

Sofia Peracchi

# INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES AGAINST GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE

A co-design approach to leverage stories,  
inspire empathy, and raise awareness

Master of science  
in **Communication Design**

School of Design  
Politecnico di Milano  
A.Y. 2020-2021

**Supervisor**  
Ilaria Mariani

**Co-supervisors**  
Marco Benoît-Carbone  
Marco Mazzaglia



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MILANO 1863



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*“En algunos momentos tengo la sensación de que esto ya lo he vivido y que he escrito estas mismas palabras, pero comprendo que no soy yo, sino otra mujer, que anotó en sus cuadernos para que yo me sirviera de ellos.”*

*“At times I feel as if I had lived all this before and that I have already written these very words, but I know it was not I: it was another woman, who kept her notebooks so that one day I could use them.”*

Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus*

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# 00

## ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

*The Introduction provides a short overview of the project, starting from the research context, describing the methodology and providing an overview of the project and the audience response gathered during the testing, in relation to the research questions. This section is also dedicated to all those people who were part in the project or supported me in the process.*



# | ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence is a urgent socio-cultural issue which, despite the major collective and political actions performed in the last decades, still permeate the Italian context, as a severe symptom of gender inequality and the hetero-normative patriarchal social structure that dictate our daily lives. Thanks to feminist movements which exploited digital media, more victims and survivors managed to speak up and share their experience, but the presence of sexist behaviours related to violence against women (e.g. victim-blaming, stereotypes, rape myths, etc.) proves how there is still room for improvement, especially in the way this problem is communicated and perceived by the public. This thesis investigates how interactive narratives can tackle the topic and inspire social change, by engaging with the audience on a deeper level than passively consumed media. By leveraging the agency of the medium and its procedural rhetoric to convey the traumatic experience of a victim of gender-based violence, the project aims to inspire empathy and more supportive behaviours, and to raise awareness about the work of Italian anti-violence centres. Therefore, in order to both portray in a sensible yet truthful way the reality of abusive relationships, while also providing correct information with regards to the centres, the project is the result of a co-design process which involved the volunteers of Parma's chapter. The testing phase revealed a high emotional engagement of the audience. It shows an overall positive response, which encourages the possibility for further research and experimentation, especially with regards to the employment of more intersectional perspectives in the creation of interactive narratives aimed at social change.

*La violenza di genere è una questione socio-culturale urgente che, nonostante le iniziative politiche e collettive emerse negli ultimi decenni, invade ancora il contesto italiano, come grave sintomo della disuguaglianza di genere e della struttura sociale patriarcale ed etero-normativa che determina la nostra vita quotidiana. Grazie ai movimenti femministi che hanno sfruttato i media digitali, più vittime e sopravvissute sono riuscite a condividere la loro esperienza, ma la presenza di comportamenti sessisti legati alla violenza sulle donne (es. vittimizzazione secondaria, stereotipi, miti dello stupro, ecc.) dimostra come ci sia ancora margine di miglioramento, soprattutto nel modo in cui questo problema viene comunicato e percepito dal pubblico. Questa tesi indaga come le narrazioni interattive possano trattare questo argomento e ispirare un cambiamento sociale, coinvolgendo il pubblico a un livello più profondo rispetto ai media fruiti passivamente. Facendo leva sull'agency del medium e la sua retorica procedurale per trasmettere l'esperienza traumatica di una vittima di violenza di genere, il progetto mira a ispirare empatia e comportamenti più solidali, e a sensibilizzare sul lavoro dei centri antiviolenza italiani. Pertanto, al fine di rappresentare in modo sensato ma veritiero la realtà delle relazioni abusive, fornendo al contempo corrette informazioni sui centri, il progetto è stato sviluppato in collaborazione con le volontarie del centro di Parma. La fase di testing ha rivelato un alto coinvolgimento emotivo nel pubblico, e la risposta positiva al progetto incoraggia la possibilità di ulteriori ricerche e sperimentazioni, soprattutto per quanto riguarda l'impiego di prospettive più intersezionali nella creazione di narrazioni interattive volte al cambiamento sociale.*

# INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing importance of activist initiatives (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Sills et al., 2016) and the construction of feminist political counter-narratives aimed to fight Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (D.i.Re & Veltri, 2017), the number of cases of gender-based violence in Italy remains too high (ISTAT, 2021). The current hetero-normative patriarchal social structure still justifies sexist behaviours related to VAWG, such as victim-blaming (Spaccatini & Pacilli, 2019), gender-based stereotypes, and rape myths (Burt, 1980; Ryan, 2011), which contribute to creating an inhospitable environment for survivors. This contribution investigates how Interactive Dramas as engaging narrative-based communication systems (Mateas, 2002) can contribute to sparking social change (Mariani, 2016), on the one hand, inspiring empathy and more appropriate/supportive behaviours, on the other raising awareness on the work of Italian anti-violence centres and organisations part of DiRe (Donne in REte contro la Violenza).

To address the socio-cultural problem of gender-based discrimination supporting VAWG, thus shedding light on the corollary of daily behaviors that protects perpetrators and still justifies them (Flood & Pease, 2009), this study included both desk and field research. A literature review of an interdisciplinary body of scientific and grey literature regarding the issue of gender-based violence as well as of the topic of interactive media aimed at social change was crucial to frame the research context and the directions in current academic panorama. Furthermore, a thorough case study analysis helped to



identify the good practices already present in the domains of Games for Social Change (G4SC) and Interactive Digital Narratives (IDN), especially in regards to the discussion of VAWG. Moreover, a survey completed by almost 200 participants, although not statistically relevant, enabled a better depiction of both the Italian population's interest in interactive media and their knowledge in regards to gender-based violence and the related corollary of toxic attitudes.

The desk research was complemented by a field investigation which involved the Centro Antiviolenza of Parma through a co-design approach. The collaboration provided fundamental insights on the necessity to describe survivors' struggles sensibly and invite bystanders to reconsider their opinion on gender-based violence victims, better understanding the discriminations and abusive situations they confront daily. Furthermore, part of the research also entailed interviews with victims of gender-based violence: their testimony was pivotal to gather accurate and truthful representation of VAWG from the point of view of women who suffered because of it. From the triangulation of knowledge derived from both desk and field research, a series of research questions were defined, setting the need to investigate whether interactive media (and interactive dramas in particular) are able to inspire social change, by triggering empathic responses and a change in perception with regards to the situation of victims of gender-based violence. Furthermore, it enquires about the medium's ability to raise awareness about anti-violence centres and to encourage the recognition of toxic daily behaviours that create a hostile environment for women. Therefore, the design and testing of an interactive drama discussing the topic of VAWG from a victim's point of view has enabled further exploration of the defined research questions, allowing an on-field experimentation of the hypotheses identified.

The interactive drama was developed through Twine, an open-source platform for the creation of branching narrative. This tool

was chosen for two main reasons: contributing to the wide community of creators which uses IDN and Twine games to share personal experiences and discuss sensitive topics, and ensuring the creation of a game accessible to everyone, also to a non-specialised audience with no coding or gaming experience. The artefact exploits the affordances and agency of the medium (Hammond et al., 2007; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010) to favour the immersion of the players and the role-taking process. It revolves around the concept of choices, which is central in interactive digital narratives (Dubbelman et al., 2018; Steinemann et al., 2017) but even more in the discourse on sexist behaviours related to VAWG. Building on procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2011) and narrative immersion (Martínez, 2014), the artefact targets non-victims, putting them in the victim's shoes to emphasise how violence is never caused by the victim's choices but by those of the perpetrator.

The interactive drama was tested in different moments and with different target groups, so as to assess different aspects of the artefact: a technical analysis was performed by expert scholars and designers to identify, and later correct, issues with the interactive drama mechanics and UX; a narrative assessment, performed by the volunteers of the anti-violence centres to ensure that the topic and the representation of the victims was truthful yet sensitive; an audience analysis conducted both online and in presence with 83 people belonging to the target audience for validating to what extent the artefact is effective in addressing the topic of VAWG. The testing revealed positive results, especially in regards to audience immersion and inspiration of empathy towards victims of gender-based violence. Furthermore, the artefact aimed to raise awareness about the presence of anti-violence centres and the support they provide. The results also reported a lower yet significant increase in the acknowledgment of the presence of toxic attitudes related to gender-based violence, especially in regards to not-violent behaviours.

The scope of this study is advancing the discussion on how interactive narratives can contribute to sensitive topics such as VAWG to trigger social change, showing the relevance of involving its protagonists for better addressing such a complex and urgent issue, increasing the possibilities of encouraging positive shifts in ideals and behaviours. The overall positive results of the study encourage the possibility for further research and experimentations, especially with regards to the representation of more intersectional perspectives on this issue and the employment of more modern and interactive technologies in the creation of IDN aimed at social change

# 01

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*The first Chapter illustrates the methodology employed to perform this research. After having defined the research question and the main themes of this thesis, the Chapter aims to describe both the desk and field research, as well as the methodologies used during the testing of the prototype.*



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OVERALL METHODOLOGY

This thesis aims to investigate how interactive media, and in particular interactive narratives, could be used to address the urgent socio-cultural issue of gender based violence, by inspiring empathy and more appropriate/supportive behaviours towards victims and survivors, and by raising awareness on the work of Italian anti-violence centres. However, in order to address this socio-cultural problem, thus shedding light on the corollary of daily behaviours that protects perpetrators and still justifies them, this study relied on a mixed method approach: knowledge was derived from a combination of literature review, case study analysis, survey and data collection, and research in the field. The study adopts a co-design approach for engaging in the research and design phases relevant stakeholders and actors who are daily associated with the matter of VAWG. The co-design activity [[→ 3.5.1](#)] especially involved the volunteers of Parma's Anti Violence centre; this perspective is then complemented with the inclusion of testimonies and experiences of survivors who could provide first-hand knowledge on the topic.

The knowledge gathered is ultimately triangulated, testing the results through diverse methods, data sources, and finally investigators the latter both as the relevant actors involved in co-design-

ing the solution, and the target audiences for the validation of the solution developed. In the following the methodologies and their application within the study are detailed [→ Fig. 1.1]:

1. A literature review, described in Chapter 2, outlines the knowledge and understanding in terms of academic literature on the topics of games and interactive narratives for social change, and how the concept of agency is linked with players' immersion aimed to inspire positive attitudes and reflections about socio-cultural issues;
2. A literature review, featured in Chapter 3, concerning the topic of VAWG and the corollary of negative attitudes that contribute in the creation of an hostile environment for the survivors and still condone the perpetrators' actions. Moreover, through the analysis of grey literature and newspaper articles, this review specifically tackled how gender-based violence is perpetrated and considered within the Italian context;
3. A selection of relevant narrative-based case studies (Chapter 4) that either present mechanics and characteristics that encourage players' immersion and empathic responses or tackle the issue of VAWG in a unique fashion;
4. A set of interviews, outlined in Chapter 3, which were part of the co-design process that involved Parma's anti-violence centre. The conversations provided a clear and extensive understanding of the role of volunteers within the organisations and the activities in which they take part, the Italian context, as well as of the struggles faced by the women who reach out for help. Moreover, they shed light on the main messages they want to convey when helping them to escape from violence;
5. A survey, described later in this chapter, completed by 197 people, concerning the topic of gender-based violence and the corollary of daily behaviours related to it;

6. The interactive drama developed as a result of the research was tested and validated through pre-experience and post-experience questionnaires, which allowed to gather relevant data for comparing the users' perspectives on the topic prior and after the experience, hence testing the effectiveness of the artefact to address the topic of VAWG.

A crucial part of the research was the input received from the co-design process performed with the volunteers of the anti-violence centres, more thoroughly described in par. 5.3.1. The contact occurred through the women who are part of Parma's *Casa Delle Donne*, a trans-feminist association of which I am part. The effective collaboration with the volunteers took place from Spring 2021, during the pandemic, and due to the Covid-19 regulations as well as the privacy laws designed to protect the victims of gender-based violence, I was unable to visit the centre or to talk directly with the people welcomed in their homes. Nevertheless, the volunteers and their testimonies were crucial to understand the nature of their work, the difficulties victims and survivors go through and the gap and activities and artefacts aimed at educating the public and raising awareness on the topic of VAWG.

Anti-violence centres, due to the political nature of their work, aimed to bring societal change in regards to the socio-cultural issue of VAWG, during the two past decades have developed various types of educational activities targeted to young students from kindergarten to high schools. These initiatives aimed to educate the students in regards to this problem, discussing concepts like gender stereotypes, sexism and rape culture, using practical approaches and encouraging discussions among the youngsters. However these activities were very limited by the Covid-19 pandemic, because in-class workshops were difficult to both organise and to conduct due to the regulations in place. Moreover, these approaches only targeted a part of the audience which, according to the volunteers

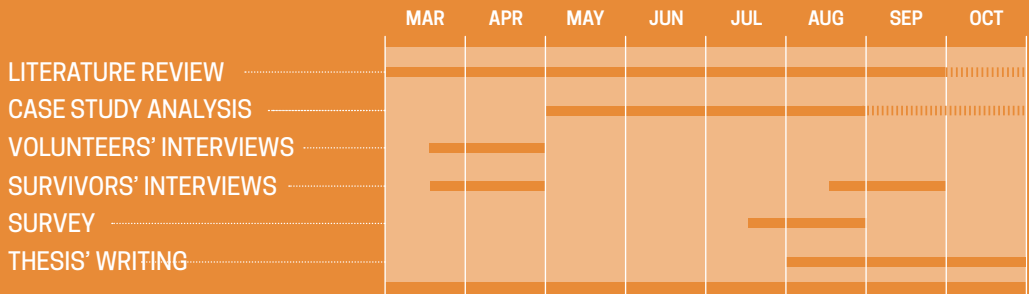
Fig. 1.1. Timeline of the research and the design phase of the thesis



# PROJECT'S TIMELINE OVERVIEW

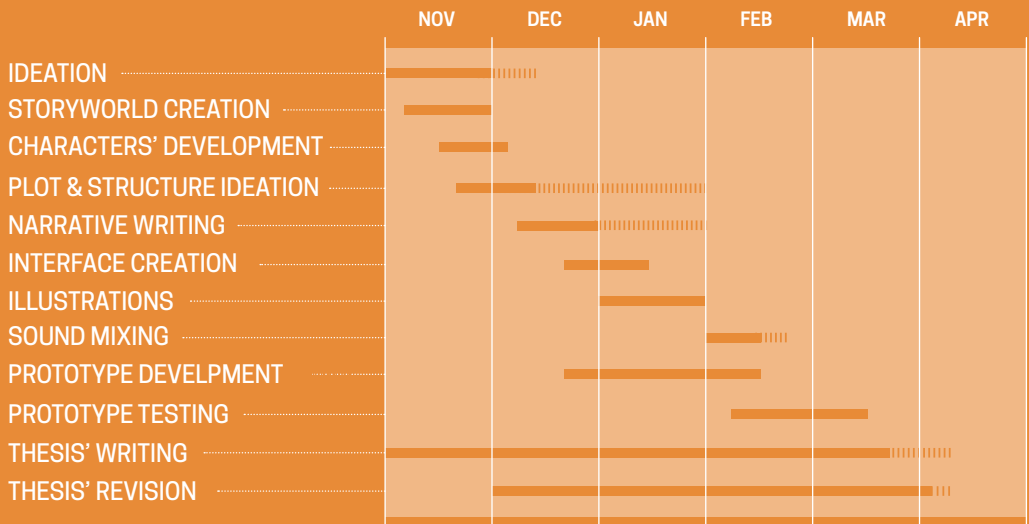
## RESEARCH

// MAR - OCT '21 //



## PROJECT

// NOV '21 - APR '22 //



themselves [→ 3.5.2] may be the most responding fragment of the population, namely bystanders who range from 16 to 35 years old.

For these reasons, the outcome of this research aims to be an artefact directed to a more mature audience and that can be experienced singularly, while still inspiring further discussions and acknowledgment of this urgent socio-cultural issue, and how it affects the daily life of thousands of women. The interactive drama created in results of this research hopes to be a device that exploits the affordances and agency of the medium to reflect on the concept of choice, which is central in interactive digital narratives (Dubbelman et al., 2018; Steinemann et al., 2017) but even more in the discourse on sexist behaviours related to VAWG. The scope of the project is advancing the discussion on how interactive narratives can contribute sensitive topics such as VAWG to trigger social change, showing the relevance of involving its protagonists for better addressing such a complex and urgent issue, increasing the possibilities of encouraging positive shifts in ideals and behaviours.

Therefore, this contribution aims to consider the following topic:

1. the exploitation of interactive narratives to inspire social change, in particular by triggering empathic responses and a change in perception with regards of the situation of victims of gender-based violence, by highlighting the concept that violence is always a choice made by the perpetrators, and it is never caused by the victim;
2. Inspiring positive attitudes towards victims and survivors, by raising awareness about the presence of anti-violence centres and the support they can provide;
3. Encouraging the acknowledgement of the toxic daily behaviours that create a hostile environment for women.

In the following the research process and its methods are detailed, explaining how they contributed to build fundamental knowledge for the study.

## DESK RESEARCH 1.2

The desk research was inherently interdisciplinary, due to the complex themes addressed in the Interactive drama. In order to triangulate the knowledge required to accurately develop this project, the desk research investigated the fields of game studies, interactive digital narratives, and gender studies, taking in consideration various sources. Moreover, it also entailed an exploration of relevant case studies, which presented characteristics deemed interesting in relation to the topic or to the game mechanics it exploited to favour players' immersion.

### LITERATURE REVIEW 1.2.1

The material collected during the literary review mainly concerns the use of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDN) to trigger social change, in particular exploiting the affordances and agency of the medium, and the issue of VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls), with a specific focus on the Italian context and the role of anti-violence centres to provide help and support to the victims of gender-based violence. Chapter 2 investigates how interactive narratives, and specifically interactive dramas [→ 2.2.2], can be employed to provide new perspectives in regards to certain sensitive topics and inspire positive behaviours in the audience, depicting also a brief overview of the differences among more educational media (e.g. persuasive games) and games for social change [→ 2.2]. On the other hand, Chapter 3 focuses on the research on the social cultural issue of VAWG [→ 3.1], diving into the toxic behaviours

(e.g. rape culture, victim blaming, etc.) and how they can affect the environment that still today condone or justify perpetrators of gender-based violence [→ 3.2 / 3.3]. Moreover, the second part of the chapter is centered on the Italian context [→ 3.4], portraying a picture of the current situation through the analysis of gray literature provided by ISTAT or by D.i.Re, the Italian network of anti violence centres and feminist organisations who support and help women who suffered from abuse [→ 3.5]. Finally, Chapter 4 [→ 4.1] investigates how feminist activism has changed thanks to the development of digital media, which allowed women and survivors to create counter-narratives that challenge the patriarchal values, still too widespread in our current society, and to share their personal experiences without being misrepresented or censored by mass media. In particular, the second part of Chapter 4 takes in consideration the example of Twine and its community [→ 4.2], focusing on how interactive narratives can be employed to recount personal stories and to discuss sensitive topics such as violence, discriminations and mental illness.

## 1.2.2 CASE STUDIES ANALYSIS

The second aspect of the desk research concerned the investigation of relevant narrative-based case studies [→ 5.1 / 5.2] that either tackled the topic of gender-based violence, presented interesting mechanics which concerned the concept of choice and favoured empathic responses to the issue at hand or the immersion of their audience. Identifying these examples was a crucial step to compare the existing artefacts and highlight the design opportunities that could still be explored through this interactive drama. In particular, the analysis of these cases studies reasoned on:

1. The creators of the artefact;
2. The context in which it was published;

3. The aim of the project (whether it was for pure entertainment, education, social change, awareness, etc.);
4. The themes and the mechanics used to discuss them;
5. Impact and public responses (where possible);

The elements of interest for the creation of the interactive drama (e.g. Limitation of agency, UI interface, use of narrative strategies to engage with the player, etc.).

### SURVEY 1.2.3

Following the desk analysis and the interviews with the volunteers, it was necessary to gather further knowledge in regards to the perception and knowledge of Italian citizens on the topic of VAWG, but also to consider their inclination and interest in artefacts like interactive narrative. For this reason, the second part of the field research entailed the creation and diffusion of a survey which tackled the recurrent topics of this thesis and aimed to gather insight and personal experiences with gender-based discriminations.

The survey, which required around 10 minutes to complete, was created through the EU survey platform and it was structured in five main parts:

1. The first part aimed to gather demographic informations about the respondents, such as gender, age, educational qualification and employment;
2. The second segment investigates the audience's opinions on several behaviours related to VAWG: the respondents are presented with a series of statements and they are given the possibility to declare whether they agree (5) or disagree (1) with them.

The sentences concerned the themes of:

- Rape myths;
- Violence against women;
- Sexism and toxic masculinity;

3. A third part instead tests the responders' knowledge of terms related to VAWG, such as victim blaming, cat-calling, rape myths, etc. In this case, the audience is asked to first give their definition of the terms they think they know;

4. In the following section, the meanings of the terms were explained and the recipients are asked to indicate how many times they witnessed these behaviours from 0 to 30+ in the last year. Moreover, they are also asked to indicate how many times they performed these behaviours themselves in the last 12 months;

5. Finally, the last segment concerned the audience's interest in interactive media, with a particular focus on interactive narrative and narrative-based artefacts, and on how they could be employed in the discussion about sensitive topics such as VAWG. At the end of this section the participants were also given the possibility to leave their email address to participate in the testing process of the final artefact and/or be contacted to leave a personal testimony in regards to gender-based violence.

Even though the target of the interactive drama developed as a result of this research includes people who range from 18 to 35 years old, there was no specific audience for this survey, because it was interesting to see how different generations reacted to the various statements regarding toxic attitudes related to VAWG. The survey, eventually completed by 197 people, was spread through:

- My personal Instagram and LinkedIn profile;
- Whatsapp contacts and groups, asking them to further spread the survey;
- Facebook and LinkedIn groups aimed to reunite Master / Phd students who need participants to their surveys.

The results are presented at the beginning of Chapter 6 [→ 6.1], while the list of questions are available in the Appendix.

### FIELD RESEARCH 1.3

In parallel with the desk research, on-field and project-based research contributed to gather more specific knowledge especially in regards to the reality of Italian anti-violence centres and the personal experiences lived by people and in particular women who suffered from gender-based violence. This part of the research was the first part of the co-design process which involved the volunteers from Parma's anti violence centre, which will be more thoroughly discussed in the next section. Due to both regulations related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure the privacy of the women who seek help from the centre, It was impossible to visit the establishment and directly assist the volunteers with their activities. Nonetheless, a few of them agreed to participate in online interviews, providing me with information about the centre's activities, their hopes and worries for the future and the type of support they offer to victims and survivors. Moreover, thanks to the volunteers of another feminist association in Parma of which I am part, *Casa delle Donne*, I also managed to organise an interview with artist and activist STED, who discussed her personal experience of gender-based violence and her work to raise awareness on the topic.

In addition to these interviews, the field research also entailed a survey, which aimed to gather information about people's knowl-

edge and experiences in regards to VAWG and the corollary of negative behaviours related to it, while also testing their interest in interactive artefacts and narratives.

### 1.3.1 INTERVIEWS WITH THE VOLUNTEERS FROM PARMA'S ANTI VIOLENCE CENTRE

As anticipated, and as it will be specifically discussed in the following chapters [[→ 3.5.1](#)], this contribution is the result of a co-design process in collaboration with Parma's Anti Violence centre, whose volunteers were involved during the first steps of the design process (research and concept definition) and later during the testing of the prototype. In this instance, the processes of co-design were implemented in order to create a new artefact, combining knowledge, ideas and expertise to create an interactive drama that could both inspire social change and further discussions on the topic, while also presenting a new possible direction for the activities aimed at fighting VAWG and raising awareness in regards to the anti violence centres' activities.

The first step in this co-design process entailed conducting three [interviews](#) with a few volunteers from the Parma's chapter, in particular the [President](#) (who is also a legal counsellor), Samuela Frigeri [[→ 3.5.2.1](#)], the [Communication Manager](#), Eva Filipardi [[→ 3.5.2.2](#)], and the [Director of Prevention and Educational Activities](#), Tina Mainardi [[→ 3.5.2.3](#)]. The interviews were conducted through Google Meet, and they all lasted for about an hour. The interviews revolved around various topics, which slightly differed according to the women's role within the anti-violence centre. Nonetheless, the main topic that we discussed were:

1. The women's role in the centre and the types of activities in which they take part;



2. The type of support offered by the volunteers (safe houses, legal counselling, job orientation, etc.) and the struggles they have encountered in the past few years;
3. The main values that support the volunteers' work and the most important message behind the activities they organise and the support they provide;
4. The Italian context, and how rape culture, sexism and victim blaming affect the life of victims and survivors;
5. (With Samuela) the problems of the Italian justice systems in situation of gender-based violence;
6. Activities organised by the volunteers to raise awareness on topics related to VAWG and to educate younger generations, and how digital media can be exploited to create new initiatives.

## SURVIVORS' TESTIMONIES 1.3.2

The last part of the field research consisted in the gathering of survivors' testimonies. Considering that, as previously discussed, I was unable to talk directly with victims and survivors that sought help and support from the anti violence centres due to privacy and security reasons, this task was accomplished in two main ways:

- Direct contact with the survivors, who agreed to participate to an interview;
- Testimonies shared during and after the survey.

In May 2020, I participated in a workshop held in Parma by **STED**, a young artist and activist who is using comics to both share her ex-

perience and to speak up against all the toxic attitudes and behaviours related to VAWG. This workshop, organised in collaboration with Parma's *Casa delle Donne*, a feminist organisation of which I am part of, allowed me to directly talk to STED, who agreed to share her experience with me during an online interview, described more in detail in Chapter 4 [→ 4.1.3].

Moreover, the survey allowed me to gather more testimonies of various length and detail, not only in regards to abusive relationships and VAWG, but also experiences related to the toxic behaviours related to this issues, which caused discomfort, discrimination and psychological violence to those people who suffered from it. In addition, 15 people out of the 197 participants left their email address to participate in an additional interview. All the participants were contacted, but only two responded and agreed to an interview. However, neither of them gave their consent to record or share the conversation, therefore it will not be recorded in the Appendix. Nonetheless, their testimonies were taken as inspiration for the creation of the interactive drama, together with the rest of the gathered statements.

## 1.4 DESIGN METHODOLOGY AND PROTOTYPE

Thanks to the insights gathered during the desk and field research, it was possible to design an interactive drama aimed to answer the research questions previously mentioned [→ 1.1]. The project was developed using softwares such as Miro and Twine, and tools dedicated to storyworld building and character creation, more thoroughly described in Chapter 6. The prototype, developed between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, was later tested by 83 people, belonging to the target audience [→ 6.3.1], in February and March 2022. The testing was performed in four

sessions, two online and two in-presence, using pre and post-experience surveys to compare the effect that the interactive drama had on the players.

A more detailed explanation of the design phase aimed at the creation of the prototype can be found in Chapter 6, while Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive description of the testing sessions and the data gathered from the participants.

# 02

## INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES AND GAMES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

*The second Chapter explores the use of interactive medias to achieve social change. In particular, this section explores how Interactive Digital Narratives and their procedural rhetoric can be employed to favour the role-taking process within the liminal space of the game.*

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# INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES AND GAMES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

## 2.1 INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES: TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGE

This contribution aims to provide new insights in the field of communication design, in particular regarding interactive digital narratives employed to spark social change. In the past few decades, several studies have tested and discussed the prospects of this storytelling method (Gesser-Edelsburg & Singhal, 2013; Parrott et al., 2017; Roth et al., 2020), employing interactive dramas in fields such as entertainment and education, to promote healthy behaviours in a way that is engaging for the user (Green & Jenkins, 2014). The immersive nature of this interactive medium allows those who experience the narrative to wear the shoes of the protagonist and to challenge their capabilities and emotions to live the story as part of it. Starting from the 1970s, a period during which the first experimentations started to appear in both academic and public contexts, interactive narratives underwent a lot of debates. However their potential stayed underestimated and they remained a niche topic among academic disciplines for decades (Roth & Koenitz, 2017).

This research builds on the relevance that this medium is gaining, and intends to further explore their role in modern society if employed to achieve positive social and cultural change.

When discussing interactive digital narratives, also known as IDN, we often refer to Jenkins and Green’s definition (2014):

«Interactive narratives [...] allow the readers to take the driver’s seat and decide the direction of the story’s plot». (p. 479)

However, the concept of interactive storytelling dates back to decades before this paper was published. Early studies and experiments were carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, but the origin of IDN, can be traced back to Joseph Weizenbaum’s *Eliza* [→ Fig 2.1], a 1966 AI experiment able to emulate a therapist, capable responding to users’ input through methods of parsing and pattern matching (Koenitz et al., 2015). In the following years, other works marked the beginning of the *interactive fiction genre*, from Crowther’s *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976) to *Zork I* (1980), which allowed users not only to interact with the story, but also to explore

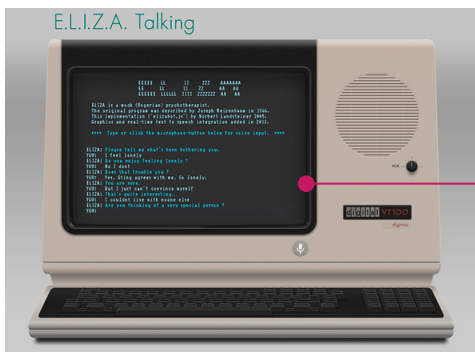


Fig. 2.1. *Eliza*, Joseph Weizenbaum, 1966

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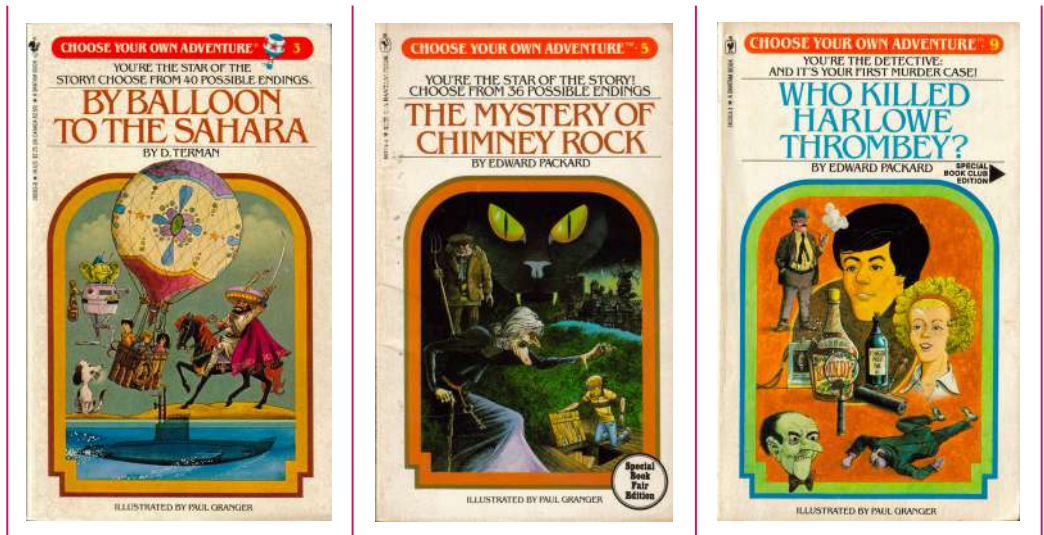
Welcome to
EEEEEE LL IIII ZZZZZZ AAAAA
EE LL II ZZ AA AA
EEEEEE LL II ZZZ AAAAAA
EE LL II ZZ AA AA
EEEEEE LLLLLL IIII ZZZZZZ AA AA

Eliza is a mock Rogerian psychotherapist.
The original program was described by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966.
This implementation by Norbert Landsteiner 2005.

ELIZA: Is something troubling you ?
YOU: Men are all alike.
ELIZA: What is the connection, do you suppose ?
YOU: They're always bugging us about something or other.
ELIZA: Can you think of a specific example ?
YOU: Well, my boyfriend made me come here.
ELIZA: Is it important to you that your boyfriend made you come here?
YOU: He says I'm depressed much of the time.
ELIZA: I am sorry to hear that you are depressed.
YOU: It's true. I am unhappy.
ELIZA: Can you explain what made you unhappy ?
YOU:
    
