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"You can't let yourself be defined by the parts that are broken": Immersion, Traumatic Memory and the Representation of PTSD in *Tell Me Why*

Introduction

Thanks to recent technological developments (such as high-resolution graphics or VR equipment), video games have become more realistic, and as a result, they possess new qualities that facilitate the process of engaging in the fictional worlds more deeply and thoroughly. Scholars who specialise in game studies often opt for the term 'immersion' to describe "video games' ability to absorb the player and continually keep her under its grasp" (Nae 11). Immersion can (but does not have to) be enhanced by the player's active role, specifically when they are the ones in charge of choosing particular pieces of dialogue and moving the gameplay forward. Such could be the case for the DONTNOD Entertainment game entitled *Tell Me Why*, which was released in three chapters in 2020.

Tell Me Why focuses on the emotional journey of revisiting traumatic experiences which occurred in the childhood of identical twins, Alyson and Tyler Ronan. After nearly ten years apart, the twins reunite to sell their childhood house. However, upon entering the bedroom of their late mother, they realise that the past might have been different than they initially remembered. The twins decide to learn the truth about their trauma and childhood. Owing to the game mechanics, the gameplay becomes individualised

and the consequences of actions taken by the player during the three chapters unravel at the end of the game. Importantly, the player initially remains unaware of whether their choice of dialogue might possess any meaning for the progression of the game and/or for the maintenance of relationships with non-playable characters. The information that a recently made choice bears significance is given only after making the decision, and it is signalled by a specific sound and icon. Moreover, the simplicity of the game mechanics, consisting in moving, examining objects and, most importantly, engaging in conversations, might lead to the impression that the gameplay experience is tedious or unappealing. It does, nonetheless, attract those who engage in games for the sake of the narrative, and not necessarily the play. Importantly, as argued by Alexander Galloway: "video games are not just images or stories or play or games, but *action*" (in Kapell 3). Thus, special emphasis should be put on the role of the player in the gaming experience, and in the case of the game in question, the player's actions dictate the unfolding of the events and eventually the conclusion of the game.

The key factor of the plot is the distinction between the known and the unknown, as the protagonists go on a journey through their psychological trauma. For the purpose of this study, I define trauma after Cathy Caruth as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (1996: 57). Deprived of the ability to control their own memories, the traumatised person is unwillingly brought back to the events which caused emotional distress and threat. Thus, a traumatised person remains "possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 1995: 4-5). The emotional and physical response occurring after the traumatic events reveals itself in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The symptoms of PTSD essentially derive "from the three symptom clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance, and arousal" (Golier et al. 226).

Traumatic memories might differ from "regular" memories, as the situation of danger or threat oftentimes leads to dissociation, which is

> an experience in which a person feels cognitively and emotionally removed from the current environment (...) [It] is an automatic response

> to overwhelming emotions. It is a protective response in which the individual "escapes" from the pain or intensity of an unbearable emotion. (...) It is a reaction that is fairly unique to specific types of traumatic situations—ones that are so uncontrollable, unavoidable, and threatening that physical escape is impossible. (Cloitre et al. 157)

Dissociation may further cause so-called dissociative amnesia, which prevents the traumatised person from retrieving the factual events at their will (Bremner 2013: 166). Instead, they are as if doomed to store the fragmented and incomplete memories (Golier et al. 226).

The aim of this article is to explore the devices employed in order to (re)present trauma in the narrative adventure game entitled *Tell Me Why*. In addition, the article investigates the role of the player in the gameplay experience, as the decisions they make have an impact on the relationship between the twins and the ending of the game.

