



REVIEW: TELL ME WHY IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE BUT IMPORTANT GAME

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Platforms: PC (reviewed), Xbox One

Tell Me Why is an uncomfortable game, and that's the point. It deals with issues that most media won't touch, let alone most games. Besides the fact that it stars a transgender protagonist, it also deals with the way law enforcement treats children, people of a lower class, and people of color. It touches on the traditions of Native Alaskan peoples and the way Christianity has become a force for good and/or bad in modern Alaskan culture.

The game touches on mental illness and drug abuse, and it does it all with a slight splash of the supernatural, as developer Dontnod has been known to do with their previous cinematic adventure series, *Life is Strange*. *Tell Me Why* is doing real, important, artistic work. The only issue is that sometimes it was hard to tell when I was uncomfortable due to the heavy plot elements, and when I was uncomfortable due to the sometimes messy gameplay.

You play as the twins Tyler, a transgender man, and Alyson, a cisgender woman. One night when they were kids, Tyler came out to his Mom and was reportedly attacked by her.

Unfortunately, he killed her in self-defense. As a result, he was sent to a juvenile corrections facility, while Alyson was adopted by the chief of police. After having not seen each other for 10 years, the twins get back together and decide to sell their mother's old house in order to move on with their lives.

Of course, this is where the supernatural elements start creeping in. Tyler and Alyson have a strange psychic connection with each other. They can speak directly to each other's minds using an inner "voice." They can also replay visions of events that happened in the past, provided that they have an emotional enough connection to them. This peculiar ability leads the twins to uncover some strange information about the night Tyler was attacked. As they uncover secrets about their Mom and the town they once lived in, the situation becomes more complicated, showing that societal, personal, and maybe even supernatural forces were at play.

Complication is the main theme of *Tell Me Why*. It refuses to portray anything or anyone as black and white. No one is simply evil for evil's sake. No one misgenders Tyler just to be portrayed as a bad person. In fact, not a single character is portrayed as wholly bad or wholly good. Instead, they are portrayed as complex people with complex histories whose behavior is largely dependent on their own past and the traumas therein.

Much of the social gameplay revolves around how you decide to react to that. Do you forgive well-meaning people who say possibly insulting things? Do you pry into other people's past if they pry into yours? Do you hold grudges for the wrongs people did to you nearly a decade ago or do you let them go and try and build a better life?

This is a huge step forward for trans representation in gaming. On one hand, the story isn't really about how Tyler is trans, and thus avoids the common pitfall of making a queer character's sole personality trait being their queerness. On the other hand, *Tell Me Why* doesn't ignore Tyler's gender identity like it has nothing to do with the plot either. People are sometimes uncomfortable around him. His relationship with people he knew more than 10 years ago is complicated, both because of his transition and because he hasn't seen them for a decade. Being trans is part of who Tyler is, and it's part of what you get to experience as a player, even while you are investigating weird paranormal happenings.

The plot does start off slow. The dialogue at the very beginning is so awkward it's painful and the way that the twins' psychic abilities are introduced is so poorly handled it made me laugh.

Luckily, *Tell Me Why* does hit its stride around the hour mark. At this point the greater mystery becomes apparent and it does hook you. It's only unfortunate that the story's biggest reveal comes right before the episode ends. At the very least we only have to wait a week to see the story continue.

I love this plot. Despite the slow goings and sometimes awkward dialogue, it's a plot that I deeply care about, and it's the type of gutsy story writing that we need in games.



But Dontnod... seriously... I mean this with all due respect, work on your QA testing.

Tell Me Why is at many times frustrating to play. It's another Telltale-style "choices matter" point-and-click adventure game, and hey, with a good enough plot these can really take off. It's just that there is so little to do outside the plot. There are two puzzles in the entire game. Just two. There are no quick-time events or any action sequences whatsoever and the characters walk around at a snail's pace with a camera that just does not want to cooperate.

So how do you progress? Just by talking to the right people and examining the right things in the right order, and this is exactly what's so frustrating. Sometimes, for example, you'll need a key to open a door. You might find the key, but if you examine it you'll just say some snarky comment and move on. Then, after you find the locked door, you might end up searching for a

way in for ages until you realize that you can pick up that original key you found only AFTER you found the lock it goes to. This is so stupid. There's no reason to gatekeep our inventory like this.

The resulting gameplay loop involves examining and talking to everything, and then doing it again until you move on, and then doing it again, and then doing it again, and then doing it again. It's never quite clear what the important thing is that you looked at or talked to. You aren't actually solving anything. You are just clicking on everything and hoping for the best. The choices are the ONLY interactive part of the game and they are few and far between.



The twins' vision power is an interesting twist on the formula. At times you can "focus on your bond" to see visions of the past overlaid with the present. Many times you need to find enough information to trigger one of these visions. However, this too can be frustrating. Your controller vibrates and the screen shimmers whenever a vision is nearby, but if you are too close to the vision when you start it might not even show up. So you have to wander around hitting the focus button over and over again just to be sure you didn't glitch the game out.

There are a ton of little nitpicks that I take issue with. Which dialogue is skippable and which isn't is completely arbitrary. Sometimes you can interrupt what the twins are saying by examining something new, and sometimes they are stuck rooted in place repeating the same

two minutes of dialogue you already heard. Sometimes, objects that you need to examine are so close to each other it's difficult to get the camera to focus on one instead of the other, meaning you'll be fiddling with the right stick just to look at the thing you want to look at. Sometimes the thing you want to look at is right in front of you and you STILL can't examine it. It's not a broken mess, it's just sloppy.



That's why Dontnod is so lucky that their storytelling is so compelling. On top of that, it's an audiovisual delight as well. August Black does a phenomenal job as Tyler's voice actor, in fact, every member of the cast really makes their character come alive. The environments of Alaska are brilliantly rendered, and on a decent rig the game will run in 60FPS easily, but you might want to reduce it to 30 just so that it has more of a cinematic look to it.

Overall, I think you should play *Tell Me Why*. Its budget price of \$40 more than makes up for the flaws and the storytelling along with the important and rarely confronted topics it tackles are worth that price. It's short, only about four hours, but we are getting another chapter in a week and yet another after that. It feels, to be honest, a lot like an HBO prestige TV series. It's a new model that intersects the models of TV and gaming, and honestly, I'm interested to see if it succeeds. I might really like playing huge 60-hour games in 4 hour spurts each week. But whether or not this is effective will have to wait until episode 2 launches on September 3, 2020.

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It's a shame that the gameplay is so shoddy at times,

because I truly believe that Tell Me Why is one of the most important games of our time, in terms of social impact. Hopefully later episodes won't feel as awkward to play.



Gameplay

7

Tell Me Why is a cinematic adventure game, so you already know what you are getting here, but even as cinematic adventure games go it feels a little sloppy.

Story

9

Tell Me Why addresses important topics that no other game or piece of media does. We need more courageous storytellers like the people at Dontnod.

Voice acting

9

All the characters come to life despite some awkward dialogue. Also, props to Dontnod for hiring an actual trans man to play their trans male character.

Graphics

9

30FPS, 60FPS, either way this game looks fantastic.

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