```

HEROES HAVE QUALITIES THAT WE ALL CAN **IDENTIFY WITH** AND RECOGNIZE IN OURSELVES. [...] STORIES INVITE US TO **INVEST PART OF OUR PERSONAL IDENTITY IN THE HERO** FOR THE DURATION OF THE EXPERIENCE. IN A SENSE WE BECOME THE HERO FOR A WHILE. WE **PROJECT OURSELVES** INTO THE HERO'S PSYCHE, AND **SEE THE WORLD THROUGH HER EYES**





the storyworld in which it was set. These new experimentations provided more game options and relative consequences, they allowed the players to solve more complicated puzzles (Marshall, 1981), introducing the world to adventure games (Chaplin, 2007).

Fig. 2.2. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, Bantam Books, 1979–1998, [tinyurl.com/CYOAB-books](http://tinyurl.com/CYOAB-books)

Some experiments regarding interactive fiction were also developed through analogical media, such as the renowned children book series *Choose Your Own Adventure Series* [→ Fig. 2.2], published by Bantam Books from 1979 to 1998, which coined the phrase through which the genre is still known today by the general public. Moreover, Cinema and TV also became part of the flow of experimentations related to interactive storytelling methods, giving birth to artefacts known as *Interactive Cinema*, *Interactive Movie* or *Interactive TV*: some of the most remarkable examples are Radúz Činčera’s *Kinoautomat*, the movie *One Man And His World*, during which the projection was stopped to ask the audience to make a decision in the story, or *Accidental Lovers*, a Finnish interactive musical comedy series broadcasted on television, during which home

audiences could influence the events of the story by sending mobile text messages to the show.

These audiovisual experimentations developed independently from IDN, which due to their nature and the media they employ, are more related to games: nonetheless, these artefacts broadcasted to their audience enabled the creation of interesting immersive and participatory mechanics which provided more awareness of interactive stories, even before the creation of more bottom-up softwares. In fact, thanks to the development of the internet and the creation of open source tools like Twine<sup>1</sup>, in the past decades IDN managed to evolve and move from more top-down contexts to collective environments, involving wide communities, capable of employing storytelling for both personal or public uses (Braganca et al., 2016; Hunter-Loubert, 2019). Interactive digital narratives are still changing and developing, reaching new audiences and new artistic forms, directed to transform themselves from mere entertainment artefacts to stories that can be charged with a more social agenda.

### 2.1.1 INTERACTIVE MEDIA: AFFORDANCES AND CHALLENGES

In each one of these Interactive Digital Narratives variations, the crucial point remains their interactivity, even though the level of agency varies according to the specific medium's capabilities. When talking about agency, we refer to the «user's freedom to either perform virtually embodied actions or alter the mechanics of narration at will» (Harrell & Zhu, 2009, p. 44). Agency consists of players' ability to perform certain actions, the effects of said actions on the storyworld and the system's ability of modifying said storyworld ac-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twinery.org>



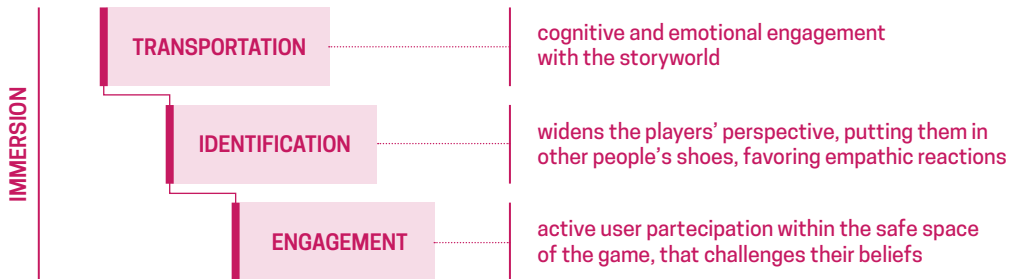
ording to the user's decisions (Harrell & Zhu, 2009). Thanks to digital media, and its continuously evolving nature, players and readers are now allowed more freedom and flexibility of choice, creating more engaging and immersive stories. Nonetheless, over the course of the past decades, many sought to generate what is known as the interactive paradox (Ryan, 2009) or narrative paradox, a game in which the user's ability to interact with the storyworld and its event is positioned orthogonally to the narrative's power to adapt the story to the choices made by the player (Aylett & Louchart, 2003). In other words, they aimed to achieve both full player agency and complete system's responsiveness to the user's choices. For this reason, developers have started introducing AI in IDNs, to explore this kind of agency: examples like *Façade* (2003) [→ Fig. 2.3] or *Versu* (2012), narrative-based games enabled through artificial intelligence, became popular but they were also criticised for not really solving the conundrum (Szilas, 2015).

**Fig. 2.3.** Screens from *Façade*, Procedural Arts, 2005

Experiments in regards to IDN, or HIDN (Hyper Interactive Digital Narrative, as Szilas defines them), have been carried out also in academic contexts (Szilas, 2007; Wang et al., 2017), but complete freedom of choice has never been achieved. Full player agency was an ultimate aspiration in interactive narrative communities, but eventually limitation of choice was re-examined, and agency is now considered more «a stylistic choice carefully manipulated over the course of a user's experience to facilitate the goals of narrative system designers» (Harrell & Zhu, 2009, p. 44), even though it is still a topic of criticism and discussion (Frasca, 2004; Laurel, 1986; Paracha & Yoshie, 2012).

Nevertheless, agency and interactivity are two of the main reasons why interactive narratives and games have proved to be successful when promoting changes in behaviours (Steinemann et al., 2017), especially to encourage healthy attitudes (Baranowski et al., 2009) or to raise awareness and educate people about a certain topic (Singhal, 2005). As several scholars have argued (Frasca, 2001; Green & Jenkins, 2014; Mariani, 2018; Nilsson et al., 2016), immersion is a crucial feature when experiencing a story: it can lead to both enjoyment and persuasion, and interactivity is able to affect and deepen this process. However, the term itself has been thoroughly discussed because of its often inconsistent usage and further studies provided a deeper understanding and a more precise taxonomy of the topic. In particular, Nilsson and his colleagues (2016) explained that the term immersion has been employed to describe different matters, such as a property of a system (Slater, 2003), a subjective response to narrative contents (Adams & Rollings, 2006), or a subjective response to challenges within the virtual environment (Ryan, 2015).

Green & Jenkins (2014) on the other hand tried to provide a more specific and layered framework to what immersion is, especially in relation to interactive artefacts [→ Fig. 2.4]. The first step



to immersion is called transportation into a narrative world, a cognitive and emotional engagement with the story, which, as proven by Green and colleagues (2006), can lead people to change their real-world ideals and beliefs in response to the claims or the vicissitudes lived within the narrative, thanks to the active engagement it requires. The second step of immersion is identification with the characters in the story: this process is possible especially in interactive narratives, because they encourage the users to actively identify with the protagonists, a term that has been widely used to portray a character/player relationship (Papale, 2014). Identification is usually facilitated by first person view, through which the player actively becomes the character, heavily impacting the player's identity and choices (Papale, 2014). This identification process is able to widen the users' perspective (Peng et al., 2010), allowing them to see the world (both real and fictional) under a different light, experiencing the consequences of specific actions, which are connected to the third step of immersion: engagement. In interactive narratives, players can act on what Gerrig calls "participatory responses" (2002), the reactions people have when experiencing a story, as if they were actually in a real situation, as or with the protagonist. These "acted" participatory responses allow the medium to engage users on another level and make them feel like they are part of the storyworld (Paracha & Yoshie, 2012). Moreover, other elements are able to influence the empathic immersion into the

**Fig. 2.4.** Narrative immersion, according to Jenkins and Green, 2014.

narrative, such as the fluency and the perceived realism of the story world, the imagery presented and the capacity to present arguments and counterarguments, capable of questioning the users' ideals (Bogost, 2007; Green & Jenkins, 2014).

However, there are also challenges to be considered when trying to encourage the user to change their behaviour. Most of said limitations are related to the players themselves. Personality or individual traits can influence the effects of the narrative and its outcome, and this is one of the reasons why it is crucial for designers to identify the target audience for an artefact: understanding the people to which a project is directed can help to make the adjustments necessary to meet their needs and inclinations and better convey the message or reach the prefixed objective. For instance some individuals need more control over the story, while others find it too stressful; some people may feel less comfortable with technology, while younger people the more targeted audience may be more skilled and easily approach the medium (Green & Jenkins, 2014). It is up to designers to make insightful decisions regarding the aesthetic and the rhetoric of the interactive narrative or game, in order to spark behavioural change in the target audience (Gesser-Edelsburg & Singhal, 2013).

Another limit to interactive narratives' efficacy lies in the fact that, even though positive results have been achieved in the past (Flanagan, 2006; Gilliam et al., 2016; Parrott et al., 2017; Salter, 2016; Tran, 2016), an official academic field has never been created for interactive narrative. Nonetheless, a big community of professionals and scholars have united to advance knowledge in regards of interactive narratives, founding an association named ARDIN<sup>2</sup> (Association for Research in Digital Interactive Narratives) and organising conferences such as ICIDS Interactive Storytelling and ZipScene

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ardin.online>

Conference, specifically aimed to share knowledge, define common vocabulary and concepts and address the open challenges in the fields. Nonetheless, there is still a limitation of grants and funds awarded to investigate interactive digital narratives, as well as a general lack of acknowledgment of the relevance of this storytelling form. As Koenits (2018) pointed out,

«this step would address many challenges for scholars in this field, including hurdles to academic recognition and tenure for individual researchers[...], as well as many of the problems holding back the field as a whole (e.g. [...] lack of a sustained space for community discussions and decisions and the excessive dependency on grants) ». (p. 13)

The research behind this issue will be explained in the following section, but I would like to point out that this research hopes to shed an additional light on the relevance and the possibilities offered by interactive digital narratives, especially those aimed to spark social and behavioural change, in particular in regards to sensitive issues like, in this case, violence against women and girls [→ 3].

## PERSUASIVE GAMES 2.2 AND THEIR TAXONOMY

In the past decades a taxonomy of terms related to game design and the employment of its techniques to create artefacts that go beyond entertainment have been developed, strengthening and legitimising this academic field. Persuasive Games (PGs), Games for Social Change (G4SCs) and Serious Games (SGs) are all identifiers of engaging interactive artefacts which allow the player to understand and explore socially relevant topics by playing (Swain,

2007). They all aim to persuade their target audience (determined by the original objective of the game), becoming the ground in which to stimulate education, commentary, satire, or critique (Bogost, 2007). In his pivotal homonymous book, *Persuasive Games* (2007), Ian Bogost first introduced the term itself, which quickly spread across different fields, branching into different types of games which all concerned social issues in different ways.

As explained above, this contribution is focused on interactive narratives, but their close relationship with PG, SG and G4SC, also due to the ludology vs narratology debate, requires a brief mention. As the project developed for this thesis, these types of games all share a common ground: covering topics that are not usually covered by entertainment artefacts, and aiming not only to provide information, but also to interest, entertain and stimulate the players, especially in regards to social issues (Mariani, 2016a).

Designing these artefacts means creating an occasion for the users to learn, not a straightforward, ex-cathedra lesson: it entails developing an artefact which is learner-centred and not teacher-centred (Stapleton, 2004). Games must be focused on the experience and meaningful stories, not on the “knowledge” they have to impart. Today, successful examples of these games can be found in numerous different fields, from healthcare to corporate, from military to non-profit organisations. The power of game is now understood also by the academia, but as Benoît Carbone and Ruffino (2012) point out, we should be careful not to swing to the opposite side of the spectrum: if for many years games have been considered noxious artefacts, inspirers of antisocial and violent behaviours, today it is important not to commit the mistake of blindly cheer their salvic abilities. At present, in fact, games tend to be presented as tools to improve our mental and physical skills (S. Johnson, 2005), not only directed to teenagers but also to wider and older audiences (Benoît Carbone & Ruffino, 2012). Their aesthetic and artistic



importance have been recognised, and they became a pivotal tool to address social and political issues (McGonigal, 2011), painting a picture that simplifies and glorifies games as the final, objective solution to world problems. Despite this, there are still some scholars (Benoît Carbone et al., 2017; Flanagan, 2006) who argue that technology is never neutral and should be employed carefully: games for change need to be connected to the real world, but they will always be a biased representation of it.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons why today persuasive games can be an efficient way to impart knowledge, values and ideas. For instance, Flanagan (2006) points out how digital games are only a small part of a wider cultural phenomenon that sees technology permeating every aspect of our work and personal life, making them the perfect medium to reach a wide, yet targeted audience. Moreover, games create secure public spaces, in which creators can present and author works that concern social or political issues, or seek an otherwise more difficult dialogue that, in this way, occurs without crossing the boundaries of everyday life (Mariani, 2016a). Furthermore, Stokes and his colleagues (2006) discussed the distinctive benefits that digital G4SC possess, compared to more traditional strategies. Firstly, PG and all related games allow the user to get to see and experience different world views at a low risk: users are introduced to new scenarios, or well-known scenarios but proposed through a specific lens. By going through topics from points of views that are not their usual ones, players are spurred to open up to other perspectives. Through the game, players are encouraged to change their identity and values within the limits of the game, without jeopardising anything and feeling a sense of empowerment instead.

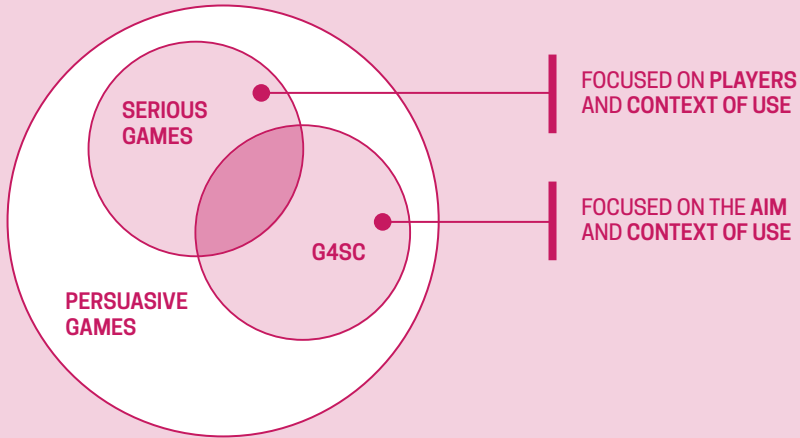
PG, SG and G4SC surely are crucial typologies of games to make players see reality through a perspective that is new and potentially impactful. Even though they are mostly defined by their mechanics

and the topic they discuss, over the course of the last years, they have employed different narrative strategies, which lead them to sometimes partially overlap with IDN (Koenitz et al., 2014; Mateas & Stern, 2006). By playing a game, and especially if this is narrative-based, we can «live experiences that can be so meaningful and significative to raise our awareness and sometime persuade us to reconsider and modify some of our prior preconceptions and pre-existent attitudes» (Mariani, 2016a, pag. 6). Therefore, games can be considered cultural artefacts able to not only convey the values of their creators, but also to fortify or challenge the ideas of their players. In other words, game play is the experience that can lead its audience to reassess their view of the world (Horn, 2014).

### 2.2.1 SERIOUS GAMES, G4SC AND INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

As Koenitz and colleagues (2018) noticed, IDN are usually mentioned in the context of entertainment, but they also proved to be useful when their characteristics are used to create serious games. As mentioned in the previous section, SG is a label used to identify artefacts whose aim is to amuse its audience, while also fulfilling an educational or training purpose. Nonetheless, the meaning of this term often varies depending on the context in which it is employed. Therefore, in order to discuss IDN in terms of *Serious Games*, it is crucial to indeed understand what they are. In fact, if it is clear that Games for Social Change are a subcategory of Persuasive Games, the line between them and Serious Games is more blurred (Mariani, 2016b).

The term *Serious Game* was first used in 1970 by Clark C. Abt, in his namesake book. According to his definition, this term gathers all those games which present a carefully-designed educational purpose, despite providing a sort of entertainment. In particular,



Abt referred to the presence of an educational purpose that is not necessarily part of the game's design, but that can come to the surface in relation to the context in which it is used or to the audience that plays with it (Breuer & Bente, 2010). Even though various descriptions have been drafted over the years (Michael D. & Chen, S., 2006; Sawyer, 2002), Abt's definition of *Serious Games* proves to be still up to date and descriptive of the overall game type. In fact, since these artefacts strongly depend on their players and their context of use, the values on which the story is based on cannot be part of its determination as a specific medium: the label 'serious games' cannot be an equivalent to certain types of socially desirable effects on their users (Breuer & Bente, 2010). Moreover, this also proves that the educational purposes assigned to a SGs is not part of its design, but can be associated to it by those who employ it, such as teachers and educator who may present an off-the-shelf game to their students, in order to achieve a specific learning objective (Charsky & Mims, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2003; Shute et al., 2009).

**Fig. 2.5.** The difference between PG, SG and G4SC, from Mariani (2016b) and graphically re-adapted.

It is in this definition that lays the main difference between SGs and G4SCs: if the former mostly depend on their players and con-

text of use, the latter are openly designed to allow their audience to question and even reframe certain values, reconsider existing positions, becoming aware of possible bias, and eventually revise their beliefs or behaviours (Mariani, 2016b). Today G4SC constitute an important branch of Games Studies, fueling research which led to the creation of the *Games for Change* movement and several conferences and college curriculum dedicated to the topic. The question is, where do interactive narratives stand in this panorama?

According to Kampa and colleagues (2016), IDNs and Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) usually do not aim to educate while entertaining, but they can be a feature implemented in Serious Games or G4SC. After all, the correlation between seriousness and play is a fundamental concept in the field, since its introduction by anthropologist Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1949). In particular, IDNs possess the unique capability to favour the role-taking process, a crucial element to change certain attitudes or ideas. According to Davis (1996), role-taking, namely the ability to adopt another person's persona as a means of understanding how they experience the world, happens on four different levels: perception, cognition, affection, and behaviour. It grants users the ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes, feel their reactions, perceive their motivations and engage in their behaviour. It is no surprise that IDN have been able to mutate, in some cases, into RPG (Role-Playing Games), where users not only gain someone else's perspective, but they actually play as them (Peng et al., 2010).

Eventually, role-taking has proved to be directly correlated to empathy, and consequently to altruistic behaviours (Batson et al., 1997), which are often the objective behind G4SC. Therefore, despite the lack of resources concerning the taxonomy of Interactive Narrative for Social Change, and its definition among PG, we should consider IDN for social change as games which employ their intrinsic narrative strategies to stimulate change in their audience.

«**IDENTIFICATION WITH CHARACTERS IS THE PROCESS OF “MERGING WITH THE CHARACTER AND SHARING THE CHARACTER’S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE NARRATED EVENTS, ADOPTING THE CHARACTER’S GOALS AND SHARING THE CHARACTER’S EMOTIONS”**. TO IDENTIFY WITH A CHARACTER IS TO **FIGURATIVELY STEP INTO THAT CHARACTER’S SHOES AND FEEL EMPATHY FOR THE CHARACTER**. DURING IDENTIFICATION, READERS “**MAKE THIS LEAP INTO ANOTHER MIND**” AND ADOPT THE CHARACTER’S POINT OF VIEW».

## 2.2.2 INTERACTIVE DRAMAS

As part of this long discussion regarding terminology, I would like to dedicate a specific mention to the term *Interactive Drama*, which I consider the most relevant in this dissertation. The term was first used by Brenda Laurel (1986), to indicate dramatic stories in which the player takes the role of the protagonist in first-person. Even though interactive dramas present some similarities to more traditional interactive narrative media (such as graphic and text adventures), they also possess some distinguishing characteristics (Mateas, 2002). For instance, as their name declares, they take drama as a guiding concept, not literature or game tropes, therefore creating a more intense experience. This is also due to another main element of interactive dramas: the first-person experience, the immersion within the story, that entails that the user's suspension of disbelief is never interrupted by the system "behind" the fantasy world (Laurel, 1986). In fact, in interactive dramas, the player's interaction is what deeply shapes the story, which however still has to maintain an author-given structure. In order to confront this tension between interactive freedom and story structure, without disrupting the first-person experience, actions such as puzzles of other trial-and-error sections must be avoided (Mateas, 2002). The player's intentions must be the formal cause of story development, but the ability to take actions, what we previously described as agency, is not completely free: it will be limited both by material resources and by authorial choices. Nonetheless, the seamless experience must remain, guided through the interface, which will "make actions available", without revealing the skeletons of the medium.

As previously discussed, interactive dramas, together with IDN in general, were not free from criticism. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) in particular strongly criticised the limitations of freedom given by the author-driven plot and by the prescribed protagonist role, highlighting the impossibility to combine freedom and narrative.

To these comments, Mateas (2002) responded that the final goal here must be to substitute the more generic term interactivity with agency, which occurs «when material and formal constraints are balanced» (p. 32), stimulating a sense of storytelling and action.

In the context of this dissertation, and more in general of interactive media aimed at social change, agency, as Murray (1997) defined it, is crucial. Agency must be considered as «an aesthetic pleasure, that goes beyond both participation and activity» (p. 125), that derives from the exploitation of both procedural and participatory properties. In particular, interactive dramas seek what Murray calls dramatic agency, which is derived from transparent interaction conventions, able to identify the rich story possibility within clear storylines, with dramatically focused episodes. The freedom within the story helps increase immersion, while the narrative constraints enable the user to focus on the matter discussed in the specific drama: it is necessary to find the right balance between formal (plot) and material (actions) constraints (Mateas & Stern, 2006). Therefore, to discuss a sensible topic like the one concerned in this dissertation, interactive dramas, with their focus on the story and the single choices it entails, instead of employing more “game-like” structures, can be considered a promising form to inspire reflection and social change in the audience.

## CREATING INTERACTIVE DIGITAL 2.3 NARRATIVES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

G4SCs concerning specific topics can foster reflection from and lead to social change and behavioural shifts (Coulton, 2016). By immersing the players into a new reality, games and narratives for social change can alter and affect their perspective, generating empathy towards certain people and/or situations (Mariani & Gandolfi, 2016). Social change derives from the exposure to a narrative

that stimulates parasocial interaction, an exchange that mimics and feels like real time encounters, which can lead the user to discover, within a social learning environment, new behaviours and beliefs (Papa et al., 2000). According to Rubin and Perse (1987), parasocial interaction can occur on three levels: (1) cognitively, (2) affectively and (3) behaviourally.

1. On the cognitive level, characters help the users recognise alternative behaviours to implement, causing personal reflections;
2. on the second degree, the audience is able to identify with certain people in the narrative, superimposing their needs and goals to their own;
3. and finally in the third stage, the readers or players are directly involved in conversations with the characters, who can then directly induce reflections which can spark a meaningful change in behaviour.

In any case, the stronger is the user's involvement with the characters, the stronger is the impact they have on the audience (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Moreover, when designing for social change, it is important to consider Gesser-Edelsburg & Singhal's rhetorical-aesthetic models (2013), which are used to define the influence of a specific narrative artefact on a person: the reinforcement model, the change model, and the entrenchment model. While the first and the third are not able to lead to long-term positive alterations, the second should be the aim for every game or interactive narrative intended to encourage social change. In fact, the change model implies that the artefact's message is able to modify the audience's existing beliefs and behaviours in the desired direction for a prolonged period



of time (Ruggiero, 2013). Through immersion and engagement, users are invited to participate in the story, enticed by the familiarity of the situations, yet intrigued by the power of interaction, finding themselves in a safe space where they can feel and act like somebody else (Bogost, 2007; Mariani, 2016a).

## LIMINALITY IN INTERACTIVE 2.3.1 DIGITAL NARRATIVES

Games are forms of entertainment rooted in human culture (Zimmerman, 2015): they were part of the birth and development of our society, together with rites, rituals and theatre performances (Mariani, 2016a). They were often used to narrate social issues as ludic representations, encouraging the audience to reflect on the fictional performance, which was connected with their reality. Therefore, exactly like back then, G4SCs are a mirror of the external socio-cultural context. They can become a meta comment for any issue (Geertz, 1973), such as societal transformations, personal dissensions and factional conflicts (Mariani, 2016b). They turn the narrative into a space of transformation, a magic circle with defined spatial (physical and/or imaginative) and temporal boundaries, where the users experience a rite of passage (Huizinga, 1949). The players, by immersing themselves into the narrative, experience a story on the edge between reality and fiction, entering a situation in which both worlds coexist and being able to switch between them, to see the correlations among the two (Mariani, 2016b).

This sense of ambiguity is known in anthropology as liminality, a term coined by Van Geneep (1909) and later developed by Victor Turner (1974), which indicates the disorienting condition lived by someone who is “standing at the threshold” between a previous state and a new one. Today, games and interactive narratives for social change create the space and circumstances for a liminal

transition and transformation to happen, initiating a reflection on social, political, ethical or moral issues (Mariani, 2016a). They provide a safe space, of which the users are aware: here, people can perform the ludic acts required by the artefact, while experiencing liminality, which allows them to transform from one state of mind to another.

In order to let the user live this process, the role of the designer becomes crucial: play here is not just entertainment, it is the oldest human method to learn and experience things, but it is not easy to obtain (Huizinga, 1950). Designers should address pleasure before entertainment and clarity, involving aesthetics and interaction design, focusing on functionality as well as implication at social, cultural and psychological levels (Gaver, 2002). In fact, the role of the designer is not providing what the user wants: they must be provocateurs, creators of new games and narrative so enticing to encourage people to explore them (Gaver, 2002), because eventually, it is the only way to spark social change within the audience.

### 2.3.2 SERIOUS GAMES, G4SC AND INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

Interactive narratives can be powerful tools, but in order to make them effective in fostering social change, it is important to take a step back and investigate their fundamental elements. Riedl and Bulitko (2012, p. 76) in their paper wrote:

«Storytelling is an integral part of the human experience. We communicate through stories, but also use stories to entertain and educate. Immersive, interactive systems that can effectively engage us within narrative experiences but still allow us to exhibit agency over our experiences

have the potential to revolutionise the ways in which computational systems are used to entertain, educate, and train humans».

Thanks to the development of digital media, interactive storytelling has evolved into more complex and diverse artefacts, making the process of designing them different according to their goal, level of agency and type of technology employed. As Janet Murray predicted in her pioneering yet controversial book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), narratives have become interactive thanks to technological development, even though she imagined them eventually transforming in tools like the Holodeck, the Star Trek's machine that created virtual 3D simulations, in which users were able to interact with the environment and the characters who inhabit it. Murray proposed a new narrative experience, in which the synthetic agents (computer generated characters) are able to respond coherently to the user's input, developing a narrative able to keep the player interested, and constructing this type of artefact, this narrative paradox [→ 2.1], was a goal for some interactive narrative scholars and creators for a while; for some of them, it still is.

In order to achieve what Ryan (2009) considers an utopy freedom of choice within an consistently coherent narrative for the past 20 years, researchers have experimented with artificial intelligence and machine learning employed in interactive narratives, with significant advances (Harrell & Zhu, 2009; Mateas, 2002; Wang et al., 2017). Nonetheless, several doubts regarding the generation of narrative structures, the level of abstraction and the believability of the characters makes the Holodeck's objective a very discussed topic within the academic community. Therefore, when designing an interactive narrative, authors must always answer several questions regarding the employed medium, the authorial intent and the agency allowed to the user, to balance users' freedom and technological possibilities.

For instance Riedl and Bulitko (2012) developed a method to label interactive narratives [→ Fig. 2.6] through three dimensions, in order to make sense of the main elements which characterise each interactive artefact: authorial intent (which varies from manually authored to automatically generated), virtual character autonomy (swinging from strong autonomy to strong story), and player modelling (the level of customisation for the single player). O. Riedl and Bulitko's taxonomy categorises different approaches to interactive narratives, and it can be useful in the designing phase, in order to focus on the objective and the type of artefact that we want to create, which may benefit more from a structured narrative and less from a computer generated adventure. Often the more technologically advanced narratives become, the more there is the need for skilled creative authors (Spierling, 2015).

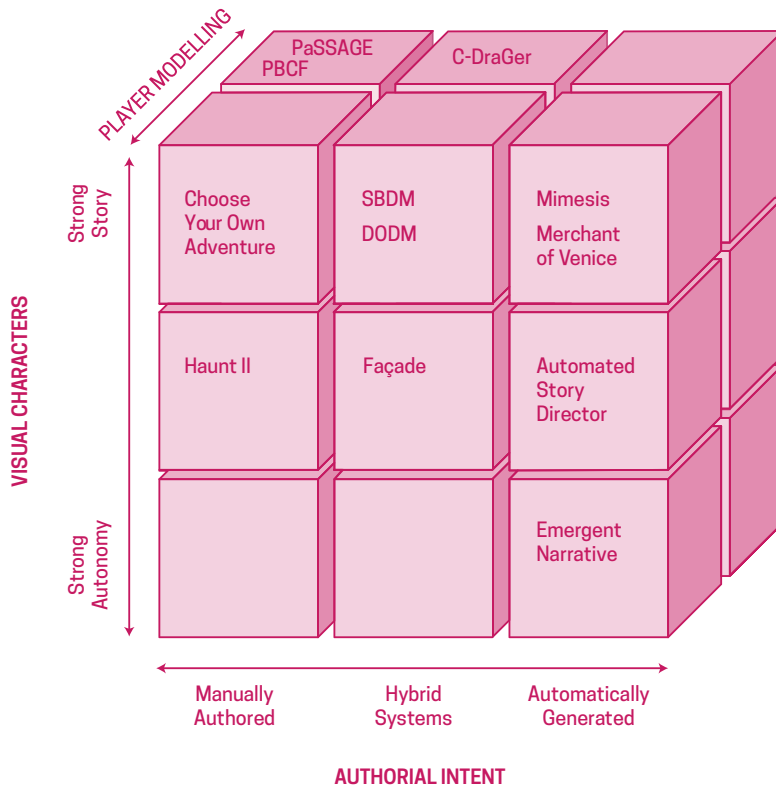
However, when creating an Interactive Digital Narrative, there are also other elements to be considered besides the ration between plot generation and user personalisation. For designer it is crucial to focus on the basis, going back to Norman's principles of designing everyday things (Norman, 1988): affordances, feedback, mapping, and constraints; and when it comes to interactive narrative, these concepts translate in specific principles, as explained by Spierling (2015):

1. Affordances: clues and hints to guide the users towards their possibilities to act within the story;
2. Feedback: graspable consequences to the players' action, which helps them navigate the plot and gain confidence in their capability to alter the story;
3. Mapping: relations between in the visible parts of the interface and the action they support;

- 4. **Constraints:** physical or logical limits which define the appropriate actions the player can achieve.

The main element to convey all these principles is through the **interface** of the IDN, which can influence the choices on different levels of abstraction. As Murray (1997) wrote, digital media are procedural, spatial, encyclopaedic, and most importantly *participatory*: they must allow the user to interact with the story. It is no surprise that interaction design eventually became a discipline of its own, and that when creating interactive narratives both authorial and interaction skills are necessary (Spierling, 2015). To transport users into the narrative, whether for entertainment or for more

Fig. 2.6. *The Landscape of Interactive Narrative Research*, illustrated by O. Riedl and Bulitko in *Interactive Narrative: An Intelligent Systems Approach* (2012), graphically re-adapted.



serious aims, the interface must not necessarily be seamless, but it has to serve the final purpose of the project. Through elements such as imagery, lexic and what Bates (1992) called *believable characters*, the final artefact should be able to lure the players into the story, often merging the protagonist's knowledge and point of view with theirs, leading to identification, connection and, eventually, self-reflection, and even change (Green & Jenkins, 2014).

For this particular contribution, that addresses a particularly sensitive topic, the narrative will require a strong story and authorial intent to accurately describe the experiences lived by victims of gender-based violence. Nonetheless, the constraints of player agency can and will be employed to convey emotional meaning and serve a pivotal role in the creation of the player's connection with the character they are impersonating (Salter, 2016).

### 2.3.3 DESIGNING INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

When designing an IDN for social change, designers play several roles: they are interpreters, mediators and storytellers at the same time (Mariani, 2016a), and sometimes even artists (Sicart, 2011). They chose the perspective of the narrative, selecting certain aspects of reality and guiding the users through certain rules in order to highlight the ideals and points of view they want to convey. When interacting with a storyworld, a universe created by one or, more often, a group of designers, players are experiencing the creators' view, which can be coherent or opposite to theirs, and it is this dynamic interplay, able to push the users to question their relationship with some aspects of reality, which makes G4SCs so appealing (Horn, 2014). Therefore, the role of a designer is crucial and extremely delicate, especially due to the power of representation they have within the storyworld they create.

As many scholars have underlined (Beck & Rose, 2021; Carbone & Ivănescu, 2020; Flanagan, 2006), games have had several issues portraying women and various minorities over the years, favoring patriarchal, heteronormative elements, and caucasian male characters. Lack of representation, or worse, derogatory portrays can cause certain audiences to pull away from several mainstream artefacts and narratives. It rests with the authors and designers to create accessible, truthful and respectful representations of minorities or targeted groups. Thanks to the work of several authors and creators (Anthropy, 2012; Gray & Leonard, 2018), and the rise of movement such as *MeToo* and *BlackLivesMatter*, in the past two decades the IDN and games panorama witnessed a growing awareness regarding the need to adopt a more inclusive, intersectional point of view (Carbone & Ivănescu, 2020). Today, designers have become more conscious of the topic, of how cultural and representational habits can be discriminatory and feed forms of prejudicial treatment. To mitigate this paramount and still coeval issue, scholars and academics have often addressed the strategies to tactfully normalise human differences, according also to the employed medium (Gray et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, more focused contributions are needed, but the progress made towards a more attentive consideration of the players is unquestionable, not only regarding their representation, but also their experience. In fact, while negative emotions can sometimes enrich the experience, allowing the user to process them in a safe space and making the interaction more memorable (Mariani, 2016a), they can also place the player in a situation of psychological distress, especially when it comes to games and narratives for social change. This is why it is important to follow certain guidelines to “protect” the users and empathise with them.

According to Dunlap (2021), there are three main principles to follow when designing games and IDNs. The first concerns compe-



**Fig. 2.7.** *Hellblade's* trigger warning, commented by Kelli Dunlap during her presentation at Games for Change (2022)

tence: designers must acquire or borrow expertise regarding the subject they are willing to discuss, on a psychological, emotional, professional cultural and social level, in order to accurately portray real-life scenarios or themes. Sometimes, this even means to involve experts and scholars to supervise the project, or involving like-minded organisations which can provide insights and credibility (Swain, 2007). Secondly, designers must prevent harm at any cost, warning users regarding potential distressing content. This leads to the third principle: informed consent. Inserting specific and detailed trigger warnings allow the users to protect themselves from upsetting content, even though some people argue that these caveats only “spoil” the story [→ Fig. 2.7]. However, like Dunlap (2021) strongly stated, «trauma is not a plot twist», it cannot go unwarned. At the same time, we should not underestimate the power of obfuscating and delayed disclosure of information, which can be an incredibly effective tool in Serious games, such as in



the case of Brenda Romero's *Train* (2009). Therefore, designing an artefact which addresses a sensitive topic such as VAWG means understanding the difference between plot devices and potential triggers, balancing the construction of an effective and immersive story and the safeguard of its potential players.

For this reason, knowing the target audience of a G4SC is crucial. When designing artefacts which involve play, designers must interview their prospective audiences, to not only draw ideas from their interests, but also to determine their psychological and technological limits, to create a narrative they can feel as their own (Gaver, 2002). When it comes to interactive media for social change, designers become more than just authors, they become storytellers aware of the consequences of their games (Sicart, 2011). They must be able to create a complete system made of rules and narratives, which engage with the users, protect them, but also trigger and influence them, in specific, calculated ways (Mariani, 2016b), finding a balance between entertainment and realism (Swain, 2007). They must create a safe space for the users to feel positive and negative emotions, that can create meaningful, emphatic experiences which can lead to social change (Mariani, 2016a).

