Res Rhetorica

Contemporary Rhetorical Theories
Współczesne teorie retoryczne

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Playing out the unspeakable: the rhetorics of trauma in *The Day the Laughter Stopped* digital game
Rozgrywka niewymownością: retoryka traumy w grze cyfrowej *The Day the Laughter Stopped*

Abstract

The article undertakes a detailed analysis of *The Day the Laughter Stopped* – a simple text-based browser game about rape, told from the perspective of a young teenage girl. While seemingly straightforward, the game uses choice poetics to build expectations of agency on the side of the player, only to subvert them at the most climactic moment, provoking emotional responses and serving as a commentary on the experience of loss of control and loss of words in the face of a traumatic event. Following existing approaches to rhetorical, emotion-evoking qualities and capabilities of digital games, the article explores the potential of the digital medium to communicate the unspeakable, overwhelming dimension of trauma, as illustrated by the game. The analysis not only explores the medium-specific means of expression which the game utilizes to encourage the audience to explore the perspective of a rape victim in an engaging way, but also leads to the conclusion that in doing so, the game aims to make persuasive statements about the social and cultural discourse around rape trauma and its representations, and therefore contributes to the larger socio-cultural discourse. As such, the article aspires to add to pre-existing studies on the specific rhetorical means of digital fiction, as well as on the approaches to cultural renditions of trauma.

Artykuł podejmuje szczegółową analizę *The Day the Laughter Stopped* – prostej, tekstowej gry przeglądarkowej podejmującej temat gwałtu, przedstawionego z perspektywy młodej nastolatki. Gra, choć z pozoru prosta, wykorzystuje poetykę wyborów, by wzbudzić w graczu poczucie sprawczości, tylko po to, by obalić je w kulminacyjnym momencie, prowokując tym samym emocjonalne reakcje i formułując komentarz do doświadczenia utraty kontroli i utraty słów w obliczu traumatycznego wydarzenia. Bazując na istniejących podejściach do retorycznych możliwości gier wideo, w artykule badam potencjał medium cyfrowego do komunikowania niewypowiadalnego wymiaru traumy. Gra służy zaś jako ilustracja. Podjęta analiza nie tylko bada specyficzne dla tego medium środki wyrazu, które gra wykorzystuje, aby zachęcić graczy do zaangażowania się w poznanie perspektywy ofiary gwałtu, ale także prowadzi do wniosku, że gra wykorzystuje je w zabiegach perswazyjnych, formułując argumenty dotyczące traumy i kultury gwałtu, i stając się niejako głosem w szerszym dyskursie społeczno-kulturowym. Artykuł ma na celu uzupełnienie istniejących badań nad konkretnymi środkami retorycznymi fikcji cyfrowej, jak również nad sposobami kulturowego przedstawiania traumy.

Key words

License

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Playing out the unspeakable: the rhetorics of trauma in *The Day the Laughter Stopped* digital game

1. Introduction

While discussing *The Day the Laughter Stopped* (Hypnotic Owl 2013), Becky Chambers writes: "I did not expect much from this game. I certainly did not expect to become physically upset. I hugged myself for a few seconds. I shut my laptop, and paced. (…) I pawed around my kitchen, looking for comfort food" (Chambers 2014). It does not seem surprising that a game which tells a story about the rape of a young teenage girl would inspire such emotional reactions. The topic itself is emotionally loaded, and its cultural representations are often charged with affective and rhetorical power, contextualized within existing social discourses (Sielke 2002). Importantly, however, the emotional impact of *The Day* is not derived solely from its topic and narrative. The moment of the game which Chambers finds so upsetting is when the formal rhetorical means of the digital medium are brought to the forefront, employed in a way that surprises or even shocks the player.

