Excerpt from the essay :

Ethics and Aesthetics of (Digital) Space: Institutions, Borders, and Transnational Frameworks of Digital Creative Practice in Ireland.

By Anne Karhio

 "*The Weight of Water* focuses on the human destinies tied to cross-border migration. It is "an interactive virtual reality installation which appropriates gaming technology to explore the current refugee crisis" (Hoey, website n. pag.). The artist describes how "[t]he work places the viewer in a central role, as both performer and witness in this 360° immersive narrative. Words and sound create an abstract visual landscape as the viewer navigates a difficult boat journey made by refugees as Europe begins to close its borders to those seeking asylum" (Hoey, website n. pag.; see Figure 2). In interviews, Hoey has underlined the importance of her choice of an immersive VR platform for the project: in a virtual reality environment, it is impossible to "avert your gaze" from the uncomfortable encounters and the unfolding events (Hoey, "Conversation" n. pag.; Hoey, Interview France24 n. pag.). Rather than empathy through the replication of first-person visual perspective, where VR's particular potential has occasionally been seen, Hoey's own words underline immersive virtual environment's potential for uncomfortable proximity, close witnessing, and invitation for solidarity.

Ireland's role in the 21st century refugee crisis is tied to its transnational reach, but also manifests itself through specific local phenomena. Due to its geographical location and sea borders, the island of Ireland has received a very small number of refugees when compared to many countries in continental Europe. Hoey stresses how Ireland has largely assumed the position of observing the refugee crisis from a distance, at a remove from the actual locations of these human tragedies:

We in Ireland were quite removed from this crisis, both in taking refugees but also in our own experience of it, so a lot of our content was coming across the news, and I wanted to somehow collapse that distance, and allow the person to become [...] completely immersed in a world that was quite scary, quite frightening. (Hoey, Interview France24 n. pag.).

In the case of *The Weight of Water*, Hoey stresses her unease with the idea of an artist, an outsider, seeking to accurately *represent* the refugee experience, or the cultural experience of those fleeing Syria, for example. This is reflected in how *The Weight of Water*, as well as *Animated Positions* , is focused on specific themes and phenomena, but stops short of purporting to explain or intimately *know* any particular cultural experience, or point of view. Instead, in *The Weight of Water* Hoey adopts an aesthetics that aims at "collapsing [the] distance" between news media reports and stories of refugees making
the perilous sea journey to Europe, and the visual environment of those putting their lives at risk in the attempt.

A sense of apprehension when it comes to the contradictions between media reports and their aesthetic representations of the refugee crisis, and the embodied situations in which refugees find themselves, has also informed a number of other works of electronic literature. In "Migrating Stories: Moving across the Code/Spaces of our Time", Anna Nacher considers how transmedia practices have been harnessed to tackle migrant experiences to "[bridge] ontologically different realms" (Nacher n. pag.). But where Nacher's discussion focuses on the use of data and data visualization in relation to narratives emerging in networked space, *The Weight of Water* invites a close encounter with destinies of the refugees in an imaginary, virtual space, less as storytelling than as an implied presence. A female voice, speaking in accented English, addresses an undefined "you": "You prepared to join us in the shadows, but you didn't. Perhaps something in our silence stopped you. Or perhaps, something in our shadows. As if the bodies that had cast them had already vanished" (Hoey, "Weight of Water" n. pag.). In the virtual space of Hoey's work, however, bodies are visible, and too close to ignore. For the viewer, the experience highlights the failure of many Western citizens to see or acknowledge the darkness of the journey from which many will not re-emerge. The addressing of the second person "you" in an interactive game environment thus invites participation and interactivity through choice, but also raises questions regarding culpability. Such a second-person perspective is also adopted in the "playable story" *Salt Immortal Sea* by Joseph Ken, Mark Marino and John Murray, which "places the interactor in the position of the refugee" (Ken, Marino et al. n. pag.). Unlike Hoey's work that plays on verisimilitude, the imagery in *Salt Immortal Sea* is highly stylized, and the characters are presented as figures modeled after those in ancient Greek art: as black silhouettes against a bright colored background, pointing towards the mythical narrative of the *Odyssey* that underpins the narrative. Through their chosen aesthetics, these two works thus make very different kinds of appeals to their addressee: where *Salt Immortal Sea* presents a somewhat disturbing contrast between the playful game narrative and its real-world referent, Hoey places her viewer awkwardly close to the human figures sharing the narrative virtual environment.

In human rights discourse, much discussion has concerned the question of empathy, and human rights organizations have sought to harness the potential of computer games and their interactive structures to move away from "[t]he passive contemplation of the image of the starving African child" to "the possibility to create, move, and direct her avatar, to 'experience' what she experiences", as Sophie Oliver writes (Oliver 94). Whether such approaches can indeed evoke empathy has been questioned, however, and associating "games" and "play" with the very real, embodied experiences of the victims of human rights violations can also be deemed highly problematic. As Oliver argues, "the virtual world of social interactivism is a utopia plagued by moral ambivalence, with the appropriateness of quite literally playing at mass human suffering seen as fundamentally suspect" (94).

But Hoey is less concerned with the replication of another's experience, than with the possibilities of perspective and immersive virtual space, and the manner in which they force the viewer to discard the comfort of observation from a distance. Like many digital authors and artists, she demonstrates an acute awareness of the importance, and the ethical dimensions, of the relationship between the reader/viewer/listener/player, and the unfolding narrative. For

Hoey, the immersive virtual environment does not make us feel the other's pain as our own, but instead denies the possibility of withdrawing to a distance that allows for detachment. This is the situation with "flat screen" or flat page view of conflicts and human rights violations, which can place reporting on the victims of conflicts and disasters between items focusing on entertainment or economy, or even advertisements. As an example, Hoey mentions an illustration included in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), where a page of *The Sunday Times* presents a picture of refugees from Bangladesh above an image, of the same size, of a woman in a bath towel gazing at a man outside her window, advertising bath soap (see Berger 152). If, in "transnational environments [...] physical and bodily location simultaneously matters and does not matter", as Hudson and Zimmerman observe (10), the transnational aesthetic of gaming environments can be harnessed to address this ambiguity, and to ask audiences consider their own situated responses to geographically distant events".

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The full essay can be found here :

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