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# GAMING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: *SHARMILA* AND THE REPRESENTATION OF OTHERNESS

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## Abstract

Digital games have evolved beyond entertainment to become tools for social activism, education, and cultural representation. Scholars in game studies have highlighted their unique rhetorical capacity, enabling narratives to shape users' perceptions through digital environments and simulations of real-world challenges. This capacity is central to serious games, which aim to raise awareness about global issues such as humanitarian crises, hunger, and climate change. Despite research on their pedagogical impact, the potential of serious games to represent marginalized themes, especially in global inequalities and humanitarian efforts, remains underexplored. Using thematic analysis grounded in extended gameplay sessions and deductive coding, this research examines *Sharmila*, a serious game by the World Food Programme (WFP) that highlights food insecurity and the struggles of vulnerable populations. The game immerses players in the realities of hunger, displacement, and survival, offering a form of situated learning that links knowledge acquisition with real-world contexts. *Sharmila* serves as a case study to explore the depiction of "the other" and the construction of difference, raising critical questions about the representation of marginalized voices and the framing of poverty and crisis narratives in serious games. This research situates *Sharmila* within broader debates on serious games and cultural representation, highlighting their role in shaping perceptions of social justice and global inequality.

**Keywords:** digital games, social change, otherness, representation, *Sharmila*.

## Introduction

Today's tech-based world has created a positive space for digital games to evolve beyond the entertainment niche, and digital games serve as tools for activism, education, and cultural engagement. According to Sicart (2009), digital games have a distinctive rhetorical capacity that allows narratives to impact users' perceptions as they navigate through digital systems and environments and immerse themselves in simulations of real-world challenges. However, while serious games have been widely analyzed for their pedagogical

impact and cognitive engagement, the scholarly community has yet to address their potential to build solid representations of marginalized themes, especially in the context of global inequalities and humanitarian efforts. *Sharmila* (World Food Programme, 2021), a serious game developed by the World Food Programme (WFP), stands out as a compelling case study. This narrative-driven simulation game set in the fictional country of Kaya invites players to assume the role of a humanitarian field officer navigating ethical dilemmas related to food insecurity, displacement, and community resilience (Figure 1). *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) was specially designed



Figure 1 Screenshot for *Sharmila*'s (WFP, 2021) intro section (WFP, 2021)

to raise awareness about food insecurity and the difficulties faced by vulnerable populations, and its game environment offers a chance for players to immerse themselves in the real-world realities of hunger, displacement, and survival.

Gee (2003) highlights how games promote situated learning through active participation, beyond rote memorization. This approach makes *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) an interesting subject for examining the new era of digital games meant to mediate humanitarian issues, particularly in their depiction of “the other”—a concept that is central to the analysis of the game’s potential. Hall (1997) argues that the construction of difference is basal to how societies define themselves and tend to attribute marginalized groups a sense of being ‘objects of discourse’, hindering their roles as active people with agency. In the context of serious games, this opens space for critical questions about which voices are always occupying central spots and how narratives of poverty and crisis are framed.

Existing literature on serious games has mainly focused on discussing how effective they are in terms of knowledge retention, levels of engagement, and potential to trigger changes in behavior (Boyle et al., 2016). However, there is still room for scholars to amplify research on serious games that specifically tackle humanitarian issues and discuss how they balance the sense of education with achievement entertainment while also tackling representation ethics.

This study relies on thematic analysis to explore *Sharmila*’s (WFP, 2021) pedagogical and representational value, focusing on representations of otherness within the gameplay,

tackling how the game’s design, narrative, and mechanics can be articulated as potential instruments for social change. Accordingly, the objective of this research is to analyze how this serious game represents otherness and constructs narratives of humanitarian crisis through its characters, mechanics, and cultural framing, assessing its potential as a digital tool for social change. By positioning *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) within the niches of cultural representation and serious games, this research adds a contribution to ongoing debates on the role of digital games in maturing public knowledge related to global inequalities and social justice. Furthermore, the data shared here also brings insights into the functionality of serious games as responsible storytelling devices that can raise awareness, educate, and advocate.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Otherness Representation in Digital Games

The representation of otherness is fundamentally important in influencing how gamers view and interact with digital games. Digital games often portray otherness as they require designers to represent diverse characters, cultures, or perspectives that contrast with the players’, generating a sense that representation can either reflect stereotypes and biases or champion inclusivity and diversity. Thus, analyzing otherness in games reveals how selfhood is shaped through social interaction is crucial for empathy, social interaction, and cultural understanding.

Stuart Hall’s theory of representation suggests that meaning is produced and exchanged in a culture through

language, signs, and images (Hall, 1997). Representation is not merely reflective but constructive, so it shapes and creates reality. Hall's (1997) concept of representation is used here to guide the identification of how *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) images, character dialogues, and visual cues build cultural difference and assign meaning to the "other." The combination of alterity and representation provides a perspective on how cultural identities are constructed around the dynamics of self and other. The relationship between alterity and representation can be illustrated through many facets of cultural identity construction. We argue that alterity and representation provide a valuable framework for analyzing how cultural identities are constructed and understood, which could be complemented by the concept of ethics of care concerning the human aspect of relationships and therefore encompasses empathy, compassion, and responsibility (Held, 2005). Specifically in the case of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), Held's (2005) ethics of care frames the evaluation of its empathetic and relational design choices, particularly how the player's decisions cultivate compassion, responsibility, and moral reflection during gameplay.

One of the key aspects of the ethics of care is its commitment to challenging harmful stereotypes, since they may perpetuate misconceptions and biases, leading to the marginalization of certain groups. Through the promotion of accurate and respectful representations, the media can help renegotiate these stereotypes and foster a more inclusive society (Sander-Staudt, 2018). The ethics of care also considers the need for positive portrayals of marginalized groups, which may empower individuals and communities by recognizing their strengths, contributions, and singular perspectives, as

positive representations can help shift public perception and promote social justice (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018).

Media and communication play a critical role in shaping public perception and social dynamics (Arias, 2019); notwithstanding, the representation of the other in the media often perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces societal power dynamics. And, although there has been a gradual shift towards more diverse representations, even if these are often inconsistent and can still fall into the ease of superficial diversity (Warner, 2018). So, despite the existence of positive strides toward better representation of others in the media, significant challenges remain, so it is crucial to continue advocating for more accurate and respectful portrayals and to support media literacy initiatives that empower audiences to critically engage with media content (Potter, 2013; Perez et al., 2024).

The representation of otherness in digital games has been researched and discussed, taking into account different perspectives. One perspective is centered on gender representation since the gaming industry has been traditionally associated with the masculine and women tend not only to be misrepresented, as attributed roles as either damsels in distress or hyper-sexualized characters (Ferreira & Gani-to, 2016; de la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2025), and the misrepresentation of women in video games can influence players' perceptions of gender roles and contribute to the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Nevertheless, despite the historical association of the gaming industry with masculinity, there has been a growing recognition of the need for more inclusive and diverse representations, a shift partly

driven by the increasing number of female gamers and the demand for more relatable and empowering female characters (de la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2025). Gender has also been approached from an LGBTQ+ community perspective, because the representation of LGBTQ+ characters has been increasing (Látal, 2023), with highly popular games like *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) exploring bisexuality (Ruberg, 2019). Different studies have brought attention to the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of marginalized groups, contributing to the recognition and discussion of these issues (Shaw, 2014; Süngü, 2020; Látal, 2023).

