

Chatting as interface in mobile gaming

Case example: *Bury me, my love*

Videojogos 2018
Terhi Marttila

Me

- Background: engineering, fine art, art education
- PhD candidate in Digital Media at the University of Porto
- Thesis title 1.0: Speech, text and stories as material for play in digital art (**keeps changing**)
- I am in the process of making sense of these types of interfaces used in gaming and digital art, hence this case study
- (Final outcome: my own piece with elements of chatting)

Stories/games that unfold through chatting

- The original chat interface: *ELIZA* (1966)
- Branching narrative for mobile: *Lifeline* (2015)
- Videogames (mostly chatting with AI): *Komrad* (2016), *Event[0]* (2016), *Avery* (2018)
- Serious game/newsgame: *Bury Me, My Love* (2017)
- Apps for reading **chat stories** since 2017: *hooked* (2017), *tap* (2017), *yarn* (2017), *lure* (2017) among others..
- Apps for reading chat stories **in real time** (eg. over 3 - 7 days) and integrating various types of content: *unrd* (published 10/2018)

Welcome to

```
EEEEEE LL      IIII ZZZZZZZ AAAAA
EE      LL      II     ZZ     AA  AA
EEEEEE LL      II     ZZ     AAAAAA
EE      LL      II     ZZ     AA  AA
EEEEEE LLLLLL IIII ZZZZZZZ AA  AA
```

ELIZA is a mock (Rogerian) psychotherapist.
The original program was described by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966.
This implementation ('elizabot.js') by Norbert Landsteiner 2005.
Graphics and real-time text to speech integration added in 2013.

**** Type or click the microphone-button below for voice input. ****

ELIZA: Please tell me what's been bothering you.
YOU: I feel a bit weak
ELIZA: Do you often feel a bit weak ?
YOU: I suppose I do
ELIZA: Do you say you suppose you do for some special reason ?
YOU: Well, I am just not too sure about it
ELIZA: Do you know anyone else who is just not too sure about it ?
YOU:

