

Game Narrative Review

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Your name: Asad Ali

Your school: Sheridan College

Your email: asad@hotmail.ca

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Game Title: Tell Me Why

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Genre: Narrative adventure

Release Date: September 2020

Developer: Dontnod Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: (Stéphane Beauverger, Morgan Lockhart), Florent Guillaume, Elise Galmard

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Overview

Memories are a curious thing. One moment, they're as clear as an untouched lake, in another, they're as muddied as a puddle disturbed by children playing. Lost. As the years stretch on, pivotal memories coalesce into their most important constituents, but also become tainted by the biases and thoughts we have in the interim.

Tell Me Why is a tale of two twins, Alyson and Tyler Ronan. The twins reunite ten years after a tragic incident, one that resulted in the death of their mother and Tyler being sent to a juvenile detention center. Taking place in rural Alaska, the two investigate what truly happened on that fateful night where everything changed. They share a special bond that allows them to telepathically communicate with each other, an ability that returns to them again after disappearing when they were separated. The game is an episodic narrative adventure game, with similar gameplay to its antecedent, *Life Is Strange*. You control the twins at different points in the story, interacting with others, making key story decisions, solving puzzles, and exploring the world of Delos Crossing.

There is also the matter of the Book of Goblins. This is an illustrated fairy tale that their late mother Mary-Ann Ronan wrote for them, as a loose chronicle of their life. However, there are secrets within the book that point to what truly happened to their mother in those months leading up to her death.

Characters

Tyler Ronan: One of the two main playable characters of the game. Tyler Ronan is a young transgender man who has recently left Fireweed Residential Center to reunite with his sister, Alyson. On the night their mother died, Tyler presumes that their mother was trying to kill him for being trans, but this is an event that becomes increasingly contentious as time goes by.

He takes the blame for Alyson stabbing their mother to protect him, and is sent to Fireweed as a result. Tyler is represented as one of the two goblins in the Book of Goblins.

Alyson Ronan: The other playable character in *Tell Me Why*. Alyson Ronan is a young woman who has lived in Delos Crossing her whole life, and was separated from her brother Tyler after the night their mother died. Alyson rushed out to protect Tyler after hearing his cries for help that night, and stabbed their mother who had a gun in her hands. She is incredibly traumatized by this. She was adopted by Eddy Brown following this series of events. She is represented by the other of the two goblins in the Book of Goblins.

Mary-Ann Ronan: Mary-Ann was the troubled parent of Alyson and Tyler. She raised the two of them on her own, and became increasingly mentally unstable over the course of her last few months alive. Tyler assumed that she was transphobic, and that that was why she tried to kill him on that day ten years ago, but during the game it is found out that she was trying to understand Tyler and even bought a book on how to raise a transgender child. The mystery behind what truly happened on the night of her death is the core motivation for Alyson and Tyler in *Tell Me Why*. She is represented by the Wise Princess in the Book of Goblins, and is also the creator of said book.

Michael Abila: Michael is Alyson's closest friend, and also her coworker at the Veni Vidi Vecchi General Store. He is part of the Tlingit community in Delos Crossing. He wants to be a chef and move out of Delos Crossing with Alyson, as roommates. He is a potential romantic interest for Tyler during *Tell Me Why*.

Eddy Brown: Eddy is the police chief in Delos Crossing and Alyson's legal guardian. He is a kind man of Tlingit descent that likes to follow procedure. Eddy became friends with Mary-Ann through his late mother, Carol Brown. When Mary-Ann was reported to the child protective services by Tessa, Eddy broke protocol and told Mary-Ann, as he felt it was his duty as a friend. He was also the officer that brought Alyson and Tyler in for questioning after the death of their mother. Over the course of the game, Eddy tries to get closer to Tyler and reconcile their differences. Eddy is represented by the Stalwart Moose in the Book of Goblins.

Tessa Vecchi: Tessa was a former friend of Mary-Ann's, and co-owns the Veni Vidi Vecchi General Store. Over the course of the game it is revealed that Tessa helped Mary-Ann out by giving her family plenty of food, providing loans for various needs, and looking after the children when needed. Tessa at one point suggests to Mary-Ann to take Tyler to a conversion therapy camp for his gender identity, and that caused a huge rift to form in their friendship. Mary-Ann proceeded to cut Tessa out of her life. She is represented by the Pious Pelican in the Book of Goblins.