The main mechanics of engagement and gameplay progression in *The Day* are rather simple and very common for the genre of text-based games – they are based on the player making choices from a set presented at the end of each passage of the story, thus pushing it forward. Usually, such a mechanic leads to branches in the game narrative, allowing for different results and even different endings, which makes it easy to assume *The Day* provides similar opportunities, as it responds to the player's input. However, in its most climactic moment – the moment where the protagonist is forced into a sexual act – and from that moment forward, the choice-based mechanic becomes purposefully broken. The player is still presented with sets of options, but the ones which would lead to the protagonist fighting, protesting, or speaking up (in other words, doing anything but being passive in the face of the traumatic experience) do not lead to game progression; they are seemingly unclickable, which forces the player to pick the options representing passive behavior to let the story unfold. Such subversion of player agency aims

to provoke a very emotional response on the side of the player, now powerless to control the game, as evidenced by Chambers' initial statement. This powerlessness mirrors that of the protagonist and, as such, contextualized by the topic of the story, it serves as a persuasive statement about the experience of being raped, communicating psychological trauma through means exceeding the narrative and aesthetic layer of the game.

Importantly, powerlessness lies at the heart of a traumatic experience – both in terms of inability to act during the event, and failure to face it afterwards. Trauma, in its most general sense, drawn from psychiatric studies and applied to broader cultural discussion, can be defined as a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience (Caruth 1996, 3-5). Such response often can involve forms of stress and shock, stripping a person of their agency during or after the experience, as well as leaving that person disturbed enough to be haunted by what transpired, while not having means to challenge it. According to Cathy Caruth's influential idea that trauma presents in itself an affront to understanding, a traumatic experience unsettles the person subjected to it in a way that makes it impossible to completely comprehend or process what happened (Caruth 1996). As result, in order to represent trauma in cultural renderings and narratives, rhetorical potential of the formal means of the medium often needs to be employed. As stated by Caruth as the traumatized do not fully process the traumatic experiences they have been subjected to, due to the very nature of trauma, the retellings are charged with that inexpressibility as well (Caruth 1996). If, then, trauma defies the conventional structures of narrative expression, those cultural texts which undertake the task of thematizing it often rely on the formal means of representation to help express the story of a traumatic event, and frame it in a way that conveys its very incomprehensibility (Hartman 1995, Whitehead 2004). That same sentiment seems to be present as the player engages with *The Day*. Not only does the game utilize the formal qualities of the digital, interactive medium to elicit emotional responses and communicate meanings outside of the narrative itself, but also, as the abovementioned description of the game's climax aims to illustrate, the very thing that it problematizes is the inability to act, speak, or face trauma in any proactive and reasonable way, both on the part of the protagonist and of the player, whose agency is stripped away. This reliance on the formal elements of the game to express the otherwise inexpressible not only serves as a better exploration of the depicted experience, but it also helps address how such experiences are depicted and discussed in a larger socio-cultural context. By problematizing agency and choice, *The Day* directly engages the issue of assigning blame – which remains a prominent issue in the discourse surrounding rape victims, as they often are accused of not doing enough during the assault, while simultaneously being

discouraged to speak up afterwards (Fahs 2016, Weiss 2010, Ro 2018) – and, by contextualizing it within the story of rape, encourages the audience to consider the problems of victim-blaming, victim-silencing, and rape culture. As such, the game not only serves as an illustration of the potential that digital games have to communicate the overwhelming, unspoken, and unspeakable dimension of trauma in ways which are not available to other media; it also, following the general tendencies of critically-oriented games, forges a highly emotional experience into a strong cultural statement, a persuasive critical exploration of a rape victim's perspective.

The following article focuses on a detailed analysis of *The Day the Laughter Stopped*, examining on how the formal, interactive, procedural qualities of digital games allow them to engage players in a meaningful experience, and how they can be utilized to provoke emotional reactions from the audience and inspire interpretations of trauma-related processes. In doing so, the article aims to explore the affective capacity of digital games, especially in those instances where the usual formal means of representation become subverted and the predominantly interactive medium becomes the tool to prompt the experience of passivity. As such, the article addresses the potential of games to add to existing cultural approaches to narratives of trauma, to expand the range of means of expression cultural texts have to explore the incomprehensibility of traumatic experiences, and to address socio-cultural discourses around such experiences in a critical manner.