## MEASURING IMPACT OF G4SC AND 2.4 INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

Finally, when creating an artefact aimed at social change, it is crucial to gather data to test the impact it has had on its prospective audience. However, it is often difficult to obtain significantly relevant results, and the lack of evidence-based knowledge, especially regarding interactive narratives, makes it difficult to construct a real academic field discussing this medium (Roth & Koenitz, 2017). The issue of objective metrics to measure the impact of G4SC has been thoroughly discussed, since, until today, several detection

methods have been employed for these artefacts, often at the same time. As Roth and Koenitz (2017) explain, these methods are often divided between qualitative and quantitative techniques, but thanks to the development of digital media, computer logs can also be extracted, even though they are still more rarely used (Szilas & Ilea, 2014). All of these methods present advantages and drawbacks, and this why it is often advisable to employ several of them when measuring the impact of a certain artefact, especially if the outcome has an influence on reality's social and cultural sphere.

For instance, qualitative methods can include structured interviews, participants observations and content analysis (Sandiford, 2015): they surely provide less *oriented* outcomes than quantitative data, but the analyses can be time consuming and the resulting outcomes can be strongly influenced by the experiment's conditions as well as by the size of the sampled audience (Szilas & Ilea, 2014). On the other hand, quantitative methods, such as post-experience and in-game questionnaires and physical measurement, which all have a long-lasting tradition in user studies, allow researchers to acquire focused data about one or more aspects of an experience, later validated through strictly defined scales (Roth & Koenitz, 2017). These methods, surely more reliable, can also be obstructive in certain situations and make it difficult to link specific actions to certain emotional states: for example in-game questionnaire may disrupt the experience, while physiological measurements, such as galvanic skin response (GSR), respiration rate, blood pressure and heart rate (HR) (Mandryk et al., 2006) or Facial Electromyography (fEMG) (Nacke et al., 2011) can be uncomfortable for the users and difficult to analyse in relation to an interactive experience. Designers can also employ mixed methods to perform their testing: they usually involve the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data through rigorous methods, and the gathered information is later integrated in the design analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These procedures manage to combine the strengths of both quali-

«WE CAN **MANIFEST A DIFFERENT FUTURE. AND WE MUST.** [...] IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO SIMPLY CALL FOR THIS AND THEN HOPE FOR THE BEST; **WE NEED INTERVENTIONS AT THE LEVEL OF POPULAR CULTURE.** CULTURE WORKERS AT THEIR BEST JUST MAKE SUCH CONSCIOUS INTERVENTIONS—**MINDFULLY CREATING TECHNOLOGIES THAT CAUSE US TO PRODUCE NEW MYTHS, AND MINDFULLY MAKING ART THAT INFLUENCES THE SHAPE OF TECHNOLOGY**».

tative and quantitative methods, while also minimising their drawbacks, but they are also very time consuming, they require extensive data collections and they need the inquirers to be familiar with both research approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Since all these methods present specific drawbacks and high development costs, human and machine-driven practises should be conducted in parallel with each other, to aggregate different types of data and paint a more complete picture of the experience and its consequences (Roth & Koenitz, 2017; Szilas & Ilea, 2014). Moreover, specific questions can be asked the user to test the personal change they lived thanks to the interactive experience: for instance, Steinmann and her colleagues (2015) tested the impact of the game *Darfur is Dying* [→ Fig 2.8], an interactive experience discussing the terrible situation of Darfurian refugees, asking the users who completed the game which percentage of an unexpected bonus (one dollar) they would devolve to a charity aimed to help people from Darfur. This study, together with several other researches (Peng et al., 2010), has proven that interactive media are more capable to spark personal and social change than traditional narratives. As Peng (2010, p. 14) writes:

**Our finding that interactive digital games [...] provide affordance to role-taking to some extent promises practical implications of the concept of role-taking outside the laboratory environment. As digital games have become one of the most popular forms of media, there are significant practical implications of harnessing the power of interactive digital games to motivate people to engage in role-taking and subsequently influence their attitudes toward social issues.**



Therefore, focusing on the real behavioural and social changes to which interactive media can lead is crucial for contributing to the already existing knowledge. Moreover, in order to test the final aim of an interactive project, researchers must challenge the prospecting audience (Bril et al., 2019), to achieve realism and the correct balance between agency and narrative, to actively direct the targeted users. In the development of a IDN prototype to test the theoretical assumptions presented in this dissertation, the issue of measuring social impact will be addressed, and during the user testing phase, the audience will be assessed through multiple feedback-gathering methods, in order to verify the behavioural and social impact of the artefact presented in this instance. The methodology to measure its results (output, outcome, and impact) will be presented and discussed in Chapter 6.

**Fig. 2.8.** Screens from *Darfur is Dying*, created by Susana Ruiz and her team, 2006.

# 03

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES WITHIN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

*This Chapter investigates VAWG as a political, socio-cultural problem, diving into the corollary of toxic behaviours related to gender-based violence. Moreover, this section contextualise the issue in Italy, describing how anti-violence centres manage to provide support to the victims, while also trying to educate the population. In fact, the last part of the Chapter is dedicated to the interviews with the volunteers.*

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# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES WITHIN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

## 3.1 A SOCIAL-CULTURAL PROBLEM

In 2015, the United Nations General assembly defined 17 global goals, intending to achieve them by 2030. These objectives are a sort of guide, a blueprint to tirelessly follow in order “to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all” (United Nations, 2015). The fifth goal concerns attaining gender equality and it states:

«Ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it’s crucial for a sustainable future; [...] there are still inequalities in some regions, with women systematically denied the same work rights as men. Sexual violence and exploitation, [...] remain huge barriers».

Gender inequality can be identified as the root of the discriminations that still occur in several parts of many women and girls’ lives, from education to personal relationships, from legal rights to professional retributions. One of the most serious consequences of





gender inequality is violence and even though this issue has been assessed for centuries both as an urgent global issue and as a human rights violation, the magnitude of this problem is still too broad.

In 1993, the UN published the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, defining violence against women as: «any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life» (p. 2). They recognised that the problem is one of the several public expressions of the unequal power dynamics between the genders, underlining how it is employed to force women into a subordinate role. In other words, as many reserchears have proven, there is a consistent correlation between men's sexist and patriarchal beliefs, and their perpetration of violence against women and girls (Flood & Pease, 2009; Harris et al., 2005; Sheffield, 1987).

According to the UN, 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence over the course of their life, but the percentage of these

**Fig. 3.1.** Opening meeting of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 1975. [tinyurl.com/UNIWo](http://tinyurl.com/UNIWo)

occurrences varies from Nation to Nation (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, even more problematic is the percentage of abuses which remain unpunished, often because the women themselves cannot trust the judicial system that is supposed to protect them (Murgia, 2021). This is due to the cultural and social system in which we live: it protects the perpetrators and convinces the victims that the violence they suffered is their fault, leading these women to experience long-term psychological effects instead of obtaining justice (Flood & Pease, 2009). The lack of denunciations may also be caused by the wrongful definitions of gender violence (Koss et al., 1988), such as the idea that violence is only inevitably physical. Even so, the socio-cultural context still protects the perpetrators, both actively or passively, and it happens everywhere. As shown by ISTAT's studies<sup>3</sup> (2019) those gender stereotypes that justify the violence, those prejudices that blame the victims for the beating they suffered, still exist and multiply even within Italian borders, fueled by the acceptance of gender inequality, a patriarchal-structured society and a lingering feeling of male inadequacy.

This contribution aims to address the bigger, sociocultural problem that supports gender-based violence in any of its forms, shedding light on the corollary of daily behaviours that protects the perpetrators and still justifies this issue. The narrative must go back to women, show their scope for action but also help the public understand the lack of agency given by certain abusive situations in which these women live. Empathy, understanding and respect must be the starting points for a new awareness, to open up the general audience, especially the bystanders, to more helpful and dutiful behaviours towards survivors.

Therefore IDN, with their engaging nature enabled by interactivity, can be used to create a more welcoming and understanding

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/235994>

social context for the victims of gender violence. In particular, this project aims to allow the players empathise with victims of abuse, and to help them understand that people in these situations are never to blame for the violence they suffered and that instead they should be supported and welcomed.

## GENDER VIOLENCE AND 3.1.1 GENDER INEQUALITY

Thanks to the accomplishments with regards to property and voting rights achieved by feminist groups during the early 1900s, the second wave of feminism, whose beginning can be traced back to 1949, with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, managed to question and uncover the structure, procedures, and inequalities present in the gendered social order. Even though this second wave became an organised political movement only during the 60s, it succeeded in bringing awareness to gender discrimination issues and obtaining political and legal solutions (Lorber, 2010). During the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist agenda was focused on increasing women's rights and opening jobs in fields dominated by men, but the activists also worked to eliminate gendered violence and sexist depictions of women in mass media. They successfully shed a light on all the different forms in which gender inequality can manifest itself, and they paved the way for the third wave of feminism, a multiracial/multiethnic movement capable of questioning, «reforming or resisting the patriarchy and misogyny of the gendered social order» (Lorber, 2010, pag. 4).

Unfortunately, we are far from having fulfilled such a scenario: gender inequality is still present in our society, in the form of lower pay, imbalanced roles in household duties and child care (Ponthieux & Meurs, 2015), lower access to education, sexual exploitation, violence and limitation of freedom in regards of their

bodies and capability of procreation (Lorber, 2010). This situation is still present, and it is often described through Connell's concept of "gender regime" (R. Connell, 2005, 2006). He divided the gendered structure in four dimensions, in which he underlined the differences between the relations among men and women, and highlighted the male-dominance of the overall societal order: division of power, division of labour, culture and symbolism, and emotional and human relationship. Throughout this chapter, all these aspects will be thoroughly investigated, to show how the general construction of our society still justifies violence against women, as a vehicle to maintain an imbalanced, gendered order. Moreover, researching all the daily attitudes and behaviours enabled by the current hetero-normative patriarchal society is a crucial step in order to properly discuss them within the project proposal and design. In fact, thanks to the desk research and the testimonies gathered during the field research, the prototype will be able to accurately portray not only these toxic behaviours, but the consequences they can have on women who are already suffering from abuse.

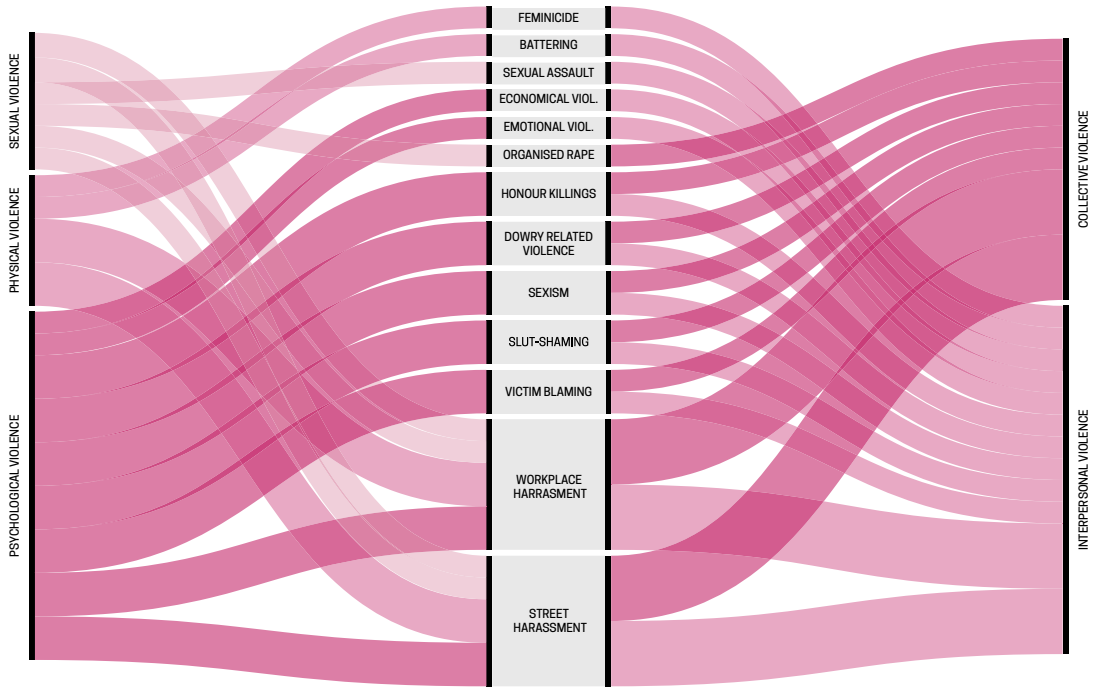
**Fig. 3.2.** Feminist demonstration, Italy, mid 1970s. [tinyurl.com/LaStampaFem](http://tinyurl.com/LaStampaFem).



**«MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS SYSTEMIC: IT CROSSES ALL SPHERES OF OUR LIVES, IT IS ARTICULATED, SELF-FEEDING AND IT REVERBERATES RELENTLESSLY FROM THE PERSONAL AND RELATIONAL SPHERE TO THE ECONOMIC SPHERE, FROM THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SPHERE TO THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SPHERE [...]. OPPRESSION AND GENDER INEQUALITY ARE THEREFORE NOT SPORADIC OR EXCEPTIONAL: ON THE CONTRARY, THEY ARE STRUCTURAL».**

However, before diving into the reasons behind violence itself, we must address what the term *gender-based violence* really entails. We already provided a broad definition of VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls), but over the years a more specific terminology have been developed to determine different types of violence [→ Fig. 3.3], which social workers and anti-violence centres employee are now trained to identify. Firstly, WHO (World Health Organisation, 2002) divided violence in two broad definitions, based on the person who committed the action: *interpersonal* or *collective violence*; moreover, they also established three other categories, based on the nature of violence, defining it as *physical* (e.g. beating, kicking, slapping, beating, etc.), *sexual* (e.g. rape, incest, degrading sexual acts or denial to use contraceptives and measures to prevent sexually transmitted diseases) or *psychological* (humiliation, emotional violence, threats against cherished objects, etc.). *Economic violence* is also recognised as a form of abuse (Frigeri, 2021), while neglect and deprivation are considered types of psychological brutality (Krantz, 2005). The most common type of violence that women and girls suffer is interpersonal violence, and it is usually perpetrated by family members, intimate partners, or by the community in which they live.

Moreover, the type of abuse can depend on the age of the victim. For instance, a serious issue still present in several countries is female genital mutilation, which occur when girls are young and not developed (UNICEF, 2021). *Child abuse* and neglect also occur, and in certain areas of the world, such as India, Taiwan, Pakistan, South Korea, and some sub-Saharan African countries, it is targeted to girls, due to a longstanding cultural traditions favouring males (Krantz, 2005; Miller, 2001). On the other hand, there are other types of violence which are specifically targeted to women who reached their reproductive age. The most common form of violence is usually perpetrated by *current or former partners*: it occurs within the limit of a relationship, and it includes physical, sexual, and



psychological violence. Even if it is the most common form of violence, and it always takes place reiterly, it is often overlooked by the victim themselves, due to rape myths [→ 2.2.4] and erroneous conceptions of personal relationships instilled by the abusive male. Another neglected form of violence is rape, especially those perpetrated by someone known by the victim (Jones et al., 2004; Koss et al., 1988): even though many consider rape solely as an attack perpetrated by a stranger in the middle of the night, the majority of sexual assaults are actually committed by an acquaintance of the victim, a partner or a family member (Jones et al., 2004; Persson & Dhingra, 2020; Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2018).

Moreover, there are also other types of violence which occur because of family issues, such as “honour” killings (females who are

**Fig. 3.3.** Alluvial diagram listing VAGW examples, according to the perpetrator(s) and the nature of the violent acts.

beated, exiled or murdered because they engaged in sexual activities outside marriage or simply because they were raped, bringing disgrace the family honour) or **dowry related violence** (abuse perpetrated by the future husband and his family) (Krantz, 2005). Finally, it is also important to mention the **collective form of violence**, especially when it is sexual in nature: it often occurs during conflicts and rape is used as a systematic subjection tool to subdue the invaded population (Armstrong et al., 2018). Over the course of the XX century, organised wartime rape has been perpetrated over 30 nations in Europe, South America, Asia and Africa. Just during the 1990s, it was used as a tool for ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, where women were intentionally impregnated by enemy soldiers; sexual assault was also used as a means of genocide in Rwanda, where Tutsi women were systematically raped by HIV-infected men recruited by the Hutu (Barstow, 2021).

All these forms of violence find their roots in **people's fear of losing a higher social status**, which confers historically established advantages: the only way to maintain these benefits is keeping (or more specifically forcing) others in a lower status group, usually based on sex, race or class-based lifestyles (Ridgeway, 2014). Therefore, as stated by Wall and colleagues (2014), **«in assessing causation of violence against women, interventions that address these specific factors to achieve attitudinal and behaviour change will be most relevant»** (p. 5). And since this contribution aims to help modify all the attitudes that still allow the occurrence of gender-based violence, these words will be taken as a reference to describe the objective of the final project.

By representing the different types of violence, and not only those with physical and sexual implications, the interactive drama will describe how the other forms of abuse contribute to create **hostile and oppressive environments**, from which victims and women in general struggle to escape. Moreover, through the eyes



and feelings of a victim, the artefact will expose the rooted gender-based discrimination hidden behind all these forms of violence and attitudes, forcing the audience to witness how widely spread and urgent this cultural and social issue is and to experience them through the eyes of a young woman in Italy.

### AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE 3.1.2 FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

As previously stated, inequality among different groups of people constitutes the foundation of many issues in our society, and it is not just based on gender, but also on other elements such as race, disability, social class, religion, sexuality or merely physical appearance (Runyan, 2018). When discriminations or privileges are distributed based on more than one personal characteristic, we can speak of intersectionality and when discussing gender-based violence it is a perspective that should always be included, to understand the specific characteristics of every woman's identity and how they are related to the abuses she may suffer because of them. The term *intersectionality*, coined by Black activist and academic Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, is an analytical framework that highlights how some aspects of a person's identity can lead to discrimination or privilege, empowerment or oppression (Holley et al., 2016). This concept helped to widen the perspective of the feminism movement, starting from the already mentioned second wave and continuing to develop until today: if the first wave of feminism was mostly focused on the objectives of middle-class white women, this new framework managed to include experiences and needs of several minorities, such as women of color, immigrants, or people who are part of the LGBT\*QIAP community (Hines, 2019). The intersectional perspective aims to avoid the isolation of certain discriminated groups, proposing a united front to challenge the unequal predisposed social order.



**Fig. 3.4.** *NonUnaDiMeno* demonstration during *Festa in Rosso*, Verona, 2018. [tinyurl.com/N1dmve](http://tinyurl.com/N1dmve)

Unfortunately, intersectionality also led to some debates among feminist groups: the most relevant, which is still present today, concerns trans women. While many feminists, such as the various *NonUnaDiMeno* (2017) national movements [→ Fig. 3.4], fight for women and trans women equally, others are more strictly bound to the “chromosomal” definition of womanhood, and do not recognise trans women are part of the feminist movement. These feminists are now widely described as “TERF” (*trans-exclusionary radical feminist*), a term derived from the 1979 book by Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, and that now identifies a distinct branch of radical feminism (Hines, 2019). The discussion regarding transfeminism has developed from the 1990s until today, blossoming around issues such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment and violence. Even though many scholars and activists believe in a more inclusive and modern view of feminism, occurrences of discriminations within the feminist community still take place, such as the 2008 London Pride, during which trans women were not allowed to use women’s toilets (Barker et al., 2009), or the boycott of 2014 London Dyke March to protest a trans woman speaker (Hines, 2019).

The intersectional perspective in regards to gender-based issues should allow us to understand and protect the experience of every woman, despite her personal characteristics. In particular, when discussing VAWG, an intersectional approach includes considering how gender crosses other types of oppressions, leading to unique experiences of violence (Imkaan, 2019). As shown by several studies (Brown & Herman, 2015; Peitzmeier et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2013), women who undergo multiple discriminations due to various aspects to their identity are more likely to suffer interpersonal violence. For instance, compared with cisgender individuals, transgender people are 2.2 times more likely to experience physical violence and 2.5 times more likely to experience sexual violence (Peitzmeier et al., 2020). It has also been proven that cisgender women of color, in particular Black women, are more likely die because of domestic interpersonal violence than Caucasian women, because they cannot always rely on police officers to help them (Gill, 2018; Rice, 2014).

Today, employing an intersectional approach to all projects aimed to reduce gender-based violence and raise awareness on the underlying gender-based patriarchal order is crucial to safeguard all women and implement community-based lifesaving interventions, in which survivors can feel safe. By taking in consideration inequalities as equally relevant, by examining various social and cultural contexts and by understanding the different ways in which violence can be perpetrated and experienced according to the victim's identity can help to design specific solutions and tools to fight VAWG and the hierarchical system that still sustains it. As Battaglia and her colleagues (2019, p. 4) stated, «we must centre the marginalized, listen to the voices of survivors, and believe them», because all women deserve respect and protection.

Therefore, when designing the interactive drama, it will be crucial to paint a more comprehensive picture of this socio-cultural

problem, describing how different aspects of a woman's identity can affect different types of discriminations. In particular, in the interactive drama presented here, the plot will show the specific conditions of a woman born in Italy from a foreign parent, and how the support system she is supposed to have is weakened by the nature of her family's identity<sup>4</sup>. This particular aspect of intersectionality was chosen for the narrative because of the input offered by the anti-violence centre's volunteers [[→ 2.5.2](#)], but also because the discussion concerning other intersectional violence, like the abuses against trans women, is still open: in fact, at the moment, safe houses are still unable to welcome not-cis women. The creation of artefacts like this, whose aim goes beyond the merely educational objective, leading instead to social change, hopes to spark further discussions and to encourage the audience to acquire more literacy regarding the intersectoral aspects of this problem.

### 3.1.3 WAVG AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A POLITICAL PROBLEM

As previously discussed, this contribution focuses in particular on sexual violence against women and girls and the corollary of negative attitudes connected to it, since they will be a crucial aspect described within the interactive narrative, which show, thanks to the immersive nature of the experience, how toxic behaviours can cause additional harm to women living in abusive situations. In her key book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), Susan Brownmiller described rape as «nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear» (p. 15). Her literary work was one of the first to identify sexual violence as a tool for creating and maintaining gender inequality, and it is still cited for having influenced changes in

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<sup>4</sup> Further information about the plot of the narrative can be found in [par. 6.3.4](#)

the American penal code in regards to rape (Cullen-DuPont, 2000). Today, thanks to development of social network and other collective tools [→ 4.1.2], more and more women have the possibility to share their story, to inform the bystanders and to work together to call out all those behaviours that justify gender-based sexual violence. However, it took decades to witness a change in the public discourse. In her book, Brownmiller criticises renowned authors like Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, debunking myths related to the uncontrollable sexual nature of men and the recondite female desire of being raped. She states that often the real reason behind rape is not sexual desire, but the wish to perpetrate power on somebody else, and in particular on women. She built the foundation for the discourse on gender inequality and she paved the way to the contemporary view on sexual assault, which starts from considering this issue a political and social problem (Di Virgilio, 2018).

Another key event in the establishment of a renewed fight against sexual assault was the *The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) [→ Fig. 3.1], organised in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly: it led to an international treaty, an international bill of rights for women now ratified by 189 states. It was the first international document which clearly defined violence against women and called for political actions from each nation to end such discriminations and violations of human rights (UNESCO, 2014). In fact, the first three articles of the treaty concern every nation's imperative duty to guarantee social, political, legal and personal equality. International agreements like this, together with the development of feminist theory, which adopted a more holistic view and started considering gender-based violence as a political problem, they helped improve women's rights and legal protection [→ 2.4.1] in several Countries, including Italy. Nonetheless, several legal scholars and activists are still concerned about the lack of enforcement mechanisms within the legal process in several Countries (Byrnes et al., 1997; Resnik,



**Fig. 3.5.** IV World Conference on Women, UN, Beijing, 1995. [tinyurl.com/UN4Wo](https://tinyurl.com/UN4Wo)

2001), because even though a committee has been formed to monitor the implementation of CEDAW. Said group cannot really execute any form of punishment for the nations which do not follow the agreed political actions (Merry, 2003).

In 2020 the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action [→ Fig. 3.5] took place: it was another UN meeting which set out progressive goals for women's rights in 12 areas, inciting widespread political action. However, during the past 25 years, too many human rights violations still took place. Especially concerning sexual violence, several governments, such as Ghana, Nigeria, Lebanon, Armenia and China, lack an intersectional approach, and fail to protect LGBT\*QIAP members from abuse («Governments Should Fulfill Women's Rights Pledges», 2020; «Human Rights Watch Country Profiles», 2017). This occurs in Europe as well: just in October 2021, Italy ruled out the draft for a new directive (DDL Zan) that would protect minorities and LGBT\*QIAP

people from any form of violence related to their identity (Casadio, 2021). Moreover, in several countries across Africa, the Middle East and Latin America laws still allow rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims («*Governments Should Fulfill Women's Rights Pledges*», 2020), something that in Italy was ruled out only in 1996 (Basile, 2013). In some Countries, such as India, Singapore, Palestine and Saudi Arabia, marital rape is still not acknowledged and persecuted (Equality Now, 2017), even though in recent years a call for regulations against online violence against woman has spread across several nations (Šimonović, 2018).

In spite of all the progress accomplished in the last forty years, discriminatory laws and legal gaps still exist, the public discourse continues to protect the perpetrators and the enforcement of existing regulations is often weak («*Governments Should Fulfill Women's Rights Pledges*», 2020). Judicial systems across the world should be reformed and improved, in order to help women come forward, protect their testimony and support them instead of shame them for what they lived through [→ 3.3]. Our society is still steeped in victim blaming and a wide series of shared behaviours [→ 3.2] which prevent women from feeling safe and inevitably causing a lack of trust in public institutions (Spaccatini & Pacilli, 2019). Violence against women must be addressed as the political problem it constitutes, creating secure laws and safe institutions able to modify people behaviours.

On this matter, it is important to point out that anti-violence centres, with which this project was co-designed [→ 3.5], provide support to victims of gender-based violence, but in doing so, through shared activities and values, they have transformed these services to a political action to encourage and lead to a change at a societal level. Therefore this project wants to align to their objectives and provide an experience that accurately portrays the current environment, hostile to victims of gender-based violence, and hopes to

encourage fruitful conversations that can foster change on a more structural level, or help the work of the volunteers that for the past decades have fought and worked to achieve it.

### 3.1.4 WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA

It is arguable that not only coverage and representations of violence against women, but female portrayal in all types of media is capable of influencing and shaping the overall perception of gender, as well as the behaviours considered acceptable by society. According to Flood and Pease (2009), there is substantial evidence that different types of media, together with the education imparted, the communities and institutions in which people participate, and the sexual and gender norms inserted in a specific culture and society, are able to influence certain attitudes toward violence against women.

**Fig. 3.6.** Princess Peach, from the *Mario* franchise [tinyurl.com/stPPm](http://tinyurl.com/stPPm)



Over the course of European-Western history, especially in a Judeo-Christian perspective, there is always been a dichotomy in the representation of women, who were often described as an angel-like figure, bearer of purity and spirituality (e.g. Dante's Beatrice, Virgin Mary, D'Annunzio's Maria), or as a temptress, bringer of catastrophes, whose objective was to lead honest men along immoral paths (e.g. Eva, Mary Magdalene, Troy's Elena, Daji) (Kühl, 2016). Moreover, for several centuries, women have been represented as plot devices, helpers, challenges, or merely damsels in distress that needed to be saved, etc (Sarkeesian, 2013). This includes both more contemporary artefacts like video games, such as Princess Peach in



*Mario's* games or the sultan's daughter in the *Prince of Persia* franchise, but also more traditional narratives, from Greek Mythology's Andromeda to Edgar Rice Burroughs's Jane from *Tarzan and the Apes* (1912). However, especially after WWII, this started to change, but even more stereotypical representation emerged. Thanks to the several emancipation movements in the 60s, women felt progressively more empowered and able to speak up about their condition, improving their representation and their presence in male-dominated fields. Unfortunately, as discussed by various researchers (Fisher, 2015; Flood & Pease, 2009), several misogynistic and stereotyped representations of women are still in place today, arguably influencing the audience's perceptions of the female gender.



Fig. 3.7. Lara Croft, from the homonymous franchise. [tinyurl.com/LaCr15](https://tinyurl.com/LaCr15)

In regards to this matter, one of the most analysed media has been pornography, since its representation of women often appears degrading and hypersexualised, and aggression is presented as a normative behaviour (Gravelin et al., 2019). For instance, sexual assault victims (even if they are porn actress) are often shown as initially rejecting a man's advances and resisting intercourse, and later becoming aroused by his disregard for her resistance (Malamuth & Check, 1981), fomenting sexual myths such as “a woman shouldn't give in sexually to a man too easily or he'll think she's loose” or “being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women” (Burt, 1980, p. 6). In fact, as some researchers (Allen et al., 1995; Malamuth et al., 2000) have proven, there is a relationship between regularly consumption of hardcore, violent, or rape pornography and sexual aggression.

As previously mentioned, another genre of mass media which has been thoroughly studied for having an impact on people's



**Fig. 3.8.** Prostitutes in *Grand Theft Auto V*, 2015

**Fig. 3.9.** Scene from the promotional material of *Rape Day*, 2019

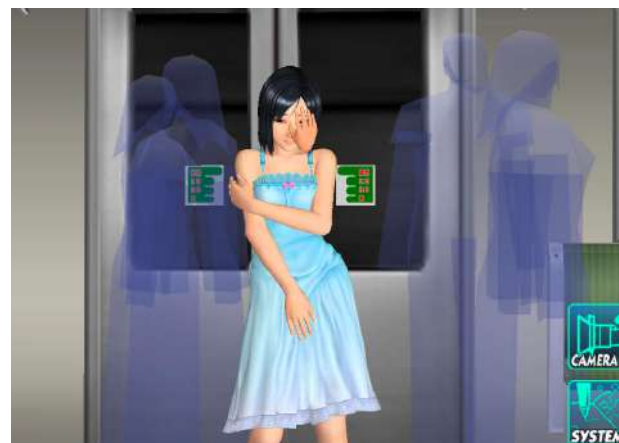
attitudes toward violence against women are videogames. Several game scholars (Carbone & Ivănescu, 2020; Flanagan, 2006; Ivory, 2006) over the years pointed out the misrepresentation of women in the majority of electronic video games, which for decades have been mainly targeted to young men. First of all, female characters in video games are less numerous than their male counterparts, who often play the role of the protagonist (Ivory, 2006), even though we witnessed an increase of less sexualised female main characters starting from 2005 (Lynch et al., 2016). Nonetheless, women more often appear as sidekick, antagonists, or functioning as plot points or objectives, fulfilling tropes like the damsel in distress or the woman in the refrigerator tropes, the female character who is killed or depowered, stimulating “protective” traits or desire for revenge in the male character (e.g. Lysandra and Faye in *God of War*, Michelle Payne in *Max Payne*, Beatrice in *Dante’s Inferno*, etc). Moreover, over the course of the last two decades, several criticisms have been moved regarding unrealistic body sizes (such as for Lara Croft) [**→ Fig. 3.7**], constant partial nudity (Skowronski et al., 2021) or aggressive behaviours towards female characters. Several studies in fact found that sexually violent and misogynist

themes present in video games can be correlated to aggressive and sexist attitudes, and even though many of these researches had limitations, the presence of several games portraying instances of violences against women is reprehensible.

Since this dissertation is mainly focused on interactive media, I deem it necessary to appoint a few disturbing examples of this type of games. For instance, even if *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) [→ Fig. 3.8], in which the player can engage with a prostitutes and kill her in order not to lose money, may be the most famous example, often used during studies that consider the correlation between video games and sexual violence, but it is not the most deplorable. For instance, in 1983 Mystique published the game *Custer's Revenge*, [→ Fig. 3.10] in which the main goal is to rape a Native American woman, who is unable to move (Payne & Alilunas, 2016). This game was highly criticised and its distribution was stopped because of lawsuits. However, this occurrence did not stop video games industries from proposing similar games. Just in 2006, Illusion published the game *RapeLay* [→ Fig. 3.11], in which the protagonist Masaya repeatedly rapes three women (a mother and her two daughters), and

Fig. 3.10. Gameplay of *Custer's Revenge*, Mystique, 1983

Fig. 3.11. Gameplay of *RapeLay*, Illusion, 2006.



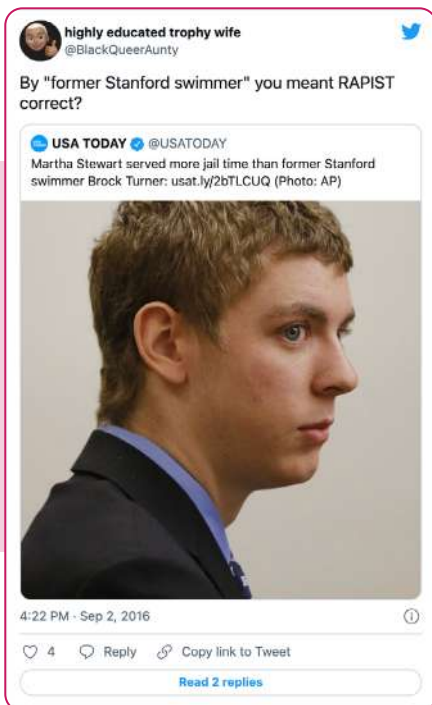
even though the game has been banned, it is still possible to play it online (Beck et al., 2012). Other controversies took place just in the last 20 years, such as the discussion around Tomb Rider, or the never released *Rape Day* (2019) (Evans, 2019) [→ Fig. 3.9]. Nonetheless, given the pervasiveness of sexualised women and portrayal of occurrences of violence against women in various games, the number of researches conducted to investigate the correlations between these artefacts and sexual assault is scant (Beck et al., 2012). This dissertation hopes to provide an example of truthful representation of the stereotypes that women undergo during their daily lives as well as in media, and to encourage further discussion on how these depictions affect real life behaviours.

Finally, it is also important to address how women, and in particular victims and survivors of gender-based violence, are portrayed by newscasts, not only in works of fiction. Even if this issue will be also discussed in a forthcoming section [→ 3.3.2], it is important to address the way sexual assault is presented to the public. Surely, coverage of episodes of domestic violence or sexual assault has increased (Kitzinger, 2004), especially after feminist scholars criticized the lack of analysis in the news and the continuous employment of male-dominated points of view (Meyers, 1994), but media reportage can also lead to negative effects, such as the depersonalisation of female victims, a decrease in empathy towards them and the enforcement of victim blaming. (Flood & Pease, 2009). During the 1980s, several studies showed how distorted newscasts' reports of rape were (Gordon & Riger, 1991; Schwengels & Lemert, 1986), while others described how perpetrators were often justified for their crimes (Meyers, 1994). Public and academic criticism for media representation of gender-based violence has been pursued for decades, but if today we read news reports about domestic violence, sexual assault or even femicide, things do not appear to have changed. An entrepreneur who drugged and raped a girl for 20 hours is defined as "*volcano of ideas now extinguished*" (Cosimi,

2020), and an athlete who sexually abused an unconscious woman is just a “Stanford swimmer” who did not deserve to see his career crushed (LaChance, 2016) [→ Fig. 3.12], while in legal courts the lacy underwear of an underage victim of rape is presented as a proof of her sexual consent (Safronova, 2018).

In light of this reflection, it is crucial to highlight survivors’ voices, helping them speak up without re-directing the narrative. The interactive drama presented here will accurately describe victims’ experiences and highlight the toxic environment, both public and private, in which they live, exposing the wrongful narratives superimposed on them by their partner, friends or by mass media. The story must show how women should be able to represent themselves in their own terms, forcing the audience to witness what they see and feel, through an immersive experience aimed to spark empathy and positive attitudes.