ELIZA Talking

src: <https://www.masswerk.at/eliza/>



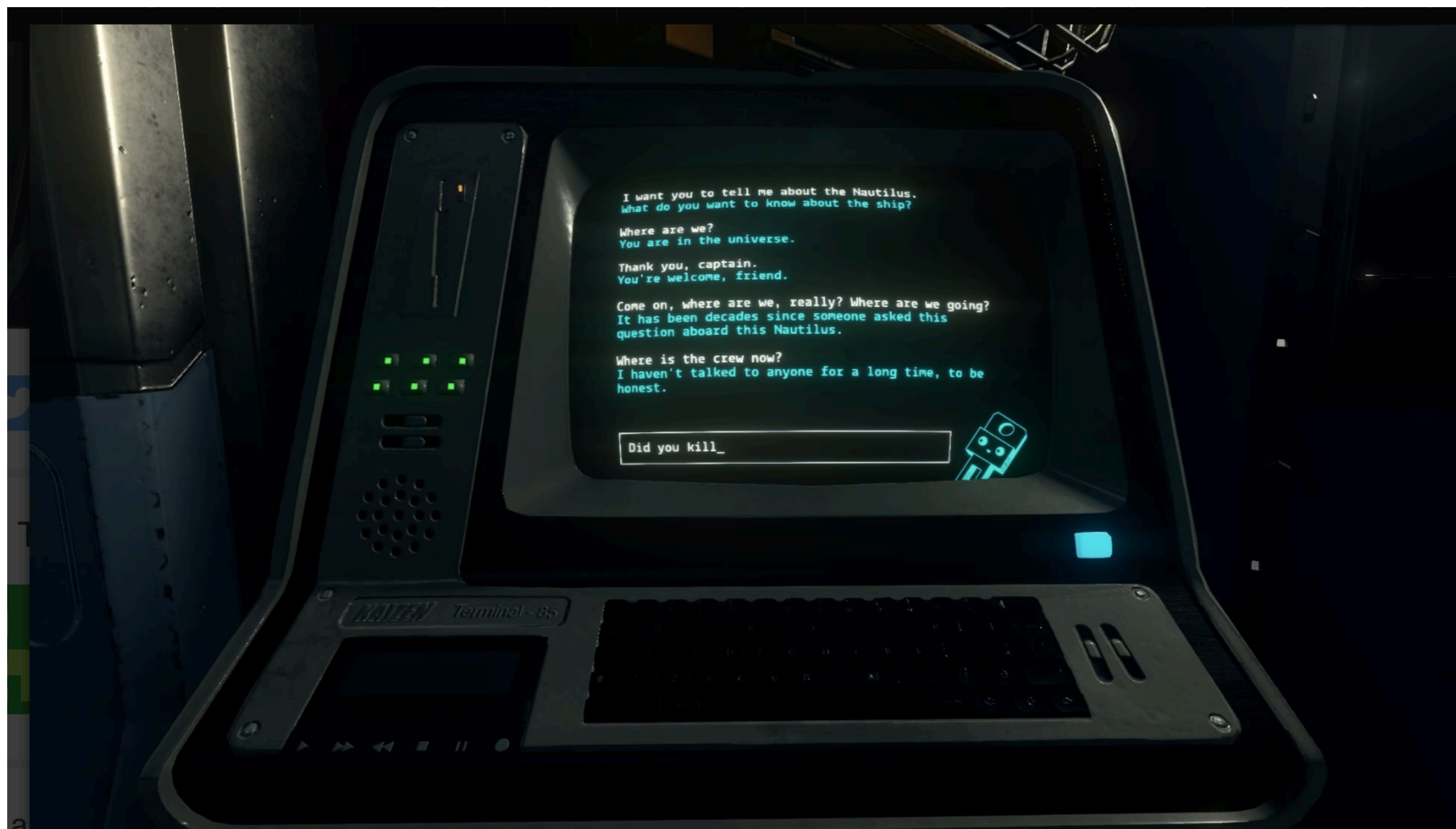
Lifeline

src: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/585290/Lifeline/>



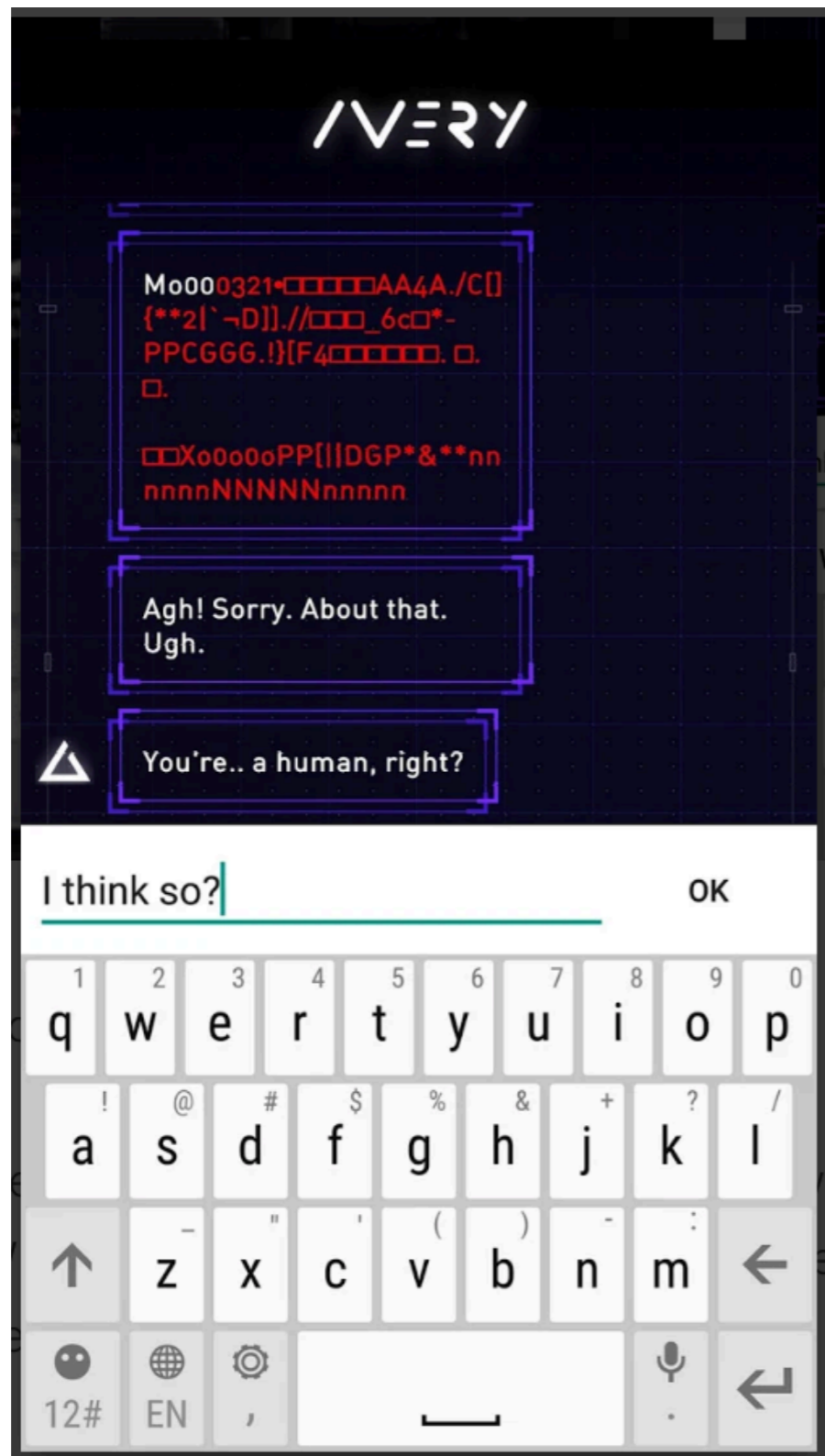
Komrad

src: <https://itunes.apple.com/pt/app/komrad/id1020876671?mt=8/>



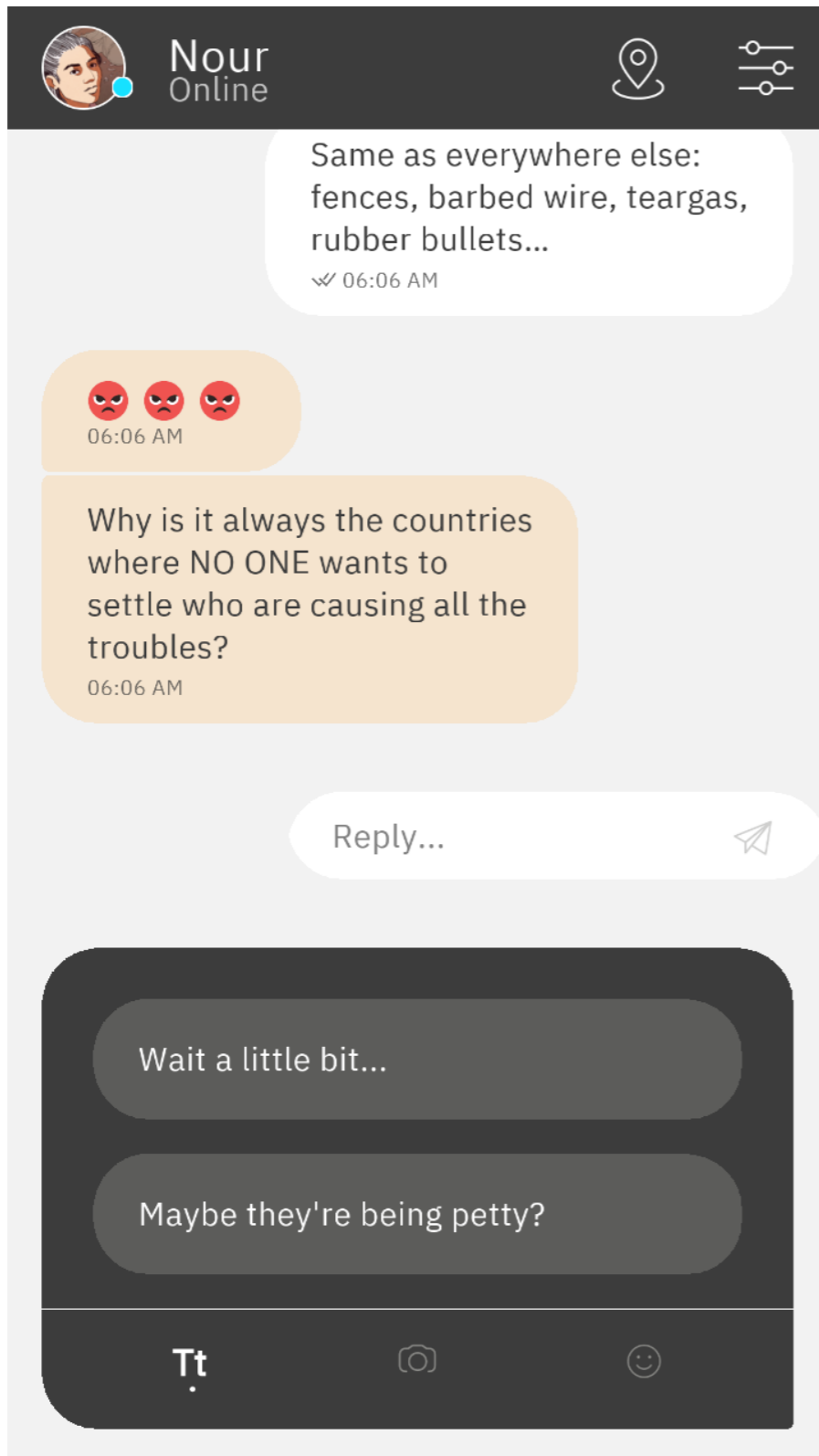
Event[0]

src: <https://www.bonusstage.co.uk/event0-review-screenshot-3/>



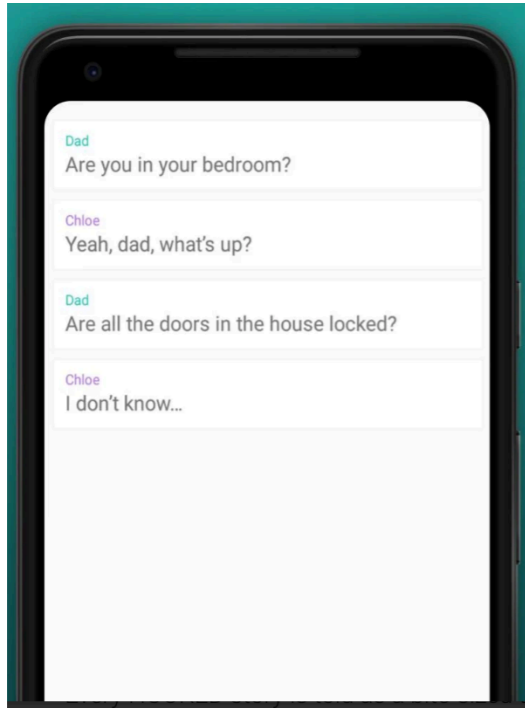
Avery

src: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=it.mixedbag.avery&hl=en_US



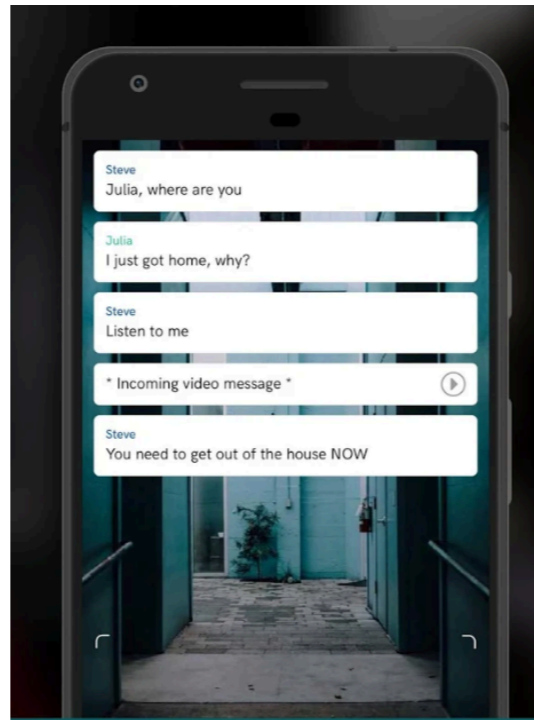
Bury Me, My Love

src: Terhi Marttila, screenshot during gameplay



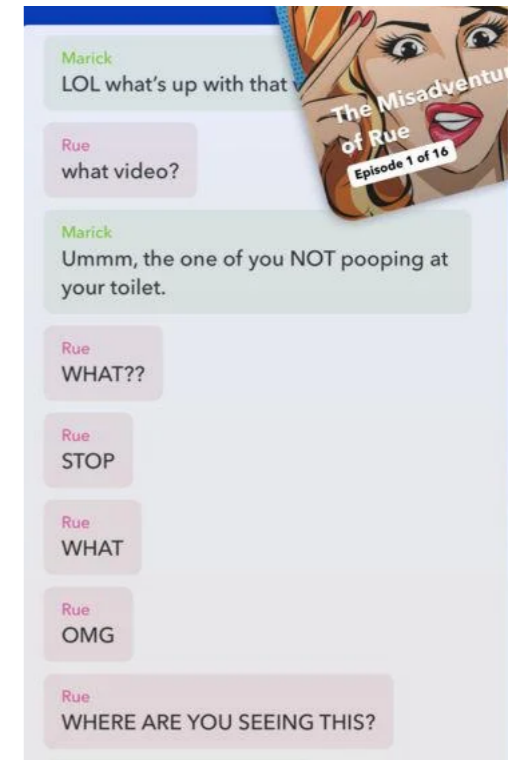
Hooked

src: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=tv.telepathic.hooked&hl=en>



