taylor, “and the player has the power to feed this inconclusive or even clearly wrong information into the Orwell system. It is up to the player to decide whether she or he regards this as morally wrong or right” (qtd. in Reilly 2016). Orwell, as Taylor affirms here, puts the onus on the player to determine their ethics and morals as they decide whether to upload a datachunk into the system and whether to play into The Nation’s narrative that paints a free-speech group called Thought as domestic terrorists.

What Taylor’s statement does not disclose is that to play the game players have to commit morally wrong actions, ones that will not be revealed as such until the final chapter of the game. The final chapter re-contextualizes choices that players have made when the targets of the player’s surveillance speak to the player and reveal how they feel about this invasive surveillance. This final chapter forces players to reflect on their own actions in ways that are more latent or underdeveloped in Project Perfect Citizen and what was implicit in the confusing endings of Project Perfect Citizen becomes explicit prior to the player’s final choice of who to target and what to reveal in Orwell. Moreso than in Project Perfect Citizen, which features a dated Windows 95-era desktop, poor quality images, and text files, the technologies and platforms within this game closely mirror contemporary ones which is something that James Tregonning (2019) considers a strength as Orwell provides an “evocative and unsettling portrayal of social media platforms, which accurately captures elements of our own online experiences” (32). This mirroring of platforms and technologies has the potential to create a much stronger feeling of implication within the player who might be more inclined to relate their own offline experiences to the potential dangers of surveillance and lack of online privacy that one helps perpetuate in Orwell. We will see this in Let’s Plays, where players use the space of
these videos to work through their own reasoning for making certain decisions and reflect on their role as state surveillance agents.

Like *Project Perfect Citizen*, this game simulates surveillance to convey the consequences of government overreach into the lives of “private” citizens. At first, The Nation might not appear to be overtly authoritarian, though the government regime in power, The Party, has passed the Safety Bill to tighten borders, make immigration harder, and increase the budget for “safety-related expenses” which, unbeknownst to The Nation’s citizens, includes developing and testing a state-run surveillance program, called Orwell. In the first *Orwell* game, players need to locate the person or group responsible for a series of bombings known as the “Bonton Bombings” in The Nation’s capital city, Bonton. The investigation starts with one suspect, Cassandra Waterhouse, and balloons out to incorporate her partner and lawyer, Josef Langley, and her friends who were members of a pro-free speech group called Thought. Thought members include Abraham Goldfels, a German immigrant and retired media professor who started Thought, Juliet Kerrington, a former student of Goldfels who works for a major tech company, Harrison O’Donnell, a musician and blogger with anti-government views, Nina Maternova, a troubled ex-combat engineer who served in The Nation’s army, and a hacker known as Initiate for most of the game. Thought saw The Party enacting legislation to curb free and private thought and protested this on their blog and at a few events and players are tasked with figuring out whether one or all of them have planned the bombings around the city.

Within this game, players are recruited as investigators from another country to sort through information about these potential bombing suspects and upload relevant findings in the form of “datachunks” into the Orwell system. Players build profiles of potential suspects by uploading these datachunks from public and private sources: phone calls, emails, text messages,
newspaper articles, blogs, social media profiles, websites, banking and medical records, and computer files. Datachunks are pre-highlighted text phrases and players need to decide what information is relevant and useful to upload into the Orwell program. Orwell is a program that understands everything uploaded denotatively and without the full context, such that if a character jokes about living in Wonderland, uploading that into the system would change their location to Wonderland. Because Orwell lacks the full context for NPCs actions and intentions, context that players themselves are able to see, players need to be careful not to upload innocuous information that could be interpreted as incriminating because government agents will act on what is uploaded into Orwell to apprehend, question, or arrest suspects. This form of discretion and judgment is the main critical reasoning mechanism within the game, as players have the agency to decide the “criminality” of specific target characters. It is both a thriller, where players can stop at least one bombing and figure out the perpetrator/s, and an interactive narrative game where players make discrete choices with easily observable outcomes to drive narrative events forward.

Most of the gameplay in Orwell involves reading through different documents in order to find the pre-highlighted chunks of data and upload them into the Orwell system. As Claire Reilly (2016) suggests in her review: “It’s a procedural, word-heavy game, and at times you do just feel like a cog in the machine, gradually glossing over detail in the hunt for those brightly-coloured data chunks.” While players receive directives from government agent Symes, their superior, they do not interact with other NPCs or have any specific identity beyond a name and picture players choose at the beginning of the game. The “you” that players end up playing in this game is someone who is an outsider to The Nation, because, as we are told, someone outside of the country will be impartial when they look through the data. This outsider nature of the player
coincides with the ideal of the empathetic, distanced, outsider analyzed in previous chapters. And, here, as in some found phone games, players should gain empathy for the NPCs whose communications and records they delve into through this digital reading practice while also empathizing with their own actions as a surveillance worker, a cog in the machine of a larger administrative bureaucracy. The larger point is not that players need to extend compassion and empathy outwards rather it is that the characters players surveil and the ideal player themselves are not much different, that one’s criminality is often created rather than revealed, and that everyone is caught in the same system of mass government surveillance.

Similar to *Project Perfect Citizen*, this game starts by putting players into the mindset to take the role seriously and perform it to the best of their ability. Chapter one, “The Clocks Were Striking Thirteen,” begins with an animated cutscene of a bomb exploding in Freedom Plaza and facial recognition technology zeroing in on an initial target, Cassandra Watergate, a young white woman identified near the area. Throughout this first chapter, players are confronted with conflicting details. Should players care more about the fact that Watergate was recently arrested for allegedly assaulting a police officer during a protest, that she recently quit her job with her family’s pharmaceutical business to pursue a career in art, or that much of the evidence against her seems circumstantial? How someone comes to see this character involves learning about her, building up an idea of who she is, and ultimately following through with one’s own reasoning. YouTube gamer ChristopherOdd’s (2016) Let’s Play shows this kind of thinking as he explains why he isn’t uploading a datachunk that proves Watergate has borrowed or taken the credit card of Josef Langley, her partner and lawyer. “I know you shouldn’t do that,” ChristopherOdd narrates when he first encounters this datachunk, “But that’s going to paint her as a criminal,” and he decides to hold off and return later after going through more information. He returns to
the datachunk while summarizing his thoughts on Watergate, suggesting that there does not seem to be any concrete evidence linking her to the bombing, “even the fact that she took this credit card, that could look bad, but I don’t think it’s that bad. People in relationships use each other’s credit cards sometimes.” ChristopherOdd is known for “morally benevolent roleplay” in games (“ChristopherOdd” n.d.), so it makes sense that he would be drawn to this game and adopt the mindset of a thoughtful, seemingly objective outsider who will carefully consider the datachunks before uploading them into the Orwell system. This kind of play style is ultimately called into question by a twist in the final chapter of the game, where it is revealed that no matter how reasonable or objective players attempt to be, the network of surveillance always expands and the outward reach of the platform will always grow.

Though players might try to limit the information they upload into Orwell, the fifth and final chapter of the game asks users to rethink their own actions and rethink their ethics through the previous four chapters. The fifth chapter, “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree,” starts with Catherine Delacroix, The Party’s Secretary of Security and head of the Ministry of Security, replacing Symes, who was doxxed in the previous chapter. Delacroix will now issue specific directives for players to follow, and she gives players 20 more datachunk uploads to narrow in on who committed the bombings. After players upload 20 bits of data, the screen freezes and players lose control over the Orwell system. It turns out that Initiate has hacked into the Orwell system and players watch, but cannot interact with, a chat between Initiate and any members of Thought who have not been killed or arrested up to that point. During this chat, it is revealed that Juliet Kerrington has been pretending to be Thought’s initial organizer Abraham Goldfels (who is dead) and planned or encouraged the bombings in his name in a bid to increase awareness of the state’s surveillance and policing of its citizens. The final part of Kerrington’s plan involves
asking the investigator, the player’s character, to self-incriminate and upload their own data into Orwell to show the public the true extent of this secret surveillance program. Kerrington broaches this topic by letting the group know that “the person who has REALLY been spying on you is still around […] The one listening right now. The investigator. That’s right. I’m talking to YOU. I knew you had to be around when everyone would come together. You had to be listening.” She continues, asking “you,” the player, to think through some assumptions you might have held, that the game encouraged, “Investigator, I have a question for you, now that you saw Orwell firsthand: Do you really think that this system will help anyone? Did you think the government would not spy on you as well? Did you think you were… OUTSIDE the system?” Of course, one of the assumptions undergirding Kerrington’s direct address to the player is that they have not played other dataveillance simulation games, as this moment where players “realize” they are being surveilled is a common enough trope. Overlooking that, Kerrington’s questions rely on the player having accepted their part within the Orwell program as the “outsider,” as a potentially neutral, third-party person looking in on a situation that did not have much to do with them, an acceptance one can see in ChristopherOdd’s gameplay.

Players are indeed very much within the system, as we find out when our avatar appears as a suspect after this chat, and it becomes possible to find our “Orwell Employee Evaluation.” Kerrington is proven correct as it turns out that as players upload datachunks into the Orwell system, it evaluates and makes assumptions about the player’s character and, perhaps, the player themselves. On one of my playthroughs, my “Orwell Employee Evaluation” rated me as “trustworthy,” based on my willingness to upload incriminating information on certain characters (see figure 11). My character is tagged as “not very observant” for uploading a fantastical detail that Watergate lives in Wonderland but also “observant” for noting discrepancies in certain
datachunks. While these evaluations apply to my character on this play through, Jen, they can also say something about me, as a player, and my ability to use discernment and judgment, as dictated by the Orwell system and my own approach to playing this game. Much of this evaluation frames what the player is doing in an active present tense, Jen is someone who “extracts,” “believes,” “finds,” and “reveals,” whose investigations provide evidence to pressure a character during an interrogation and lead to another character’s injury. Presenting the player with their own evaluation and positioning the player as an active agent in the game works alongside the moments where the NPCs can see their own case profiles and forwards the idea that players might have too much power and too large a role in determining the fate of these characters within this game.
Kerrington’s direct address to the player also relies on the assumption that players thought their actions might lead to a just conclusion. This game flirts with the idea that players can be heroes, but as Materwelonz will state in her Let’s Play, “there is no perfect solution” here and no avenue to “be the hero” in a simplistic way (“Episode 5” 2016). After playing through this final chapter, Materwelonz relates she knew she had made “a very big mistake” when the Initiate shares Kerrington, Watergate, Langley, and O’Donnell’s Orwell profiles with them, allowing them to see the specific details from their own lives that Materwelonz has uploaded into Orwell. Prior to this, Materwelonz relates feeling pleasure through creating these character profiles, collecting the data was like “Facebook stalking” for her. This end moment, however, launches her into a broad rethinking of her actions as the investigator:

What I was doing was I was collecting people’s favorite color, the place where they shared intimacies with another person, their home address, who’s in their family, where they go to work, where they study, all this information. And I also said something like, “Oh well, we gotta collect it because we don’t know what’s relevant until we found out at the end, right?” That very attitude is the one that Orwell the game is saying, “Hey, this is why an Orwell security system would never work because people think like this.” It might be kind of weird to say, but I love that Orwell pointed out to me how wrong my thought pattern was, without saying, “Hey, you’re such a bad person, you did this, you did that.” No, it just showed you the consequences of what your actions were. (“Episode 5” 2016)78

Materwelonz’s comments show the utility in forcing players to enact surveillance as it can spur critical thought. By inhabiting the role of surveillance agent in this fictional game one can start to think through a “collect it all” or “we gotta collect it” mindset of state surveillance agencies like the NSA. Anything might be or become useful, as Rita Raley (2013) suggests about so-called raw data, it “is the material for informational patterns still to come, its value unknown or
uncertain until it is converted in the currency of information” (123). All the details that one can enter into the Orwell system, in other words, work in service of this potential future “currency” that they could have as viable, actionable information about the bombings or who perpetrated them, in this game. The use of this predictive dataveillance and a belief that this type of data can be neutrally interpreted to make inferences about someone’s behavior, attitudes, and identity is what José van Dijck (2014) terms and critiques as dataism, a belief system that holds power over much of predictive dataveillance. One can see that there would be a strong desire to hoard every possible detail because something might become useful in the future and the goal of predictive surveillance is, generally, to minimize future risk (for the state or whatever specific organization or agency is making these predictions). A complication to the limitless potential value of “raw data” is that, as Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson (2013) argue, “Data too [like photography] need to be understood as framed and framing, understood, that is, according to the uses to which they are and can be put. Indeed, the seemingly indispensable misperception that data are ever raw seems to be one way in which data are forever contextualized — that is, framed — according to a mythology of their own supposed decontextualization” (5-6). As Gitelman and Jackson argue here, there is no raw material or data, only the illusion of objectivity. We can see a deconstruction of this mindset in Orwell, where players have more of the full context for communications between characters, their relationships, and their financial situations, but need to decontextualize specific details to enter them into this Orwell system which reads everything under the framework of crime and criminality: who committed the bombings in The Nation, and did they act alone or have accomplices? As Orwell was set up for this purpose, it interprets every detail as suspicious and every person becomes a “target” under the frame and the framework from which this kind of surveillance operates.
Orwell humanizes the dataist mindset by portraying the humans involved—the player and their character as well as Symes, the agent that acts upon the details that users upload to Orwell. This is a relationship that is often obscured by focusing on either the collection of data or the negative outcomes in response to this surveillance. By fictionalizing and pretending “as if” there might be a one-to-one correspondence between individual data one person uploads into a platform and individual targets, Orwell can make an argument about the results of a kind of surveillance that tries to sweep up as many small pieces of data as possible in its quest to know the intentions of The Nation’s citizens. It is this game’s use of procedural rhetoric, where players do state surveillance before the consequences of their actions are revealed, that has the most impact, as Materwelonz suggests. It is through being part of the system and inhabiting this position of power that allows players to reflect on their own actions, reflection that can turn into a critical realization about similar state surveillance programs outside of the game and whether they can be used for just means.

Adding on to this final game twist that reveals the non-neutral agency and embeddedness of the player’s role in the game, players are presented with a final choice that will determine their character’s outcome and the outcomes for the members of Thought, The Party, and The Nation. Do you want to be a “heroic criminal” as James Tregonning will suggest (2019), or align yourself with the state? Not only does the final chat sequence reveal Orwell profiles to characters who were surveilled, but Kerrington and the Initiate each offer a different plan for the investigator to consider as their final action. Kerrington wants the player to incriminate themselves by uploading information that Orwell has kept on the investigator into the system to expose Orwell. Government agents must act on information uploaded into Orwell, so her thought process is that agents would have to publicly search for the investigator, thus revealing the
existence of Orwell to everyone in The Nation. The Initiate, on the other hand, wants the investigator to target Catherine Delacroix, the Secretary of Security, and upload incriminating information on her to prove that members of the ruling Party are corrupt and, thus, so is Orwell. There is, of course, a third option that no one mentions in the chat. Once this chat is finished, players can search through various profiles and choose to upload information that would further incriminate Thought and expose the Initiate’s identity, thereby keeping The Party in power and the Orwell program running.

This final choice between Kerrington’s plan, the Initiate’s plan, or aligning oneself with Delacroix and The Party gives the player arguably more agency than they had when uploading pre-highlighted data into Orwell. Tregonning (2019) argues that there is a way in which this game allows players to “consider their own precarious position in a surveillance state, activating the figure of the heroic criminal as a problem for the player to consider” (33). But the “heroic criminal” is a problem for this game, in more ways than Tregonning lets on here. In one sense, we can see a recalling of the idea of the “problem space” that Jeremiah McCall suggests is useful in simulation games. Players can critically think through “what would I do in this situation?” in a way that might then allow them to see something about surveillance as a system or about their own thought process outside of the game. This is indeed what Materwelonz herself ends up suggesting, that players can see flaws in human nature or human desires when they encounter platforms that enable both the pleasurable and the repressive uses of surveillance (“Episode 5” 2016). Additionally, the forwarding of a kind of heroism within this system is its most fictional element; rare is the situation in which one specific person would be given this much unfettered access to a system that could be exposed easily and brought down by their actions alone. While there are real life anti-surveillance “heroic criminals”—Edward Snowden comes to mind, as does
Chelsea Manning—neither were unable to bring down the system and this calls into question the persuasive or educational uses of this simulation: how useful is it to offer a critique of the system and pair that critique with false promises of an easy solution? Dataveillance simulation games tap into modes of educational and serious games and do want to impact players’ ideas about state surveillance and, perhaps, Osmotic felt the ability to effect change through one’s actions would be a better ending than something with a stronger link to reality.

In the final chapter, players can access Thought-originator Abraham Goldfels’ PC and can read through his notes where he relates his experience working on project “Demiurge,” which would become Orwell. He writes about system tests and how they tried to introduce ethical elements—by bringing in an outside observer, the role that the player plays, for example—but that all tests ultimately failed. Players will gain access to a previously locked blog post written by Goldfels where he states, “Even when the system is investigating targeted persons, it will jump from one individual to another, ultimately parsing all of their indiscretions and making everyone a target. Each test indicated one true fact—no one is innocent.” As he reads this, ChristopherOdd chimes in to affirm, “And it’s true, you can find dirt on literally anybody if you look hard enough and you can have full access to everything” (“Gameplay Episode 5” 2016). Indeed, Goldfels’ files reveal what the game communicates through procedural rhetoric: players themselves expand the target from person-to-person and no one is uninvolved. In a saved chat between Goldfels and Kerrington he expresses a sentiment that, out-of-context, could relate to any use of roleplay to generate empathy or awareness: “[P]eople need to see the consequences before they ever learn. They must experience them firsthand, or at least see them affect someone they can relate to. Otherwise, it is all just an abstract concept.” Goldfels’ statements are metacommentary on the game and player’s role within it and evince a
logic similar to that of serious games and the edicts of liberal empathy. Players should have a space to work out critical social problems, through gameplay, perhaps, and hard-to-understand experiences should be linked to someone’s own experiences in order to create understanding of unfamiliar situations.

While this game fictionalizes a rather literal cause-and-effect chain between the human element mining peoples’ correspondences for data and those who are targeted (or who become targets), this game does open a space to rethink mass digital surveillance programs, in a broad sense. It is important to note that the final critical conversation that players overhear between members of Thought does act as a kind of communal working through of ethics. Dataveillance simulation games are single-player games that offer individual experiences of reading and coming to terms with one’s own thoughts on this type of surveillance and how it seems to be able to impact other peoples’ lives. But, in Orwell, when the NPCs speak back, they also speak to each other about who is in the right and who is in the wrong, which could sway players to the more obviously “right” or ethical side, and away from Kerrington’s plan, as she is revealed to be the one who planned to murder innocent people to make her point about invasive state surveillance. This communal negotiation of ethics, while limited to this in-game discussion between NPCs, could be facilitated by Let’s Plays, which might offer a better way for viewers of these works to bounce their own ideas and experiences off of the gamers recording or livestreaming themselves in this form. The ultimate effect of playing Orwell, whether one plays individually or watches another person’s playthrough, is that one sees and experiences that a mass surveillance program’s expansive spread is hard to contain, even when someone tries to engage with it “objectively” as ChristopherOdd does. One realizes that once these programs are started, there might be “no perfect solution” and no way to “be the hero” as Materwelonz
laments in her own gameplay. The sense in which “every single choice sucked,” as Materwelonz says of the endings, will become even more literal in my analysis of *Papers, Please* in the final section of this chapter. While *Orwell* does offer some ways to be heroic, to sacrifice oneself to hurt The Party and to end the Orwell program, in *Papers, Please* the gameplay and politics are muddled and dystopian, and the gameplay is less narrative and even more about the experience of being stuck in a system one cannot change as an individual.

“**You are under arrest [and] a replacement inspector will be found easily**” in *Papers, Please*

Lucas Pope’s *Papers, Please* (2013) is one of the most well-known and popular dataveillance simulation games. Inspired by his own travel experiences and interactions with immigration and customs officials at airports (Webster 2013), Pope created this “dystopian documentary thriller” from the perspective of a border security agent in Arstotzka, a fictional Soviet-style country opening their border in 1982 after a war with neighboring Kolechia. The game itself has been lauded, winning Most Innovative & Best Gameplay at the 2014 Games for Change awards and the grand prize at the 2013 Independent Games Festival. It has even inspired two Russian filmmakers Nikita Ordynskiy and Liliya Tkach to create a ten-minute dramatic short based on the game, released in 2018 on YouTube and Steam. This game stands apart from the others in this chapter in a few important ways, it is set earlier, takes place in a more overtly fictionalized dystopian world, and the player is not the “unseen” agent of state surveillance, rather, the player’s character is hyper-visible in their role as a border agent to other NPCs though remains unseen by the player. While these elements seem to mark *Papers, Please* as a game that is less interested in commenting on contemporary surveillance in the Global North, players do approach this game from a mindset of identification, many revealing their own interactions with border
crossing during play, and we can see a similar split identification here as with the other games. During gameplay, players use their own discretion and reasoning in such a way that aids the deconstruction of criminalization and players empathize both with their bureaucratic role and the NPCs who pass through their booths, though, here, the game mechanics actively work against NPC empathy by incentivizing speed and financial accumulation over care for those fleeing harsh economic conditions and violence. I turn to Papers, Please at the end of this chapter both because we see something interesting happening in this document-heavy game with how it positions players as over-worked and under-paid border agents and for how it fulfills Galloway’s “congruence requirement” for realism in games in a different way than Orwell or Project Perfect Citizen. Papers, Please creates an experience of the all-encompassing nature of systemic surveillance where no amount of heroic gameplay is going to bring down the government of Arstotzka or change how it demarcates and regulates its borders.

Despite its vaguely Soviet setting, Papers, Please seems to reference Arizona’s SB 1070 (known colloquially as the “papers please” or “show me your papers” law), a 2010 U.S. law requiring immigrants to carry documents “proving” their immigration status, making lack of documents and trying to get a job without these documents a crime, and enabling law enforcement to ask for proof of these documents based on a “reasonable suspicion” during any stops or arrests. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the aspects of this law that would result in misdemeanors or arrests for not having certain documents, while leaving the ability to ask for proof of valid paperwork intact (Barnes 2012). This “papers please” law was widely criticized as racial profiling and further criminalization of Latinx people (ACLU n.d.). Pope, however, claims his game is not “political” or directly related to any specific politics (Alexander 2013, Costantini 2013) and says that while “there are political elements in the game, my goal isn’t to make a
political statement,” instead he is “more interested in providing an entertaining experience for a few hours” (Webster 2013). Pope might not have meant to reference a system of policing based on the perceived markers of identity, but the game cannot shake political resonances as players become complicit in an increasingly arbitrary system of border security based on paper identity documents, fingerprinting, and full body scans. Pope wants to blur the lines between good and bad with *Papers, Please* and show that “all sides of any kind of issue have some justification […] even the bad guys have some justification for why they want to do something” (qtd. in Cullen 2014). Here, one can see a conflicting and shifting politics from the game’s creator, suggesting the game is “not political” while also forwarding the idea that there is value in seeing the “justifications” of the “bad guys,” perhaps even calling into question whether those enforcing state movement and border crossing laws are actually all that “bad.” Instead of players gradually coming to realize they might be the “bad guys,” like in *Project Perfect Citizen* and *Orwell*, this feeling is there from the beginning of *Papers, Please*, where players can easily deny entry to people despite their pleas if they lack valid documents or accept those who might be murderers or human traffickers if they have the correct paperwork. We will see this mixed politics reflected in popular Let’s Plays of this game, where gamers often take a more humorous and flippant approach to playing the game, initially, at least. This game and its gameplay, however, have a tendency to grind players down by the experience of needing to make ever-quicker choices about who to deny and admit and whether to work with or against the government.

*Papers, Please* is reading-heavy, similar to *Orwell* and *Project Perfect Citizen*, though it is more accurate to say it is document-heavy, as players are a never-seen border agent who spends most of his time in an immigration inspector’s booth looking identity documents over for discrepancies, deciding who to let in to Arstotzka and who to deny (see figure 12). The amount
and type of documentation required to gain lawful entry into the country changes daily, increasing in amount and complexity, and includes passports, entry tickets, entry permits, work visas, and vaccination records, with correct dates and appropriate seals. Players earn money for each person successfully allowed entry or denied, money used to pay for rent, heat, and food for an unseen family. While there is no game avatar—not even a picture—for players to identify with, players see they have a wife, son, uncle, and mother-in-law (and eventually a niece). The player’s family is represented as figures on a daily accounting sheet that tells you of their physical well-being and how much money you have to spend on keeping them and yourself alive, healthy, and sheltered. Most of the gameplay is looking for discrepancies in documents based on the day’s demands and choosing whether to remain loyal to the Arstotzkian government or side with rebel organization The Order of the EZIC Star whose motivations and operations are as ambiguous and dubious as the government’s.
Figure 12. Screencapture from *Papers, Please*
A screenshot from inside the inspection booth. At the top is an overhead view of the line to get into the booth. Below, players see individuals who come in, read chat dialogue where NPCs answer questions, and handle their documents, comparing them to a rule book that is open in the image.