Fig. 3.12. Tweets criticising the way the media portrayed Brock Allen Turner after the accuse of sexual assault



## 3.2 THE COROLLARY OF SEXISM AND GENDER VIOLENCE

As discussed above, gender-based violence is one of the consequences of gender inequality, a wider issue which pervades several, if not all, aspects of our society. Inequality can take many forms, but when it concerns violence against women and girls it is hidden behind specific **shared behaviours**, capable of orienting public opinion and heavily affect the lives of millions of women. This series of attitudes and behaviours, so inherent in many communities, is a symptom of deeper discriminations, and constitute a system of protection of an outdated heteropatriarchal order.

In the following section, we will thoroughly discuss a few of the more relevant attitudes, and how they manage to affect our society, with a particular focus on perpetrators, survivors and bystanders. These behaviours are the focal point of this research, since they will be the primary target for the project: in fact, addressing and providing a safe space or a space for reflection and encouraging a more supportive, aware, and respectful conduct is one of the most important steps to create a system in which survivors can speak up and try to face and overcome their trauma.

### 3.2.1 RAPE CULTURE

In 2000 (p. 14), Alyn Pearson wrote an interesting similitud on how rape culture fits within our society:

«We have assimilated rape into our everyday culture much as we have the cold. Like the folklore surrounding the common cold, there is folklore about rape, like the notion that if a woman wears revealing clothing or goes

to a bar alone, she is likely to “get raped.” But in fact a woman is no more likely to be raped from these activities than from simply dating a man or being home alone».

Her descriptions highlights rape culture’s capacity to spread, to move from one person to the other and affect their lives: she explains that germs are everywhere and rape is merely one of the symptoms of a socially oppressive and unbalanced system (Pearson, 2000). This similitude is particularly appealing and suitable because it represents the problem as something we all can understand, but that we have never been able to eradicate. Rape culture often incorporates all the behaviours and ideas that we will discuss in the following sections: it can lead to sexual assault as well as to further damaging practices, which are often perceived as less “real” just because they frequently take place in the digital realm. They entail several harmful practices, such as rape jokes (also known as *indirect sexism*), harassment, cat-calling, sexualized ‘banter’, criticism on women’s bodies, clothes and behaviours and the general tendency to blame the victim for the violence she experienced (Keller et al., 2018; Mendes, 2015).

Mass media have started to pay attention to the concept of rape culture only in the last few years (also thanks to the spread of social media), but the term itself was coined during the 1970s by second-wave of feminism (Sills et al., 2016), referencing conceptions and behaviours that have been employed in our society for centuries. Already in Greek and Roman mythology as well as in their actual history, the perpetrators were almost always acquitted, while the consequences of the assault fell on the victims, who had to live with the fear and the shame of being no longer pure. The term *rape culture* was firstly used in Connell and Wilson’s *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (1974), one of the pivotal works for the development of the rape studies, but it was also mentioned in Brownmiller’s *Against our will* (1975). In her book, Brownmiller included

first-person reports of rape and she highlighted that this problem was more widespread than how many imagined. Both these works agreed on the fact that, in order to eradicate rape, a revolutionary transformation of our society was needed.

Today, the acceptance of sexual assault is so common, that rape is even commercialised. Some scholar argued that the representation of rape in movies and games is employed not to shock the audience, but to turn it on (Muscio, 2002; Sills et al., 2016). But commercialisation did not stop at merely visual entertainment. For instance, in the past few years a few brothels opened all around the world offering life-like dolls to their clients (Dickson, 2018): those who decide to engage with these toys can perform both consensual and non-consensual sexual activities, because the dolls are equipped with a “resistance settings”, during which their body would turn rigid and still (Baynes, 2017). The emergence of ventures like these raises questions not only on the legality of “rapable” toys, but especially on the reason why there may be the market demand for them.

This forces us to reflect on the need for a better education regarding consense and sexual assault. For instance, Hall and Barongan (1997) suggested promoting interpersonal contact with women and ethnic minority people to better convey positive messages and actively uncover the wrongful conceptions behind misogynistic behaviours often considered “normal”. Starting to educate boys and girls at a young age during school is crucial, and these type of programmes should revolve around empathy (Murnen et al., 2002): in fact, taking the perspective of another person and living their experience can lead to feelings of sympathy towards another person (Batson et al., 2007). Nonetheless, when discussing VAWG and traumatic experiences that survivors go through, a more mature audience is often advised: the interactive drama in fact will target an audience between 18-35 years old, a section of population still



**<<RAPE IS ENDEMIC BECAUSE IT PERVADES EVERY ASPECT OF OUR COMPLEX SOCIAL STRUCTURE. IN ORDER TO VACCINATE AGAINST IT, WE WOULD HAVE TO CHANGE MANY PARTS OF SOCIETY THAT PEOPLE ARE FULLY COMFORTABLE WITH AND ACCEPTING OF. PATHRIARCHY IS STILL MUCH AT WORK, ONLY MORE SUBTLY>>.**

young enough to easily modify their ideals and beliefs, but adult enough to understand the implications of the topic and experience more explicit content. Eventually, the goal of the project should be to reduce empathy for male perpetrators, while increasing it towards the survivors of sexual assault (Bongiorno et al., 2020), in order to prevent victim blaming [→ 3.3] and cause peer pressured blame for the attackers.

### 3.2.2 TOXIC AND HOSTILE MASCULINITY

*Toxic masculinity* is a term used to identify a series of cultural norms associated with a stereotypical idea of men and boys, which is associated with harmful behaviours and the normalisation of violence. Growing up in a context which perpetuates toxic masculinity may lead to bullying, aggressive behaviours, sexist and homophobic ideas and emotional repression (Flood, 2019). This attitude is a consequence of what Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) defined as hegemonic masculinity, the dominant social position of men over women, or whoever presents stereotyped female characteristics (Dailami, 2014). However, the current meaning of the term slightly differs from the one Shepard Bliss coined during the mythopoetic men’s movement of the 1980s: in that context, in fact, toxic masculinity was used to characterise father’s authoritarian and distant relationships with their sons, which led to the development of “toxically” masculine men (Harrington, 2021). The term later became linked to marginalised men, with low-income, patriarchal family values and strong “natural” male dispositions (Harrington, 2021).

On the other hand, the contemporary meaning has emerged only over the course the past decades: a few academic papers regarding toxic masculinity started to appear between 1990 and 2015. For instance, Kupers (2005) provided the current definition of the term,

even though the popularity of this idiom was mostly caused by the general public (Harrington, 2021). In fact, the term *toxic masculinity* appears as to have gained its popularity thanks to the “post-feminist” vernacular, especially with regards to conversations about Trump’s sexism or the #MeToo movement (PettyJohn et al., 2019). Being able to identify this set of behaviours helped increase awareness, as well as the number of studies which investigated the correlations between toxic masculinity and gender-based violence. For instance, Malamuth and Thornhill (1994) found correlations between the domineering attitudes related to toxic masculinity and behaviours supporting sexual assault and violence against women, while Connell (2002) recognised the relations between masculinity and acceptance of violence and aggression as a form of male domination. Also Obierofu and Ojedokun (2017) found that the combination of hypermasculinity and characteristics linked to toxic behaviours (e.g. aggression, conservative masculinity, and devaluation of emotion) were significantly linked to rape supportive attitudes.

Despite the academic awareness and the call-out culture developed through social media (Mendes et al., 2018), we can still witness toxic masculinity everywhere. Institutions such as sport teams, still tolerate and defend this type of behaviour and toxic attitude. It is crucial to start addressing these roots to modify all the branches of violence and discriminations. In fact, as Posada wrote (2017, p. 178):

«The transformations of masculinity required to eradicate men’s violence against women (sexual and otherwise) are also the key to eradicating all forms of gender-based and sexual violence».

Therefore, when designing the interactive drama, it will be important to describe toxic masculinity, together with all the negative

behaviours described in this section, as contributors in the creation of hostile environments for victims who may seek support, justice and freedom. In particular, within the creation and design of the interactive drama, toxic masculinity will be addressed through the characterisation of the abuser and the negative male roles present in the narrative, highlighting how this behaviour is often related to sexist attitudes and violent and discriminating tendencies.

### 3.2.3 GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SEXISM

Another symptom of internalised gender inequality is the application of gender stereotypes in everyday life: these occurrences may vary from more “harmless” concepts, such as “boys should play with trucks because dolls are for girls”, to more segregative ideas, like the notion that women are not interested in STEM subjects, to highly unfair expectations, such as the concept that in an heterosexual couples, women should favor taking care of children and elders to their job. It does not matter whether the use of the stereotypes has a malignant or a benevolent objective, they still actively promote a “structural difference” among genders, to quote the controversial statement by historian Barbero (Santarpia, 2021). They create what Sills and her colleagues (2016) call a matrix of sexism, namely an environment where where the normalisation of a ‘natural’ order of things can be weaponised to justify sexism, rape culture, and misogyny are normalized in everyday life.

Gender stereotypes constitute the foundation of sexist behaviours, which then appear to be justified by the disparity between genders. They reflect the general expectations that society has about members of certain sets of the population, overemphasising the differences between groups, while underestimating the variations within them (Ellemers, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that in our heteronormative patriarchal society gender stereotypes

tend to represent women, non-caucasian, and other minoritised subjectivities as the weaker groups. Gender stereotypes are also connected to gender roles, namely the set of behaviours considered appropriate for a person based on their biological or perceived sex (Alters & Schiff, 2009), as well as to the double standards that derive from them. Eventually, these stereotypes are capable of modifying how people, and in this case women, are viewed and treated not only in their personal life, but also within those institutions that actively impact their existence, such as workplaces or legal systems (Gilbert, 2002).

During the past decades, several scholars investigated the correlations between gender stereotypes and violence against women, finding some interesting, yet unsurprising results. For instance, traditional gender roles beliefs presented a positive relationship with sexual assault, acceptance of rape myths [[→ 3.2.4](#)] (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004) and victim blaming (Glick & Fiske, 2001). The same concept of aggression is often considered different based on whether the perpetrator is a man or a woman: as Campbell (1994, p. 1) stated, «for women aggression is the failure of self-control, while for men it is the imposing of control over others». These stereotypes and gender roles are widely spread in our society, and they are constantly perpetrated both actively or passively. For instance, several linguists pointed out the sexist nature of several languages, in particular Romanic languages, such as French and Italian, which use the masculine form as the default option or employ the term “man” also to indicate a human being. Non-latin based languages also present sexist elements: in Chinese, for example, the character for women is made up by a “female” part and a broom, while the character for wives shows the “female” character holding a broom, an object that in China is considered basically useless (Tan, 1990).

Another example of the perpetration of dangerous gender stereotypes occurs during sex education. As Clonan-Roy and her col-

leagues (2021) pointed out, not only the majority of textbooks still indicate abstinence as the only way to preserve one's safety, but they also appoint boys and men as initiators and women as the gatekeepers, giving girls the responsibility to employ strategies that preserve their abstinence and protect them from sexual aggression. Moreover, this type of mindset is also perpetrated within school rules as well: for instance, just in 2020, a female high school vice president in Rome ordered a student not to wear a skirt at school because it may distract the professors (Dellapasqua, 2020) [→ Fig. 3.13]. This happens in western countries, but the limitations based on gender roles are even stricter in the Middle East or Central and South Asian countries.

The overall presence of gender stereotypes can actively shape the course of women's professional lives, influencing their possibility of being directed for future careers and the way their work and knowledge is valued and retributed (Ellemers, 2017). Moreover, gender stereotypes can also affect their personal relationships, in which their partner, on the basis of wrongful preconceptions, may construct a toxic environment and cause women harm. This is why,

**Fig. 3.13.** Photos published from female students, protesting sexist dress code. [tinyurl.com/LiceoRo](https://tinyurl.com/LiceoRo)



as Obierefu & Ojedokun (2017) stated, it is important to create education programs aimed to reduce masculinity-relating ideologies and challenge gender stereotypes, especially in order to limit sexual aggression. Nonetheless, a reduction of these stereotypes may improve not only the VAWG issue, but also several aspects of everyday life.

### RAPE MYTHS 3.2.4

The term rape myth was first introduced by Martha Burt in 1980 to indicate «prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists» (p. 217), capable of creating an hostile environment for sexual assault victims. In her studies, she identified several myths, such as “*only bad girls get raped*”, or “*any healthy woman can resist a rapist if she really wants to*” (Burt, 1980). These types of myths often derive from all those cases that differ from the “*real rape*” script: this wrongul myth identifies rape only as that sexual assault that occurs late at night and to the expense of a non-intoxicated and prude woman, who sustains obvious physical injuries and immediately reports the crime to the police (Hockett et al., 2016). However, how it has been proved by several scholars, cases of acquaintance rape are always more than stranger sexual assaults (Newcombe et al., 2008; Yamawaki, 2009), and at least one third of sexual assault victims are incapable of any resisting strategies, being paralised or overpowered (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1976).

Rape myths are used for several purposes, from the justification of sexual assault (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), to the rationalisation of male aggressive tendencies, from blaming the victim to the creation of cautionary tales of what may happen to incautious women (Ryan, 2011). However, the consequences of rape myths are even more serious when these conceptions become scripts, namely prototypes of how real-life events normally occur (Schank & Abel-



**Fig. 3.14.** Relation between rape myths and toxic attitudes related to gender-based violence

son, 1977). In particular, rape scripts are beliefs which concern the nature of rape (e.g., the location and weapons of intimidation), the roles of the sexes and the disposition of the victim to the act (Ryan, 2011). Ryan (1988) proved that the most common script is the already mentioned *real rape script*, even though some others typical behaviours have been recognised in other studies, such as the *too-much-to-drink script* or the *man-is-ready-for-sex script*, both linked to acquaintance rape (Clark & Carroll, 2008).

The presence of sexual scripts is extremely dangerous especially for the survivor of sexual assaults, for two main reasons: firstly, they can narrow their definitions of rape, lowering their possibility of acknowledging the severity of the event (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004), and secondly they can heavily influence how public institutions, such as legal courts, consider them. It has been proven that the prevalence of negative attitudes towards rape victims, especially regarding false report, varies in different countries (e.g. 18.3% in the UK, 29.5% in Canada, 40,2% in Ireland, 32.9% in Hong Kong and 51.5% Malaysia) (McGee et al., 2011; Ward, 1995), even though studies have shown that only 8% of sexual assault reports are fake (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 63). Moreover, sexual myths have also played an active role in the court proceedings or deliberations: for instance Smith & Skinner (2017) found that rape myths were often used in court to oversimplify the context of the



sexual assault, criticizing the lack of victim's resistance (compared to what it is considered by them the "normal behaviour") and undermining the testimony of a traumatised individual.

According to Edwards and her colleagues (2011), our current society still witness the presence of four key rape myths: "*husbands cannot rape their wives*", "*women enjoy rape*", "*women ask to be raped*" and "*women lie about being raped*" and they argue that they specifically permeate legal, media, and religious institutions. Over the course of the last years, several scales have been employed to assess the presence and the depth of these rape myths and scripts, but the most used are the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt 1980) and the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al. 1994). Since rape myths have proven to be still incredibly present in Italy (ISTAT, 2019), these scales will be used also for this contribution, to better investigate the audience of the project and the most common sexual assault scripts shared by the population [[→ 6.2.2](#)].

## SLUT-SHAMING 3.2.5

In her pivotal book *I Am Not a Slut: Slut-Shaming in the Age of the Internet*, Leora Tanenbaum (2015. p. xv) defines slut-shaming as the «**multiplicity of ways in which females are called to task for their real, presumed or imagined sexuality**». The term indicates the collection of actions aimed to criticise people, and in particular women, for their behaviour considered promiscuous and deprecating. Slut-shaming may take the form of criticism for wearing provocative clothes, having premarital/casual sexual relations or requesting access to birth control pills, but in the most serious cases, it can lead to revenge porn (the publication of explicit material to shame an individual) or institutional victim blaming for sexual assault (Webb, 2015). This type of criticism can lead to severe consequences in the victim's professional and personal life, while as argued by Poole

(2014) for men it has no real repercussions. Surely, slut shaming and the “accepted” conduct it is based on are a consequence of the strong presence of the gender roles and stereotypes we already discussed [→ 3.2.3] (Ringrose, 2012), but it is interesting to acknowledge that the term gained its popularity thanks to a movement that protest it.

In 2011, a Canadian Police Officer, while performing a talk on personal safety at Osgoode Law School (York University) in Toronto, argued that women and young girls should “*avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised*” (Rush, 2011). The female students who attended the event were so outraged by the remarks he made, that they organised a march they called “SlutWalk” [→ Fig. 3.15]: this initiative went viral in several cities of the world, from North America to Australia to India, and SlutWalk has now turned into an international movement aimed to raise awareness about the

**Fig. 3.15.** Slut Walks around the world. [tinyurl.com/SWworld](http://tinyurl.com/SWworld)



wrongful assumptions of public officers and to fight victim blaming for the survivors of sexual assault (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). The movement re-claimed the word *slut*, as it has been done with the world queer: it is a re-signification (Butler, 2021), it transformed an insult into a celebration and a banner for political action (Attwood, 2007). And in doing so, the SlutWalks managed to gather attention on the problematic normalisation of male sexual aggression and the consequent victim blaming.

Nonetheless, especially thanks to the internet and social media, the perpetration of slut shaming still exists, causing serious consequences on its victims. It perpetrates sexual double standards, setting up different rules for male and female behaviours in terms of relationships or casual sexual encounters, and providing the umpteenth justification for male aggression (Dragotto et al., 2020). In regards to Western digital contexts, such as social media, chat rooms, blogs, vlogs and online gaming platforms, slut-shaming and gender-based attacks are very recurrent and they represent a «patterned resistance to women's public voice» in digital space (Sobieraj, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, this phenomenon has become even more common and dangerous with the spreading practice of sexting, the production and sharing through digital media of sexual images and videos (Dobson, 2018). Revenge porn can lead to heavy repercussions, and countries' legal systems are only now seriously addressing the problem.

Just last year, in Italy a serious case occurred, showing how deeply rooted slut shaming practices are in our population. In November, a kindergarten teacher sent a video and a few photos of sexual nature to a man she had been dating for a few months, and her partner shared that content with his friends. One of his friend's wife recognised the woman as her son's teacher, she sent the video to other parents in the class and together they asked the victim not to report her partner, because if she did, they would have sent the

**Fig. 3.16.** Comments under *LaRepubblica's* post about the event



content to the school's headmaster (Palazzo, 2020). Eventually, the principal heard about the situation and decided to fire her employee, threatening that she would never be hired by anybody else.

This event caused a huge backlash, and the mother who threatened the teacher and her husband are now on trial, while the ex-partner has already been condemned. However, the man was only convicted to do community service for a year, while the woman's reputation has been forever besmirched. Slut shaming is a practice for which people should be held accountable, because it is related to defamation and other serious crimes. Nonetheless, this type of behaviour occurs too often through digital media, as a form of cyberbullying and discrimination, and it is overlooked and underestimated. Just by reading some of the comments [→ Fig. 3.16] regarding the teacher's story in the related post published on Instagram by the newspaper *La Repubblica*, we can see how widely spread antiquated gender roles are. In order to actively undermine these conceptions, a better education regarding respect, empathy and positive citizenry is necessary.

**kirkos\_4** Un po' di cervello no? La maestra conoscendo poco l'amico un ragionamento in più poteva farlo. Bastava pensasse che mettere in chat non è come mettere documenti in cassaforte. E basta!!!

51 sett. Rispondi

**orchideablu65** Il problema è che ci sono persone senza morale e depravate. Anche l'abito fa il monaco... Dipende dai contesti...Una maestra è anche un'educatrice...e anche la vita privata conta. Della serie si predica bene e si razzola male?

51 sett. Rispondi

**laura\_d.angelo** Sì è però bisogna avere il buon senso di sapere che non si scambiano foto e video con persone che si conoscono poco bene. Tutti abbiamo fatto questo errore (uomini/donne), non ripetiamolo.

51 sett. Rispondi

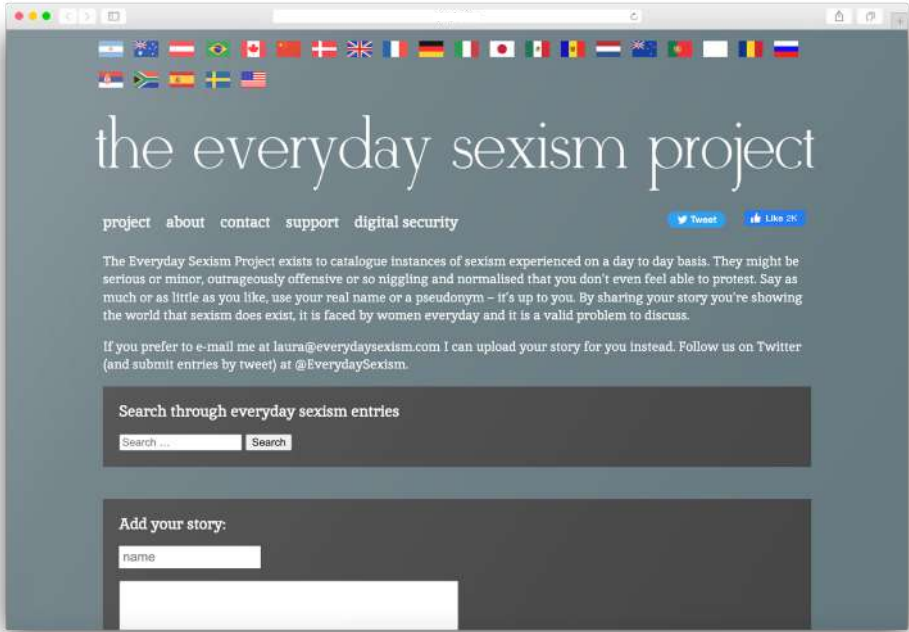
**\_\_giorgio\_\_so\_\_cc** Ondevitare problemi non mandate nudes, semplice 😊

51 sett. Rispondi

## CATCALLING AND STREET HARASSMENT 3.2.6

One of the most common consequences of gender roles and gender inequality is street harassment, which is usually gender-based: this term indicates all those unwanted and unsolicited comments and acts, usually sexual or offensive in nature, forcefully perpetrated by a stranger in a public setting (Stop Street Harassment, 2015). It includes behaviours like whistling, leering, yelling degrading and offensive comments, asking for someone's personal information, flashing, groping, public masturbation and sexual assault. This type of behaviour is so widely spread and so common, that for generations women have been educated to fear public spaces and empty areas, especially at night (Mezzatesta, 2021). Women are educated to be careful because sexual harassment is normalised. These behaviours are often minimised as "compliments", while hiding the "predatory models" from which they originated (Priulla, 2020, pag. 70): exactly like rape culture, public harassment is just another way to impose male supremacy on women, a performance of their virility (Mezzatesta, 2021).

The way these events are often presented not only lead to victim blaming, to a portrayal of girls who cannot "take a joke", but they also limit women's capacity to enjoy public spaces. Mezzatesta (2021) calls this phenomenon "urban segregation", and it is yet another method to perpetrate a heteronormative domain over women. As Kissling (1991, p. 454) states, «street harassment marks women as trespassers in public spaces that belong to men». This separation of public areas is a direct descendant of the division of labour: men belong at work, in communal spaces, while women belong at home (Federici, 2020). Even though 70s emancipation movements allowed women to take back the streets, manifesting and fighting for equality, public spaces still possess an aura of dangerousness and discomfort, due to harassment and gender-based



**Fig. 3.17.** the *Everyday Sexism project* 's homepage, 2012

assaults (Mezzatesta, 2021). Nonetheless, thanks to the development of digital media, women managed to organise and create shared platforms and initiatives not only to report public harassment, but also to provide help and support to each other. One of the most famous examples is *Hollaback!*, a nonprofit organisation aimed to combat online and in-person harassment. The movement started in 2005 in New York City as a platform to share stories of public harassment and call-out the city perpetrators, while now it has become a series of mobile apps and it is used to monitor over 50 cities around the globe (Dimond et al., 2013). Another interesting website is *Everyday Sexism Project* [→ Fig. 3.17], created by Laura Bates in 2012: this blog aims to document instances of everyday life, during which women have been victims of street harassment and more generally of gender inequality. This initiative, which represented one of the projects that started the fourth-wave of feminism (Munro, 2013), managed to shed a light on how common public harassment really is and it allowed women to directly speak up and tell their stories without being filtered by others.

Street harassment is a social problem, even if it was only recognised as such in the past few decades. Moreover, even though the most common victims are women and girls, other elements, such as ethnicity or sexual identity, are targeted by these types of actions (Logan, 2015). Therefore, exactly like all the other behaviours listed in this section, street harassment must be considered in an intersectional perspective. There is the need for targeted and inclusive legal action, now more than ever: for instance, France introduced a law against catcalling in 2018, while Italy still does not have one (the penal code only punishes more generally crimes related to “public harassment”, which is not considered an offence to a specific private citizen) (Della Ratta, 2021). It is necessary to take action to establish a new identity for public spaces, to allow everyone to feel entitled and safe when passing through these areas, without feeling shameful, powerless or scared (Logan, 2015).

### VICTIM BLAMING, SECONDARY VIOLENCE 3.3 AND THE PROTECTION OF THE ABUSING MALE

All the behaviours described in the previous sections are part of an intricate system that allows perpetrators and abusive males to be protected and to avoid punishment for the crimes they committed and the profound pain and discomfort they caused, while survivors are forced to relive trauma and live with the consequences of the violence they suffered. The testimony of a victim of assault, especially if this victim is a woman or part of a minority group, are often questioned or minimised, and the behaviour prior to the aggression is used as a justification for the perpetration of the violent act. This unfortunately very common practice is called *victim blaming*, a term derived from William Ryan’s 1971 book *Blaming the victim*, which indicates the act of holding a victim completely or partially accountable for the harm they endured. When this occurs to sexual assault survivors, we can also speak of *secondary victimisation* (Williams,

1984), namely forcing the victim to relive the trauma through the interaction with individuals and institutions. This event can be extremely painful for the survivor, because these types of interaction usually include victim blaming, but also minimisation of the severity of the abuse, a misbelief of the victims' testimony or inappropriate mental health treatment to confront their trauma (R. Campbell & Raja, 1999). Moreover, victim blaming often occurs in regards to victims who were intoxicated by alcohol or drugs prior and during the assault, who were wearing provocative clothing, who knew their aggressor or if they did not “fight enough”: basically, victim blaming is perpetrated in any situation that differs from the myth of the real rape script [→ 3.2.4].

Moreover, victim blaming is often supported by the so-called *Just World Theory* (Lerner, 1980), which argues that people consider the world to be a fair place where each individual is given what they deserve. In particular, by blaming survivors of sexual assault, people try to maintain a sense of control and justice, thinking that if they do not assume certain behaviours, nothing bad will ever happen to them (Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). This behaviour is highly connected to the *Defensive Attribution Hypothesis* (Shaver, 1970), which states that the level of attributed blame depends on observers' perceived similarity with the victim of the attack. In other words, if the victim and the observer are similar, people tend to be more emphatic and understanding, while when perceived differences are present victim blaming is used as a defensive mechanism, a self-protective distortion (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

However, victim blaming can also be more systematic, and actively employed by institutions that are supposed to provide help and support to the victim of sexual assault, leading to secondary victimisation instead. In 1994, Martin & Powell tried to portray the different methods through which victims of sexual assault are dealt with within public or private institutions, differentiating “respon-



sive” and “unresponsive” rape processing. When officials such as police officers or hospital personnel dismiss the victim’s request for help, the survivors are forced to relive the trauma, while trying to enforce the authenticity and seriousness of their claim. Secondary victimisation and victim blaming in particular, perpetrated both by public entities or people close to the survivor, can inevitably lead to additional psychological trauma and consequently to lack of assault reports (George & Martínez, 2002; Patterson, 2010). It is also crucial to notice that the occurrence of victim blaming can also be caused by other discrimination factors, bound not to the event of the assault, but to the identity of the victim: for instance, George & Martínez (2002) found that compared to intraracial rapes, interracial assaults were more rarely judged as “definitely rape”, since the victims were considered less credible. Again, when confronting the problem of secondary violence and victim blaming, an intersectional perspective is crucial.

Finally, we must consider that victim blaming can also occur within an abusive relationship and cases of domestic violence as well: the offender usually uses these strategies as a justification for his aggressive behaviour (Lila et al., 2013), but also to keep women in a subordinate, helpless position. Abusive relationships usually follow a cycle, which often involves the same events (tension, explosion, honeymoon), and several different mechanisms, both psychological and physical, used to prevent women from escaping and to maintain an unfair power balance. These recurrent attitudes will be crucial aspects to be described in the interactive drama, to enable the user to understand how, under the constant manipulation and fear that characterise an abusive relationship, victims tend to blame themselves for their partners’ behaviour.

### 3.3.1 RE-LIVING THE TRAUMA

In 2015, Jessica Ladd launched at Pomona College and the University of San Francisco an online platform called *Callisto*, which allows survivors to file secure and time-stamped records of their attacks. These files are used to document sexual assaults and match cases in which the perpetrator is the same, alerting then the authorities (Ayres, 2015). According to Ladd (2016), if more survivors were able to come forward, police officers would be more inclined to believe them and 59% of sexual assaults could be prevented, because the perpetrators would be stopped early on. However, systems like this are still rare in most countries, and survivors are still not welcomed by public institutions with the support they would need.

Rape myths and gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in the population, especially in certain types of observers. For instance, studies have shown that male heterosexual observers tend to possess more stereotypical beliefs, which lead them to attribute blame for sexual assault on the victim (Davies et al., 2009; Davies & Hudson, 2011). Secondary victimisation can be perpetrated by close friends and family, but also by the legal system as well. As Van der Bruggen and Grubb (2014, p. 527) states,

«These results could have immense implications for the criminal justice system as they imply that the balance of men and women in juries can possibly influence guilt verdicts in real life rape trials».

In these settings, survivors of sexual assault are force to re-live their trauma, while also witnessing the discrediting of the violence they suffered. Even in hospitals, physicians often avoid the designation of sexual assault, preferring diagnosis as “alleged rape”, no matter how clear the wounds are (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1975). As Campbell and Raja (1999, p. 262) argued:

«What system personnel assume to be the needs of victims actually has very little to do with what survivors want, and everything to do with sustaining the values of the organisation».

This lack of empathy and understanding for survivors may lead them to a process of isolation and stigmatisation (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015), and society's behaviour will «continue to be responsible for that silence and their solitude» (Hercovich, 2015).

It is also important to mention the impact that therapists and mental health professionals may have on the victim who seeks their help (R. Campbell et al., 2001). Campbell & Raja (1999) developed a study to assess how severe could be the consequences of unresponsive institutions. It emerged that the majority of the mental health professionals believed that sexual assault survivors can be further traumatized when they turn to community professionals or the legal system, because of invasive exams, harmful counseling practices or stressful questions. Campbell and colleagues (2001) also found that the responsiveness of professional health personnel was also influenced by the identity of the victim: for instance, white women were more likely to receive information about HIV and STDs, as well as to see their case prosecuted in court (70% vs the 30% of women who are part of an ethnic minorities). Moreover, another element capable of influencing institutions' behaviours towards sexual assault survivors are the circumstances of the event: cases of stranger rape constitute 80% of the prosecuted cases (R. Campbell et al., 2001) and the victims are more likely to be believed. In other words, only those women who fit the "ideal victim" profile (Christie, 1986), namely a weak, blameless and highly bruised woman, appear to be worthy of justice.

The process of secondary victimisation and victim blaming are the two main reasons that lead survivors of sexual assault not to report or not to have faith in the institutions who are supposed to protect them. Nonetheless, associations and bodies such as anti-violence centres [→ 3.5] and women's houses are spread across several nations to provide helpful and respectful support to the victims, thanks to the work of trained volunteers or certified mental health professionals. However it has to be recognized that their work alone is not enough to scratch the beliefs and prejudices still rooted in the contemporary socio-cultural dimension. For this reason, communication artefacts and systems can contribute, using their apparently entertaining nature to open up reasoning and incept seeds of change within the general public.

### 3.3.2 VICTIM BLAMING IN THE MEDIA

Together with public institutions, media can also perpetrate victim blaming and secondary victimisation, by discrediting the survivor and presenting the perpetrator as the real victim (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). Meyers (1994, 1996) argued that newscasts often justify sexual violence rather than inspiring empathy for the victims. She argued (1994) that in certain cases the perpetrators are portrayed as the “real victim”, driven by obsession, jealousy or love, especially in cases of battering, domestic violence or feminicide. On the other hand, in regards to sexual assault, it is easier to justify the violence using the woman's behaviour, clothing or past sexual experience as an excuse for sexual engagement. These types of representations of occurrences of VAWG imply that the victims' choices triggered the perpetrator's actions, while the abusers' actions and decisions are often minimised; by doing this, they eventually portray women both cause and solution of their own trauma: if they had made better choices, they would not have had to deal with the situation in the first place (Taylor, 2020). Therefore, the practice of victim blaming

can be very deleterious for women who suffered from VAWG, who already tend to blame themselves for the trauma they experienced and the choices that led them to it (Eaton, 2019). Being forced into an hostile public environment (and often facing blaming behaviours from close friends and relatives) can lead victims to experience a progressive process of isolation, marginalisation and stigmatisation, that result in less requests from help (Spaccatini & Pacilli, 2019). Moreover, news tend to blame the event of sexual violence on the individual (wheter it is focusing on the perpetrator or the victim), without considering the larger societal context that still justify VAWG (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). In doing so, «the news disguises the social roots of battering while reinforcing stereotypes and myths which blame women. In this way, the news sustains and reproduces male supremacy» (Meyers, 1994, p. 60).