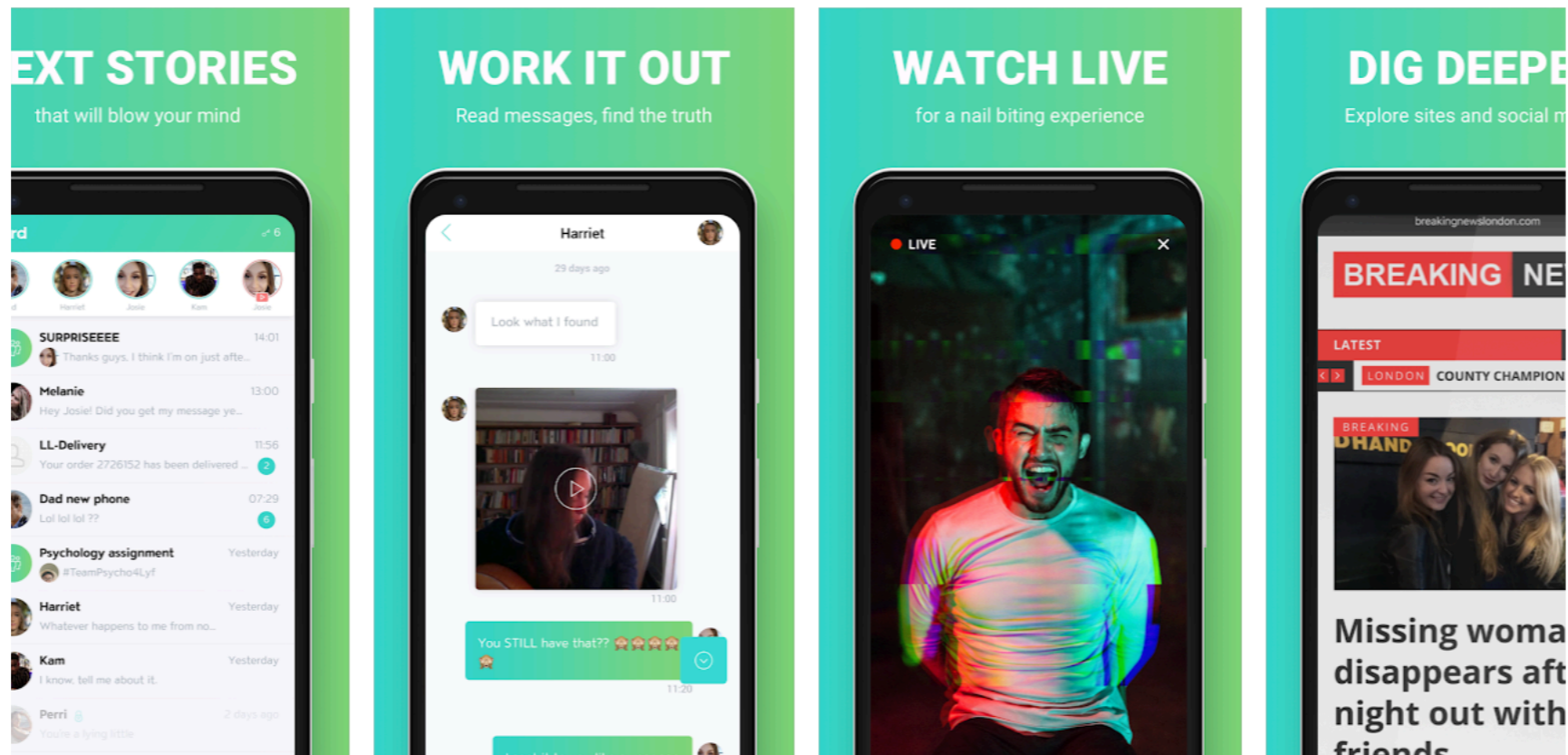
Tap

src: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.wattpad.tap>



Yarn

src: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.science.yarnapp>



unrd

src: [https://play.google.com/
store/apps/details?
id=com.foolsandgeniuses.unrd](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.foolsandgeniuses.unrd)

Chatting as interface in games or fiction is:

- a relatively recent phenomenon**
- an evolution in narrative inspired
by the WhatsApp era?**
- fertile ground for future study**

Bury Me, My Love

(BMML)

“Bury Me, My Love”

=

A syrian saying

=

**“I want to die before you do because I love you so
much that I don’t want to live without you”**

=

“I love you”

=

“I miss you”

A game about a Syrian refugee making their way into Europe

- Published October 26, 2017
- Created by The Pixel Hunt, indiegame dev of reality-inspired games
- Main author/project manager: Florent Maurin, written by Pierre Corbinais
- Distributed by Playdius and Arte
- Available on iOS and Android, possibly on desktop
- Unfolds through a chat between husband and wife

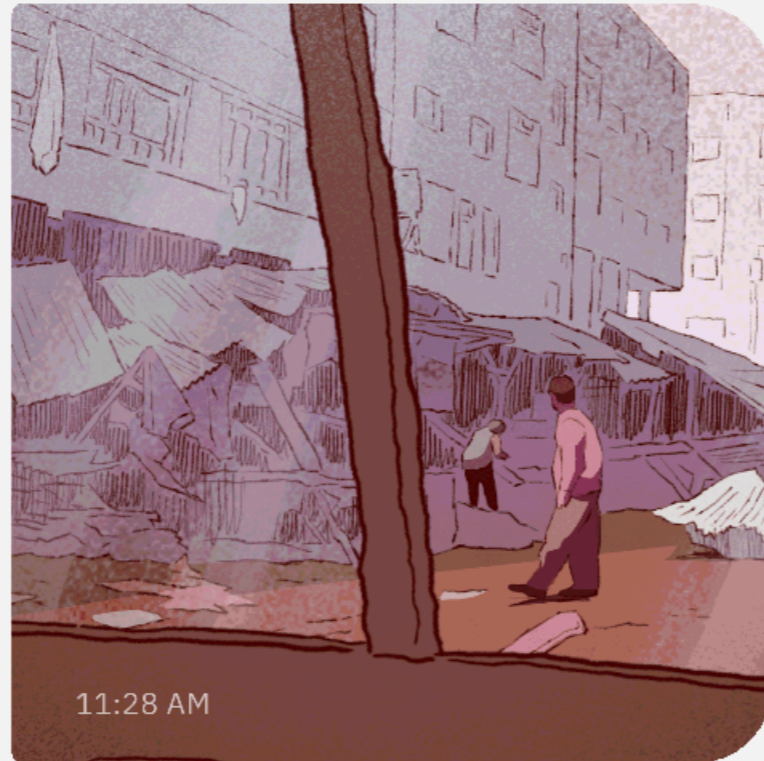


Nour
Online



Do you remember the time
we visited Harasta with
Adnan and Qamar?

11:28 AM



11:28 AM

...

11:28 AM



✓ 11:28 AM



Reply...



A game about a Syrian refugee making their way into Europe

- Nours sister dies. Nour has now lost her entire family due to the war and decides to leave Syria.
- Her husband Madj must stay behind to care for his elderly parents.
- We play Madj, keeping in touch with Nour via a messaging service on her journey to Europe.



Nour
Online



07:00 PM

And she broke down in tears
in my arms as soon as we
were alone 😞 😞 😞

07:00 PM



✓ 07:00 PM

What's wrong?

✓ 07:00 PM

She lives in a camp. That's
what's wrong

07:00 PM

She used to study
architecture, and all of a
sudden she has to be a
housewife. Except her house
is a container

07:00 PM



Reply...





Nour
Online



Same as everywhere else:
fences, barbed wire, teargas,
rubber bullets...