Sam Kansky: Sam was a friend of Mary-Ann's and a repairman that often helped the Ronan family around the house. He is very often seen intoxicated and unkempt. He was in love with Mary-Ann and never truly recovered after her death, looking after her empty house in the ten years between then and now. He is represented by the Old Bear in the Book of Goblins.

Breakdown

Mechanical/Narrative Intersection

Tell Me Why is simultaneously a fairly simple and incredibly complex narrative. At its core, it is a game that is primarily about the nature of memories, and how they shape us as individuals. The game constantly reinforces this through the main decisions that you make through the game, which involve deciding whose memory of an event is the "correct" interpretation.

Near the beginning of the game, the player is faced with a choice regarding whose memory of an event involving Tessa Vecchi they should believe, Tyler or Alyson's. Tyler remembers Tessa calmly approaching their mother, who becomes upset at the conversation they were having. Alyson on the other hand, remembers an angry Tessa approaching their mother while she is simply shopping at the store. While on the surface this is a straightforward series of events, things become muddled when the player realizes that the memory they choose will also affect how the siblings feel about each other. If you choose to let Alyson trust her own memory of the event, Tyler will feel upset that he wasn't trusted, while if you choose to believe Tyler he'll be relieved that his sister trusts him.

These intertwining elements create a rich tapestry of emotion, from which a large amount of information can be gleaned. Alyson and Tyler's differing opinions on their mother, Mary-Ann, can very clearly be seen from how their own thoughts have colored their recollection of this event. However, this isn't the only element that complicates what otherwise would be a simple, binary choice. Prior to this, Tyler finds a book in their mother's room about how to raise a transgender child. This confuses Tyler greatly, considering that up until that point, both siblings thought that their mother tried to kill Tyler due to transphobia. They also find advertisements for a conversion therapy camp among her things, which confuses both of them further.

The intersection between trauma-laden memories, considering the relationship of the two siblings, and trying to figure out what actually happened given the information present, makes these choices incredibly difficult to navigate. It forces the player to throw their weight behind the memories that they decide to believe in over the course of the game.

The constant reframing of Mary-Ann's character as an individual is an element that carries over to most of the major characters of the game. In doing so, *Tell Me Why* makes its audience view everything through a layered and multifaceted lens. Characters that seemed irredeemable are redeemed through their perspectives on the events of the past, before being thrown back into an antagonistic light when more details come to the surface. Characters that come across as upstanding individuals are plunged into the depths when hidden agendas come to light, only to rise up again when the reasoning behind their ulterior motives is finally revealed. This bolsters the core theme of the fragility of memory beautifully, as it demonstrates how our recollection of people and events is only ever piecemeal; a fragment of the truth that we commit to like gospel.

Primary/Ancillary Thematic Cohesion

The execution of the primary themes of the game are done well, but what drives *Tell Me Why* to true excellence is the manner in which the core narrative interweaves with its more secondary ones. Tyler is a trans man. As with any individual that has to go through the myriad hardships that many minority groups face, your actions and thoughts are colored by those

experiences, and they create a unique lens through which the world is viewed and contextualized.

Tyler's experiences as a trans man aren't the primary focus of the game, however. These experiences are both important to the narrative and yet not a dominating factor. Former game journalist Io Brindle states it best when they say, "I appreciated, in particular, how the trans elements of the story, and of Tyler's life and history, were woven together with many other strands into a fabric neither dominated by trans elements nor bleached of them." It is incredibly rare to find a narrative that manages to strike this balance, and it is perhaps one of the only video games to attempt to do so. *Tell Me Why's* focus on the core narrative doesn't take away from the experiences that Tyler faces as a trans man; rather, it bolsters and enriches it. The realism of the depiction represents how the lives of trans individuals actually are in a much more mature and nuanced manner. Just like with those who decide to transition, while it is a very important and pivotal time in their lives, it is not the only element that defines them. The character of Tyler showcases many elements of a trans man's life with a precise and gentle touch that is often missed in depictions of trans characters. He talks about the names he was thinking of changing to without overemphasizing the point. He reminds himself to take his testosterone, but doesn't linger on it. While there is nothing necessarily wrong about creating a game that is very direct in its messages, this method of delivery has the distinct advantage of the authenticity of living as a trans individual. *Tell Me Why* manages to make this element pivotal to the core plot, but not the sole focus of it.