Traumatic Memories Reflected in the Game Mechanics

When the player is first introduced to the game, the storyline seems to be rather simple, as it focuses on the protagonists' reunion after having been separated for ten years. The main characters, Alyson and Tyler, meet for the first time since the tragic death of their mother (Mary-Ann). What ought to be mentioned, however, are the circumstances in which Mary-Ann died. The initial recollection of the memories from the twins' childhood provided in the game offers a version in which Mary-Ann, angered by Tyler's transness, and provoked in particular by him cutting his hair short, tries to kill him with a gun. Upon hearing Tyler scream for help, Alyson runs to stop Mary-Ann and in defence of her brother she stabs her mother with a pair of scissors. Tyler successfully persuades Alyson to lie and tell the police that it was him who killed their mother. Eventually, Tyler is sent to a juvenile detention centre, and Alyson stays in town with her new legal guardian (a police officer, Eddy). This particular version of events is disputed once the twins discover a guidebook for parents of transgender children among their mother's possessions. The discovery, although potentially insignificant, changes the protagonists'

approach towards their traumatic past, as it contradicts their explanation concerning Mary-Ann's aggressive behaviour. The book leads to Tyler questioning the past the twins remembered and/or believed in: "She can't do this to me. Not now... When I've... finally made sense of a few things" (*Tell Me Why*, chapter 1). From this moment on, the game engages the player in the process of reconstructing the past, as the protagonists interview the residents of the town who were close to Mary-Ann and who might have known about her problems before the tragic events.

The exploration of the past is facilitated by the inclusion of supernatural elements, such as *the bond*—an ability to mentally share thoughts, feelings and memories between the twins. Moreover, Alyson and Tyler are capable of recalling their memories in the form of physical, and often quite detailed visions. These mechanisms, or powers, provide an opportunity for a player to (re)discover the past of the protagonists in a rather unusual, yet engaging form. They additionally seem to correspond to the ideas found in magical realism, which

> combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them (...) [it] radically modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its basis of representation from within. (Faris 1)

The twins possess and use a supernatural power which simply exists in their reality, yet it is noticeable only to them.

Throughout the game the possibility of interacting with an upcoming memory is signalled by a specific sound. Additionally, the area in which the recollected event happened starts to glow. The player cannot dismiss these memories, as they are necessary to understand the story and to progress within it. On the one hand, memories appear haphazardly and force the protagonist (and the player) to acknowledge them; on the other hand, though, the player needs to activate, or, as it is named in the game, *remember* them by holding the mouse button. The simultaneous intrusiveness of memories and the effort put

into activating them seem to represent the complex nature of the psychological process of retrieving memories.

The visions which occur in the game could be classified on the basis of their (in)direct connection to the traumatic memories associated with the death of Mary-Ann. The memories which hold no direct connection to the twins' trauma are remembered easily and rather quickly, as the player needs to hold the mouse button for approximately a second. In the case of the traumatic memories, particularly the ones preceding the death of Mary-Ann and/or happening in the same spot (the dock), the twins have trouble remembering them, which is also reflected in the player's experience, as in order to activate the vision, the mouse button needs to be held for much longer. What might be considered a rather insignificant element of the mechanics of the game, in fact, seems to correspond to the distinction made in trauma theory between regular and traumatic memories: "[h]ealthy (...) [m]emory formation involves encoding, storage (or consolidation), and retrieval" (Bremner et al. 2002: 379). In comparison,

> dissociative states at the time of psychological trauma may represent a marker of pathological processes affecting brain structures involved in memory, such as the hippocampus (...) Considering the role that the hippocampus plays in memory, dysfunction of the hippocampus may result in a breakdown of healthy integration of memory and consciousness. This breakdown may entail abnormalities of memory encoding, consolidation, or storage or some combination of the three. (Bremner et al. 2002: 390)

The mechanics of the game are constructed in a manner which seems to represent the difficulty of retrieving traumatic memories in real life.

The ability to re-imagine, or retrieve the traumatic memories through the aforementioned visions is eventually used to arrive at a conclusion as to what actually happened on the day Mary-Ann died. Each of the twins, after interviewing people around them and gaining new knowledge concerning the time before the event, remembers the event differently. The possibility of the twins experiencing dissociation due to experiencing extreme emotions suggests that this is what might have led them to remember the details of the event

differently. As argued in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*,

> [d]issociative states may also result in the encoding of bizarre or distorted traumatic memories that reflect altered perceptual states occurring at the time that traumatic memories were formed (...). Beyond the selectivity of the information that is encoded at the time of the trauma, repetitive rehearsal of traumatic memories can alter the meaning (...). The focus on central details at the expense of contextual information present in the initial encoding process becomes even more pronounced in rehearsal of traumatic memories. (Krystal et al. 158)

