

Choices, affects and trans representation: An analysis of mechanics and gameplay in Tell Me Why

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The article discusses selected aspects of the 2020 game *Tell Me Why*, focusing on particular gameplay mechanics pertaining to player choices and the manner in which they influence player emotions, as well as on the representation of trans experience in the game. The authors draw both on affect theory and on approaches derived from game studies concerning the presence of emotions in gameplay. In the final part of the text, trans representation in *Tell Me Why* is analysed and juxtaposed with the readings typically found in the game's reviews.

KEYWORDS: affect theory, *Tell Me Why* (2020 game), emotions, game studies, gameplay mechanics, trans representation in games

Published in 2020 by Don't Nod Entertainment Studios, *Tell Me Why* is a narrative adventure game divided into three chapters. Its protagonists and playable characters are twins, Tyler and Alyson Ronan; the former is a transgender man, whose storyline includes same-gender attraction, and the latter, a cisgender woman.[1] *Tell Me Why* has been lauded as the first large budget game featuring a playable transgender character, and thus, a text responding to the "long expressed frustrations with the lack of representation [of transness] in video games." [2] The main timeline of the game commences a decade after a horrifying childhood tragedy that resulted in Tyler and Alyson being separated. The twins reunite in their hometown, Delos Crossing, and strive to make sense of the past and its continued effects on their lives. The player can speak to non-playable characters to obtain information about the twins' past, use each avatar to interact with the other twin and thus compare their memories, as well as explore the material remnants of the Ronans' childhood by means of a preternatural ability to share memories and thoughts, thus learning more about the complicated circumstances surrounding their childhood's formative experience. The gameplay requires the player to switch between controlling Tyler and

Introduction

[1] Alyson's sexuality is not given a significant role in the narrative and may be considered ambiguous or heterosexual.

[2] M. Hyun Kim, *Tell Me Why Is the First Major Video Game to Feature a Transgender Main Char-*

acter, them, 11.09.2020, <https://www.them.us/story/tell-me-why-video-game-trans-character> (accessed: 12.06.2022).

Alyson in each chapter, and the narrative uses the differences between their recollections to achieve its intended dramatic effect.

Thematically, *Tell Me Why* is preoccupied with the subjects of trauma, gender identity, and the experience of queer and, in particular, trans people. Much of the exploration is dedicated to the question of why Tyler and Alyson's mother, Mary-Ann, had behaved in an erratic and violent manner, which led to Alyson killing her (ostensibly in defence of her brother) and Tyler taking responsibility for the killing and being placed in a juvenile detention facility. For both the characters and the player, returning to the place of childhood memories and trauma creates space for formulating and answering questions, facing and resolving doubts, and ultimately, achieving narrative and emotional closure. As such subject matter, including an exploration of trauma experienced by queer people as a result of abuse, can be considered particularly sensitive, the studio reportedly worked closely with "transgender staff from GLAAD" and encouraged input from the trans actor voicing Tyler,[3] so as to avoid stereotyping or causing offence. Notably, the game introduces a previous masculine name for Tyler, which enables it to avoid a depiction of deadnaming[4] even in the flashbacks to the Ronans' childhood, for which the game has been singled out.[5] However, certain aspects of its representation of trans experience still bear closer scrutiny, which this article endeavours to provide. In addition, the article examines the manner in which the mechanics and gameplay of *Tell Me Why* impact on the player's emotions in a way particular to the game medium, and how these emotions are distributed between the two playable characters.

Games and Affect

The last three decades have seen the intensification of interest in the broadly and variously (or even contradictorily) understood notion of affect.[6] Bringing together the body and its environments, the physiological and the technological, the affective turn can offer a way for "critical theory" to "fac[e] [...] the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism"[7] and an alternative (or re-invigoration) to structuralist and poststructuralist modes of inquiry.[8] This affective turn also encompasses game studies, where it has proven particularly useful in enabling diverse research perspectives to be brought together, thus avoiding a situation of "reducing

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Using a transgender person's pre-transition name, which does not correspond to their gender identity (e.g. name assigned at birth).