How does the game interweave these disparate themes, then? One of the best examples is the way in which Tyler associates with his memories of past events. Often for trans individuals, it is immensely difficult to relate to memories from before they transition. In many cases, they can feel like the memories of a different person. The focus on memories in *Tell Me Why* allows this to be showcased wonderfully. The main event around which the whole game pivots is Tyler and Allison's memory of what they remember as their mother, Mary-Ann, trying to kill Tyler for being trans. The constant reexamination of those events puts the veracity of that fateful night into constant question, and having to think back on a time when one went by a different name than they identified with, alongside having to present in a manner that doesn't fit who they know themselves to be is painful on a level that is hard to describe. Combining this with the core theme creates an experience that allows for players to empathize with transfolk on

a level that far exceeds what is possible through a narrative that focuses solely on their lived experiences. The themes of memory and its fragility create an entry point through which a player can contextualize experiences that would otherwise be too far from their own lives to truly feel empathy for.

Authentic representation through consultation

While this is not necessarily something that is immediately apparent in the game itself, one of the greatest strengths of *Tell Me Why* in its portrayal of a transgender character is the lengths that Dontnod went to in order to make sure that they were accurate to the real lives of trans individuals. Right from the announcement of the game, the team made a concerted effort to ensure that the portrayal in *Tell Me Why* would not be insincere or poor in its execution. There was a FAQ posted around the time of the announcement that contained various pieces of information pertaining to the nature of the story to better inform the public about potentially painful elements of the game, about how trans folk were involved in the creation of the game, and debunking false stereotypes about why a person would transition. Right off the bat, Dontnod went above and beyond in ensuring that their representation of trans lives was done as well and as tastefully as possible. This is something that is very rarely, if ever, seen in this industry and should be commended.

Another element that aided in the landmark representation that *Tell Me Why* brings to the AAA space is that Dontnod worked with GLAAD, an association that has worked tirelessly to look for and fight against defamatory media coverage of LGBT folk, to ensure that their script was written well and to help with casting the voice for the character of Tyler. One of the core tenets that make *Tell Me Why* work as well as it does is its metered approach to the nature of the representation itself. Nick Adams, GLAAD's director of transgender representation, has stated during an interview with the LA times:

"That's a human experience that doesn't have anything to do with Tyler being a transgender man, and one of the things that makes the game special. He is a human who has flaws, but he is flawed because he's human and not flawed because he's trans. I think the game is interesting in that it makes these characters complicated. Sometimes transgender stories can be flat because well-intentioned people want to write sort of an after-school special of what it means to be trans."

This is absolutely critical to the success of the approach, and creates a much more layered and nuanced experience as a result.

The final element that truly cements *Tell Me Why* as a role model for transgender representation in video games lies in its casting. August Aiden Black is a trans masculine voice actor that was cast to play the role of Tyler. Not only that, he was allowed to make edits during recording sessions to ensure that *Tell Me Why*'s portrayal of Tyler did justice to his character. His own personal experiences also inspired key moments in the game, as well as many lines of dialogue. This is one of the greatest elements of an already fantastic game, and it exists outside the world of the game itself. While not traditionally considered narrative by many, there is no doubt that the creation of these pieces tell a story in their own right. To go so far to make sure an experience is authentic, and to give voice to the people that you are trying to represent provides experiences and opportunities to trans folk that they are often deprived of.

Strongest Element

The Book of Goblins. Within the game, there is an illustrated fairy-tale book written by Mary-Ann that depicts her history, as well as those of Alyson and Tyler. However, the book chronicles events in a very abstract manner, with all of the individuals in Mary-Ann's life depicted as fairy-tale characters. For example, the twins are portrayed as goblins, and Mary-Ann as a wise princess. What makes this particularly compelling is the integration that the book has mechanically, as well as thematically with the game as a whole. There are various puzzles within the world of *Tell Me Why* that can only be figured out by deciphering information within the Book of Goblins. Mary-Ann has set up various locks and hidden compartments throughout her house, and in the process of finding/solving them, the player receives a great deal of insight into both the past and her character as a whole. The book also serves as a symbolic reflection of the game's focus on the nature of memory. While all the information the twins need is within the book, it is also marred by Mary-Ann's escapist fantasies and biases; a distorted mirror through which glimmers of the past are seen. The addition of this element to the game strengthened the core narrative a great deal with its twist on the execution of the core themes of *Tell Me Why*. It causes the player to consider another lens altogether in their analysis of what

truly happened, and the intrigue generated by this heightens the sense of drama within the game by a great deal.

Unsuccessful Element

The mechanical elements weren't taken far enough. While the mechanics present in *Tell Me Why* were used to facilitate the themes present within, they did not go far enough to truly marry the narrative to the interactive elements that define this medium.