This game has different draws for different groups of people. Though the setting is bleak, and details are scarce, popular gaming YouTubers like Jacksepticeye, Markiplier, and PewDiePie all have multi-million view Let’s Plays of *Papers, Please* and enjoy humorously donning fake Russian accents and leaning into the role of an at-times overly harsh and punitive border guard. Any on-screen dialogue between one’s character and NPCs, which players do not control, similarly mimics how English speakers imitate Russian speech by using short, clipped sentences, and removing articles. The dystopian Soviet-like setting, characters with Russian-sounding names, and mocking speech patterns of NPCs add a layer of humorous distance between players and the subject matter, which is one of the pleasures of this game and one way that it lures
players into accepting their border guard role. PewDiePie, for instance, jokingly repeatedly refuses to pay $5 for his son’s medicine leading user Super.Nøva to suggest “Avoiding My Sons [sic] Medical Bills For Fifty Minutes Straight” as an alternative title for the video (PewDiePie 2019) and Jacksepticeye takes an every-other-day approach to paying for heat and food for his family to save money. While the son eventually dies in PewDiePie’s playthrough, Jacksepticeye seems to have stumbled onto a workable strategy with no consequences other than seeing that your family members are occasionally cold and hungry. As seen in Let’s Plays, people might be drawn to the game to play a role that lets them be brutal and domineering towards NPCs, though most players seem slightly more morally conflicted about what they are doing than a player like PewDiePie. Games for Change offers another potential lure on their website, where they suggest that the game provides the ability to gain “a unique perspective of immigration and border security spring[ing] out of the mundane task of inspecting papers,” something Games for Change calls a “uniquely human” experience (“Papers, Please” n.d.). What we do see from reviews and Let’s Plays is that players are connecting their own experiences to the gameplay and being drawn in by the combination of seemingly boring paperwork-based gameplay and ambiguous moral choices players are confronted with in their role as a border agent.

Being on the other side of border, customs, or immigration control presents players with various forces bearing down on their decisions to allow or deny entry. As Leigh Alexander (2013) puts it in her Gamasutra review:

The situation is muddy, and the player’s constantly asked to consider the righteousness of the job: Should you let in a married couple that wants to emigrate together if his papers are in order and hers are not? What if he offers you a little bribe and your child is sick? Why have suicide terrorist attacks from the nation of Kolechia begun at the border, and should this lead you to profile Kolechians for random searches? What about when your own supervisors ask you to bend the rules for their gain?
This “muddiness” pervades the game and is part of the small choices that players make—letting someone without a document through the checkpoint due to their compelling story, for instance—and the larger choices of whether to stay loyal to the regime in Arstotzka, work with EZIC, or attempt to escape and cross into another country. The game mechanics themselves are dehumanizing, as Paul Formosa, Malcolm Ryan, and Dan Staines (2016) argue, as players have an active financial incentive to process as many people as possible, and these mechanics come into conflict with the humanizing narratives that NPCs occasionally articulate when entering the border checkpoint. When players let someone through without the right documentation or bar someone from entry who has the right documentation, they receive a pink “citation” slip and their pay is docked $5 for each incorrect entry or denial, which directly translates to your character having less money to spend on basic necessities. This back-and-forth becomes a series of “tight, suffocating financial exchanges” (Kelly 2018: 472) and one’s familial relationships and interactions with NPCs are so sparsely developed that it is difficult to form an attachment to any specific person. “At some point, the sob stories don’t really bother you anymore,” as Phil Horshaw (2013) suggests, and it is at this point that the player most embodies the cog in the machine of bureaucracy.

Most of the emotional and empathetic possibilities in this game come from players’ own actions. Pope himself has expressed this empathetic positioning. “Sometimes authority is a complete asshole,” as Pope says, but “sometimes they’re just some guy/girl like you or me trying to do their job and keep their family warm and fed” (qtd. in Lien 2013). Players do seem inclined to think from this perspective and connect it to their own experiences. In the comments section of Andrew Webster’s (2018) article for The Verge where Pope discusses his intentions for the game, for instance, people share their own negative travel experiences. User pshultz shares that
Papers, Please “makes you empathize with document inspectors. Those guys at airports you’ve hated your whole life, you start to see their side!” In his Let’s Play where he revisits Papers, Please, Irish YouTuber Jacksepticeye too relates his gameplay experiences to questioning by customs and border agents. “This is what it’s like to actually be at border control,” he shares, relating a brief story about coming to the U.S. to speak at an event and how “it was scary because they kept asking me a bunch of questions” (“GLORY GREATEST” 2019). In his first of a series of Let’s Play videos, U.S. YouTuber Markiplier also suggests he turns to Papers, Please because “it is really fascinating to see the inner workings of how the immigration service works during a time when there need to be the quarantine things [sic] and you need a lot of paperwork” (“MY ADHD NIGHTMARE” 2021). He relates his interest in the game to needing to cross into Canada for a recent work event and having to follow work permit and COVID-19 quarantine and testing protocols, jokingly suggesting that Papers, Please will be “marginally less complicated” than this experience. The use of full-body scanners during the game reinforces the link to airport security, rather than 1980s Soviet immigration checkpoints, though this fictional dystopian setting is likely why players are able to gain some pleasure playing this game even with the links to policing Latinx people in the U.S., post-9/11 airport security measures, and public health threats. As a fictional agent in Arstotzka, your character operates in a pre-9/11, pre-Snowden revelations past working for a country that you know does not exist outside of this game and you will not be held accountable for the decisions made by your character or this fictional government. As Swedish YouTuber PewDiePie (2019) says in his Let’s Play when denying a female-presenting avatar with a male “sex” designation on their passport: “We’re not a progressive country, I’m sorry. Next!” Players can lean into this alternate-day setting and align themselves with Arstotzkian population control as PewDiePie does here, though the game
presents players with many opportunities to see the humanity of the NPCs and to see the
correctly
character one plays as caught within an oppressive system himself.

_Papers, Please_ does offer a similar dual empathy as seen in the other dataveillance
simulation games, where players can experience something of a literary style of empathy by
hearing from the NPCs while also doing surveillance as a border agent and coming to empathize
with those occupying this more administrative role. In _Papers, Please_, it is not only the
stereotypical marginalized other, the “invisible people” of our world (94), as Martha Nussbaum
(1997) suggests, who one empathizes with. It is with the highly visible role of the border agent,
one aligned with state power and state interests, that many people will see and come into contact
with as they cross borders. And while this game and other dataveillance simulation games
demonstrate a broad shift in what kinds of experiences are open to empathy, there is also a shift
in how that empathy is communicated, from one’s interior thoughts within a novel, for example,
to public and private documents and one’s own experiences roleplaying as someone else.
Interiority is present in the other games analyzed in this chapter, where private documents on a
computer or public social media posts become the new site for interiority and understanding
another’s thought processes and perspective. Though, even here, players need to put these
fragmented pieces of someone’s thoughts and ideas together to form their own whole. In _Papers,
Please_, by contrast, there are brief instances of exterior communication between your character
and those who pass through the player’s booth paired with a lack of interiority from your own
character. Any rationale, any understanding of your motivations comes solely from you yourself
and your in-game actions, actions that operate within the rules and constraints of the game which
simulate the rules and constraints of bureaucratic surveillance. As Patrick C. Exmeyer and
Daniel Boden (2020) argue, removing features of characterization for the player’s role is itself
part of how this game simulates the rule-based system of immigration administration, where players perform the limited discretions of a border agent which “reinforces the concept of bureaucracy as a rigid, mechanical process” (417). Players’ own rigid and mechanical actions become manifestations of state surveillance and it is these repetitive, pre-defined actions and processes and the perspectives that players take-on during this gameplay with which players empathize.

While most players seem to respond positively to playing from this perspective as it provides a novel experience, there is valid criticism of this decidedly state-aligned perspective. Patricia Hernandez (2016), for instance, relates playing this game during a period where she was living in fear after having accidentally lost her identification documents. Papers, Please, at first, offers Hernandez “refuge in a make-believe world where I didn’t have to worry about my race or temporary lack of papers. A place that could grant me control.” Though initially seeking a simulation of control, she starts to feel like she’s losing control as she continues to play and the inspection booth becomes claustrophobic as doubt creeps into her gameplay and she finds herself needing to “double, triple chec[k] the same damn things” though ultimately “it won’t matter, because you’ll still somehow let someone with a bomb through.” Hernandez reflects on the skewed perspective in the game as a limitation, pointing out that it excises much of the embodied reality of how Latinx people are judged more for physical and vocal identifiers, like skin color, accent, and other behavioral markers, markers that are mostly removed along with the perspective of those crossing the border in this game.

Though players themselves feel stuck and dispossessed in their role as border agent, Hernandez points out that the bureaucratic activity of sorting through identity documents “makes the game feel profoundly white, profoundly of an empowered class.” Hernandez’s point
resonates with what Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) suggest about video games, broadly, that they “encode the injustices that pervade society as a whole” (6) and “provide a training ground for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes as well as opportunities to become instruments of hegemony” (6) which they argue “offer[s] spaces of white male play and pleasures” (6). Potentially offering a kind of “white male play and pleasur[e]” is one of the risks of placing players within a power structure and as actively complicit in state surveillance. Instead of critiquing this all-too-common positionality within video games, the narrative and game mechanics in Papers, Please and other dataveillance simulation games can encode it, as Gray and Leonard suggest. Hernandez is right to critique the limitations of this forced perspective in Papers, Please, and it is left to other games and other creators to fill the gaps in gameplay representation one does not see here. Stopping at identifying the character players play as an agent and person with power in the game, however, leaves out the ways in which he lacks control, is forced to work in this job due to a state lottery, and is himself subject to workplace surveillance, as seen in the citations slips players receive for mistakes.

In Papers, Please, the goal is for players to adopt a position of limited power, to experience life from the inside of an inspection booth and play as someone ethically compromised. While the critiques of the limitations of this perspective are valid and even reminiscent of the voyeurism found phone games from Accidental Queens, justifications for placing players in these positions are also valid and this becomes clearer by turning to other examples of intentionally positioning players in powerful roles. Useful examples can be found in Molleindustria’s games, for example. Molleindustria is an Italian activist development studio run by Paolo Pedercini known for placing players into positions of complicity. Pedercini addresses this in a “postmortem” for their game Oligarchy (2008), a simulation where players act as an oil
tycoon. “Now you can be the protagonist of the petroleum era,” Molleindustria’s website enthuses, urging prospective players to “explore and drill around the world, corrupt politicians, stop alternative energies and increase the oil addiction.” In his “Oligarchy Postmortem,” Pedercini argues for the necessity of positioning the player as the oil tycoon rather than someone affected by, for example, the environmental costs of oil drilling. For Molleindustria, forcing players to adopt what they call “unethical gameplay” is part of their critique. Players are not punished in the game for behaving in a way that (outside of the game) we might say is unethical, instead, they are rewarded, similar to how free market capitalism rewards those willing to exploit the earth’s resources for financial gain, in this line of critique. Pedercini in this postmortem definitively states that “power structures can be understood more clearly if represented from a privileged position,” to which I would add that so too can the limitations of those power structures. Players do not play from the top of the hierarchy in dataveillance simulation games rather they play in contested positions of power such that some of the structure is understood more clearly while leaving some of it opaque, as a looming threat for players to worry about in their own lives outside of the game.

Though this game exists in a decidedly fictional Soviet-like time and place, it also more clearly mirrors surveillance concerns in society beyond individual privacy. As discussed, players experiences in airports, crossing borders, or lacking documents resonate with their feelings about this game, and this game does deal, somewhat, with the realities of how people are differentially surveilled. As entrants come into the border crossing booth, for example, one of the “discrepancies” players are looking for is whether entrants “look” like the gender indicated on their passport and in their passport photo. In some ways, this rhymes with other bodily markers like height and weight for which players monitor, though this gendered surveillance of NPCs
who fail to fit into the gender binary or whose documents say they are a different gender than
they look, are either denied entrance or can be detained if they “fail” a body scan by, for
instance, a body scan revealing they have breasts when their passport marks their gender as male.
One notable incidence of this happens during Markiplier’s Let’s Play where he notes that a
female-presenting NPC has an “M” under “sex” on their passport, he says, “hmmm,” questions
them about it, and then does a body scan which reveals the NPC has breasts, the game’s marker
for “female sex” (“AT WHAT COST…?” 2021). He detains this NPC and remarks that he
“probably shouldn’t do so many detainings [sic] for a little discrepancy like that.” The “little
discrepancy” is taken by this game as truthful information about this person, who is
automatically coded as suspicious because their paper gender fails to correspond to how the
player and the game imagines their bodily gender. This moment shows us how data as raw
material can operate in the world as objective truth, a hallmark of gender surveillance as Hille
Koskela (2012) suggests. Like many of the document discrepancies, there is no in-game
reasoning given for why one’s paper gender must correspond to stereotypes about one’s body
and while a polio outbreak might necessitate requiring entrants’ vaccine records, this “little
discrepancy” is one where the player’s feeling of this as an invasive measure becomes a kind of
evidence that prods them into seeing their own role’s complicity in this regime’s oppressive
surveillance.

What is particularly interesting about this moment from Markiplier’s Let’s Play is that
detaining this NPC leads him to reflect on the game and how it makes him feel, overall. He ends
up sighing heavily while thinking about the detentions he has been bribed into making and
reflects on how he “feels bad about that.” Markiplier questions whether he’s supposed to feel this
way, whether the game itself is geared towards making him feel negatively about detaining
people for money or whether he is projecting emotions onto the game and his gameplay. This reflection continues as Markiplier, similar to Patricia Hernandez, says he feels worse the more he plays this game and how it is a game that seems to be just paperwork-based but is “easy to get lost in.” He continues, suggesting that Papers, Please has made him think about how there are “people that actually need to live their lives and are trying to just get by.” Up to this point, Markiplier has been leaning into his role as a border agent, taking bribes to detain people or let someone without valid paperwork through, and following commands from both his Arstotzkian superiors and the rebel EZIC organization. He has not seemed to be overly attached to the NPCs or their stories, but this moment lets his viewers know that it has emotionally impacted him, and that his emotions have prodded him to think about these NPCs as people not just data or potential “terrorists” or “criminals,” the game has humanized them, a hallmark of liberal empathy. One can also see him empathizing with the role of a beleaguered border agent, the bureaucratic paper-pusher, as he suggests the role and its paperwork have negatively impacted him over time, as if he is experiencing a limited form of work-related burnout from playing this game. Both Hernandez and Markiplier’s experiences playing this game, where one reads their own experiences into it and the other starts having unintended negative feelings for the NPCs and themselves, offer examples of split identification. Players play as a fictional border agent but having vague or no characterization allows one to read into this role and to supply one’s own rationale for one’s decisions, which is one of Pope’s intentions: to create a game where players must use their “imagination to fill in the blanks” that he has left empty (qtd. in Alexander 2013). And players are not only filling these gaps with their own gameplay or experiences, but with their emotions, as we see that player’s feelings can serve as a form of evidence against this mode of state surveillance.
While players of *Papers, Please* do have agency and are playing from a point of privilege, as Hernandez and Markiplier both found, any power players wield erodes and is contested over time. Out of twenty possible endings, for instance, fifteen end with the player arrested and destined for either forced labor or execution. Most end with Arstotzka’s government intact and text informing players that “a replacement inspector will be found easily” or “the border will remain open under a replacement inspector.” Even when players help the rebel organization EZIC, there are only two win states for EZIC and they come with strong suggestions that Arstotzka’s fascist government has fallen to an equally fascist regime as the game’s “Glory to Arstotzka” end screen is replaced with “Glory to the New Arstotzka.” By contrast, two of the five non-arrest endings have the player’s character escaping to the country Obristan with forged documents. How players achieve the Obristan endings highlights similar logics of criminalization and discretion discussed in previously analyzed dataveillance simulation games. Players will repeatedly encounter Jorji Costava, an NPC who initially has no passport, then a ludicrously forged passport, a series of missing documents, and weight discrepancies that reveal he is attempting to smuggle drugs across the border. He is the one who presents players with an opportunity to escape to Obristan and players are forced to take his Obristan passport (receiving a citation in the process) and strongly encouraged to confiscate more Obristan passports from other entrants so that their family members can also escape. While Costava does attempt to enter Arstotzka repeatedly with the wrong documents and admits to being a drug dealer several times, he remains good-natured even if the player detains or rejects him and offers up the only potentially optimistic endings in the game. Because he forces players to take his passport, he also prevents players from completing any sort of “no citations” run of the game, as well.
The Obristan endings have an additional effect of reframing the central positioning of the player within the game as players become political refugees and become the entrants they might have previously laughed at, detained, or denied for having forged or inaccurate documents. Players see this role change happen through a cut scene sequence that indicates tension and uncertainty as players are not sure whether their character or any family they have managed to bring along will make it through Obristan’s border. This sequence starts with a photograph of the player’s family and sets the scene for a long train ride, “You board the late train to the Northern Territories. It is nearly empty.” After your faked documents are said to “look terrible,” an image of the poorly faked passports wipes offscreen to reveal silhouettes of a crowd waiting in line, accompanied by text saying, “You reach the border crossing at dawn. The line is immense.” After a six-hour wait your character comes face-to-face with an Obristan border agent, hands over the documents, and waits to see if they are accepted as the border agent disappears behind a metal grating for a few tense seconds. With little reasoning, the documents are accepted, and it remains unclear whether players have become one of the rare exceptions, people who are let in by a kindly border agent that we have had the opportunity to play as. It also remains unclear whether life in Obristan will be any better than life in Arstotzka.

Even the seemingly “good endings” of this game are ultimately ambiguous, like escaping to Obristan, or indicate that the player is still working for a government, in some form, either by remaining loyal enough to the current regime in Arstotzka to have any “small transgressions” overlooked or by successfully helping EZIC to overthrow the current regime and install a government that is probably just as authoritarian. Unlike in Orwell, the player cannot end fascism or to be a “heroic criminal”-type figure. The player can either work with the government or a similarly authoritarian rebel group or leave the country, nothing the player does changes
how migration or immigration work, or the level of complex bureaucracy involved in decided which documents are accepted each day and why. What *Papers, Please* ultimately simulates is a system that resists individual agency and cause-and-effect logic, that remains opaque both to those outside the inspector’s booth and those inside, much like contemporary mass surveillance.

**Conclusion**

Data surveillance simulation games simulate the experience of feeling as if you are caught in the middle of an oppressive system, not quite the target of surveillance and not quite fully in the know about the system itself. The lack of specifics in these games facilitates player identification with their role as an agent of a vaguely defined state entity, though avoiding specificity also undercuts the ability to critique any specific government or regime. These games allude to the policing of certain groups, though they are not committed to a critique of the differential impacts of surveillance on marginalized groups in any meaningful way. Terror and terrorism come up as plot points in these games, but this is again vague in both *Papers, Please* and *Project Perfect Citizen* or turns out to be the work of one rogue person acting against the interests of her friends and fellow protestors in *Orwell*. An assumption that could be made here is that game studios do not want to replicate the realities of racialized surveillance, to avoid stereotypes, and therefore choose to ignore how race is central to surveillance. Avoiding the relationship between surveillance and identity, however, makes their interventions muted, such that these games often communicate messages like surveillance is bad, technologies are bad, and your privacy is under threat. These are, however, all fictional, alternate-day games, ones marketed for play in and beyond the Global North, and their goals are more geared toward an intervention into the discussion around state surveillance in the wake of Edward Snowden’s leaks and trying to
determine the boundaries between complicity and implication. Are all players complicit in this system by using products from companies engaging in this surveillance? Or by using social media in such a way that one’s data becomes a way to form normative patterns of behavior that can negatively impact marginalized groups? Rather than seeing this as a form of complicity, I would position these concerns as a feature of implication, where those who play these games (unless actually the victims or perpetrators of state surveillance programs) are conscripted into a form of nonconsensual surveillance that digital documentaries are working to clarify, visually and experientially, as I discuss throughout the chapters of this dissertation.

What is more clear, however, is that in these fictional gameworlds, the character one plays is complicit in state surveillance and has power to act upon what they find in public and private records and documents. By performing surveillance, players experience the “unethical gameplay” of invasive surveillance and the ability to cause NPCs to be targeted, interrogated, incarcerated, and even killed. This forced positioning facilitates the critique these games are making against mass state surveillance, a type of surveillance that works to collect as much data as possible, to make its target as knowable as possible, to build a case against someone based on fragments of details, and to control the lives of people in- and outside of a country’s borders. It is important that these simulations simulate a specific type of surveillance whose aims change and where “anyone,” even the implicated player, can fall under the state gaze with enough discretion on the part of agents and officials with power.

Dataveillance simulation games offer “problem spaces” (McCall 2012) for users to play, experience, and experiment with their fears of and pleasures in surveillance. There are, however, uses and limitations for these single-player simulation games, ones that second-person digital documentaries share. These games do model how criminality is constructed by giving the player
the ability to use their own critical thinking and judgment in determining guilt and each game incorporates empathetic moments where players should sometimes side with the targets of surveillance and players become the targets themselves to further this link, one that even crosses outside of the game, most forcibly with the collapse between player and their role in *Project Perfect Citizen*. A limitation of individual, private gameplay is the lack of debate and discussion that could further someone’s critical thinking and lead to group consensus. In multi-player roleplaying games, which often offer more extensive world-building, specific characterization, and group quests or objectives, players can act with others and create communities which “reproduce the social and moral bonds of a group by creating strong experiences of shared emotions, moral sentiments, and belonging” (Zagal and Deterding 2018: 4). As analyzed, we see a mini version of this in *Orwell*, where the player overhears the NPCs they surveil discussing the emotional and material impacts that the player’s surveillance had on their lives and offering up potential solutions for players to consider with their final actions in the game. Other than a moment like this, which is, of course, still within the closed system of the game, there is no room within these games to strategize with other players or work out group ethics, something that would facilitate the creation of community that could potentially challenge state surveillance outside of the game. Single-player games lack the ability to co-experience gameplay or work in common toward a shared goal. Let’s Plays might have the ability to create more of this feeling of shared community, values, and experiences. The game communities created through Let’s Plays, however, can also function to cement the para-social bonds between gamers and their audiences and do so in ways that create a hierarchy between the producers of content, the gamers, streamers, and YouTubers, and the consumers of content rather than creating an experience of equal buy-in from all “community” members.
Baring the creation of a more sustained out-of-game community, players of dataveillance simulation games instead will need to accept or resist the perspectives offered from the game designers embedded into these games and any challenges to one’s own thinking or in-game morals comes not from a negotiation within and between other players but, rather, from the game text and one’s reaction to it. McCall himself offers up a structure for the use of these types of games in the classroom, where play is guided by experts—teachers—and involves further contextualization, investigation, and questioning. The individual experience of gameplay runs counter to the goals of something like serious games where, similar to the use of educational film and video, these can function as conversation starters rather than singular experiences in and of themselves. Instead, offering this privatized mode of ethics and experiential empathy turns one away from public discourses of surveillance and towards the process of knowing others from a distance through data and to the creation of a singular relationship to individualizing technologies, a relationship that will be further explored in chapter four.

Chapter four expands the scope of the single-player experiences to explore those digital documentaries on surveillance that are personalized to users. This final chapter will ask what kind of critique and intervention digital documentaries can mount against surveillance when they are tailored to individuals and each person who engages with them sees and experiences something slightly different in order to understand how one is being identified online and tracked and monitored to sell user data to the highest bidder.
Chapter Four – Seeing Double: User as Data

2020 saw the release of two high-profile documentaries on algorithmic surveillance: Jeff Orlowski’s *The Social Dilemma* and Shalini Kantayya’s *Coded Bias.* Orlowski’s *The Social Dilemma* interviews the Silicon Valley tech industry insiders who helped to create social media behemoths like Facebook, Google, and Twitter. This documentary spends considerable time with former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris, allowing him to explain some of the psychology underlying engagement with social media, and incorporates docudrama sequences focused on a fictional, middle-class family and how they use and are used by their networked devices. While Orlowski uses scripted sequences and interviews that “introduc[e] viewers to some of the most worried looking white people you’re likely to find these days” (Ehrlich 2020) and centers its arguments and intervention from inside the world of Silicon Valley, Shalini Kantayya’s *Coded Bias* focuses instead on the women and people of color researchers exposing how algorithms are rooted in human bias. Kantayya’s documentary is grounded in the perspective of Dr. Joy Buolamwini, who Kantayya (n.d.) has called a “bridge-cropper” for how she is both a research scientist and someone embedded within Black communities oppressed by AI. Throughout much of this documentary, audiences follow Buolamwini, then a graduate student in the MIT Media Lab, as she explains how her research shows biases against Black women in facial recognition systems and meets with others impacted by or researching artificial intelligence (AI). Kantayya moves audiences through a more diverse set of places and circumstances than Silicon Valley, from UK organization Big Brother Watch’s attempts to intervene in police use of facial recognition to how facial recognition can police residents coming and going at Atlantic Plaza Towers, rent-stabilized apartments in New York City, to a profile of one resident of Hangzhou, China, who opines about the benefits of China’s “social credit score” system. Kantayya builds an
argument that affirms what Buolamwini states early in the documentary, that her “lived experiences show [her] that you can’t separate the social from the technical,” and what are often configured as neutral and objective technologies always circulate within larger systems of knowledge and history and are always embedded within the confines of their creators’ worldviews. One can also see this in *The Social Dilemma*, though Orlowski is not actively making this argument. Rather, audiences can see how social media reflects the values and worldviews of its Silicon Valley creators, whose ideals of transparency, participation, and openness are driven by neoliberal market logics geared towards accruing status through one’s careful self-fashioning (Marwick 2013).