[5] Cf. e.g. A. Staszak, "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*, "Currents" 2021–22, vol. 7–8, pp. 177–190, <http://www.currents.umk.pl/files/issues/7/staszak-defined.pdf> (accessed: 6.11.2022).

[6] Cf. e.g. P.T. Clough, J. Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Durham – London 2007; M. Gregg, G.J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham – London 2010.

[7] P.T. Clough, 2007, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Affective Turn...*, p. 1.

[8] G.J. Seigworth, M. Gregg, *An Inventory of Shimmers*, [in:] *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. M. Gregg, G.J. Seigworth, Durham – London 2010, p. 5.

video games to either their representational qualities or their digital and mechanical properties.”[9] In fact, Aubrey Anable argues that the quality of games being *affective*, their role as “structures of feeling”, is why they should be the subject of “feminist and queer interventions”[10] and, more broadly, that if video games are acknowledged as emotionally affecting, this should cement their “cultural status” as no lesser than “film and other arts.”[11]

It should be noted that the present article makes no attempt to offer a definition of affect that would differentiate it from *emotion* or *feeling*, as is done in some studies on affect.[12] This choice follows the lead of such scholars as Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai. The former cautions that a differentiation between older feminist and queer studies of the body and feelings and the newer “turn to affect” may serve to “turn away from emotion” and even obfuscate the genealogy of this research.[13] The latter sees in the opposition between affect and emotion a remnant of psychoanalytic attempts to “distinguish [...] first-person from third-person feeling, and by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not” through “creating two distinct categories of feeling.”[14] Significantly, digital games on their most basic level can be seen to undermine such a distinction, due to such phenomena as affective identification and player engagement in performing the actions through the avatar.

Affective identification, agency, and player engagement play an important role in a “play-centric critical approach” to game texts, the focus of which is the nature and diversity of player response modes.[15] In “any medium other than games,” no matter how effective the suspension of disbelief, or how strong the immersion, the audience inevitably remain “only witnesses, not actors,” as Katherine Isbister notes, and are ultimately unable to affect the outcomes of the unfolding stories.[16] In her book *How Games Move Us: Emotions by Design*, Isbister reflects on the ebb and flow of emotions that the player feels when they make choices or take actions which have consequences, and then as they witness the results of those choices and actions, thus experiencing “a sense of consequence and responsibility.”[17] The resulting “rich set of feelings” depends, as she argues, “on the active role that [the player] plays in the experience.”[18]

[9] A. Anable, *Playing with Feelings. Video Games and Affect*, Minneapolis – London 2018, p. xvi.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. xvii.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. vii.

[12] Cf. e.g. E. Shouse, *Feeling, Emotion, Affect*, “M/C Journal” 2005, no. 8(6).

[13] S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh 2014, p. 206; cf. *ibidem*, pp. 205–207.

[14] S. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, MA – London 2005, p. 25.

[15] P. Jagoda, P. McDonald, *Game Mechanics, Experience Design, and Affective Play*, [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. J. Sayers, New York 2018, p. 174.

[16] K. Isbister, *How games move us: Emotion by design*, Cambridge, MA 2016, p. 8.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

[18] *Ibidem*.

Consequently, game texts can bring forth very particular mental states associated with agency, ranging from “responsibility and guilt” to “pride” which, in contrast, “a reader or filmgoer” is unlikely to experience: “[a]t most, they may feel the sense of uneasy collusion” or joy, because they have relatively little influence over the unfolding of the narrative in a written or filmed text.[19] Not unlike other media texts, games make it possible for their audience – the players – to identify with the characters; however, since the way the players “project themselves into the character” is directly related to the fact that they also control those characters as avatars,[20] the form and extent of that identification go beyond any identification that might occur in texts of other media. Isbister goes on to explain:

Over the course of gameplay, players extend themselves further into the motivations and the visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy possibilities of the avatar, forging an identification grounded in observation as well as action and experience.[21]

In this context, the mechanics are one of the most crucial ludic aspects of game texts. A mechanic can, as Jagoda and McDonald state, “constellate an array of feelings,” precisely since a mechanic is “an action that the game can allow or disallow,” while the player is the one who “must take up that act as their own for the game to proceed.”[22] The mechanics of *Tell Me Why* in both cases create appropriate contexts of actions,[23] thus allowing for the experience of affect. A mechanic is also a “key point of mediation between the player and the game that opens up the ambiguity of play,”[24] a quality which is discussed later here.