2. Digital games and trauma

While within the field of game studies works on trauma seem to be sparse, there are some scholars who approach that topic, including Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps. Analyzing games depicting traumatic events, Smethurst and Craps argue that digital games, due to their unique means of representation, are especially suited to explore the problems of psychological trauma and related processes (Smethurst and Craps 2014), and those unique means of representation can be ascribed mainly to the interactivity of the digital medium and to the specific ways in which interactivity and rules guide the player's engagement. Such a conviction places their work among approaches which focus on the rhetorical and affective power of digital games, and which detail the formal means through which games can communicate meanings within gameplay. It seems, then, beneficial to briefly explore those approaches, as they not only provide crucial context for more specific trauma-related studies, but also outline perspectives for gameplay-oriented critical analysis.

In accordance with what Smethurst and Craps appear to believe, the general consensus in the field of game studies seems to view interactivity and procedurality as the defining qualities of digital games, differentiating them from other media. As Jonne Arjoranta (2011, 1) writes "[t]hese qualities change how games create and transmit meaning to their players". Interactivity of games means that they allow for and respond to the player's input, and in that process meaning is created and transmitted. Such interactive engagement results in the feeling of agency, defined by Janet Murray (1997, 126) as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices". Choices, then, lie at the heart of interactivity and player agency, as the actions taken by the player are recognized by the game as meaningful and influential, which elicits further engagement and further transmission of meaning. The other unique quality of digital games invoked by Arjoranta – their procedurality – can be described as the potential to represent processes; in Arjoranta's text, it relates to Ian Bogost's influential theory of procedural rhetoric. Bogost (2007, 2008) claims that meaning in games is directly linked to their rules – a game is composed of sets of rules, against which the player's behavior is executed. Rules regulate the options the player has for how to behave, but also serve as the basis for an ongoing feedback loop between the player and the game, guiding what happens in the gameplay. As such, games provide unique means to represent processes and "expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior" (Bogost 2008, 128) by problematizing those real-life processes or behaviors in their own rule sets. Thus, Bogost links the rhetorical potential of the digital games to the formal means, such as game mechanics, which not only guide the player's engagement but can also make persuasive statements about the topics they explore, by implementing specific procedural models imitating those found in the real world.

While Bogost is primarily interested in broader ideological readings of selected titles, Doris C. Rusch (2009), assuming a similar perspective of procedural rhetoric, focuses more on the capability of digital games to express the human condition and thus allow their audience to explore specific mental and emotional processes. She argues that while the fictional and aesthetic layers of the game provide clear links to certain experiences as they problematize them, it is "the game-part [which] brings in the affective strength of the real world activity and the fiction contextualizes those game emotions and enables players to attribute them to the events in the gameworld" (Rusch 2009, 3). In other words, the procedural, interactive characteristics of the medium allow for active engagement of players, while at the same time they use the context of the specific fictional elements to guide that engagement towards specific understanding of the represented topics. Assuming

such a perspective allows one to approach games as interactive systems which, through formal, rule-based means, not only encourage player engagement but also focus it by employing specific strategies of affect. While undertaking critical game analysis, then, it is crucial to investigate the specific ways in which particular titles make use of that rhetorical power, and how they employ formal, ludic means to encourage particular responses, which are then contextualized within the game narrative and within broader socio-cultural contexts.

Tobi Smethurst seems to share Rusch's conviction while discussing the unique formal characteristics of the digital games which are employed in problematizing trauma. She writes:

> [b]y innovating with the interactivity and player agency that define them as a medium, games have the power not only to match (…) trauma fictions in representing the trauma of the victim rhetorically but also to involve the player in the complicity, guilt, and potential trauma of the perpetrator through methods uniquely available to games (Smethurst 2015, 821).