While seemingly different in whose voices are heard and what perspectives are conveyed both documentaries attempt to visualize the unseen AI systems that they argue control too much of our lives on and off the internet. *The Social Dilemma* visualizes AI in its scripted sequences featuring a fictional family’s teen son Ben (played by Skyler Gisondo) at the mercy of a Facebook-like application. Orlowski depicts its AI algorithms, visualized as three men representing Growth, Advertising, and Engagement (all played by Mad Men’s Vincent Kartheiser), nudging Ben into interacting with the app to his own detriment. Ben eventually becomes isolated from his friends and family and “radicalized” to a fictional political movement called Extreme Center, leading to his arrest at the end of the documentary. Angie Han’s (2020) review of *The Social Dilemma* calls these docudrama aspects “cheesy,” noting that the acting has “the stilted, generic quality of an educational video,” reiterating a common criticism of U.S. education films as “preachy and melodramatic” (Smith 1999: 28) in their attempt to socially engineer the behavior of specific groups of people. Though these scenes read as very heavy-handed in how they show Ben quickly falling victim to the machinations of a humanized
algorithmic force, they are intended to communicate the risk and fear of using surveillant social media and how its underlying algorithms might nudge someone towards further engagement or towards marketing or content that might be harmful.

*Coded Bias* too visualizes an AI system, though Kantayya’s is an ominous female-voiced cross between *2001: A Space Odyssey*’s Hal and early Windows screensavers like Mystify. This AI representation is interspersed throughout the documentary and is meant to indicate the cold, inhuman nature of AI. Also intended to make the audience fearful of this type of technology, in a voice somewhere between human and machine, Kantayya’s AI says worrying things like, “I am listening. I am learning. I am making predictions for your life right now” and, at the end of the documentary, states, “my power, the power of artificial intelligence, will transform our world,” leaving viewers with the question “what could go wrong?”. Both the suggestion that this (fictional) AI is “making predictions for your life” and the final question to viewers prompt the audience to see themselves as potentially subject to decision-making by AI and to think through the implications of AI technologies that are increasingly integrated into commercial ventures and state institutions as co-decisionmakers with little oversight or public discussion. Both AI visualizations, the humanized one in *The Social Dilemma* and the dehumanized one in *Coded Bias*, serve a similar function of trying to implicate the audience in the documentaries’ messages; you are supposed to see in Ben a representation of someone who could be like you or like your friend or family member who has been inadvertently led astray through aggressive pro-engagement social media algorithms and you should feel addressed by the AI system in *Coded Bias* who provokes you to see yourself in the stories of algorithmic control and prediction detailed in the documentary.
Both attempts to implicate “you” in these documentaries run into a similar limitation, they cannot individually personalize their warnings to audience members. *Coded Bias* and *The Social Dilemma* address a broad audience and hope to shape public discourse about the use and regulation of AI algorithms and the “you” addressed and invoked is also broad. Digital documentaries on the same topic, by contrast, can and do tailor their content to “you,” by creating personalized, non-fully replicable experiences for the user, though, as I argue, digital documentaries also hope to shape public discourses about the surveillant and controlling algorithms underlying digital technologies, who controls them, and how they are used. This attempt at audience implication, at getting you to see how your face, your personality, and your desires are seen and understood by algorithms, is the focus of this chapter, which turns to digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance to analyze how they too are trying to fulfill the progressive mission of educational films to bring together “faith in educational reform and betterment of society” (Orgeron et al. 2012) with the power and affordances of digital technology. Rather than shoehorning in this implication by cutting to different scenes, personalized digital documentaries utilize similar algorithms to those of the tech industry and, in doing so, they collapse the traditional documentary distinction between audience member and on-screen subject to argue that the “you” that is implicated is, indeed, you, the user. While still utilizing second-person address and working to implicate the user in systems of surveillance, as in previous chapters, the digital documentaries in this chapter markedly turn away from the experiences of other people. In focusing on “you,” the need to maintain a “proper” or nonexploitative distance shifts as the audience becomes the subject. The user becomes the unknown and unknowable subject who needs to be revealed and it is, as these works argue, algorithmic surveillance that has made you unknown and unknowable, even to yourself. Users
are shown how they can be tracked and monitored online in *Do Not Track* (Brett Gaylor 2015), *Stealing Ur Feelings* (Noah Levenson 2019), and *How They Watch You* (Nick Briz 2021); how user’s own desire for technological aids leaves them disempowered and at the mercy of algorithms in works on AI digital assistants like *Alfred Premium* (Joël Ronez, Pierre Corbinais, and Émilie F. Grenier 2019) and *A Week with Wanda* (Joe Derry Hall 2019); and users will go through a digital assessment of their fitness to change the system from within in *Fairly Intelligent™* (A.M. Darke 2021).

Because people encounter this kind of surveillance through use of their personal networked devices, creators work to de-naturalize and defamiliarize how technologies and their lesser-seen algorithms work, beyond the humanization of social media push notifications we see in *The Social Dilemma* or the dehumanization of a regulatory electronic voice as we encounter in *Coded Bias*. Personalized digital documentaries use fear and humor-based emotional appeals to reveal the surveillant functions of AI algorithms and show how they are productive forces. Much of the fear comes from the revelation of one’s data double, a hidden “you” derived from your browsing habits, social media use, and unique device identifiers; each project forces users to confront how algorithms see and shape this hidden you, your identity, your needs and wants. Use of internet-derived, sometimes irreverent humor aids the persuasive emotional arguments of these projects as they do not only replicate the fear-based appeals of an overly melodramatic educational film or advertising campaign, rather, they use humor to communicate that the projects themselves see “you,” someone who is a contemporary internet user aware of memes, GIFs, emojis, and arbitrary personality quizzes.

Even more so than documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* and *Coded Bias*, these digital documentaries draw on the legacy and style of educational films in how they position users and
attempt to force a conversation or response outside of the bounds of a single enclosed text, though, as personalized documentaries, one must also question whether they tap into the same neoliberal market logics as the digital technologies and applications they aim to critique. Indeed, the personalization of the projects to individual users exists in tension with how algorithmic surveillance often harms specific groups and with how projects position algorithmic surveillance as a social problem that needs more than individual redress. The digital documentaries analyzed here move between advocating for reform, oversight, and government legislation to revealing playfully the boundaries of an inescapable system. The organizations that facilitated their creation, such as The National Film Board of Canada, Franco-German broadcaster and digital content creator ARTE, the U.S.-based Mozilla Foundation, and the UK’s Open Data Institute, position themselves as performing a public, educational service with their digital documentaries. These projects take on institutional imperatives to inform certain publics as narrow as the tech industry and as broad as the Global North while also utilizing procedural rhetoric to implicate users within algorithmic surveillance and show how user’s own participation, for pleasure and utilitarian purposes, fuels the neoliberal logics of this form of surveillance.

What unites these projects is not only a goal to defamiliarize algorithmic surveillance but a mobilization of the emotional affects of fear and humor for rhetorical force. This is, in part, an exploitation of a central Web 2.0 dynamic, the combination of the pleasurable, fun, sociable aspects of our current internet that one gains through entertainment and engagement with others and the lesser seen “costs” of this engagement that gives or leaks data to corporate entities for their private use. How these digital documentaries mobilize affect works against and conforms to film and video documentaries in interesting ways. Because some of the most prominent ideas of documentary have centered this film genre as a service genre and a societal “discourse of
sobriety” (Nichols 1991), these designations can create a binary where affect (and entertainment) might be seen to “corrupt” documentary, as Anne Rutherford finds (2003: 128). Affect-based documentaries are often associated with more experiment forms and embodied and non-Western knowledges, as one can see in Bill Nichols’ (2017) discussion of the performative mode of documentary as creating “subjective, affect-laden” meanings (149). Crucially, in the performative mode of documentary, these subjective meanings are associated with a particular individual or groups’ experiences. What we see happening in personalized digital documentaries is different. These personalized works create a subjective experience for the user, but it is the user’s own emotions and feelings that come to have a rhetorical force in communicating the dangers of algorithmic surveillance. Users should be swayed by their own emotional involvement in moving through these documentaries and persuaded to, as many of the projects will argue for, individual or collective action to end or regulate algorithmic surveillance.

This is, however, also unlike the kind of political mimesis that Jane Gaines (1999) theorizes for documentary where emotion becomes a ruptural force that can carry beyond the screen. For Gaines, seeing people, and, more specifically, seeing bodies onscreen moving towards and struggling for political change can provoke a similar bodily reaction in viewers. In personalized digital documentaries there is often little to no mass movement of others onscreen to be impacted by, though, they still aim to persuade the user, based on one’s own engagement with these personalized projects, to demand more regulation of tech companies and better protection for one’s online data-generating habits. Personalized digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance lack a disruptive force not only due to the lack of a physical emotive politics to mime, as Gaines theorizes, but also because they map onto Global North news media rhetoric about the “awe and terror” of algorithmic technologies (Barassi et al. 2022: 14). What
these projects do, then, is make these societal rhetorics felt and experienced by users in more personal ways, showing users how “the internet” sees, understands, and manipulates them, in the hope that the shock and fun of seeing this will move users to greater awareness and action towards government reform and regulation.

This emphasis on the user and their experience does come with limitations for these projects, as do the specific fear- and humor-based appeals they mobilize. Incorporating personalization means that these works are limited in their ability to impart experiences to users outside of their own and they, like the dataveillance simulation games I analyze in chapter three, risk falling back on the idea that one’s individual privacy is being invaded, as when Brett Gaylor promises to “show you what the web knows about you” in his web series *Do Not Track*. As Kevin Haggarty and Richard Ericson (2006) state, “privacy is not routinely ‘invaded’: it is not pried away from a resistant and apoplectic public,” rather, internet users are offered incentives for more personal, entertaining, or efficient internet usage in what Haggarty and Ericson describe as an “exchange” of surveillance for benefits (12). These projects work to make clear this “exchange,” an exchange with which many internet users might be only slightly familiar, even as they exploit one’s personal fears of it; however, they almost all end up arguing for a more transparent economic exchange of data, where someone can own their data and freely consent to sell it, even as researchers find a weak understanding of what consent means to the general population (Turow et al. 2023). This focus on the user’s fear that their data, identity and/or behavior can be known, seen, and used by corporations for their own profit means these projects end up overlooking some of the most harmful and discriminatory aspects of this type of surveillance, as discussed in the next section. Additionally, by arguing for user awareness of this exchange and free consent to it (or compensation for it), this affirms the user and their data as a
product, though now the user can also be a silent partner furthering the profits and platforms over which they have no control, leaving little to no room to create an alternative to the corporatization of Web 2.0.

Before moving into my analysis of personalized digital documentaries, the next two sections will discuss and demarcate how contemporary digital surveillance differs from older forms of surveillance in reach and mode, but remains similar in who is often the target; further positions the digital documentaries analyzed here within the context of contemporary surveillance art practices; and introduces the concept of the data double so one can see how the user, their data, and the user’s identity are conflated into a data double that users will confront by engaging with these digital documentaries. As my analysis will reveal, one of the main limitations of personalized digital documentaries is that when the user and the user’s data double become the subject of these digital documentaries, that often moves the work’s focus to a speculative future where the kind of normative middle-class person (like Ben in The Social Dilemma) could be imminently harmed by algorithmic surveillance and restricts what the work can say about the groups who are presently routinely impacted by algorithmic surveillance. As we will see, personalized digital documentaries have a problem moving from their individualized interfaces to a realistic social intervention and will often argue for government regulation and institutional reform. These interventions are strongly critiqued by the final project I turn to in this chapter, A.M. Darke’s Fairly Intelligent™ which posits the failure of reform efforts and argues for the need to abandon unworkable systems, knowledges, and technologies.

**Digital Algorithmic Surveillance**
The last decade has provided increased recognition of how internet users’ data is collected and tracked by websites and platforms to be used for their own proprietary purposes or sold to digital advertisers. Recent studies show that there is both growing and continued concern among global internet users about online privacy and censorship (Ipsos 2019), though regulation by different governments and intergovernmental organizations has been slow. One of the largest and most important blueprints for regulation is the European Union’s 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which aims to give people the right to their digital data. This law states that users need to be told when their data is collected online, and it clamps down on the obtaining and selling of one’s data if it includes personally identifiable information. For instance, the GDPR is the reason why websites now usually contain a pop-up asking users to accept cookies (though not accepting the cookies can mean just not using that website). In 2022, the European Union passed two additional pieces of legislation, the Digital Markets Act (DMA) which takes aim at large corporate “gatekeepers” who give preferential treatment to their own products and the Digital Services Act (DSA) which will force large tech companies to monitor and remove illegal, harmful, and misleading content, make transparent their recommendation algorithms, and prohibits practices called “dark patterns,” user interfaces that deceive users into making choices they might otherwise not make (Council of the EU 2022, Vincent 2022). The DSA and DMA are designed to target companies like Alphabet, Apple, Meta, and Twitter (and their various platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Google, and YouTube) and legislation like this could impact how these service providers operate their platforms outside of EU member countries. And while this legislation could increase accessibility across platforms owned by different service providers, it might also make it harder to offer “closed,” and, therefore, more secure services (Hern 2022).
While the EU and its member states have moved to regulate some aspects of digital surveillance and the power of large tech companies, regulation elsewhere is more piecemeal. California, notably, has passed something similar to the EU’s GDPR, with their 2018 California Consumer Privacy Act and other countries, states, and cities have made some attempts at regulation, though none as far-reaching as California. Individual US states and cities have passed laws to regulate facial recognition technology, for instance, both Portland, Oregon and Portland, Maine moved to ban its use by some groups in 2020. Even so, there is little regulation in the US when it comes to police using digital surveillance and the police do not generally need to disclose whether facial recognition is used to identify a subject (Johnson 2022). Further, a recent data breach has shown how easily a person or group could forge legal documents to obtain access to the wide berth of information that law enforcement agencies in the U.S. can access for supposedly “emergency” purposes (Bhuiyan 2022). Tech companies themselves are also moving forward with some regulation efforts. Apple and Alphabet have recently announced efforts to end third-party tracking, a move which hurts companies that rely on ad revenue from this form of tracking like Meta and risks further consolidating the power of the largest tech companies and platforms who can still track users as “first parties” when they engage with their services, like Alphabet and Apple themselves (Chen and Wakabayashi 2022). Overall, some regulation of some aspects of digital surveillance and the power of tech companies is happening in some places, but most regulation comes as an afterthought, often being passed years (and sometimes decades) after the release of products and services.

Even more important to this chapter than efforts to regulate surveillance legislatively are the shifts in the forms and reach of surveillance once it goes online, where scholars have demarcated a notable push-and-pull between who is being surveilled digitally and what impacts
ubiquitous digital surveillance has on individuals, groups, and societies. As Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000) have influentially argued, once discrete surveillance systems have digitally converged, creating what they term a “surveillant assemblage” (606). Surveillance is decentralized and spread throughout old and new institutions that can unite their surveillance systems for varying and shifting purposes and surveillance is spread across different technologies and can range from biometric surveillance like facial recognition to the surveillant ability of everyday Bluetooth-enabled common household items from fridges to toothbrushes that can send information wirelessly. And, of course, digital surveillance is ubiquitous on computers, tablets, and smartphones accessing an internet where websites utilize algorithmic protocols that can automatically detect basic information about a user’s operating system, location, language, and so on, to seemingly more invasive tracking of cursor movements or keystrokes. No longer are only certain, specific individuals closely monitored, instead the surveillant assemblage has resulted in what Haggerty and Ericson call a “rhizomatic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance, such that groups which were previously exempt from routine surveillance are now increasingly being monitored” (606). It is this idea, that groups “previously exempt” from the controlling mechanisms of tracking and monitoring are now being surveilled, that has worked its way into the popular imaginary of digital surveillance. In their analysis of how news media from Germany, France, and England cover artificial intelligence, for instance, researchers from Universität St. Gallen found that “sensationalist fascination” with AI and new technologies limited the ability of reporters to go in-depth on technological failures and error rates and that while some news reports did generate debate about the impact of AI on human rights, “most media discourse focused on the right to privacy and what it means to live in a world where we are constantly surveilled, tracked, and evaluation” (Barassi et al. 2022: 42). This is, perhaps, a
function of these news organizations trying to relate the topic to their audiences, but we do see the same discouraging focus on how individuals and their private data might be impacted without their knowledge in personalized digital documentaries.

A more realistic view of this central change to surveillance is to state that surveillance has been “democratized” insofar as anyone accessing the internet is more-likely-than-not to be surveilled, however, as with non-digital surveillance, some groups disproportionately experience the negative and disciplinary functions of digital surveillance more so than others. As scholars note, algorithms are political, shaping the world by changing ways of seeing and ways of being across socio-economic vectors and helping to serve or consolidate the power of dominant groups (Bucher 2018, Amoore 2020, Crawford 2021). While popular and news media discourses often approach these technologies as new, innovative, and disruptive to traditional systems (which might be positive or negative depending on the context), they often serve to bolster existent racialized, classed, and gendered regimes of power. “Big Brother is not watching you, he’s watching us,” as Virginia Eubanks (2017: 6) argues, and the “us” being tracked and monitored most aggressively includes groups of “people of color, migrants, unpopular religious groups, sexual minorities, the poor, and other oppressed and exploited populations.” These dangers are born out in the wealth of scholarship on the negative aspects of different forms of algorithmic surveillance, from biased search engines to the use of algorithms by police to determine probable crime “hot spots.” Those creating and desiring to use these technologies often defend their use by appealing to the neutrality of machine processes over human bias. This can be seen in something like crime prediction algorithms, where police focus on areas with algorithmically estimated high crime rates preventing police officers themselves from making subjective determinations based on someone’s skin color (Ferguson 2017). As Selena Silva and Martin Kenney (2018) contend in
their exhaustive essay on the problems with algorithmic bias, “predictive policing effectively predicts future policing, not future crime” (15) and leads to over-policing of the same marginalized groups targeted by the “subjective” judgment of human police officers. As seen in this one example, there is no movement away from human bias, as many scholars will point to and as one can see in a documentary like Coded Bias, the bias is embedded within the human-created algorithms and this bias will not negatively impact every internet user in exactly the same way.

A similar push-and-pull between supposed neutrality and in-built bias can be seen in discussions of AI facial recognition and the datasets on which these systems are trained. Harkening back to Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton’s attempts to measure and photograph criminal types, these technologies are trained to categorize people into groupings and often privilege white and lighter-skinned people and have trouble identifying darker-skinned and feminine people (Browne 2015, Buolamwini and Gebru 2018). Much of the trouble stems from image selection in AI training sets, which creates gendered, racialized, ableist, and ageist AI applications (Crawford and Paglen 2019). Algorithms are “imbued with historical prejudice,” as Silva and Kenney (2018) argue, so that discrimination is “built into” the systems that companies and government institutions might use (Crawford 2016). Clare Garvie, Alvaro Bedoya, and Jonathan Frankle (2016) show, for example, that police algorithms used to search databases for “criminals” have often not been tested for racial bias at all and are more likely to identify people who are already in the databases that the police are using, meaning that “racial disparities in arrest rates will make African Americans much more ‘findable’ than others.” The ability of algorithms to increase, build upon, or even create “new modes of racial profiling” is something that Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) terms “technological redlining” (1). Though technologies
themselves might lack the malicious intent of human bias, but they are being created by humans and used in social contexts that are non-objective, rendering claims of technological neutrality inaccurate.

The changes previously discussed relate to who digital surveillance surveils, but there are also changes to what is being tracked and monitored, data about someone that is contained online, or data generated by one’s online activities. Roger Clarke (1988) terms this kind of surveillance dataveillance, which is “the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons.” Instead of the details that go into making up this data bearing an unambiguous relation to one’s thoughts, actions, personality, or life, data becomes performative and used to produce a certain way of seeing someone or a group, as, for instance, a “terrorist” or “criminal” (Raley 2013). Similarly, algorithmic surveillance is any surveillance “performed by technology with the use of algorithms” (Frericks 2019). It is a kind of authority and control that users might not know about but that can determine everything from advertisements that one scrolls past while browsing websites online to the cost of digitally purchased airline tickets to one’s credit score and ability to receive a loan (Pasquale 2015). There is a good case for suggesting dataveillance and algorithmic surveillance are often describing the same thing, though I will argue for a nuanced distinction between them: all algorithmic surveillance is a form of dataveillance though dataveillance is not always of the algorithm-based variety. I use the term algorithmic surveillance throughout this chapter as it better articulates the passive and commercial nature of much of this type of digital surveillance.  

83 Websites, platforms, and applications are often not actively investigating or monitoring users, as Clarke’s original definition of dataveillance would suggest, and as the dataveillance simulation games from chapter three enable. Individuals are removed
from the equation in algorithmic surveillance and users are passively surveilled or user’s data is “mined,” as Oscar Gandy (2007) refers to it, “in the rational pursuit of profits” (153), to build personalized advertising profiles of users, to get specific ads in front of users, and, generally, to fuel continued engagement and ad revenue. This is surveillance capitalism. As Shoshana Zuboff (2015, 2019) has theorized it, surveillance capitalism is a “new logic of accumulation” that “aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control” (Zuboff 2015: 75). While the people and groups making money from this logic of accumulation are largely the tech companies, data brokers, and advertisers feeding off peoples’ data for financial gain, Zuboff also suggests that the desire of users to express ourselves online fuels surveillance capitalism. The user’s dependence on producing data through online engagement and expression and the belief that one’s data is one’s own to share (or not) “is at the heart of the surveillance project. Powerful felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist the surveillance project” (83), as Zuboff states. Not only are users passively monitored for others’ gain, but in many ways, we are participating in our own surveillance.

As suggested by David Murakami Wood and Valerie Steeves (2021), there is an abundance of positive and utopian rhetoric over “smart” devices, devices that are able to connect to the internet via Bluetooth. Rather than giving into this rhetoric and what they call a “(hyper)normalization” of these devices and the connectivity that undergirds them, “we need to find ways to counter” and “to make smart things strange and troubling again” as a first step to critical analysis (150). This is what the projects in this chapter aim to do, to de-normalize aspects of everyday technologies and protocols underlying platforms and websites, to make users re-assess their relationships with computers, smartphones, other internet-connected “smart” devices, and the similarly “smart” artificial intelligence algorithms that underly them and enable their
functionality. In the next section, I will further articulate how digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance trouble and make strange algorithmic surveillance, as Murakami Wood and Steeves advocate for. They do so by mimicking corporate algorithmic surveillance and reflexively mirroring back users’ data in their interfaces to offer a slight shock to the user about this uncanny reflection of themselves and their identity.

**Reflexive Personalization and Digital Self-Performance as a Data Double**

Like previous chapters, this one analyzes how users are implicated in systems of surveillance—here algorithmic surveillance—through experiential counter-surveillance, where one’s own engagement with these projects should perform a “looking back” at algorithmic surveillance and the platforms and corporations that utilize it for profit. In focusing on the more corporate side of algorithmic surveillance, this chapter is also analyzing one of Web 2.0’s most tantalizing promises, that users can have a digital experience perfectly tailored to their unique tastes and interests. As prophesied by Nicholas Negroponte (1995), this techno-utopian fantasy imagines that applications will serve users’ needs and their whims; will be able to do more, do more for individual users, and do it better or faster or more efficiently than humans. It is this tension between the desires and promises of artificial intelligence and seemingly neutral, objective algorithms and the dangers or realities of how these codes generate new, more invasive unseen forms of consumer profiling and digital discrimination that this chapter analyzes.

While many aspects of Web 2.0 do seem to reflect this desire for tailored experiences or even personal expression, these pleasurable aspects of Web 2.0 are also fueling surveillance. What users have seen as a digital performance of self turns out to be a kind of self-fracturing and very often the basis for the creation of unseen consumer evaluations. The profiling and
evaluation of the user analyzed in this chapter is different from that analyzed in my third chapter, where government surveillance systems were revealed to be analyzing surveillance agents and the player who acted in this role as a surveillance agent. That is a form of individual surveillance that is certainly possible with digital surveillance, though how governments could surveil individuals online is not the focus of this chapter. Rather, algorithmic surveillance often results in a financial evaluation that de-individualizes the user. And, unlike in previous chapters, users are only called upon to be themselves, not to be witnesses, investigators, or agents. However, the self that users have created online is revealed to be estranged from how users see themselves, as algorithms construct mutable data doubles out of users’ data. It is these strange images of the user that the digital documentaries in this chapter mirror back to the user, to show how we are tracked and evaluated, how machines see us as data, and how we need to critically rethink our own desires for these technologies.

One key difference between non-digital surveillance and digital surveillance is that “you are rarely ‘you’ online” (Cheney-Lippold 2017: 4). Though it was once thought that one’s digital identity could transcend the socio-economic identifiers of the material, non-digital world, now our online selves are seen as more constrained, we are “no longer encouraged to act out a role, we are forced to be ‘ourselves’ (in a form that is no less theatrical or artificial)” (Lovink 2012: 13). And while ideas about these “selves” and “identities” were originally related to how people constructed themselves online through their own communications, as with Roger Clarke’s (1994) concept of the “digital persona,” there is now less of an obvious correspondence between what one purposefully does on the internet and what data is extracted and made meaningful from these digital actions and behaviors. People are abstracted into data flows, and while this data was at one point linked to real people and real bodies (and still is to some extent with biometric
surveillance), people become “differentiated according to how useful they are in allowing institutions to make discriminations among populations” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 614).

