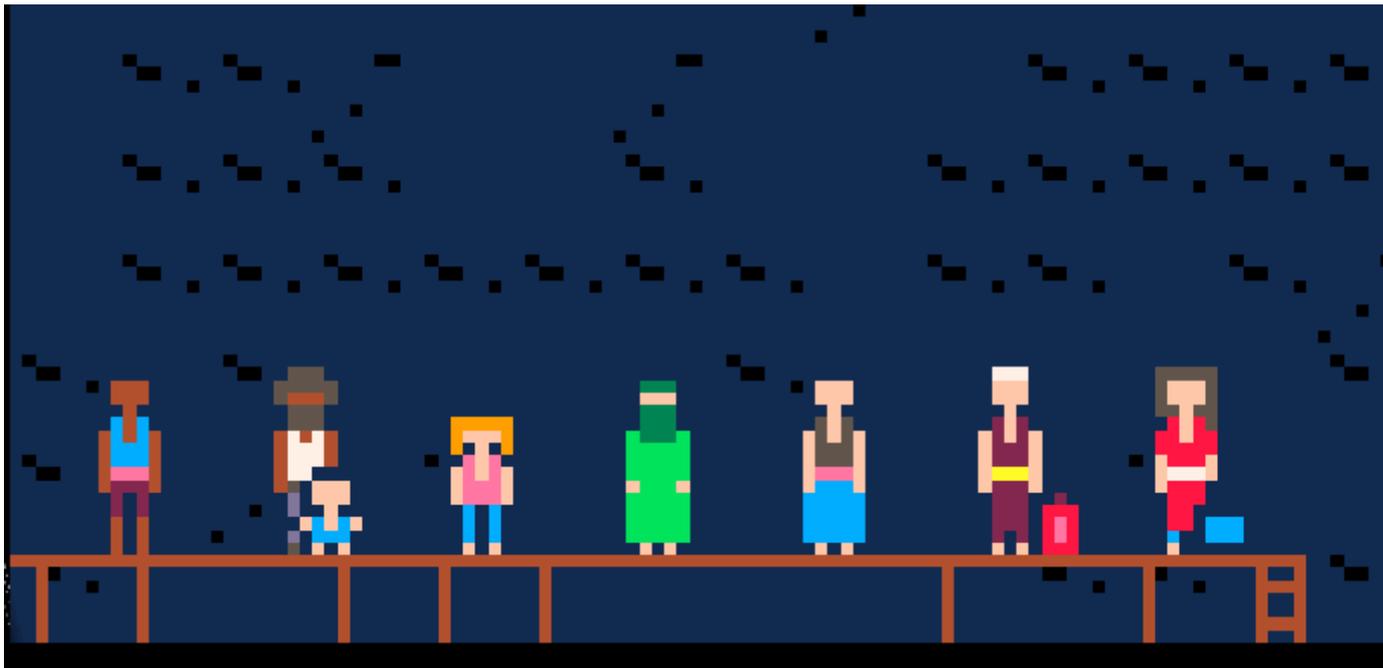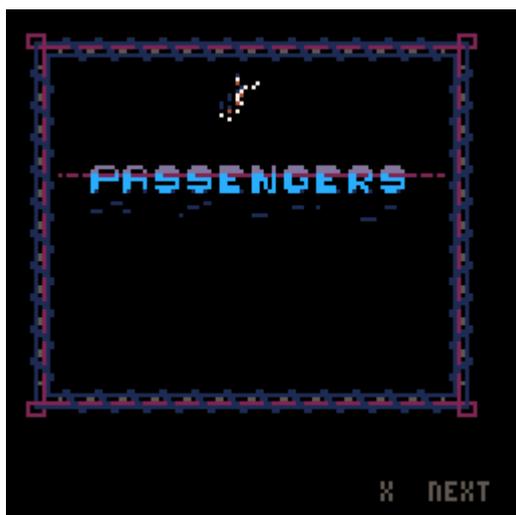# PASSENGERS

Passengers' main aim is to break the very homogeneous image of the migrants given by news and medias. Here is the story of why and how we made the game. The game is available for free at the end of this post.