Smethurst's perspective not only links the communication of trauma in games to their ludic qualities, but also, by stressing the uniqueness of the formal tools at the digital games' disposal, it explores how games can add to the expressive range of existing trauma fictions by utilizing rhetorical and affective strategies inaccessible to other media. While Smethurst does not claim that games have the power to express the experience of trauma fully, this approach presents games as a resource that allows audiences to experience virtually mediated aspects of psychological trauma, and which does so by employing means beyond those offered by linear narratives. Importantly, Smethurst notices that in allowing for such exploration of difficult experiences, games often go beyond simple representation of events, as they challenge the player's ethics and upset their prejudices (Smethurst and Craps 2014). Thus, she recognizes the potential of games to expose and question specific ways of thinking resulting from the audience's socially and culturally predetermined expectations. In this respect, she seems to mirror the sentiment many scholars have when writing about art games – usually defined as games with a specific artistic intent, beyond that of simply entertaining their audience, which often includes undertaking topics of social and cultural issues (Holmes 2003, Strużyna 2014). Scholars often use art games as illustrations of the potential the digital medium has to describe and deconstruct current social reality (Raczek 2012), allow for exploration of marginalized perspectives through gameplay (Nacher 2016), and therefore provoke players to reflect on the represented issues, serving as "artistic interventions of a critical nature" (Nacher 2016, 50). Importantly, games which do so are often self-reflective as well, as they employ formal means of expression in an unexpected way, problematizing gameplay by twisting its usual conventions in order to craft specific experiences during play,

using the principles of what Lindsay Grace (2014) calls critical game design. Such critical employment of formal means of expression can be directed at providing social commentary by contextualizing critical gameplay within particular socio-culturally oriented themes and narratives, and seemingly, for Smethurst, trauma games can follow that pattern – they can use methods unique to games to involve the audience in experiences of trauma to shed light on the represented issues, thereby contributing to the larger cultural discourses around such experiences.

Following this assumption, and adopting the abovementioned theoretical approaches, I will conduct an analysis of *The Day the Laughter Stopped*, focusing on both the rhetorical and affective power of the digital medium, as well as on the intersections between the game's formal and aesthetic means, relating the rules and mechanics to the narrative. Consequently, the analysis will aim to expand upon the existing research concerning digital trauma fictions, as well as to explore the potential of the digital medium to represent traumatic events in a way that does not overlook their usual narrative inexpressibility, and in turn utilizes it to craft a persuasive critical experience.

3. *The Day the Laughter Stopped*: playing out rape trauma

The Day the Laughter Stopped is a short, simple, online text game created in 2013 by Hypnotic Owl. It follows a story of a 14-year-old girl, as she meets an older boy – whom she calls old enough to be "almost a man." Throughout the game he repeatedly shows interest in her, by attempting several kisses, following her after school, seeking her out during parties, and finally forcing her into a sexual encounter. As a game thematizing rape and exploring the perspective of its victim before, during, and after the traumatic experience, *The Day* clearly fits into the larger body of trauma fiction. Accordingly, the tone of the game, especially the style of the narrative, seems to draw from the characteristics of the literary representations of trauma told from the perspectives of its survivors – it strongly resembles a testimony by using the first-person past-tense narrative voice, and presenting a detailed, almost analytic account on what happened, exploring both the chronological information ("It was a rainy day in late September when he first noticed me") and exploration of the protagonist's reasoning and emotional state during the course of the events ("Hesitantly, I agreed. These guys were so much older than us and we wouldn't know anybody there, but my friend said it would be fine"; "Whenever I saw him in school during the next weeks, I was anxious he would mention our encounter on the balcony") (Hypnotic Owl 2013).