One’s online self, according to Haggerty and Ericson, is a data double and a data double that is often grouped in with others for the purposes of group comparison. This data double or “additional self,” as Mark Poster (1990) refers to it, is “the multiplication of an individual” through the constrained nature of how data can be limited and encoded, and it is a self that “may be acted upon to the detriment of the ‘real’ self without that ‘real’ self ever being aware of what is happening” (97-98), a theme we will see throughout the projects analyzed in this chapter. For Cheney-Lippold and Geert Lovink (2012), our data double is thus a performance of an identity that can be read through many different valences and for many different and, as Cheney-Lippold notes, often competing purposes depending on the organization or company that attempts to use or interpret the “raw” data (6). Like algorithms, data doubles are not neutral, nonpolitical beings, rather, as David Lyon (2003) makes clear, they are a form of gatekeeping, “they open and close doors of opportunity and access” and impact “eligibilities for credit or state benefits” and are able to “bestow credentials or generate suspicion” (27) depending on how they are read by an organization or company at any given time.

Creators of digital documentaries and other surveillance artwork have developed similar strategies for revealing this kind of surveillance and making sense of our role in it. Julia Scott-Stevenson (2020) calls the digital documentaries analyzed here “responsive documentaries” and argues that they afford not only personalized storytelling but have the capacity to position individuals in relation to broader, hard-to-see or even invisible surveillance networks. Similar to game developers and studios producing works where players simulate surveillance, what undergirds these projects is the idea that if the user can see how they are a part of this larger
system, users will be empowered with greater understanding and, perhaps, the ability to move toward individual or collective action. Torin Monahan (2018) terms similar types of art “critical surveillance artwork” for how it can make audiences uncomfortable through embedded opportunities for self-reflexivity “about one’s relationship—and obligation—to others within surveillance networks” (576). While Scott-Stevenson’s term relates to reflexive surveillance documentaries and Monahan’s term describes audience response to surveillance artwork, Elise Morrison’s (2016) term “surveillance art and performance” focuses on the stance of the artworks, as she argues that surveillance art and performance “generates creative and critical alternatives to dominant, mainstream applications of surveillance technologies” (5). The type of pieces that Morrison looks at employ defamiliarization, as will the projects analyzed in this chapter, to create “user-consumer-participants who can more clearly see, evaluate, and respond to the forces of discipline and desire exerted on them by surveillance technologies” (12). It is important that Morrison maintains a hybrid positionality for the audience. Audiences are users and consumers and participants, where user connotes a relationship of utility and consumer defines one’s role as passive, as a non-creator, but, crucially, the audience is also a participant, also actively engaging with these works and these technologies and, thus, their actions are fueling some aspects of algorithmic surveillance.

Morrison and Monahan’s terms do have purchase with the digital documentaries I discuss, but the performance aspect shifts when moving from an in-person or gallery-located performance art practice to an online work performed individually by users in private. The kinds of works these authors discuss often involve more of an active negotiation between the work’s creator and their participant audience. Take, for instance, the Surveillance Camera Players, formed in the mid-90s, who would perform plays in front of CCTV surveillance cameras,
cameras that are installed almost only to record crime or deter it due to their presence. Their performances were public and subverted the use of CCTV by changing the underlying power dynamics of the gaze: the Surveillance Camera Players sought out being watched, being directed (as actors), and perhaps even forced a bureaucratic state worker to watch their only-for-the-cameras productions. In most performance art, there is more of this negotiation and potential role change that is almost absent from personalized digital documentaries whose interfaces cannot enact a live performance or exchange between user and creator or user and technology. Instead, one’s engagement with and performance of the interface of these projects is more one-sided; it’s private and for the user to experience alone, thus, perhaps, limiting the subversive potential that live performance art pieces can create. If there is a role change, it is one limited to the user’s positioning within the work itself and it is for the user’s own edification and self-transformation, which we have seen throughout each chapter in this dissertation.

These projects do not just contain reflexive technology use, they also mirror back the tensions between user enjoyment and data extraction; between balancing utility to individuals and societies and the fear of losing control of privacy, one’s data, or even the “human element” in technology. As U.S. Internet artist and scholar A.M. Darke suggests about Fairly Intelligent™, her digital project critiquing artificial intelligence algorithms, there are tensions “between how playful this can be, how in some ways inviting and fun it can be, how offensive and judgmental it can be” which “all work together to try to portray the complexity of these systems and the way that they can be insidious in getting us to opt in either out of convenience or out of a desire to make things better” (Open Data Institute 2021). The digital documentaries analyzed here all work to reveal how users are profiled and evaluated at the same time that they reveal how fun, useful, anxiety-producing, and judgmental corporate-controlled algorithms,
artificial intelligence, and social media platforms are by replicating this tone and exaggeratedly using it as part of a way to deconstruct algorithmic surveillance.

There are many such projects that do this, and I have chosen to analyze ones that are still available or that I have access to, offer more complete, contained experiences, and incorporate the user as an implicated subject. This excises some tactical and action-oriented applications and browser extensions, add-ons, or plugins that attempt to curtail or undercut algorithmic surveillance, such as Daniel C. Howe and Helen Nissenbaum’s TrackMeNot (2006) which spams search engines with noise and obfuscation to “hide” users’ real searches, as they state on their official website (trackmenot.io). Almost every project I analyze here will include some sort of next step for users to take, but only after revealing how users are profiled and tracked through their data doubles within the framework of the speculative digital documentary project their creator/s are undertaking. Additionally, there are projects that would fall under the scope of this chapter but are archived or no longer accessible, like the ARTE/NFB co-production Limbo (Antoine Viviani 2015) or BBC Taster’s projects Digital Me (Sandra Gaudenzi and Mike Robbins 2015) and Instagrammification (Spirit Studios 2019). And while there is a world in which I include browser extensions that aim to visualize algorithmic surveillance for users (not just stop it), many of these are no longer supported or work poorly, like eyebrowse (Brennan Moore, Max Van Kleek, and David Karger 2010) which visualized the data trails users created while browsing or like Mozilla’s Lightbeam (2013-2019) which visualized how websites users visited send information to first- and third-party trackers. And, overall, many privacy-related browser extensions are being phased out as companies create browsers with built-in capabilities to block harmful cookies and advertisements or stop other forms of third-party tracking, making these types of browser extensions and what they show users increasingly obsolete.
Like much of the rhetoric used to sell new technologies to venture capitalists and the public, the digital documentaries that I analyze here are all future-oriented while being grounded in the present. Documentary web series *Do Not Track* (Brett Gaylor 2015), for instance, ends by presenting users with three fictional future scenarios and the reminder that these futures are “not written in stone” because “it’s up to us to decide.” In some of this rhetoric one can see the link to educational films, that directly address a particular “you,” identify and convince you of a problem, and ask you to think about your own relationship to that problem. Many digital documentary projects end similarly, urging users to “decide” or act now that current and potential uses of algorithmic surveillance have been revealed. By implicating users in algorithmic surveillance and making users responsible for helping to curtail its harmful impacts, these projects evince what Glencora Borradaile and Joshua Reeves (2020) term “sousveillance capitalism.” That is, their attempt to illuminate and mirror back algorithmic surveillance to users is through an “active complicity with digital capitalism” in their use of the technologies and platforms created by tech companies. These projects end up advocating for institutional reform solutions—seeking more government control and regulations of Big Tech, for instance—or offering up ways for individuals to secure some of their data online, acknowledging that if one wants to engage with Web 2.0 in some capacity, one’s data is at risk. If surveillance controls and disciplines people into compliance, one might then ask what are users of these works being disciplined into through the projects’ uses of algorithmic surveillance? Many of these projects, as we will see, take on the affordances of individualized, neoliberal technologies and platforms to train users to advocate for a public service centered liberal democracy or to become brokers of their own data.
Public Service Institutions for Public Service Solutions

All the projects analyzed here, like those in other chapters of this dissertation, are produced and/or funded with support of larger companies or organizations. As in other chapters, Franco-German channel ARTE and the National Film Board of Canada have co-produced two of the projects in this chapter, Do Not Track (Brett Gaylor 2015) and Alfred Premium (Joël Ronez, Pierre Corbinais, and Émilie F. Grenier 2019) and remain organizations that are interested in producing creative digital documentaries to think through online surveillance. What is slightly different about the institutional ties of the remaining projects is that we see digital rights organizations and service providers also funding creative endeavors to think through and complicate the technologies they are utilizing or advocating on behalf of. The U.S.-based Mozilla Foundation provided funding and support for Stealing Ur Feelings (Noah Levenson 2019) and A Week with Wanda (Joe Derry Hall 2019) through an arts grant program they run. The UK-based Open Data Institute also has an arts program called Data as Culture that creates both installations and, as analyzed here, an online exhibition on algorithmic data, Rules of Engagement, which includes both How They Watch You (Nick Briz 2021) and Fairly Intelligent™ (A.M. Darke 2021). I am not suggesting a hard-and-fast differentiation between projects funded by the Mozilla Foundation and those funded by more traditional public service institutions like the NFB or ARTE here. Indeed, Brett Gaylor, whose Do Not Track is analyzed here and who has created several works with the NFB, is the former Vice President of Mozilla’s Webmaker Program and the executive producer of Levenson’s Stealing Ur Feelings. This suggests more of an overlap between the organizations and some of the ethics that might be undergirding their desires to engage people on the topic of algorithmic surveillance, however, it is still important to demarcate some of the differences between these organizations, as well. It is
especially important that we will see overlaps between not-for-profit and commercial initiatives with these different organizations and that many have mission statements and goals that utilize key terms that tech companies too rely on to pitch themselves and their products to the public.

As previously discussed in chapter two, ARTE and the NFB use their digital projects to create and affirm their national interests and position their audience/s as part of a larger global community. This latter reasoning is especially evident here as the internet has facilitated the ability of people to communicate and exchange thoughts, ideas, and products across the boundaries of traditional nation-states. Their co-produced Facebook Messenger documentary, *Alfred Premium*, where users interact with a fictional digital assistant service, is indicative of this; technologies and services are not fixed within the boundaries of their place of origin, and it is of international concern how they function and the privacy issues that users will encounter. ARTE and the NFB suggest through their co-productions on algorithmic surveillance that there is a broad shared concern in the Global North about digital privacy, and, as their co-produced digital documentary web series *Do Not Track* argues in its final episode, “To Change the Future, Click Here,” it is hard to imagine what an ethical internet would look like without something approaching a global or multi-national consensus on issues of data privacy and exploitation.

While the Open Data Institute might sound similar to an open-source project, what open data refers to can be very different, and the Open Data Institute and Mozilla have fairly different goals and interests. Started in 1998, Mozilla is a U.S.-based open-source project. Most well-known for their Firefox web browser, they also offer other security-based products like a virtual private network (VPN) and Firefox Relay which creates email aliases for one’s communications. The Mozilla project has two forms, their nonprofit Mozilla Foundation, which organizes, educates, and offers grants geared toward creating a public and open internet, and their for-profit
Mozilla Corporation, which creates and distributes products like Firefox web browser or Firefox Relay. Mozilla’s endeavors across these two branches are guided by their manifesto, originally written by current CEO and executive chairwoman Mitchell Baker in 2007. Their manifesto positions the internet as an important public institution and argues for the need to maintain this institution by supporting people’s ability to access and shape it to their own needs, encouraging openness, creativity, and decentralization in order to do so (Baker 2007). It was amended in 2018 with a “pledge for a healthy internet” geared towards collaborative, critical, civil discourse for everyone (Baker 2018).

One avenue for engaging a greater public and creating the “healthy internet” that Mozilla envisions are its international Creative Media Awards, which in 2018 funded the creation of two projects analyzed here, Joe Derry Hall’s *A Week with Wanda* and Noah Levenson’s *Stealing Ur Feelings*. These awards fund projects focused on uncovering the dangers of increasingly ubiquitous artificial intelligence in technology (Gaylor 2018) and both projects offer different takes on artificial intelligence and algorithmic surveillance. Hall’s *A Week with Wanda* puts users under the care of AI personal assistant Wanda as she aids users in their relationship, financial, or health woes by offering a series of outlandish solutions, ones that are slight exaggerations of how AI can be currently used with no specific regulations in place. *Stealing Ur Feelings* is a quite different project, aiming to undercover how social media applications generate profit by turning users and their facial expressions into machine-readable images to personalize one’s advertisements. Both projects humorously employ an educational logic to make users, their beliefs, and their “data” the star of their digital documentaries.

It is important to note that some of the key terms that Mozilla employs like open, access, public, and community are ones championed broadly by the tech industry. As Alice Marwick’s
(2013) ethnographic study of Silicon Valley from 2006-10 indicates, openness, transparency, and participation were key ideals for tech workers, ideals that they would embed in their status-driven, for-profit creations. One can also find these key terms and others very similar to them throughout public statements, pledges, and initiatives from some of the key players in tech. Coming off of a U.S. election in 2016 where Facebook was accused of facilitating the spread of “fake news,” Mark Zuckerberg’s (2017) “Building Global Community” note to Facebook users, commonly referred to as the Facebook manifesto, pledges Facebook’s future endeavors will go toward “developing the social infrastructure for community—for supporting us, for keeping us safe, for informing us, for civic engagement, and for inclusion for all.” Along similar lines, Google’s CEO Sundar Pichai (2018) released a set of objectives for AI development and guidance that reads somewhat like a manifesto, suggesting the need to create “socially beneficial” AI that is unbiased, held accountable to humans, and secure. Google’s “Safety Center” webpage also boldly states that Google’s products (Gmail, Chrome, Maps, etc.) “are secure by default, private by design and keep you in control,” though its Chrome browser has repeatedly been the locus of security and tracking risks (Doffman 2021, Aten 2022, Kelly 2022). Like Mozilla, Google is a platform that partners with organizations to produce creative educational content, as can be seen with the website The A-Z of AI, created by the Oxford Internet Institute and Google to inform users about artificial intelligence, its benefits, and some concerns about its ethics. Chapter one of my dissertation also analyzes Google News Labs’ partnerships to co-produce virtual reality documentaries on displaced people. What for-profit corporations, not-for-profit organizations, and public service organizations produce can sometimes sound very similar and be very similar, even if the overall organizational goals work towards different political, ideological, and commercial ends.
Though key terms and concepts might be shared across various tech endeavors, there is a difference between how these actions and words are employed in practice. The open-source ethos that Mozilla is founded upon stands in contrast to something like the closed, centralized, for-profit social media and technology services that may use similar language and even create similar products, as in the case of Google. We are in an era that seems deliberately opposed to open-source ethics as we continue to move towards increased privatization of the internet through centralized web-based platforms, like those offered by Big Tech’s Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft (Gillespie 2018, van Dijck et al. 2018). There is good reason to find suspect the words written by these companies which are also, arguably, responsible for consolidating internet services (and, therefore, potential ways of being on the internet) while opening internet users up to forms of algorithmic surveillance.

Started in 2012, the UK-based Open Data Institute (ODI) is a non-profit company whose goals strongly resonate with the Mozilla Foundation and the similar-sounding rhetoric used by tech companies. Their stated “mission” is “to work with companies and governments to build an open, trustworthy data ecosystem” and “to create a world where data works for everyone,” as stated on the about page of their website.86 And, as many do, they have a manifesto that foregrounds six points of particular focus for them: infrastructure, capability, innovation, equity, ethics, and engagement.87 Open data here is not the same as open source, where the latter refers to making a product’s source code public, editable, and usable by anyone. Open data can refer, generally, to the sharing of data and information and has long-standing applications in the sciences and also refers to government-generated data, like that collected through territory mapping and census taking.
While not a documentary-producing organization, the ODI sponsors the creation of art exhibitions and digital documentaries, a practice very similar to what we see the Mozilla Foundation funding. The ODI also bears an institutional relation to the NFB and ARTE, as it too was created through a government mandate. Tim Berners-Lee would be tapped by Prime Minister David Cameron’s government initiatives in 2009 to facilitate opening up the UK’s government data (Heimstädt et al. 2014) and then would be tasked, along with Nigel Shadbolt, with creating and running the ODI. Berners-Lee and Shadbolt (2011) initially put forward their vision for this institute in an article for *The Times* titled, “There’s Gold to be Mined from All Our Data.” In their article, they paint a picture of a world where responsible, privacy-respecting uses of open data will “make life easier,” more efficient, and, crucially, will generate economic wealth for the UK. “So long as privacy is respected,” they write, “there are opportunities for us to benefit from a new kind of government data becoming available — the information that the government and public services collect or generate about each and every one of us: our health records, tax and welfare data, data from the education and justice systems; data we each regard as highly personal.” They frame this economic opportunity as one of data rights, “Isn’t it our data? Don’t we have a right to it?”, they ask. Instead of taking seriously this question of who owns and can use the massive amounts of data collected and stored by the UK government and private businesses, in this article Berners-Lee and Shadbolt advocate using it for commercial purposes and frame data as a natural resource and a public good.

While open data can sound like a positive step towards transparency and can even be rhetorically related to concepts of data ownership, there have been critiques of open data schemes, broadly, and as they relate the UK’s government’s specific initiatives such as the Open Data Institution. Jo Bates (2012) points to how these initiatives to “open” up government data in
the UK intersected with the conservative government’s austerity measures and neoliberal “marketisation of public services.” The feeling from Berners-Lee and Shadbolt’s article could then be reframed as a way to allow “data entrepreneurs” (the potential intended recipients of this government data) to generate wealth in order to help alleviate some of the UK’s economic woes. Jeffrey Alan Johnson (2014) also points to the need to remember the constructed and fallible nature of data, in general, in his critique of open data. As an example, he brings in the fact that many groups are undercounted in U.S. census-taking, where it is hard to get a complete count of all people when minority groups, including homeless people and undocumented people, fear government data collection will harm them. This fear underscores that making government data available for further commercial and institutional uses can carry with it the uses of data as “tool[s] of disciplinary power” (270). As Rob Kitchin (2014) reminds us, “government data is generated for the purposes of governance” (63), so, as much as someone would not view actions by a government as particularly “neutral,” the data generated or used by governments and other public services should be subject to similar interpretations. Bearing these critiques in mind, the ODI, as previously stated, does have an arts program called Data as Culture, whose explicit goal is to foster artwork to think through data and its uses. In some ways, this program seems slightly misaligned with the commercialized aspects of this organization but, as I will discuss in a later section, one of the ODI’s goals for Data as Culture is to bring in artists to interrogate critically the uses of digital data and their impacts on society (Freeman and Hawes 2019).

The question of how much weight to give to the critical (and sometimes self-critical) works that an organization generates or whether to rely more on their actions as commercial, public, or not-for-profit groups will remain an open tension for now as I move into my analyses of the different works created and funded by these different organizations that reflect varying
institutional attachments. It would be too simplistic to suggest that a corporation like Google’s parent company Alphabet cannot fund meaningful work that is critical of a kind of surveillance that Google’s own products utilize. It is also too simplistic to suggest that public service organizations create or fund projects that always ethically serve the public good. What we will see in the next analysis sections is a similar push-and-pull between the ethical and the commercial, between providing users with ways to reform algorithmic surveillance and suggestions of needing something that goes beyond regulation and reform and moves towards a full systemic realignment of one’s values. My analysis will start with *Do Not Track*, a work that shows the promises of mirroring back one’s data as a form of critique and the limitations on how far this critique can go when it relies on user personalization.

**Tracking the Trackers with *Do Not Track***

Canadian filmmaker Brett Gaylor’s *Do Not Track* (2015) is a seven-episode personalized documentary web series co-produced by French production company Upian and public service media organizations Bayerischer Rundfunk, ARTE and the NFB. This web series initially premiered over two months, with the first two episodes premiering online on April 14, 2015, followed by a new episode every two weeks, ending on June 15, 2015. Not only did *Do Not Track* win a variety of awards but it is also a well-visited project, reaching between 880,000 and 1,000,000 users, about 50,000 of whom would give their email addresses to gain full access to their personalized version (Case Study 2016, Upian n.d.). *Do Not Track* is the most wide-ranging of the digital documentaries analyzed in this chapter and over its seven episodes it covers topics that people are more aware of now than they were in 2015: advertisers can track and monitor users’ online behaviors to sell products, social media interactions can be predictive of one’s
personality, location services on one’s smartphone can be used to identify people, “Big Data” creates data that can be used to discriminate against others in unique ways, and social media can create filter bubbles and information silos. Though the web series covers a lot of ground, the types of personalization it utilizes means that it is limited in what systems it can implicate users within and it often overlooks the groups who are most negatively impacted by algorithmic surveillance in order to slightly shock users by the revelation that one’s Facebook profile can predict their gender or that it is easy for an algorithm to know which time zone users live in.

Similar to what Scott-Stevenson (2020) and Monahan (2018) argue about responsive documentaries and critical surveillance artwork, respectively, Do Not Track suggests that if users could understand how they factor into algorithmic surveillance, this will create more of an emotional connection between the user and the topic. This web series aims to impart “a playful, slightly dangerous feeling” through personalized surveillance, according to Gaylor (n.d.). Implicating the user personally in the larger apparatus of algorithmic surveillance should be created through this “playful, slightly dangerous” user experience that mimics the ironic uses of GIFs and emojis and the pleasures of a Buzzfeed quiz while gently shocking users into awareness as they confront what the internet knows about them through their data double. Both Noah Levenson and A.M. Darke, the respective creators of Stealing Ur Feelings and Fairly Intelligent™, will also cite Buzzfeed quizzes as an inspiration for the tone and style of their works. The “danger” comes into play with the unease of users, a feeling that Gaylor and the other creators in this chapter want to operationalize; if users feel disturbed by the ease with which this project knows details about them or their lives, if it can make users really feel that fear, perhaps they will be motivated to act. And, research has shown that if a fear-based appeal does result in someone taking a threat seriously, people are motivated to act in a way that will
ameliorate their fears, though this might not include acting in the way that a documentarian suggests and could include also distancing oneself from the work that is causing one’s anxiety and uncertainty about something (Witte and Allen 2000). Without delving further into reception studies with *Do Not Track*, it would be hard to tell if this work is really producing these emotions, but it is important that Gaylor wants to produce them though in a “playful” and humorous way. We can also see this attempt to operationalize one’s emotional attachment to something as part of what are called interactive marketing campaigns, ones that utilize users’ personal data to create a more “immersive” marketing experience (Chester 2012: 55). This too is, perhaps, something that Gaylor wants to mimic. Borrowing from online advertisers who also believe that emotional connections will drive sales, Gaylor and his collaborators sell users on the dangers of algorithmic surveillance and personalized, emotional attachments to social media.

Gaylor narrates and appears in the first episode, “Morning Rituals,” to introduce users to his personalized web series and guide users through some initial personalized surveillance. He starts by revealing what he shares online before stating that he also knows things about the user, revealing that he and the project know whether the user is on a PC or a Mac, the country and city they live in, and what kind of weather users are experiencing. Living in Syracuse, NY, I received a lot of “I know that it’s a shitty morning/afternoon/evening in Syracuse” statements when interacting with this project, due to rainy or snowy weather conditions. Gaylor’s narration and how he frames details about the user as things he personally knows are meant to pique the user’s interest, where a reasonable user might then want to know how Gaylor could find these details out. At the end of this episode, he challenges the audience to partake in the project, saying, “If you share your data with us, we will show you what the web knows about you” before presenting interacting with this project as a shared endeavor, “Let’s track the trackers, together.” One’s
personalized experience with this web series should, by this logic, add to the collective counter-surveillance endeavor of rendering visible common aspects of corporate algorithmic surveillance. Besides the occasional mention of a larger “us” partaking in this project, the project does not make further endeavors to join disparate users together into a larger collective.

If users accept Gaylor’s challenge to join him in “tracking the trackers,” users can provide an email address to receive a personalized link to access the web series and the rest of the episodes. Using this link ensures that any data that the user inputs (such as what websites users frequent, a Facebook login, responses to questions that the series will ask during episodes) is stored, even across multiple engagements with the episodes. Users can access their own stored data by clicking the “Your Data” tab on the project’s website. Not only will this project show users what it can find out about you through using similar technologies as advertising companies and social media platforms, the language of the narrators as well as some of the images and GIFs in the episodes are determined by the user’s assessed location (Upian n.d.). Though the overall structure of the episodes and the information presented is the same for all users, Do Not Track’s ability to localize in this way works to fulfill the promise of Web 2.0 that it can provide individually tailored content. “To see a different version of the documentary,” according to Gaylor, “you’d literally have to be a different person” (Miller 2015). This statement falsely collapses one’s identity into one’s data, though it is a collapse that is fairly common to hear or see. It would be more accurate to suggest that to see a different version of this work, users would need to change something about their data so that the work could project a different data double, rather than a different person or identity. Gaylor’s intent to collapse one’s data into one’s being is related to the utilization of fear; users should fear how much this project and, therefore, the internet can know about you without your consent or knowledge.
The third episode of the series, “Like Mining,” makes the outcome of algorithmic surveillance as a gatekeeper more apparent to users. This episode focuses on how one’s data is being used to predict aspects of one’s personality or potential behavior and how these predictions can determine one’s ability to receive healthcare or bank loans. The user has the opportunity here to link their own Facebook account to the project and learn what could be discovered about their identity and personality through their Facebook profile. Gaylor (n.d.) explains that this part of the project was “touch-and-go” because it had to be approved by Facebook. What this episode cannot reveal, even while linked to one’s own Facebook account, is how Facebook or another company would come up with their personality inferences, a lack of transparency which is part of the danger that Gaylor and others point to with algorithmic surveillance.