Although this particular identification can be found in many – if not a majority – of games, it is more significant in some types of games than others. In games, characters are “agents through whose actions a drama is told”: the players either “inhabit and control them [...] or interact with them in the game world”; therefore, attachment is regarded as one of the most crucial elements for engaging the players and ensuring “emotionally rich experiences.”[25] Narrative-heavy games, like other storytelling-oriented media texts, tend to rely on affective identification to achieve the desired effect; at the very least, they require the player to follow and participate in the conflict and struggle which the avatar or the non-player characters are facing, the player should share such characters perspective, “feeling with [them] rather than about [them].”[26] A related concept is “character attachment”, which refers to “the sense of liking, connection and closeness”

[19] Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

[20] Ibidem, p. 11.

[21] Ibidem, p. 13.

[22] P. Jagoda, P. McDonald, op. cit., p. 176.

[23] Ibidem, p. 177.

[24] Ibidem, p. 176.

[25] J.A. Bopp et al., *Exploring Emotional Attachment*

to Game Characters, [in:] *CHI PLAY '19 – Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 2019.

[26] J. Cohen, *Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters*, “Mass Communication & Society” 2001, no. 4(3), p. 251.

felt by the player towards the game characters, whether playable or not.[27] The player may control a character or characters, but it is ultimately only through characters' actions that the drama that is the heart of the game can be told; in order to create an "emotionally rich experience," those characters must engage the player by allowing for attachment.[28] Due to the fact that players tend to "attach emotional value" to characters with whom they can associate memories or who facilitate self-expression,[29] in *Tell Me Why* the potential for affective identification is not symmetrical, even removing from the discussion the individual predispositions and responses of the players. It can be argued that the primary affective identification in the game concerns Tyler, while the secondary affective identification is with Alyson, owing to those characters' storylines, and agency allowed for by the game. Tyler is a transgender man who, through the majority of the story, faces the present – forming new relationships, affirming and demanding affirmation of his gender identity and exploring potential directions for his future. Due to the narrative structure of the game, which opens with the young Tyler being interrogated by a police officer, and Tyler's strong characterisation, his character constitutes the site of primary affective identification, particularly for the non-heteronormative players.[30]

On the other hand, an expression of the ideal self, related to the subjective perception of ethics and emotional investment, can be associated with Alyson, given that Alyson is initially presented as Tyler's protector as well as moral arbiter. While being in control of Alyson, the player deals primarily with the past and repercussions of the past, and her dialogue and gameplay options revolve around interpretations of the events investigated by the twins. Furthermore, Alyson – and, therefore, the player – is put in the role of someone who cares about and for Tyler. This facilitates the arousal of emphatic emotions in the player, who not only shares most of Alyson's knowledge, but also processes that knowledge from Alyson's perspective.[31] Consequently, Alyson's character, due to the part she plays in the narrative and due to the nature of the decisions she has to make – decisions the player has to make – can be seen as particularly relatable, seeing as Alyson's character goals, as well as her conflicts and struggles, all contribute to the specific dramatic need she both stands for and satisfies in the narrative.[32] Whereas Tyler's gameplay concerns the issues of desire

[27] J.A. Bopp et al., op. cit.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] Ibidem.

[30] Some studies suggest that trans players may tend to be more interested in "transforming their bodies than their personalities in virtual worlds. This conclusion supports the idea that users are constructing an authentic ideal self". K. Baldwin, *Virtual Avatars: Trans Experiences of Ideal Selves Through Gaming*, "Markets, Globalization & Development

Review" 2019, no. 3(3). Similarly, despite being a fixed (non-customizable) character, Tyler may focus the attention of many players who will experience attachment towards him.