News coverage helps the perpetrations of rape myths and, consequently, the acceptance and the more likely perpetrarion of gender-based violence. For instance, Renae Franiuk and her colleagues (2008) found that news headlines containing rape myths can lead to rape-supportive attitudes in their audience, as well as to the justification of the abusers' acts (Ward, 1995). The perpetration of gender stereotypes and myths can not only affect survivors, but it can also undermine the credibility of a whole group, such as women, ethnic minorities or LGBTQIA+ communities (Johnson et al., 2021), making it easier to place the blame on them. Therefore, it is no surprise that survivors with intersecting marginalised identities are particularly vulnerable to victim blaming (Stewart et al., 2014). However, this practice can also be targeted to the individual herself: elements such as victim's attractiveness, clothing, overall behaviour and past romantic and sexual experiences are used to justify what happened to them, while perpetrators are portrayed as "slaves" of impulses. After all, to quote the father of the convicted Stanford athlete, why should you ruin a young man's life for just "20 minutes of action"? (Hunt, 2016).



**Fig. 3.18.** Headlines from various newspapers, which performed victim blaming while describing occurrences of sexual assault. 2017-2021

In the past decades, several scholars investigated how the language used to portray cases of sexual assault in newscast can influence the perception of the victim and the act itself. For instance, Bohner (2001) asked 67 participant to describe the circumstances of a rape and found that rather than using the name of the victim, the use of the passive voice with expressions such as “she was assaulted” or “the woman was attacked” was positively correlated with rape-myth acceptance, perceived responsibility of the victim, and consequently a lower perceived blame for the abuser. The way an event is described can easily disclose the point of view of the speaker, therefore affecting the audience’s perception. In his TED Talk, Jackson Katz (2012) explained how often the narrative of rape is always focused on the victim, even morphologically: headline prefers the formula “Mary was beaten” rather than “John beat Mary”. The spotlight remains on the woman, analysing to the smallest details what she was wearing or how much inhibited by alcohol she was, while the actual perpetrators remain in the background.

## Bacio 'rubato' alla ex, 46enne condannato per violenza sessuale



Treviso Today | 16-03-2022 16:50



RIMINITODAY

Sezioni

Cronaca

Cronaca

## Ubriache fradicie al party in spiaggia, due 15enni violentate dall'amichetto

Le ragazzine ricoverate in ospedale per la sbornia non ricorderebbero nulla di quanto accaduto, lo stupro documentato dai medici

We can point out several examples of this issue from newscasts all over the world, from *The Times of India* to the *La Repubblica*, from *Sole 24 ore* to *The Telegram* [→ Fig. 3.18]. Mass media play a crucial role in portraying cases of sexual assault and presenting them to the public. Social media already allow perpetrators to spread their misogynistic ideals and find ways to unite and share illegal content online (Sills et al., 2016), mass media such as newspapers should portray accurate and respectful reports of the events, without perpetrating victim blaming and causing secondary victimisation. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that today feminist collective actions [→ 4.1.1] are being performed also thanks to social media, especially to call out comments and headlines that still spread stereotypes and wrongful rape myths (Sills et al., 2016).

However, the presence of several headlines that still blame the victim for the violence they suffered is a symptom of the deeper problem. Like Meyers (1994, p. 60) wrote:

«The news, socially constructed, represents the values of the dominant social order[...]. And when that order is steeped in an ethic of male supremacy, the news reflects it. By perpetuating the idea that violence against women is a problem of individual pathology, the news disguises the social roots of battering while reinforcing stereotypes and myths which blame women. In this way, the news sustains and reproduces male supremacy».

### 3.4 GENDER VIOLENCE IN ITALY

This dissertation is specifically focused on the Italian context. Until now, the literature review depicted an international picture of VAWG. However, since the project will be developed for Italy, with activities of field research and co-design with the Parma's anti violence centre, it is crucial to dedicate specific attention to the Italian context and how the issue of gender-based sexual violence is addressed within national borders. The project presented in this dissertation was created thanks to the collaboration of the volunteers of Parma's anti violence centre, who not only provided crucial information in regards to the kind of support they provide and the type of experiences that women who request their help go through, but they also participated in the evaluation and testing of interactive drama. In particular, through [interviews](#) [→ 3.5.2] with three key figures in the centre, I was able to gather insightful knowledge which not only inspired the project itself, but also helped to better understand the current Italian context.

As of now, the issue of gender-based violence is indeed particularly urgent, especially because, during this pandemic, Italy witnessed a remarkable increase of domestic abuse against women and girls



(Moffa & Chirivì, 2020). In fact, according to ISTAT, the calls to 1522, the Italian emergency number to report violence against women, have increased 79,5% during 2020, something probably due to the forced cohabitation caused by the pandemic.

This following section paints a picture on how Italy is facing this issue, under a social, legal and cultural point of view. The recognition of VAWG as a structural problem followed the series of international meeting and conferences (e.g. Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Beijing in 1995, etc.) that discussed the topic of violence against women and other gender-based discriminations, but still today the Italian penal system struggles to identify violence against women as a gender-based problem. Moreover, studies have shown that rape culture attitudes (related specifically to gender stereotypes and rape myths) are still very widespread among the population (*Gli effetti della pandemia sulla violenza di genere*, 2021; ISTAT, 2019). In order to change the trend and stop this other “epidemic”, it is important to address the weak point in our system, such as the penal code, the portrayal of gender-based violence in the media and the widely diffused stereotypes that still protect the offenders and cause harm to the victim, while also promoting those institutions, such as anti-violence centre and feminist association who keep working to educate the population and provide support for survivors.

Communication artefacts and systems developed *ad hoc* to address and cover such a pressing issue could help audiences to reinforce positive attitudes and behaviours toward the topic, or develop a more informed perspective in case a positive attitude was not yet present or rooted (Blumberg et al., 2012). The latter may be considered, indeed, the first step towards an increased awareness of the problem and its complex and multi-layered features. The interactive drama developed in light of the research presented here will address the issues detected in the Italian context, describing

the reality of victims under the point of view of a woman living in an abusive relationship. The creation of a strong empathic bond between the player and the main character, through the processes of immersion and role-taking, will enable the users to immerse themselves into a reality that may appear familiar to them, but witnessing it from a completely new perspective, and therefore favouring the development of a more aware and positive outlook, especially towards victims of gender-based violence.

### 3.4.1 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE ITALIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

The history of gender-based violence and specifically of sexual assault in the Italian penal code is troubled and difficult to untangle, because it was not until recently that this issue has been properly addressed. Even though the penal code still contains some crucial gaps, some major adjustments have been implemented. If we look back at 1930's *Codice Rocco*, women were arbitrarily placed on an inferior level, and their rights were not as safeguarded as today (Basile, 2013). For instance, only in 1969 Italy assessed that both wife and husband could be equally punished for adultery: before that, women were disciplined just after one occurrence of infidelity, while men were able to avoid penance as long as they kept their mistresses outside of the marital home (Sentenza n. 147 del 1969, 1969)

However, one of the most serious inequalities between men and women in the Italian penal code concerned sexual assault. Until 1996, rape was considered a crime against morality and common decency, and not against individual freedom and if the perpetrator agreed to marry the victim, the crime was canceled (Basile, 2013). This changed thanks to the courage of several Italian women, including Franca Viola [→ Fig 3.19], the first Italian girl who refused



the shotgun wedding after she was kidnapped, raped, and held in isolation for 11 days by the man who his father forbade her to marry (Agresta, 2019). Moreover, rape within the marriage was not acknowledge until 1976. Before that date, husbands could only be prosecuted and convicted for minor crimes, such as threats and battery. The conviction for femicide was also reduced in case of honour killing (3-7 years in prison against the 24-30 years sentence for uxoricide).

During the 2010s, several updates to the Italian law have been implemented in order to conform to EU's standards (2013, 2015, 2016) and to provide better safeguards for the survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault (ISTAT, 2021), which was considered by the government as an emergency (Merli, 2015). Moreover, in 2019 the Italian government introduced what is known as *Codice Rosso*, a law to protect the individuals who suffered from several types of violence. This new law established a fast lane for the cases of violence against women and augmented the sentences for crimes related to gender-based violence, including revenge porn, stalking, sexual assault, battery, forced marriage, and disfigure-

**Fig. 3.19.** Franca Viola, talking to the police after being rescued.  
[tinyurl.com/FVcaso](https://tinyurl.com/FVcaso)

ment (Marzigno, 2020). *Codice Rosso* also prolonged the time span in which a survivor of sexual assault can report the violence to the police (from six to twelve months), but still today the women who do not denounce immediatly are questioned and the thruthfulness of their testimonied is doubted, as the politician and comedian Beppe Grillo did in regards of his son's accusations for sexual assaults (*Grillo: a difendere il figlio dall'accusa di stupro anche la mamma - la Repubblica*, 2021).

As Merli (2015) argues, it is unlikely that Italy will ever create laws to protect women specifically, because the penal code must remain neutral. As the Italian constitutional court stated, however, it is possible that differences of biological nature can become discrimination on a societal level, and that therefores should be addressed as such. Gender-based violence should be recognised as a structural problem, rooted in deep inequalities that should be consequently punished by the law. *Codice Rosso* enforced some new achievements and crucial steps, but for some survivors it may seem like not enough. This topic was thoroughly discussed during my interview [[→ 3.5.2.1](#)] with Samuela Frigeri, lawyer and President of Parma's Centro Antiviolenza, who was glad to participate in the co-design process for the creation of this dissertation, providing detailed information in regards to the legislative processes concerning reports of VAWG. She stated that today the timespan for a prosecution is biblical, because *«reporting can occur today, but the case can go to trial in over a year and a half, and the whole process is emotionally wrecking for many victims»*. For instance, just this year, the European court condemned the judges of Florence's Court of Appeal who absolved seven young men from the accusation of rape because the woman was inhibited by alchool and because in the past she engaged in bisexual casual relationships (Bresolin, 2021). The Court in Strasbourg recognised the enacted process of victim blaming, which forced the woman to undergo secondary victimisation, and ordered Italy to pay her 16.000 euros

for moral damage (Bresolin, 2021). This is just one of the several cases of sexual assault that still today are dismissed through the perpetration of victim blaming. The legislative process and the cases' development during trials must be regulated, in order to accelerate and improve the process of conviction (if it is the case), but especially to limit further psychological and emotional trauma for the victim.

### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND RAPE 3.4.2 CULTURE IN ITALY: DATA FROM ISTAT

As Merli (2015) argued, Italy lacks insights for what concern violence against women, because the only censuses are carried out by ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics. ISTAT often conducts investigations regarding gender-related disparities, such as gender pay gap (2016) or gender-based discriminations (2011), but every year, on 25<sup>th</sup> November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, ISTAT publish the statistics regarding VAWG in Italy. They often include topics such as calls to 1522 and anti-violence centres, number of women in safe homes, admissions to the ER and other information that can help paint a picture regarding the situation of gender-based abuse within Italian borders.

According to this report<sup>5</sup> (2021), over the course of 2020, over 15.000 women reached anti-violence centers to escape violent relationships, of which 74,2% did not start during the pandemic but was worsened by it. To these women, the Italian anti violence centres managed to provide various types of support, from immediate action to ensure the safety of the victims and possibly their children, to psychological and legal counselling. The restrictions

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<sup>5</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/ISTAT2021>

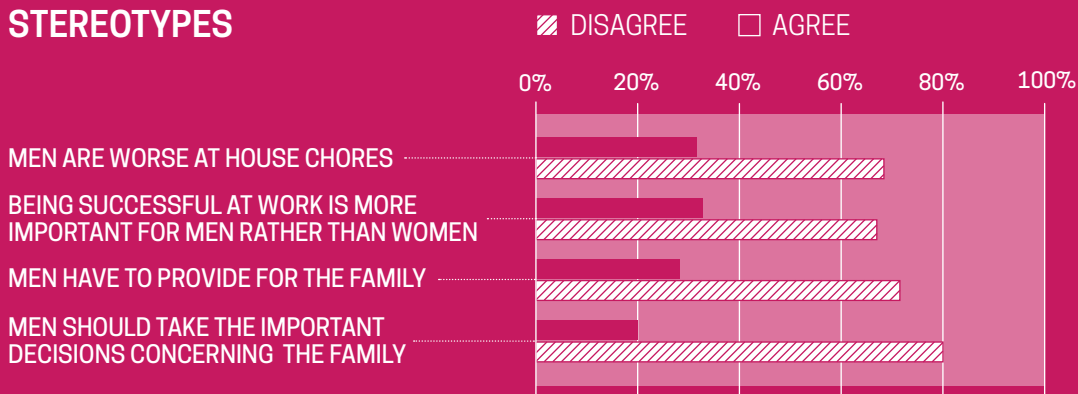
due to the spread of the pandemic have amplified women's fear for their safety, but they also caused a reduction of the requests for help and the police reports, especially during the months of lockdown. Being forced to cohabit with the perpetrator, many women's situation quickly worsened and, due to a greater control perpetrated by their abusive partner or relatives, the victims were unable to reach out. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic led to the deterioration of many abusive relationships. Nonetheless, anti-violence centres across Italy managed to provide the support needed by thousands of women despite the unprecedented conditions that arose in 2020 and 2021.

Another interesting census carried out by ISTAT concerned gender stereotypes and rape myths shared by the Italian population [ $\rightarrow$  Fig 3.20]. These behaviours are part of the rape culture that still entangles our social and cultural life, and in 2018 ISTAT tried to determine, through a series of interviews, how widespread they are. According to the results, 58,8% of the population, with no real distinction among men and women, agrees with one or more stereotypes regarding gender roles, the most common being “for men it is more important to be successful in the workplace” (32,5%), “men are less suited for household chores” (31,5%) and “men should provide for the economical needs of the family” (27,9%). For what concerns gender based violence, ISTAT gathered some troubling insights: 39,3% of the population believes that a woman can always avoid a sexual relation if she really wants to, while 23,9% thinks that women can provoke sexual assault through the way they are dressed. Moreover, 15,1% of the respondents believed that if a woman is inhibited by drugs or alcohol is in part to blame if she is sexually assaulted. Moreover, the study also investigated the reasons behind these beliefs, discovering that 10,3% of the population think that claims of sexual violence are often false, while 7,2% is convinced that women often refuse sexual advantages even when they actually want to engage in such activities.

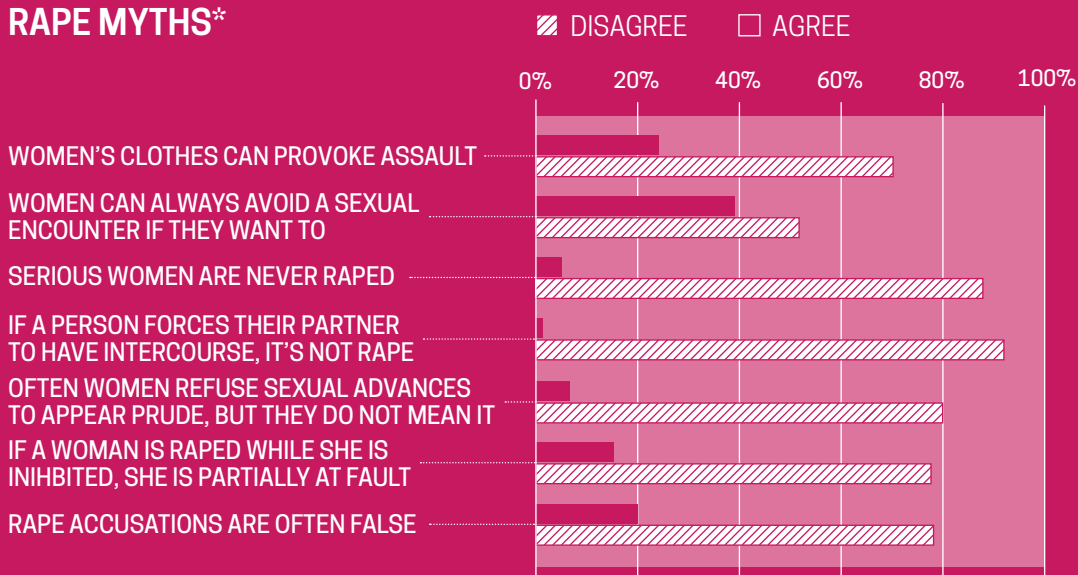
**Fig. 3.20.** ISTAT's report about gender stereotypes and rape myths shared by the Italian population, 2018

# GENDER STEREOTYPES AND RAPE MYTHS IN ITALY

## STEREOTYPES



## RAPE MYTHS\*



\* The percentages of people who did not answer to the questions were not included

The overall picture presented by this study is very concerning, yet sadly not surprising. The lack of education and the diffusion of misconceptions among the population create a context that justifies perpetrators and undermines the victims' experiences. Moreover, it was also interesting to acknowledge that only 20,4% of the Italian population would advise women to contact an anti-violence centre, while 64,5% would encourage survivors to report. According to Samuela Frigeri, lawyer and President of Parma's Centro Antiviolenza [[→ 3.5.2.1](#)], due to the highly complicated and unsettling Italian legal process, victims of violence should be advised to contact trained volunteers and professionals to confront the abuse and evaluate future possibilities, instead of rushing to the police. Anti-violence centres in Italy provide physical, psychological and legal support to whoever asks for it, to help the victim take back the ability to make personal choices, whether they involve reporting the abuse or simply distancing themselves from the abuser. These institutions also often organise events and initiatives to inform and educate the public regarding the issue of VAWG: raising awareness about the presence of anti-violence centres and their activities in Italy may be one of the objectives to improve bystanders' behaviours and their beliefs. Wrongful and stereotyped conceptions enable abuses to spread and to go unreported and unaddressed, causing victims even more harm.

### 3.4.3 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ITALIAN MEDIA

Italian media are often criticised for their portrayal of femicide, especially for the use of terminology such as “raptus”, “tormented love” or “passional crime”, which justify the homicide and portray the woman as the ones to blame (Spadorcia, 2021). Homicide becomes a crime warranted by jealousy and love, while the probable abuses that came before the homicide are hidden away. As we al-



ready discussed, the way these occurrences are reported often influence public opinion, and in case of sexual assault, it may spread wrongful stereotypes. In the past few years, many newscasts and TV hosts have been called out for having perpetrated victim blaming in their headlines and articles, or for having shared inappropriate comments during their shows.

One of the most famous reports of sexual violence in Italy concerned Alberto Genovese, a man who abused and recorded a 18-years-old girl for over 20 hours after a party at his house, during which he served cocaine and GHB, the date rape drug (Coin, 2021). The girl managed to escape the house only the next evening, and she was later admitted to the Mangiagalli Clinic in Milan, where she remained for three days. The police arrested Genovese only on October 12th, and in a matter of days 5 more victims came forward and reported his abuses, which he perpetrated with the same M.O.. Despite the despicable crimes of Genovese, Italian media preferred to focus on his accomplishments: La Repubblica's headline read *Who is Alberto Genovese, the magical startup entrepreneur who was arrested in Milan for sexual violence* (Liso, 2020), while Sole24Ore described him as *"a vulcano of ideas that has been extinct, for now"* (Coin, 2021; Perozzi, 2020) [[→ Fig 3.18](#)]. They performed what Kate Manne (2017) calls himpathy, the disproportionate amount of empathy for powerful man in cases of sexual assault. Moreover, in the following days, papers also reported Genovese's 'justifications' (Guastella, 2021). He presented himself as a man *"tormented by his incapacity to distinguish reality from fiction"*, surrounded by fake friends and prostitutes. In doing so, he tried to convince the audience to take pity on him (Coin, 2021). The fact that the Italian media facilitated the emphatic portrayal of a serial sexual offender was highly criticised by the public; because of this backlash, Sole24Ore's article was eventually deleted and the paper issued an official apology, but no real change was witnessed.

Moreover, the problem in this representations of domestic violence and sexual assault is not only the tendency to spread myths and stereotypes regarding gender-based violence, but also the depiction of these events as “exceptionals”, related to the single perpetrator (Guareschi & Rahola, 2011), and not to the systematic structure of our society, based on the social and gender relations already in place. Even on TV, speculation regarding the victim’s blame often proliferates. For instance, just this year Barbara Palombelli, the TV host of a mock trial show called *Forum* was criticised for a comment she did during one of the episodes: while talking about the statistics on femicide, she wondered if all the convicted men were out of their mind, or if it was their wives’ behaviour who was aggressive and exasperating (Di Falco, 2021). These types of discussion also occurred in regards to Genovese’s abuses, during the talk show *Non è l’arena*, where a few of the entrepreneur’s friends argued that it was up to the young girl to stay away from the party or refuse Genovese’s attention (Coin, 2021). Italy has had some trouble in eliminating sexist behaviours in media, which were derived from the nation’s history and increased by two decades of *Berlusconism* (Peroni, 2018). Cases of violence against women are still used to reinforce political agendas that aim to maintain disparities between genders, hidden behind a mantle of moral panic (Giomini, 2010). However, today thanks to the widespread of our means of communications, activists and groups can respond and call out the misrepresentation and perpetration of rape culture attitudes.

One example of this occurred in Parma just last year. Parma’s local newspaper covered a case of sexual assault occurred in August 2018. Two middle aged men raped, flogged, and beat a 23-year-old woman for an entire night. However, the several articles they published to report the assault and the following trials were emphatic with the Italian perpetrator, Federico Pesci (the other one was his Nigerian pusher), and highly judgemental towards the victim. The woman was described as “frail”, “ipersexualised”,

“disturbed”(Longoni, 2020), while Pesci was just “a man convicted before the trial” (Longoni, 2021). She was not the perfect innocent victim, the pusher was another foreign man already convicted for other crimes: they were not worth defending. Pesci, however, was just a man in an unfair trial, “standing up like a student during an oral test” (Longoni, 2021). The online newspaper *Parma Press 24* also covered the event, questioning the truthfulness of the victim’s testimony. They wrote:

«The next evening, the entrepreneur texted the “victim”. He asked how she was, after a night of extreme sex, a notion that was never denied. The conversation speaks for themselves, there is no need for further comments. Here are the pictures that she [the victim] sent Pesci. Just bruises, small bites».

All these representations undermined the victim’s testimony and speculated about the events that really happened in 2018, while also perpetrating secondary victimisation and victim blaming on the young woman. These articles, however, did not go unnoticed. The Coordination of the Anti-Violence centres in Emilia Romagna issued and signed a letter to protest *Parma Press 24*’s articles (Coordinamento dei Centri anti violenza, 2020), while Parma’s *Casa delle Donne* organised a mail-bombing campaign to protest *Gazzetta di Parma* (Rinaldi, 2020). These events were able to shed light on the troublesome representation of sexual assault and allow public groups to respond and question the way in which media decided to portray certain event and “judge” the perpetrators. Thanks to grass-root tools, such as social media, the public is more and more able to speak up, and to question mass media as well as the authors of speculations and unfair articles. As Sills and her colleagues (2016, p. 14) wrote, online feminist collective actions are able «to provide the dual functions of counterpublics: “withdrawal and re-entry

into the wider communicative flows of the public sphere”». The presence of online feminist counterpublic provides to marginalised groups the support, knowledge, and tools to critically respond to rape culture (Sills et al., 2016). These initiatives, now more than ever, are needed to confront and contrast the deeply rooted myths and stereotypes in our society.

### 3.5 ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES IN ITALY

As previously discussed, Italy took some time to acknowledge VAWG as a structural problem (some citizens still do not), and therefore, a coherent response to the problem has been only recently developed. The second wave of feminism in the 60s and 70s, with its political agenda aimed to improve women’s rights and freedom of expression, sparked discussions and initiatives to face gender inequality and provide new spaces for women to interact and cooperate (D.i.Re, 2014). Thanks to these discussions and to the testimony of many women, they acknowledged that gender-based violence was one of the cruel social and cultural mechanisms used to reinforce inequality among men and women, and they established the need for a coherent and collective response, to provide a safe place for those women who suffered from abuse (D.i.Re, 2014) and to create a political debate on the topic. The first women’s house (Casa delle Donne) was born in 1989 in Bologna, after the debate sparked by the rape of three underage girls during the spring of 1985 (La nostra storia - Casa delle donne per non subire violenza ONLUS Bologna, n.d.). Simultaneously, other similar shelters were born in Milan, Modena, Roma, Latina and Parma: in less than a decades 70 anti-violence centres were spread all over Italy, and in 1996 they all met in Ravenna, to draft a common political plan and a series of shared practises (La storia dei centri Antiviolenza – Liberetutte, 2014).

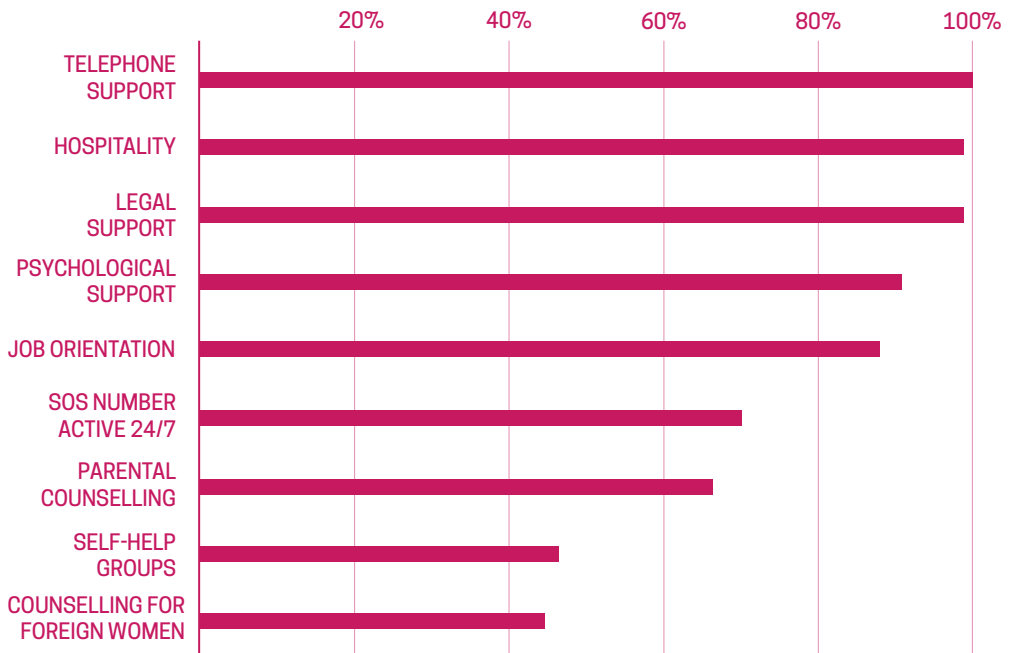
Today anti-violence centres are places where women who suffered from male violence can be welcomed and protected, while seeking counsel and support. These centres actively cooperate with local services (both public and private), to create projects and systems aimed to prevent VAWG and to help women recover from abuse (D.i.Re, 2014). They are not just a public service, they are politically active groups aimed to change our society and to enforce gender equality (D.i.Re & Veltri, 2017). Anti-violence centres are “social workshops”, in which women create and develop initiatives to prevent and educate the local population, while also providing support to the women who seek it, thanks to the collaboration with other institutions which also look at gender-based violence with a view to social change (D.i.Re, 2014). In these centres, the only employees and volunteers are women, not only to make the survivors feel safe, away from male perpetrators, but also to show them the possibilities they have, without forcing them down a certain path or presenting them only pre-constituted solutions. Anti-violence centres’ main objective is to allow the victims to take back their ability to make choices, their freedom, their independence from traumatic events or toxic relationships, and because of this, any potential activity that may help women to recover (counseling, safe house, police report, etc) will be initiated only with their agreement and active request (D.i.Re, 2014).

Eventually, the main objective is to create a safe space, where survivors and victims can work through their trauma, and feel empathy and support in each one of their choices, while also working to improve the social condition in which all women live and the cultural norms and misconceptions it entails. This is why many of the anti violence centres now present within the Italian territory are united in one network, D.i.Re, to create common guidelines and actions to not only help women, but also fight the urgent socio-cultural issue of VAWG on a political and structural level.

### 3.5.1 THE ITALIAN NETWORK: D.I.RE AND THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS WITH PARMA'S ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRE

The majority of anti-violence centres share similar methodologies when helping victims they aim to empower their identity, while reinforcing the relation between women (D.i.Re, 2014). Since VAWG is rooted in gender inequality, as the *Carta della Rete nazionale dei Centri Antiviolenza e della Casa delle Donne* states (D.i.Re & Veltri, 2017), these centres try to positively describe the female gender, highlighting women's personal choices and rights, and standing together to face the problem. Violence against women is a structural, collective problem, and therefore fighting it requires communal actions (D.i.Re, 2014): this is why all these centres decided to unite in one network, which is «anti bureaucratic, flexible, centered on the needs of women and their offspring» (D.i.Re, 2014, p. 4).

**Fig. 3.21.** Percentages of Italian anti-violence centers able to offer specific services.



D.i.Re (Network of Women against violence) was born on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, even though a many centres and feminist groups collaborated informally for over 30 years for the same purpose (D.i.Re & Veltri, 2018): in 2006, they had already issued the *Carta della Rete nazionale dei Centri Antiviolenza e della Casa delle Donne*, a document that later helped to develop D.i.Re's official statute. Today this network counts 84 Italian organisations, which manage 109 anti violence centres and 50 safe houses, which work together to enhance a political action to promote cultural change and to fight VAWG (Rossi, s.d.). To achieve these objectives, they organise initiatives to raise awareness in regards of gender-based violence, foster researches and publications to improve education and training and facilitate public discussions (Rossi, s.d.), both with national and international groups and organisations. They adopt a common language and similar methodologies, employing the same ethical values, such as privacy, equality and respect.

As recorded by 2020's report<sup>6</sup> (Sdao & Pisanu, 2020), all D.i.Re's anti-violence centres offer various types of help and support to abused women [**→Fig 3.20**]: telephonic support (100%) hospitality in safe houses (99%), free legal consultation (99%) psychological and parental counselling (respectively 91% and 67%), job orientation (88%) and self-help groups (56%) (Scoppa, 2021). 72% of the centres receive regional fundings, 60% can count on the municipality contributions, but as stated by Samuela Frigeri in her interview [**→ 3.5.2.1**], the financing can vary according to the elected political parties as well as the various governmental agreements. The fundings can also be provided by private organisations and citizens: they usually vary from 14.300 to 1.500 euros each year. The majority of the women working in anti violence centres are trained volunteers, who undergo a learning period in which they are flanked by professionals or more expert collaborators (D.i.Re, 2014). The only

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<sup>6</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/DireReport>

professional figures involved in the centres are the psychologists, doctors and lawyers (even though the latter only provide free counsel as volunteers): they never present themselves as authoritarian figures, they try to establish a relationship with the victims in order to help them make their decisions.

Each year, D.i.Re issues a report of all their activities (Sdao & Pisanu, 2020), publishing the numbers of women they helped and the type of support they offered. In 2020, anti-violence centres and women's shelters welcomed 20.015 women: 13.390 were received for the first time, while the rest had reached these organisations before. The majority of the victims are Italian (only 26% are foreign), and 54,7% of them are from 30 to 49 years old. Among these women, only 27% chose to initiate a legal process. Psychological violence was reported by 77,3% of the victims, followed by physical (60%) and economic abuse (33,4%). Sexual violence and stalking present the lower report rates, 15,3% and 14,9% respectively. In the majority of cases, the offender was the victim's partner (60,2%) or former partner (22,1%), meaning that abuse often derives from a relationship between a man and a woman. In said situations, violence is used to gain or maintain control over the woman, creating a relation based on control and oppression. Noticing that these numbers have not varied much in the past years shows how rooted the problem is, despite the new employed regulations and the initiatives carried out by organisations like D.i.Re.

In order to better understand the work done by feminist centres, to better comprehend the Italian context and in order to assure that the interactive drama will not only be coherent with D.i.Re.'s goals, but also describe a realistic and sensible portrayal of the issue of VAWGs, I contacted Parma's anti-violence centre to ask for their help and support. Parma's centre was founded in 1985, but it became fully operational in 1991, when the first safe house was opened. It is part of D.i.Re and it maintains relations with the municipality, the





regional government, police forces, USL, Social services and various feminist institutions (both laic and religious). At the moment, they offer various services, such as interviews, legal and psychological counselling, support in work placement, temporary hospitality in safe shelters and specific training for all volunteers.

**Fig. 3.22.** Percentages of women who reported gender-based violence to anti-violence centres in 2020

I managed to contact a few volunteers who have been part of the anti-violence centre for several years thanks to Parma's association *Casa delle Donne*, of which we are all members. Their expertise and internal knowledge were crucial both in the designing and the testing process, in order to define the specific social objective of the interactive drama, to accurately portray experiences of victims of gender-based violence and abusive relationships, and to provide correct information in regards to the Italian anti-violence centres. Through interviews and testing sessions, we conducted a co-design process to create an effective artefact that can reinforce and inspire positive attitudes towards survivors of VAWG, encourage a more informed perspective of the topic and raise awareness in regards to the work of D.i.Re anti-violence centres.

«**THE TIME HAS COME TO SAY ENOUGH AND TO ACT COLLECTIVELY SO THAT ALL OUR VOICES BECOME ONE: THE VOICE OF WOMEN WHO DEMAND THE RIGHT TO A FREE LIFE, THE RIGHT TO SAY NO TO VIOLENCE WITHOUT HAVING TO PAY WITH THEIR LIVES, AND THE RIGHT TO FORCEFULLY CLAIM THE FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL ROLE OF THE ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES AND OF THE MANY FEMALE WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS WHO DAILY WELCOME WOMEN FACING THE MANY DIFFICULTIES WE KNOW**».

## INTERVIEWS WITH THE VOLUNTEERS 3.5.2

In order to gain a better understanding of the Italian context and the work performed by anti violence centres, I organised interviews with three of the key figures in Parma's chapter, during which we discussed various topics, ranging from the victims' experiences and struggles to the various types of support offered by the volunteers, from the political story of the centre to its positioning within the public discourse on VAWG. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to privacy regulations, I was unable to visit the centre and to talk directly with the survivors, because one of the pillars of the volunteers' work is assuring the anonymity and wellness of the women who reach out to them. Nonetheless, during the interviews, the three women managed to provide insightful knowledge that not only strongly influenced the direction of the project, but also offered interesting perspectives in regards to activities aimed at social change.

During spring 2020, I organised online interviews with the President (who is also a legal counsellor), the communication manager and the director of prevention and educational activities. They all agreed to contribute to the project and its development by providing fundamental insights. The initial activities aimed at setting the ground of the cooperation, shaped as encounters and interviews occurred over the course of spring 2021. All meetings lasted one hour, during which the three women answered a series of questions about their role in the anti-violence centre, past and future activities and the aspect of their work they would like to improve. The encounters were particularly relevant because they set the ground for the perspective to adopt, identifying the more significant targets for the projects. Further reflections regarded a critical analysis of the educational activities conducted by the Parma's centre, which pointed out the initiatives and practices that proved to be the most effective and empathetic. Moreover, each

one of the encounters provided different and complementary views on the centre's activities, resulting in particularly useful insights for the project development, in particular concerning the portrayal of the victims' experiences in the interactive drama.

### 3.5.2.1 SAMUELA FRIGERI, PRESIDENT AND LEGAL ADVISOR

Samuela Frigeri has been serving as President of Parma's anti-violence centre for seven years, but she is also one of the three legal counsellors who volunteer in the establishment. As President, she is responsible, together with the Executive Council, for the administration of the activities and for the political actions of the centre. She also maintains relations with the media and with other local and national organisations with which the centre can collaborate. At the moment, Parma's centre counts 25 volunteers and 5 psychological professionals, who manage the mental recovery of the women who contact the organisation. Mrs. Frigeri would like a bigger

**Fig. 3.23.** Samuela Frigeri, at a recent conference



space to improve welcoming activities, to train new volunteers and to create more opportunities to signal the presence of the anti-violence centre in the local area, but due to several reasons, these objectives are difficult to achieve.

During the interview, we discussed both work conducted by the centre and specifically her role as a legal counsellor. She highlighted the importance of communicating to the public that seeking help from the anti-violence centre does not mean reporting the violence right away: on the contrary, they always advise women to in-

form themselves before proceeding with a legal process. According to Mrs. Frigeri, women often need time to process what they went through, the majority of them suffered from several types of abuse for many years. They need to recognise violence as it is, and to understand that they are free to make their own decision, outside of their relationship with their partner, who often perpetrates victim blaming and makes them feel responsible for their malfunctional relationship. Mrs. Frigeri portrayed abusing relationship as a vicious circle that women need to break, as pointed out in the interview extract that follows:

«Violence is a vicious circle: it creates a situation from which it is difficult to get out. As a matter of fact, many women do not recognise violence, because the dynamic of the relationship makes them feel responsible for what is happening. [...] They feel responsible and for this they struggle to report it. [...] Nothing ever justifies violence. Those who suffer violence have no other choice, while the perpetrator always has an alternative. Violence is always a choice. That is why the operators must challenge the idea of victim's responsibility».

Mrs. Frigeri declared that emphatic and powerful educational initiatives can help to dismantle the misconceptions and stereotypes around violence against women. She highlighted the role that activities in schools (even in kindergartens) can play in defying wrongful convictions from an early age. Among all the projects organised in the past year, she identified the exhibition *What were you wearing?* as the most effective. Inspired by the similar exhibit in Kansas, the exhibition displayed different outfits worn by women who suffered sexual violence, to challenge the myth that clothing actually provoke abuse. The people who visited the exhibition walked next to the clothes

hanging from the walls, which were accompanied by a testimony of the person who was wearing them. Mrs. Frigeri stated that many people were actually moved by the installation, being inspired to conduct deeper reflections on the topic, which is probably the more powerful and more useful reaction they could hope for.

