Soenke Zehle

Border Games: Migrant Media Changes Terrain

Border Games is a project by the Spanish network of media activists Fiambrera Obrera (FO) that directly involves migrants in game development to educate and encourage self-organization.[1] According to FO,

> *Border Games* has been conceived as a working space that is made available to young maghrebis from the Madrilenian suburb of Lavapiés. The main aim of the project is the creation of a tool, in videogame format, that will allow these young people to develop an expressive and organisational autonomy with which to represent themselves and their situation within their community, in an environment where their cultural traditions can be combined with the urban context in which they are currently living. *Border Games* will also function as an instrument of political, social and cultural coordination and communication, in order to generate a sense of community and to share useful information through the game.[2]

The game is developed in workshops in which FO activists assist young migrants in documenting their experiences and translating their stories into game narratives, featuring everyday situations around questions of legal documents, employment, and housing encountered by migrants in their own neighborhood.

Created to encourage passage "from subalternity to autonomy" (FO), *Border Games* links the idea of digital play to practices of self-organization and the (cultural) transformation of citizenship. The game not only draws attention to abstract juridico-political categories of exclusion and inclusion, but takes seriously the everyday encounters involved in contesting and negotiating the limits of citizenship. The encounter with Spanish police officers demanding the papers of the (migrant) player, one of the first such

---

[1] <www.sindominio.net/fiambrera>, the game is available for download at <http://www.bordergames.org>.

[2] <http://blog.sindominio.net/blog/bordergames>. FO has also taken the game from Madrid to other cities across Europe, a Berlin version of the game is available at <http://bordergames.de>.

encounters that occur in the course of playing the game, illustrates that the experience of citizenship is not only defined once and for all in an abstract, juridico-political sense, but is made and remade in the course of everyday 'acts of citizenship'.[3] Other encounters with workers and older members of the immigrant community suggest that the regulation of the limits of citizenship is distributed across a range of actors below and beyond the state. For FO, *Border Games* is not just a matter of playing by the rules of the game: it is about engaging the rules that define the current cultural, economic, and social position of migrants in societies that rarely, if ever, think of migration in terms of play.

Commenting on the conceptual elaboration of possible definitions of 'cultural' citizenship, Nick Couldry has cautioned that "instead of assuming that we know what 'cultural citizenship' involves, we should investigate more closely the uncertainties about what constitutes the 'culture' (or cultures) of citizenship", and ask "[w]hat is at stake in the term 'culture' when applied to citizenship" (Couldry 2006: 321). To simply invoke 'cultural' citizenship might leave the (liberal) notion of citizenship unchallenged, as if the cultural were simply a new attribute of a citizenship that remains defined by the (liberal) assumptions of autonomy, rationality, and self-sufficiency.

In her own definition of these stakes, Aihwa Ong has approached cultural citizenship as "a process of self-making and being-made in relation to nation-states and transnational processes" (Ong 1996: 737). She notes that in conceptual accounts of citizenship, "[s]eldom is attention focused on the everyday processes whereby people, especially immigrants, are made into subjects of a particular nation-state" (Ong 1996: 737). To limit cultural citizenship to the demand for full citizenship status regardless of cultural difference (a right to be different), Ong insists, suggests that "immigrant or minority groups can escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging" (Ong 1996: 738). She contends that they cannot, and approaches citizenship as "the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often

---

3   I borrow the notion of constitutive 'acts of citizenship' from the Citizenship Studies Media Lab ("The phrase 'acts of citizenship' [...] concerns the performance, enactment, making and unmaking of citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens", <http://csml.calumet.yorku.ca>), as well as Lowe 1996.

ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria for belonging within a national population and territory", including civil institutions and social groups as well as the state in the range of "disciplinary forces involved in the making of cultural citizens" (Ong 1996: 738). Attentiveness to the cultural dimension of citizenship is also called for in response to *shifting* constructions of exclusion. Ong insists that it is her "focus on subject-making and self-making that gives primacy to human agency in manipulating different categories, mechanisms, and norms of belonging" (Ong 1996: 759), and cultural citizenship is the (flexible) outcome of an ongoing contestation and negotiation between subjects and these forces.