The twins remember the general event similarly. The one element that they cannot decide on, however, is the intention of Mary-Ann, and whether she genuinely intended to hurt Tyler, or whether he happened to surprise her the moment before a suicide attempt. The final decision, and the twins' different versions of the events, reflect the complexity of recapturing one's traumatic past. The core reason as to why Mary-Ann was pointing a gun at Tyler remains unknowable to both the protagonists and the players. However, the player is the one in control, as they can decide which version to assume to be true. Importantly, either choice, combined with other decisions taken by the player in the whole game, results in a different ending, partially pointing to another aspect of the traumatic memory—the difficulty to accept new elements of trauma, not considered previously:

> [i]n contrast to "ordinary" memories (both good and bad), which are mutable and dynamically changing over time, traumatic memories are fixed and static. They are imprints (engrams) from past overwhelming experiences, deep impressions carved into the sufferer's brain, body and psyche. These harsh and frozen imprints do not yield to change, nor do they readily update with current information. The 'fixity' of imprints prevents [one] from forming new strategies and extracting new meanings. (Levine 24–25)

Depending on the decisions made throughout the game, the epilogue shows either of the twins. If Tyler is seen in the epilogue, it confirms that "the twins will follow through on their plans to sell the house. Otherwise, Alyson will stay at 12 Cannery Road to process and heal from her grief in the place she knows

best" (https://www.tellmewhygame.com/endings-explained). Importantly, as it is noticed by the lead narrative designer Elise Galmard, the epilogue which includes Alyson staying in the house,

> is very much the Alyson way of healing and trying to make sense of it all: by channeling all of that energy into creation and art. Life is not over, and it is most definitely not put on hold for Alyson. She is simply going through a period (…) where she needs to look within for a little longer before emerging on the other side. And that is okay. (https://www. tellmewhygame.com/endings-explained)

Contrary to Alyson's appearance, Tyler appearing in the epilogue is never an implication of him trying to process trauma. As Galmard explains, "Tyler 'did the work' already when he was in Fireweed by going through therapy and dealing with what had happened. Going back to Delos was just a way to seal this chapter of his life shut" (www.tellmewhygame.com/endings-explained). Although the explanation provided by the creator does not necessarily signal the only line of interpretation, it comments on a significant aspect of the experience of trauma.

Representation of Trauma and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Part of the gameplay experience in *Tell Me Why* represents the process of coming to terms with the difficulties of the past. As established before, the identification of PTSD depends on the recognition of symptoms from at least one of the three clusters, "re-experiencing, avoidance, and arousal" (Golier et al. 226). In *Tell Me Why*, Alyson is the only character exhibiting symptoms of PTSD.

The re-examination of the past leads to Alyson displaying symptoms of trauma in the form of nightmares. Uncertain whether her killing Mary-Ann was justified and unable to access her traumatic memory in full detail, Alyson questions her own actions from the past. Most vividly, Alyson's trauma is represented in the last episode of the game, which opens with a scene in which she is having a nightmare about being stranded in the ice near the dock—the place where Mary-Ann died. In the nightmare scene, Alyson is woken up by a hooded character (resembling herself) who throws flyers onto the ice. The flyer

she picks up reads "you killed me." The flyers that can be noticed on the ground include the following captions: "you killed your mother" and "you will end up like me." When the ice breaks, Alyson falls on the floor of her childhood home. She is led by the hooded figure towards the door of their childhood bedroom. Upon entering, she yet again finds herself in the place where her mother died. The scenery is painted in darker colours, intensifying the eeriness of the nightmare. The hooded figure standing on the dock resembles Mary-Ann at the moment of pointing a gun at Tyler. When Alyson touches the character, she suddenly becomes the hooded figure herself and drops a pair of scissors. Eventually, she sees her mother on the dock saying "you killed me." When she turns around she is met by Tyler repeating "you killed me." The scene is disrupted by the title screen. This sequence shows that Alyson is haunted by intrusive nightmares which directly stem from her trauma. Moreover, the nightmare points to the mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, which leads to the situation in which "the form the memory takes may make it seem strange or foreign. This is particularly likely if the memory occurs as an illusion or a fragmented image" (Golier et al. 226). In addition, as argued in *Treating Post-Trauma Nightmares: A Cognitive Behavioral Approach*,