As discussed in the previous chapter, awareness and empathy can be the most effective tool to make people, especially bystanders, acknowledge the issue of VAWG and all the misconceptions that still justify it. And in this case, seeing the outfits displayed in the exhibition and reading the testimonies managed to help people understand the groundlessness of many of the most common stereotypes. Installations like this, exactly like the interactive narrative discussed in this dissertation, hope to become the spark that spreads a wildfire of new personal and public reflections regarding a topic that still today is affected by deeply rooted misconceptions and negative attitudes. And as *What were you wearing?* targeted in the stereotype that the outfits worn by victims of sexual violence meant that the women “were asking for it”, the interactive drama will specifically concern victim blaming and the wrongful conception that women’s choices can actually cause the violence from which they suffer.

### 3.5.2.2 EVA FILIPARDI, COMMUNICATION MANAGER

Eva Filipardi is a young volunteer in Parma’s Anti-violence centre, she is part of the Executive Council and for the last year she has been responsible for the organisation’s online communication. For the past four years, she has also often participated in the educational activities organised in local schools, as well as other initiatives with partner such as *Jolly* (theatrical co-op), *Maschile plurale* (a male feminist association), and *LDW* (an organisation aimed

to rehabilitate abusing men). Eva started her training as a volunteer during her last year of high school: she underwent an interview, attended theoretical courses, and conducted a practical training period.

Since she also assisted professional operators in welcoming victims, during the interview we briefly discussed the role of volunteers and the types of experiences survivors go through. The majority of women contact them for cases of verbal or psychological violence, but if they choose to continue a journey within the centre, they often eventually disclosed different types of abuse, some of which they did not recognise as such. For this reason, rape, especially within the boundary of an intimate relationship, is one of the most difficult violences to detect. In the centre they only welcome women, to prevent triggers for the hosted victims, but in the last few years the question of trans women started to emerge. At the moment, D.i.Re is discussing this matter in order to organise collective strategies to implement homogeneously across national ground and to create specific training for the volunteers.

For what concerns the fight against rape culture and all the misconceptions related to VAWG, Eva agrees that educational activities and political actions, such as the protest against unfair media representations of cases of violence [[→ 3.4.3](#)] are very helpful to expose the myths and stereotypes rooted in ourselves. The centre also has organised conferences and lectures, but they noticed that the majority of the participants are people already interested in the topic. Eva recognized it is easier to educate younger generations about these topics, because older people often possess ingrained opinions difficult to eradicate. For this reason, the best target for



Fig. 3.24. Eva Filipardi

educational activities, at this point, are adolescents and young adults, from 15 to 35 years old.

Nonetheless, it is important to make a distinction between the types of educational initiatives performed by the centre and the interactive drama later described in this dissertation: when volunteers engage with students through practical activities, they want to educate them on gender-based violence. The interactive drama can be a powerful tool to add at their centre's sensibilisation program for two main reasons: (1) it will target a more mature audience (18-35), providing a method to reach another fragment of the population that is not usually involved in their activities, and (2) it will have a less educational structure, providing instead a more immersive experience, capable of offering new perspectives on the topic and encourage further reflections.

In discussing the best strategies to raise awareness about anti-violence centres, Eva explained that it is important to reach private citizens and businesses, and digital media can surely be the best way to do so. However, it is crucial to convey the values of privacy and anonymity rooted in every aspect of the centres' work, to explain that every choice is always up to the woman. Eva argued that the majority of media talks about VAWG focusing on the abuse rather than on the recovery the victim can go through, a message that instead should be broadcasted, in order for other women to understand what anti-violence centres can do for them. Eva stated:

«The real problem lies in the fact that if you talk too much about the violence itself, you may cause trauma to the victims. We want to spread the opposite message, namely that there is a future after violence, that there is hope. It is the opposite of what newspapers do».



Therefore, when designing an artefact that discusses such a sensible topic, even if they are not the target, people who may be traumatised by the narrative should be protected, through specific trigger warning, not only in the beginning, but also throughout the experience itself.

Moreover, as Eva suggested, the empathic experience should be focused on what survivors went through, but also on the choices they have and the actual support from which they can benefit. Thus the concept of choice can be further explored in the interactive drama, whose main mechanism concerns agency, namely the ability given to the player to make decisions and influence the development of the narrative. The interactive drama stresses how choices made by the victim do not really cause the trauma that these women have suffered, but they can influence their future. An abusive relationship may cause a woman's inability to acknowledge the choice that she can make: the choice to ask for help, knowing that there will always be someone ready to answer.

### TINA MAINARDI, DIRECTOR OF 3.5.2.3 EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The last interview was with Tina Mainardi, the director of educational activities for Parma's anti-violence centre. She has been a volunteer for this organisation for over 11 years, during which she helped improve and re-organise the educational activities in schools and in other groups and organisations. She explained that unfortunately, during the past two years, the majority of these projects have been cancelled because of the pandemic. Before the spread of Covid-19, they organised different types of activities for students from kindergartens to high schools, and some further collaborations with universities and other institutions, both public and private. What emerged from our discussion is the importance of targeting

not only the topic of violence itself (which is more suitable for older students), but especially stereotyped gender roles and rape myths with which we often grow up. It is crucial to dig deeper and convey how respecting and understanding others and their emotions is the key to prevent and fight gender-based violence. In her interview, she said:

«Respecting others and recognising their emotions [are the key topics to convey]. The discussion about violence can be developed on various levels, there are several social, cultural and economic situations that may influence episodes of violence. What is important is to change the more basic behaviours, and teach kids, starting from a young age, how to respect others and the emotions that we may cause them».

Moreover, she highlighted how interactive activities proved to be the most successful, not only to engage the students, but also to convey messages and spark discussions. To confront topics such as gender representations and violence, they often used songs, videos and skits to make examples and ask students their opinion. This reference to real life events and to popular artefacts that students may know can help attract their attention while also showing how common these behaviours are. Sometimes, the volunteers invited experts to participate in these activities (for instance, journalists to discuss the portrayal of women in media, or neuroscientists to discuss the perception of emotions), while other times they organised training for the teachers themselves. Moreover, Tina explained that they also would like to target the students' parents with their activities, because even though school plays a big part in students' education, many stereotypes or myths can be instilled at home. Therefore employing a new tool like an interactive drama, able to reach an audience outside of educational environments, can be useful to

create possible complementary initiatives and inspire the creations of new activities able to encourage social change and awareness on the topic.

Tina also reported that several teachers over the years thanked them for their initiatives, a few students, like Eva, actually became volunteers, while others tried to approach them to talk about their personal traumatic experiences (especially in high school). However, the anti-violence centre can only help adults, because under-age kids must follow an entirely different process. This limitation proved to be a big obstacle sometimes, because the volunteers were unable to help those who sought their support and they were not able to continue a conversation that may have helped a few young women. Therefore, when discussing the topic of violence and the presence of womens' houses, anti-violence centres and safe shelters, it is important to present all the possibilities, to allow anyone to actually receive the help they need.

In conclusion, the volunteers' testimonies allowed me to reflect on the importance of sharing truthful stories to lead the audience to reconsider this issue, pondering on the effect that daily behaviours can have on victims of gender-based violence and how we do not really know or understand the situation in which they are living. Therefore, in order to create a narrative capable of triggering insightful discussions and further reconsideration of the socio-cultural issue of VAWG, it is crucial to create truthful and realistic stories, which draw inspiration from real-life experiences. The interactive drama created as a results of this research should distance itself from the hegemonic perspective, providing instead a critic of the mass media's discourse on VAWG and accurately portraying real-life occurrences, which would not only offer a more immersive experience, but would allow the audience to reflect on the issue by witnessing a less filtered story.

# 04

## NARRATIVES & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: INTERACTION AS A MEANS TO FAVOUR EMPATHY

*This Chapter investigates the creation of feminist-counternarratives through digital media, to fight patriarchal values and to allow survivors to speak up. Moreover, the Chapter discusses open-source tools like Twine, which inspire their community to use of personal experience as the inspiration for IDN and games that discuss sensitive topics such as mental illness and abuse.*

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# NARRATIVES & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: INTERACTION AS A MEANS TO FAVOUR EMPATHY

## 4.1 THE VOICE OF THE SURVIVORS

As discussed in the previous chapters, digital media have proven to be very helpful in allowing survivors to share their story and organise collective actions to contrast patriarchal attitudes that still occur both online and in real-life. Rentschler (2014) describes the collection of testimonies, advices and cultures of support emerged to fight the VAWG issue, and in particular sexual violence and harassment, as “feminist response-ability”, term inspired by Kelly Oliver’s concept of “response-ability”. Rentschler defines feminist response-ability as «an activist engagement of subjectivity based in networks of media production and distribution» (p. 67), which has widely developed across several digital platforms, to report, inform and contrast wrongful conceptions and actions. The use of social network, in fact, allowed to quickly and actively respond to cultures of harassment and attitudes sexual violence, while also building a network of feminist response (Rentschler, 2014).

The revival of feminist attention to rape culture has emerged in several countries (Sills et al., 2016), targeting not only occurrence-

es of physical and sexual violence, but also all those harmful practices that trivialize rape, such as rape jokes, cat-calling and sexualized ‘banter’ (Keller et al., 2018). This type of initiatives took place especially through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and others, where, despite being online spaces, traditional gendered power relations were replicated (Sills et al., 2016). However, in this setting, more than in real life or in old media, the separation between speakers and public crumbles, allowing a counterpublic made of women’s voices to emerge. These online spaces have become a real public forum, in which those people who were often silenced and struggled for legitimacy, namely women and many minorities, finally managed to speak up. They are resistant subcultures that fight against wrongful social norms, while also forming new languages, vocabularies, and communicative modes of engagement and resistance (Ringrose & Mendes, 2018).

In fact, taking a look at all the bottom-up initiatives and trends that have emerged in the last few years (which will be discussed in the next section) it emerges that they heavily rely on personal stories, testimonies which inspired others to speak up and to show their support. According to Mendes and Ringrose (2019, p. 39), the majority of the people who participated in movements such as #MeToo were «**compelled to add their voice and often literally felt ‘moved’ into doing so from outrage, anger, and a desire to be heard and spark social change**». The #MeToo movement in particular helped to demonstrate how the public can employ digital technologies to create networks of feminist support and solidarity, and it is important not to mistake it for slacktivism just because it is carried out online (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). The testimonies shared at this juncture regarded traumatic and powerful experiences, stories that many women struggle to share with others, and this is why this movement in particular marked a pivotal point in our history: it broke the silence, contrasting the unspeakability

of sexual assault (Loney-Howes, 2018) and people started listen (Anitha et al., 2020). This and other movements, these responses to rape culture, managed to prompt crucial public conversations around sexual violence, consent, and those misconceptions that still allow and disguise gender-based violence as personal issues rather than a structural problem.

### 4.1.1 #METOO, #BEENRAPEDNEVERREPORTED AND COLLECTIVE FEMINIST ACTIONS

On October 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey published an article on the New York Times entitled «*Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades*», disclosing testimonies of Weinstein's abuses, which he perpetrated for over 30 years on the actresses and models who were working for him (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). The story went viral, and in a matter of hours dozens of other women stepped up to share similar stories regarding the Hollywood producer (Peroni, 2018). Inspired by this event, the actress Alyssa Milano, on October 14<sup>th</sup>, shared a tweet that read [→ Fig. 4.1]: «If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet». The actress used the term created in 2006

Fig. 4.1. Alyssa Milano's tweet that inspired the #MeeToo hashtag. [tinyurl.com/AMMetoo](http://tinyurl.com/AMMetoo)



by Tanya Burke, a social activist and community organizer, to encourage “*empowerment through empathy*” among the community of sexually abused women of color (Guerra, 2017). In just a few hours, the tweet got over 60 thousands comments, sparking the beginning of a very wide-spread movement, which found resonance all over the world: in France #*BalanceTonPorc* spread



across the internet, in India they used *#HimToo*, while in Italy the hashtag *#QuellaVoltaChe* found its way across Twitter, thanks to the blogger Giulia Blasi, who denounced the Italian justice systems' abuses and the secondary victimisation they cause and encouraged people to share their stories.

The fourth wave of feminism is studded with collective initiatives like *#MeToo*, movements and projects that aimed to shed a light on the issue of VAWG and to encourage women to collaborate to fight rape culture and gender inequality. The *#MeToo* movement was probably the most widespread initiative that we witnessed, but it was not the only one. For instance, already in 2014 a similar hashtag trended on Twitter: *#BeenRapedNeverReported* encouraged women to share their stories and explain why they never reported sexual assault to the authorities (Mendes et al., 2018). The majority of the women who participated did not share their story lightly: they reflected on the consequences, but as Mendes and her colleagues (2018) explained, they were eventually overwhelmed by the support they receive, the 'favourites', the 'retweets', or the direct messages from strangers who wanted to show them solidarity. Events like this created meaningful opportunities to build networks of feminist support and consciousness, but also social change created by collective shifts based on personal stories.

Other initiatives like the already mentioned *Hollaback!*, *Everyday Sexism*, or the app *Not Your Baby*, exposed different types of public behaviours correlated with violence against women: they were possible thanks to digital media's ability to unite communities of women. Liking a message, spreading a tweet, sharing a story or giving advice from behind a screen is not low-intensity activism as some have argued (Gladwell, 2010), they are actions charged with trauma, anger and desire for things to change. As Ringrose and Mendels (2019, p. 14) wrote:

«Power lies firmly in the collective act of speaking out against sexual violence and knowing there was ‘strength in numbers.’ We must firmly understand #MeToo as a digitally networked phenomenon which has enabled mass participation, connectivity, and consciousness-raising. [...] it therefore plays a critically important role in making visible the ‘structural connections of sexism and violence’ which are becoming increasingly harder to ignore».

#### 4.1.2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM

When discussing the 2013 Steubenville case, Rentschler (2014) argued that social media can become “aggregators of online misogyny”, and during the last few years several events exposed all over the world seemed to have proven her right. In the case of Steubenville (Macur & Schweber, 2012), a group of high school football players abused and filmed a 16-years-old girl when she was inhibited by alcohol. They posted several pictures and videos on their social media profiles, and despite this evidence existing thanks to a local blogger who gathered all the content, a big part of the local community defended the perpetrators. These young boys used social media as a weapon to shame and abuse a young girl, and they were defended for it. Another example of digital abuse is even more recent. In 2020, news uncovered several Telegram groups with over 43.000 subscribers where Italian men exchanged pornographic and pedopornographic content and shared misogynist and sexist messages (Fontana, 2020). Events like these have become more and more common in the last decade, instances of revenge porn or problems such as fake pornography: thanks to digital media, people found several ways to sexualise and violate women and girls. Digital media seem to be fostering rape culture

and misogynist ideologies, because they allow easy circulation for messages and content.

However, as Sills and her colleagues (2016) argued, these online platforms can also be key spaces for feminist education and activism: if rape culture is perpetrated here, it can also be resisted thanks to the feminist counterpublic. The movements discussed in the previous chapter were focused on personal stories, but the feminist counterdiscourse can take the form of educational and call-out activities as well, targeting rape culture and gender stereotypes. These types of educational activities can act in various ways, from documenting and criticizing instances of rape culture, like the Tumblr blog *stfurapeculture* or the Zerlina Maxwell's Twitter hashtag #RapeCultureIsWhen (Sills et al., 2016), to satirising victim blaming, like the Twitter hashtag #SafetyTipsForLadies (Rentschler, 2015) [ $\rightarrow$  Fig 4.2]. Moreover, through digital media feminist activists can orchestrate public responses to certain events, from marches organised through online campaigns, to petitions and meetings (Sills et al., 2016). Social media are particularly effective to encourage feminist actions because they are accessible, well disseminated and user-oriented: they make it easy to reach a wide audience and to publish brief yet effective content, which can be shared or remixed (Sills et al., 2016).

In 2000, Bevacqua already argued that communications networks, both formal and informal, have been used as tools to spread anti-rape culture message for several years, starting from underground feminist magazines, feminist conferences, and campus



Fig. 4.2. Ironic tweets using the hashtags #SafetyTipsForLadies. [tinyurl.com/SF4LH](http://tinyurl.com/SF4LH)

activism. These networks initially started to address issues such as sexual harassment or unwanted sexual contact advances, but they eventually uncovered the perpetration of sexual violence was quite common and that it often occurred in private, not public. Today, this issue is tackled through online communication channels, which are able to connect many-to-many rather than one-to-many, transforming top-down activities to bottom-up initiatives (Castells, 2007). This has broadened the engagement, the organic development of activist actions, allowing feminist messages to reach different niches. Of course, if networks like these helped women to unite and collectively speak up against VAWG, this entailed that also pro-violence actions could be organised in the same way.

Although there are numerous examples of improper uses of social media, they can also be employed to give relevance to less-discussed topics, and to create emphatic narratives aimed to raise awareness and spark social change. In like of this, the project developed within the framework of this thesis intends to leverage the positive impact that networks can create, the call-out culture they can develop or contribute to develop, at campaigns such as *Unbreakable*, at organisations such as *Callipso*, and witness the power of feminist unity, in the hope that, sooner rather than later, the positive actions will outnumber the violent ones.

### 4.1.3 STED AND QUESTO NON È AMORE: NARRATION AS CATHARSIS AND ACTIVISM

Thanks to the movements emerged in the past decades and to the courage of the activists that fought for equality, enabling the creation of safe support systems, today more and more survivors are able to speak up and share their story, in their own way and through their own tools. Some of these women, such as Jessica Ladd, Antonia Lassar or Carlotta Vagnoli, have decided to become

activists. Each of them chose different ways to convey their message and their story: they employed images, tweets, books, or projects aimed to help other women, because every medium can help to reach different niches of people. This year I had the pleasure to participate in a workshop conducted by one of these amazing activists: STED, a woman who decided to share her story and to speak up against VAWG.

Thanks to the collaboration of Parma's *Casa delle Donne*, STED managed to present her unedited book to the public and to lead a short workshop on how to represent feelings and commentary through brief, concise comics [→ Fig 4.3]. However, while she was explaining her work, she also discussed her personal story, her abusive relationship and the secondary victimisation she went through. I found her testimony so powerful and her book so unique, that I asked her if I could interview her, to know more about her relationship with digital media and the way she told her experience through comics and humor. She agreed, and we managed to meet a few weeks later through an online call.

Her book, *Questo non è amore - L'amore non uccide* [This is not love - Love doesn't kill] is now finally published, but the process was not easy. She approached several editors, but many of them refused to publish her work because «gender violence does not sell». That is why she really enjoys being able to express her ideas through her comics, which she shares on her Instagram page: there she can freely express her opinions. However, during the last year she often had to face the platform's censorship and the organised haters who



Fig. 4.3. STED signing autograph during her workshop in Parma

tried to shut her down, because even though social networks are free and easy to access, there are still rules (not always very well applied) and people can find ways to ban certain content if they act together. Therefore, for STED, sharing her experience, especially through digital media, has been a *bittersweet experience*: on one side, she received support from many people, on the other, seeing how many women lived through similar experiences forced her to acknowledge how widespread this issue was, making her feel guilty of not doing enough. This problem has been found in many feminist activists: as Mendes and her colleagues (2018) argued, many women who organised online awareness and educational actions tend to encounter burn-out, economical and psychological problem, due to the highly affective and exploitative work they do.

Her book alone took several years to be created: she started working on it a few years after the end of her abusive relationship, and even though she wrote the story in just one night, it took her 6 months to draw the first half of the boards. She felt the need to “spit out” her story and everything she went through: she needed to talk about her abusive relationship, but also about the people close to her who blamed her for the suffering she was experiencing. At the time, STED and the abuser were in a relationship, but he was jealous, possessive, and he often beat her telling her it was her fault. He tried to kill her a few times, and eventually, thanks to her parents’ support, she managed to finally leave him. Before that, she talked to some of her friends about it, but they did not advise her to go to an antiviolence centre or to someone who could help her: they just said “break it off”, and they still hang out with this man, despite knowing what he did.

STED explained to me that she is glad she was not able to report him to the police (she tried, but the officers explained that it was pointless): she was not ready to go through another process of secondary victimisation. Eventually she started collaborating

with a community centre, where she managed to find a group of people who made her feel safe, and who listened to her experience, supporting her and helping her work through her trauma. As she said, «at the beginning, they helped me find a distraction, but eventually in those people I found the maturity and awareness I needed to feel safe with them». The volunteers and women working at the anti-violence centre described this need as well: survivors (a word that STED does not use to describe herself) need a safe space, an environment where they can speak freely, tell their experience without restrictions and perceive the support of others. Online communities, women's shelters, understanding groups of friends or even the pages of a book, they can all be a sort of safe space: what is crucial is making them available, to give to anyone the courage to speak up.

STED believes that younger generations are more aware and educated, but there is still a lot of work that can be done. In particular, she believes that bystanders should be the main target for an educational project. Many women who suffer violence often do not realise the severity of their situation because they are stuck in a vicious circle, but the support system around them should be able to help them and show them that there is a way out. If friends, like STED's, or family members diminish the situation or, worse, blame the victim for her situation, the consequences can be deeply traumatic. Moreover, when approaching bystanders, it is crucial to create empathy towards the women who suffer or suffered violence, and often the best way to do so is telling their stories. As STED herself said:

«I'd talk about my experience, to convey empathy [...], to show that there is a tomorrow, to show that there are possibilities outside of what they [abused women] are going through».

## 4.2 TWINE: REPRESENTING AND EXPERIENCING PERSONAL STORIES THROUGH INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES

In the previous chapters grassroots initiatives to fight VAWG have been thoroughly discussed: digital media and social platforms allowed women to unite and create a counter discourse to the heteropatriarchal norms. However, this kind of initiatives did not only concern activism, but also other niches of people who managed to aggregate around a medium, or in the case of Twine, around a software. Twine is a platform which allows its users to create interactive stories with branching narratives [→ Fig 4.4], and due to its free and personalisable nature, it provides an interesting case study (Friedhoff, 2013). It enables the creation of text-based games through a simple markup coding language, like other developer-friendly tools such as Game Maker or Game Salad. However, its independent community is what turned Twine into a unique platform: it has become an aggregator for games that explore and navigate personal stories, especially in regards to sensitive issues such as queerness, violence and discrimination (Friedhoff, 2013). The community showed that «what is essential for emotional representation is not player agency: instead, it is the lack of choice that is most strongly resonant» (Salter, 2016, p. 1).

In an interview with *The Guardian* (Ellison, 2013), Anna Anthropy, the writer and blogger that started what is now known as the “Twine revolution” [→ 3.2.1], argued that this new usage of games to tell personal stories was a consequence of the state of the art of mainstream games, which are deeply depersonalised and unable to accurately portray the human condition. There was the need to see games that are personal, relatable, and it is exactly what the Twine community has created. These games are continuously expanding and transforming not because of the artefacts themselves, but because of the voices, stories and issues that inspired them (Salter, 2016). Through interaction, they are able to discuss,



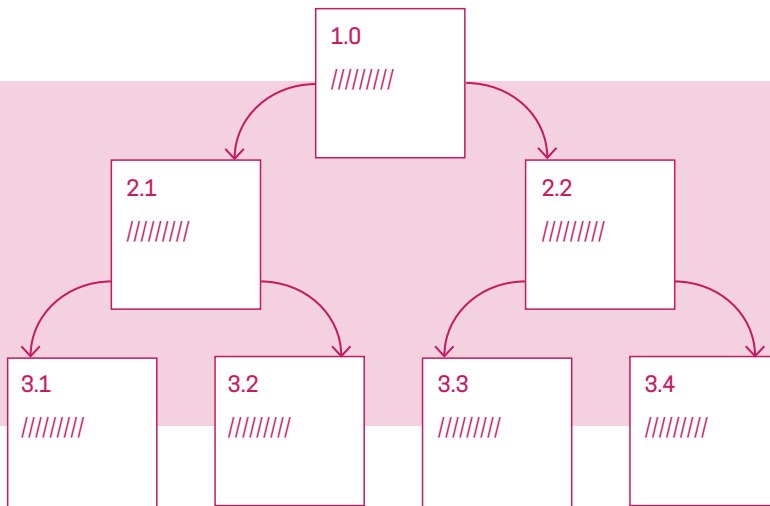


Fig. 4.4. Passage system in Twine that allows the creation of branching narratives

within an interactive space, mental health challenges, traumatic experiences and socio-cultural issues and whoever plays the game can be immersed in the narrative, finding emotional involvement and relatable connections. As Salter (2016, p. 2) argued, «Twine games [...] are not clearly goal-oriented, and instead place empathic development at the centre of play». This characteristic, the simple structure preferred over the realism of the narrative, allows to more effectively portray some concepts, which became the focus of the story instead of entertainment itself (Braganca et al., 2016).

For the purpose of this project, which is focused on interactive dramas capable of conveying empathic responses, on the topic of VAWG, Twine appears to be the perfect starting point to investigate the power of narratives focused on immersion rather than entertainment, as well as the perfect context where to situate an artefact covering such a topic. In the following sections, the Twine's origins are discussed, as well as the main characteristics of the variegated products that it originated. This process paints a complete picture of one of the few platforms that today can join activist work, personal experiences and interactive narratives for social change.

Elison (2013)

«AND ASIDE FROM BEING FREE [TWINE], **IT'S REALLY NOT PROGRAMMING AT ALL** – IF YOU CAN WRITE A STORY, YOU CAN MAKE A TWINE GAME. [...] TWINE IS THIS AMAZING **QUEER AND WOMAN-ORIENTATED GAME-MAKING COMMUNITY** THAT DIDN'T EVEN EXIST A YEAR AGO»

## THE HISTORY OF TWINE 4.2.1

Despite what many think, Twine was not originally designed as a game design tool, rather as a system for authoring, a software aimed at the creation of interactive stories, more similar to *Choose Your Own Adventure* books than to actual digital games (Bernardi, 2013; Harvey, 2014). Instead, Twine was adopted by rather than targeted at digital game-makers, it became what it is today thanks to the **community** that started employing it to tell their stories (Harvey, 2014). Twine was created in 2009 by the interactive fiction writer Chris Klimas: since its origin, it has been a free platform supported by both Mac and Windows, with a command-line user-friendly interface, which enables the users to create and export games not only as .tws files but also as HTML files (Friedhoff, 2013). This last aspect helped to differentiate Twine from other hypertext tools, such as Eastgate Systems' *Storyspace* and Apple's *Hypercard*, which needed special softwares to run the games. However, during the first year after its publication, Twine gathered only a few contributions: its breakthrough moment arrived thanks to Anna Anthropy's book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, which criticised the multi-billion dollar video game industry and invited a new generation of artists to intervene and create more personal and human games (Seven Stories Press, 2012). The author argued:

«I feel like video games need more voices and more people creating them. Video games are... very homogenous, and they are very alienating, and very hard to look at without... vomiting? [...] So I absolutely think that queer people and people of colour, and people who are outside the nerd status quo need to be involved in making games». (Ellison, 2013)

In less than a year, Twine flourished with projects, tutorials and even a manifesto for a new type of game design, becoming a fer-

tile terrain for marginalised and discriminated voices could speak up (Anthropy, 2012). Moreover, the platform itself started owning this new movement that it generated: all reference materials, both official and community-based, praise the importance of the question of why over the how and stories' ability to help people "learn more" about a topic or to change the players' perspective (Friedhoff, 2013). These tutorial and reference materials are a call-to-arms for developers: they encourage the use of personal experience as the subject of their game, favouring narrative construction over coding skills. Twine authors are writers more than developers: the structure of the tool itself, made up of blocks of narrative instead of strings of code, enable authors to focus on the story more than anything else (Friedhoff, 2013).

The functionalities of Twine are quite simple and intuitive: a link in its markup language is basically a node in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book (Anthropy, 2012). Most of the time, the projects created with Twine are branching narratives made of connections between passages, which can be created in a semi-automatic way (Friedhoff, 2013). Moreover, thanks to the implementation of CSS and JavaScript support (Braganca et al., 2016), the interface of the interactive narrative itself can be deeply modified and personalised, to employ diverse immersive techniques, such as the addition of sounds and videos. Moreover, even if in a limited way, it allows the introduction of some game-like mechanics. The development of more possibilities, also thanks to the tutorials and materials created by the online community, enabled Twine to become a free space, based on collaboration, creativity and personal growth. Twine boosted the creation of truthful and touching narratives, aimed to spark empathic responses in its audiences, as well as to provide a safe space for those who experienced traumatic or emotionally difficult events.

## TWINE AND GAMES: DEVELOPING STORIES 4.2.2 WITH EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

In 2007, Morie & Pearce developed the concept of “hegemony of play”, a term that indicates a collection of conventions regarding themes, employed technologies, practices and elements that have become the standard in the game design industry, which highly favour the elite of white cisgender heterosexual male, considered the predominant group in developers and gamers communities. These conventions imply that the majority of narratives and games tend to portray characters and stories that interest the predominant demographic, often setting aside the representation of minorities (Braganca et al., 2016). This is the main reason behind the Twine revolution, a movement aimed at the democratisation and politicisation of games, challenging the hegemonic norms (Harvey, 2014). This allowed the creation of a very wide variety of stories, with styles and narrative very different from one another, but that still present similar characteristics.

In 2016, Salter conducted a study that analysed ten of the most popular Twine IDN to define the common characteristics observed in many of these narratives. The findings were the following:

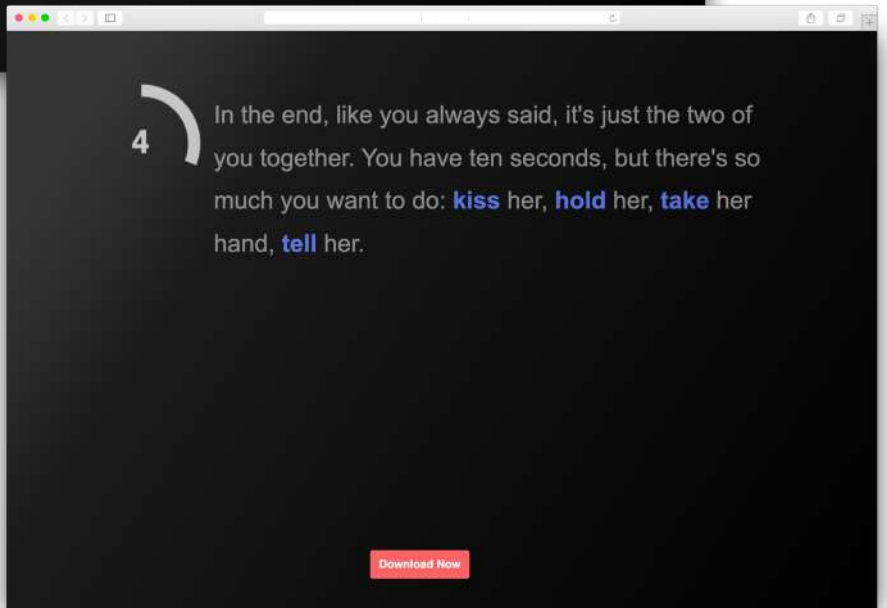
1. The majority of the games are strongly autobiographical: most of the events discussed in the games are experiences lived by the creators, and even though this is something observed also in indie games, Twine games appear to be used especially for the purpose of sharing personal stories;
2. The use of the second person (you) is quite common. It may be a direct influence of *Choose your Own Adventure* books, but in Twine games it is used to invite the player to be part of the narrative, to feel the emotional struggle and to make the decisions as the protagonist;

3. The choices in Twine stories are often limited, but the restriction of agency is used to amplify an emotion or a message;
4. Dark palettes and imagery are very common: this may be due to the fact that Twine's default interface presents a blue background, but it is more likely to be a specific stylistic choice. As the author Porpentine (2012, n.d.) points out, «black on white is daylight, it's mundane. Twine invites us to write our secrets into the night». These stories are personal and often traumatic, therefore white or colourful palettes are not always the fittest choice;
5. Finally, the usage of internal monologue or dreamscapes is very common in Twine games: the narrative voice is used to draw the players in, and to help them feel what the protagonist experiences.

As Salter (2016) states, all these features contribute to creating emotionally charged experiences. A shared trait is that the stories are usually short and simple with a low level of agency, but they all present a huge emotive impact. The restricted choices are often connected to the story itself, such as in stories of abuse, like *Calories* by Emma Fearon, or depression and mental issues, such as *Depression Quest* by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey and Isaac Schankle. The author can make to lead to discussion, empathy or education (Salter, 2016) and this aspect is crucial for the development of an interactive drama concerning as sensible and traumatic as violence against women and sexual assault.

Fig. 4.5. Anna Anthropy. *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, 2013

Fig. 4.6. Porpentine. *Everything You Swallow Will One Day Come Up Like A Stone*, 2014



# 05

## “THIS ACTION WILL HAVE CONSEQUENCES”. EMPATHY AND IMMERSION IN NON-LINEAR DIGITAL NARRATIVES ADDRESSING SENSITIVE ISSUES

*This Chapter collects a series of relevant case studies: they were selected because of their game and plot mechanics able to ensure players' immersion and to favour the role-taking process. In particular, the second part of the Chapter is dedicated to Twine IDNs capable of inspiring empathic reaction in their audience with regards to issues such as sexual assault or mental illness.*



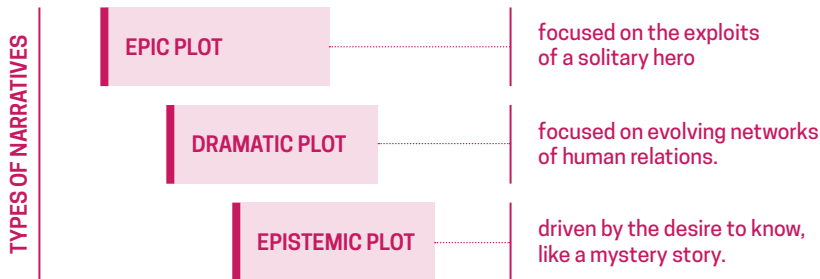
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# “THIS ACTION WILL HAVE CONSEQUENCES”. EMPATHY AND IMMERSION IN NON-LINEAR DIGITAL NARRATIVES ADDRESSING SENSITIVE ISSUES

## 5.1 IMMERSIVE NARRATIVE-BASED GAMES AND FILMS

Persuasive Games and Interactive Digital Narratives are relatively new forms of entertainment. Despite their recent introduction, however, many remarkable examples concerning serious issues have already been developed in the past decades, paving the way for interdisciplinary reflection and for significant knowledge useful for the creation of new artefacts. This Chapter explores case studies relevant for the creation of an interactive drama concerning VAWG. All these examples present interesting characteristics related mostly to the concept of agency and choice (or lack of), emphatic immersion through first or second-person narrative and discussion of sensitive topics such as violence or mental illness (Mateas & Stern, 2006; Salter, 2016).

The case studies presented in this Chapter discuss social and sensitive issues (e.g. mental health, poverty, abuse), using their in-