A different perspective on otherness explores racial and ethnic diversity. Digital games' lack of racial diversity has often been criticized, primarily because many still feature a lot of white characters. People of color are significantly underrepresented in digital games, both as characters (mostly as protagonists) and in the gaming industry itself (Chaplin & Vanderhoef, 2014; Passmore et al., 2018). Stereotyped characteristics are frequently used to depict characters of color when they appear, which can reinforce harmful biases (Ramasubramanian et al., 2023). Digital games have also fallen short in terms of the representation of a wide range of cultural backgrounds accurately and respectfully. Characters from non-Western cultures are often underrepresented or depicted through stereotypes, such as the tendency to present Middle Eastern characters as villains or terrorists (Saleem & Anderson, 2013; Al-Batineh, 2021) or Latin American characters as gang members or drug dealers (de la Vega, 2021). Despite not being the most visible, there are also positive examples of otherness representation in digital games,

like the case of Zau, from *Legend of Kenzera™: ZAU* (Surgent Studios, 2024), a protagonist of an action game inspired by Bantu-speaking cultures; or *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014), a game inspired in the folklore of an Alaska Native people, *the Iñupiat*, which had collaborated in the game development.

A last perspective considered essential to be addressed is disability representation, despite academic research on this topic remaining relatively underexplored (Nardone et al., 2022) compared to gender or ethnic representation, perhaps due to characters with physical disabilities being rare in digital games. Existing research highlights that disabled characters are significantly underrepresented, for instance, Shell (2021) has shown that disabled characters often appear as secondary or non-playable characters rather than main protagonists, and the few times disabled characters are included, they tend to be portrayed through the use of stereotypes or tropes that can be harmful, such as disabled characters being depicted as overly dependent on others or as villains with disabilities being used to signify evil.

Notwithstanding, efforts have been made to improve disability representation in commercial games, and some have started to include disabled protagonists and more nuanced portrayals that highlight their strengths and individuality. Some examples are *Celeste*, in which the protagonist, Madeline, deals with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, and Eva, the protagonist of the indie game *Pulse*, is blind. The representation of the other can have a profound impact on players, so positive and accurate portrayals are needed since they can foster empathy, understanding, and a

sense of belonging (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023); conversely, negative or stereotypical representations can perpetuate misconceptions and exclusion (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). Serious games leverage the power of interactive storytelling to address social issues and promote cultural awareness through the incorporation of diverse cultural representations. These games can educate players about different traditions, values, and perspectives, and, in the case of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), these perspectives inform the subsequent analysis of the game by highlighting how the game's characters and scenarios operationalize difference. Specifically in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), this is achieved through gender, culture, and disability, all used as a means to construct empathy and challenge or reinforce existing stereotypes.

## 1.2 Games for Social Change

Serious games are games that look to offer entertainment experiences complemented with goals, such as educating, informing, or training specific skills (Michael & Chen, 2006). These games are developed using all the traditional game basic elements, and as games, they should be fun and entertaining. Nevertheless, being entertaining is not their primary goal; they have intrinsic alternative goals related to providing added value to players, which differentiate them from commercial entertainment games (Laamarti et al, 2014). Games play a crucial role in communication for social change because of their distinct capacity to engage, educate, and inspire players (Gee, 2003; Sicart, 2013a, 2013b) considers that games' potential as tools for social change has been poorly explored, the number of titles launched that tackle serious topics compared to the of non-serious ones is low, and due to

the commercial success and impact of some entertainment blockbusters, it ends up being a missed opportunity to imprint games with features that promote ethical gameplay. Sicart's (2013a, 2013b) notion of games as moral systems supports the interpretation proposed here for *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) mechanics and the approach to its procedural enactments of ethical reasoning, where gameplay decisions are structured to model humanitarian and moral values.

In fact, digital games have an immense potential for fostering social change due to their characteristics as representation systems and interactive media products, which offer engaging experiences to users. McGonigal (2011) emphasizes that games can create a sense of agency in players, enabling them to feel empowered to address real-world problems, since the possibility of first-hand experience and active participation is essential for players' capacity to understand complex social issues more deeply through gameplay (Dhiman, 2023). Another important dimension of the gaming experience is having the ability to be in the shoes of others, which can foster empathy and understanding for people from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016), leading to greater compassion and a willingness to take action on social issues. Games are also ideal environments for training problem-solving and critical thinking skills, which, according to Dihman (2023), can translate to real-world skills and encourage players to address social challenges creatively and effectively. Additionally, games may foster community building, since they can bring people together, creating communities that have cross-cultural and geographical divides, which can lead to collaborative efforts to address social issues and promote positive change (Pollack & Pierre-Louis, 2019). In



articulation with games' role as tools that can lead to different outputs, such as learning or fostering empathy, they can also serve as platforms for activism and social movements.

The aforementioned conceptual framework underpins the examination of *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) mechanics and narrative design, guiding the assessment of how the game's structural features enact social change principles through representation, empathy, and participatory learning. Building on this theoretical foundation, the next section introduces *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) as the case study through which these principles are examined in practice.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis to examine *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) as a tool for social change. Rather than testing the game with users, the analysis focuses on its internal structures: (i) narrative, (ii) characters, (iii) mechanics, and (iv) environments. This approach follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis, which is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning across a dataset. In this case, the "data" comprises in-game content, including character bios, mission structures, dialogue, visual elements, and interactive systems. The analysis involved close engagement with the game through repeated playthroughs, coding of relevant features, and interpretation of emerging themes. The coding process was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the material, and theoretically informed by

critical game studies, with attention to power, agency, and representation.

While thematic analysis is often applied to textual or interview-based data, this study extends the method to include procedural and ludic elements such as decision pathways, gameplay mechanics, and feedback systems. This broader data inclusion aligns with contemporary understandings in game studies, which treat games as multimodal systems that produce meaning not only through narrative and visuals but also through play (Bogost, 2006; Sicart, 2009; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016). Accordingly, the study adopts a ludonarrative perspective, in which meaning is seen to emerge from the interplay between narrative content and game mechanics. This integrative analytic approach is essential to understanding *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) pedagogical and representational strategies as a game designed for social impact.

### 2.2 Corpus and Data Collection

The corpus consists of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), a serious game developed by the WFP to educate players, primarily WFP staff and partners, on humanitarian response, food insecurity, and risk assessment. Considering the extensive size and branched structure of the game, which includes multiple regions, each with its own villages, characters, and decision-making paths, the analysis is based on a representative sample of in-game environments and character interactions. Those were selected according to the depth of their narrative.

Game content was accessed and documented via direct playthrough and systematic in-game observation. Field notes

and screenshots were collected and recorded by the research team to capture narrative structures, character portrayals, and the designs and elements involved in the environmental structure of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), all aiming to use the collected data stream to achieve the proposed study goal. It is noteworthy that special attention was given to situations involving player choice, representations of vulnerable communities, and moments designed to awaken a sense of empathy

in the user or to expose people to decision-based actions that trigger moral engagement.