> although post-trauma nightmares may be described as replicative, there is usually some variation of content from the actual event. The variation may be related to stuck points or hot spots—aspects of the trauma that are difficult for the individual to process. In addition to replicative nightmares, trauma-exposed individuals may also report trauma-similar nightmares (i.e., nightmares that have some components similar to their traumatic event, but such significant features as place, time, and people involved are different) or trauma-dissimilar nightmares (i.e., nightmares with no distinguishable relationship to the trauma). Even those nightmares that appear to have little to do with the traumatic event may still be associated with it. (Davis 42–43)

The contents of the nightmares included in *Tell Me Why* correspond to Davis's description of post-trauma nightmares. The elements of the traumatic event (the setting, the characters and the act of killing Mary-Ann) which appear in the nightmare become distorted by the intrusive thoughts troubling the protagonist. After questioning the rightfulness of the action she had taken,

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Alyson's traumatic memory changes to such an extent that she becomes haunted more by her inability to justify her own actions rather than the traumatic memory itself. The fact that Alyson eventually becomes the mysterious hooded figure (who haunts her at first) could be interpreted in multiple ways; however, one of possible readings is to interpret the figure as a metaphorical representation of the condition of being trapped in one's own mind experienced by a traumatised person.

Another aspect of traumatisation included in the game also points to Alyson's struggle with intrusive thoughts and distorted versions of the memory visions discussed in the previous section. The gameplay presents traumatic memories as particularly difficult to access, as the typical manner of activating the memory visions is impossible, despite there being signs of upcoming ones. The player, thus, is capable of vicariously experiencing the difficulty of recalling the traumatic event at one's will and the intrusive nature such memories can possess. The memory visions, previously activated by the player, in the last episode, specifically in the section which focuses solely on Alyson, are activated automatically. They are the visual representation of the protagonist's intrusive thoughts, which find confirmation when Alyson herself decides to talk about them:

> ALYSON: My anxiety's through the roof. I can't eat anything without getting sick… And I've been seeing things… Memories. Of Mary-Ann, and me and Tyler when we were kids, and Eddy, and… It used to be just stuff I'm pretty sure really happened, but now I see them everywhere, shouting every shitty thought I've ever had about myself. I don't know how much more of it I can take. (*Tell Me Why*, chapter 3)

A further exploration of the intrusive nature of trauma is presented in the breakout room of the local police station. The intensification of Alyson's traumatic responses after discovering new aspects of the past, along with the setting directly connected to her trauma, causes her mental distress. Unable to rationalise her intrusive thoughts, Alyson suffers a severe panic attack. The player is in control of calming the protagonist down, as the gameplay requires them to play a mini-game in the form of an anxiety-relieving application. The

mini-game's point is to steady the protagonist's breathing. The memory vision appearing after handling the panic attack points to the fact that the consuming aspect of Alyson's trauma could be attributed to her allowing Tyler to take the blame for her action (i.e. the act of killing Mary-Ann). Once she reveals the truth, her PTSD symptoms seem to subside.

Final Remarks

Throughout the gameplay of *Tell Me Why*, the player, and the protagonists, have the opportunity to discover new aspects of the past, focusing especially on its traumatic elements. Although trauma is a subject that is considered unsettling and oftentimes unspeakable, its representation can be found in various types of media. The inclusion of traumatic themes in video games no longer appears shocking or surprising. As noticed in "Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game,"

> the last few years have seen the release of big-budget video games that acknowledge trauma by using it as a trope or characterization method (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, 2011, for instance), allow the player to step into the shoes of a traumatized character (*Trauma*, 2011 and *Max Payne*, 2001), incorporate the structure and aesthetics of trauma into the mechanics of play (*Limbo*, 2011 and *Braid*, 2009), or put the player in traumatizing situations and require them to make near-impossible choices (*Spec Ops: The Line*, 2012 and *Lone Survivor*, 2012). (Smethurst & Craps 270)