To bring up another of Dontnod's works, *Life Is Strange* utilizes its core mechanic of reversing time to devastating effect in episode 2. The usage of the time reversing mechanic allowed for a much more metered and contemplative approach to decisions that would otherwise have to be made in a moment, by letting you gauge the response of other characters to various actions and allowing you to freely choose between them. However, during the end section of the second episode the protagonist Max loses her power for a short section of gameplay due to overuse of her ability. Unfortunately her powers are lost in the most critical moment of the game thus far, trying to talk a friend out of committing suicide as she stands on the edge of a roof. The loss of your ability to make the "best" decision and carefully plan out what you say during said crisis creates an intensely nerve-wracking sequence, where your memory of the character is put to the test when you're prompted to show you really know her through a series of questions. The loss of a huge portion of the player's agency here ties into the core themes of *Life Is Strange*, and is incredibly memorable for how harrowing it is.

Tell Me Why could be dramatically strengthened with tighter integration of its core mechanics with the narrative itself. While this game also has a supernatural element in the form of the twins' telepathic bond, it isn't used for much more than communicating between the two of them covertly while making bigger decisions with a third party present. The telepathic bond could be used to much greater symbolic effect if there were more aspects to its functionality. Even during the end of the game, there are only two real outcomes in regards to the link between the two siblings, high bond or low bond. This difference is only truly made clear at the end of the game, where you get a different variant on the ending depending on how close the two siblings are. A way to make this element stronger could be to allow for character switching

using a specific input, and changing its effectiveness depending on the choices you make during the game. A subsequent consequence for a low bond could be one of the twins acting on their own and disregarding the others suggestions as a sign of the weak trust the two of them share at that specific moment.

Highlight

The climax of the final episode of *Tell Me Why* certainly stands out. After deducing that there is a possibility of Tom Vecchi being their biological father, the twins call his number to get him to visit. They threaten to go public with the affair that Mary-Ann and Tom shared, which would ruin his chances of getting elected. Upon meeting him, Tom tells an entirely different account of what happened on the night that Mary-Ann died, as he was watching from a distance. According to him, Mary-Ann was planning on committing suicide with a gun before being interrupted by Tyler. She chased him down to the dock to try and calm him down, but was stabbed by Alyson in her attempt to defend Tyler. The player is ultimately left to make the final decision as to what memory of the event they believe to be true.

There is information pointing in both directions, but Alyson suspects that Tom's accounts are the true events of that night. Regardless of what the player chooses, there is no definitive answer as to what truly happened, and Tyler comments that perhaps they'll never know the objective truth.

This scene is what truly cements the core themes of the story and makes the message of the game abundantly clear. Our memories are fragile, and we often will never know what truly happened in a large number of key events in our lives. However, the way that you interpret events does have an impact on who you are. If given sufficient leeway in the validity of a claim, do you choose to believe that a more empathetic interpretation could be possible? If not for anyone besides yourself? Ultimately the choice is only something that you can decide, and there is no right or wrong answer. This focus on empathy ultimately is what drives many of the decisions made in *Tell Me Why*, and having an ending that so succinctly captures all the disparate elements of that together leads to a very strong finish for the narrative.

Critical Reception

According to metacritic, Tell Me Why garnered “generally favorable reviews”. The game has an average rating of 75/100 on PC, and 78/100 on Xbox One.

Marcus Estrada of HardcoreGamer stated in their review of Tell Me Why(Where they give a score of 8/10):

“While still supernatural, Tell Me Why provides more of a mature tale overall than Life is Strange. It’s surprisingly dark, but uplifting at times as well. This game takes chances with the cast of characters in ways that are mostly a resounding success. It’s exciting to see a LGBTQ lead character and a storyline that doesn’t plunge headfirst into tropes. Here’s hoping that this is a sign of where Dontnod will go in the future, because Tell Me Why is a step in the right direction.”

Dani Cross of The Digital Fix, who gave a score of 8/10 wrote:

“It’s a short game overall (each chapter took me roughly 3 hours) so I’d recommend giving it a shot on Xbox Game Pass. It’s a game you probably won’t return to once you’ve completed it but if you enjoy story-driven games, this is one of the best I’ve played and I fully recommend it. The gameplay may be limited but I enjoyed my time with it and I appreciated how it tackled the issues it chose to include. Tell Me Why is a significant step forward for trans representation in media, and it helps that it’s a genuinely engaging story too. It gives me hope that more studios will follow suit in the future and deliver similarly respectful narratives like this one.”