The notion of cultural citizenship acknowledges that citizenship involves not only the formal dimension of juridico-political status, but should also be understood as a process of mediation, including ongoing social contestation, and relates to the collaborative logic invoked by games theorists, especially those attentive to the distinctiveness of 'serious' games.[4] Digital games offer media activists new ways to experiment with alternative forms of agency and modalities of cooperation.[5] And with the rise of a 'serious

---

4 "'Mediation' is a name that we might give to the processes by which a given social dispensation produces and reproduces itself in and through a particular set of media. Because of the structural ambiguity of media, the work of mediation is always potentially volatile. An obvious way of being in the world depends on certain everyday practices of mediation that can, with a slight shift of perspective, begin to appear arbitrary or externally imposed. [...] Accounts and analyses often imply that media are something that happen to or are imposed on already-constituted local worlds. The local, in this view, is composed of a certain set of cultural values and practices to which media must then adapt, in order to find an audience. The media are then commonly understood to 'impact' the local world in a number of beneficial and/or deleterious ways. But rarely is it acknowledged that mediation, and its attendant cultural politics, necessarily precedes the arrival of what we commonly recognize as 'media': that, in fact, local worlds are necessarily already the outcome of more or less stable, more or less local, social technologies of mediation" (Mazzarella 2004: 346, 353).

5 The notion of a "game gaze" suggested by Barry Atkins, for example, is closer to activist, even interventionist concepts of cultural agency than the (passive) viewership associated with other forms of visual media. Atkins writes: "Video games prioritize the participation of the player as he or she plays, and that player always apprehends the game as a matrix of future possibility. The focus, always, is not on what is before the player or the 'what happens next' of traditionally unfolding

games movement', digital games are moving beyond the realm of enter-
tainment to contribute to debates over the role the logic of mediation –
rather than the logic of representation – might come to play in redefining
the borders of citizenship. *Border Games*, too, is a 'serious' game insofar
as the element of entertainment is as important as the use of the game as a
platform to engage everyday experiences, tell stories, and rediscover (indi-
vidual and collective) cultural and political agency.[6]

For the game theorist Gonzalo Frasca, serious games foster critical
reflection and, ultimately, self-organization, among "spect-actors", i. e.
players that are both creators and users.[7] Admittedly, Frasca's notion of the
spect-actor is not unique to digital gaming but resonates with contemporary
network-cultural concepts like the "produser" (user-generation of content
and, increasingly, peer-to-peer infrastructures), "hacktivism" (tech-savvy
media activism), and "commons-based peer production" (collaborative
contributions to a public domain of culture and knowledge), but also offers
a way to reconnect visual culture back to the "relational aesthetic" of per-
formance and political theater.[8] But the concept is nevertheless useful in
relating efforts such as *Border Games* to a broader shift, evident both in the
practice of users as well as corresponding analytical approaches to visual
culture, from the representational (advocacy, exposure, counter-informa-
tion) to the constitutive (identity, self-organization) aspects of media.[9]

---

narrative but on the 'what happens next if I' that places the player at the center of
experience as its principle creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and
always orientated toward the future" (Atkins 2006: 127).

[6] Several networks have been organized to connect the serious games community,
including industry/trade associations that indicate the growing commercial signifi-
cance of serious games, and expand what was originally a US-based idiom, see
<http://www.seriousgames.org>.

[7] Frasca adopts this term from Augusto Boal and his drama-oriented approaches to
radical popular education. See Frasca 2001.

[8] In some of its action-research workshops with migrants, FO refers to this perspec-
tive. For a discussion of relational aesthetics, a term reintroduced by the French
curator Nicolas Bourriaud, see Bishop 2004.

[9] For an early conceptual account of this shift, see Lazzarato 2003. For Lazzarato,
the massive protests at the 1999 Seattle meting of the WTO amounted to an event
that illustrated the extent to which 'media' and its creative usage by a multiplicity
of collective actors pointed beyond the idiom of representation.