2.3 Analytic Procedure

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process (familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and reporting), the thematic analysis was conducted in stages that sustained a thorough

Table 1 Deductive Themes and Analytical Categories

Deductive Theme	Analytical Category	Illustrative Examples
Representation of Difference / Otherness	Gendered leadership and empowerment; Humanitarian paternalism vs. community agency	Perina (Farmer): describes loss of crops and medicine due to the river project, highlighting indigenous women’s environmental knowledge and exclusion from decision-making.  Tubu (Tribe Speaker): Emphasizes indigenous autonomy and community consultation, showing resistance to external humanitarian paternalism.
Protection Risks and Conflict	Child-marriage framing as socio-economic coping mechanism; Disability and exclusion; Gender-based violence and livelihood precarity	Jiti (Mother): reveals how food scarcity and early marriage issues.  Petra (Local Farmer): Addresses child labour and the silencing of locals due to fear, exemplifying intersectional protection risks.
Cultural Framing and Visual Identity	Fictional synthesis of Global South aesthetics; Cultural specificity as empathy trigger	Sharmila (Technoshaman): Embodies a hybrid aesthetic blending technology and indigenous cosmology (cultural continuity).  Sara (Child Protection Actor): Shown in bright patterned garments and a respectful posture, reinforcing visual authenticity and professional care.
Game Mechanics and Learning	Engagement-score as formative learning mechanism; “Engines” as procedural metaphors for humanitarian skills	Thrul (Farmer): Explains the construction of the “Data Engine” as a metaphor for participatory information-sharing and capacity-building.  Maduc (Engineer): Explains the power of communication towers and how they connect villagers, UN officers, and partners.
Emotional Engagement and Social Impact	Empathic storytelling and affective immersion; Ethics of care through relational decision-making	Rafa (Local Child): Evokes empathy by narrating his brother’s disappearance and exploitation, reinforcing the ethics of care in player response.

theory-driven process grounded in deductive thematic coding. During familiarization, the researchers engaged in extended gameplay sessions, which allowed for the systematic observation of *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) environments, missions, and decision-making structures. During each playthrough, field notes and screenshots were collected to document recurring patterns related to representation of difference, ethics of care, pedagogical intent, immersive learning, and procedural rhetoric. The themes were derived from the study's theoretical framework. Considering the different environments and character interactions within the game, each was considered a unique unit of analysis. Visual, textual, and mechanical elements such as dialogue options, mission outcomes, and feedback systems) were examined and coded according to their relation to the deductive categories. Codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected how *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) represents otherness and enacts humanitarian principles through play. Table 1 below outlines the deductive themes and analytical categories used in this study, each derived from the theoretical framework

and substantiated through in-game evidence. Notably, these categories guided the organization of findings presented in the following sections.

Aiming to ensure analytic transparency, our coding process was iterative, so initial observations were revisited in subsequent replays to confirm consistency and refine interpretations. Field notes and screenshots collected by both researchers formed an audit trail that supported theme validation. Although coding was primarily researcher-led and deductive, inductive insights (e.g., portrayals of vulnerability, cultural cues, or empathy triggers) were incorporated when they added nuance to our predefined categories. After establishing the themes and categories, the resulting coded material was then interpreted through the lens of the theoretical framework outlined earlier in the paper, hence connecting our descriptive coding of *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) game environments and mechanics to broader analytical claims about how serious games can embody humanitarian principles and foster empathy through play.

Table 2 Corpus & Sessions Summary

Game Details	<i>Sharmila</i> - first publicly recognized in 2021, winning the Australian Game Developer Awards 'Excellence in Serious Games' on October 6, 2021; no official public release date available
Total Playthroughs	5
Total Gameplay Hours	12
Device	MacOS and Windows MS
Language Setting	English
Data Collected	Narrative transcripts (dialogue captures), mission/engine states, engagement-score snapshots, environment screenshots (39 screenshots total)

Table 3 Sample Overview of Analyzed Characters and Thematic Focus in *Sharmila*

Character (Role)	Gender / Age	Scene & Main Theme	Key Issue / Narrative Focus
Jiti (Mother)	Female, 41	Wedding Season/ Gender Inequality	Child marriage due to food insecurity
Kasano (Farmer)	Male, 31	Land Dispute/ Indigenous Autonomy	Local exclusion from land/resource decisions
Petra (Local Farmer)	Female, 45	Conflict Zone/ Disability exclusion	Fear of reporting child labour
Rafa (Local Child)	Male, 13	Missing Boys/ Child Protection	Brother exploited as a child labourer
Lerick (Local NGO)	Female, 38	Community Recovery	Food scarcity and child marriage
Sinah (Truck Driver)	Female, 35	Field Logistics/Moral responsibility	Staff ignore child marriage offers
Juani (Mayor)	Female, 46	Moringa Crops/Food security	Flooding destroys nutritional sources
Perina (Farmer)	Female, 30	River Project/ Environmental displacement	Loss of crops and medicine access
Tenshin (Field Officer)	Male, 24	IDP Camp/Disability Inclusion	Lack of accessible communication
Tubu (Tribe Speaker)	Male, 72	Rantigo Land/Cultural preservation	Indigenous rights ignored in projects
Suhala (Mother)	Female, 27	Language Barriers – Intercultural Conflict	Marginalization of the indigenous group
Sara (Child Protection Actor)	Female, 49	Festival Season/ Education	Boys aged 11–14 are absent from school
Vern (Minister)	Female, 36	Food Supply Crisis/Governance	Agencies neglect community priorities
Thrul (Farmer)	Male, 61	Data Engine Project/ Digital Literacy	Building local data for protection
Maduc (Engineer)	Female, 21	Communications Tower/Access	Broken communication with UN agencies
Mohn (Gov. Leader)	Male, 48	Khazara Settlement/Governance	Bureaucratic distance from locals

Character (Role)	Gender / Age	Scene & Main Theme	Key Issue / Narrative Focus
Sharmila (Technoshaman)	Female, ??	Technoshaman's Journey/Ethics	Bridges tech, spirituality, empathy
Tilda (Village Elder)	Female, 72	Desert Region/Mobility	Isolation of elderly women
Bachir (Village Leader)	Male, 55	Ibrum Village/Coordination	Need for improved communication
Atepo (WFP Field Officer)	Male, 33	Field Site – Emergency response	Communication gaps with locals
Bestadot (Partner)	Male, 41	Partnership Context/Collaboration	Partners lack food aid capacity
Chenil (Representative)	Male, 39	Community Meeting/Representation	Local voices in decision-making
Doshi (Field Officer)	Female, 29	Operational Scene/Logistics	Food shortages in remote settlements
Farhad (Field Officer)	Male, 32	Field Context/Conflict	Mobility risks in insecure zones
Randa (Cooperating Partner)	Female, 27	Camp Operations/PSEA Policy	Sexual exploitation during aid work
Minash (WFP Personnel)	Female, 26	Rural Area/Gender and Migration	Women affected by snowstorms
Tenshin (Field Officer)	Male, 24	IDP Camp/Disability	Need for accessible communication
Tubu (Tribe Elder)	Male, 72	Rantigo Land/Rights & consent	Lack of consultation in WFP projects
Tilda (Village Elder)	Female, 72	Desert Settlement/Health Access	Blocked mobility for women
Suhala (Mother)	Female, 27	Language Barriers/Displacement	Ethnic exclusion during aid delivery
Zerena (Gov. Leader)	Female, 61	Wyic Nation/Governance	Symbol of female leadership