Jesse Gregoire of Adventure Gamers, who gave a score of 8/10 in their review wrote:

“But don’t let its small size fool you, as Tell Me Why is more than the sum of its parts. Although smaller in scope than its brethren, its examination of the human condition is one that is sure to stick with you, making you ponder it well after you leave the twins’ tragic story behind. The nature of memory, bigotry, sexuality, appearance and reality, and the ability to let go are all put under the microscope in a thoughtful, nuanced way. If you have a penchant for narrative adventures that make you think, then this game should be near the top of your to-play list. The more you demand of it beyond that, the less you will get out of your time with Tell Me Why. With that caveat, it’s still worth playing if just for the well-told experience of walking a mile in another’s shoes, which in turn might make you realise that those annoying loved ones aren’t the (only) ones whose views are biased or at least incomplete.”

The critical reception that *Tell Me Why* received reflects a lot of my own issues with the game, in broad strokes. The lack of additional mechanics that tie into the narrative hurts the overall experience a fair bit, as mentioned in the weakest element section. However, it is also heartening to know that critics appreciated the incredible well implemented LGBT content within the game.

Lessons

The intersection between abstract themes and the lived experience of minorities creates a dramatically more impactful narrative, especially when it comes to empathizing with the group in question. One of the key lessons to take away from *Tell Me Why* is that balancing the representation of a group and interweaving it into the core themes of a game’s narrative will greatly help avoid many stereotypes and pitfalls that other well meaning stories often fall into. Over-focusing on representation suffers from the same problem that shoving these elements into the background does, as it doesn’t properly reflect on the lived experiences of any given minority. While being trans is a very important aspect of Tyler’s life and personality, it is by no means the only thing that defines him. This is significantly more accurate to how trans folk view their identity and the idea of transitioning than making it the sole focus of everything that happens to them. This approach creates much more nuanced characters and depictions of other walks of life than focusing solely on identity itself. Using broader themes allows for players

to better understand these group's struggles, especially when they mirror struggles that are much more common to the audience at large.

Framing and re-framing a character's motivations and actions due to new information being discovered creates nuanced and empathetic characters, regardless of if they are antagonistic or not. Just as with the last lesson, approaches that more closely mirror how we as human beings experience life create for much more layered characters and experiences. When we meet and get to know people in reality, it isn't a simple and straightforward road to either friendship or hatred. There are peaks and valleys as we learn more about one another. What may at first read as alarming behaviour can go much deeper than that, and it is only by knowing said person better that you can truly get insight into why they do the things that they do. We as individuals have many flaws, but we also have reasoning behind our actions as well. Learning more and more about Mary-Ann over the course of *Tell Me Why* mirrors how empathy is fostered, where over time you learn to withhold judgement until you have as much information as you possibly can. Approaching characters in this manner allows the player to get into a much more empathetic mindset, and that leads to seeing many more layers to said character that the player would otherwise not see.

Working with and getting guidance from the minority group that you are writing about not only creates a much more realistic and holistic narrative, but also helps abolish the frameworks that keep these groups away from telling their stories in the gaming medium. Dontnod's approach to making sure that the experience of *Tell Me Why* was as authentic as possible is commendable, and a key part of the success of the game as a whole. Historically, trans roles in various forms of media have been played by cisgender actors, a notable example being Eddie Redmayne in "The Danish Girl". This is endemic of a lot of issues that trans individuals have to face in creative industries, as they constantly get looked over for roles that they have every right to play. Casting August Aiden Black to play Tyler was an incredible move by Dontnod that both significantly bolstered the authenticity of the narrative, but also sets up a stronger precedent for trans actors to not get looked over for roles that they would excel in. We are at a critical moment in this industry, and it is actions like this that push the AAA gaming space to be a much more inclusive and diverse space. Diversity of stories is something that narrative designers strive for, and this pushes the envelope in that very space.

The only way for narrative in video games to evolve is to mature in the ways that stories are told.

Summation

Tell Me Why is an incredibly strong narrative adventure on the merits of its well crafted storytelling. Where it truly shines however, is in its incredibly well executed representation of the experience of living as a transgender individual. The manner in which *Tell Me Why* weaves its story through and around transgender representation without being subsumed by it shows a specific maturity in storytelling that is not often seen in this medium. The thematic integration with said representation serves only to bolster the empathy that players will feel towards said group, in a manner that feels incredibly natural and realistic. Hopefully *Tell Me Why* acts as a watershed moment for this medium in terms of LGBT representation in the AAA space.

Citations

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