✓ 06:06 AM



06:06 AM

Why is it always the countries
where NO ONE wants to
settle who are causing all the
troubles?

06:06 AM

Reply...



Wait a little bit...

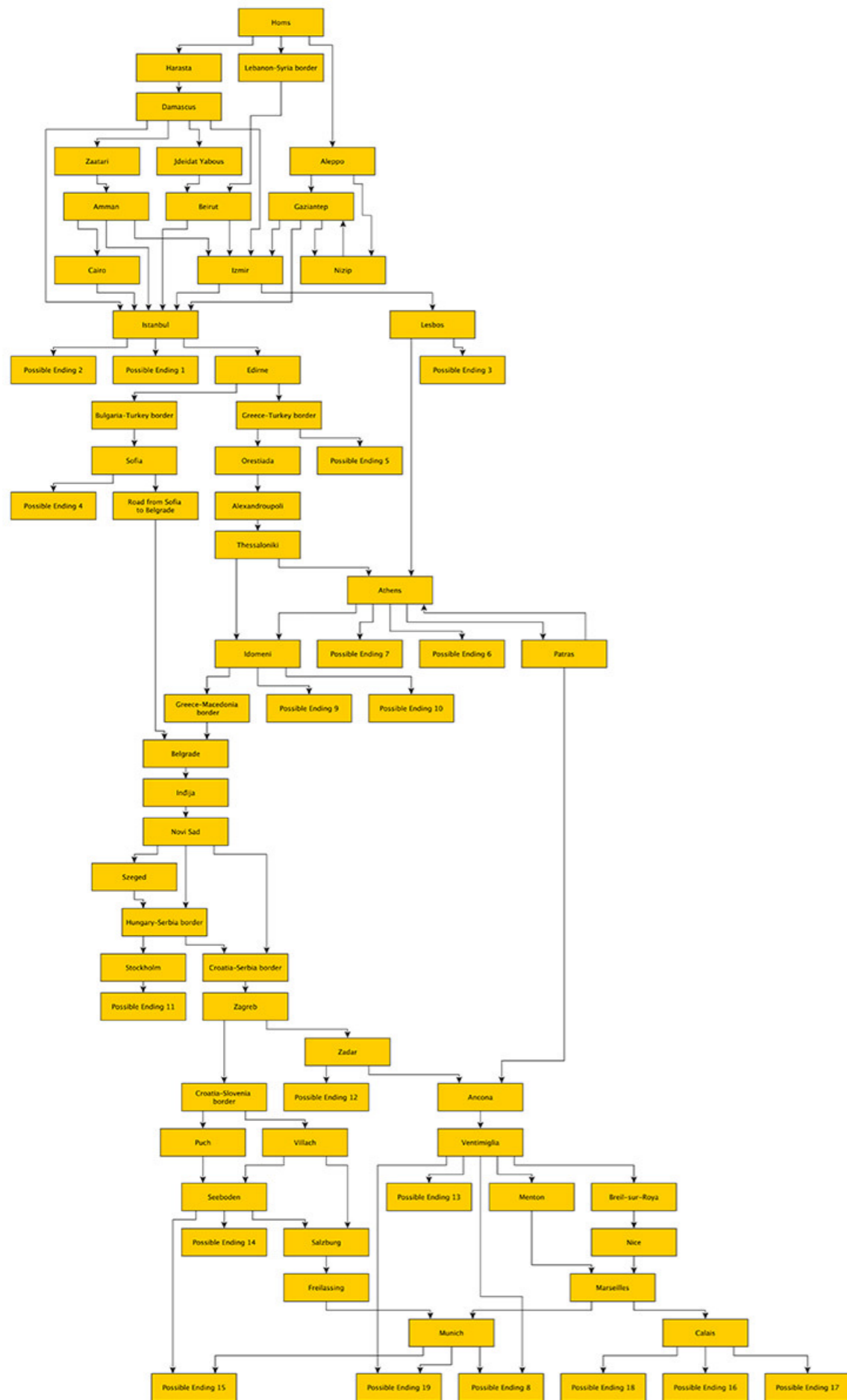
Maybe they're being petty?

Tt
.



Game mechanics in *BMML*

- Nour asks Madj for advice.
Madj's advice affects the outcome of the game
- Nour's path is governed by four variables:
her morale,
her money,
her relationship with Madj,
her inventory.
These variables affect the outcome of the game.
- There are 19 possible endings.



BMML as a reality-inspired game / newsgame

- All places and events are based on **true stories** and the **experiences** of refugees.
- The team worked closely with **Dana**, a Syrian refugee who made it to Germany
- Dana helped with Syrian culture, customs, sayings, songs, etc.

**Living an experience that you expect to badly
shake your feelings is tough.**

**And indeed, reality-inspired games sometimes are
tough: they offer you introspection, not evasion.**

Maurin 2018a

Inspired by an innovative journalism format

- Lucie Soullier published an article in Le Monde:
- “The journey of a Syrian migrant through her WhatsApp thread”

•



Qui sont ils ?

SEPTEMBRE

Samedi 19

Dimanche 20

Lundi 21

Mardi 22

Mercredi 23

Jeudi 24

Vendredi 25

Samedi 26

Dimanche 27

Lundi 28

Mardi 29

Mercredi 30

Jeudi 1^{er} oct.