Arnaud De Bock and myself (François Alliot) are French indie gamedesigner based in London. We worked together on a couple of projects and wanted to do something for Ludum Dare. I created my first game for a LD two years ago (Singular) and we always loved the jam, people are crazily talented around here.

So Arnaud called me at 7 am on Saturday morning to say he had this idea of a game about migrant smugglers, reading about the jam theme (« You are the monster ») and listening to the radio. They were talking about the « migration crisis » in Spain and Italy, and how this

was starting to be a « big problem ». He was really surprised on how migrants stay « unnamed », unknown. They die each day, but they continue to be the migrants, the untouchables.

This idea resonated with some things I wanted to explore in games. The idea of frontier, of migration which today means these desperate exodus. How migrants are considered as a threatening tide of poverty, not as people with different stories, different characters, different goals. The figure of the smuggler is also interesting, and how his « passengers » are basically giving him their money, their hopes and their freedom for a journey.

What is interesting in games is that they're probably the only cultural medium able to take advantage of people's amazing ability to « put themselves into someone else's shoes ». Games are efficient at that because the player is always in charge of what's happening, we're only bringing the rules and the role to be played.

Here, we simply used that ability to raise an awareness, or at least to raise some questions. The game will not answer them, but at least they are here. The game is not a documentary (after all, reality is far worse than that) but it puts you in a position to make your own perspective on the theme, and dig it. We created Passengers as a way to ignite interest, certainly not as a way to say « this is how it's happening ». It's still a game.

We're quite amazed at the way people react. They really have no idea that « Migrant crisis » could mean this sort of situations. Passengers is just enough to make people look into the subject, beyond the general noise.

This was possible also because we are using Pico-8, a very constrained little game engine made by Lexaloffle (http://www.lexaloffle.com/pico-8.php). It has a single resolution, forcing you to work with a little screen and very large pixels.

The less you show, the more you suggest, the more people will fill the gap with their own vision and understanding. Talk about a drug dealer singing lullabies to a child and show a 5 pixel-height character with a 1 pixel-height beard and 3 pixel-height red shirt : people will create his story, draw his picture, imagine his future.

We built the game as a set of open rules around this, the generated migrants characters and « bio » you see in the second screen. We wanted simple, evocative, factual stories. Of course none of them is complete or faithful of reality. The point of the game is not there, it's in the way the player brings depth to these stories and makes his choices.

We didn't want to bring any judgment or moral justification in the game. It's the player role to do that, as the smuggler, with this terrible power over these people. Everything else is a combination of rules around these stories : the boat, the bribe, the difficulty of the journey, its length, the number of people on the boat… it all affects the outcome in various ways.

Some players will refuse the passage of people with children because it's too dangerous (but then what happens to them), some will try to squeeze as much money as possible from « bad » jobs or sullen attitudes, some will even only bring drug dealers so that if the ship sink, well…

Yes, you can succeed as a smuggler. It generally implies a cold optimization of the system : have a decent boat, pay some bribe, maximize the price of each passenger, not overcrowd the boat, choose a longer but less monitored route. But this success is not rewarding and it's certainly not guaranteed. There too, we let the player build his own understanding of the outcome and of his own « optimization process ».

Note that we made the game in around 36 hours. As much as we tried to avoid bugs and imbalance, it can happen :-).

In this game we were very much inspired by Lucas Pope's « Paper Please… », Jason Rohrer's work (the title Passengers is a reference to his game Passage), Chris Crowford's and Paolo Pedercini's (Molle Industria). Also Joe Saccoe and Mike Davis (Planet of slums).

Arnaud did the art and the music, I wrote the stories and developed the game. We shared the game design.

François Alliot

[Play Passengers](#)

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Passengers in the press:

- Joop (nl)
- OffWorld | BoingBoing (en)
- Develop (en)
- Wired (it)
- Il Fatto Quotidiano (it)
- MotherBoard (en)
- Anait (en)
- Libération (fr)
- Dwutygodnik (pl)