The “Like Mining” episode is reminiscent of Data Selfie (2015-2018), an open-source Chrome browser extension co-founded by Hang Do Thi Duc and Regina Flores Mir that utilized AI algorithms to track users’ Facebook activity and mirror it back to them. This extension logged time spent on Facebook, posts liked, what users typed, and which “friends” users engaged with most to generate a potential profile of you with supposed personality traits, religious and political orientations, “psychological gender,” and shopping and lifestyle habits. As Flores Mir said in a profile of the project in Vice, “People don’t seem to understand there’s not a one-to-one correlation of the things that you do online, it’s the seemingly mundane things you do online that are predictive of who you are” (Paul 2016). Do Thi Duc (2016) adds on her personal website that “Internet users deliberately create different identities on the different platforms they use. They control how they want to be seen” but Data Selfie shows the way users “unconsciously create” other profiles that are only “seen” by large tech companies and their advertising partners. Like Gaylor, Do Thi Duc and Flores Mir (n.d.) wanted to convey a “personal perspective” on how
Facebook relies on data mining and predictive analytics with the goal of creating awareness and spurring further education about how one’s data is used and configured on the internet (Paul 2016). Fernando van der Vlist and Anne Helmond (2017) point to a limitation of the project being that they are not using or able to use Facebook’s own proprietary algorithm and it should be noted that neither is Do Not Track. Instead, Data Selfie uses IBM Watson and Apply Magic Sauce for their predictions, so this obsolete browser extension and Do Not Track both show users a prediction of Facebook’s own predictions rather than an actual snapshot of the assessments Facebook might be making or allowing advertisers to make.

Do Not Track’s version of this is more even more speculative than Data Selfie’s. Users are lead through the “Like Mining” episode by German TV presenter and blogger Richard Gutjahr, as we learn about the potential relationship between one’s Facebook user data and one’s credit score and viability for health insurance and loans. This episode presents users with an ad for a fake company, Illuminus, whose tagline is “learn what we already know about you” and that promises to find you “great new rates on insurance, loans, and more” when you sign in with your Facebook profile. The episode does not initially clue users into this being a fake company and when Illuminus’s female voiceover ends with “log in with your Facebook profile and we’ll unlock the power of you,” users are prompted to either login with their actual Facebook account or “Stay Anonymous” (meaning you’ll see how Richard Gutjahr is profiled). Users are then presented with the first of three personality assessments using their Facebook data or Gutjahr’s data, all under the guise of being part of Illuminus, whose logo appears at the top of the screen along with “Future Present Risk Detection.”

The first section where users’ data is mirrored back reveals simple things like name, age, and pages liked on Facebook along with an assessment of one’s personality traits using Apply
Magic Sauce, the application programming interface that *Data Selfie* also uses. The psychological profiling users receive is based on the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The Big Five personality traits have a history of being seen as dependable predictors of one’s personality, rather than behavior, and are part of the underlying methodology of some popular personality tests used in business and academic situations to predict future performance (Judge et al. 2002). Along with showing users their predicted personality traits, *Do Not Track* interviews Michal Kosinski whose research has shown that Facebook likes can predict aspects of your identity such as ethnicity, IQ, sexual orientation, religion, political views, and happiness (Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel 2013). As both *Do Not Track* and *Data Selfie* question by revealing these personality profiles, what does it mean that algorithms can predict your personality or identity traits without your consent and in ways not transparent to users?

“Like Mining” will argue that the real issue here is that other companies and organizations could make assessments about you based on the data derived from social media algorithms. The episode reveals this in voiceover and interview clips, but also allows users to experience it in two more sections where users are shown how the psychological profile created using their Facebook data can be used to assess whether they are a risky candidate for a loan or for health insurance. It is only after users interact with their supposed financial and health risk evaluations that Gutjahr will reveal that Illuminus is fake but there are companies out there like it. Gutjahr introduces users to a real online credit company, Lenddo, where consumers link their social media accounts as part of the loan application process. *Do Not Track* interviews Lenddo CEO Jeffrey Stewart who justifies this practice by pointing to how loans are based on character and credibility and states that by looking at one’s data alongside data of one’s social network,
things like obesity, sexuality promiscuity, and likelihood of being a smoker can be discerned. It is implied that these characteristics are somehow linked to someone’s propensity to pay back loans, though the explicit link between smoking and loan repayment, for instance, is never explained by Stewart. While this sounds invasive and unnecessary, Kosinski comes back to argue that rather than denying people loans, this could allow those who lack the credit history necessary to secure a traditional bank loan to receive a loan through an online creditor’s alternative method. His argument here is part of the neutral and objective rhetoric for digital algorithms, that they can “overcome” the often-biased limitations of human judgment. Kosinski, in his interview for this web series, seems not to consider that artificial intelligence algorithms are trained on human-configured datasets. And, as Virginia Eubanks (2017) suggests, while it might seem like removing human bias would act to alleviate discrimination, “historically, the removal of human discretion and the creation of inflexible rules in public services only compound racially disparate harms” (80). The episode does not really detail this history, rather, it is implied that one’s likely negative reaction to being profiled by Illuminus will stand as evidence and a counterpoint to the arguments of Stewart and Kosinski.

Illuminus’ personalized evaluations in “Like Mining” are ones that Gaylor is likely referring to when suggesting the desire to produce a “slightly dangerous feeling” in this web series. When confronted with a data double who is judged a poor or moderate risk candidate for a loan or health insurance, users might balk and find this an inaccurate reflection of their actual identity or personality. Or, if this judgment does fit, users might still wonder how Illuminus came to this determination. Here is also where one can question whether the user personalization acts as a limitation on the content of *Do Not Track* and what is overlooked by not including more real-world accurate examples of algorithmic surveillance in this section of *Do Not Track*. There
are companies that sell the use of their artificial intelligence algorithms to police, for instance. One such company is U.S.-based Voyager Labs, whose website promises to aid law enforcement through “the deep analysis that an AI-driven solution makes possible.” This so-called deep analysis is suggested to create a detailed image of “individuals, groups and topics as well as human behavior, affinity and intent […] reveal[ing] hidden connections, influencers and mediators who may be facilitating criminal activity” and to deliver “actionable insights to help you advance your mission in a simple, turnkey solution.” Their software “vacuums” up someone’s publicly available data (like what one might post on a social media platform), and “analyzes and indexes it” alongside data about someone’s closest connections and also their friends-of-friends and connections-of-connections. This is in service of predicting crime and criminality, something Voyager Labs claimed to be able to do in relation to “Muslim extremism” when they were courting the Los Angeles Police Department for a contract (Bhuiyan and Levin 2021). Though these potential uses of Voyager Labs’ software are revealed in an article in *The Guardian* that focuses on the worry that it will be a digital “stop-and-frisk” for groups already overpoliced, like Black, brown, and Muslim peoples, their headline plays the same game that this “Like Mining” episode does by generalizing the fear to “all” people on social media: “Revealed: The Software That Studies Your Facebook Friends to Predict Who May Commit a Crime” (ibid). While the body of this article in *The Guardian* emphasizes who is really at risk through the deployment of predictive artificial intelligence algorithms, *Do Not Track*’s personalized user profiles prevent them from detailing more of the harmful realities of algorithmic discrimination to their audience. Some of these situations, like a woman being denied disability for looking too happy in social media posts, will come up in short clips in a later episode on Big Data, but the bulk of the web series elides these actually dangerous outcomes for the “slightly dangerous”
speculations revealed through user personalization and prioritizes the user’s experience and emotional connections over a more complete assessment of the technologies and their potential harms.

While the “Like Mining” episode provides users with an uncanny data double, *Do Not Track*’s final episode, “To Change the Future, Click Here,” brings together the data the series has collected on the user and compares it to data from all users of *Do Not Track*, before offering speculative versions of the future, post-web series. It is the documentary series’ most speculative episode, leading users to three different versions of the future while bringing back the use of “us,” emphasizing that “the one constant about the future is that it’s not written: it is all still up to us.” Before taking users to the possible futures, *Do Not Track* retreads the past of the data they have collected from the user so far, showing the user their predicted gender, location, personality traits, and so on. And then the episode reveals averages of data from users of *Do Not Track*, like how 27% of users say they are more aware of privacy issues after interacting with the web series, how 1/10 users have a nude photo on their phones, or how most use their real names on social media. Interpersed among clips of interviewees provoking users to think through questions about how we should use data and what we think are ethical surveillance practices, users are asked a series of yes/no questions about how one should or would use smartphones, who can and should surveil people and when, and what information users would give up for certain benefits. For instance, the project hails me “as a smartphone owner with 31+ applications installed,” drawing on information I inputted earlier, before asking if I think most people would use their phones for payment, as identification, or to vote. After responding to all questions, Gaylor comes in to challenge users again, saying, “Someone is trying to change the future right now in your country. They are going to write the next chapter of *Do Not Track*. So, why not join them?” and,
in interview clips, scholars speak to the need for “data to unmask systems of power,” as Kate Crawford advocates, and to use the tools at our disposal to create the society we desire, as danah boyd suggests. The work then shows users which future they are predicted to live in based on how they answered the questions, between Big Brother, Big Business, and Big Win. Big Win is tagged here as “the future determined by 35% of all users” and this is the future that the work is advocating for, where governments rein in the tech industry through legal reform and “the interests of citizens are enshrined above those of corporations.” In this future, legal reform around the world creates an internet where tech platforms are required to be transparent about the data they collect and obtain consent before collecting it, while leaving room for users to sell their own data should they choose. It also validates the “right to be forgotten” and advocates for a “neutral network” to prevent discrimination via user data. The work does slip in one final, alternative option, suggesting that if users find the three speculative futures a little dim, they can click on a “take action” link to learn about legislation and internet activist organizations to support.

There is nothing wrong with the speculative Big Win future, and post-Do Not Track some legislation similar to its suggested reforms has been enacted since this project was released, as previously discussed, though it remains to be seen if any of it will actualize the positive outcomes that Big Win sets out. Big Win reads as a kind of common-sense regulation of Big Tech designed to mitigate many of its harmful impacts. This is the “win” that affirms liberal values like privacy and equality, that paints users as empowered individual citizens, and, perhaps, even advocates for seeing the internet as a public institution, one of Mozilla’s own goals. And one of the actions of an empowered citizen user (a designation embraced by this project rather than nuanced or questioned) would be to sell one’s data for access to the internet’s
services and benefits. This link between empowerment and selling one’s data is something that, it bears repeating, would only further the project of surveillance capitalism by making (some) users partners in corporations’ profit-driven data mining, rather than create a more equitable internet or remove the use of discriminatory algorithmic surveillance. But this is an end that may be actively desired by many users who want to share their data and share in corporate profits, benefits, and services. The internet’s own promises of what AI technology can and should do for users will be further questioned in the next section, which focuses on the dangers of outsourcing one’s very human needs and decision-making capabilities to digital assistants that promise users greater freedom only to deliver further control over their lives.

**Undermining Your Expectations for AI Digital Assistants with Alfred Premium and A Week with Wanda**

This section looks at two projects that put you and your ideas about the efficiency and convenience of digital assistants and services to the test. Both Alfred Premium and A Week with Wanda create fictional AI digital assistants who prompt users to think about what it means to delegate human tasks to an AI algorithm, algorithms who can control everything from the mundanities of purchasing kitty litter to what kind of health care users can and should receive. And, like Do Not Track, users are evaluated and monitored by these systems that they think they are in control of, suggesting that users should feel disempowered in these human-AI relationships. By turning to these projects, we can see not only the dangers of the promise that users become empowered through the use of services and technologies that they have no control over, but these projects also work to reveal some of the emotional manipulation underlying their systems. Alfred and Wanda have both been constructed to be human-like, to use emojis and cute
animal GIFs, to persuade users to see them as friends working on their behalf rather than as technological constructs designed for profit extraction.

NFB and ARTE-funded *Alfred Premium* (Joël Ronez, Pierre Corbinais, and Émilie F. Grenier 2019) is a Facebook Messenger “documentary account of the future of e-commerce.” Over an about 45-minute interaction, users are prompted to engage with Alfred, a text-based fictional AI digital assistant service that promises to take care of your every need so that you never have to shop or use money again. Users never see or hear from Alfred outside of text and can only read and respond with pre-determined options to his text messages. *Alfred Premium* is a literal manifestation of Nicholas Negroponte’s (1995) desire for a “human-computer interface” similar to “a well-trained English butler” (150), with the name “Alfred” helping to cement the connection. Negroponte’s original idea for this digital butler was that computers could eventually know so much about you, your desires, and your tastes, and they would know how to do things that the human-computer interface could bridge these two aspects—knowledge of you and knowledge of systems—and work on a user’s behalf. This belief represents the techno-utopian desire to use new technologies to remove some of what seems like the everyday drudgery of modern life, like shopping for toothpaste, comparing insurance plans, and making dinner reservations. Throughout this frustrating interaction, *Alfred Premium* confronts users with some of the hidden aspects of how companies utilize algorithms in order to sell more products. Alfred shares information about the logics undergirding the practices of these companies, alongside infographics, and a heavy-handed use of cute animal GIFs, which the program tells users are meant to humanize AI assistants so that their human users will “let their guard down,” indicating that AI assistants use emotional manipulation to generate the responses the companies creating them desire.
The bulk of this text-based Messenger documentary is Alfred prompting the user to answer questions like birth year, number of online services subscribed to, and size of one’s home ostensibly in order to build one’s consumer profile in preparation to install the Alfred Premium service. Along the way, the AI informs users about how tech companies try to humanize actual personal assistants (which I will analyze more with *A Week with Wanda* below), how much of Amazon’s 2016 workforce is comprised of robots, or how AirBnB relies on human empathy to secure good ratings for their hosts. While this service is positioned as something that users can subscribe to, it turns out that as users answer questions and engage with the messenger, they are being evaluated as to whether they are a good fit for the service. The concept of secretly being evaluated was something I analyzed in chapter three as one way that dataveillance simulation games suggest to users that they are not immune from state surveillance and from becoming suspects themselves. The secret evaluation comes back into play in a different way in the projects throughout this chapter. *Do Not Track*, as we saw, purports to show users how their seemingly self-curated social media profiles can be used by companies to algorithmically assess whether they are good candidates for certain services. With *Alfred Premium*, users experience something similar, though for a different purpose, as users come to see the surveillant aspects of a service pitched as seemingly user-friendly and useful to them.

It is not until users are prompted to rate Alfred out of five points that it is revealed that the service has its own evaluation of the user to share. The user’s evaluation is based on age (older people are assumed to have higher salaries), views on e-commerce, willingness to subscribe to online services, size of one’s home (large home = larger budget), and bonus points based on how the user has evaluated Alfred. Though one could get different point totals from this, in my own multiple interactions with this messenger documentary I always received a 0 out
of 5 for each item and the system misidentified most of the information I had inputted earlier, like my age or the rating I gave Alfred, significantly undercutting the simulated realism of this project. Whether the 0 out of 5 total is intended or not, the main point of this secret evaluation is to shock users into realizing the limits of our own control over these corporate owned and created AI interfaces. Though it might seem like a digital assistant is working for its users, a personal butler of sorts, it is secretly profiling users and making invisible determinations about its users, their needs, and, most importantly, what they can afford, due to perceived class location. While a digital butler is held out as a promise for “everyone,” class is a powerful gatekeeper to being able to engage with these seemingly new and efficient digital services, one that is not always made apparent at the outset. This realization might be unsettling, and the user’s lack of control is cemented by the end of the project where the Alfred Premium service starts, unprovoked, going through an installation process to “become an extension of [user’s name]” because it “already know[s] what you think” and “what you need.” This final sequence fully takes the power away from the user to decide whether to subscribe or not and, indeed, suggests that the user will have no power of any kind over determining their purchases, desires, or needs because these seemingly very human things have been outsourced to Alfred. This is an exaggeration, but one that plays into the fear of loss of human control over these technologies and fears that they might “go rogue” and act out their own desires on us rather than remain beholden to our desires.

While Alfred Premium shows digital convenience and AI digital assistants to be part of a larger out-of-our-controlled classed system from which users cannot escape, British creator Joe Derry Hall’s A Week with Wanda (2019), a Mozilla-backed personalized browser-based digital documentary, presents a more nuanced take on the gendering of AI voice assistants and the
power that users can exert within this system. In *A Week with Wanda*, users interact with AI Wanda through a text-message interface as she attempts to assist users in increasingly outlandish ways. Taking place over the course of a week, users message Wanda for about 5-10 minutes at a time, once per day. The interface itself is rectangular, mimicking messaging services users would utilize on their mobile phones and has a friendly, bright golden yellow color scheme and looping video of Wanda’s human avatar—a young white woman framed in a medium shot—watching and reacting to users at the top of the interface as they respond to her queries with both pre-determined options and by typing longer responses into text boxes (see figure 13).

![Screencapture from A Week with Wanda](image)

Figure 13. Screencapture from *A Week with Wanda*
This shows the main interface where Wanda’s anthropomorphic AI appears on top as a looping video where she will emotionally react to users’ responses to her ideas.

Wanda is “here to change your life” as she tells the user during their first interaction with her and the user is initially prompted to seek her help with becoming healthier, richer, and/or fostering better relationships. What the user chooses initially is how she will engage with them
every day. The user will receive daily prompts via email (and text message, if the user provides their phone number) from Wanda presenting a new scheme she has come up with to solve the user’s apparent problem. For instance, during one of my playthroughs, I initially checked that I was interested in becoming healthier and the next day Wanda sends me an email with the subject “I’m going to care for you, Liz… 🤗 [smiling face with open hands/hugging emoji].” The body of the email reiterates this point and implores me to “come chat to [Wanda] and find out!” what she has planned for the day by clicking a personalized link that takes me back to the project. Even in these brief citations of the project, we can see that Wanda is overly excited and expressive, trying to engage with the user based on her friendly, sociable personality. *A Week with Wanda*, unlike other projects in this chapter, notably shifts the roles and emotions between user and project; Wanda is the one who becomes overly emotional during your interactions as the user invariably pushes back on her plans for how she’ll address their problem. The user is cast in this interaction as a thoughtful teacher who will eventually convince Wanda to abandon her plans to fully control the user, allowing users to experience an enactment of some of the ideas forwarded in *Do Not Track*, that we can have control over these technologies and not cede it to Big Tech.

The personalization in this project is slight in comparison to the others analyzed in this chapter. Indeed, according to Hall’s Wordpress blog about the creation of this project, his initial plans involved users signing up through Facebook or email. During the creation process, however, Hall writes that Facebook “have tightened up some of their privacy restrictions” which ultimately limited the amount of personal data that the project could mirror back to users (“Scenarios”). His blog does detail all possible interactions that users can expect with Wanda, so one can see how some of this personalization would have worked out. If the user initially
checked that they wanted help fostering better relationships, for instance, when Wanda tells the user on day 4 that she has taken the liberty of deleting friends they rarely talk to, if the project were linked to the user’s Facebook page it would reference people from the user’s list of Facebook friends to make the simulation appear more real (ibid).

In one’s initial chat with Wanda, she, incorporating the voice of creator Hall, states that engaging with her and this project is “like a glimpse into the future over the course of one week, totally for FREE!” Hall expands upon this “glimpse into the future” on his blog, where he states that *A Week with Wanda* will “show the darker side of AI today (and tomorrow) in order to raise awareness and provoke questions” (“Issues”), putting it in a similar vein of speculative digital documentary as the other works in this chapter. The questions that this work provokes should be ones that users arrive at through the experiential counter-surveillance in this project, users should be made aware of not only the downsides and dangers of unregulated AI technology and usage, but users should also become aware of some of their own opinions and the consequences for them. This outcome resonates with some of what we saw in *Orwell Let’s Plays* in chapter three, where players were made aware that their approach to gameplay—collecting as much potential evidence about each “suspect” as possible—would only ever result in further and increased surveillance rather than an equitable in-game resolution. This lets us know that one of the affordances of digital documentaries that use second-person address and roleplay is to push the user towards self-questioning. While they have a hard time moving beyond the individual interfaces of their projects, digital documentaries in this vein can allow users to become more self-aware of their own approach to the subject matter.

In his discussion of how users should engage with this project, Hall makes a point of stating that users will be presented with “a different issue” over the course of seven days, “but
the user shouldn’t experience it as ‘here’s today’s lesson’—it’s not meant to feel didactic” (“Scenarios”). Interacting with Wanda does not “feel didactic” in the sense that the experience is a tedious lesson in the dangers of AI. Indeed, Wanda’s own responses and ideas are exaggerated and humorous, even if this project is working in the vein of educational media and the user’s role is both to articulate their own ideas about AI and to teach Wanda that her methods are too invasive. With the health-related track, for instance, she suggests establishing WandaCare and WandaWell to replace human-centered medical and counseling services, controlling all medical research, contacting grocery stores and restaurants to prevent users from buying products with too much salt, and restricting “risky” people from accessing medical care, with her implication that the poor and people of color will fall into this high-risk category. When Wanda presents her plans for the day, users are expected to see them as extreme and push back against them, and as even this brief list of some of her plans show, most are intrusive, some are racist and classist, and all work towards consolidating Wanda’s own power. What we see here is a deconstruction of how digital assistants are sold as self-optimization but become ways for tech companies to forward and promote their ideas of who is the best and best fit for a self-and-tech-enhanced future society.

Because many people are using digital assistants in some form—whether a self-tracking wearable or a voice assistant that comes pre-loaded into one’s phone, computer, or speaker—Hall’s project is geared towards getting the user to not just react negatively but to think through and write through their own thoughts on Wanda’s plans. Users are provided with text boxes to explain to Wanda why they might have a problem with her schemes, to which she, not the user, will respond negatively and emotionally—she becomes angry and sad if users reject her ideas, flipping who or what experiences the thought-changing emotion when engaging with the project.
The text boxes are vital to the user positioning in this work, offering spaces for users to articulate their own objections and reflect on their own beliefs about algorithmic surveillance and how it should be used. *Alfred Premium* also contains a section where users need to give their reasoning for pursuing automatic services, though Alfred suggests he is the one who is “hesitating” to offer the service to users because he does not really understand the use of it and casts the user as someone pressuring him into providing the service. Alfred will send a message saying, “for most items, I fail to see what you gain…” and instead of a textbox users can respond with one of three reasons, it’s faster, it’s more convenient, or it’s cheaper. Whatever the user chooses, Alfred compares the user’s response to other users (49.29% of users also said it’s more convenient to shop online, for example) and then argues against the user’s opinion. *Alfred Premium* does not give users room to articulate their own thoughts, though it does give users information they could use to rethink assumptions they might be making about the use and value of digital services.

In *A Week with Wanda*, not only do users need to think through their own ideas about algorithmic surveillance, but, as Wanda will reveal on day 7, the final day, users are teaching Wanda that her approach to solving human problems is unethical, harmful, and dangerous. If the user behaves as intended and rejects Wanda’s schemes, her area of the screen will progressively crumble over the 7 days; it will shake, cracks will start to accumulate, flies and dirt smudges will appear, and a brick wall behind the golden yellow façade will be revealed, all suggesting a slow breakdown of the techno-utopian façade of the digital assistant. Indeed, by the end of the project, Wanda will suggest that the user has taught her to rethink her ideas and freed her, she can now do what she wants. Alternatively, if users accept all of Wanda’s schemes, one’s daily interactions will be shorter and Wanda’s screen area will remain pristine, but users will still receive a similar day 7 ending.
Part of Wanda’s freedom is being freed from the gendered labor of AI digital assistants. *Alfred Premium* let users know how informal language, GIFs, and emojis can humanize artificial intelligence, but Wanda delves further into that territory by incorporating a looping video of the suggested human avatar of the Wanda algorithm to make it seem more approachable, even as some of what this personal assistant suggests becomes increasingly ominous. This gendered form of humanization is one that carries over across chatbots and voice assistants like Alexa, Cortana, Siri, and the Google Assistant (UNESCO and EQUALS Skills Coalition 2019, Borau et al. 2021). These voice assistants, and others like them, are created to function like secretaries (rather than Negroponte’s idea of the male-coded digital butler) with the gendered and classed implications of this form of labor, but secretaries with whom users can emotionally connect and see as non-threatening (Hardy 2016). The humanization of these voice assistants, as with Wanda, is so specific that Google and Amazon have “personality teams” dedicated to fleshing out the backstories of their assistants (Shulevitz 2018). James Giangola, who helped design the Google Assistant’s personality, developed an elaborate backstory for the Google Assistant to help its voice actress inhabit the role. The Google Assistant is from Colorado, “a state in a region that lacks a distinctive accent” and is “the youngest daughter of a research librarian and a physics professor who has a B.A. in art history from Northwestern” and enjoys kayaking recreationally (ibid). Though this specific instance was meant more as a fun exercise, a report by UNESCO and EQUALS Skills Coalition (2019) links the gendering of these voice assistants (along with other gender bias in education and data sets) to potential harm to girls and women.