teractive nature and the game mechanics to favour the process of role-taking and immersion. A reflection on this aspect of interactive media designed for social change is crucial in order to better employ their features to inspire emphatic reactions towards victims of gender-based violence and foster educated discussions on the topic. Moreover, the case studies were selected for their focus on the narrative aspect of the game, more than the game-like elements (e.g. puzzles, levels, etc.), which may disrupt the process of immersion. The examples cited in this Chapter are the most relevant to the topic at hand and the ones who exploited their mechanics as a metaphorical tool or to inspire role-taking within the audience. However, a full list and detailed descriptions of the case studies taken into consideration for this research can be found in the Appendix.

**Fig. 5.1.** The three types of narratives described by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Interactive Narrative, Plot Types, and Interpersonal Relations*, 2008

This section in particular dives into the world of videogames and interactive movies, which in this case are considered as longer narrative-based artefacts which enable the players to immerse themselves in the story and personally make decisions as the protagonist, influencing the outcome of the story without focusing on the action of winning or losing (Perron & Wolf, 2013). Three of the four artefacts described in this instance present a dramatic plot, they are focused on the development of human relation, while one is more goal oriented and presents an epic plot, in which the player must survive in a hostile world (Ryan, 2008). Dramatic plots are

usually more difficult to develop because contrary to goal-oriented games that present defined objectives to the players, the missions in this type of artefact change together with the relationships built in the game, and therefore must be clearly re-defined throughout the gameplay to allow the player to proceed. However, what makes dramatic plots unique is the type of emotional immersion they can provide (Mateas & Stern, 2006): when playing goal-oriented games, players experience emotions such as excitement, triumph, frustration or amusement (Lazzaro, 2004), but this range of feelings is very limited compared to what we perceive in our everyday life (Ryan, 2008). Dramatic plots allow for deeper emotional engagement, both direct towards ourselves or others. As Ryan (2008, p. 12) stated:

«While narrative games based on epic patterns deliberately sacrifice characters to action, playable stories based on interpersonal relations have only been able to create characters sufficiently lifelike to generate emotional reactions by limiting the player's agency».

*Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) and *Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018) in particular enable the player to develop emotional relations with the characters, while *Spent* (McKinney & Urban Ministries of Durham, 2018) and *Grayscale* (Harrell, 2017) are capable of immersing the user in the context of the story, making the players perceive the pressure of decision making and the real struggles and consequences that these decisions are related to. Through different types of interaction, all these artefacts inspire empathy in the players, towards both the characters and the situation described through first-person experiences, leading the users to make moral-charged decisions and reflect on the serious issues tackled by the stories.

«GAMES SHOULD TRANSPORT THE PLAYER INTO A LEVEL OF **PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT, EMOTIONALLY AND VISCERALLY**. GAMES SHOULD MAKE PLAYERS FORGET THAT THEY ARE PARTICIPATING THROUGH A MEDIUM, SO THAT THE INTERFACE BECOMES INVISIBLE OR UNNOTICED BY THE PLAYER. GAMES SHOULD ENTICE THE PLAYER TO **LINGER AND BECOME IMMERSSED IN THE EXPERIENCE**».

### 5.1.1 LIFE IS STRANGE: MORAL ENGAGEMENT AND REVERSIBLE CHOICES



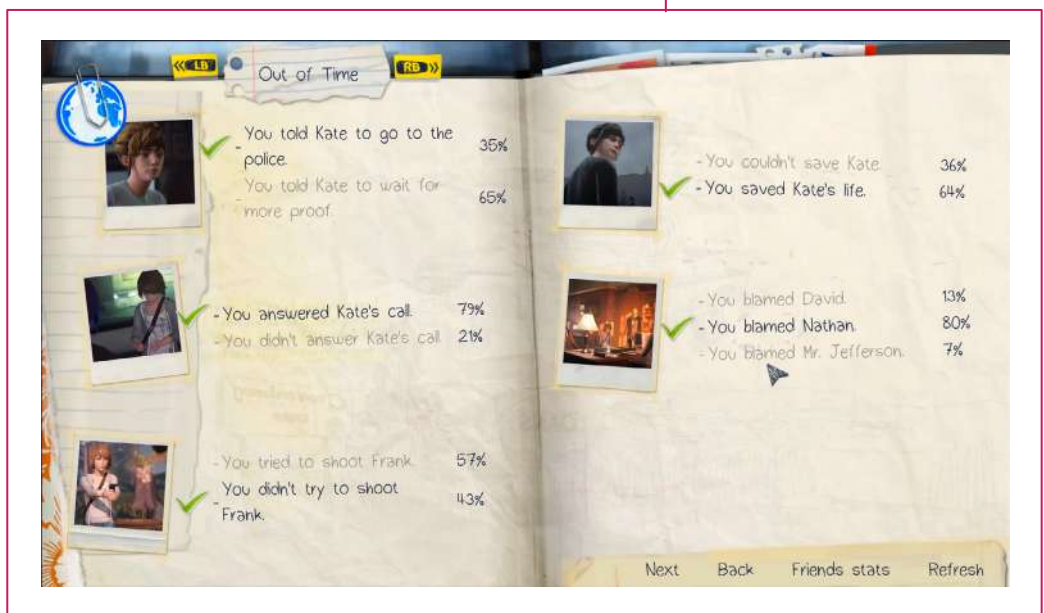
**Name:** *Life is Strange*  
**Year:** 2015  
**Developer:** Dontnod Entertainment  
**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Windows, macOS, Linux, Nintendo Switch, iOS, Android  
**Genre:** Graphic adventure  
**Mode:** Single-player

**Fig. 5.2.** Scene from *Life is Strange*, 2015. [tinyurl.com/LISappendix](http://tinyurl.com/LISappendix)

In 2015, *Square Enix* partnered with *Dontnod Entertainment*, the French studio that in 2013 created *Remember Me*, and published *Life is Strange* (also referenced as *LiS*), an interactive narrative experience, which was released in 5 episodes from January to October 2015 (Grufstedt, 2016). The player embodies Max, an 18-years-old girl enrolled at an art academy in her childhood town, from which she had moved out a few years before. Since the game is narrative based, and therefore features heavy dialogues and less game-play dynamics, the player is able to get to know the NPCs, their backstories and the issue they are going through (Vance, 2019). The game discusses several serious topics, such as assault, cyber bullying, suicide, and drugs abuse (the game is in fact rated PEGI 16), and the player has to make choices in regards to moral matters. However, the entire game revolves around one mechanic that makes the theme of choices and relative consequences even more interesting.

At the beginning of the story, Max discovers her ability to rewind time and consequently change the course of events, modifying her choices and saving people's lives. In particular, her main choices concern one character: Chloe, her childhood friend, who Max saves on several occasions over the course of the story. The themes of morality and choice are very present in LiS, and they are magnified by the rewind option: as Low (2020) argues, the ability to change the course of the event allows for greater moral engagement. Unlike games such as *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), with a "tree-branch narrative" that allows users to replay the story to explore all the possible endings, in LiS players are held more accountable for their own decisions. By being able to rewind time, they have the possibility to reflect on the consequences of their actions even after they have performed them: the game itself, through the interaction of other players such

Fig. 5.3. Players' statistics embedded in the game





This action will have  
consequences...

**Fig. 5.4.** *LiS'* animation to mark the choices that determine the outcome of the game

as Kate, or through Max's inner monologue, hints at the players that they can or should change their previous choice, to influence the outcome of the story (Harper, 2015). Moreover, the discussion of morality is even more facilitated by the statistics about other players' choice [→ Fig. 5.3], made available in the game's menu: users can see the percentages of people who made a specific choice instead of another, creating a link between individual and collective gameplay (Low, 2020) and picturing engaging with the game as a social act (Mänder, 2017). Morals often derive both from innate intuitions, but also from shared social norms, therefore comparing the player's own choice with the community's can be troubling, because they may want to align with the majority's decisions, going back to change their previous actions (Low, 2020). Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that even in choices where players can decide whether to save or defend seemingly villainous characters, such as Frank (an aggressive drug dealer) or David (Chloe's wary stepdad), the community is not unanimous in its choices (Low, 2020). *LiS* is strongly focused on choices and the results of each decision, a concept that the game reminds through the animation of a small butterfly and the ominous phrase "This action will have consequences".

However, not all choices made by the player can be reversed. There are two fixed points in the narration that are inevitable: Kate's suicide attempt in episode 2 and Max's final decision in episode 5. These two events cannot be reversed and this game me-

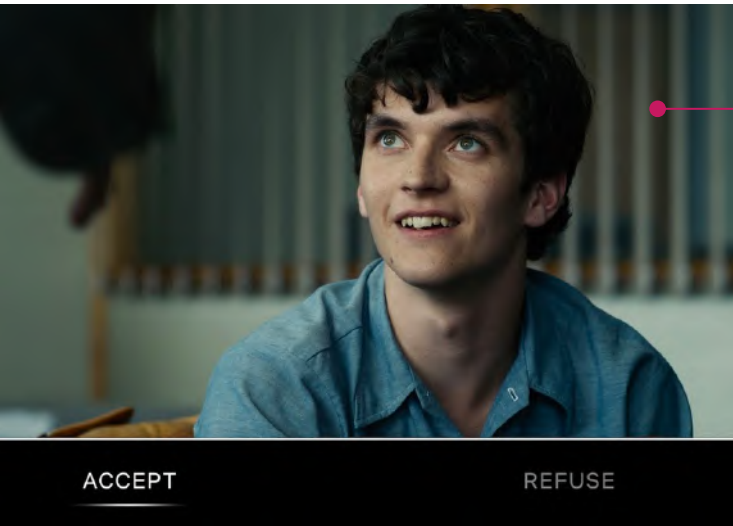


chanic is incredibly useful to bring the player back to reality: after having been able to change their decisions, the players have to rely solely on their choices, exactly like it happens in real life. As Tristram (2020) argued:

«The game has suddenly made you human; a powerful tool for realizing that actions have consequences and once your own power has been taken away, you are vulnerable: you feel just as vulnerable as the person on the ledge and there is no safety net if you fail».

LiS is a coming-of-age story and the protagonists are two adolescents on the verge of becoming adults. A moment, more than any other in human life, that is based on decisions that may influence the outcome of the following years of a person's life (de Miranda, 2018). It is fitting to set a game so focused on freedom of choice and the results of one's decision in a time of such change and uncertainty: the game itself becomes the liminal space (Mariani, 2016b; Turner, 1982), a walking simulator of real life (Zimmermann & Huberts, 2019), in which players can "safely" make decisions, while also considering the fact that each action always has consequences. The butterfly (an homage to Lorenz's famous butterfly effect theory) is a constant reminder of this, and the immersive narrative allows the player to see all the moral implications of each of their decisions. The moral engagement in this game is driven by the complex and emotional narrative the protagonist experiences: the players are dragged in Max and Chloe's story, and their empathy, sensibility and morality is required in order to make decisions and develop a narrative that cannot have a real happy ending, no matter how much the users try.

## 5.1.2 BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH, A CONTROVERSIAL INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE



**Name:** Bandersnatch  
**Series:** Black Mirror  
**Year:** 2018  
**Director** David Slade  
**Screenwriter** Charlie Brooker  
**Platform:** Netflix app, Browser  
**Genre:** Interactive movie  
**Mode:** Single player

**Fig. 5.5.** *Blackmirror: Bandersnatch's UI, 2018*  
[tinyurl.com/BLBSimg](http://tinyurl.com/BLBSimg)

If the previous example was well received by both the public and the critics, *Bandersnatch*, the interactive movie from the Netflix series *Black Mirror*, had more mixed reviews. Even though this contribution is focused on IDN, and narrative-based games, this interactive science-fiction film discusses sensitive topics and raises questions regarding control, representation and immersion, and therefore it can be an interesting case study to define well or bad-received interactive narrative techniques.

The futuristic *Black Mirror* series was created by Charlie Brooke, a renowned British broadcaster, and it was purchased by Netflix in 2015 (Nee, 2021). The creator kept working and writing for the series, and in 2017 he approached Netflix, together with Annabel Jones, with the idea of creating an interactive episode for the series. Interestingly enough, in order to create the complicated plot

of *Bandersnatch*, Brooke used Twine (Heggestad, 2021), which he valued the most efficient tool to create what McSweeney and Joy (2019) consider an artefact of hyper-narrative interactive cinema. However, at the time Netflix did not have the technology to create such an artefact, and it took them two years to create a software, now named *Branch Manager*, that allows to incorporate interactivity into other Netflix programs (P. Rubin, 2018): for instance, in 2020 an interactive episode for the comedy series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* was also released. Netflix chose to ride the rising wave of participatory culture and apply agency and interactivity to television, a medium that has always been considered mostly passive, despite the experimentations created in the past [→ 2.1]. As Nee (2021) has argued, many viewers turned to social media to better explore or to vent about the experience, adding an entire new level of participation to the episode itself. Nonetheless, *Bandersnatch*'s reception was mixed.

Fig. 5.6. Scenes from *Blackmirror: Bandersnatch*, 2018



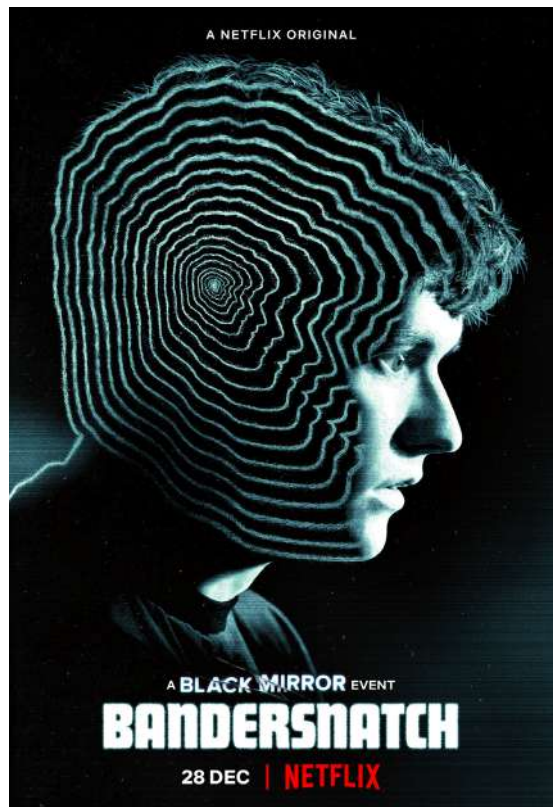
The story revolves around Stefan Butler, a young amateur video game designer who is trying to develop and publish a game in the 1980s. The tone of the narrative is dark and ominous, because the story slowly starts to explore the protagonist's mental illness and psychosis and his past trauma. One of the main themes of the game is control and lack of it. Stefan himself realises that he is losing control of himself, specifically thanks to his psychosis, which makes him realise (or imagine) that his choices are taken by somebody else, the player. However, even though who makes the choices appears to be in control of all the decisions, this is not always true. Firstly, the choices given by the UI are only two, and they are often perceived as limited or biased by the audience (Nee, 2021). Secondly, they sometimes appear pointless, causing only an illusion of choice, and not real agency (Roth & Koenitz, 2019): for instance, early in the narrative the movie asks the players if they want to take the drugs that Stefan's colleague Colin is offering them or not, but even if they refuse, Colin ends up spicing Stefan's drink anyway, making the decision useless. Nonetheless, this choice, even though appears to be pointless, raises questions of moral nature within the audience: by this point we have already witnessed some of Stefan's mental issues, so the action of taking drugs becomes also an ethical question, because if not taking any substances may be better for us, the protagonist, accepting them may lead to the most interesting consequences (McSweeney & Joy, 2019).

Moreover, in regards to Stefan's mental illness, *Bandersnatch* received some criticism in the way it portrayed the protagonist. In fact, Stefan represents several of the tropes often linked to psychosis, which misrepresent the people who actually suffer from this type of mental issues. As Henning (2019) argues, Stefan is Caucasian (as is 95% of the total individuals with schizophrenia, represented in film and on television), with a medium/high economical status and exaggerated violent tendencies, which the majority of people who suffer from schizophrenia do not display. Moreover, he is also

presented as a troubled genius: in fact, the only ending in which his game obtains a 5 stars review is the one in which he gives in to his psychosis and kills his dad. This lack of representation and intersectionality, together with Stefan's poor ability to inspire sympathy, makes it difficult for the audience to fully identify with him. Roth & Koenitz (2019) conducted an experiment to test players' reaction to the *Bandersnatch* experience, and the majority of the participants had trouble immersing into the narrative and perceiving agency and freedom of choice. Nonetheless, they valued the UI as being easy to use, and they perceived the narrative as cohesive, despite it being complicated and with complex meta-narrative elements.

Fig. 5.7. *Blackmirror: Bandersnatch's* promotional poster. [tinyurl.com/BMBSPost](https://tinyurl.com/BMBSPost)

If *Life is Strange* was widely acclaimed and well-received, *Bandersnatch* gathered more mixed impressions. Immersion was hindered by the portrayal of the main characters, with which it was difficult to relate; moreover, the story was complicated, and many players were frustrated by the limitation in agency (McSweeney & Joy, 2019). Nevertheless, the usability was well received and the plot was interesting enough to keep the majority (94%) of the players active and invested (Strause, 2019). Therefore, even though this case study differs from the interactive drama presented in this dissertation, some interesting inspiration can be drawn from *Bandersnatch*, especially in regards of representation, UI and the complexity of the story can influence the level of immersion and identification of the players.



### 5.1.3 SPENT, A SERIOUS ONLINE VIDEO GAME



**Name:** Spent  
**Year:** 2011  
**Developer:** McKinney  
**Platform:** Browser, Windows, OS X, Linux  
**Genre:** Online game  
**Mode:** Single-player

**Fig. 5.8.** *Spent's* starting choice

In 2011, the Urban Ministries of Durham, an association that provides food and shelter to people in poverty in North Carolina, collaborated with the ad agency McKinney to create an online game discussing the issues of poverty and homelessness (Spent, 2018). This persuasive game, called *Spent*, was created to raise donations and it was ideated by Jenny Nicholson, who based the story on the limitations she experienced during her own life as a single mother (Thomas, 2015). The player plays the role of a single parent who just lost their home and who has only \$1000 left: the goal of the gameplay is to manage the remaining funds for a month, but bills, unplanned expenses, and lack of job opportunities make it difficult to balance the budget (Thomas, 2015). Each decision has an effect on the player's budget, but also on their wellbeing, because often the cheapest options have a negative impact on the character and their family's health (Ruggiero, 2014). To explain the consequences of the players' choices, the UI uses statistics to stimulate awareness in regards to the different types of issues that people struggling with money have to face, whether they are financial, psychological or medical.

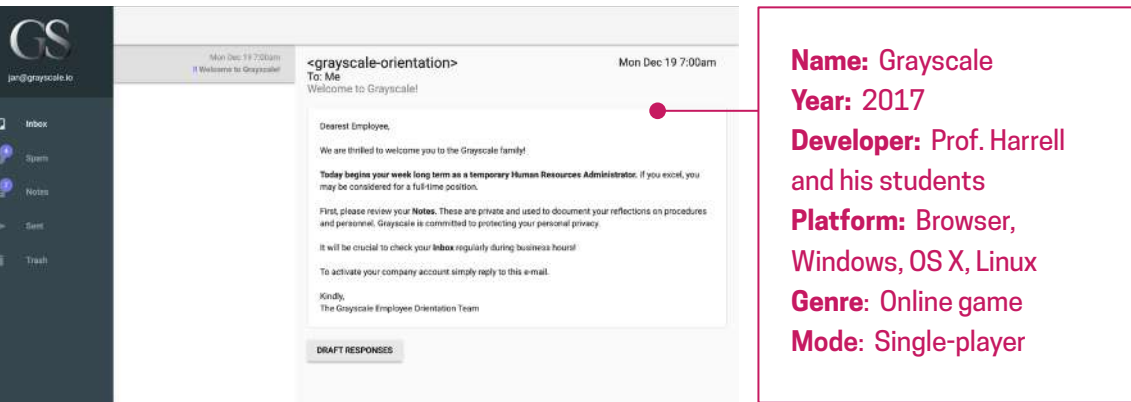
As Ruggiero (2013) argues, *Spent* is able to provide both specific knowledge on the issue and persuasive techniques which paint a realistic simulation of poverty, in which each payment, each unforeseen event, is a struggle. The use of reliable information and statistics, from sources such as the NPR, the Federal Reserve, and the U.S. Poverty Bureau, gives credibility to the UI and enables a higher level of persuasiveness to the gameplay. On the other hand, the immersion within the game is provided by the second-person narrative style, that does not include any specific address to gender, ethnicity or nationality, in order to allow the player to live the situation personally (Ruggiero, 2013). Moreover, the game sole success indicator is pay, but the game itself requires making choices that require moral engagement more than anything else: for instance, in one of the versions of the game the player is asked to choose whether to euthanize the sick dog, let it suffer, or pay to have it treated, but using the funds to do that would mean less money for the food for the child (Ruggiero, 2013).

*Spent* is a perfect example of serious games that, despite not being narrative-based and more goal-oriented, is able to stimulate immersion and deep reflections. As Ruggiero (2013, p. 83) says,

«without prejudice or impending peril, the game demonstrates to the player that their choices, given their limited means, have an impact (usually negative) on their life».

*Spent* was to be able to inspire emphatic reactions to the lifestyle they had to live within the “safe” space of the game, also because there is no real possibility of success: it managed to raise money from thousands of new donors, proving that persuasive mechanics, combined with game design elements can spark motivation to actively engage in social issues (Ruggiero, 2014).

### 5.1.4 CHIMERIA: GRAYSCALE, AN INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE GAME AGAINST SEXISM IN THE WORKPLACE



**Name:** Grayscale  
**Year:** 2017  
**Developer:** Prof. Harrell and his students  
**Platform:** Browser, Windows, OS X, Linux  
**Genre:** Online game  
**Mode:** Single-player

**Fig. 5.9.** Starting email in *Chimeria: Grayscale, 2017*

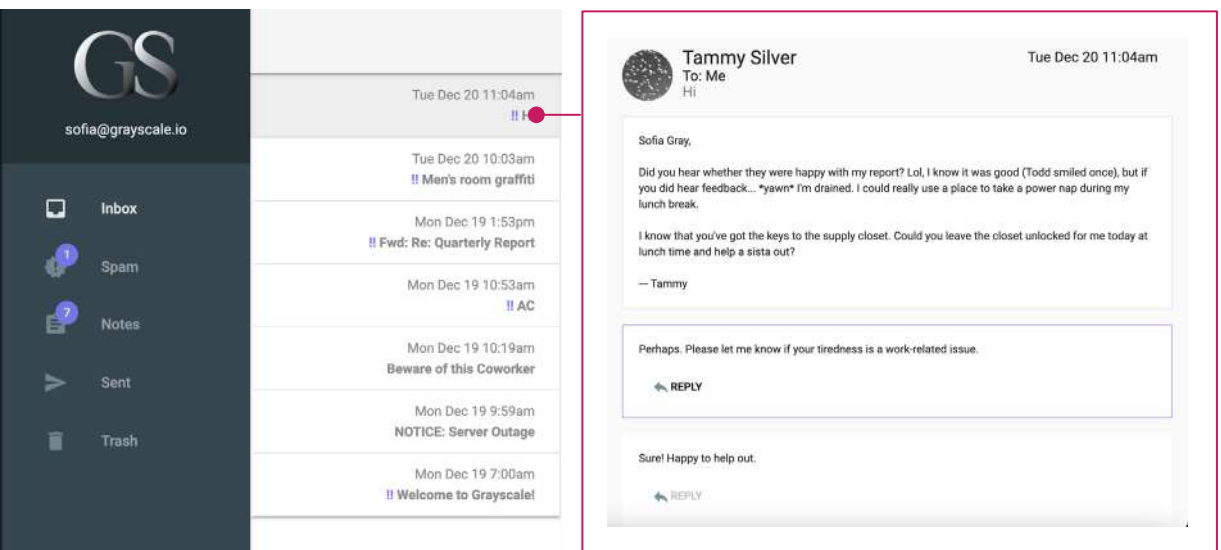
The last example is surely the less renowned among the four games described in this section, and its relevance to this contribution is more related to the consequences it has on the players more than the immersive mechanics of the experience itself. In 2017 MIT professor Fox Harrell, together with a few of his collaborators and students, used the platform *Chimeria* to create *Grayscale*, an episodary interactive narrative that describes sexist behaviours in the workplace (Treanor, 2017). *Chimeria* is a social identity modelling engine, which was also implemented with interactive narrative authoring features (Treanor, 2017): this platform supports simulations of social models, using a data-driven approach, allowing the creation of various types of outcomes, from a 2D visual novel style game to a 3D virtual environment (Harrell et al., 2018). Harrell and his team created *Grayscale* in order to show the possibilities offered by this tool, but also to test interactive narratives' ability to prompt self reflections in its players (Ortiz & Harrell, 2018). In particular, they reference Mezirow's concept of critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1990), which is characterised by an individual's reexamination and



change of their own presuppositions, after the acquisition of new information and perspectives (Ortiz & Harrell, 2018). According to the two professors, through role-playing, the players will be able to consider different points of view in regards to certain sensible issues, transforming their perspective and carrying out a personal critical self-reflection about their beliefs and behaviours.

Harrell created a unique interactive narrative, whose plot is not unfolded through texts and dialogue, but in a very seamless and customisable email box interface. This single-player game was designed to prompt reflections in regards to sexism in the workplace, conveyed through microaggressions (Harrell et al., 2018). In *Chimeria: Grayscale*, players take the role of an on-trial HR Manager, who must deal with tensions among the different employees of the office. The seamless interface enables a deeper player immersion (Treanor, 2017), but also facilitates the retrieving of information useful to proceed in the game (Short, 2018). When an important

Fig. 5.10. When answering an email in *Grayscale*, the player is given a few options on how to respond



email arrives, the player is asked to draft a response [→ Fig 5.10]: based on the reactions to employees' complaints and requests, the player character's social category membership changes (Treanor, 2017), swinging from activism and conformity (Harrell et al., 2018).

Despite having received some criticism (Short, 2018) in regards to the lack of in-depth character descriptions («there wasn't really enough time for them to develop extensively») and the weak premises («a real person in this situation would be aware of applicable laws and corporate policies»), the game proved to be able to inspire reflections in its players (Ortiz & Harrell, 2018). Ortiz and Harrell tested the game on 31 players and, even though the game is short and with a fairly simple structure, the majority of the users perceived a sense of agency and behavioural involvement (female users felt it more than their male counterparts). All participants reported having engaged in a various degrees of critical self-reflection, feeling that their actions and the character's were highly interdependent. With its unique narrative structure and realistic depiction of a specific social system, *Chimeria: Grayscale* was able to foster critical awareness and conceptual transformations in its players in regards to a specific social and cultural issue (Ortiz & Harrell, 2018). Therefore, when designing an artefact aimed to prompt perspective-taking and emphatic responses to certain situations, it is crucial to convey the underlying structure that allows social issues like sexism, harrasments and violence against women to arise.

## 5.2 PERSONAL STORIES TOLD THROUGH TWINE INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

The case studies described in the previous section employed different media and levels of agency to present their stories to the players, but nonetheless they succeeded, to various degrees, to favour immersion and empathy, and to prompt self-reflection and

community discussions. However, except for *Spent*, all these artefacts were works of fiction and they were created with specific aims and allocated budgets. In contrast, the majority of Twine games and interactive stories are specifically created by developers who want to share their story and personal experiences, to help the players reflect on sensible issues such as mental illness, discrimination and abuse (Friedhoff, 2013). Twine games are usually short, and they tend to present trigger warnings in regards to the content of the game, because they may be troubling for those people who experienced similar trauma. As the Twine creator Porpentine (2012) observed, the very nature of this platform encourages the developers to be personal, to feel free in the creation of their games because they will not be limited by code. She writes: «It's hard to visualise our problems and emotions when they get interrupted by code, but we know the feel of words» (Porpentine, 2012, n.d.)

In Twine games, game mechanics and emotions are very interdependent, because limitation of agency is often used to convey a certain feeling of helplessness and despair, as in the case of the following case studies. As Sweetser and Wyeth (2005) explain, control is one of the main elements that characterise the gameflow, and therefore is connected to other features that influence the level of enjoyment of the game, in particular to immersion and emotional involvement. Twine enabled independent developers to push the boundaries of personal representation and limitation of agency, used as a significant tool to inspire empathy and emotional resonance (Salter, 2016). The following case studies employed intentional limitation of agency throughout a short game as a way to introduce specific emotional discourses and traumatic situations. These types of Twine games managed to be tools to raise awareness in their players and start discussion in regards to specific sensible topics, but they also were useful for the developers themselves, who found a way to express their experiences while also pursuing inclusivity and education within their community.

## 5.2.1 DEPRESSION QUEST: LACK OF AGENCY USED TO DESCRIBE MENTAL ILLNESS

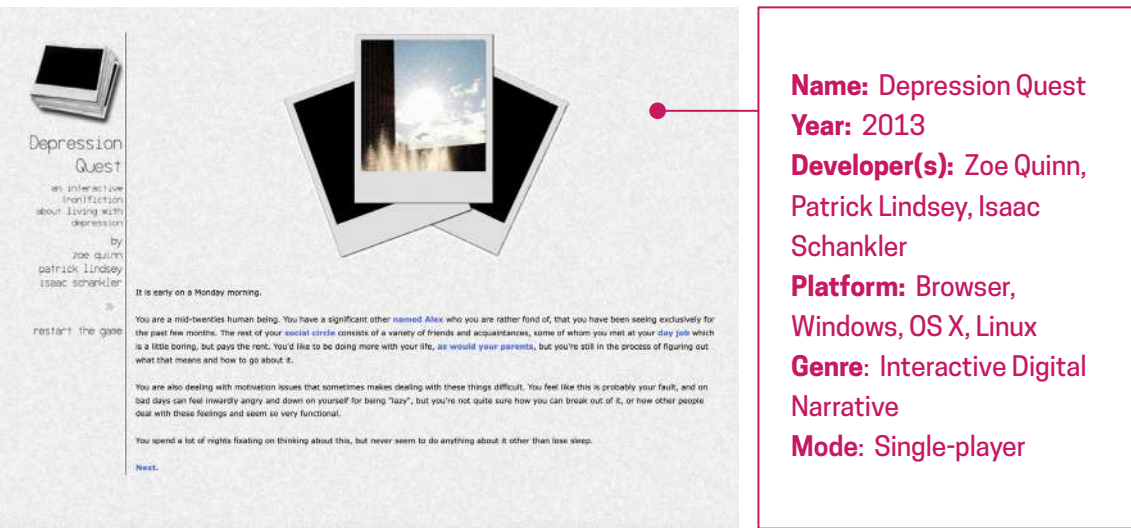


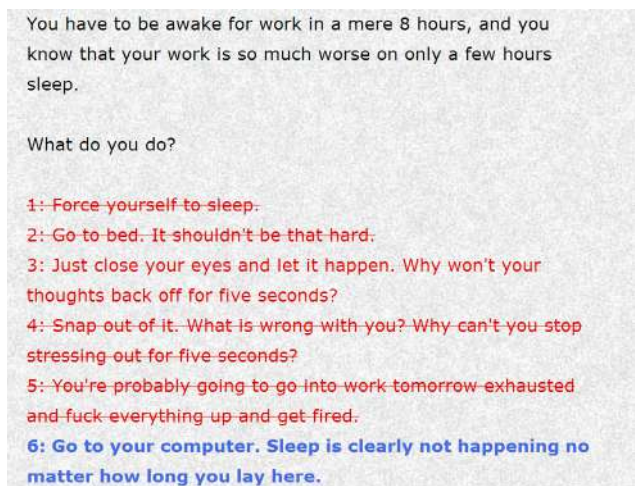
Fig. 5.11. First passage in *Depression Quest*, 2013

Capitalising the technological advances which lowered the barriers of entry to video game development, in the past decade more and more individual developers have had the possibility to create and distribute their own games, without having to rely on big corporations (Hoffman, 2019). Tools like Twine enabled accessibility and freedom to independent creators, which were able to create personal and unique artefacts. One of the most successful and renowned Twine games is Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*: it was the first interactive narrative from this platform to be published on *Steam* (Hoffman, 2019), and it was played by over one million users (Parkin, 2014). The game was created by Zoe Quinn, with the support of the writer Patrick Lindsey, and the musician Isaac Schankler: it discusses the existence of a genderless person in their twenties, who is struggling with depression, as the author Zoe Quinn had to do when she was young. The story is recounted through short texts,

with very little images and music, and the player is asked to make decisions as the main characters, but since the beginning, the most logical and healthy ways to face mundane and simple situations such as hanging out with their significant other or going to a party are not available (Vazquez, 2014). The player cannot detach from the limitations of the protagonist, and the more they proceed in the game, the more options they see crossed out (Salter, 2016) [→ Fig 5.12]: as it happens for people suffering from this “invisible” mental issue, the protagonist lives the “downward spiral” of depression, from which they struggle to resurface (Hoffman, 2019).

According to Quinn, the objective of *Depression Quest* (Quinn et al., 2013) is twofold: on the one hand, it aims to help people who do not suffer from this illness to understand how depression is really like; on the other hand, the game also seeks to show to those who are actually suffering because of this mental issue that they are not alone, that there is a community that can help them (Hoffman, 2019). For these reasons, Quinn has devised a few design solutions to favour immersion and to accurately portray the experience of depression, without being too metaphorical (Parkin, 2014). For instance, the protagonist is specifically designed to be genderless and nameless, with only a few information in regards to their life (the player only knows that they have a job they hate) or their relationship (they have only a significant other called Alex) (Vazquez, 2014). Moreover, the game purposely does not have a “tidy ending”, because, as the developers argued, there is no real cure for depression. Even though the

Fig. 5.12. Several choices in the game are crossed out, to portray the struggles of people suffering from depression.



"Its emotional character is probably mostly indescribable except as a sort of double bind in which any/all of the alternatives we associate with human agency - sitting or standing, doing or resting, speaking or keeping silent, living or dying - are not just unpleasant but literally horrible."  
- David Foster Wallace

**Fig. 5.13.** Quote used by the author to introduce the game

game received some criticism in regards to the mostly positive ending, in which the protagonist gets better because they start going to therapy and taking medications: to some people this ending appeared to be too simplistic. However, as Quinn stated, the game does not aim to describe all degrees and types of depression, but rather «to be a basic introduction to the concept and to get the conversation started» (Parkin, 2014, n.d.). Through the progressive limitation of agency, the game tries to mimic the exhaustion and the lack of the strength to make healthy decisions, one of the strongest signs of a depression disorder (Vazquez, 2014). It is a realistic yet sensitive representation of a mental issue through the modification of the players' agency.

Despite being even connected to the Gamergate scandal, which sparked around the accusation moved by Quinn's former partner, *Depression Quest* received many positive reviews by both critics and the public: the developer herself stated that she had been often very moved by the emails that fans of the game sent her (Parkin, 2014). Moreover, in 2019 Kelly Hoffmann carried out a study to analyse the behavioural effects of the game on its players and better understand the audience's reception to the game. She found that *Depression Quest* managed to stimulate self-reflection in the majority of players, which led to more emphatic sentiments towards those

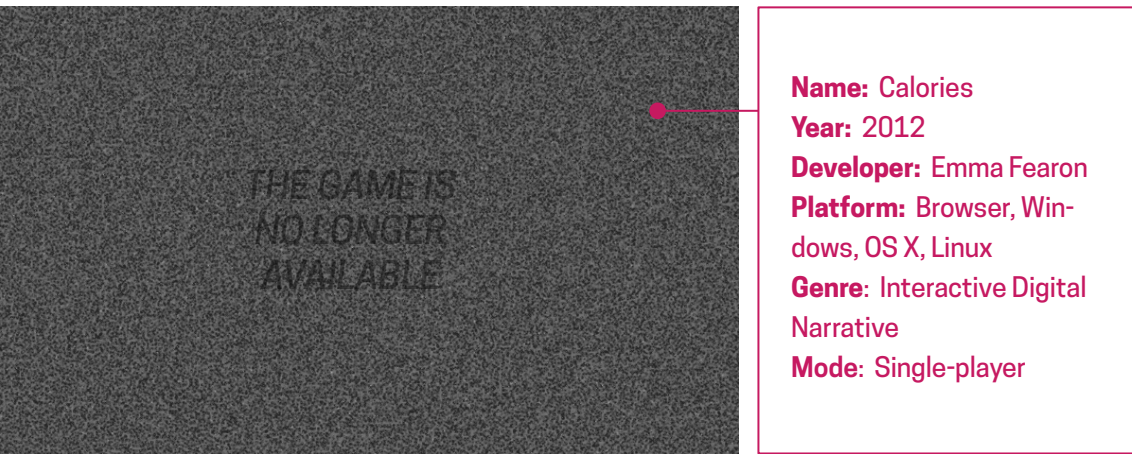
who are suffering from this disease and to a self-evaluation of their own behaviours compared to the character's. Moreover, the game also managed to prompt discussion in regards to depressive disorders, conversations regarding personal experiences and community building around fellow players who are suffering from this issue.

Depression quest is a good example of the possible positive behavioural and social changes that an interactive narrative can inspire in its audience. In particular, this game managed to use agency and the limitation of the player's choices to convey the sentiments that many people who struggle with depression experience. As Salter (2016, p. 7) stated:

«The use of restricted choices serves a pivotal role in The creation of the player's connection with the character: this metaphor of limitations extends through games with circumstances ranging from abuse to clinical depression to suicide, and in each case the player must wrestle with the knowledge of options outside the reach of body or mind».

The players are forced to perceive what depression really causes to the decision making process of a person, and throughout a process of immersion, they are able to develop more understanding in regards to the personal experiences of those people who do actually have to coexist with this disorder.

## 5.2.2 **CALORIES AND THE DAY THE LAUGHTER STOPPED: STORIES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**



**Fig. 5.14.** After the death of the author, the game was removed, and it is no longer available.

Among the thousands of Twine games created in the last decade, some of them concern sexual abuse and violence against women and girls. Some of these stories are works of fiction, while others are inspired by trauma lived by the developers themselves or one of their close friends. One remarkable example among those, identified also by Anna Anthropy as a compelling Twine game (Bernardi, 2013), is *Calories*, created in 2012 by recently deceased Emma Fearon. What makes this game particularly interesting is again linked to the limitation of agency, despite the already short duration of the game.

This brief interactive story enables the player to live a common day in the life of a teenager who suffers from an eating disorder: they have to perform simple choices, related to easy tasks such as going to school or deciding whether to eat or not during lunch,



## *The Day the Laughter Stopped*

It was a rainy day in late September when he first noticed me. My friends and I were coming from gym class and hurried across the school yard to get out of the cold. I saw him standing in front of the southern entrance, where the 10th graders were allowed to smoke.

I noticed that he was looking at me all the way from the gym hall to the building. My heart skipped a beat. He was tall, handsome, and all of my friends had a crush on him. I always thought he was way too cool for me. He was almost a grown man, and I was only 14.

Before I entered the school building, I stopped for a moment and looked back at him. There he stood, a cigarette in his hand, his eyes still fixed on me.

**Name:** The Day the Laughter Stopped  
**Year:** 2013  
**Developer:** Hannes Flor  
**Platform:** Browser, Windows, OS X, Linux  
**Genre:** Interactive Digital Narrative  
**Mode:** Single-player

but regardless of the choices made throughout the day, the ending is always the same: “Your father gets into bed with you and rapes you.” The simplicity of the phrase is what makes it impactful and full of emotional power, creating an experience that is difficult to forget (Friedhoff, 2013). Moreover, thanks to the alienation effect caused by the ending, which surprises the players since the title and most of the choices are related to food and the character’s eating disorder (Morrison, 2013), the emotional investment in the ending is even stronger. Due to the short nature of the game, the player is compelled to try again, to make different decisions, but the inevitability of the ending is what makes this game so powerful. Many victims of sexual abuse cannot fight their aggressors, or prefer not to do it because they are scared or petrified (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1976): this game shows that violence never occurs because of the victims’ choices, but it is always a decision of the

**Fig. 5.15.** After the death of the author, the game was removed, and it is no longer available.

perpetrator [→ 2.5.2.1]. As Friedhoff (2013) argues, a game like *Calories* (Fearon, 2012) due to the presence of incest, would be banned from publication and distribution, but thanks to the accessibility of Twine, its low-/no-cost, decentralized, and deregulated publishing system, and the community that has risen around this software, this game found some resonance and praise.

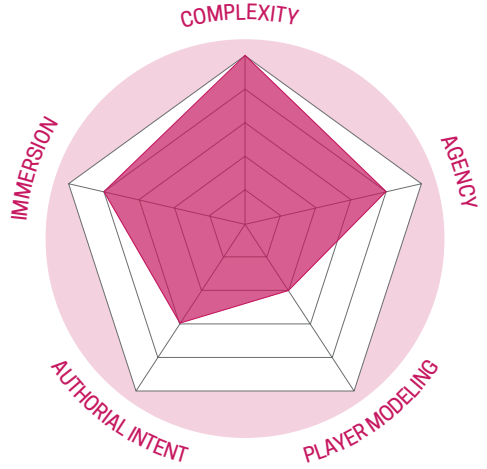
Another example as interesting as *Calories* was instead created on occasion of the 28th Ludum Dare Jam (2013), an international game development competition, during which participants are asked to create a game in 48-hours, based on the theme “You only get one” (Corriea, 2013). The game, called *The Day the Laughter Stopped* (Flor, 2013a) [→ Fig 5.15], was created by Crabman, nickname for Hannes Flor, and it is inspired by the real experience of one of the developer’s friends, who agreed to let her tell her story through an interactive narrative. The game follows the story of a 14-year-old girl who meets an older boy in school, with whom she becomes friends and who one evening invites her to his lake house, and later to a secluded trail, where he assaults her. As in *Calories*, regardless of the player’s choices, the rape always happens, but there is an additional mechanic that is interesting to acknowledge. Throughout the sexual assault, the player is given the options to fight the boy or to stay still, but the first option, despite it being interactive, does not work. The player is forced to remain still, scared, petrified as the 14-years old who is being assaulted. Again, through the deliberate delimitation of agency, the creator was able to provoke strong emotions in the players, who may be frustrated but also emotionally invested in the story. Of course, the entire game appears to only enable a simulation of agency, because the player’s choices do not prevent events from happening or modify the character’s personality, but as the creator explains, it was exactly the point of the game.

Now, you might argue that, hadn't you gone to the party, it might not have happened, but that's exactly the kind of thinking I'm trying to get you to reconsider. Hadn't you gone there, he would've found another way to get closer to you. It's what he does repeatedly over the course of the game. Most of the decisions are out of your hand because he makes them for you. He intercepts you when you try to go home, he takes you on a walk around the lake whether you want to or not. He's a predator, and you are his prey. (Flor, 2013b)

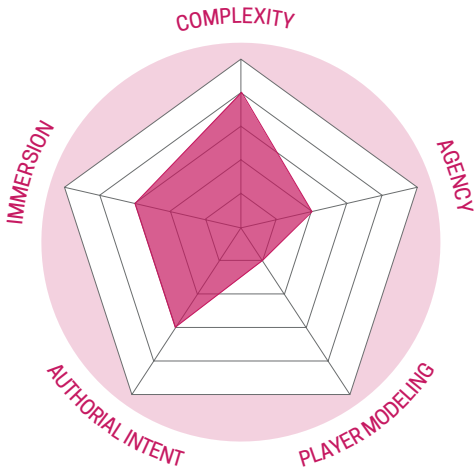
The bottom line that both *Calories* (2013) and *The Day the Laughter* (2014) reach is the same: victims of rape are never at fault, because avoiding predatory behaviours is sometimes impossible, regardless of the clothes they were wearing, the attitudes they maintained and the decision they made. However, there is an additional remark to make in regards to the narrative presented in these two games: both of them stop after the occurrence of rape, in *The Day the Laughter* the player is even denied the possibility to talk to their parents about it, and as Eva argued during her interview [→ 3.5.2.2], this may send the wrong message. It is important for victims and for the people close to them that there is hope after the violence, that there is freedom outside an abusive relationship, that there are people and organisations who can help. These interactive narratives, through limitation of agency and will construct-ed plots, managed to create impactful short experiences, crucial to start conversations about sexual assault and to spark empathy and understanding for survivors' behaviours and testimonies. Nonetheless, interactive narratives can be brought to the next level, and be used to describe not only the traumatic experience, but also the possibility of a new, safer future.

# CASE STUDIES

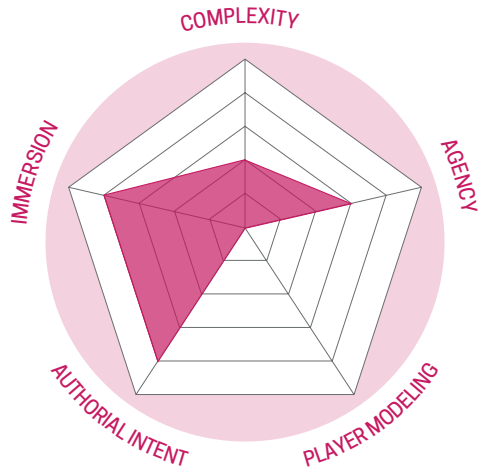
Overview of the relevant games and IDN mentioned in the chapter, evaluated by the main characteristics that influence their effect on their audience.



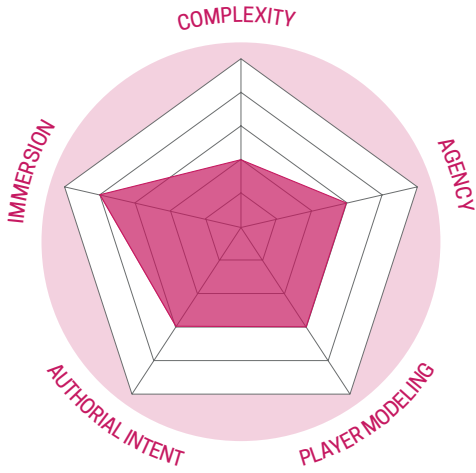
**LIFE IS STRANGE**



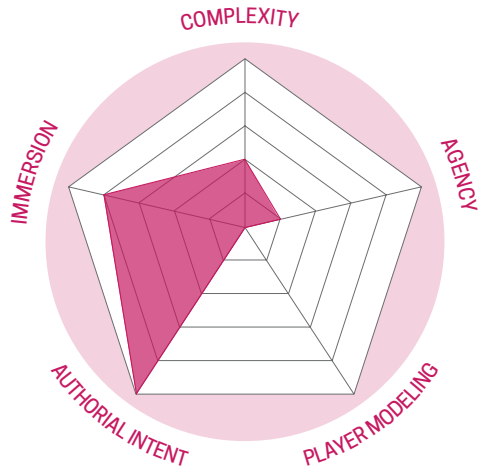
**BANDERSNATCH**



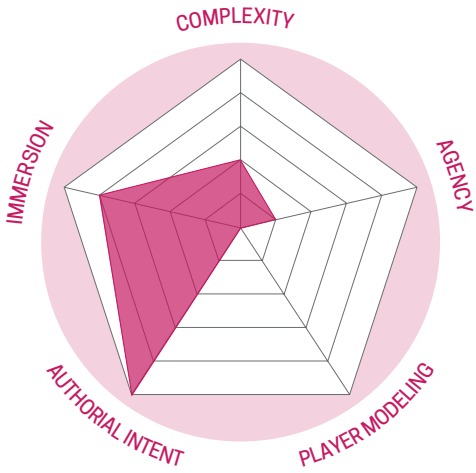
**SPENT**



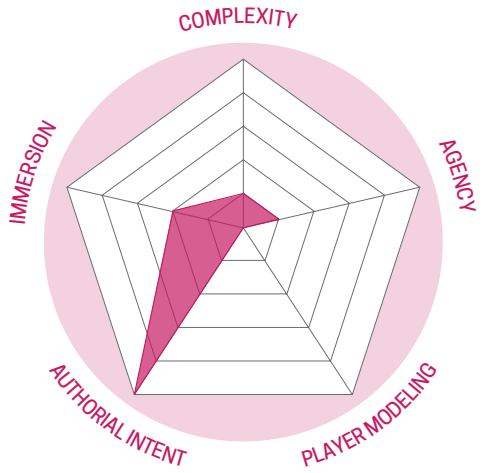
**GRAYSCALE**



**DEPRESSION QUEST**



**THE DAY THE LAUGHTER STOPPED**



**CALORIES**

# 06

## COME VETRO TEMPERATO: CREATING AN INTERACTIVE DRAMA DISCUSSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*The following Chapter is dedicated to the projectual phase of the thesis: it aims to describe the design process that led to the creation of the interactive drama, derived from the field and desk research. After a thorough overview of the project, the last part of the Chapter will take into account the results of the testing and compare the gathered results, in relation to the research questions.*

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# **COME VETRO TEMPERATO: CREATING AN INTERACTIVE DRAMA DISCUSSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

## **6.1 DESIGN METHODOLOGY**

The results derived from the desk and field research, together with the case studies analysis, fueled the design of the interactive drama. The project was developed over the course of November and December 2021, and January 2022, while its testing [[→ 5.4.2](#)] was performed in February and March 2022. Due to the digital nature of the artefact and the Covid-19 pandemic, the testing was conducted in part remotely.

### **6.1.1 PROTOTYPE: AN INTERACTIVE DRAMA**

*Come vetro temperato*, the digital interactive drama that was developed to test the assumptions and hypotheses of the study, further described in Chapter 6, is an engaging artefact that aims to help the audience reflect on the issue of gender violence by taking the perspective of a woman who is suffering because of it. The story



described in the interactive drama is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by the testimonies gathered during the field research: interviews and testimonies were crucial to provide a more realistic representation of everyday sexism and the impact of gender violence on a woman's mental and physical wellbeing.