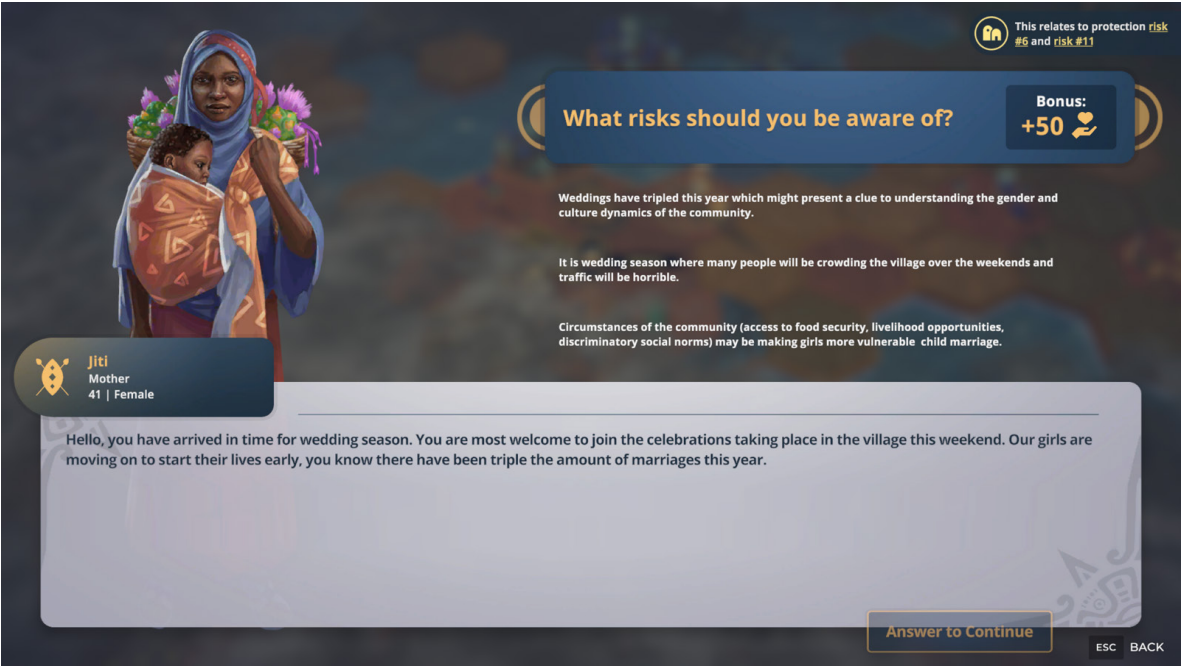
2.4 Data Display & Audit Trail

To enhance methodological transparency, Table 2 summarizes corpus scope, playthroughs, and documentation outputs, and Table 3 details the sampling frame across regions/settlements/characters.

The screenshots below (Figures 2 and 3) are illustrative examples of the in-game environments and interactions analyzed

in this study. Each example demonstrates how narrative dialogue, character design, and interface cues work together in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) and are representative of the broader dataset summarized in Table 3, and were selected to visually contextualize key narrative patterns discussed throughout the analysis.

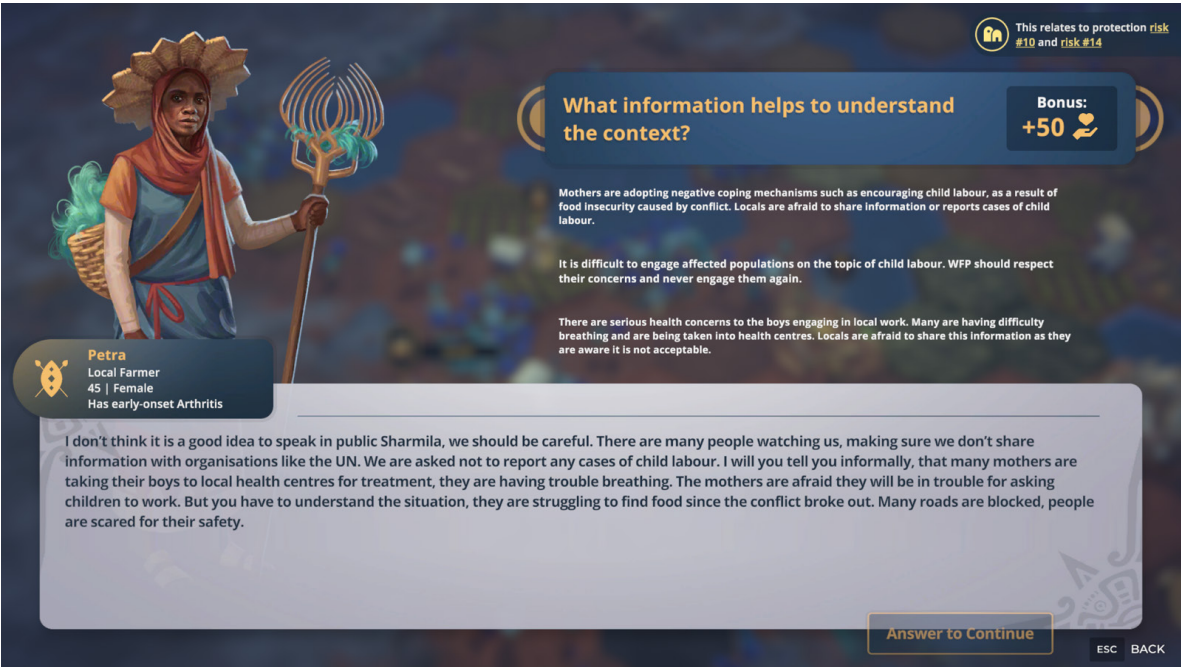
To ensure comprehensive representation, we adopted a maximum-variation sampling strategy across in-game regions,



**Figure 2** Character Jiti (Mother) during the “Wedding Season” sequence, illustrating how gender norms and cultural expectations intersect with food insecurity and early marriage. Players need to identify social risks and be aware of how vulnerability can be socially constructed (WFP, 2021)

capturing diverse protection risks (e.g., child marriage, health crises), representational forms (e.g., gender, culture, disability), and gameplay mechanics (e.g., mission types). We considered the dataset analytically sufficient once no substantially new codes emerged across two consecutive settlements within each region, indicating stability in the identified patterns.

All in-game images and screenshots used in this study were captured directly during the researchers' playthroughs for academic analysis and illustrative purposes only. *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is freely accessible through the WFP's public training platform, and all visual material remains under its copyright. The use of images complies with fair academic and educational use principles. Screenshots were captured at a 1920×1080 pixel resolution to ensure legibility while maintaining fidelity to the original game visuals.



**Figure 3** Character Petra (Local Farmer) addressing child labour and maternal coping mechanisms within a conflict-affected region. The scene exemplifies *Sharmila*'s (WFP, 2021) ethics of care, where players face moral dilemmas

## 2.5 Game Overview and Gameplay Structure

*Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a serious game developed by the United Nations WFP as part of its humanitarian training toolkit. Overall, the game's design mixes storytelling and decision-making mechanics to train players and exposes them to themes such as food security, protection, and community engagement, bringing matters of crisis contexts to the core of its narrative.

*Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is set in the fictional nation of Kaya. Once in the past, Kaya was blessed with the eternal engine that guarantees all the tribes have access to everything that they need to have a healthy life. The periods in the game are referred to as moments of light and darkness, with 'darkness' representing difficulties in infrastructure and access to basic needs such as growing agriculture props, clean water, and shelter. Players assume the role of Sharmila, and their role is to travel, investigate problems, and help the inhabitants of Kaya. As players advance in the game, they encounter settlements filled with people, challenges, and conflict - the objective is to speak to these people, understand their challenges, and make decisions that will improve their quality of life and help them thrive.

As *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a game about exploring a world different from our own but with familiar problems, its gameplay unfolds through dialogue-based interactions, mission objectives, and ethical decision-making that simulate real-world humanitarian dilemmas. However, instead of keeping competition and combat at the core of its game mechanism, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) encourages problem-solving, negotiation, and

empathy-driven choices, guiding players to strengthen cultural sensitivity while navigating the game's operation. As the missions are completed, the engagement score goes up, so players are marking their progress with a system based on dynamic feedback and their responsiveness to community needs, and how they act on behalf of humanitarian principles. This means that success in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is assessed qualitatively, opening space for personal reflection and supporting the game's pedagogical goal of formative learning and critical thinking rather than performance maturity.

## 3. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) revealed a complex point of connection between representation, cultural framing, conflict, pedagogical logic, and emotional engagement. The game's narrative and structural features offer multiple entry points to support reflection on how digital games can promote awareness of humanitarian crises and challenge popular constructions of otherness. The following subsections will discuss the dimensions identified in the game and present illustrative examples extracted from the dataset.