Frasca's colleague and collaborator Ian Bogost, who prefers the term 'persuasive games', has approached serious games as a new form of 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost 2006a). Borrowing the notion of 'procedural authorship' from Janet Murray and her reflections on interactive drama, Bogost reaffirms her sense that authorship "means writing the rules by which the text appears as well as writing the text themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions" (op cit Bogost 2006a). While *Border Games* could also be understood as a documentary game, emphasizing the role of 'virtual' environments in offering an alternative visual account of the everday situation of migrants in Lava-piés, Bogost insists that "[w]hile the subject matter [of documentary games] itself is comparable to documentaries and news broadcasts, to understand what the games are saying about these historical events we need to ask how the player interacts with the rules to create patterns of meaning".[10] Games are 'procedurally expressive' when they are designed to "invite the player to participate in their representation", embodying (social) commentary in their rules rather than their content alone.[11] Involving migrants in the documentation of their urban environment to develop a game around the challenges that structure the migrant experience, *Border Games* does offer an example of procedural expressiveness, perhaps in its most basic sense – the game facilitates the self-representation of those involved, both in the semiotic and the political senses of representation.

Bogost proposes procedural rhetoric as a new way of approaching the ancient task of political persuasion by structuring the way players approach any one issue from within the broader horizon of the (cultural, economic, social) institutions that frame it. The complexity of establishing such a horizon is a tall order in terms of designing a game, and it is perhaps no accident that many serious games do not yet live up to such a comprehen-

---

[10] Bogost invokes Tracy Fullerton's work only to insist on the need to engage the *procedurality* of serious games, yet Fullerton, especially the way the increasing use of forensic simulations (visualizations based on high-definition laser scans of scenes of crime) in court may change the notion of 'evidence', does address the question of how 'the rules of the game' are made and remade. See Fullerton 2005.

[11] As Bogost has noted elsewhere, such a broad definition of procedural expression is not limited to digital games. See Bogost 2006b.

sive combination of education and empowerment but indeed remain, by and large, within a 'documentary' framework in the simple sense of documenting a situation that calls for political attention.[12] Yet procedural expression is not as far from (alternative) documentarist strategies as Bogost might have it; the history of documentarism (across a wide array of media) is replete with examples that do not seek to reproduce a historical 'real' but approach the very constructedness of such a (social) reality and facilitate new modalities of cooperation, an explicit aim of *Border Games* as well. *Border Games* can therefore be understood not only in terms of a documentary game, but in relationship to the broader notion of an antagonistic realism that involves both media interventions and alternative modalities of political organization.[13]

Increasingly, audiences weary of crisis coverage, including accounts of migration, experience a 'compassion fatigue' that also affects traditional advocacy approaches to migrant media. Consequently, the power of exposure, traditionally assumed to be part of a logic of enlightened political communication, has grown weaker and weaker.[14] At the same time, border regimes are becoming more complex, challenging activist approaches that aim to illustrate the role of borders in the ongoing delimititation of citizenship.

If the status of migrants is defined in the terms of such an ongoing contestation and negotiation of the limits of citizenship, the way we locate

---

[12] Some of the serious games celebrated as new mechanisms to expose players to situations of conflict they might otherwise have been unaware of include the projects undertaken by international agencies like the UN World Food Program (*Food Force* was hailed by well-meaning games theorists as the first 'humanitarian' game) as well as MTV (*Darfur is Dying*). <http://www.food-force.com>, <http://www.darfurisdying.com>. This trend is reflected in other areas of human rights media as well; the advocacy site *Eyes on Darfur* maintained by Amnesty International incorporates elements of an 'interventionist' games aesthetic, <http://www.eyesondarfur.org>.

[13] For an influential theoretical account of the notion of an "antagonistic realism" and its use as a strategy to advance cooperation, see Kluge 1975.