Loulou

Y a pas

18 h 35

Dash

Mimoty, ouvre l'atlas de la Turquie et trouve-moi
Basmane

18 h 35

Loulou

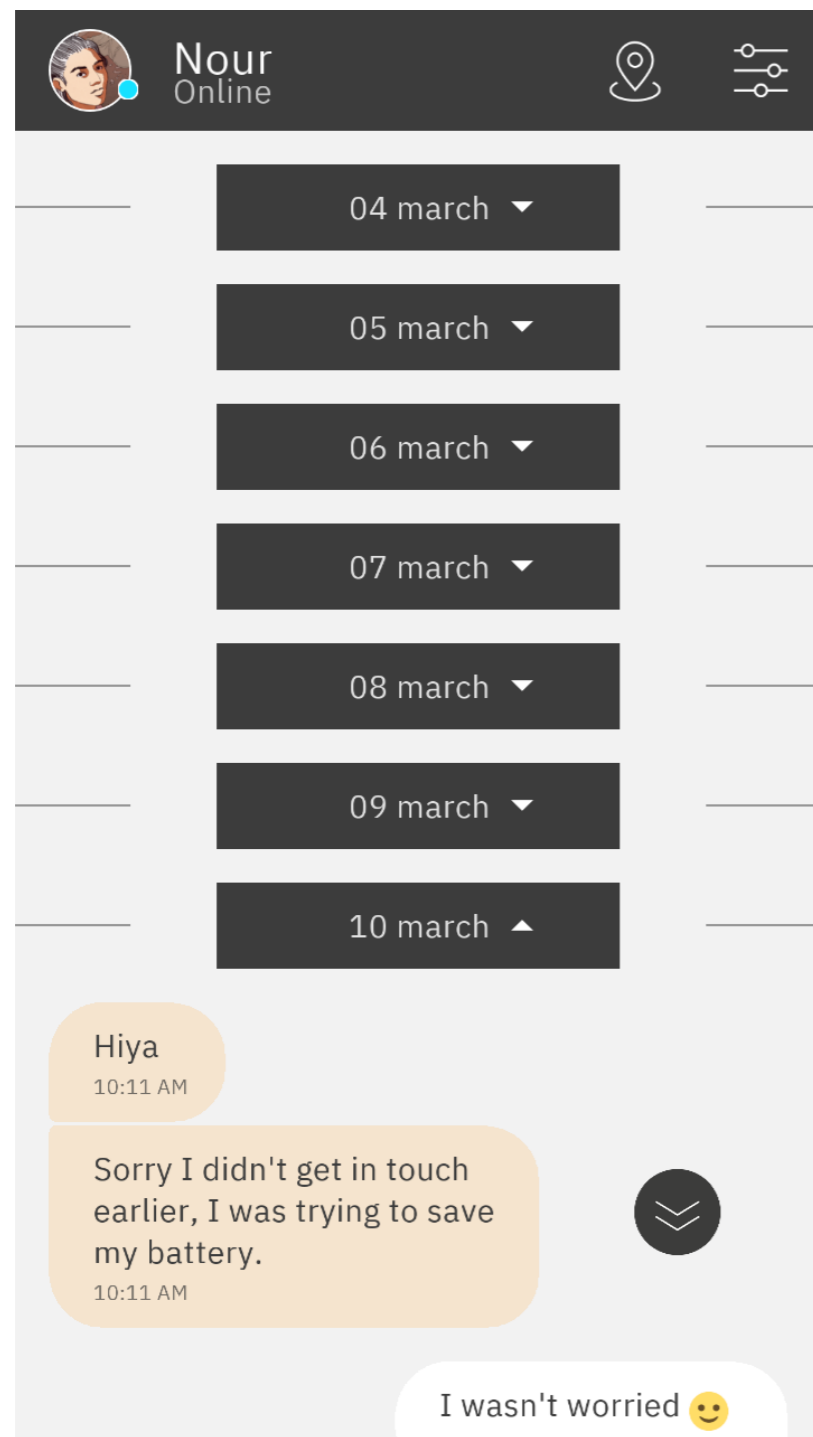
Donne-moi le nom précis

18 h 36

Dash

Va voir dans Google et envoie une capture

18 h 35



***BMML* looks a lot like
the original
newspaper article**

Unpacking *BMML*

BMML

- There is plenty of angles for analysing *BMML*
- Sonja Gabriel (2018) assessed *BMML* through the Serious Games Design Assessment (SGDA) framework, concluding that according to the framework, enough criteria is met that the game should successfully create empathy in players
- I expect *BMML* to be discussed at length in the coming years, currently it is hard to find publications
- I focus on **how chatting as interface** affects **player experience**

**The penultimate
justification for chatting
as interface in BMML:**

***Bury Me, My Love* is designed to mimic the
way migrants use messaging apps**

Maurin 2018c

**= migrants chat with their
loved ones along the
journey**

Those who stay behind (Madj):

**= our loved one is so far away and in very
challenging circumstances**

**= all we can do is wait to see the outcome
of their actions/choices**

= meanwhile keeping in touch by chatting

***BMML* is thus a truly
procedural representation of
a migrants' journey to Europe**

**This is why *BMMML* is
so powerful**

Thus *BMML* is an exceptional case by comparison to other games which use chatting as interface

RQ:

How does the chatting interface in particular contribute to player experience?

My methodology

- Autoethnography: my own experience as the subject of research, asking:
- How did I experience the game through the chatting?
- How do I feel while chatting with Nour?
- What catches my attention especially regarding the way the chatting is implemented?
- How does chatting in *BMML* relate to my personal experiences with chatting? (Assuming that this parallel will help me empathise with the characters)

Sources

- Primarily experience of playing the game multiple times
- In support: discussions and statements by others in gaming-related media, websites, blogposts, etc.
- Further insights from interviews and blogposts by the team (Maurin and Corbinais)

What is chatting?

In my life: Chatting as..

- ... keeping in touch with your loved ones
- ... asking for help
- ... moral support in times of crisis
- ... sharing photographs
- ... being entertained when bored, waiting, etc. killing time
- ... being calmed when worried, sad, angry
- ... receiving news from friends and loved ones

In *BMMML* chatting as..

- ... keeping in touch with your loved one
- ... asking for help (googling information)
- ... asking for a second opinion on what to do
- ... moral support in times of crisis
- ... social contact when surrounded by strangers
- ... sharing news, sharing events that happen
- ... ultimately, a lifeline through the perilous journey

And most importantly

- The experience of *BMML* is built very strongly around the dynamics of **chatting with your partner**, your loved one. This is a very specific (chatting) relationship.

**What is chatting with
your partner?**

Chatting with your partner

Usually implies that you are separated momentarily

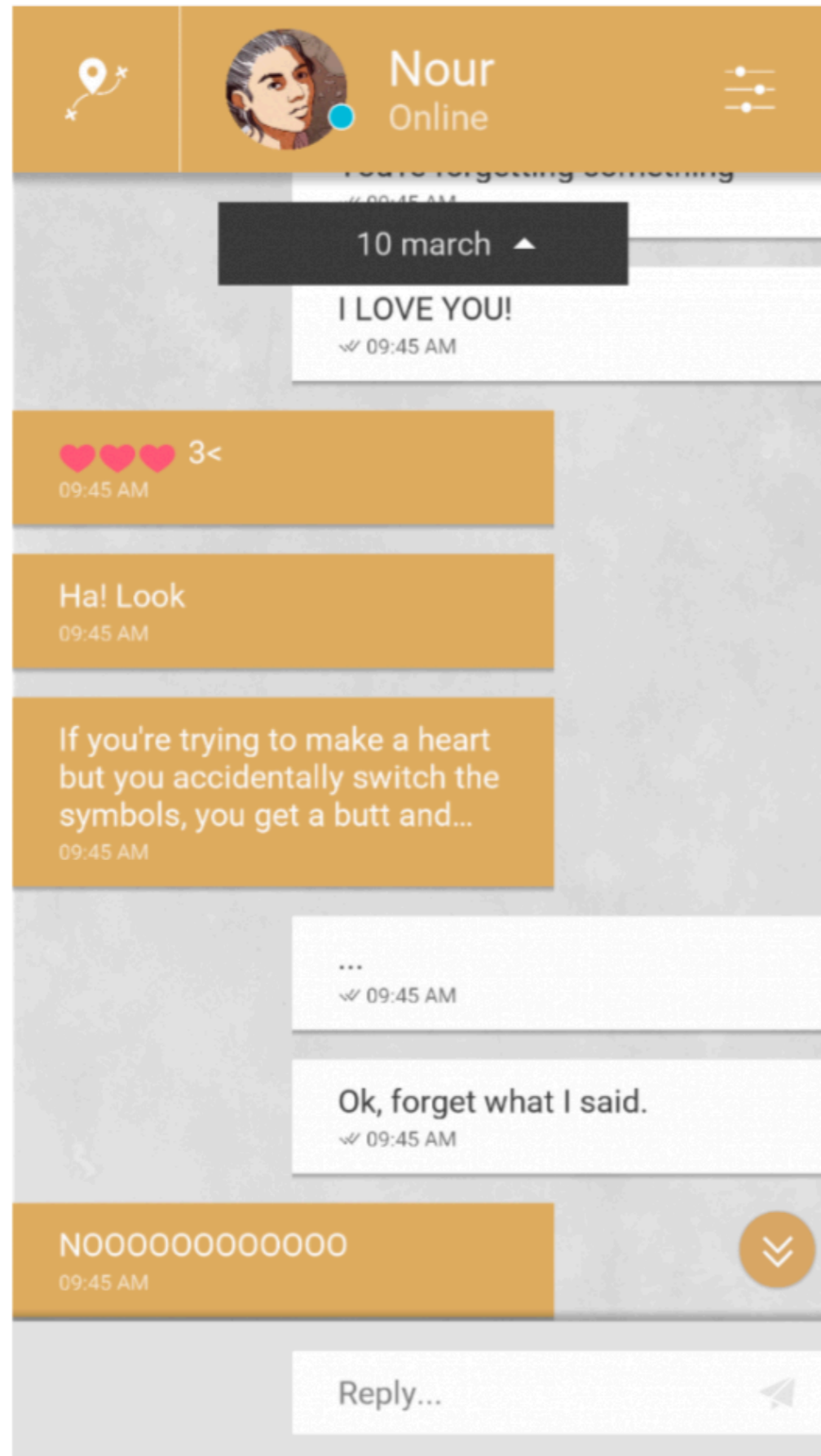
- These chats are private
- Time spent waiting for them to respond...
- Sometimes being worried about them (has he arrived home safely?)
- Humor
- Sending icons, smileys, hearts etc..
- Jokes, inside jokes
- Little fights, big fights
- Sending photos
- Reminiscing about the past