### 3.1 Representation of Otherness in *Sharmila*

Data from the game narrative of *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) shows that it presents a solid variety of characters who embody different forms of social vulnerability and cultural norms. Within the game, these characters are part of a precarious environment, but some of them are still portrayed with dignity, depth, and individual agency. At most, characters do not share deep personal backstories during the narrative of the game, and



only a few allow access to deep, in-character perspectives. This nuance should be added for accuracy. For instance, Farhad is a 55-year-old man, a WFP Field Officer, and he uses a wheelchair designed by a technoshaman, namely Sharmila, a shaman who makes use of modern technology to live his life. Also, Sharmila herself is a female field agent who assertively moves through different high-risk contexts and demonstrates a lot of compassion in her dialogues. She is a female member of the Nawa tribe who was banished after trying to fix the Eternal Engine, which is referred to by the tribe's folklore as being responsible for the balance between Lightness and Darkness. Since darkness has been prevailing in the game's narrative, she has dedicated her mission to solving the issue, despite women not being allowed to interact with the engine. Her portrayal is an invitation to rethink gendered expectations and reflects efforts in humanitarian education to popularize female leadership. However, the game also has a pattern of intervention with a recurring need for the player to "fix" community problems, which may be an illustrative example of how tension can arise in broader dynamics of representation in humanitarian narratives that are gamified.

To ensure analytical transparency and to connect descriptive findings with their empirical basis, Table 4 provides a sample of pivotal dialogues extracted directly from the game dataset. Each entry summarizes how specific in-game interactions informed the deductive themes and analytical categories identified in this study. These excerpts exemplify how meaning is constructed through player–character exchanges, linking representational, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions to the broader humanitarian framework embedded in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021).

The game's overall narrative seems to challenge reductive or simplistic portrayals of marginalized groups by offering the user access to layered narratives and different types of motivations behind each character's path of action. In *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), characters are not shown as passive victims of their reality and show up more as active parts of their communities who participate in decision-making, resistance, and negotiation to fight against structural injustice. The game's cast is overall diverse with multiple gender identities, family roles, age groups, and economic contexts. Each of these representations in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is associated with different dimensions of otherness.

Despite the bet on variety, some representational choices in *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) gameplay operate within popular humanitarian standards. Commonly, players need to 'correct' cultural misunderstandings or stop harm in some contexts in the game, and this strategy may subtly reinforce the idea that vulnerable communities are heavily dependent on the logic of 'another' to become stable. While aligned with training goals, this may reinforce the gap between empowerment and paternalism present in humanitarian discourse.

### 3.2 Protection Risks and Conflict Themes

Conflict is a core part of *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) gameplay, as the game constructs risk through different real-world scenarios, including child marriage, resource scarcity, interpersonal conflicts, gender inequality, health crisis, or even cultural misunderstandings. These conflicts are not just obstacles that need to be overcome, but as learning opportunities where players must use their particular beliefs in terms of cultural

Table 4 Illustrative Dialogues and Analytical Insights (excerpts directly from the game dataset)

Character (Role)	Excerpt (Dialogue)	Analytical Theme	Interpretive Note
Rafa (Local Child)	<i>"Zutu was not accepted by our family and the school, as they think he is a bit slow to learn. Only and my sisters can go to the local school."</i>	Protection Risks/Family Conflict	Illustrates exclusion of children with disabilities and breakdown of family safety nets; emphasizes social exclusion and vulnerability.
Petra (Local Farmer)	<i>"We are asked not to report any cases of child labour(...)mothers are afraid they will be in trouble for asking children to work."</i>	Representation of Difference/ Otherness	Reveals fear of surveillance and conflict between community norms and humanitarian principles; reflects moral complexity in protection ethics.
Perina (Farmer)	<i>"The water project destroyed our crops and medicinal plants... I have no medicine for my baby who is sick and I now have to walk the forest to find similar plants."</i>	Protection Risks and Conflict	Illustrates how environmental disruption increases women's caregiving burden and exposure to risk; links ecological injustice to humanitarian ethics and gendered protection concerns.
Tilda (Village Elder)	<i>"We are living so far away in this desert, it is a hard life... We are not doing well, children are hungry, older people don't have strength to get up in the mornings."</i>	Emotional Engagement & Social Impact	Evokes intergenerational suffering and displacement; invites empathy through the lens of age, climate vulnerability, and food insecurity.
Sharmila (Technoshaman)	<i>"As a technoshaman, the practical knowledge of how to maintain and fix the technology was part of how you were raised - but none of your people fully understand how it works."</i>	Representation of Difference / Otherness	Symbolizes female leadership and technological agency within patriarchal constraints; challenges gender norms in humanitarian training.
Tubu (Tribe Speaker)	<i>"Our ancestors have been very kind to us over the centuries... Recently though, we have been experiencing a big problem. The water supply running through our village has been affected."</i>	Cultural Framing & Visual Identity	Depicts indigenous cosmology and intergenerational knowledge as sources of moral authority; connects cultural heritage to resource management.

Character (Role)	Excerpt (Dialogue)	Analytical Theme	Interpretive Note
Vern (Minister)	<i>"We are having many issues with the food supply in this region. We are hoping WFP can support with emergency food supplies."</i>	Game Mechanics & Learning	Represents institutional coordination and decision-making; reflects real-world humanitarian collaboration and dependency patterns.
Randa (Cooperating Partner)	<i>"There has been a sexual exploitation and abuse situation reported through the community feedback mechanism."</i>	Protection Risks & Conflict	Shows procedural awareness and ethical responsibility; integrates gender-based violence prevention into game pedagogy.
Sinah (Truck Driver)	<i>Recently things have changed. When we stop for tea on the way through, many fathers in the village ask to marry their girls.</i>	Emotional Engagement & Social Impact	Demonstrates moral discomfort and complicity in humanitarian logistics; reveals ethical reflection through everyday interactions.
Mohn (Government Leader)	<i>Well? The Swasao region is wonderful, isn't it? Are you traveling alright?</i>	Representation of Difference / Otherness	Illustrates polite but distanced institutional discourse; highlights the tone of bureaucratic detachment in humanitarian communication.

sensitivity, protection, and humanitarian ethics. Each mission requires players to engage with different community members across the fictional regions of Kaya. Each region has its own ethnic characterization, impacting characters' physiognomy, clothes, and artifacts, and it is in these sub-worlds that the issues start emerging. For example, in Hekara village, the practice of child marriage is portrayed not as cultural backwardness. In this community within the game, young girls face pressure to marry early due to cultural norms and economic hardship, and Sharmila works with community members, implementing educational programs and providing economic support to families to reduce the pressure on young girls to marry. Hence, the narrative embraces the idea

that marrying young is a type of coping mechanism linked to resource scarcity and systemic poverty.

In this scenario, players are asked to collaborate with community members and other partners to develop community education initiatives and offer economic support to families, thus addressing the root causes of the issue rather than allowing them to make choices without imposing external moral judgment. Furthermore, players encounter environmental and political conflicts in the different villages. In Swasao, for instance, outbreaks of disease caused panic and mistrust, and resolution from the players' side includes the enhancement of healthcare services and awareness campaigns to

educate the population. The area in the game is also known for tribal disputes ignited by misinformation and restricted access to basic services. These scenarios reflect multi-layered protection risks, e.g., limited access to legal identification, health care, cooking fuel, and information in minority languages. In each of these cases, the player needs to deal with competing interests and make decisions surrounded by power imbalances to 'fix' community dynamics with solutions that apply to the contexts that are happening inside the game, but that also happen in real life for many. Another example of real-life conflict portrayed in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is gender-based violence, which appears in several narratives. A character example to follow is Jiti's narrative, a 41-year-old mother holding a baby, who refers to child marriage as a survival mechanism, highlighting how women and girls change their eating habits and travel far for work due to scarcity. Petra, a local farmer with arthritis, is also a good example, as her character expresses fear of surveillance when discussing child labor and conflict-related food insecurity. She notes that boys, including those with disabilities, are sent to work on cocoa plantations, while mothers avoid reporting abuses out of fear. Her character's discourses also tackle the impact of conflict on food security and state that families are struggling to find food, and that is the reason they opt for these solutions.