[14] Thomas Keenan (2005) has argued that the proliferation of new media actors, including perpetrators no longer afraid of exposure but actively involved in the creation and distribution of media, has severed the link between exposure and compliance, itself rooted in a rational public sphere model of mutual accountability.

these limits affects how the situation of migration is documented, since migration cannot be represented without making visible the border regimes that 'produce' migrants in the first place. For Étienne Balibar, "[t]he borders of new sociopolitical entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve all the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled – for example, in cosmopolitan cities" (Balibar 2004: 2). Moving beyond the truism that cities are increasingly shaped by migrants and their communities, Balibar proposes that "border areas – zones, countries, and cities – are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center" (Balibar 2004: 2). The constitution of citizenship occurs, then, not only at the geographical limits of Europe, but across an assemblage of overlapping (and mutually reinforcing) border zones.[15]

---

[15] On the notion of 'assemblage' (used here in the sense of the standard translation of the French 'agencement'), also see Marcus; Saka 2006. They caution that "assemblage functions best as an evocation of emergence and heterogeneity amid the data of inquiry, in relation to other concepts and constructs without rigidifying into the thingness of final or stable states that besets the working terms of classic social theory" (Marcus; Saka 2006: 106). This assessment of a deterritorialization of regulatory regimes once associated exclusively with the nation state has been echoed by other observers as well, see Sassen 2007. In her reflections on the contemporary "mutations of citizenship", Ong has similarly stressed the process of an increasing dis- and re-articulation of its constituent elements that transform the agency of citizens and non-citizens alike: "We used to think of different dimensions of citizenship – rights, entitlements, a state, territoriality, etc. – as more or less tied together. Increasingly, some of these components are becoming disarticulated from each other, and articulated with diverse universalizing norms defined by markets, neoliberal values, or human rights. At the same time, diverse mobile populations (expatriates, refugees, migrant workers) can claim rights and benefits associated with citizenship, even as many citizens come to have limited or contingent protections within their own countries. Thus, the (re)combinations of globalizing forces and situated elements produce distinctive environments in which citizens, foreigners, and asylum-seekers make political claims through pre-existing political membership as well as on the grounds of universalizing criteria. [...] The confluence of territorialized and deterritorialized forces forms milieus in which problems of the human are crystallized and problems posed and resolved" (Ong 2006: 499-500, 504).

Featuring as its setting the 'border zone' of an urban neighborhood rather than an international boundary, *Border Games* seems to take this complexity into account. Even if it does not aim to map entire border regimes, it confronts players with the question of what a border is, and how its effects are experienced in everyday life. Combined with support for self-organization, such concerns differ significantly from advocacy approaches aimed at general audiences. *Border Games* does do not simply reiterate the well-known critiques of corporate media and the apparent inevitability of a marginalization of alternative perspectives, and its main concern is not the education of outsiders about the experience of migrants. Instead, 'insiders' are the main audience, documenting key experiences to re-play their uneasy relationship to a public sphere structured around the principles of citizenship. This is no small matter, as such empowerment is an important element in the affective response to border regimes based on the production of fear (in addition to economic and political exclusion).[16]

Linking activist media to self-organization, *Border Games* resonates with other efforts that support organization among migrants and engage in the contemporary transformation of citizenship.[17] Understood in terms of

---

[16] "There is indeed no question of *suppressing the flows of migrants* towards Europe. These flows are absolutely needed, to reproduce the old 'capitalist reserve army' in a period when a significant part of the 'national' labor force is still (although less and less effectively) protected by social rights and regulations which have been partly 'constitutionalized'. But this means that the new proletarians (in the original sense adopted by Marx : workers without a social 'status' or 'recognition') must be transformed into subjects and objects of fear, *experiencing fear* of being rejected and eliminated, and *inspiring fear* to the 'stable' populations. This is supposed to make sure that they will not become integrated into the political 'constituency', in particular through their participation to common social struggles, in the end becoming 'citizens' in the active sense, with or without a European passport" (Balibar 2004: 16).