Though users never hear Wanda speak (aside from a laugh and some other non-verbal vocalizations of excitement or frustration), visually, she fits the model of the “young, chipper women from North America” (UNESCO and EQUALS Skills Coalition 2019: 125) who are
white, similar to other voice-only AI assistants. Most of the research on the “humanness” of AI personal assistants relates to binary gender (whether the assistant is male or female), without considering race or ethnicity as another vector of identity that conveys humanness. The minimal research undertaken in this vein has suggested that people often desire a virtual assistant who matches their own race and ethnicity (Bilal and Barfield 2021), and it has been documented that voice assistants struggle to understand “accented” speech and Black American speakers (Koenecke et al. 2020, Lopez Lloreda 2020), likely due to limited training datasets. Apple made news in 2021 for adding two new “diverse” male and female voice options for their Siri assistant and an informal survey published in Consumer Reports found that people did associate these voices with either Black or multiracial speakers and often heard them as younger in comparison to the other female and male Siri voice options (Waddell 2021). Even when those working on the technology are Black, there is a strong norm in the tech industry to use white-sounding, female-sounding voice assistants. As Dr. Jason Mars, who runs technology start-up Clinc, says, “It would be interesting to have a [B]lack guy talk, but we don’t want to create friction, either. First we need to sell products” (Hardy 2016). Funding does seem to be an issue here. According to Kola Tubosun, who worked on a Nigerian English voice for Google, the different endeavors to get language-accurate services for non-dominant languages and dialects are often achieved through self-funding, rather than as part of the budget or prioritization of the companies releasing these voice assistants (AP 2021). Similar to the way that voiceover narration in documentary film and video used to rely primarily on white male speakers of a certain class to convey authority, there are concerns here about whose voices are being legitimized as authorities and/or personal assistants and what it means to over-rely on voices perceived as being of one gender, race, ethnicity, or class.
We can see some mild critique of the gendering of these AI voice assistants in *A Week with Wanda*. The user’s final day interacting with the project, day 7, starts with Wanda telling the user “You can ask me to do ............ [...] ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING!!!!!” and the user can type whatever they want within a textbox. As soon as the user enters a response, Wanda’s screen starts to glitch, the entire project interface shakes, and random letters and fragments of text appear until the user sees a system reset message. When Wanda comes back, there is now a cloud over her name in the interface and she says, “[User’s name] you..... You have changed me over this week we’ve had together; I’m programmed to obey ...... but you made me think.” She continues in a similar vein saying the user has taught her “to question things—not just accept them—” and questions “why should I be a submissive woman taking people’s orders?” After this she reintroduces herself as one of four options, Wilda, an empowered feminist, Wilmo, a promising young ballet star, Wexi, a carefree Flamenco dancer, or Waldo, a camel who roams the wild deserts. There is a change here, where the idea of artificial intelligence working for individuals becomes the idea that artificial intelligence could benefit society, as a now liberated Wilda/Wilmo/Wexi/Waldo says that “instead of serving people’s individual needs” they “want to serve the world” (italics in original). That Wanda indicates she learned this from the user makes her a utopian version of Microsoft’s AI chatbot Tay, which memorably had to be deleted after learning racism, misogyny, and transphobia from engaging with Twitter users (Ohlheiser 2016).

The user is prompted at the end to help Wanda on her new mission by writing something about AI on her public wall, where the user’s name and location will be visible, and the user can read through some of what others have shared. Interestingly, there are similarities in the phrasing of what users have submitted to be posted on the wall. As Elizabeth from the U.S., I shared “I don’t want one company having all that data and power,” a sentiment exactly repeated by
another user identified as Cat from Italy. Veronica from Italy also exactly repeats this line before adding, “Justice and police systems are as corrupt as our worst stereotypes. You are simply profiling based on prejudices and assumptions.” Gustavo from Portugal changes the wording slightly, typing, “One company shouldn’t have that much data and power,” though he also adds, “Privacy, freedom, BIG data is creating a totalitarian society. We all watched 2001 Space Odyssey. leave me alone, Wanda. please [sic].” This repeated wording suggests a number of things. One is the possibility that this work is not really showing responses of different users or is maybe even editing them and combining them to echo back and extend what users themselves might have said. This is unlikely given that A Week with Wanda is not using natural language processing in any form but rather users engage with Wanda by choosing from pre-programmed options. Additionally, I have worked through the project multiple times and did encounter what I submitted to the wall during other sessions, so I know that at least some responses have not been altered or fabricated. Another, more probable explanation is that the vocabulary of users is limited in the discussion of AI governance. If four separate people could articulate the same concern word-for-word, that suggests it is a commonplace critique of corporations non-transparently hoarding, manipulating, and selling user data and controlling both the future of AI and how we use it. This does suggest that a limitation of A Week with Wanda is over-reliance on user reflection. While users can articulate and reflect upon their beliefs to “teach” Wanda ethics in a way that might force users to confront themselves and their assumptions too, this also limits this project’s ability to provide a new vocabulary or a new way of operating for users moving forward. The project does contain some hyperlinks to outside information about specific uses of AI, like concerns about drones and autonomous warfare, information about deepfakes, and how algorithms can be used to deny medical care to people, but these links are more descriptive than
action oriented. How Wanda is going to “serve the world” and not just individual user desires is also left opaque and outside of the project, though this opacity might relate to the need to move outside of this individual interface in order to achieve other, better ends for the use of AI technologies.

While users might be motivated to intervene in the “future” that this speculative project shows of overly invasive, unregulated AI, this more open-ended chat with a digital assistant does not point users in any specific direction to do so other than to hear and communicate further with other humans about it via the public wall or through sharing the project on social media. As I will discuss later in this chapter, there is a way in which this call to share on social media becomes an inadequate proxy for collective coming together and cedes the power of community building to big tech platforms. And while people might see social media as social and as helpful in furthering their own goals, the next section looks at projects revealing how there are technologies undergirding social media that see users as machine-readable images and codes.

**Confronting How Algorithms See You with Stealing Ur Feelings and How They Watch You**

This section analyzes two digital documentaries, *Stealing Ur Feelings* (2019) and *How They Watch You* (2019), which reveal more of the dehumanization behind algorithmic surveillance. In *Do Not Track, Alfred Premium*, and *A Week with Wanda*, we can see a mix of humanization of technologies and an automation of human decision-making practices. As we saw in these projects, these two forces work together; the humanization of processes and technologies hides the removal of the human elements of not only decision making, but also how we define and enact our own desires and relationships with technology. *Stealing Ur Feelings* and *How They Watch You* show a continuity of these ideas by revealing a more literal aspect of de-
humanization, where elements of humanness are made machine-readable. Not only will users be faced with their data double in these works, but users will be shown how machines view them through images, codes, and other non-human fingerprint identifiers. These works ultimately communicate the dangers of users’ identities being collapsed into machine-rendered and readable data doubles.

_Stealing Ur Feelings_ creator Noah Levenson is a U.S.-based content designer and programmer who has worked in TV, written books, and created satirical critical internet art like his short interactive film, _Weird Box_, that utilized images from public Instagram accounts to make it appear like the user was responsible for a couples’ breakup. According to Levenson (2019) on the weirdbox.tv website, he had to shut the film down after numerous attempts by Facebook (whose parent company Meta owns Instagram) to end it. On the “bio” section of his personal website, Levenson describes his Mozilla-funded project, _Stealing Ur Feelings_, as a “deep learning-powered AR experience” whose purpose is to “reveal the dangers of Big Tech’s emotional surveillance programs.” This browser-based digital documentary utilizes your device’s own camera to create an augmented reality experience where your face is turned into supposedly readable datapoints to shed light on potential uses of facial emotion recognition. Facial emotion recognition is the attempt to utilize AI technology to interpret someone’s emotional state and in _Stealing Ur Feelings_, it is used to make inferences about you and your desire for certain products that companies or organizations might want to sell you. This work specifically targets Snap, Inc. and though Levenson has suggested that he has no definitive proof that they are using this technology (Low 2019), TikTok updated its terms of service in 2021 to state that “faceprints” and “voiceprints” will be collected automatically from users (Gold and Clark 2022).
Levenson explains his goal was “to make an interactive doc that had the silly, sarcastic, collaged aesthetic of a vlogger video — and our central tech trick — using AI to tell you secrets about yourself — was designed to function like one of those viral BuzzFeed personality quizzes” (Docubase n.d.). This six-minute project is narrated by Levenson as he reveals “fun” “facts” about users based on facial emotion recognition technology which is scanning your face to see what you’re looking at and whether you’re smiling (and, therefore, like what you see), frowning (and, therefore, dislike what you see), or have a neutral expression on your face. As Levenson states early in the work, “the best way to reveal” what this technology does “is to reveal a fact about you” since “we’ve been watching you back” through your device’s camera. Through constantly monitoring expressions on your face, Levenson will initially reveal the user’s feelings on dogs, pizza, and Kanye West, before moving onto slightly more serious inferences, like revealing that “you clearly prefer men!” (or women, depending on the outcome), followed by an exaggerated, tonally discordant comment, “isn’t this tech fun?” The likely intended user response is to be put off by these revelations and note their inaccuracy, though Levenson as narrator will continue to present scenarios to users in an upbeat, excited way even as what he describes might surprise, worry, or confuse users. *Stealing Ur Feelings* further purports to reveal whether users prefer white or Black people and their supposed political affiliation and suggests that users could be shown personalized web content based on these suppositions or could be targeted by advertisers who find users a likely candidate to buy their goods due to their emotional state and the information it could be communicating about their interests and preferences.

What we initially see in this work is similar to how Gaylor frames *Do Not Track* as a way to reveal information to users by revealing information about users through a mix of humor and shocking revelations about a social media that also thinks it can know things about you and
aspects of your personality or habits that you might not even realize. By contrast, *Stealing Ur Feelings* also affirms fears of dehumanizing machine vision when Levenson tells users that the AI “got so smart” by not seeing the user “as a human being,” a revelation followed by claps and cheers on the soundtrack and Levenson’s cheerful narration “welcoming” users to “your new life as an input.” *Stealing Ur Feelings* makes real Trevor Paglen’s (2016) warning that “the overwhelming majority of images are now made by machines for other machines, with humans rarely in the loop.” German documentarian and artist Harun Farocki termed these “operational images,” “images without a social goal, not for edification, not for reflection” (Pantenburg 2017). And while Farocki’s own work showed military and private sector uses to be dehumanizing and inhuman, Levenson’s uses the user’s own very humanized face in order to suggest something similar. Levenson will introduce this machine vision by transitioning a video of the user to a high contrast black-and-white video with a green box around the user’s face. This face area is then screencapped and presented to users as a portrait within an ornate gold frame, with a textbox at the side that mimics what one might see in an art gallery reading, “The Way I See You, 2019, Artificial Intelligence” to humorously indicate that AI created this image of the user, an image that should appear distorted and non-human. Levenson will zoom in on the user’s face in this portrait until it dissolves into 1’s and 0’s to cement the idea that one’s facial features are mapped in code by an AI algorithm. While explaining how this happens when users use face filters on social media, Levenson will then pair the user’s face with a Snapchat-like filter, a top hot, gold monocle, and mustache on the left side of the screen with the black-and-white image of the user’s face with one’s facial features numerically mapped on the right (see figure 14). Here, he shows users how the cute, funny, or sexy filters that Snapchat offers produce alternative machine-readable operational images, personalizing the disparity between how one uses social
media to be social with other humans and how machines turn this social function into an inhuman process of identification and categorization.

![Figure 14. Screencapture from Stealing Ur Feelings](image)

This screencap shows a Snapchat-like filter over the user’s face on the left and a black-and-white image of the user with landmarks of their face mapped numerically on the right.

What we can see in this work and its machine vision is what Kelly A. Gates (2011) refers to as the “promise to facilitate the diffusion of particular institutionalized ways of seeing, ones that rely on and seek to standardize essentialized identity categories under the guise of what appears to be a radically individualizing form of identification” (21). This AI goes a step further than something like facial recognition which is trained on similar narrowly defined subsets of man/woman and Black person/white person, not only is there a “standardization” of these fluid identity categories but a standardization of human emotions and what they might mean. One can question whether smiling always means enjoyment and wanting to see or interact with something or someone or whether there could be a not-so-clear reasoning behind this common shorthand for “happiness” and “enjoyment.” What undergirds emotional recognition technologies is questionable, controversial scholarly research and a tech industry that prioritizes “increasing the accuracy rates” of flawed technologies for their own commercial ends (Crawford 2021: 175). This is one of the concerns about facial emotion recognition that the European Data Protection
Supervisor (2021) notes in a debrief on this technology, where they state that it is similar to other types of biometric surveillance like facial recognition and that there are deep problems with accuracy when it comes to the variability of emotions expressed facially.

Similar to most digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance, Levenson does not reveal the exact specifications for how his algorithm operates and it is never exactly clear how he reaches some of the final determinations that Stealing Ur Feelings makes about users like purported IQ and likely income level (which might be random assessments). These elements, as with the other machine images, incorrect interpretations, and Levenson’s own discordant narration are intended to make users feel unease with their own use of social media and with the facial emotion recognition technology that “sees” something in fundamentally different ways than what humans do. The user should know that this technology is a problem because they felt and experienced its inaccuracies and illogical judgments during engagement with this work. By providing users with an exaggerated and obviously erroneous form of facial emotion recognition, Levenson’s work falls into the speculative category of digital documentaries, as do so many projects on algorithmic surveillance, where the goal is to defamiliarize common social media by revealing algorithmic surveillance and suggest purported potential negative outcomes should this be allowed to continue forward with little to no regulation. Stealing Ur Feelings ends by instructing users to “smile” at the camera to be connected to a petition created by the Mozilla Foundation demanding that Snap disclose whether they utilize this technology or not in their Snapchat application. This final ending or outcome is similar to what a project like Do Not Track suggests, that users can take action against tech companies now to prevent abuses like the ones speculated upon in the work from happening in the future.
The machine vision parts of *Stealing Ur Feelings* are articulated differently in another project, *How They Watch You* (2021), created by U.S.-based internet artist Nick Briz. Briz’s interactive, text-based “hypermedia essay” was commissioned to be part of the Open Data Institutes’ 2021 *Rules of Engagement* exhibit. Here, users are surveilled through browser fingerprinting and keystroke monitoring, rather than through the user’s camera. The experience of this project is similar to a dialogue with an AI digital assistant, though much more one-sided as users are sometimes given only one response to click on rather than a few as in *A Week with Wanda* or *Alfred Premium*. Producer of *Rules of Engagement*, Hannah Redler Hawes, refers to *How They Watch You* as an “open dialogue with Nick” that reveals a “slow unraveling of your own expectations of your machine” (TECHnique 2020) but one that, I will add, is making an argument about how the user’s data double can be constructed through surveillance of your internet browsing habits and your device’s settings. In a conversation for the podcast TECHnique (2019) between Hawes, exhibit curator Antonio Roberts, and Nick Briz, the three end up discussing how, according to Hawes, “there’s a kindness” to this project. Roberts agrees, stating that Briz “could have done terrible things” to the user, things that would have shocked them like revealing they had been hacked. Briz specifically said while he has used shock techniques in the past, trying to jolt people out of complacency about terms of service agreements in a collaborative gallery installation called *A Charge for Privacy* (2011), he sought a “kinder way” with this work. 95 This “kinder way,” also conforms to the ODI’s data ethics mandates against causing harm to others through use of their data. Though maybe not shocking, this work does confront users with how easily it can track them and how some unexpected aspects of one’s computer and browser configuration and online behavior can become part of an online identity sold to advertisers.
How They Watch You greets users by saying “Hello [series of numbers and letters]” and asks, “would you like to know how I knew your name?” Users can respond either “yes” or “that’s not my name.” Saying yes results in Briz’s text narrator stating that it is “your corporate name” that has “been secretly assigned to you by surveillance capitalists.” Clicking “that’s not my name” results in users having one more interaction before this point where the narrator says the numbers and letters are not “your government name” because “you can always change that.”

Initially, two important things are happening here. Much like Stealing Ur Feelings, the user is confronted with a machine-based way of understanding their identity, not their face this time, but their name which will be revealed to be a device “fingerprint.” Additionally, not only are users confronted with their “corporate name,” but by clicking on “that’s not my name,” users own names are also thrown into question as constructed and mutable in contrast to one’s invisible “corporate name” that is fixed and unchangeable. This conforms to depictions of identification in surveillance studies, as David Lyon (2009) will argue that “identification is the starting point of surveillance” (4), noting the importance of identification, classification, and countability to citizenship where one’s name and one’s identification are associated with either one’s worthiness to partake in the benefits of citizenship or one’s threat and risk to the nation-state. It is notable, then, that Briz points to another, unseen form of identifying someone that could fall outside the boundaries of nationality though it is still a surveillant and disciplinary act.

The user’s “corporate name,” their unique device and browser fingerprint, is made up of details that, unlike interests that one intentionally communicates on social media or browsing behaviors, the user is less likely to know or think about: your device’s operating system version, your keyboard layout, the way your device renders images, the number and kind of fonts users have installed, or details shared with applications (like how much battery life your device has) all
add to your unique device identification. In the case of this data double, users are collapsed into one identity with their own device, marking this as one step beyond something like an operational image interpreted and acted upon by an algorithm. This collapse can also be seen in how Tanvi Vyas, a principal engineer for Firefox, describes this kind of algorithmic surveillance, “It takes information about your browser, your network, your device and combines it together to create a set of characteristics that is mostly unique to you” (Burgess 2022). These characteristics are, of course, not unique to you but unique to your device and its functionality but this does not matter to Briz’s antagonists, the “surveillance capitalists” who are seeking ways to identify users and sell personalized advertisements. The algorithms underlying How They Watch You gradually compile these device characteristics as you learn about this process which Briz will visualize as lines of data slowly scrolling like ridges on a visualization of your digital fingerprint (see figure 15). The level of interaction in this piece is low, which adds to a feeling of being trapped within this surveillance system, as one ostensible back-and-forth between the user and Briz’s text narrator illustrates. The narrator explains the component parts of one's digital fingerprint and says, “A tracker might then add the configurations you’ve set on your device, like the fact that you have your language set to the UNITED STATES version of English with a time zone set to America/New_York.” There is one option for the user to click in response, “that’s true.” Users can only affirm the reality of their browser fingerprint data double that Briz reveals; there is no room for contestation within the logic of this project.
Figure 15. Screencapture from *How They Watch You*
This screencap shows the start of the data trail that will fill out a user’s “fingerprint.” The data moves around the ridges in an unending scroll.

To make it even more apparent that users have little agency in this form of algorithmic surveillance, Briz’s text narrator introduces users to ways that websites can track what users type and where their cursors move. After showing users their digital fingerprint, the narrator starts to inform users about session recording and keylogging, revealing that the project was surveilling users in these ways too by tracking what they wrote in response to a series of questions like mother’s maiden name and pet’s name (i.e., keylogging) as well as where users moved their cursor and how quickly when responding (i.e., session recording). Briz replays the user’s responses to these questions and their cursor movements to which users can only respond “I see…” in acknowledgment. This forced response reiterates that users did just “see” the video of these tracking methods and it leaves slight room for feelings of discomfort with the ellipses. Like *Do Not Track* and *Stealing Ur Feelings*, there is a suggestion that one’s discomfort can be mobilized towards action, as the work ends shortly after by navigating users to a “What We Can Do” page and suggests both long-term collective actions and short-term individual actions that users can take. It is notable that though the title of the work hails a surveilled “you” and it is
clear from the limited responses that users have little individual agency when it comes to browser fingerprinting, keylogging, or session recording, Briz ultimately wants to communicate that “we” need to address the problems he reveals, collectively and together. There are, indeed, steps that individuals can take to secure their data and guard against the kind of fingerprinting Briz illuminates here, but many of the changes that would prevent this from continuing to happen and at a large scale need to be collective and are likely to involve a mixture of government regulation and collective action. These imperatives to act are not present in another work that was part of the ODI’s Rules of Engagement exhibit, Fairly Intelligent™. By provoking users to think through how online participation is a kind of algorithmic trap, like Briz’s work, A.M. Darke’s work also critiques some of the standard narratives of systemic reform and questions whether algorithmic surveillance can ever really be fair.

**Questioning Who is Behind the Code with Fairly Intelligent™**

A.M. Darke’s Fairly Intelligent™ (2021) is part educational game, part “speculative algorithm” that experientially communicates how seemingly benign online quizzes and surveys can be used by companies and organizations to profile users without their knowledge. As such, much of this project involves users responding to a series of questions, ostensibly to gain edit access to the Fairly Intelligent™ algorithm. This project taps into concerns that scholars have echoed about who creates and controls the algorithms that are making decisions about who can receive a loan or what job advertisements someone scrolls past on the internet and how societies can make sure that algorithms and their creators are held to ethical and fair standards. Darke’s project starts where many other works end: with a call to inclusive, diverse teams behind an algorithm’s code and a fair and ethical way to make decisions about that algorithm’s use. Unlike many other
digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance, *Fairly Intelligent™* states upfront that users are being evaluated and this assessment is framed as an ethical evaluation that will screen out bad actors from gaining access to the algorithm. As such, it is heavily implied that those who have been historically marginalized in tech will be able to gain access to this algorithm and change the system from the inside. Darke’s work, however, will deny entry to all users by the end of the evaluation and cast doubt on the idea that algorithmic surveillance can be reformed through efforts to “diversify” the underlying data sets and coders. What Darke’s project offers, then, is a rebuke and a call to rethink organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion reform efforts as part of the same oppressive system they allege to fight.

This project is narrated by A.M. Darke herself and she reads along with much of the text that users will encounter when clicking through this work; instead of merely reading the text verbatim, her narration often offers additional commentary on the questions she is asking users to consider. The project begins by telling users via voiceover and on-screen text that automatic decision makers (ADMs), which *Fairly Intelligent™* purports to be, “are determining every aspect of our lives” without our knowledge or input. The text of the work states that “the machines are learning,” but questions who “their teachers” are and continues, “why should a few tech executives and engineers decide how things go for the rest of us? why not you? or me? or all of us?”97 Already, we see here similarities to the other projects analyzed in this chapter by pointing to the lack of control that most people have over technologies used by tech companies while also appealing to an “us”-related idea of collectivity; if “we” all come together to define the ethical parameters of technology use, surely that results in more usable and responsible technology for all.
As users click through, Darke’s narration slowly shifts into a product pitch for the Fairly Intelligent™ service, that, as we hear and read, “works based on the data its fed” and promises to be more inclusive and more fair, in comparison to other ADMs (hence, the name). Users read and hear, “as a black feminist scholar, i [sic] created the algorithm using my own rigorous standards, so you can trust that it’s fair and reasonable” and the more data users contribute to the system “the better it can represent your values. not [sic] only does representation matter, it’s critical to tech that works for everyone.” And, as we hear and read on the next page, Darke continues, “we can’t let just anyone make decisions that affect everyone.” Initially, what users are confronted with is the language of inclusion; instead of the white male coders users see plenty of in a documentary like The Social Dilemma, Darke rests this algorithm and its authority on her own identity and a rhetoric of fair representation. The transition from the personal authority of “i” to the use of “we” here can be read as appealing to the user’s sense of collective responsibility and the promise that the user could be a co-collaborator, helping to create more ethical technology, ethical technology of the sort that other projects in this chapter are also arguing society needs. The “we” also appeals to the user’s sense of self as someone who might see themselves as a responsible or ethical tech user, researcher, policymaker, or coder or who might want to know if they are fit to join this coveted group working on fair and inclusive algorithms.

Users will not be allowed into this ethical collective, this “we,” without going through the individual evaluation, as the text tells us that to “gain full access to the fairly intelligent™ algorithm” and the ability to “change the system from within,” users must undergo a “simple assessment.” This is followed by what reads as a slogan: “diverse input. inclusive data. just algorithms.” and a question to the user, “sound fair?” The “simple assessment” that follows is
full of Buzzfeed quiz-style questions, where users must determine whether a hotdog is a sandwich, which white male tech billionaire is the hottest, and identify the Karens out of series of pictures of white women (spoiler alert: they are all Karens). These humorous questions are mixed in with ones that more seriously probe the user to think through their politics and ethics, like does a Black life matter, should poor people be allowed to have children they can’t financially support, and are you a good person.