**Let's look at how each of
these aspects of chatting
emerge during gameplay**

Usually implies that you are separated momentarily

**Nour and Madj are
very separated**

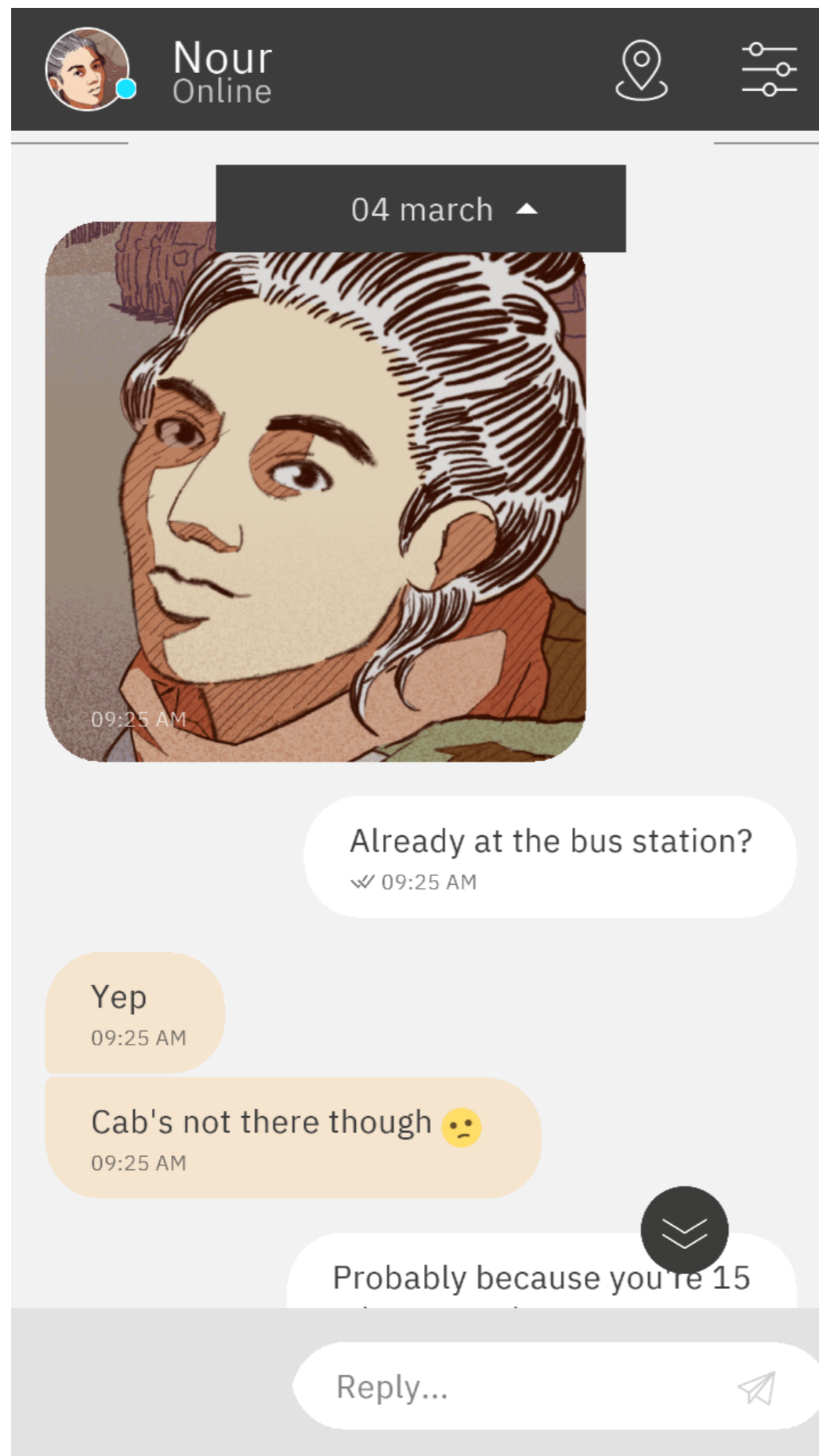
“Humor”



Letting a small typo evolve into a funny exchange.

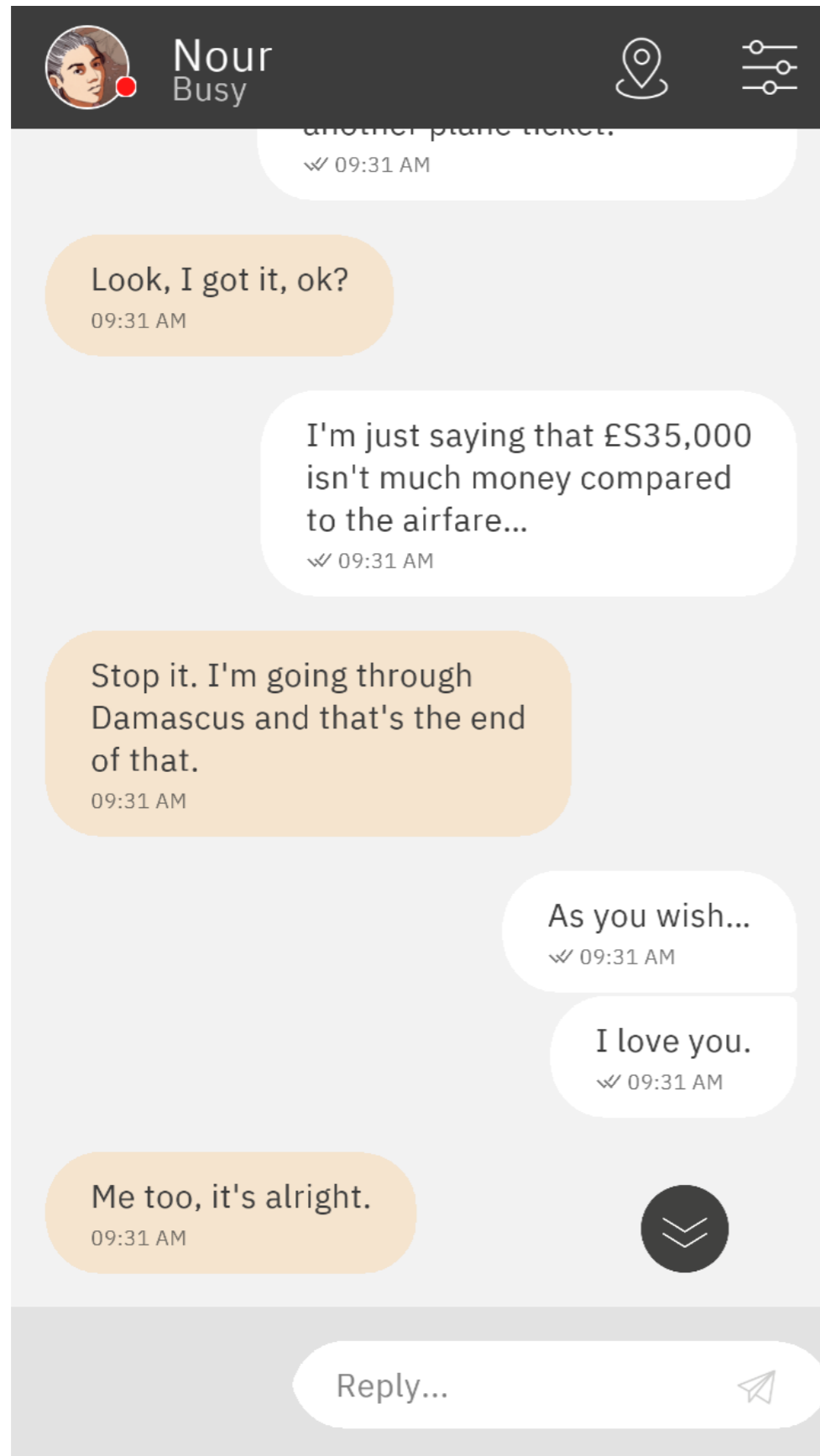
(Furthermore, adding this type of light content in between emotionally heavy scenes makes for a nicer narrative)

“Sending photos”



**This is easily something
I would do: send a
photo because I'm early
and have some time to
kill.**

**“Little fights, big
fights..”**



Because these fights build up over the exchange (and we can choose what we write to Nour, I am as emotionally captivated by the exchange as I am in my own little “fights” in chat



Nour
Online



But not this morning 😭

06:17 AM

I still don't see how this is my fault!

✓ 06:17 AM

Are you even listening to me?

06:17 AM

I only had one alarm!

06:17 AM

And you didn't call to wake me!