[31] J. Cohen, op. cit., p. 251.

[32] Cf. P. Lankoski, S. Heliö, I. Ekman, *Characters in Computer Games: Toward Understanding Interpretation and Design*, [in:] *DiGRA Conference*, 2003, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05087.10012.pdf> (accessed: 12.06.2022).

(pursuing needs and hopes) and practicality (i.e. obtaining practical goals, asserting his identity, etc.), Alyson's gameplay sequences concern the questions of right and wrong. Where Tyler's decisions inform his identity, Alyson's decisions concern morality.

Mechanics of Affect and Choices

The story of *Tell Me Why* begins with Tyler as a child telling the police that he killed his mother in self-defence (it is only later revealed that it was, in fact, Alyson who had stabbed their mother, Mary-Ann, in order to protect her brother). The player then learns that Tyler spent the following ten years in a juvenile detention centre, which he is now about to leave to reunite with Alyson, so the two can go to Delos Crossing to sell the empty family house. Tyler and Alyson explore the house, uncovering the debris of their childhood and run into Sam, Mary-Ann's friend, who had taken it upon himself to take care of the house. Further investigation involves talking to various residents of Delos Crossing and reveals new facts, casting doubt upon what the twins have believed to be the truth about their past. The story unfolds to reach its culminating point in which Alyson, the player's avatar in that particular sequence, has to make a life-altering choice of deciding whether what they accepted as their past was true, or if they misunderstood their mother's behaviour and motivation, and Mary-Ann never in fact wanted to harm Tyler (for being trans). This ending showcases two aspects we consider particularly significant to this game – the central mechanics are not primarily associated with actions affecting the outside world but rather making interpretative choices whose significance is primarily emotional, and that the player's choices are marked by ambiguity, which contributes to its affective resonance. In addition, it bears noting which avatar is associated with which choices and, accordingly, which player emotions.

As it was previously established, the player has two avatars at their disposal, as both Ronan twins are playable characters. The mechanics in the game include movement within, exploration of and interaction with the gameworld, but also concern some themes and story elements specific to *Tell Me Why* in particular. One aspect of these mechanics is the use of the ability called the Voice, which allows the siblings to exchange thoughts and ideas without speaking aloud. The other, arguably more important and also fundamental mechanic throughout the game, is the ability to call up memories as remembered by both Alyson and Tyler in the form of flashbacks and then (this happens primarily when the player is controlling Alyson) choose which one seems more plausible or accurate – in other words, truer – according to the character who happens to be the current avatar. Such a choice can be illustrated by means of the following exchange, which commences after a flashback in Chapter Two:

MARY-ANN:
Hey guys, you all done yet?

YOUNG ALYSON:

Yes... Mom, can we go outside while you and Tessa play cards?

MARY-ANN:

I'm afraid there's no time for games today, sweetie. Now, let's go—

TESSA:

Can you come here?

MARY-ANN:

Sorry Tessa, I'm in a bit of a hurry.

TESSA:

Oh, what's your excuse this time? Emergency repairs for the beaver dam?

MARY-ANN:

Tessa, look—

TESSA:

No, I don't want to hear it. I want to talk to you: now. Or do I need to start calling in your debts?[33]

Subsequently, the twins attempt to compare the experiences as they remember them:

ALYSON:

Huh. I had completely forgotten about that.

TYLER:

I remember it, but not exactly like that. Here, let's see if we can call up my version, okay?[34]

Both versions of the remembered events, Tyler's and Alyson's, are similar as far as the order of events and the persons involved are concerned. However, the difference lies in the attribution of affects and it is underscored by the labelling of versions visible to the player while using the mechanic. The player is given the choice between "Mary-Ann was angry" and "Tessa was angry," which clearly points to the interpretations of the fight between Tessa and Mary-Ann as remembered by each twin. When faced with this problem, the twins talk it over, but only the avatar currently controlled by the player makes the choice:

TYLER:

Okay, we remember that slightly differently. I guess that makes sense—Rashomon, you know. But whatever happened, after that they walked to the counter, and then Mary-Ann lashed out at Tessa, right?