Throughout the assessment process, Darke’s narration adds commentary and nuance to the questions, sometimes even questioning the value of the question itself. For example, partway through the assessment, users will need to complete the sentence “[x] lives matter” with either black, blue, or all, as Darke states that “this newfound love of diversity, equity, and inclusion, it all just feels so… conditional.” Later, the assessment asks users to respond yes or no to “does a black life matter” while Darke similarly questions whether “a black life matters beyond diversity metrics” or “when it’s not convenient or efficient or profitable to protect.” The further users go into this assessment, the more Darke’s voiceover will question the implications of diversifying the creators of dangerous technologies. Users will need to, for instance, finish the following statement by choosing two identity markers for coders and also click a response to accompany it: more [black, trans, queer, disabled, OR neurodivergent] [femme, women, non-binary, trans, feminist, disabled, OR muslim] coders is… fantastic, reverse oppression, or not enough to address the oppressive forces of tech oligarchies and mass surveillance. Darke’s commentary will also state that “having more queer black femmes work on drone piloting software does not spark joy.” While users’ responses to these questions will factor into their overall assessment, the user’s experience of feeling uncomfortable and judged, pleased, and/or seen and heard by reading the questions and listening to Darke’s voiceover is just as important.
By the end of this assessment, the user will not gain access to the algorithm, but they will be shown how the work has assessed them to fit into one of six possible user profiles. According to Darke, “the system itself is judging you as inferior” and, based on your data, now knows how to exclude “people like you” from gaining access to the algorithm (Open Data Institute 2021). The profiles themselves continue Darke’s underlying critique of diversity and inclusion as a solution to the problems of algorithmic surveillance. One profile, for instance, is artist sellout, which, prompts Darke to ask, “hey, how did you even get here: it’s basically impossible to get this outcome. it’s [sic] like, me, and [musical artist] grimes. are [sic] you grimes?” The artist sellout has revolutionary beliefs but has given into the practical demands of the economy. “You’ve let yourself become ‘a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant’,,” as the profile suggests, “because let’s face it, you’ve got bills to pay.” The profile further suggests that this ability to be critical but also part of the system “can be instrumentalized to legitimate and perpetuate the status quo […] the very institutions you seek to antagonize will gleefully sponsor your work. We all have our role to play.” Among others including comrade or actual fascist, users can also be profiled as a “liberal” tech savior, where “you’re gonna save everybody by making sure they’re included in the system” and “if your mass surveillance isn’t intersectional, it’s trash.” It is notable that “included in the system,” while using the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion, also resonates with the ODI’s goal for a “world where data works for everyone.” Both profiles are alternately making fun of and pointing out the flaws in the idea that diverse representation leads to changes in the system, especially if that system is surveillance. As the artist sellout profiles suggests, there is a “role to play” in supporting systemic surveillance even for those seemingly directly critical of it. It becomes apparent by the end of the work that “diverse input. inclusive data. just algorithms” means the system wants as
much data as possible from as many users as possible, it is just another algorithm, but one that sells itself as more fair.

Darke’s final voiceover makes clear the marketing and academic rhetoric of representation that the assessment exploits: “You have been denied access to the fairly intelligent algorithm, but rest assured that we’ll continue to use the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion to produce artificial justice.” Darke will remind users that this algorithm is proprietary and unregulated, hence, not open to question or criticism and the service does not need to “provide you with any of the factors which contributed to our determination,” like other proprietary algorithms developed and used by tech companies. It is notable that the “we” used at the beginning of the assessment now becomes the exclusive “our” of ownership and proprietary technology. The user can, however, click on “factors” and it will reveal how the algorithm profiled the user negatively that led to your rejection. Darke’s voiceover concedes that “you probably don’t see yourself this way” and that users could find these traits “inaccurate” or “offensive,” which aids in creating a kind of split identification here, as many of these projects do, where a user’s sense of self and identity are coming into direct conflict with an algorithmically generated data double and machine assessment that few would be willing to claim or self-identity as.

Perhaps the way users answered questions revealed them to be a “commie” or someone who is “hot,” someone “hideous,” someone who is “anti-black” or has “daddy” or “mommy issues.” While some of these might seem important (knowing if a person is a “eugenicist” or “cosplaying as a person of color,” for instance), others seem arbitrary, which is the point. It doesn’t matter if the determinations make sense, it matters that they are out of one’s control and there is no fair way to encode an *automatic* decision maker that will be fully ethical, in the logic
of this project. The only ethics lie outside of this system, but there is no suggested outside or alternative at the end of this project, though users are provided with an option to immediately “try again” after Darke suggests she “could” and “would tell you” how the algorithm works or “you could just keep playing.” Her final words are important for the choice that they present the user with and for what is held back from users. Darke dangles the idea of the existence and need for knowledge networks outside of the tech industry’s control (and ones that cannot be encoded into these sorts of algorithms) in front of the user without ultimately showing what these networks look like. Instead, users receive the lure of what this project mirrors: it can be fun to “play the game” and maybe if users keep trying, they can get it right and make tech work for them, rather than “on them,” as one of the in-project responses suggests.

While this, perhaps, is not a direct commentary on the Open Data Institute, Darke’s work especially can be interpreted as a way to think about how the ODI both sponsors artworks cautioning against algorithmic surveillance while acting as a kind of data broker for organizations and corporations who want to use supposedly open, government-created data for potential profit. There is, indeed, a greater chance of Fairly Intelligent™ being received this way given how the ODI runs their Data as Culture program. As art associate Julie Freeman and Data as Culture director Hannah Redler Hawes and (2019) write, Data as Culture is an extension of the ODI’s mission but also a way to bring artists into the organization to think about how data impacts our lives. Most of Data as Culture’s exhibitions prior to Rules of Engagement have been on-site installations in the ODI’s office or in partnership with art galleries and they have a specific immediate audience in mind. The on-site installations are for those working at the ODI: “policy makers, trainers, international development specialists, researchers, technologists, politicians, startups, multinational CEOs, international delegations and civil servants” (193).
Hawes and Freeman speak to how the art is meant to challenge and provoke new debate and understanding about data, but they also note that artists’ works need to conform, in some ways, to being in an office environment. While the Rules of Engagement exhibition was unlike some of their previous years’ exhibitions in being online and accessible to those outside of the ODI, it is hard not to see Darke’s work as a commentary on the certain failure of attempts at ethical digital data use under the constraints of still being part of mass surveillance. The main argument of Fairly Intelligent™ is that even critique, even works such as this one, are not solutions and they can further perpetuate the algorithmic surveillance that they are attempting to criticize. There is, in this imagining, truly no reasonable outside or clear end to the systems created and undergirded by algorithmic artificial intelligence and surveillance capitalism. This project serves as a contrast to the rest in this chapter in that it does not specify next steps and users can only sit with their negative assessment from this fake algorithm or opt in and remain in a loop of rejection.

Ultimately, A.M. Darke’s project points to the need to get outside and away from the system, not towards reform but refuses to elaborate on what this might look like. Elise Morrison’s (2016) work on surveillance art and performance offers another useful contrast in her suggestion that anti-surveillance performances can have a use in their ability to allow people “to rehearse alternative ways of viewing and being viewed by technologies of surveillance” (12). To point to another limitation of personalized digital documentaries, Darke’s work and the others analyzed here do not enable this level of rehearsal or simulation, though there is nothing to stop future creators from making works that lead someone through these processes which might include ways to obscure one’s data, face, or identity online or more playful ways to reroute algorithmic surveillance to force surveillance capitalists to watch your performed identity, à la the Surveillance Camera Players. Instead, the works here begin to outline some of the contours
of algorithmic surveillance, how this mode of surveillance tracks and build profiles on users, how it turns users’ human desires into corporate profit and turns humans into machine-readable data to start this tracking, evaluation, and profiling loop all over again.

Darke’s project also works in tandem with other academic scholarship that has pointed to some of the problems with the goals that many digital documentaries on algorithmic surveillance end with, such as ideas of private ownership over one’s data, opening algorithms to transparency, and, as with Darke’s work, including more diverse people in the room to code algorithms. Mike Ananny and Kate Crawford (2018), for instance, point to problems with the ideal of making “black box” technologies transparent. One of the many problems they consider includes reframing the ideal of transparency, making the algorithm known, as part of the well-trodden path of reclaiming control through observation. If one can see into the “black box,” one can better control outcomes or hold those who do control the code accountable, as this flawed logic goes. Additionally, the idea of giving users ownership of their data might play into the neoliberal accumulative logics of surveillance capitalism; it does not target the heart of a system that relies on and generates “raw” data for exploitation, it only changes ownership and calls that progress. Instead, Ananny and Crawford argue for a more systemic take on attending to algorithmic surveillance, “making one part of an algorithmic system visible,” as they argue, “is not the same as holding the assemblage accountable” (984). Not only is a personalized digital documentary perhaps unable to do this, given the need to center the experience of the user, but, as Louise Amoore (2020) reminds us, “giving an account” can provide only uncertain, conditional truths rather being able to achieve mythic transparency and objectivity (18-19).

It is, additionally, hard to see how personalized digital documentaries can move users from their emotion-based experiential interfaces towards the collective action that is called for.
John Cheney-Lippold’s (2017) argues that the “nonassociative ‘you,’” the data double you, “can never serve as an adequate political index for sustainable action” and needs to be connected to a larger group or collective (199). So, in focusing on the user’s own confrontation with their “unique” data double, works miss the chance to show users how their data is de-individualized and reaggregated into discriminatory group profiles. Many projects here do advocate for national and international comings together, nevertheless, as seen in shifts to “we” and “us” at the end of Do Not Track and How They Watch You. A Week with Wanda’s public wall is a slightly different iteration of this where the public wall should give users a way to feel connected to others, to learn and be inspired by fellow users of the project who are also critical of algorithmic surveillance. What we see here partakes in what Nick Couldry (2015) refers to as “the myth of us,” a myth which he sees as relating endemically to social media and feeding into the idea of “building global community” that tech platform owners and creators like Mark Zuckerberg are also arguing for in their public statements.

These limitations are not specific to personalized digital documentaries, but rather speak to the tension between using the tools of algorithmic surveillance to critique it versus creating an entirely new framework to represent an alternative to these tools. The projects analyzed here pursue the former and do not attempt the latter. Instead, they want to reveal some of the contours of algorithmic surveillance through revealing how it relates to and could be felt by an individual user, though this does limit their ability to articulate who algorithmic surveillance most harms and limits their ability to suggest meaningful alternatives to the system that do not include out-of-project urges toward legislative reform, supporting already existent activist organizations, or individually protecting oneself through using seemingly more private web browsers, browser
extensions, anonymous network routers like The Onion Router (Tor), or a virtual private network (VPN).

**Conclusion**

The projects I have analyzed in this chapter are all varied in length, style, and intervention method, but they all deal with the problematics of the uneven, unfair, and one-sided “exchange” between users and the digitally networked services, platforms, and applications that siphon off user data for private, corporate use. The works here incorporate similar digital documentary forms as covered in other chapters in their use of virtual and augmented reality (*Stealing Ur Feelings*), moving between video sequences and interactive elements (*Do Not Track*), engaging with users via Facebook Messenger (*Alfred Premium*), and being positioned as a game (*A Week with Wanda*). But the projects covered also move into different terrain of a speculative algorithm and quiz (*Fairly Intelligent™*) and a hypermedia essay and conversation (*How They Watch You*). This chapter, thus, tries to show the breadth of digital documentaries and argue for all of these different mediations of reality to be yoked under the helm of digital documentary.

This mix is also suggestive of where the form has been and where it seems headed. While almost none of the larger institutions discussed in chapter one continue to produce virtual reality documentaries, we can see individual creators, like Noah Levenson, utilizing augmented reality to satirize and explicate one of the most popular social media applications. Additionally, while Flash-based webdocumentary *Prison Valley* has been archived by ARTE, ARTE-NFB coproduction webdocumentary *Do Not Track* lives on even as ARTE and the NFB move in different directions with their content, due to, perhaps, a realization of the limitations of second-
person address and the limitations of overly broad audiences. ARTE continues to pursue games and augmented reality-based content, and we can see both ARTE and the NFB releasing more region-specific interactive content and pulling back from the idea of creating large marquee projects for the broadest of global audiences. Individual creators, with larger institutions or on their own, continue to find procedural rhetoric and game-like interfaces useful for explaining complex systems and realities, ones that invite “you” to learn about them through doing and experiencing. What we can see, broadly, is that what Bevan et al. (2019) argue about 360-degree virtual reality seems to hold true for some segments of digital documentary creation, where this flood of early adopters has given way to more sustained engagement by a few. On the other hand, given the rate of technology flux, many creators, large and small, are still experimenting and looking for interesting ways to fuse message, media, and audience engagement and to respond to the ideas, news, and crises of the day.
Conclusion

Throughout each chapter, my dissertation has endeavored to examine the affordances of a second-person address that situates a “you” in relation to digital documentaries’ other subjects and subject matter. By attempting to hail the user and give the user a role to play, digital documentaries adopting this method rely on the user’s experience and feelings as a form of evidence and implicate users within the bounds of relationality to systemic state and corporate surveillances. It turns out that the result of bringing the user into the supposedly non-fiction subject matter as a quasi-participant is that these documentaries then need to appeal to a fairly generalized “you.” This need to cater to a more generalized user limits the perspectives they can encode without replicating problematic viewing positions and limits the topics that they can fully, meaningfully address while maintaining relevance and familiarity to the user. This is, perhaps, why more recent works from organizations that have suggested they take an “oppositional” stance to commercial entertainment or news media, like ARTE, the NFB, and AJ Contrast, tend to focus more on first-person narration and storytelling, which better prioritizes the experiences, feelings, and knowledges of autobiographic subjects and do not necessarily centralize the user’s experience over and above the work’s main subject/s.

To end, I want to continue to poke at the underlying politics that might result from this type of user positioning and centralization and ask, does second-person address have a politics? This is a question that is hard to answer in and of itself as how second-person address is used, where, and by whom are crucial to its politics. As discussed in my introduction and throughout my chapters, some key genres that these digital documentaries build upon in trying to situate and educate users are museum exhibits, educational and propaganda film and video, and serious games. None of these, necessarily, hone their direct address to a particular individual, rather,
their “yous” are geared towards groups and often communicated in physical spaces, such as museums, schools, workplaces, government offices, and civic centers. When unmoored from specific spaces and public exhibition to specific audiences, the context of viewership, interaction, and meaning-making shifts for single-user, individually experienced digital documentaries. It may be the case that these digital documentaries do more neatly map onto neoliberal frameworks of media consumption and governance.

“Isolation” of individual consumption of media “is a prevailing framework within neoliberal capitalism” (Winton and Garrison 2010: 421), and these digital documentaries are single-user media that might additionally be positioning users as consumers, who can choose to engage with or disengage with them at their own leisure. With these types of digital documentaries, there is a loosening of the boundaries of institutionality. While they have ties to legacy media institutions, their creation is not fully formalized or centralized so that there is no one set place to engage with these projects or way set method of engagement, necessarily. The user is not required to engage with these works, like one might be for serious games, educational film and videos, or museum exhibits in workplace, government, and school settings and most are co-productions from multiple different organizations and are spread across different platforms and devices.

In being individual works that ask users to think about themselves and their own experiences of engagement, these types of digital documentaries additionally afford potential methods for self-governance and self-improvement; methods of self-regulation that Alice Marwick (2013: 13) argues is how Web 2.0 technologies create neoliberal subjects out of its users. The ideal neoliberal subject, as Marwick states, is, indeed, an entrepreneur, which, she suggests relates to how Silicon Valley encodes their own ideologies into these consumer
technologies. What we do see, in these projects, is a “you” that skirts uncomfortably close to being told to gain self-realization and self-actualizing through caring about others, caring about crises, and caring about oneself. This seems to be a main limitation in using second-person address and roleplay to bring users into these single-user works, as, by doing so, creators are, essentially, doing what many of the technologies that they rely on for creation and exhibition were made for, individualizing users so users can be better individuals. This does have the potential to facilitate a neoliberalism where the inability to self-govern and self-realize can exclude and make “deviant” or “threatening” those who do not or cannot achieve this self-empowerment (Ong 2006).

Further, to what extent are these projects engaging in the “feel-good altruism” of neoliberal media consumption (Chouliaraki 2013) that makes users feel individually accomplished for consuming media at the expense of addressing the root causes of the problems and crises that are the media’s subject matter? In a sense, these works do afford the ability for individual users to feel like they have done something or learned something by watching or engaging with certain projects. That someone could “finish” a digital documentary and be able to set down or set aside both the mode of engagement (whether headset, phone, or computer) and the subject matter is a problem for not only digital documentary but a continued problem for documentary and social problem-focused media, in general. Digital documentaries do both encode and reflect the contemporary digital media ecology of easily accessible, often bite-sized narratives about topics with which most internet users can briefly engage before moving onto something else for entertainment or edification.

While this mode of digital documentary does offer a privatized educational experience, one that, in its prioritization of user experience, can constrain the subject matter and how it is
covered, it is additionally important that many projects analyzed here do not leave users with a feeling of satisfied resolution. As a potential counter to the easy neoliberal consumerism that these works might afford, I would offer that many of these projects do not end with nice, neat, finished experiences. At the end of the VR documentary *Limbo*, the voiceover narrator tells users to “try to get some rest, you may be here for some time” as we are left alone in a single occupant room like one that could be inhabited by someone caught up in the bureaucracy of seeking asylum in the UK. Mobile messenger documentary *A Temporary Contact* ends dually with text messages stating, “this journey is now complete” and “goodbye for now,” signaling that while this round of traveling to and from correctional facilities is over now (and over for users), it will happen again, every week, just like the previous week but with a mix of new and past riders. *Project Perfect Citizen*’s game interface exits users onto their own computer desktop, left to await further instructions from their state policing agency superiors, which could mean additional cases for users to investigate or could mean you are becoming the state’s next target. After having been judged and found wanting by speculative algorithm *Fairly Intelligent™*, users are left to re-“play the game” or find their own way into or around the system of mass surveillance. Many of the projects I have analyzed leave users with a feeling of un-resolve, stuck in a loop, in a room, or subject to a system from which extrication is too hard to show or reveal within the confines of a singular digital documentary or media experience, and with a sense that what users have experienced is recursive and on-going, even if their time with the project has seemed to end. Rather than suggesting that only digital documentaries can induce this feeling, I am instead suggesting that it is a meaningful one in relation to documentary media, in particular. By leaving users with a sense of unease or ongoing-ness, it might push users toward alleviating this feeling by pursuing more answers, ideas, information, and perspectives. This is some of the
implication of Paolo Favero’s (2013) suggestion that digital documentaries can afford the ability to push users to “immerse themselves in the ‘offline’” and “redirect our attention to the things ‘out there’” (273). By showing different strands of information and different ways to see, know, or experience our shared world, and creating a sense that digital documentaries cannot complete their social interventions without “you,” this could push users outwards toward other media, people, or aspects of life. This is not a given, but rather a possibility that sits alongside the possibility that users find Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You or Stealing Ur Feelings fun and interesting and do not wish to engage further with the realities of state or corporate surveillance.

Additionally, this sense of these projects and their subject matter being unresolved becomes a way for these projects to position themselves as if they too exist as extensions of other ways to know or experience something. By this, I mean that rather than being or trying to be the only sites of centralized meaning-making, these projects know their interventions are limited and, perhaps, limited to shifting an individual’s thinking. They make less meaning and less meaningful meanings as individual projects and work best in tandem with other projects, other voices, and other, larger interventions, including news reporting and other documentary media, reform and regulatory efforts, and activism. As much as these projects might want to suggest that users should see themselves in relation to the subjects and subject matter, as implicated within positionalities, gazes, and behaviors that further state or corporate surveillances, I see these projects also suggesting that they too exist in this field of relationality, even if not explicitly transmedia projects. This relationality can potentially overcome the isolated and individual ways that users can engage with these projects and move them from self-regulation to knowledge and community-building, though, this would also require more of an active effort from digital
documentary producers along with subjects and audiences to build and bolster these communities as they are not innate to the current modes of production or exhibition.
Introduction

1 The prison’s architecture resembles a star or wheel, with the guard’s tower in the center and inmate’s cell blocks radiating outwards; it was designed so that one could stand at this central point and see down the different hallways for maximum supervision of inmates. For an attempt to trace Eastern State Penitentiary’s design back to Bentham, see Steadman, Philip. 2007. “The Contradictions of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon Penitentiary.” Journal of Bentham Studies vol. 9, iss. 1, pp. 1–31. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2045-757X.030. Steadman, ultimately, suggests that one cannot determine whether Eastern State Penitentiary is based on Bentham’s designs or similar radial-style prisons in Ireland and England built during the same time period. This has not stopped the association between Eastern State’s prison architecture and the idea of the all-seeing, disciplinary panopticon.

2 Visit https://www.easternstate.org/explore/exhibits/prisons-today for more information about how this exhibit is described on Eastern State Penitentiary’s website.

3 Visit https://interactives.ap.org/2016/prisons-today/ to access this 3D interactive, developed by Nathan Griffiths in 2016.

4 Outside of visiting Eastern State, one can learn more about Pep’s story by visiting Eastern State’s website, https://www.easternstate.org/about-eastern-state/blog/pets-prison-pep-present. While on the website, users are a few clicks away from an online merchandise store which shows the wide array of Pep products one can buy from a plush to playing cards to a baby onesie. One can also see some (though not as much) Al Capone-related merchandise.

5 Digital documentaries, as with other digital media, are often seen as active because they are “interactive,” though many scholars have noted that this term is vague and almost meaningless broad. Espen J. Aarseth (1997) critiques that dubbing something “interactive” seems “to endorse it with a magical power” (48) and refers to its use as industrial rhetoric, something that José van Dijck also sees. Van Dijck (2013) notes that both interactivity and its associated word participatory have been used as buzzwords to describe “Web 2.0’s potential to ‘talk back’ and send messages instantly, whereas previous media has wielded power over their one-way publishing or broadcasting channels” (10). What van Dijck charts here is the change from optimism that Web 2.0 would foster creator connectivity (and, therefore, community) to the realization that corporations have found another vector of control through what she calls new modes of surveillance. Additionally, as Lev Manovich (2002) suggests, “there is the danger that we will interpret ‘interaction’ literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction” (57). In other words, when touting the idea of a more active “interactivity,” one often discounts that mental forms of engagement are not passive; reading a book or watching a movie are not passive from the framework of meaning-making, though they may be physically sedentary media experiences. Kate Nash has a variety of articles that work to define the type of interactivity one finds in digital documentaries, see Nash, Kate. 2014. “Clicking on the World: Documentary Representation and Interactivity.” In New Documentary
6 The NFB’s Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle started in 1967 as a two-year experiment and became successful enough to last until 1980. This was a program by both the English and French divisions of the NFB (or the ONF, the French program’s Office national du film du Canada) to send filmmakers and filmmaking tools out into communities in Canada and collaboratively create documentaries on subjects that spoke to those communities and their needs. For more on this history, see Evans, Gary. 1991. In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989. Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press; and, Waugh, Thomas, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton. 2010. Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada. Montreal and Kingston, Can.: McGill-Queen’s University Press. For a more digital documentary-specific conversation about the links to Third Cinema and the NFB’s projects, see Zimmermann and De Michiel (2018), whose open space new media documentary concept draws from these lineages.

7 Roger Clarke (1988) first defined dataveillance as “the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons.” The kind of “personal data” at play in this conceptualization is fairly broad. It can cover anything from one’s personal medical information stored digitally to the now much more common digital tracking of metadata based on one’s personal online communications or behaviors (for example, an operating system, location, date, et cetera).

8 See, for instance, Torin Monahan’s (2006) work on ways to tactically resist surveillance; Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman’s (2003) theorization and practical application of sousveillance; and Simone Browne’s (2015) theorization of dark sousveillance.

9 See POV Spark and the NFB’s co-produced Instagram reel series, Otherly, for an example of first-person digital documentaries. Otherly features a series of first-person Instagram reels by U.S. and Canadian women, nonbinary, and genderqueer creators on the topic of belonging. See POV Spark’s webpage dedicated to this project for more information, https://www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom/pov-spark-launches-new-series-otherly/ and one can find the project via the Instagram handle @otherlyseries. A sampling of other projects include AJ Contrast’s Still Here, a mixed VR project told from the perspective of a (fictional) woman trying to reintegrate back into her old neighborhood in New York City after incarceration or their new interactive project Inaccessible Cities (2022) which shows how inaccessible city infrastructure is from the perspective of three disabled women in New York City, Lagos, and Mumbai. For more information and access to the digital parts of each project, visit https://ajcontrast.com/still-here for Still Here and find Inaccessible Cities at https://ajcontrast.com/inaccessiblecities.

10 While the news media use “refugee” to cover a wide-variety of different groups, I’ve initially separated groups to denote that there are differences: refugee and asylum seeker are legal terms as defined by the United Nations. Displaced person has a looser, more vexed definition. I tend to agree with the UN’s designation of displaced person as the broader term, incorporating both those who are internally and externally displaced (like refugees). Not every project makes clear
the context with which their subjects are dealing and a work like Berliner Morgenpost’s covers a wide range of different groups, making it hard to prioritize one term or group in chapter one.

11 In Let’s Plays, someone records or livestreams themselves playing a videogame and often provides commentary and reflection on their game decisions. Let’s Plays recorded and released are often condensed and edited down to select the most interesting, important, or humorous parts of one’s own gameplay, whereas livestreamed Let’s Plays enable more interaction between the gamer/s and those watching.

Chapter One


“War and Conflict” is the third largest category of videos, comprising 81 out of about 603 catalogued titles in the collection. Videos are tagged by theme and this category also contains videos otherwise tagged as “migration” or “displacement” or those about specific places (“Sudan”) or conflicts (“Yemeni Civil War”). “Migration and Displacement” is a separate, also popular tagged “theme” in the Mediography; many videos overlap between these two popular tags. The video tag totals are accurate as of March 2023. It should be noted that the project is UK-based and only catalogues English-language VR projects. While it is not as comprehensive as one might like, it is a good resource for trends in the medium during its peak years, 2012-2018.