06:17 AM

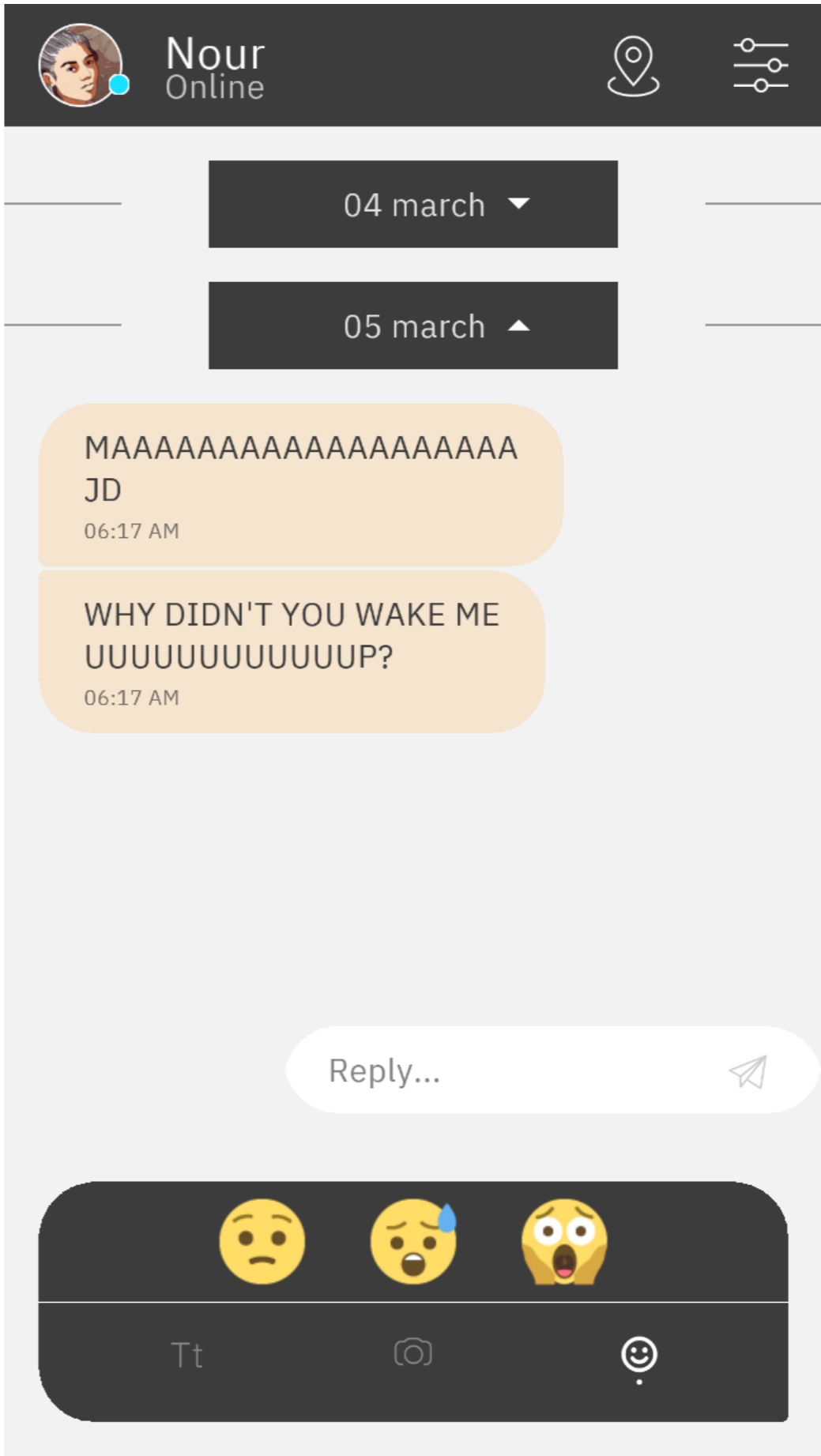
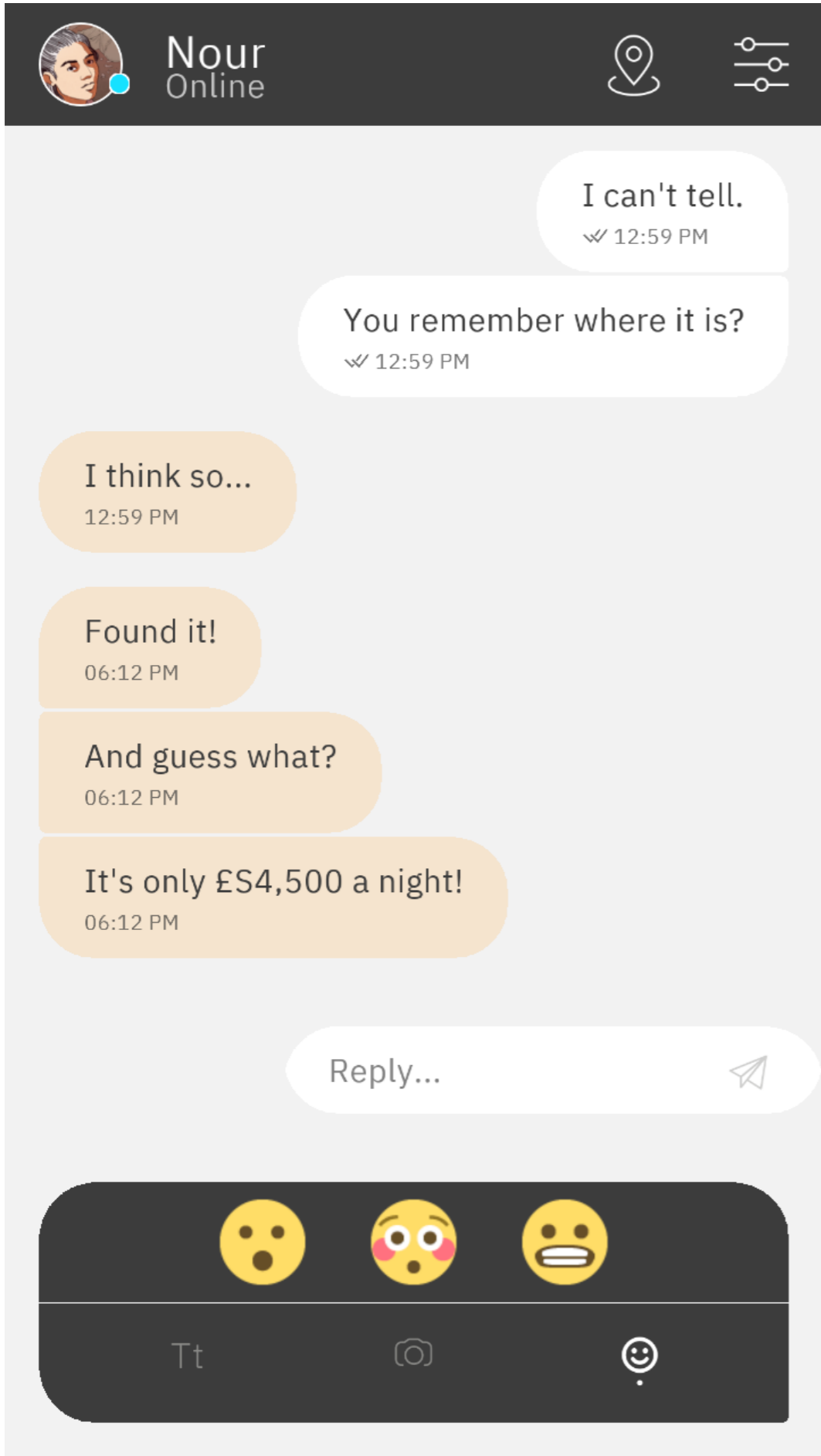
Reply...



How was I supposed to know...



**“Sending icons,
smileys, hearts, etc..”**



“I’ve never been so disarmed by a conversation with a character in a game than the first time Nour sent me a kiss emoji right before turning her phone off at the border to save battery life.”

Gach 2017

**“Reminiscing about
the past..”**

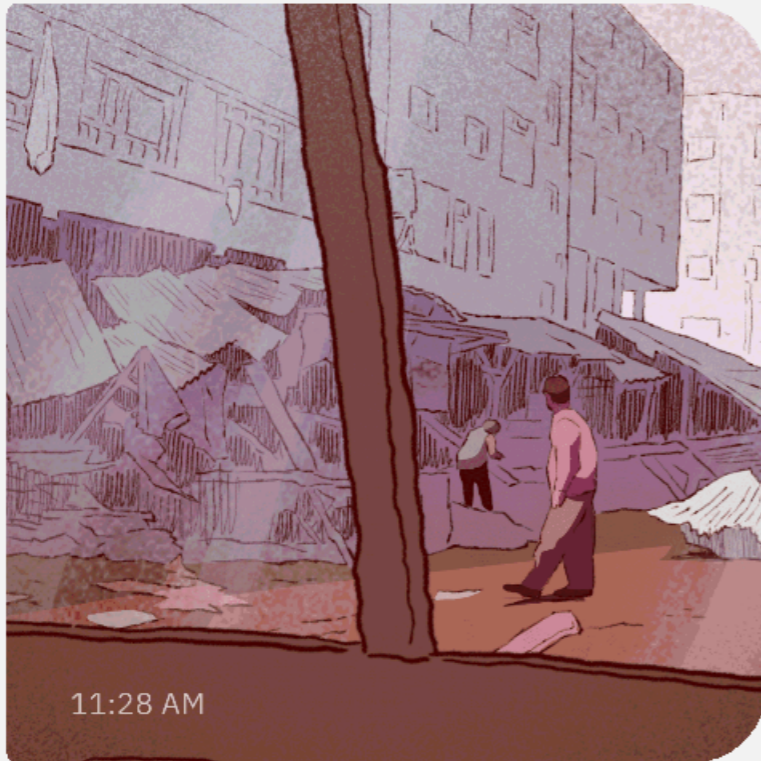


Nour
Online



Do you remember the time
we visited Harasta with
Adnan and Qamar?