ALYSON:

Uh, no, Mary-Ann defended us because Tessa got all preachy.

[33] *Tell Me Why*, Chapter Two, 2020.

[34] *Ibidem*.

TYLER:

So, which is it going to be? [35]

At this point the player, as Alyson, decides which twin's version they mean to side with: "Choose Tyler's memory (*Mary-Ann was angry*)" or "Choose Alyson's memory (*Tessa was angry*)". What is particularly salient here is that choosing one version of a memory (or one interpretation of a memory) is not tantamount to it being declared factual or correct: the task of the player, through their avatars, is not to find the truth understood as certainty as to past events but rather, to construct a narrative that can be considered the most satisfactory and cohesive, and in which the avatar will choose to believe.

An interpretation oriented towards a cohesive, satisfactory emergent narrative plays a central part in *Tell Me Why*. In both ludic and narrative terms, the game relies on ambiguity of the experience. This ambiguity consists in confronting the player with difficult material, strong characters, story, and writing,[36] all of which can contribute to an emotional challenge the player is presented with. In the case of *Tell Me Why*, the primary challenge the player faces is not related to complex mechanics or a demanding pull narrative – skill, dexterity or patience required for thorough exploration are not what the player needs to overcome this challenge, as Cole and colleagues explain while discussing ambiguity. [37] Instead, the challenge presented in *Tell Me Why* is meant to be overcome with a cognitive effort, so that the player can experience pleasure stemming from the "resolution of tension within the narrative, emotional exploration of ambiguities within the diegesis, or identification with characters." [38] The game employs all of those three approaches, since both the story and the main mystery of it, as well as the basic mechanics, are informed by the "controlled use of ambiguity" (Cole and Gillies 2021): the mechanics and the storyline both assume the fundamental malleability of memory and recollections, and emphasise it. In this way, the game leaves "space for the player to think and contemplate," as Cole and colleagues point out, allowing them to "emotionally invest [...] in the diegesis" to a greater extent, and thus receive a "greater emotional return." [39] *Tell Me Why* effectively employs ambiguity to provide the player with eudaimonic gratification – fulfilling their ethics-oriented expectations [40] – by "leaving space for the player to build their own interpretation" [41] in order to focus on the potential for emotional impact. In regular circumstances, the opportunity to expend effort on building and interpretation in

[35] Ibidem.

[36] T. Cole, P. Cairns, M. Gillies, *Emotional and Functional Challenge in Core and Avant-garde Games*, [in:] *Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 2015, pp. 121–126.

[37] Ibidem.

[38] Ibidem.

[39] Ibidem.

[40] M. Elson et al., *More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games*, "Journal of Communication" 2014, no. 63(3), p. 525.

[41] T. Cole, M. Gillies, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, "Games and Culture" 2021, no. 16(2), pp. 187–207.

itself results in a “more powerful and deeper emotional experience.”[42] However, the way *Tell Me Why* employs ambiguity goes beyond that, as the player must build not only an interpretation but also the very story and narrative which is to be the subject of that interpretation.

Choices made by the player that convey the avatars’ in-game agency follow the same ludonarrative logic as the game themes. Both Tyler and Alyson have dialogue options at their disposal, which very often involve the same characters. However, these dialogue options demonstrate an important difference between the way both characters are constructed. In the context of the mechanics itself and the gameplay, the choices made as either Tyler or Alyson function in an identical manner. However, in practice, the options available to avatars reflect what are at times quite dramatic differences in their respective personalities, relationships, and social standing.

An example of this is some of the conversations with Michael Abila, Alyson’s high-school friend and Tyler’s potential romantic interest. On the occasion when they meet Michael at his workplace in the store, Alyson’s dialogue options include mainly asking about Michael’s work and his education plans. In contrast, when Tyler and Michael talk, the conversation topics revolve around the challenges connected to being queer in a small town, and the possible prospect of romantic development between the two characters.

