

Social Media Narrative:

Issues in Contemporary Practice

hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy

and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:

Lineage and Contemporary Practice

Facebook, November 16 - 21, 2016

## Transcript: Marco Williams



**Marco Williams**

November 20 at 4:03am

Reflecting on my on-line game The Migrant Trail ([themigrantrail.com](http://themigrantrail.com))

While there are plenty of games about killing, few games address the reality of death. Through repetition and forced choices, when killing yields survival and achieves winning, games run the risk of trivializing death. But to truly tackle certain content, death needs to be part of the gameplay. The question becomes: How do you represent this delicate issue?

When I first conceived the game, it was met with much resistance. Few funding people wished to support a 'game' that highlighted death, particularly deaths along the U.S. - Mexico border; a game that calls attention, indirectly to the United States immigration policy. I was only able to get support when I agreed to also present game play also from the perspective of a border patrol agent.

The Migrant Trail asks players to experience a perilous border crossing through the eyes of various migrants as they make - and in many cases don't make - the journey across the Sonoran desert into the U.S. Death is a central theme in that journey and it is used throughout the game to highlight the starkness of the choices migrants face.

The true goal of the game is not to highlight death, per se, but to create empathy.

I welcome your thoughts on whether the digital frame has the potential to create empathy and whether a game about death can do the same.

### Comments



**Mark Marino** Wow, **Marco**, I had not seen this game yet. This looks amazing, very powerful. I love the combination of illustrations with photographs and video. When did you make the game? Are you planning on porting it out of Flash?

November 20, 2016 at 5:19am ·



**Marco Williams** Can you help me to transport it out if Flash?

November 21 at 7:57am



**Mark Marino** I can't but I know some people who should be able to help!

November 21 at 4:22pm



**Judy Malloy** Social Media Narrative welcomes NYU Arts Professor, Marco Williams, whose directing credits include: *The Undocumented* (2013), *Inside the New Black Panthers* (2008), *Banished* (2007), *Freedom Summer* (2006), *I Sit Where I Want: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education* (2004), *MLK Boulevard: The Concrete Dream* (2003), among many others.

Visit <http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#marco> to see his bio in the Panel Program



November 20 at 7:52am



**Judy Malloy** Hi Marco, Thanks you so much for taking the time, to talk about the important issues in *The Migrant Trail*!

This is a good example of a well designed game that is very accessible in terms of the interface, but as Marco points out uses the interactivity of choice to confront real issues. Your choices are not in the fantasy realm of axe-wielding dwarfs. Rather, they confront the realities of crossing the desert in the hazardous reality of seeking a better life in this country.

I have never played as patrol but one of my students chided me for this, saying that she learned a lot by also playing as patrol. Nevertheless, I still have not done this.



November 20 at 8:02am



**Judy Malloy** And I want to add that The Migrant Trail is included in this discussion of Social Media Narrative because if you look at the definition of enhanced social media as including the shaping and enhancing of virtual community with creative content that stimulates discussion, the role of The Migrant Trail in bringing the issues in Marco's film, The Undocumented, to Social Media discourse is important.

November 20 at 9:16am



**Deena Larsen** Hi **Marco Williams**--when you were first confronted with the need to play from the border agency perspective, what did you think? What process did you go through to determine how to present that?

In light of recent events, will you be changing this to meet the discourse needs of the next four years?

November 20 at 11:20am



**Marco Williams** The Border Patrol perspective has the components for empathy-- recovering human remains, rescue those in distress. But it lacks the life and death element of the role of the migrant. But, looking ahead, I do wonder what prospective impact President elect Trump's proposed wall might have on people's experience playing the Border Patrol.

November 20 at 1:02pm



**Joe Sansone** Hey Marco very interesting project you have made. I had a question about it though how did you think of this scenario for your game and why did you choose the migrant trail over some other scenario to portray in your game?

November 20 at 9:42pm



**Marco Williams** I wanted to reach a wider audience than a PBS film. I made an interactive website-- [theundocumented.com](http://theundocumented.com)

But mostly I wanted to translate the experience I witnessed while filming in the Sonora desert, meeting with Mexican families who lost loved ones in the desert, and honoring the work of dedicated people in Tuscon who work to identify the dead and to repatriate the bodies back to loved ones.



[The Undocumented](#)

“THE MIGRANT TRAIL presents a first-person journey through Arizona’s desert borderlands...  
[theundocumented.com](http://theundocumented.com)

November 21, 2016 at 8:00am



[Samantha Procida](#) This is a really wonderful concept for a game! About a year ago, another work, Undertale, came out with a similar theme. It's a game that has a plot that adapts to how you choose to play the game, either by defeating "enemies" or befriending them through a pacifist route. Similar to your game, it also encourages empathy and gives death more prominence, but I think yours will strike even closer to home, especially with how many people are panicking over illegal immigration because of Trump's continued prejudiced rhetoric. I just have to ask, do you think your game's message will be able to reach out to those people?

November 21 at 3:12pm



[Marco Williams](#) The game's ideal audience is ages 13-25. I do think it has the most impact when it is curated, guided by a teacher for example. I have also created a study guide for teachers.

If a person allows her or himself to become fully immersed in the playing-- reading the texts, pausing to make choices, I think the potential for empathy is high.

It can be particularly effective when playing with a partner. Decisions have to be negotiated. This invites more reflection,

November 22 at 1:13am



[Tara Woolfolk](#) I did not know this had been made into a game, assuming I am on track when I compare this to the tour described in an episode of This American Life where groups participate in a live "sample" of the experience. I hope the gamers give more energy towards empathy than the people (corporate "team building" experience group) in the simulation I heard.

November 21 at 11:07pm



[Marco Williams](#) I don't know the This American Life episode. Can you direct me to it?

November 22 at 1:14am



Tara Woolfolk Let me look up the episode-will post as soon as I can today.  
November 22 at 9:23am



Tara Woolfolk Forgive the irony that I have to share the episode with screenshots instead of a link. It kept getting stuck when I tried to share the link and I'm trying not to take it personally. Lol. Here is the episode and a shot of the segment to which I referred....  
November 22 at 9:53am



Tara Woolfolk



Like · Reply · November 22 at 9:54am



Tara Woolfolk



November 22, 2016 at 9:54am



Chindu Sreedharan What a powerful idea, Marco.  
November 22 at 2:32am



Judy Malloy When as a protagonist in Marco Williams' Migrant Trail-- <http://themigrantrail.com/> - we join a group of migrants crossing the desert from Mexico to the US, over and over, the supplies dwindle as we share them with stricken comrades, and their/our chances of making it to safety in Arizona are fraught with exhaustion, heat stroke, scorpion bites, arrest by the border patrol, or death in the desert. The reality is overwhelming; we do not emerge unscathed by the experience.

I played this game again yesterday evening, following 6 or 7 of the characters. No one whom I became/followed made it to safety.

Expect not a treasure, in this game. Understanding is the only reward.

The Migrant Trail accompanies Marco William's The Undocumented, a film that documents migrant deaths along the Arizona-Mexico border. The game, (computer- media interactive experience seems more appropriate here), is a potent example of how -- when transmedia accompanies films -- the affordances of interactivity contribute to empathy and understanding.

Thank you very much , Marco, for sharing your thoughts on this important work!

December 1 at 8:04am