Employing that style within the narrative voice seems to be aimed at fostering empathy, as it places the player as a witness of the events, while at the same time

allowing for in-depth exploration of the protagonist's perspective, emotions and vulnerabilities. In doing so, *The Day* encourages what Smethurst and Craps (2014) call, after Jonathan Belman and Mary Flannagan (2010), "empathetic play" – a mode of engagement in which the players relate their own feelings and reasoning to the characters represented in the game. However, much in accordance with what Smethurst and Craps describe, when investigating the rhetorical potential of games to represent trauma and encourage empathy, *The Day* does so not only through its narrative means, but by utilizing its formal means of expression, unique to the medium of digital games. Through the employment of choice poetics, understood here as critical use of choice-based systems to make persuasive claims on the represented subject – an expressive measure analyzed in depth by Peter Mawhorter, Michael Mateas, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, and Arnav Jhala (2014) – it channels its aspect of interactivity into making the player feel complicit for how the events unfold. The player is presented with pairs of choices after each small passage of the text. The choices determine how the protagonist reacts to the events that are happening within the story – if she will wave at the boy as she first meets him or ignore him, if she will drink at a party she attends with her friends, if she will pull away or allow him to kiss her. The game, in turn, incorporates those choices into subsequent text passages, either describing her actions accordingly, or at least acknowledging them in her thought process.

The choices, as well as their acknowledgment by the game, translate to the player experience by helping foster the feeling of agency, and therefore responsibility, over how the events unfold – a common intended result of the affective use of choice-based systems (Mawhorter et al. 2014). They allow for the player to take active part in the realization of the story and shape it to their liking within the framework provided by the game. In doing so, they simultaneously provoke engagement, as the player now has to evaluate the story to decide what should happen and then act upon those evaluations, and also place at least some degree of responsibility (and/or blame) for the outcome of the game, and the potential success of the protagonist, in the player's hands. Moreover, these choices reduce the distance between the protagonist and the player, as each represents one of the protagonist's own possible thought-processes or decisions. *The Day* notably limits the choice options to the heroine's reactions, and the influence over the events to whatever influence her decisions in the moment could have had. In other words, the only actual control the player has is over the protagonist's initial responses and attitudes, and not over the whole scope of events, which further links the perspectives of the audience and the character and builds upon the empathetic link between them, by drawing from what Belman and Flannagan (2010, 2) after social science literature call "cognitive empathy" – an experience of assuming another

person's perspective, in order to familiarize oneself with their convictions, norms, beliefs. In *The Day* the main gameplay mechanic, mixed with the limitation of perspective to that of the protagonist alone, encourages such cognitive empathetic link, while at the same time structuring the emotional empathetic experience, by presenting the plight of a young, innocent girl, which the player can feel sorry and responsible for, within the assumed perspective.

Such encouragement of an empathetic, engaged approach to play is rapidly subverted in the most climactic moment of the game, and harnessed to inspire a strong emotional reaction in the player. While within the story the "older boy" starts to force himself on the protagonist by pushing her on the ground, lying on her, restricting her movements, and initiating a kiss – a scene which always happens, no matter the choices made thus far – the game presents the player with two options on how to react: they can choose for the protagonist to "Stop Him" or "Stay Still". However, if the player attempts to choose the former option, they will quickly realize it is unclickable, meaning that the mechanic of choice has been purposefully broken: picking that action does not bring any results, and in order to progress the game, the player is forced to pick the other, passive choice, and let the heroine remain still. Once the latter option is selected, the game acknowledges the choice by presenting another passage, depicting the consecutive details of the assault: "His hands went under my sweater and reached for my breasts, grabbing them hard. He started to breathe harder and I felt him getting more and more excited" (Hypnotic Owl 2013). From then on, the narrative voice focuses solely on the description of the assailant's actions, thus emphasizing the protagonist's own inability to act and hinting at a feeling of detachment as the assault progresses. Corresponding to the events and the emotional tone of the narrative, the same mechanic of broken choice is repeated throughout the entirety of the scene, making the player click the passive options as they are taunted with the active ones still visible on the interface.