The game does not feature a true ending in either sense of the word; neither of the choices available to the player leads to an ending intended by the creators of the game as the preferred conclusion of the story or to one that would constitute a satisfactory answer to the questions posed by the narrative. It is up to the player to choose how to understand events from the Ronans’ childhood (the past of the time of gameplay).[43] The most significant and ultimate decision—although not the last one in the game—concerning the way in which the information collected should be put together and interpreted is made by the player as Alyson (who once again acts as the moral arbiter). However, due to narrative ambiguity enforced by the game mechanics, Alyson has to choose what she *wants to believe*, not what she *knows* or even strongly suspects *has actually happened*. This may be explained by the fact that it is Alyson whose fate hangs in the balance and is down to her choice; Tyler is shown to be reconciled with his past, while Alyson struggles with her part in it. Thus, having Alyson choose whether she was wrong to shoot their mother or if she made the best possible decision then allows the player to not only shape the affect and emotions contingent on affective identification, but also retroactively accept or reject emotions aroused by identifying with Alyson which reflect Katherine Isbister’s

[42] Ibidem.

[43] Throughout the game, the player, alternating as Tyler or Alyson, makes choices that shape that understanding of the past. Depending on those choices, the ending to any playthrough will feature either Tyler

or Alyson in Mary-Ann’s house, along a combination of other minor differences reflecting the player’s decisions concerning the twins’ interactions and relationships with other characters.

analysis of game-specific affects: guilt, remorse and—most importantly—complicity. This reflects the main theme of the game, and the player is offered no indication if the selected version corresponds with facts (the objective truth), at least in the game itself – its paratexts, however, do reinforce a particular interpretation, as we show in the next section.

Transgender Representation

The issues of trans rights and transphobia have, in recent years, taken on particular urgency and garnered growing attention, becoming a lightning rod subject in politics and popular media. The increased “visibility” of trans people, be it trans celebrities or high-profile fictional trans characters in media has been accompanied by a rise of political polarisation.^[44] Accordingly, Tyler’s role as an avatar and the way in which his experience as a trans man is represented – and in particular, which affects his avatar comes to be associated with – may be considered both particularly significant and potentially fraught with tension.

As it was mentioned previously, reviewers and scholars have by and large lauded Tyler’s story and representation as “a breath of fresh air,”^[45] in part because Tyler’s experiences with transphobia have been considered to play a minor role in the story,^[46] and this may stem from the fact that the affects players are supposed to associate with Tyler are primarily positive. The “Frequently Asked Questions” section of the game’s website emphasises precisely such a point, juxtaposing “mainstream narratives about trans people [...] rooted in pain or trauma” with *Tell Me Why*, self-described therein as “a different, more multi-dimensional story”, whose every conclusion “include[s] an optimistic future for Tyler.”^[47] The game is meant to include only limited negative experiences related to gender identity in the narrative present, and the instances when any negative attitudes towards Tyler are expressed by people of Delos Crossing serve to assert Tyler’s identity, allow him to defend himself, or otherwise exert agency in a way that is meant to produce positive emotions (including pride and sense of empowerment).

Indeed, avoidance of negative feelings caused by transphobia goes even further, since one of the major narrative reveals prompting the story in Chapter One consists in Tyler and Alyson discovering clues that Mary-Ann was not as opposed to Tyler’s wish for transition as they

[44] Cf. T.B. Abbott, *The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres*, London 2022, pp. 1–31. It should be acknowledged that this increased visibility pertains more to trans women rather than trans men or nonbinary persons and characters, although the latter groups have also found themselves more frequently represented in the media in recent years, and trans men have been the focus of media scrutiny with regard to transition-related healthcare.

[45] H. McKay, *Tell Me Why Review – Finally, trans representation done right*, Checkpoint Gam-

ing, 28.08.2020, <https://checkpointgaming.net/reviews/2020/08/tell-me-why-review-finally-trans-representation-done-right> (accessed: 24.02.2022).

[46] Ibidem. Cf. Q. Mathys, *Tell Me Why Portrays Trans Characters in Healthier Way Than The Last of Us 2*, Game Rant, 2.09.2020, <https://gamerant.com/tell-me-why-last-us-2-trans-character-representation/> (accessed: 24.02.2022); A. Staszak, op. cit.