[17] See, for example, TransitMigration, "an experimental, transdisciplinary and political project [that] examines the ways in which transnational migration movements are transforming Europe and ist discourses on governance, citizenship and labor markets" and includes a mapping of migration-related governance regimes (MigMap – Governing Migration: A Virtual Cartography of European Migration Policies). For a list of participating activists and artists, see <http://www.transitmigration.org>; also see the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) <http://www.picum.org>, a support network

the playful, but no less serious engagement with the limits of citizenship, *Border Games* signals a broader shift, evident both in the practice of users as well as corresponding analytical approaches to digital media, from the representational (advocacy, exposure, counter-information) to the constitutive (identity, self-organization) aspects of media.

Digital games have become a central dynamic of cultural production. A significant, if marginal contribution to this trend is the use of games to facilitate the self-organization of migrants.[18] While a number of media initiatives already exist that address the cultural, economic, and political marginalization of migrants by calling into question dominant protocols of media coverage, serious games that mobilize the logic of play to educate and empower players offer an alternative to a social media tradition based on advocacy and counter-information.[19] It is in this sense, perhaps, that *Border Games* offers an example relevant to 'outsiders' as well, illustrating how the shift in attention to the constitutive dimension of media and the material effects it produces relates to the (possible) transformation of the limits of citizenship.

<div align="center">s.zehle@mx.uni-saarland.de</div>

Works Cited

Atkins, Barry (2006): "What Are We Really Looking at? The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play", in: *Games and Culture* 1, pp. 127-140.

Balibar, Étienne (2004): "At the Border of Europe", in: Balibar, Étienne: *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Transl. James Swenson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1-10.

whose efforts overlaps with other initiatives around migrant labor and precarity (<http://www.precarity-map.net>).

[18] For the most recent addition to this genre, see '*ICED – I Can End Deportation*' (a play on the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department), see <http://www.breakthrough.tv> and <http://www.icedgame.com>.

[19] See, for example, the Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and Media (RAM) Project (UK), dedicated to "promoting best practice in media representation of refugee and asylum issues" <http://www.ramproject.org.uk> as well as the Exiled Journalists Network <http://www.exiledjournalists.net> and the Independent Race and Refugees News Network <http://www.irr.org.uk>. These sites document existing journalistic codes of conduct and monitor governmental agencies.

Bishop, Claire (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", in: *October* 110, Fall, pp. 51-79.

Bogost, Ian (2006a): "Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy", *First Monday Special Issue* 7, September. <http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9/bogost/index.html>

Bogost, Ian (2006b): *Unit Operations. An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Couldry, Nick (2006): "Culture and Citizenship: The Missing Link?", in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, 3, pp. 321-339.

Frasca, Gonzalo (2001): *Videogames of the Oppressed.* MA Thesis. <http://www.ludology.org/articles/thesis>

Fullerton, Tracy (2005): "Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History", Playing the Past Conference, University of Florida, Gainesville. <http://www.tracyfullerton.com>

Keenan, Thomas (2004): "Mobilizing Shame", in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, 2-3, pp. 435-449.

Kluge, Alexander (1975): *Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin. Zur realistischen Methode*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Lazzarato, Maurizio (2003): "Struggle, Event, Media". <http://www.republicart.net>

Liebman, Stuart (1988): "Why Kluge?", in: *October* 46, pp. 1-22.

Lowe, Lisa (1996): *Immigrant Acts. On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Marcus, George E.; Saka, Erkan (2006): "Assemblage", in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, 2-3, pp. 101-106.

Mazzarella, William (2004): "Culture, Globalization, Mediation", in: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, pp. 345-367.

Ong, Aihwa (1996): "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States", in: *Current Anthropology* 37, 5, pp. 737-762.

Ong, Aihwa (2006): "Mutations in Citizenship", in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, 2-3, pp. 499-505.

Sassen, Saskia (2007): "Toward a Multiplication of Specialized Assemblages of Territory, Authority and Rights", in: *Parallax* 13, 1, pp. 87-94.