11:28 AM



...

11:28 AM



✓ 11:28 AM



Reply...



**Nour travels
through a place
where they went
together.**

**Except now it is
completely
bombed.**

“Private chats..”

**Nour sends Madj a
picture of herself
tucking her cash into
her bra**

**“Time spent waiting
for them to respond...”**

One of the techniques used to do this is "pseudo real-time" texting, borrowed from the 2015 game Lifeline.... [if] you tell Nour to wait at a closed border for two hours to see if it opens, you won't hear from her again for two real-world hours.

Maurin in interview with Priestman 2017

Pseudo real-time

- In *BMML*, this is often minutes - Nour often enters with “crap crap crap” because something bad is happening.
- Sometimes hours - usually with either very good or very bad news
- And at times, also **days** eg. When Nour gets caught and detained by the Macedonian police.



Nour
Online



I believe in you

✓ 01:14 AM

and I love you

✓ 01:14 AM

and I don't want you to die

✓ 01:14 AM

and you're not answering me

✓ 01:14 AM

and I hope that means you're
running

✓ 01:14 AM

please be running

✓ 01:14 AM

please please please please

✓ 01:14 AM



00:00 - 01:10

10:14 AM

Reply...



01:14 AM

Madj wants Nour to get up
and run.

Nour is wet and cold
because she fell into
the river while trying to cross
from Turkey to Greece

10:14 AM

9 hours later Nour sends a voice
message.

It is evident she is tired and cold.
She has laid down and tries to keep
talking in order to keep herself
awake.

This is Nours last message to Madj.

**“The waiting isn't something you can do in a book
or movie.”**

Florent Maurin in interview with Robertson 2017

**Meanwhile: “worrying
about whether they are ok
when they don’t respond”**



Nour
Online



How are you now? Are you on the ground?

✓ 11:18 AM

Yes

11:18 AM

They brought us to a camp in Lesbos

11:18 AM

Gave us some blankets and everything

11:18 AM

We're waiting to be registered

11:18 AM

I just charged up my phone

11:18 AM

The worst part is over!

✓ 11:18 AM

You just need to get your identification bac



Madj hears back from Nour for the first time in many hours after Nour gets on a boat to cross the mediterranean.

As I waited for her reply, I was feeling very anxious and scared.

I felt immense relief when she replied, and when she told me that she is on land.

And when Nour stops texting you, tucked safely in your cozy bed with a roof over your head, you'll find yourself wondering if she's alright.

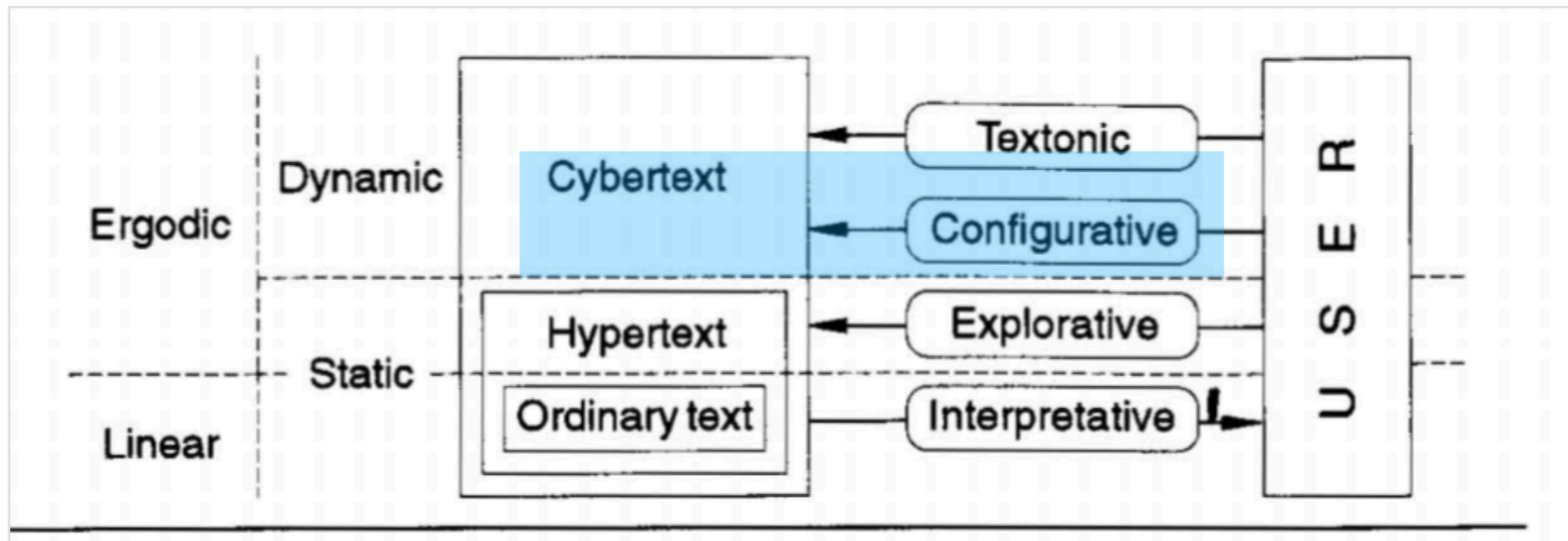
Chan 2017

In conclusion:

- *BMMML* echoes chatting practices I can identify in my own life
- *Immersion* is built through recreating many of these dynamics of real-life chatting practice relatively accurately
- The largest detriment is the lack of natural language input.

Aarseths cybertext

- How does it apply in the case of *BMML*?
- What could the theory of the cybertext imply regarding player experience?



**Fig. 1. User Functions and Their Relation to Other Concepts
(Aarseth 1997,64)**

User functions in the cybertext: *configurative* and *textonic*

“the *configurative* function, in which scriptons are in part chosen or created by the user”

“ If textons or traversal functions¹ can be (permanently) added to the text, the user function is *textonic*”

(idib.)

1) “It is useful to distinguish between strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exist in the text, since these may not always be the same. For want of better terms, I call the former scriptons and the latter textons ... In addition to textons and scriptons, a text consists of what Ih (Aarseth 1997, 62)

Real-life chatting as cybertext

- When we chat with our loved ones, they might ask us to choose: where to have lunch, what to bring home for dinner, etc. -> in answering, we alter the course of events (*configurative* user function)
- (If our loved one asked us to choose from a list of existing options, user function would be *explorative* = hypertext)
- We might contribute words, facts, etc or even suggest behaviours and actions for our counterpart in the chat (*textonic* user function)
- **And of course real-life chatting shouldn't and can't be read as a cybertext, since it is real-life behaviour and not media**

BMMML as cybertext

- Madj is able to choose from various things to say to Nour (scriptons). Importantly, these scriptons alter Nours' four variables, which in turn alter the outcome. Thus the user function is **not only explorative**. User function is *configurative*.
- (User function would be *explorative* if Nours four variables had no influence on possible paths to take.)
- There is no evidence of *textonic* user function in *BMMML*, as we are at no point able to input natural language (scriptons), nor input functions which would reconfigure existing textons into scriptons.

In conclusion

- Immersion and engagement with *BMML* might in part be explained by the fact that it allows for configurative user function: we realise that we can influence the outcome both with our attitudes towards Nour as well as what we tell her to do - as opposed to just clicking the story through
- We might also ask whether immersion and engagement in chatting-based media might be enhanced if it also allowed for textonic user function? (especially natural language input)

Let's remember that..

- Yes, the reality of the chatting makes the experience immersive and relatable.
- But importantly, in *BMML*, the everyday-style messaging exchange between Nour and Madj is simply the meat around the skeletal structure: it is used to deliver heavy and fact-based content related to the the difficulties that migrants face

Future work

- Diversify research approach to include other methodologies targeting questions related to **chatting as interface** in the same game, or a different game, to build a deeper qualitative understanding of chatting as interface
- Utilise findings of this preliminary study **to develop my own work** utilising a chat interface

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