Rafa, a 13-year-old boy, reveals another type of vulnerability shown in the game: the marginalization of children with learning difficulties. His brother, Zutu, was excluded from both school and family support, ultimately going missing after seeking work. Their family narrative opens a window into social exclusion, disability discrimination, and the breakdown

of traditional family safety nets because of economic disadvantages.

The resolution methods modeled in the game are based on a mix of consensus-building and active listening to the in-game communities. When playing *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), instead of binary decisions, players are encouraged to rely on inclusive logic, communication, and respect for cultural norms while advocating for protection principles. This narrative design resists paternalistic solutions and instead promotes co-created outcomes through trust-building participatory dialogue and reflective humanitarian action. It is by embedding protection risks into both character narratives and community interactions that the game effectively links pedagogical experience with humanitarian decision-making, guiding players to internally reflect on relational ethics, adaptive problem-solving, and empowerment. Conflict is used in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) as a means to educate players who are not interacting with these issues as isolated or superficial matters. Instead, the game embeds them in much more complex community dynamics that demand thoughtful negotiation from the players' side, reinforcing an ethics-of-care approach, where the resolution is co-constructed with local actors.

### 3.3 Cultural Framing and Visual Identity

Although the game is set in the fictional country of Kaya, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) relies on a combination of visual and narrative with linguistic elements to evoke real-world cultural references from across the Global South. The in-game environments are made with scenes and direct characteristics of rural life, e.g., traditional housing, subsistence farming landscapes,

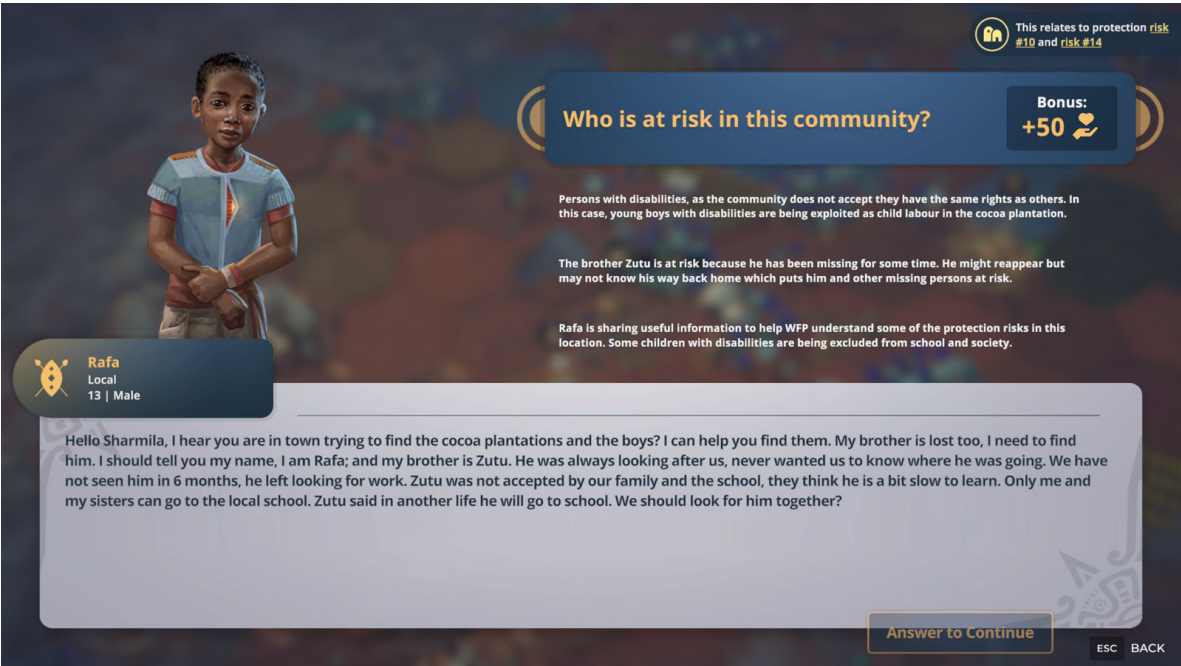
and water wells, and characters within these scenarios wear culturally distinctive clothing (e.g. Petra's handmade hat made with natural materials). A good example within the game is Tubu, 72 years old, a male tribe speaker from the Ratingo, a tribe that has a deep connection with nature. He is depicted holding a staff and wearing traditional clothing, which includes elements that reflect the cultural heritage and traditions of his people; the staff he holds is likely a symbol of authority and wisdom. This and other design choices imply that the narrative was built with a careful effort to build a setting that, while fictional, resonates with real-life humanitarian contexts shaped by poverty, inequality, and displacement.

Furthermore, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) relies on cultural specificity as a tool for empathy-building. As the narrative unfolds, specific practices such as oral storytelling, traditional healing, and community farming are not shown as exotic but as part of the characters' everyday challenges. Perina, for example, is a 30-year-old female farmer, who has been affected by a water project downstream that destroyed her crops and medicinal plants. This has forced her to travel far into the forest to find similar plants for food and medicine, which is dangerous due to illegal loggers and poachers. There is also Suhala, a female indigenous who is pregnant and is depicted with attire that reflects her background. Suhala mentions the challenges posed by continuous rain, which makes it difficult to travel through the forest and access services. She mentions that her community lives in an isolated region and lacks government support. They have a unique language that few people outside their group speak, which contributes to their isolation. Her character highlights the growing tensions between the local people, which she considers to be exacerbated by the lack

of access to basic services and resources. She also mentions that most of WFP's nutrition centers are located too far away for pregnant women to travel, and that it is often unsafe for them to do so. These examples highlight how cultural identity is preserved in the game and also connected to experiences of risk and resilience.

Moreover, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) places minoritized perspectives, including those of women, children, elders, indigenous communities, and persons with disabilities, at the core of its narrative. Characters like Farhad, a field officer who uses a wheelchair, and Rafa, a boy whose brother with learning difficulties was excluded from school and went missing, are solid examples of how different notions of vulnerability are linked with discussions around protection risks within the game (Figure 4).

However, the game's symbolic landscape also introduces interpretive complexities because there is a variety of cultural features from different regions used to visually present the game, tackling aesthetic choices from the Middle East, East Africa, and South Asia. This visual mix makes *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) fiction a composition of the Global South that can be general and not too focused on cultural distinctions. Excluding the nuances, in this case, may be functionally effective for humanitarian training, but it puts a shadow over the structural and historical particularities of the crises represented within the game. So, *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) cultural framing is somehow between pedagogical flexibility and the ambiguities of cultural representation. Nevertheless, by using culture not just to decorate the game's setting, but more as a narrative core and ethical link, the game successfully triggers



**Figure 4** Rafa (Local Child) expressing concern over his missing brother, Zutu. The dialogue connects disability exclusion, family responsibility, and child protection, which are all key aspects of *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) representation of layered vulnerability and humanitarian ethics

cultural awareness, empathic engagement, and a sense of recognition within users who are facing digital exemplifications of humanitarian experience. The gameplay settings encourage players to engage with cultural differences and not see them as obstacles but as an opportunity to apply critical lenses through which notions of protection, justice, and dignity must be interpreted.