Subverting the established mechanic in this way places the player in the role of the unwilling witness to the events, while simultaneously expanding that role to that of a more engaged party, through both associating the perspective of the player with that of the victim and by the continuous use of the means of expression, which prior to the traumatic events served as means for eliciting active engagement. In doing so, *The Day* harnesses the feelings of agency and responsibility that it initially encouraged and channels them to inspire the feelings of helplessness and frustration instead. The player is still actively engaging with the choice mechanics, still empathically invested in the story, but their powerlessness to exact that engagement in a desirable way – to influence the events of the game – is directly confronted by the visual representation of the

choices on the interface. By problematizing the most basic mode of engagement, and (paradoxically) forcing the player into impotence in order to act, the game not only aims at provoking a strong emotional reaction, but it also problematizes blame. It contextualizes those emotions within the experience of a rape victim; it compels the audience to face the helplessness of the protagonist not only within the story, but also through analogy in the relationship between the audience and the game, and thus comments on the common reaction that victims of the sexual assault have, as they are unable to fight or even protest. Similarly, in the aftermath of the assault, the protagonist and the player remain deprived of choice regarding how to act – the game continues to present two options, but those which would lead to confronting the situation by speaking up remain locked. Not only does this mechanic and its repetitiveness throughout the rape scene and afterwards aim at eliciting the player's frustration (which may then turn into grudging acceptance), but it also serves as a further commentary of the psychological effects of post-rape trauma, as the victims often experience apathy and inability to articulate or even acknowledge what happened (Weiss 2010, Ro 2018). The mechanic, then, mirrors the narrative in the representation of suppression.

Importantly, the very framework of the choices presented throughout the game, and what actions they refer to, serves as basis for further commentary on cultural discourses concerning rape victims. The assumed style of choose-your-own-adventure games, and the associated expectation of the player, is that the choices are meaningful and thus lead to different, varying outcomes. This can inspire a calculative mindset, a belief that there exists a frame of reference against which the choices can be measured and calculated. Yet, as previously mentioned, the choices within *The Day* concern solely the protagonist's reactions to the events. This limitation encourages an empathetic approach to the heroine, on the one hand, but, on the other, it places her reactions under scrutiny, when linked to this calculative expectation for the choices to have consequences, because such reactions are presumed to influence the game's outcome. This presumption is further problematized by the cultural associations those choices invoke, since they are crafted in a way that shadows the questions of whether the protagonist has encouraged the perpetrator: her decisions such as drinking during the party, meeting with him after school, or letting him kiss her. Therefore, they bring forth connotations with the discourse of victim blaming, as the victims of sexual assault often are faced with questions, or even outright accusations, concerning the possibility that through their own behavior, clothing, or attitude they might have encouraged the situation that led to rape, or were even "asking for it" (Fahs 2016). By further linking those connotations with the mechanic that deprives the protagonist's choices of any meaningful impact, and the audience of any active

means to act upon their calculative evaluation of the situation, the game seems to aim at reinforcing the idea that the victim has no control over the events, or even over their own reactions in the face of overwhelming trauma.

The Day further explores this topic by questioning the logic of choice-based evaluation, as it employs yet another subversion of the expected use of formal means of expression to place additional emphasis on the impossibility of confronting the consequences of the choices made during the game. Namely, as the game ends, the player is presented with the option to start over. However, if selected, it only leads to additional text, stating: "There is no starting over. This happened." This illusory choice thus affectively blocks any attempt at a second playthrough. By presenting the possibility of playing the game again, only to immediately reveal that possibility as an illusion once the player avails themselves of it, *The Day* again strips the player of a meaningful choice and refuses to let the player analyze or rationalize what happened, stirring them towards the realization that no amount of calculation or re-arrangement of choices would have changed the outcome. Not only does it serve as a further commentary on the fallacy of assigning the blame to the victim, but this refusal to let the player engage with the game again also encourages the audience to scrutinize the idea of the inexpressibility or even incomprehensibility of trauma. Within the story itself, the protagonist does not tell her family what happened, and when the choice to do so presents itself on the interface it is, following the established mechanic, unselectable. It thus seemingly serves to express the loss of ability to speak about the traumatic event in its aftermath, analogous to the loss of ability to act during the assault. Similarly, because the possibility of replay is locked, the player is forced into passivity, loaded with a strong emotional impact, as their very basic expectations, founded on the usual tendencies in game design, are subverted. Usually, the replayability of digital games serves as one of the means of rational control over gameplay, as it allows players to confront evaluations, try again with a more prepared mindset, test different options, and craft their experience of the game in a desired way. Thus, by disallowing this mechanic, the game questions such a rational approach, and problematizes the analytical mode of engagement to the presented subject. As the player is left without the option to confront their choices or explore the content again, they are deprived of an outlet to process the experience they have been subjected to; instead, at the most overwhelming moment, they are faced with silence, mirroring that of the protagonist. In employing this subversion, the game encourages the audience to explore not just the traumatic events of the story, but their overwhelming nature, as they resist efforts to rationalize, process, or control them.