[47] <https://www.tellmewhygame.com/faq> (accessed: 10.09.2022).

had assumed. In the course of their investigation, the twins learn that their mother was aware of Tyler's transness and that she possessed literature addressed to supportive parents of trans children. Therefore, her ultimate violent outburst, which they had been attributing to a reaction to Tyler's masculine gender presentation, must have had an alternative reason. The aforementioned website, functioning as the game's paratext, clarifies that in the beginning Tyler "mistakenly believes that his mother attacked him because he changed his gender expression" but, in fact, "Tyler's mother, Mary-Ann Ronan, was not transphobic,"^[48] seemingly as a reassurance for the (potential) player. However, such a development means that Tyler's own judgment concerning his experience as a trans person is rendered suspect. While this is obviously in keeping with the game's central concept and mechanics, consisting in the exploration of unreliable and contrary memories, the conclusion that the trans character is "mistaken" about experiencing transphobia may be considered a way to invalidate his perspective, even if this belief is shared by his cis sibling, Alyson.

Another aspect of Tyler's story and representation that may be worth considering in a more critical way is the attribution and sources of guilt and trauma in the narrative. Some reviewers seem to agree with the claims of game producers about *Tell Me Why* differentiating itself from mainstream stories about trans people in that "[Tyler's] past [is not] rooted in trauma,"^[49] because his *transition* is unrelated to trauma: however, even if transition is not its effect or cause, it is precisely traumatic childhood that the game thematises.^[50] Moreover, the attempt to divorce said trauma from transness, despite the fact that the characters had spent a decade believing in the connection between their mother's violence and transphobia, further invalidates Tyler's (unexplored) negative feelings. This may be seen as a part of the game's attempt to avoid associating Tyler with negative affects – it is primarily Alyson to whom game assigns such experiences. The source of particularly strong feelings in this context is the separation of the twins, whose circumstances and details are gradually uncovered in the course of the playthrough. After Mary-Ann's passing, Tyler was charged with her death, even though it was Alyson who shot their mother in his defence, and he was sentenced to a juvenile facility, while Alyson was raised by a police officer. Significantly, playing as Alyson means controlling the avatar as she confronts her guilt over Tyler's wrongful punishment as well as over her mother's death; for Alyson, one of the narrative goals is fulfilled by confessing her thus far hidden involvement. In contrast, regardless of the choices made in the game, Tyler holds no grudge over his institutionalization (and in fact seems to remember his time at the juvenile facility with fondness) or Alyson's lie by omission (since she allowed him to take the blame for her actions) – his only

[48] Ibidem.

[50] Cf. A. Staszak, op. cit.

[49] H. McKay, op. cit.

negative affects pertain to the lack of contact with his twin in the intervening years. Consequently, the same narrative decisions that are meant to associate positive affective experiences of the player with the trans avatar foreclose the possibility of depicting justified anger that Tyler might feel, or fully acknowledging Alyson's responsibility for not just her part in Mary-Ann's death (over which she feels guilt) but also the fate of her brother.

Conclusion

As we have attempted to demonstrate, *Tell Me Why* is a game whose reliance on an unconventionally high degree of narrative ambiguity is facilitated by both the narrative (incorporating contrary recollections and interpretations) and the mechanics (involving choosing between such recollections without indication of truthfulness) used to construct and tell the story. These mechanics play a particularly significant role in evoking affects in the player, and *Tell Me Why* is relatively challenging in not merely depicting some instances of negative affects experienced by the avatar, but by offering a conclusion that requires the players to confront negative affects particular to video games. Nevertheless, its interpretative openness seems to be curtailed, perhaps owing to an aversion to allowing the association between the trans playable character and negative affects, which is particularly obvious when contrasting the story in the game with the official paratext, which provides a ready-made interpretation of parts of the narrative. Finally, while such a choice may be justified as a way to avoid causing negative feelings in a potential trans player, whether this in fact also means avoiding allowing the cis character (and the cis player) fuller apprehension of the role of cisnormativity is a question that requires further reflections.

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LINKS

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