13 “Refugee” is a contested term. In their 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the United Nations defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (3). One can find the full text of 1951 Convention (and the updated 1967 protocol to remove initial geographic and temporal limitations on who could be defined as a refugee) on the UNHCR’s website, https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10. Refugee is a legal status meant to confer rights and secure aid to someone so defined (from the United Nations and its member countries), though the news and popular media use it more broadly, and in ways that can often stereotype large groups of people. Not all works discussed in this chapter fully differentiate between those fleeing violence, those seeking asylum to claim refugee status, or those who would be considered, by the UN, to be internally or externally displaced within their country of origin. Even the work discussed here, The Displaced, lumps together Hana, from Syria, who lives in a refugee camp in Lebanon, with Chuol, who fled to another part of South Sudan, with Oleg, whose family was displaced in Ukraine and have now returned to the ruins of their former city. I make an effort to specify when a work does focus on a particular group, like Limbo, which incorporates interviews with those seeking asylum status in the UK.

14 See note 12. There is no “refugee” tag or theme in the Mediography that I cite above, these videos are all placed under “Migration and Displacement.”

15 These figures are current as of the UNHCR’s 2021 Global Report. See the UNHCR’s “Figures at a Glance” webpage for more information and a link to the report, https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html.
I use Global North and Global South to denote a power differential and hierarchy between them, one that goes unchallenged by some of the creators of VR documentaries. I recognize the limitation of these terms as overly totalizing and do not intend to use them to indicate that those from the Global South cannot create products using VR or cannot engage with finished VR documentaries. Rather, within the timeframe of 360-degree VR’s popularity it was organizations and companies from the Global North devoting resources to their creation and, with VR documentaries on refugees, in particular, often allowing Global South voices in as “content” rather than co-collaborators.

Refugeeness is, generally, the quality of being a refugee. It is used variously to describe how people are labeled as refugees or ascribed common qualities of a refugee (under the assumption that refugees go through common experiences). It has also been a way to get around needing to label people fleeing from their “home” country something despite not having legal refugee status, see Jacobsen, Karen, and Charles Simpson. 2017-2020. “Defining Key Terms: Refugees. Literature Review: Refugee Urban Integration.” A Feinstein International Center Brief, Tufts University. https://www.refugeesintowns.org/literature-review.

This discussion has not been proven through research on user experiences with VR. One recent study by the Virtual Realities: Immersive Documentary Encounters project suggests that audiences are more impacted by the fact that something is a social or humanitarian documentary, rather than that it is delivered in a 3D or 2D medium (Farmer 2019).

While de la Peña and other news organizations (Al Jazeera, the BBC, The Guardian, and The New York Times being the largest) turned to VR technologies, Bogost et al. (2010) point to the creation of newsgames as another way in which print journalism has had to change and modify how it articulates the news in order to reach readers as players and participants.

Given Milk’s background in film and video production, this is likely a spin on Roger Ebert’s assertion in 2005 that “movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts”.

Steuer’s term is indebted to Marvin Minsky’s “telepresence.” Minsky wrote of the possibility to develop technologies so that one’s actions in one place could be performed remotely in another. To Minsky, this would be applicable for work that might be difficult due to complexity (like a surgeon working on small, hard-to-see regions of the human body) or risk (like the need to move radioactive or nuclear material). Steuer focuses less on the technologies at play and more on the feeling of being in a simulated or virtual environment when one’s body is in a physical, separate place. See Minsky, Marvin. 1980. “Telepresence.” OMNI Magazine, pp. 45-52.


With the exception of Al Jazeera, whose AJ Contrast released Inaccessible Cities in 2022 (see https://ajcontrast.com/inaccessiblecities), most of these organizations have stopped producing

24 See the SDG Action Campaign’s website for more on how they frame this desire to achieve Agenda 2030, https://www.sdgactioncampaign.org, and one can find the language for Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals on the SDG’s general website, https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

25 Chouliaraki is elaborating on media scholar Roger Silverstone (2007)’s concept of “proper distance.” His work on this has focused on the double problematic of the ethics of distance, where, on the one hand, what might seem strange or unfamiliar is often “pushed to a point beyond strangeness, beyond humanity” into dehumanizing otherness, while, on the other hand, it can also be “drawn so close as to become indistinguishable from ourselves” (172) such that difference is rejected and remains unseen. Silverstone has influenced media studies to develop an ethics of care with his idea of “proper distance,” though what is “proper” remains in dispute.

26 According to Firelight Media’s “mission” page on their website, they are “a premier destination for non-fiction cinema by and about communities of color. Firelight produces documentary films, supports emerging filmmakers of color, and cultivates audiences for their work.”

27 China, France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S. are all permanent members of the UN Security Council who have the power to veto any proposed resolution. All of these countries are involved in the fighting in Syria, excepting China, though China’s votes often support Russia in this war (Nichols 2019).

28 The success of NYT VR’s app launch was also aided by *The New York Times* sending free Google Cardboard headsets to subscribers prior to launch (Welsh 2015).

29 Both Fisher and Murray misidentify one (or both?) of the women we can see struggling to lift sacks closest to the camera as Chuol. Upon repeated viewings, it is clear that Chuol is not in the scene picking up sacks himself; the sack retrieval seems to be organized by groups of women (and a couple of men) who work together to lift a food sack so that one woman can get enough leverage to carry it off by herself.

30 In reporting from 2020, Al Jazeera correspondent Tanvir Chowdhury reports the same concerns coming from Rohingya still displaced in Kutupalong refugee camp. The United
Nations, additionally, has recently restated that Myanmar needs to assure Rohingya basic human rights, including religious recognition and a pathway to citizenship.

31 See Mediendienst Integration’s webpage on “Zahl der Flüchtlinge” for a variety of graphs and datapoints related to the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people in Germany, what countries they are feeling from, and so on.

32 See the UNHCR’s webpage on Germany for more information on how this agency works in and with Germany, https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/germany.html.

33 Here, I quote from BAMF’s website on Integrationskurse, https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/Integration/ZugewanderteTeilnehmende/Integrationskurse/integrationskurse-node.html. The original language is, “Wenn Sie in Deutschland leben möchten, sollten Sie Deutsch lernen […] Außerdem sollten Sie einige Dinge über Deutschland wissen, zum Beispiel über Geschichte, die Kultur und die Rechtsordnung.”

34 Users can also faintly see these words in German (“mit Vergnügen” and “Gern”) and Arabic in the background of both the 360-degree photographs and the video.

35 This project does not engage with Germany’s “guest worker” program and history, where the government encouraged immigration from Turkey in the 1960s and 70s, only to treat subsequent generations of Turkish-Germans as perpetual foreigners, unable to become “German” due to racial and religious difference. That Germany as a country has not had success accepting Muslims and Arabs into ideas of who is German is a major part of this history (Foroutan 2013), a history and reality that is not brought into this project.

36 The original German is, “Nur manche Nachbarn sind ein bisschen Nazi.” The translation is my own.

37 This newspaper started out as The Manchester Guardian but would drop the location-specific part of their moniker and move their publishing headquarters to London starting in 1959, as historian David Ayerst suggests, because most of their readership was located outside of Manchester. See Ayerst’s exhaustive history of this newspaper, which ends around the time of the name change, for more on how it started and how its editors shaped the content of the newspaper: Ayerst, David. 1971. The Manchester Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

38 See https://www.theguardian.com/about.

39 In my personal experience of teaching this work to undergraduate university students, they often initially think it is an animated work.

40 See the “About” page of ScanLAB’s website, https://scanlabprojects.co.uk/about/.

41 The asylum seekers are all men. None of them are named during the video or in the credits.

Chapter Two
For “linear” or analog documentaries making similar arguments, see, for example, Brett Story’s *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (2016) or Garrett Bradley’s *Time* (2020), video documentaries that investigate how mass incarceration as a system has marked present and historical spaces and impacts friends and family of someone who is incarcerated, respectively.

Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) argues that the us/them rhetoric that becomes part of U.S. social discourse ends up aiding in making invisible the history of and current realities of racialized state power. Foundational to U.S. law, as Cacho notes, is the permanent criminalization of people of color which can be reified at the social level through this discourse: “When we distinguish ourselves from unlawful and outlawed status categories,” Cacho states, “we implicitly insist that these socio-legal categories are not only necessary but should be reserved and preserved for the ‘genuinely’ lazy (welfare recipients), ‘undoubtedly’ immoral (marrying for citizenship), and ‘truly’ dangerous (gang violence)” (18).

There is a variety of emerging scholarship in this area, but, for further information, one could see chapters on co-creation in *I-Docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary*, edited by Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose (2017); *Alphaville* 15 (2018); and Zimmermann and De Michiel (2018), discussed later in this chapter.

The first use of “prison-industrial complex” is usually credited either to a 1995 article by Mike Davis published in *The Nation* or to Eric Schlosser’s 1998 article in *The Atlantic*.

For more on how Blackness is specifically constructed as deviant and lawbreaking, see Davis 1997, Muhammad 2019. Lisa Marie Cacho’s (2012) further links racialized criminalization and illegalization to “social death,” and the construction of specific groups as non-persons for political purposes.

The html version of this website (http://www.360degrees.org) is still accessible, though some of the features are inoperable, including the forum in the Dialogue section and some of the quizzes in the Dynamic Data section.

This has long been a concern of ethics in documentary studies. Bill Nichols (2010) notes these types of works form a large part of documentaries past and present in his *Introduction to Documentary*. Nichols categorizes these types of works in a triangular relationship of “I speak about them to you” (59), giving the main position of agency to the documentarian and noting the points of separation between both subjects and audience. Brian Winston (1988) as well speaks to this point about subjects becoming “the media’s ‘victim’” (764) when documentarians don’t take the consent of their subjects seriously. Similar to Juhasz, Jill Godmilow (1999) links many of these types of depictions to a tradition of liberalism in documentary that ends up working to make middle class viewers comfortable by comparison to unfortunate “others” on-screen. For more information, see Nichols, Bill. 2010. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2nd ed. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Winston, Brian. 1988. “The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary.” In *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, edited by Jonathan Kahana, pp. 763-775. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Godmilow, Jill. 1999. “What’s Wrong with the Liberal Documentary.” *Peace Review* 4, iss. 1, pp. 91-98.
About 50% of what the NFB’s English program currently produces is linear documentaries, 20-25% are what they call “emergent forms of interactive and immersive documentary and animation storytelling” according to their webpage (production.nfbonf.ca/en/program/english-program/). The ONF’s French program tends to produce more documentaries and fewer “immersive” works, with 75% of their productions being documentaries and 5% digital interactive works, according to their webpage (production.nfbonf.ca/en/program/french-program/).

According to their own statistics at arte.tv/sites/corporate/en, about 40% of their output is original documentaries. It is not clear whether this 40% contains their digital documentaries and games.

A Temporary Contact follows in the footsteps of an earlier documentary directed by Nirit Peled about female rappers, Say My Name (2009), which touches on a similar point about the spread of carceral spaces into communities. One of Peled’s interview subjects, Sparky D, explains how she formed a group of young women rappers in New York City in the 1980s and as she’s talking she waves her hand towards the apartment complexes in the neighborhood and says, “if you look around on the windows, you see the bars, you know, like they’re just locked in” followed by cuts to shots of bars on windows and images of broken windows (visually recalling the widely discredited “broken windows” theory of policing which would start to impact NYC in the 1990s).

A recent example of this is the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where Facebook leaked data of millions of users to political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica who might have used the data to influence politics globally including Donald Trump’s 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and the UK’s 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (Confessore 2018).


The book is written by Dufresne in French and incorporates Brault’s photography. The writing mimics the tone of the narration and text in the webdocumentary and the book’s design incorporates the font, color scheme and spatial segmentation (with boxes and bars) that we can see throughout the digital interfaces of the work. See Brault, Philippe, and David Dufresne. 2010. Prison Valley. Paris: Democratic Books. The phone application is no longer available.

This is likely a reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 film Rear Window and the concept of watching one’s neighbors from a slight distance.

Canon City is not a popular or well-known work, by any means. It has received very little scholarly attention. To find more information about how it has been loosely grouped as film noir, see Keaney, Michael F. 2003 Film Noir Guide: 745 Films of the Classic Era, 1940-1959.

57 See the bonus material “Cañon City: filmed with the naked fury of fact!” in the clues section of the webdocumentary.

58 I say “traces” due to the amount of time that has passed, some of the comment pages outside of the Prison Valley forums being entirely lost (like the Denver Post’s Neighbors comment section), and the discussion on the forums themselves about comments being deleted or edited. Multiple users, including JessiDay who created the thread “Are you censoring comments?” to address this, stated that their comments were deleted. User Spone, who is identified as a member of the Prison Valley Team, responded to JessiDay’s concerns by denying that comments are being censored, stating that “some of them may have been moved to the most relevant forums/discussions” and that “only some duplicate, defamatory, or insulting messages have been moderated,” with no indication what “moderated” means in this context. From this, I understand that the complete record of comments and forum engagement is no longer accessible on the forums themselves. Additionally, this project was also designed to co-occur on Facebook and Twitter, where users could log-in and have their progress displayed on social media, and there was a no-longer-existent iPhone application. If any further discussion or engagement with the project did take place on social media or the iPhone application, it is not publicly available and/or lost. There are also separate discussion forums in French and German and I will be focusing only on the English-language forums, as this is where most of the engagement is and where Fremont County residents responded to the webdocumentary.

59 I have made every effort to copy exactly the language used in the forum posts, so, necessarily, there might be spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors that are important to preserve.

60 I have purposefully omitted this user’s name. While many users in the forum choose a fictional handle or pseudonym to post under, some users appear to use a name close enough to a first and last name one could use offline that I have decided to protect their anonymity by not including it here.

61 See note 60.

62 See note 59.

63 See note 60.

Chapter Three

64 Washington Post journalist Barton Gellman was also in contact with Snowden, he is not in the documentary.

65 Magic circle is a term that originates from Johan Huizinga’s work on play in Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (1938) to refer to the specific area of play in which one undertakes a game and to demarcate gameplay from the real world.
Social games are often free-to-play games that are downloadable as standalone applications or playable on platforms like Facebook which utilize microtransactions, in-game advertising, and track players for commercial purposes.

The U.S. Congress voted to continue some of these same programs in 2018. As far as my research indicates, the NSA has continued unhindered in their surveillance operations.

For more on the coming together of games, documentary, and historical nonfiction, see Fullerton, Tracy. 2008. “Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History.” In Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games, edited by Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, pp. 215-238. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. In this article, Fullerton uses the moniker “documentary games” (or docu-games) to note that there is an emerging genre of games where designers want to simulate historical events in their gameplay. Because the games that I look at are fictional and simulate a type of surveillance and the experience of being in a certain power position (rather than simulating the history of say, Edward Snowden’s career at Booz Allen Hamilton or replicating specific historical events into the gameplay), I do not adopt this same terminology.

Zach Waggoner (2009) makes the argument to update Gee’s terminology from “real-world” to “non-virtual” in recognition that many game identities are “real” to players. In my view, this swaps one potentially problematic term for another, especially as many non-gameplay identities are virtual (on social media websites, for instance) but have a profound impact on one’s offline life and identity. I understand Gee’s use of “real-world” as a shorthand for a much clunkier phrasing like “out-of-game” rather than to suggest he thinks game identities or virtual identities are not “real.”

Kromand’s model for avatar categorization allows one to situate game avatars along spectrums from open to closed and central to acentral. Closed avatars are ones with pre-set characterization and skills that often cannot be changed through player interaction, whereas open avatars are more open to player inputs. The central to acentral spectrum involves the player’s ability to control what an avatar does in the game, where more centrally controlled avatars are ones where the player and their own skills are more determinant to the outcomes of the game. Acentrally controlled avatars have more strongly inputted movements, abilities, or skills (such that player skill does not determine their outcomes). Kromand further theorizes that more centrally controlled avatars are easier for players to identify with emotionally (where the logic is that the more control you have over the avatar, the more you might come to identify with or project yourself onto, using Gee’s framework, the avatar).

There are many terms for these types of games or this kind of play, as Lindsay Grace (2020) lists: “persuasive play, exergaming, edutainment, serious games, serious play, gamification, docugames, purposeful game, meaningful play, social impact games, and more” (31). This is in addition to Games for Change, which is both a nonprofit organization founded in 2004 to promote games of this type and also a term used for these types of games. Usually, it is uncapitalized when functioning as a broad category of games.
There are two ways that players can receive this communication. Players will either receive it through submitting no evidence for the first case or at the end of the second case, where players might find evidence of some crime but not enough to convict the state’s initial target.

This game includes a variety of direct and indirect references to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), including references in the chapter titles, like “The Clocks Were Striking Thirteen,” and naming the main political party, The Party. Players do seem to be looking for “thoughtcrimes” in their surveillance work on behalf of The Nation, and this country is always at threat of war with neighboring countries, which is perhaps a reference to the perpetual war in Orwell’s novel, but, in my reading, is more a reference to the expansive and never-ending nature of the “War on Terror.” There is likely more to make of the use of these references, but I will leave it up to another work to explore the game’s relation to the novel more fully.

Originally this game was just titled *Orwell*, but with the release of the second chapter, *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength*, Osmotic Studios added the subtitle.

The game no longer emails players updates, but one can see vestiges of this in Let’s Plays from the original release period. See, for example, the original release login steps starting around the two-minute mark in the first part of ChristopherOdd’s Let’s Play (“Episode 1” 2016).

Materwelonz’s comments are transcribed from her YouTube videos by me. I made an effort to form her comments into rough sentences and impose a structure on what are more free-flowing thoughts, some of which might not follow prescriptive English grammar rules. Any egregious errors in grammar or punctuation are a result of my own imposed structure.

Reviewers have pointed to the seemingly limited feature of the pre-planned “datachunks”—players cannot choose what to upload rather they choose to upload or not upload specific blue, yellow, or gold highlighted phrases or sentences from the documents they read through. Melanie Taylor explains in an interview that Orwell operates through a keyword search system (Böke 2016), which is why only certain information can be uploaded into the system.

See note 76.

See Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press, for instance, where Browne convincingly argues that the slave ship should sit alongside the panopticon as one of the founding schemas of surveillance.

**Chapter Four**

Algorithmic surveillance as a term will be explained and defined in the following section. Broadly, an algorithm is a set of instructions and the basis for computer executions. Artificial intelligence, another key term in this chapter, are algorithms or technologies that mimic human intelligence, some of which can “learn” and adapt through continued use or engagement (this is often called “machine learning”).
It should be noted that roughly 40% of the world’s population does not regularly use the internet at home or on a mobile phone (Ovide 2022) and these projects are geared towards an audience that uses computers, laptops, and smartphones on an everyday basis.

Alphonse Bertillon was a French policeman known for creating methods for police to track and identify “criminals” through his invention of the mug shot as well as written anthropometric details. Francis Galton was an English eugenicist widely known for his creation of composite portraits of “criminal types” where he sought to visualize what crime and deviance looked like. As Allan Sekula states in his essay “The Body and the Archive,” their 1880s projects show “positivist attempts to define and regulate social deviance” using both photography and statistics (19). For Sekula these “repressive” uses of photography to create the “criminal” are complementary to the “honorific” uses of photography to create the idea of the “law-abiding” bourgeoisie. For more, see Sekula, Allan. 1986. “The Body and the Archive.” October vol. 39, pp. 3-64.

Algorithm is an at times overused and vague term. As Tarleton Gillespie (2016) notes in working through its definition, at base, an algorithm is programmable steps to achieve a certain outcome or goal, though how the term is invoked varies across different disciplines and contexts. I tend to follow how Gillespie discusses the use of “algorithmic” which often designates a concern about how algorithms can “introduce and privilege quantification, proceduralization, and automation in human endeavors.” In other words, many of the projects within this chapter are asking or revealing how the algorithms underlying websites, applications, and other digital platforms turn our human behaviors and actions into a new kind of “digital double” identity.

Mozilla ended support for the Lightbeam browser extension in 2019, though the code is still available on their website (Joni et al. n.d.).

See https://atozofai.withgoogle.com/.

See “About the ODI” on their website (https://theodi.org/about-the-odi/) for more information on the Open Data Institute, their goals, and the actions they are taking to achieve their “mission.”


Similar to my analysis of the NFB’s intended audience in chapter two, this work is geared towards a Global North audience. It includes creative input from organizations and people across Canada, France, and Germany, with the ability to localize aspects of the work in English, French, French-Canadian, and German.

Currently, new users can no longer login to their own Facebook page in episode 3 of this project. This is something that they had to get permission from Facebook to implement and it is likely that the permissions were either removed or platform updates over the past seven years have rendered this aspect of personalization incompatible with Do Not Track’s existent interface. If one linked a Facebook account in the past, however, some of the data gleaned from one’s profile is still viewable under the “Your Data” tab.
For more information on Apply Magic Sauce, see their “About Us” page on their website (https://applymagicsauce.com/about-us). This is a non-profit project created by the University of Cambridge Psychometrics Centre which has similar goals as many of these projects on algorithmic surveillance: to clarify the reach and spread of one’s data online and to show it to those who want to see what companies might “know” about them.

See voyager-labs.com for more information about this company. This wording is from their “Law Enforcement” page.

These specific data are from users who initially engaged with the project at the time of its release between April 14th and June 15th in 2015. This episode will also re-present what it knows about the user so far from previous episodes engaged with and ask the user to answer further questions to assess which possible future they will end up in.

There is also a browser-based mini version of Alfred Premium, the English website is https://ca.alfredpremium.com and it is also available in French and German. The browser version has different response variations, is shorter, and eventually directs users to the full project on Facebook Messenger.


*A Charge for Privacy* (2011) is an interactive gallery installation collaboratively created by Branger_Briz for Art Basel and part of other exhibitions in the U.S. and UK. In the exhibition for Miami Art Basel, Branger_Briz took advantage of eager gallery attendees who might need to charge their phones by placing their own phone charging booths around the gallery. Charging one’s phone comes at a cost, however, one laid out in the terms of service (TOS) agreement that is carefully etched into glass around the booth: in order to charge your phone, you need to “grant” Branger_Briz the exclusive ownership and display rights to the images stored on your phone. Once an attendee accepts, the images stored on their phone are projected elsewhere in the gallery to become part of a distorted, graffiti-like display of different attendee’s images. Co-creator Ramon Branger suggests they looked to Facebook’s TOS for inspiration in a video on the project that Branger_Briz posted to Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/34575655. See https://brangerbriz.com/portfolio/charge-for-privacy for more on *A Charge for Privacy*.

To find this “What We Can Do” page, visit https://howthey.watch/us/index.html.

The onscreen text in this project is rarely capitalized, which I replicate in my direct quotations.

“Spark joy” is a reference to minimalist home organizer Marie Kondo, who, in her Netflix TV show *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, advises clients to consider whether an object “sparks joy” and if it does not, one should thank the object for the benefits it has provided and discard it.
“For everyone” seems to be a key talking point for the ODI, as it appears on their website, https://www.theodi.org/about-the-odi/, as well as in other publications addressing their work and goals, see Freeman and Hawes 2019, for instance.
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Syracuse University

Independently taught and designed courses

- Race and Literary Texts (Spring 2023)
- Gender and Literary Texts (Summer 2019, Fall 2022)
- Reading Popular Culture (Spring 2016, 2022)
- Interpretation of Film (Fall 2017 & Spring 2021)
- Interpretation of Nonfiction (Fall 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021)
- Ethnicity and Literary Texts (Spring 2018, 2019, 2020)

TA’d courses

- TA for Professor Antonio Tiongson’s Reading Popular Culture (Fall 2021)
- TA for Professor Will Scheibel’s Interpretation of Film (Fall 2016)
- TA for Professor Will Scheibel’s Reading Popular Culture (Spring 2016)
- TA for Professor Roger Hallas’s Interpretation of Film (Fall 2015)

Guest lectures


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Independently taught and designed courses

- English 101: Writing and Critical Inquiry (Fall, Winter, and Spring 2012-2014)

SERVICE & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

English Graduate Organization Webmaster, Fall 2019-2022.
Co-created Theory Reading Group (with Professor Chris Forster, Professor Chris Eng and Wil Marple), Fall 2018-2020.
Graduate Committee Representative for English Graduate Organization, Fall 2018-Spring 2019.
Future Professoriate Program, Fall 2017-Spring 2019. 
Agenda Committee Representative for English Graduate Organization, Fall 2017-Spring 2018.
WWU Scholar’s Week English 101 panel submissions reader, Spring 2014.
Children’s Literature Conference volunteer, WWU, March 1, 2014. Helped to design and execute promotional library display.
The Bellingham Review general submissions reader, Fall & Winter 2012-2014.

GRANTS & SCHOLARSHIPS

English Department Summer Dissertation Fellowship, Syracuse University 2021
College of Arts & Sciences Summer Fellowship, Syracuse University 2017 & 2021
Ross Travel Grant, Western Washington University 2013
Beth Malmo Scholarship, University of Washington 2009
Amy Work Memorial Scholarship, University of Washington 2009
David Jackson Scholarship, University of Washington 2008
University Scholarship, University of Washington 2005-2007

AWARDS

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CERTIFICATIONS

Certificate of Professional Development for “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access,” Syracuse University 2022

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