By utilizing formal means of expression in order to bring forth those dimensions of trauma, *The Day* seems to engage with what trauma scholars identify as the inexpressibility of a traumatic experience – the unassimilable character of trauma, which resists understanding and renders the attempts to narratize it in fiction problematic, as it stands in direct opposition to the representational logics of narratives (Caruth 1996, Goarzin 2011). *The Day* seems to address this issue by turning to the rules and mechanics of the game itself – it twists the expectations of agency into the clearly accentuated and emotionally loaded absence of agency, refusing to provide means for the audience to either take meaningful action during gameplay or analyze the experience afterwards. It taunts the player to act, to speak up through the options present on the interface, while at the same time rendering those choices unselectable, effectively forcing the player into silent impotence. It then blocks the replay mechanic, compelling the player to understand that the events they were witness to and the rhetorical play they were subjected to cannot be addressed or processed in any comprehensible way. It does so without directly addressing the issue, as the understanding is reached procedurally rather than verbally, through the purposefully broken promise of a gameplay mechanic, which both serves as a metaphor of the overwhelming dimension of the experience of rape trauma, and purposefully employs non-language-based means in order to express the unassimilable. The expressive impact of such measures would not be possible without a pre-existing set of expectations for interactive engagement, strongly associated with digital games in general, and additionally highlighted by fostering empathetic play in the first portion of the game. It is the core characteristic of the digital games, namely their focus on action, both in terms of stories they usually tell and modes of audience engagement, that allows for that moment of forced passivity to strongly resonate with the player, as the game takes away their power to meaningfully influence its outcome. It is this encouragement, this illusion of agency, that helps contrast what follows immediately as the story reaches the moment of the assault, during and after which the rules change, and both the protagonist and the audience face the impossibility of addressing the trauma directly. Thus, the game makes a play on its very relationship with the audience, directly problematizing their mode of engagement in a way that would be inaccessible by other, non-interactive media. In doing so, it encourages the audience to explore aspects of trauma that would be inexpressible through narrative alone. In other words, *The Day* presents a story of a traumatic event both as an experience to be communicated and problematized in fiction, and as a non-experience, or a refusal of experience, when the presented trauma is approached with the intent to be made sense of or controlled.