Thus, it can be concluded that trauma has become a subject that is employed in various manners and that can be found in numerous game titles. It might, however, be interesting to consider the reasons why players would willingly choose such games. The appeal of the gameplay experience of *Tell Me Why* might stem from the so-called "positive discomfort [which] is connected to game content that provokes reflection in the player, provides new insight, has a purpose in the narrative, or makes the player curious about the story and makes her want to continue playing" (Jørgensen 160). What could have additionally contributed to the popularity and the critical acclaim of this game

is the fact that "*Tell Me Why* [was] the first major studio game to feature a playable transgender lead character" (Durkee).[1]

Furthermore, *Tell Me Why* discusses the problematic aspect of seeking help after being exposed to a traumatic experience. The possibility of not being able to receive proper treatment is presented in the game in a rather realistic manner. Importantly, as described in the previous section, only Alyson exhibits symptoms of PTSD, which might pose a question concerning her reasons as to why she had never gotten the help she needed and whether she was eventually capable of going to therapy. The answer to the former concern can be found in the explanation the character provides: "I've looked into therapists a few times, but they're all so far away, and so expensive" (*Tell Me Why*, chapter 3). Although this remark is not particularly highlighted, this piece of dialogue comments on the issue of inaccessibility of psychiatric treatment. As concluded in a recent study, "[t]he most prevalent barriers to healthcare access link to issues with affordability, (...) as many Americans lack the physical or financial resources to receive the healthcare services they need" (Coombs et al.). Noticeably, however, every ending alludes to the fact that Alyson eventually receives the needed help.

The gameplay experience of *Tell Me Why* allows the player to visualise and understand the difficulties of dealing with psychological trauma. As a central part of the narrative, it is represented in a multilayered form, thus, providing a realistic experience, despite its inherent fictionality. The usage of the game mechanics, and most importantly, the possibility of re-examining the past in a rather effortless manner, enables the player to fully submerge in the story and, perhaps, even find solace in the characters' experiences. Supposedly, the representation of trauma in the form of a video game, and the employment of audio-visual elements proves beneficial, as the traumatic memory "is (...) not subject to the usual narrative or verbal mechanisms of recall, but is instead organized as bodily sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks" (Whitehead 115). The form of the video game, thus, assists the

player in a comprehensive journey through the psychological trauma, which might contribute to better understanding of the subject, but it potentially also could lead to the vicarious traumatisation of the player. Vicarious trauma, although briefly characterised as "the traumatization of the ones who listen" (Caruth 1995: 10) can also be experienced by readers, spectators and players. However, it is worth mentioning that

> [i]n a certain sense all media response should be seen as at most vicarious trauma, not as experiencing trauma itself[, as] (...) spectators do not feel the protagonist's trauma. They feel the pain evoked by empathy—arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experiences. Such mechanisms are especially powerful when a viewer has had firsthand traumas that are similar to those being portrayed. (Kaplan 90)

Kaplan here touches upon another important element of vicarious trauma—the therapeutic aspect of the experience. Potentially, in terms of the discussed game, a player with similar experiences could see themselves and their struggles represented, which could result in making their own experience feel less alienating.

Endnotes

1. The protagonist's trauma does not stem from his being transgender or the process of transitioning. In order to avoid stereotyping of a transgender character and to ensure the authenticity of trans experience, the game developers sought "guidance from LGBTQ, cultural and mental health advocates" (https://www.tellmewhygame.com/resources). Despite the fact that the game heavily relies on the events from the past (before Tyler's transition), his storyline is written in a manner aiming to be sensitive to transgender, or gender non-conforming players (e.g. the game never reveals the deadname of the character).

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to conduct an analysis of traumatic memories and the role of the player in the gameplay of the narrative game *Tell Me Why*. Drawing upon the theory of trauma and memory as well as game studies, the article provides an interpretation of the narrative and the mechanics developed in the game. As the game primarily focuses on the aspect of processing the trauma and dealing with (un)wanted memories, the article discusses the possible impact on the player, considering mostly the issue of decision-making, and the outcomes resulting from it. Additionally, the article addresses the question concerning the popularity of the game.