### 3.4 Game Mechanics and Learning

Beyond solid strategies of narrative representation, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) also relies on educational logic to unfold its narrative's mechanics. As players advance in the game, they are guided by a real-time engagement score, a dynamic feedback system that reflects how well they respond to the needs of local communities across a 100-day mission. This score is directly linked to the strategic use of seven key "engines," which are essentially functional metaphors for core humanitarian

competencies. The solutions are represented by the different engines Sharmila can build and upgrade, each representing a key area for local population support, including:

- 1. Communication:** radio communication, audio communication (speaker announcements, music), visual communication (images, paintings, graphics), text-based communication, easy-to-read text (inclusive of persons with disabilities)
- 2. Data:** RAM food security assessment, disaggregated data, protection analysis, joint WFP analysis, and interagency assessment
- 3. Disability Inclusion:** Accessibility engine for accessible food distribution sites, buildings, meeting areas, nutrition programs, and cash-based transfers.
- 4. Engagement:** focus group discussions, key informant interviews, community feedback mechanism, language translation, referrals on gender-based violence services and mental health, and psychosocial support
- 5. Partnership:** affected populations, UN agencies, government, civil society organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities, protection actors (child protection, gender-based violence), protection and food security clusters, and interagency services.
- 6. Supply Chain and Logistics:** transport, UN Humanitarian Air Service, warehouse, food distribution center, and procurement.

**7. WFP Activities:** general food assistance, school feeding, nutrition interventions, asset creation and livelihood support, climate adaptation and disaster risk management, social protection, and smallholder agricultural market support.

Each engine is linked to field-based practices that players must activate thoughtfully, depending on the context of the mission. For instance, if a player is interacting with Jamora, a WFP field staff member, or Mohn, a government leader (Figure 5) they must align communication, logistics, or protection strategies with context-specific needs, and this goes from collaborating with local leaders to addressing illiteracy and fraud.

The game also includes ethically complex situations, such as the context of Jahern, a displaced man supporting a family of seven. In the game, he mentions that they have found shelter and water in the camp, and humanitarian workers are providing some assistance, although it is temporary. Jahern expresses embarrassment that none of his family members have been to school, making reading a challenge, so they rely on others to read for them when dealing with mobile money agents. He also highlights the issue of being tricked by people when collecting money from these agents and mentions that his wife has hearing challenges, adding to the family's overall vulnerability. Jahern asks for assistance in understanding posters, and his context embraces issues related to illiteracy and financial fraud. When dealing with these characters, players must combine communication and protection engines to promote access to reliable information.

A similar scenario unfolds when players encounter Zere-na, the Government Leader of the Wylic Nation. She mentions the challenges faced by communities in her region, particularly with the weakening of the Eternal Engine and the spreading effects of the Darkness across Kaya. She highlights the request for UN support to find solutions, emphasizing the importance of listening to the needs of various groups, including women, men, girls, boys, and persons with disabilities, to uncover hidden solutions. Her dialogue reflects her role as a leader and her responsibility to

address the challenges faced by her community, but she underscores the importance of inclusive approaches to problem-solving, considering the needs of diverse groups. It is noteworthy that *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) avoids penalizing players, so instead of “failing” missions, wrong or less effective decisions result in lower engagement scores. This can be interpreted as a case of formative learning since there is time for experimentation and reflection that ultimately leads to the development of humanitarian skills. *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) gameplay emphasizes soft competencies like active

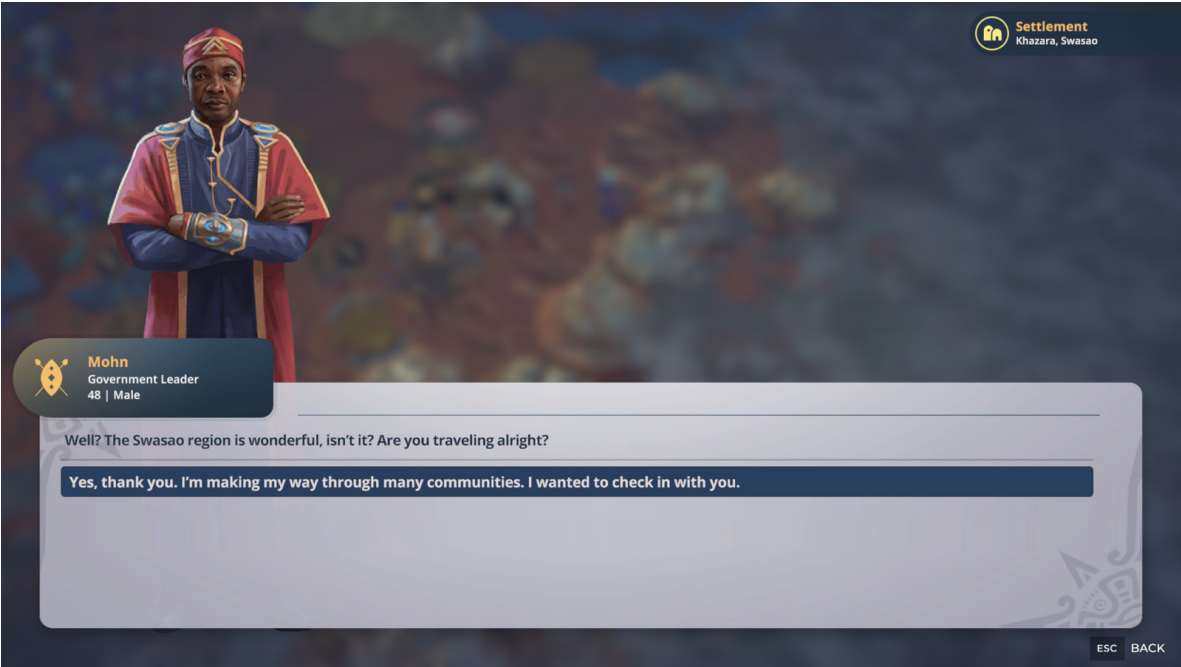


Figure 5 Mohn (Government Leader) welcoming Sharmila to the Swasao region.



listening, empathy, and collaborative negotiation and does not rely solely on binary precision. Some of the learning outcomes expected as the narrative unfolds are (i) a broader understanding of protection risks; (ii) application of humanitarian perspective; (iii) engagement and problem-solving; (iv) accountability; (v) emotional connection; (vi) cultural sensitivity; (vii) resource management; (viii) team collaboration; (ix) critical thinking, and (x) ethical decision-making.

For players who engage with *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), knowledge acquisition comes in the format of humanitarian issues, in-depth understanding, scenario analysis, and data interpretation. Complementarily, behavioral change happens with a sense of empathy through the engagement with the stories and perspectives of the different characters, as well as the direct need for ethical decision-making. When facing ethical dilemmas inside the game, players need to make decisions that would privilege humanitarian principles; hence, their proactive problem-solving needs to be motivated by addressing protection risks while improving community well-being. Beyond gameplay, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) offers supplementary materials, e.g., Protection Manuals, Accountability Plans, and training videos that reinforce learning objectives. Most importantly, by measuring progress not only by efficiency but by dignity-centered action, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) reinforces that meaningful humanitarian work requires more than technical expertise and is also dependent on inclusive thinking, adaptive communication, and ethical decisions that are based on reality. To succeed in the game, players need to go beyond action and intervention and enhance their ability to build trust, activate relevant mechanisms, and discuss accountability in affected populations.