4. *The Day the Laughter Stopped*: game against rape culture

While exploring the ways in which *The Day* engages with rape trauma and carefully crafts a story of its victim as an affective experience for the audience, it seems possible to note that such representation might serve a further, critical function. In other words, the game seems to aim at more than simply overwhelming the player in the moment of gameplay – rather, it attempts to guide that reaction towards a specific understanding of the depicted experience as well as its larger socio-cultural implications. Becky Chambers (2014) echoes such a sentiment in her commentary, as, after the initial description of her heavily emotional reaction to the game, she states "*The Day* The Laughter Stopped is a brilliant argument against victim blaming". What Chambers understands by "victim-blaming" is a general tendency in societal reactions to incidents of rape, which, on a scale uncommon for any other interpersonal crimes, often involve questioning the details of the assault by assigning part of the blame towards the victim (Gravelin et al. 2018). The common factors that can contribute to placing at least partial responsibility on the victim's behavior include alcohol consumption, flirtatious attitude, revealing clothing, or lack of physical resistance during the assault (Fahs 2016). As scholars interested in this topic emphasize, the tendency to blame the rape victim is directly related to patriarchal power structures, as it refers to societal preconceptions of how a woman should behave, while excusing male sexual aggression (Weiss 2010), thus making victim-blaming a political act. Accordingly, there exist specific cultural scripts in patriarchal society – rape myths – which serve a defining and justifying purpose; they are perpetuated through narratives that most commonly situate "real rape" as a violent sexual assault performed by a stranger on a resisting woman in a public place, and anything that does not follow that specific script may be normalized as non-rape and used to place responsibility on the victim (Brinson 1992). Thus, cultural narratives and media representation can and do contribute greatly to reproduction of rape myths which allow for flexible social acceptance of violence against women – or, in other words, contribute to rape culture (Gravelin et al. 2018).

By presenting a narrative which goes against the dominant rape imagery, by thematizing acquaintance rape and by empathetically exploring a victim's perspective, *The Day the Laughter Stopped* already provides an alternative voice to those perpetuated by rape culture, thus contributing to a larger body of critical representations of rape in fiction. However, the criticism it undertakes goes beyond the simple choice of topic. As described in the analysis, the game continuously links the arguments it makes through critical implementation of game design with associations to particular cultural preconceptions of sexual assault. Its deliberate manipulation and subversion of player agency and control seems directly oriented

at problematizing not just helplessness, but also blame – a link made clear by connecting the most striking instance of stripping the audience of gameplay control with the climactic moment of the assault. In so doing, the game seems to encourage the audience to disregard any responsibility on the victim's side. In turn, stripping away the meaningfulness of any of the player's choices – which involve the protagonist's alcohol consumption, partying, and showing interest towards the later rapist – and then disallowing the replay mechanic serves as a gameplay-based metaphor of the calculative mindset of victim-blaming, thus contextualizing the previously established notions within a larger set of cultural connotations, effectively guiding the player's understanding towards critique of similar evaluations. In other words, or in the author's words, the game poses the following question to its players: "Do you know for sure it couldn't have ended any other way? It absolutely couldn't have, but that doesn't keep victims from asking themselves this very same question" (Flor 2013). Additionally, by fostering empathy in gameplay, *The Day* not only allows for exploration of a marginalized, underrepresented perspective in a performative, meaningful way, which allows the audience to expand their potential viewpoints, but it also forces the players to confront the depicted issues in a more engaged, direct manner, while guiding the interpretation towards how the main character had no control over the events that transpired, and thus how harmful and misguided victim-blaming can be. Thus, the game employs critical game design to challenge the pre-existing notions the audience might have, and, through careful use of mechanics and rules, represents and problematizes social processes relating to experiences of rape and resulting trauma. In doing so, it encourages audience's critical reflection on social discourses surrounding rape – and does so successfully, if the players' feedback, which led to several entries on the author's website and provoked further discussion on the represented story (Flor 2013), is any indication.

In summary, the game places itself within the larger body of critically-oriented games, as it works as a form of social engagement, an *artistic intervention of a critical nature*, a tool not just to present the victim's story, but to do so in hopes of exposing hidden ideologies that guide social understanding of sexual assault, while encouraging audience to critically evaluate rape culture. Thus, *The Day the Laughter Stopped* illustrates the potential of digital games not only to represent trauma, but to do so critically and persuasively, to contribute to the larger discourse around traumatic events, and to do so through means unattainable to other media, especially while approaching topics of agency, blame, and helplessness. In the end, it leaves the audience in silence that is simultaneously metaphorical to the depicted experience, indicative of the inexpressibility of trauma, and persuasive in itself, as it forces the audience into a moment of quiet reflection.

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