### ***3.5 Emotional Engagement and Social Impact***

All the worlds within *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) are designed to evoke affective responses that deepen the learning process, encouraging players to deepen their intellectual and factual understanding of protection risks and also feel the weight of their decisions through live simulation. The emotional resonance of the game happens mainly through the narratives of community members facing different types of vulnerabilities, since many characters talk about their challenges in intimate, first-person terms. The narratives are not meant to be sensational or to become an exaggerated spectacle, so the tone is focused on grounded empathy, building this feeling through storytelling. This specific tone of voice is meant to emphasize notions of resilience and dignity within the complex context of humanitarian crises. Characters such as the aforementioned 13-year-old boy Rafa, whose brother has been missing for months after being excluded from school, invite players into deeply personal dilemmas involving real-life scenarios such as educational exclusion, disability stigma, and emotional loss. Likewise, Tilda, the 72-year-old elder from a desert tribe, invites a reflection on displacement caused by climate shocks, describing the exhaustion and uncertainty experienced by older adults when they are faced with broken health systems and food insecurity. These stories do not just portray their characters as victims in need of 'saving'; instead, they are placed as agents with knowledge and experience and as individuals capable of talking about their needs, hopes, and strategies to survive the crises.

*Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) affective design is supported by its immersive mechanics, which require players to engage in open dialogue, listen actively, and make decisions that have direct consequences on their engagement score. The cinematic visuals of the game also contribute to triggering emotional investment, as well as the dramatized crisis narratives that are always sustained by moral ambiguity. In different cases, players need to choose between logistical efficiency, community consensus, or cultural norms, so they need to consider the three sides of their decisions, i.e., strategic, emotional, and ethical.

By inviting players to act in the role of a humanitarian actor, the game promotes learning that is not merely cognitive but also affective and ethically embodied by those navigating the game's world. The game is not a call for activism, but a chance to encourage further reflections that may inspire players to question more about social representation, justice, and humanitarian responsibility in the offline world.

Ultimately, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a type of training and pedagogical tool that opens a new space for emotional literacy and ethical reflection. The game is a solid example of the potential of serious games to educate people and help them question and transform their attitudes toward solidarity, care, advocacy, and awareness.

#### 4. Discussion

Ethics of care, as defined by Held (2005), emphasizes empathy, compassion, and responsibility in the portrayal of characters and situations, aligning with *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021)

cultural representation, which reinforces that it is through language, signs, and images that cultural meaning is produced and shared (Hall, 1997). Additionally, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) presents real-world problems like gender inequality, resource scarcity, and child marriage as teaching opportunities because of its approach to conflict resolution, which emphasizes cultural sensitivity and humanitarian ethics. The game serves as an illustration of how the media can effectively reinforce the value of culturally sensitive representations (Arias, 2019).

The approach used in this study to analyze *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is particularly effective in training environments where nuances of representations are reduced to operational checklists, which happens commonly in gaming. Because *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) narrative carries culturally situated conflicts, its narrative is an inviting challenge to players to navigate the complexities of their morals and confront the binary thoughts behind it. This design aligns with Hall's notion of "contested meaning" (1997) and his statement that culture is not static but constantly renegotiated through discourse. *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) world is, by default, a digital space where humanitarian practitioners must contend with conflicting cultural, logistical, and ethical priorities, and it is the intersection of these three points that opens space for critical reflection that may reinforce players' ethical humanitarian engagement. *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is also proof of the value of digital games as narrative infrastructures, where meaning is co-created through gameplay and not just passively consumed. In this context, the game becomes a space of dialogue, where the process of learning is performative and situational, a notion that aligns with Gee's (2003) theory of situated learning.

Furthermore, *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) educational logic is embedded in its game mechanics. The game emphasizes soft skills like active listening, empathy, and collaborative negotiation, promoting formative learning through experimentation and reflection. Players' progress is measured by their engagement score, reflecting their response to community needs. This approach aligns with the principles of serious games, which aim to educate, inform, and train specific skills while providing entertainment (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016; Pollack & Pierre-Louis, 2019). In addition, these mechanics concretely operationalize Held's (2005) notion of the ethics of care by rewarding players not just because of their directed actions but also because of their attentiveness, relational sensitivity, and moral reflections. In *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), when players prioritize the collective well-being over game efficiency, they are mirroring a relational interdependence central to care ethics. Similarly, the "Engines" in the Kaya world function as a metaphor for humanitarian responsibility towards topics such as accessibility and communication, which proves that the game's design emphasises responsiveness and contextual judgment, two core principles of the ethics of care. For those playing *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021), moral reasoning emerges through interaction rather than following prescriptive rules.

This alignment between game structure and ethical philosophy thus illustrates how *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) mechanics embody more than representational intent; they function as learning tools that enact care in practice. By linking these gameplay systems to the theoretical framework introduced earlier, we could demonstrate how digital games can model ethical reasoning through play. In this sense, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) transforms moral abstraction into interactive

pedagogy, fully embracing the ethics of care in narrative form and in procedural experience.

In addition, the use of engagement scores in *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) can also be interpreted through the lens of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2006), in which rules and mechanics embody ideological arguments. If players can get a reward for their positive behaviors (e.g., deep listening and consensus-building), then the game is successfully communicating that humanitarian work does not depend only on efficiency, but on a solid ethical process. *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) game design is not rooted in what players can learn, but in how they learn it, which challenges traditional gamified tropes focused on "winning" instead of encouraging solid and responsible engagement with the game world. These aspects align with the ethics of care paradigm, both in game narrative and logic itself, highlighting relational ethics as the way to drop the focus on player heroism and walk toward community and shared feelings of victory.

## Concluding Remarks

*Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) has the ability to connect affective storytelling with operational realism. The game's core embraces humanitarian scenarios, but its major point of differentiation is in the fact that, to advance in the narrative, players must not look for straightforward or simplistic solutions. Instead, engagement with the game's portrayals of structural vulnerability is a condition to move forward. This design principle offers pedagogical lessons for humanitarian training and insights for the design of future serious games that also want to promote social transformation. Game designers,

educators, and communication professionals might benefit from *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) framework to understand how gameplay can serve as both a means of reflection of global disparities, as well as a means of intervention to propose more participatory and justice-oriented ways of thinking in games. *Sharmila's* (WFP, 2021) framework is an example of fostered knowledge and an applied example of the ethic of responsibility, framed by listening, contextual sensitivity, and acknowledgment of historical legacies that are shaping worldwide humanitarian actions.

Beyond its core training function, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a solid example of how digital platforms can be used to encourage long-term shifts in humanitarian education. The narrative is made to show that games can be a tool to simulate crises while also cultivating the sense of empathy, ethical reasoning, and intercultural sensitivity necessary for real-world engagement. In this sense, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a contribution to the advancements of communication intersecting with social change strategies in the digital age.

In conclusion, *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is an example of how serious games can inspire social change through less biased cultural representations influenced by the ethics of care. It renegotiates popular narratives, fosters a greater comprehension of humanitarian concerns and global inequality, and immerses players in the realities of survival, displacement, and hunger. *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) is a prime example of how storytelling can be employed responsibly in online games to inform, encourage, and increase public awareness of significant social issues. The contemporary integration of affective storytelling with learning mechanics shows the potential of

serious games to offer more than awareness; they can trigger actionable humanitarian skills among players. Examining how digital games depict otherness, conflict themes, cultural framing, game mechanics, and emotional engagement, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about how media affect public perceptions of social justice and global inequality.

Understanding how interactive media can mediate complex social realities is essential to navigating the digital landscape that continues to evolve. Games like *Sharmila* (WFP, 2021) are a step forward in engaging audiences with issues often misunderstood in traditional media formats. Further research may investigate how serious games can be enhanced to include more diverse viewpoints and stories, particularly from groups that are typically underrepresented in digital games and media in general. Additionally, studying how these games affect players' attitudes and actions toward social justice issues over the long run may yield insightful information.

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