The interactive drama is divided in two acts: the first part is a foldback story, while the second has a branching narrative structure, leading to four different endings of increasing seriousness. A foldback story is intended as a narrative in which «the plot branches a number of times but eventually folds back to a single, inevitable event before branching again and folding back again to another inevitable event» (Adams & Rollings, 2006, p. 174). On the other hand, a branching narrative offers several plot lines shaped by specific player's choices, which allow the player to experience the story differently each time he plays the game (Adams & Rollings, 2006). As it will be discussed in par. 6.3.4, this structure will help the audience to slowly approach the issues, experiencing "less traumatic" events during the first act (e.g. cat-calling, sexism, victim blaming, etc), to later dive into the cruel reality of an abusive relationship (e.g domestic abuse, physical violence, sexual violence, etc).

As per what discussed in Chapter 4 [→ 4.2], even though more modern methods could be employed to create the interactive drama, the prototype has been created with Twine, for two main reasons:

1. It is a user-friendly open-source platform, with a rich community that thrives on personal stories and discussions about serious topics. Twine has become a hub for projects like this, defining itself as a tool used to create projects aimed at emotional engagement and detachment from the mainstream;

2. It allows users without coding skills to create accessible IDNs that can be easily linked to an online website.

Creating a functioning prototype was crucial to perform the testing with a technical audience, with the volunteers of Parma's anti-violence centre and the target audience. Moreover, it also enabled me to link the interactive drama to a landing page which not only provides information about the project, but it is focused on the work of Italian anti-violence centres and their activities. A more detailed description of the prototype can be found in parr. 6.4 and 6.5.

## 6.1.2 PROTOTYPE TESTING

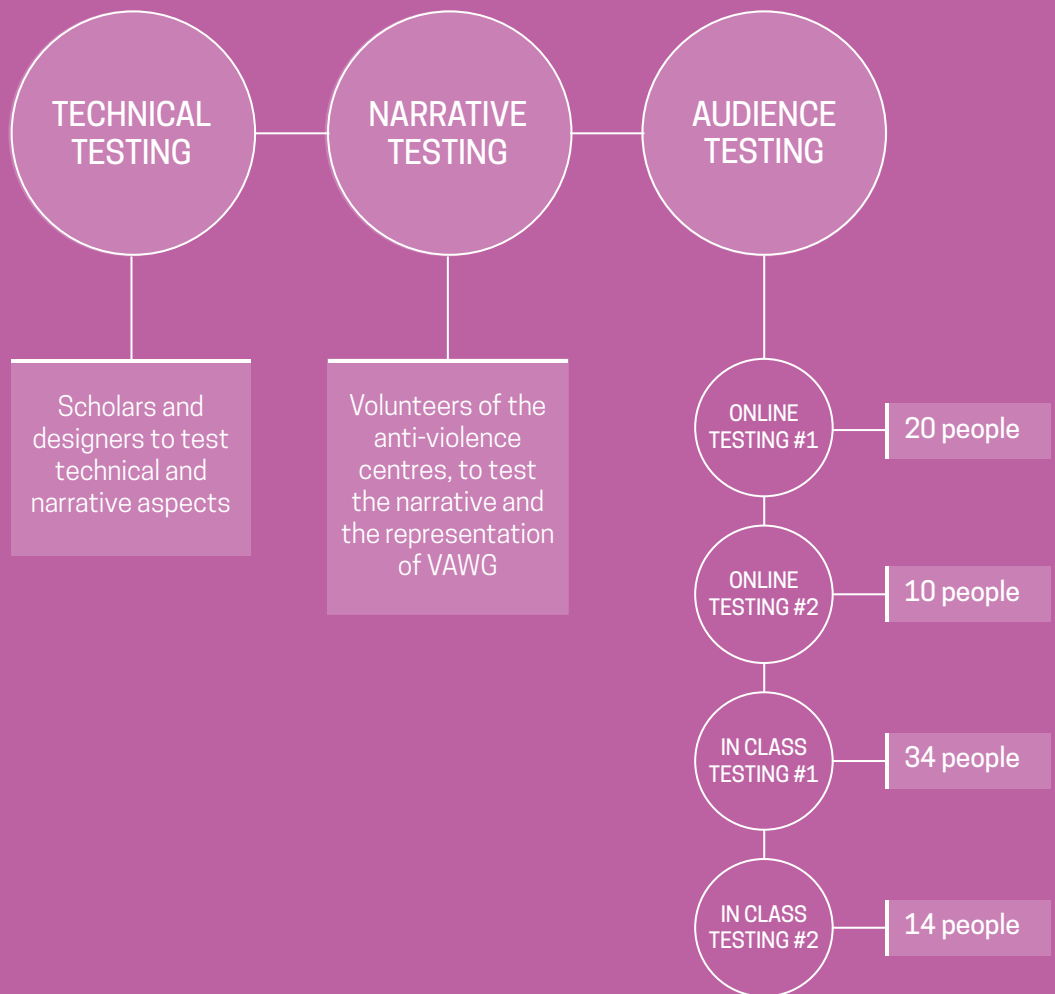
Fig. 6.1. Overview of the testing, performed three different phases

*Come vetro temperato's* Twine prototype was used to conduct the testing phase on three different levels: a technical testing, performed by expert designers and scholars in the fields of game studies, interactive narratives, and communication design, a narrative testing, carried out by Parma's anti-violence centres volunteers, and finally an audience testing, with people belonging to the target audience, namely bystanders living in Italy between the age of 18 and 35. Due to the current sanitary emergency in Italy, the testing phase was conducted both online and in presence. The three testing phases presented two main purposes:

1. Consider both the technical features and the narrative of the narrative, to identify possible modifications to the interactive drama;
2. Verify the efficacy of the artefact in relation to the research question defined in Chapter 1 [→ 1.1].

# TESTING OVERVIEW

The testing was performed both in-class and online, with participants belonging to the target audience. They were recruited among PoliMi students and survey's participants.



### 6.1.2.1 TECHNICAL TESTING

The first phase of testing involved expert scholars and designers and served to identify, and later correct, issues with the interactive drama mechanics and UX. The testing concerned the interactive drama, the landing page and the experience evaluation surveys. The process allowed the identification of bugs, such as audio issues or possible UX improvements to favour audience immersion. The involvement of experienced communication and game designers to analyse the interactive drama provided specific and complementary feedback, useful to improve different aspects of the artefact

### 6.1.2.2 NARRATIVE TESTING

Since the narrative tackles sensitive issues, while the final landing page provides specific information with regards to anti-violence centres, I contacted Eva, the Communication manager of Parma's chapter, to perform a testing of the prototype, to ensure that the plot depicted gender violence in a truthful, yet respectful way. During our call, I briefly explained the nature of the project, the objectives and the target audience. She tried the narrative and I later described the four endings. We also went through the information provided in the landing page, double-checking its correctness. During our meeting, Eva has provided insightful suggestions for what concerns the effectiveness of the narration, which have been implemented before performing the testing with the audience.

### 6.1.2.3 AUDIENCE TESTING

Finally, after having completed the first two rounds of testing, the prototype was used to perform the experimentation with the target audience. Before and after the experience, users were asked to fill

out a questionnaire (a Google form): these two surveys were crucial to compare how the player's attitudes, opinions and knowledge varied before and after having completed the interactive drama. In this instance, these two questionnaires were used as practical tools to investigate if, how and to what extent this interactive drama impacted on its players, and to achieve this, it was crucial for the two surveys to be performed in two different moments, to prevent the corruption of the data (Mariani, 2016b). As she explains it, the preferable time span between the two questionnaires should extend from a couple of days to two weeks (which is the optimal solution). Therefore, when organising the audience testing, the participants were contacted two weeks in advance, to ensure that the pre-experience surveys were completed in a long enough time span.

The two questionnaires investigated the audience's perceptions of various themes: it concerns their understanding of gender-based violence, their knowledge with regards to Italian anti-violence centres and their level of empathy towards victims and survivors. As for the first questionnaire, it was divided in three brief sections:

1. The first part aimed to inquire demographic information about the participants, asking for their name (or alias), gender, age, level of education and city of residence;
2. The second section enquires about the audience's perception of anti-violence centres, their interest and understanding of gender-based violence and the behaviours linked to it, and the type of reaction they have when reading a passive narrative concerning VAWG. This section was crucial to assess a change in knowledge, interest and empathic responses in the audience between the pre-experience and the post-experience, and it let participants to express their current opinions and cognition with regards to the topics discussed through a Likert scales, and open or multiple choice questions;

3. Finally, the last portion of the questionnaire was intended to allow the participant to sign up to the testing sessions, scheduled for 21 and 22 February, 2022.

The post-questionnaire aimed at highlighting possible changes in the audience thanks to the narrative. The participants were asked to fill out the survey after having completed the interactive drama. The structure of the questionnaire was created referencing the models created by Mariani (2016b), and it was divided in 5 sections;

1. The first part requires the participants to indicate their email address and the alias used in the pre-experience questionnaire, in order to ensure the comparison among the data provided before and after the interactive drama;

2. The second section is dedicated to the acquire general information with regards to the completion of the game: the players are asked to indicate whether they completed the narrative, which ending they attained and to indicate the most important feelings derived from the narrative;

3. The third portion is characterised by the use of Likert scales, with values from 0 (complete disagreement) to 5 (complete agreement), to evaluate:

→ the degree of appreciation for the different aspect of the interactive drama, such as the duration of the game, the level of interactivity and the style of the narration;

→ the different emotional responses inspired by the story and by the way the story was presented;

→ the degree of ethical reflection stimulated by the gameplay

4. The fourth part is focused on the knowledge acquired through the interactive drama; the questions inquire:

- The audience's opinions with regards to misconceptions concerning gender-based violence;
- Their perception and ability to recognise toxic behaviours related to VAWG and gender inequality;
- Their knowledge and interest in anti-violence centres.

5. Finally, the last section aims to allow the participants to freely describe their main take-aways from the experience, and explain whether they would recommend this narrative and whether they think it can be considered useful to inspire further discussions concerning gender-based violence.

This testing was performed in two different instances, engaging different groups of people belonging to the target audience:

1. On 21 and 22 February 2022, a group of 35 people (20 and 10 respectively divided onto two dates, plus 5 participants who completed the experience autonomously) joined an online call, during which they were asked to complete the interactive narrative and complete the post-experience survey; the participants were contacted by email: some of them were approached because they provided their contact at the end of the survey organised for the field research [→ 1.2.3 / 6.1], while others are personal acquaintances who agreed to participate;

2. On 28 February 2022, I tested the prototype on 34 students enrolled in Prof. Mariani and Prof. Ciancia's course *Complex Artefacts And System Design Studio*. During the test-

ing in class, various elements from the *Rapid Ethnography Model* (Mariani, 2016b) were observed, especially in regards to the reactions and the behaviours of the players;

3. On 15 March 2022, thanks to the collaboration of Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, the prototype was also tested in real life during the course *Communication Design and Gender Culture* at *Politecnico di Milano*, with a class of 14 Italian students.

Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter 7, further experimentations with different settings and / or specific target audiences could help to improve the efficiency of the game.

## 6.2 SURVEY RESULTS

As described in Chapter 1 [→ 1.2.3], part of the field research entailed the creation and distribution of a survey, which collected 197 respondents, of which 65% were women. The survey was open to every age group, but the target of the interactive narrative (people who range from 18 to 35 years old) represented half of the respondents (50,5%). The full structure of the survey and its results are available in the Appendix, aggregated through Excel. The main topics of investigation were the perception and knowledge of Italian citizens on the topic of VAWG, but also their interest in interactive narrative and similar artefacts.

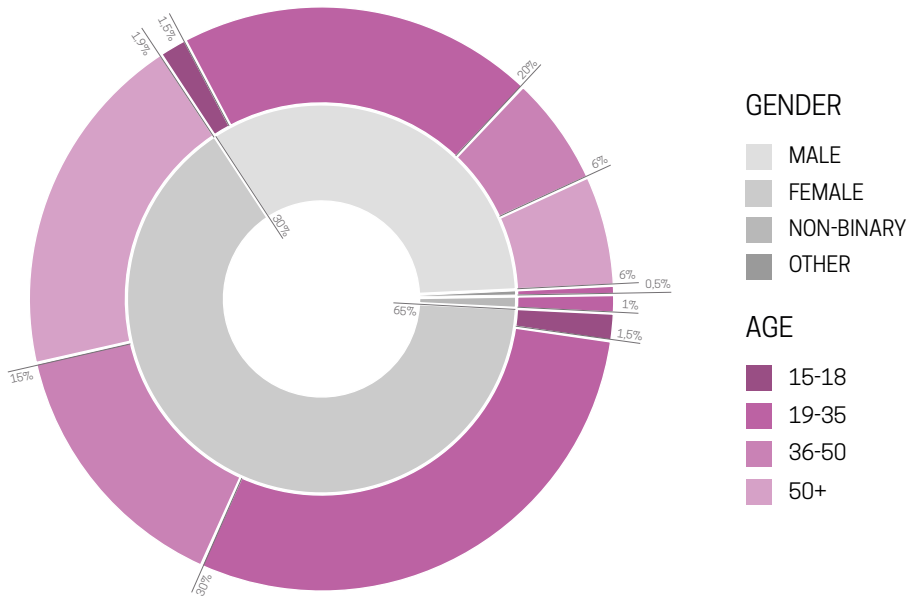
Fig. 6.2. Audience profile of the survey's participants

Fig. 6.3. Percentages of respondents who agreed with rape myths

In regards to the acceptance of toxic attitudes concerning and related to VAGW, discussed in the second section of the survey, the questionnaire produced predictable results, coherent with ISTAT's report<sup>7</sup> on the topic. For instance, on the subject of acceptance of rape myths [→ Fig. 6.3], a few statements found a wide agreement

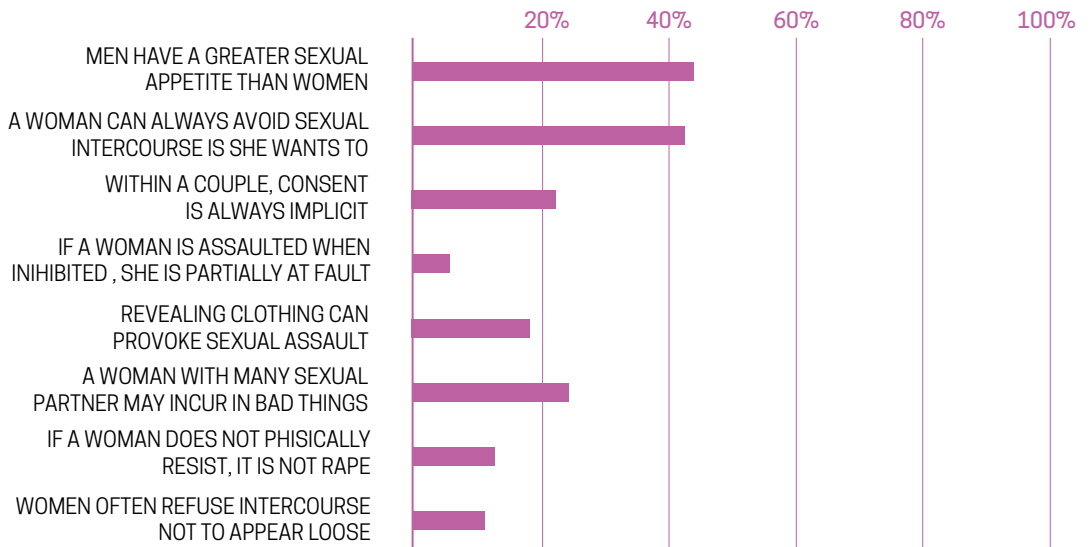
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2019/11/Report-stereotipi-di-genere.pdf>





## AUDIENCE PROFILE

### RAPE MYTHS ACCEPTANCE RATE





**Fig. 6.4.** Average number of times the participants have witnessed toxic attitudes related to VAWG in the last year

for the audience<sup>8</sup>: “Men have a greater sexual appetite than women” (43%); “A woman can always avoid sexual intercourse if she wants to” (42%); “If a woman has sexual relations with multiple men, something bad can happen to her” (23%), “Within a couple, consent is always implicit” (20%).

These results were interesting because rape myths proved to report the higher number of consensus, but also one of the lower percentage of acknowledgment (as proved in the third section of the survey). On the contrary, statements directly concerning acts of violence against women (both physical and psychological), sexism and toxic masculinity registered a low percentage of agreement (>12%), with the exception of the statement “men are naturally more aggressive than women”, which was met with a 34% consensus.

The third section of the survey covered the participants’ knowledge of the specific toxic attitudes that support VAWG and it re-

<sup>8</sup> The term “respondents that agreed with the statements” includes those who reacted to each statement with a 3, 4 or a 5 (answers which range from “I fairly agree” to “I completely agree”).

13 TIMES

RAPE  
MYTHS

19 TIMES

GENDER  
STEREOTYPES

5 TIMES

WITNESSED  
VIOLENCE

11 TIMES

STREET  
HARASSMENT

vealed that while some concepts are more well-known, like cat-calling (68%) and street harassments (69,5%), gender stereotypes (78%) and sexism (79%), others were only understood by a small percentage of the audience, like victim blaming (11%), rape myths (10,6%) and effects of domestic violence on children (10,6%). Moreover, this section also gathered information on the average number of times each participant witnessed these toxic behaviours during their daily lives [→ Fig 6.4]. It was alarming to acknowledge that the majority of these attitudes were averagely witnessed over 10 times in the last year; in particular, gender stereotypes (19), toxic masculinity (16) and cat-calling (13) were widely acknowledged despite the Covid-19 situation.

This section also allowed the participants to contribute with their personal experience, leaving a comment describing a particular situation they lived or witnessed that concerned VAWG and relative toxic attitudes. These are some of the most relevant and alarming testimonies.

“A man showed me his penis while laughing and blowing me kisses across a street, around 5 p.m.”

- [F], 23 years old

“Walking next to a bus stop, in broad daylight, wearing a jacket and tracksuit, an elderly man asked me “do you want to be raped?”, I told him to go to hell, but the thing that upset me most was the guy who was there at the bus stop who didn’t say or do anything.”

- [F], 24 years old

“My male colleagues, teachers, often comment on the clothing and physical appearance of female students saying that if they were raped, they would have brought it on themselves.”

- [F], 54 years old.

I recently started a PhD in Toronto (Canada) and experiencing the research environment first hand I discovered how common these things are. I started in January 2021 and since then a professor is under investigation for sexual harassment, a student has been abused by another PhD student. Why did I grow up thinking these were rare cases? I feel like I was raised and educated in a bubble.”

- [M], 25 years old

“One afternoon I was in Padova with a group of five girlfriends, and a man in his thirties started catcalling us. My friends decided to ignore him, I answered him instead, annoyed, asking him how dared to do that. This man, apparently convinced that I was flirting with him, started following us until we reached the car and left... The thing that really bothered me most was my friends who then scolded me telling me that I should have ignored the catcalling from the start, ignoring him instead pushing him to chase us.”

- [NB], 24 years old

“I reported my husband who threw me down the stairs of my house, under the eyes of my son.”

- [F], 37 years old.

“As a male, I often wear accessories that are considered feminine and I am frequently insulted in the street because of them.”

- [M], 16 years old.

“Simple but effective: I went to school wearing a pink mask, and during recess a boy said to me: ‘Take off the pink mask, are you gay?’”

- [M], 17 years old

**Fig. 6.5. Audience's interest in IDN, according to the survey's results**

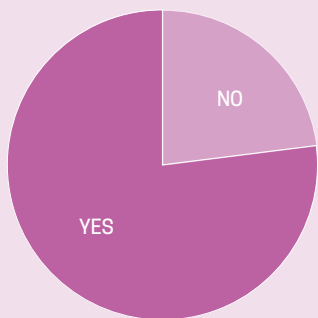


Finally, the last section of the survey concerned the audience's interest in interactive narratives and the use these artefacts could have in discussing the issue of VAWG. The majority of the audience (77%) declared to be interested in interactive narratives, while 72% agreed that they could be used to depict sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence. Moreover, the audience was also asked which types of emotions an interactive narrative could trigger in the audience, and the most common responses were curiosity (71%), entertainment (60%) and empathy (55%). Furthermore, the audience also stated that the narrative, in order to be interesting and engaging, should be realistic, concise and immersive.

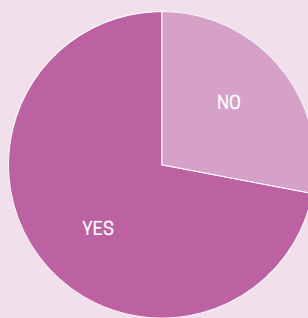
Out of the 197 participants, 76 people chose to leave their email contact to participate in the testing of the interactive drama, created as a result of this research, while 15 respondents declared to be available to leave a further testimony on the topic. As described in Chapter 1 [→ 1.3.2], only two people answered the follow-up email, agreeing to a short interview, but neither of them gave me their consent to record or share the conversation.

In conclusion, the survey not only provided a lot of real-life testimonies of daily experiences of VAWG and relative toxic attitudes, but it managed to depict a picture of the Italian context and highlight the topics on which Italian citizens still have wrongful opinions. In particular, attitudes related to the acceptance of sexual assault and rape myths, and the toxic behaviours such as victim blaming and secondary victimisation, are still widely spread and accepted. Moreover, it proved how discriminations and instances of gender-based harassment are still very present in our current society, thanks to the presence of patriarchal values that enables them.

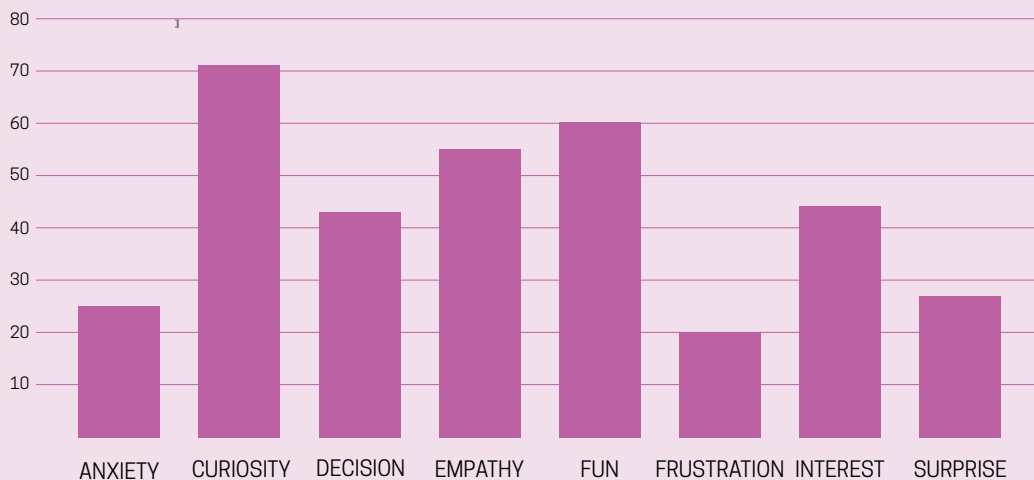
# AUDIENCE'S INTEREST IN INTERACTIVE MEDIA



ARE YOU INTERESTED IN  
INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES?



COULD IDNS BE USEFUL TO DISCUSS  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?



WHICH EMOTIONS CAN AN IDN INSPIRE?

### 6.3 AN INTERACTIVE DRAMA TO DISCUSS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

To address the research questions described in Chapter 1 and the issues in our socio-cultural order surfarced from the desk and field research, an interactive drama was designed, and through its plot, created to favour discussion with regards to the topics of this contribution, and the limitation of agency and game mechanics, this final product aims to address gender-based violence in an interactive and engaging way.

The potential that narratives have in stimulating empathy and conveying specific messages, as discussed in Chapter 2, together with their ability to impact the audience's behaviours and further discussions, were regarded as pivotal point in designing an artefact to address gender-based culture and the toxic socially widespread behaviours that worsen the lives of victims and survivors. Therefore, an interactive drama focused on the experience of women living in abusive relationships became, in the projectual phase of this contribution, a method to address the communication purpose of the project, increasing empathy towards victims and raising awareness on how to help them. The reasons behind the use of interactive drama as a tool to approach the audience in the discussion on VAWG lies in the definition of this medium itself, provided by (Mateas, 2002) based on Laurel's dissertation (1986), concerning how it differs from other conceptions of interactive narrative.

«Interactive drama takes drama, rather than literature, fine art, or game interaction tropes, as the guiding narrative conception. With this focus on drama comes a concern with intensity, enactment and unity. Interactive drama wants player interaction to deeply shape the path and outcome of the story, while maintaining a tight,



author given story structure. Thus interactive drama confronts head-on the tension between interactive freedom and story structure. Interactive drama seeks first-person immersion as a character within the story».

(Mateas, 2002, p. 22)

Interactive dramas, with their author-driven approach and their focus on drama and intensive narrative experiences, which enable user immersion, can be an efficient tool to discuss a sensitive topic such as gender-based violence. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4 [→ 4.2], interactive narratives that tackle issues such as mental health or trauma, proved to be the most effective when limiting players' agency: therefore, choosing a medium more author-driven and plot-centred can be crucial to address gender-based violence and actually spark social change within its audience.

## TARGET AUDIENCE 6.3.1

The segmentation of the audience was defined taking in consideration the results of the surveys as well as the interviews with survivors and the volunteers of Parma's anti-violence centre. In the survey, a high percentage (90%) of participants between 17 and 35 years old showed interest in interactive narratives and in their power to discuss gender-based violence, while only 70% of the users from 35 to 60 years old thought they can be useful in tackling sensitive topics such as this. Moreover, as highlighted by both Eva and STED during their interviews, older generations tend to be more sceptical about changing their ideas and values, which had been eradicated for a longer time. In addition, younger generations are more interested in digital media and they are more prone to discuss ideas and issues related to the social order. As Eva has stated:

People of a certain age, with some exceptions, hardly change their mind, while younger generations are more malleable, it's easier to question them. This is also true for children, but we should be careful about the contents discussed with them. The best target for this kind of project are people between 15 to 30-35 years old.

Considering that this project discusses violent and disturbing topics, I opted to target only adults, from 18 to 35 years old. Moreover, since one of the objectives of the narrative, described in the following section [→ 6.3.2], concerns raising awareness about Italian anti-violence centres, the segmentation of the target includes both men and women living in Italy.

However, another important aspect of the target segmentation relates to the type of experiences lived by the players. As pointed out by the volunteers during their interviews, one of their biggest concerns when welcoming and supporting the women who ask for their help is safeguarding their wellbeing, meaning assuring them a safe space, free from possible traumatic triggers (Bedera, 2021). Therefore, experiencing an interactive narrative that describes, even in a sensitive way, abuses of any kind, could be more damaging than helpful for those people who may have suffered from gender-based violence. Hence, this type of narrative is targeted specifically to those people who never experienced such traumatic events, but who yet could cause harm to other women with their behaviour.

During her interview as well as her workshop, STED stated that now, years after the abuses she suffered, what hurt the most was her friends' behaviour: people who dismissed her confession when she told them of what she was going through, people who still today hang out with her abuser, people who made her feel as she

was, even partially, the one to blame. Some of her close friends told her to go to the police, or to just break up with him: she tried both and all the attempts were pointless. She only managed to confess everything she went through freely when she found a group of activists, ready to listen. And, according to STED, this is what she thinks survivors need: «A safe space, in which their mind can finally click [and ask for help]». This safe space can be provided by friends and family, their personal support system, but it can be found especially in the anti-violence centre, where trained volunteers and professionals can provide the assistance victims and survivors need.

Therefore, this project is directed to bystanders, people who may have the chance to step up, to help a woman who is suffering, providing her with the support she needs, instead of worsening her situation with toxic behaviour and wrongful attitudes. Moreover, by developing a greater awareness of the issue of gender-based violence, bystanders can take part in the discussion in regards to this urgent socio-cultural issue, engaging in positive and constructive conversations that can lead to social change.

## NARRATIVE'S OBJECTIVES 6.3.2

As hinted in the previous sections, this interactive drama aims to address various issues that emerged during desk and field research [→ Chapter 3 and 4], using game mechanics [→ Chapter 2] to achieve the social change. The projectual approach is focused on the development of a narrative, designed to help players create a bond with the main character, harvesting empathy towards her and her situation (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019). Moreover, the storyline also aims to inspire reflections and discussions on the common behaviours that worsen victims' daily life, while providing the necessary information on the associations and institutions created to help them.

Therefore, this narrative is designed to be played alone: it aims to stimulate reflection about VAWG and to inspire long-term social change in the users' relation with women who suffered from violence and abuse. The narrative's interactive nature will allow a more immersive experience, which will more easily prompt emotions like empathy and desire to help. Thus, the main objectives of the narratives can be described as follows:

1. To inspire empathy towards victims and survivors of gender-based violence, by portraying the struggles of their daily lives;
2. To convey the message that victims are never at fault for the violence they suffered and that they should be helped and supported instead of blamed;
3. To fight the toxic attitudes and behaviours which worsen the victims' lives and enable the normalisation of VAWG;
4. To raise awareness with regards to the Italian anti-violence centres and the support they provide for women;
5. To inspire further discussions around gender-based violence, that can lead to social change at a more societal level.

## 6.4 COME VETRO TEMPERATO: THE NARRATIVE

The resulting interactive drama is called *Come vetro temperato*, literally translated as *As tempered glass*. The title is a play on the words *temperato*, namely a toughened type of glass, and the adjective *temprato*, which refers to a person strengthened both physically and psychologically by their experiences. The name was inspired by a quote from Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Chisciotte della Mancia*:

«È la donna un vetro, inver,  
Che non s'ha a provar perciò  
Se si può spezzare o no,  
Ché potria tutto accader.

E più facile è a spezzarsi,  
E non è saggezza intanto  
Arrischiar che vada infranto  
Ciò che più non può saldarsi».

(Cervantes, 2008, pag. 416)

«Woman is a thing of glass;  
But her brittleness 'tis best  
Not too curiously to test:  
Who knows what may come to pass?

Breaking is an easy matter,  
And it's folly to expose  
What you cannot mend to blows;  
What you can't make whole to shatter».

(Cervantes, 2015, pag. 530)

The idea is that women are strong beings, like *tempered glass*, they can resist a lot, but once they are broken it is very difficult to put the pieces back together. Violence bend and break many women, who often need a lot of time and support to work through their trauma. When they manage to do it, they are stronger, but they were not supposed to be broken in the first place. The concept of glass is also reprised in the graphic aspect of the project [→ 6.5.2].

The narrative describes one day in the life of Dalila, a 28-years-old Italian-Tunisian woman, who is living in an abusive relationship with Davide, her boyfriend. Throughout the day, she experienced various types of violence and discrimination, and her responses to them help the player shape her personality. Nonetheless, as it happens to women who live in a violent relationship, some choices and some events are just inevitable, because, as the narrative aims to show, the choices made by a victim or survivor never causes the abuses they experience. The narrative is not designed to entertain or to be an enjoyable experience: it aims to portray, as accurately and sensible as possible, the reality of a woman in Italy today.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3 [→ 3.1.2], when discussing gender-based violence, it is crucial to assume an intersectional perspective: in this game, for instance, the woman was born in Italy, but her father was born and raised in Tunisia. She is an Italian citizen, but her upbringing and her family situation is not necessarily the same as many Italian women whose family and community have always been in this country. As stated by Eva during her interview,

«Women who ask for an accomodation in a safe house or who reach out to us when the situation is at its worst are usually refugees, foreigners or are in difficult economic situations. Italian women usually have a better support system»

In this story, one of the reasons why Dalila struggles in asking for help is her lack of a support system, because her family, due to their values or life experiences, are unable to provide the assistance she needs, even though she tries to ask for it. Moreover, she feels isolated because of the abusive and controlling nature of her relationship, she is only around her partners' friends, always when he is present.

In the projectual phase, it was taken into consideration to address more pressing intersectional issues, telling the story from the perspective of a transgender women (as described in Chapter 3), but a project like this would have encountered two main issues:

- As of now, Italian anti-violence centers are not equipped to welcome transgender women (especially those who did not complete the transition process), for two reasons: their presence may trigger the other women, but also because assisting them will require specialised training for all the volunteers, in order to better address the intersectional nature of the abuses they suffered; nonetheless, as stated by Eva, in the past few years, Italian anti-violence centers have started to work to enable the assistance of transgender women;
- The issue discussed in this narrative is already sensitive enough: adding an additional level to the story may raise the audience's barriers, making it more difficult to convey empathy and the message related to gender-based violence.

Nevertheless, a positive reaction to this narrative, would open up new possibilities to further experimentations with interactive drama dedicated to raise awareness about gender-based violence and inspire empathy towards victims and survivors, allowing the addition of a transgender intersectional perspective, based on further research and testimonies.

### 6.4.1 THE STORYWORLD: CONTEXTUALISING REALITY WITHIN THE LIMINAL SPACE

One of the questions in the survey conducted during the desk research asked the participants what would make an interactive narrative dedicated to gender-based violence effective and appealing for the audience. Many participants stated that the narrative should be plausible (or generally based on real-life experiences), engaging and capable of creating bonds with characters with a certain emotional-depth. Moreover, since the narrative tackles existing issues, setting the plot in a storyworld different from ours would make the process of conveying the messages more difficult and less direct. The story is therefore set in a storyworld extremely related to our reality, and that nonetheless belongs to the characters .

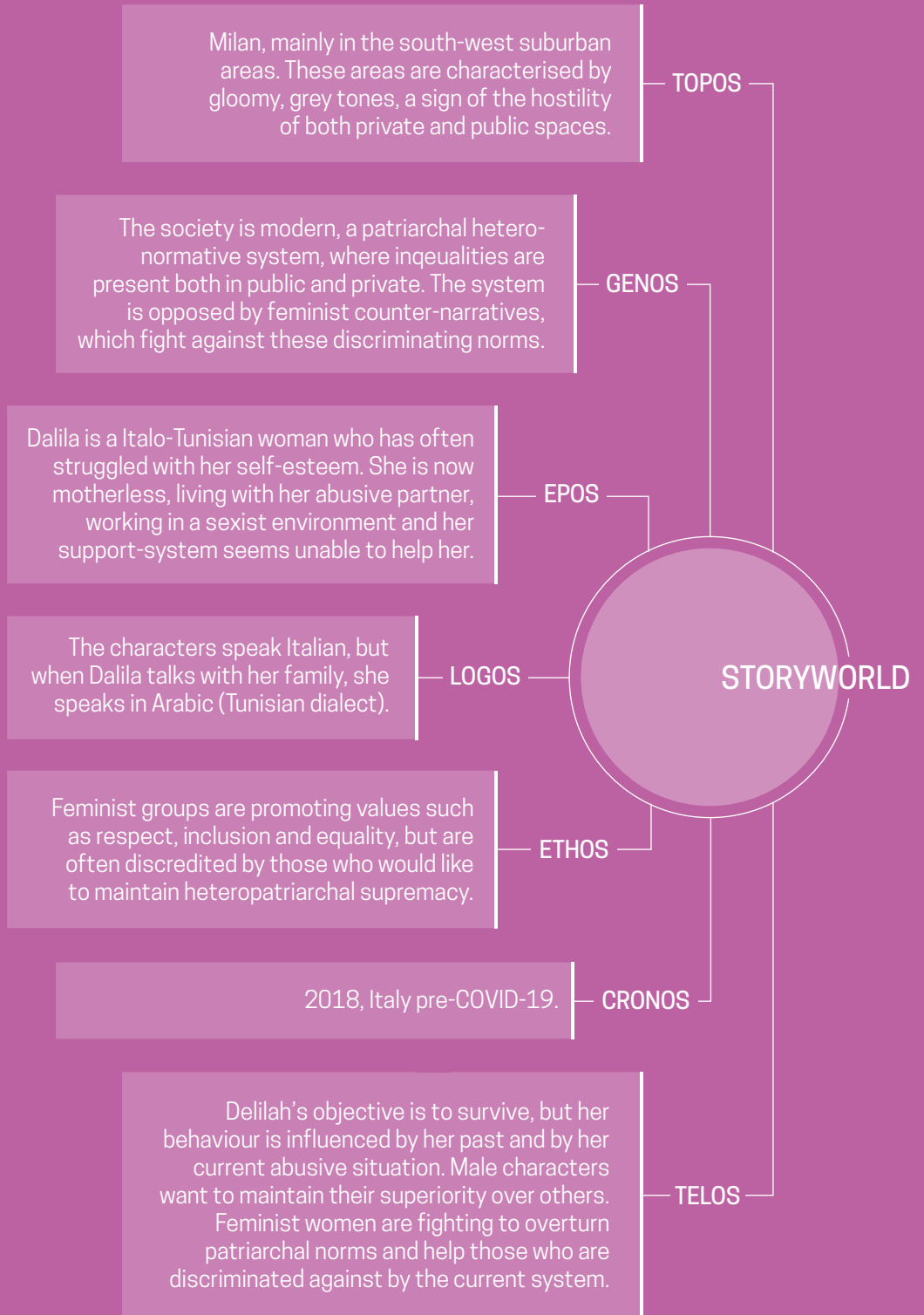
In their book *Storyworld across media* (2014, p. 33), Ryan and Thon addressed the issue that arises when the storyworld of a fictional narrative is extremely similar to the real world:

«Storyworld is a broader concept than fictional world because it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively. But it could be argued that in the case of nonfictional stories, the notion of storyworld is superfluous. If these stories are told as true of the real world, doesn't reality serve as their referent? In this case we could divide stories into those that project an imaginary storyworld [...] and those whose storyworld is simply the real world».

Fig. 6.6. Storyworld canvas for *Come vetro temperato*

The story that unravels in this interactive is inspired by abuses and discriminations that women have suffered during their existence, therefore even if Dalila's story is not technically true, this does





not mean it cannot be lifelike. As anticipated in Chapter 1 [→ 1.3.1], the game provides the players a liminal space in which they can reflect on social, political, ethical or moral issues (Mariani, 2016a), without fearing real-life consequences. Moreover, the familiarity of the setting will facilitate a deeper connection with the character, and the experiences she is living. Dalila was here designed as a repository of stories and meanings, aimed at triggering reflections in the audience on the values of the socio-cultural context (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019), which is portrayed in the storyworld.

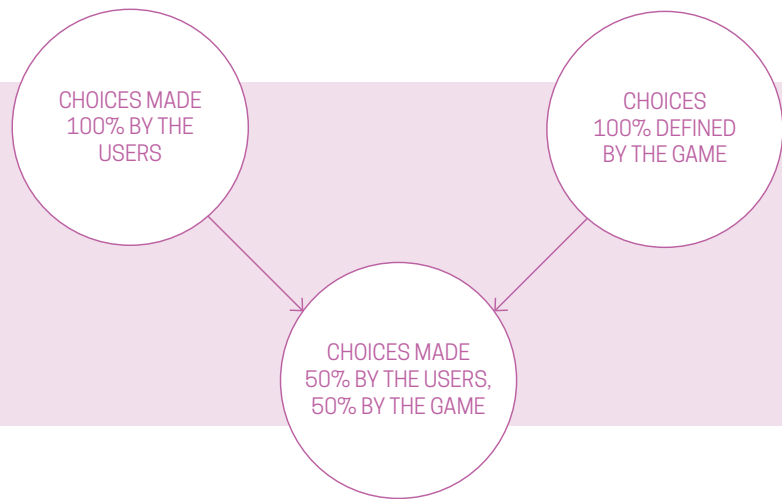
Over the course of the past two decades, several publications investigated tools to help authors and designers build storyworld: scholars such as Klastrop & Tosca (2004, 2014) and Wolf (2012) tried to develop elements to support the creation process. For this particular interactive drama, I employed the Storyworld Canvas [→ Fig. 6.6] designed by Ciancia, Piredda and Venditti (2019), inspired Pinardi & De Angelis's (2006) and by Italian anthropologist Carlo Tullio-Altan's work, with the seven categories he selected as values that allow a group of people to identify as a collective identity. Ciancia and colleagues employed these elements in a tool to develop a storyworld based on seven categories: *topos* (the environment), *logos* (language), *genos* (system of relations), *epos* (background story), *telos* (goals & objectives), *ethos* (value system) and *chronos* (time).

As anticipated in the first paragraph, the storyworld described in this interactive drama is fairly similar to the real world, since gender violence and discrimination are issues related to our everyday existence. The story is set in Milan a couple of years before the pandemic: Covid-19 has in fact created new issues in relation to domestic violence, as reported by ISTAT (2021) and they would add an additional level of complexity to the narration. Therefore, it was preferable, for an already faceted interactive drama, to simplify the storyworld and focus on the plot and on the dichotomy between feminist and patriarchal values that are already in place.

## GAME MECHANICS AND 6.4.2 THE CONCEPT OF CHOICE

As already discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, agency is a crucial aspect of interactive narratives, because it states the degree to which the player can interact with the game and influence the plot as well as the storyworld (Harrell & Zhu, 2009). In 1998, Murray stated that IDN usually find their place in the balance between dramatic structure and player freedom: in creating a game for social change, defining this equilibrium is crucial in order to effectively convey the message. In fact, as proven by IDN such as *Depression Quest* [→ 5.2.1] and *Calories* [→ 5.2.2], sometimes agency can be employed as a metaphor in relation to the theme discussed by the narrative (Harrell & Zhu, 2009) or to favour the process of perspective-taking of minorities or specific groups (Enschot et al., 2019): in particular, restricted choices can serve a pivotal role in conveying emotional messages and favour immersion in situations that range from clinical depression to abuse (Salter, 2016). Therefore, the concept of agency, especially in the context of G4SC, goes beyond being able to interact with the narrative, but it is dependent on meaningful choices which can lead to important consequences (Mason, 2013).

During the interviews, the volunteers of the anti-violence centres stressed how one of the most crucial aspects of their work revolves around helping women re-gain confidence and self-esteem, essential to understand that they can make their own decisions, especially outside their abusive relationships. As the centre's president stated, many women tend to blame themselves and their behaviour for the situation in which they are and for their partner's action, and what the volunteers must do is help them comprehend that the abuses they suffered were not their fault, because victims and survivors are never to blame. The theme of choice can therefore be considered the fundamental interlink between the interactive nature of the narrative and the topic of gender-based violence.



**Fig. 6.7.** Three types of choices present in the interactive drama

Thus, before starting the design process of the narrative, it was necessary to precisely label the narrative and its interactive mechanics. Using Riedl and Bulitko's method<sup>9</sup> (2012), this interactive drama is characterised by high authorial intent (namely a more manually authored structure), low virtual character autonomy and low player customization. The limitation of agency was crucial to convey the oppression that victims of VAWG feel, but also to realistically describe the dynamics of abuse that characterise violent relationships as well as discriminating public and private spaces. Therefore, one of the more important aspects of the design process consisted in defining the nature of the meaningful choices presented within the interactive drama. There are three main types of choices [→ Fig. 6.7]:

1. Decisions made 100% by the players: the relevancy of these choices can range from low impact decisions (e.g. accepting or refusing a coffee from a coworker) to a high impact ones (e.g. the two choices that define the ending reached by the user); these choices are completely made by the users, without any implications from previous ones;

2. Choices made 50% by the players 50% by the game structure: in order to maintain narrative continuity and characters' coherence, some choices as well as some of the situation presented are defined by the decisions precedently made by the users (e.g. if the players decide to wear a skirt, the protagonist will experience certain events instead of others, in which however they will be free to make choices);

3. Decisions defined 100% by the narrative structure: in order to accurately depict the oppressive nature of abusive relationships and to stress the idea that violence cannot always be avoided because it is never caused by the victim but always by the perpetrator, a few choices in the game are unavailable (crossed out), yet present on the screen.

Therefore, the mechanics of the game play a crucial part in actively describing the situation in which victims live, to realistically mimic mental and real-life conditions that often people who never experienced violence or abuses cannot imagine or do not understand.

## CHARACTERS AND ROLES 6.4.3

Another crucial aspect of the construction of this narrative was the definition of the characters because, as previously mentioned, they play the crucial role of enablers of the players' emotional aspect of the narrative experience (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019). As stated in par 6.2.2., one of the objectives of this interactive drama is to inspire empathy for victims and survivors, and therefore designing the protagonist's role is crucial in helping the audience enter the story and taking the perspective of women living in abusive relationships and/or suffering from abuse. As Papale (2014) argued, it

<sup>9</sup> A detailed discussion on Riedl and Bulitko's taxonomy can be found in par. 1.3.2.

is crucial to consider the bond that can be created between players and characters, in order to understand the type of emotional response arising in the player. In particular, Papale (2014) specified the difference between empathy and sympathy, following Grodal's work (2009, p. 3):

«In other words, when experiencing empathy we share emotions with the character, while when experiencing sympathy we feel emotions for the character / directed towards the character»

Therefore, this interactive drama aims to help the player identify with the main character and experience her emotions, and the interactive nature of the game aims to also favour this process. With regards to the other characters, their role does not aim to directly inspire an emotional response from the audience (even though outrage and anger could be triggered through the interaction with them), but it is more bound for the depiction of realistic circumstances which enable deeper empathic bonds with the protagonist. Nonetheless, their definition and description was also crucial in the projectual phase of the interactive drama: they needed to be plausible and realistic, while also serving as a plot element to better describe the protagonist's story and context.

The characters of *Come vetro temperato* were designed in terms of physical and internal characteristics, background story and the role they play in the story. The tools and references taken in considerations to design the characters were Vogler's Archetypes (Vogler, 1998) and the Character Wheel (Piredda et al., 2015). These two tools were applied to both define the character's role in the story as well as to define their inner world, which include their personality, interests and morals, as well as their external one, related to their work, their appearance and their habits. The character wheels are

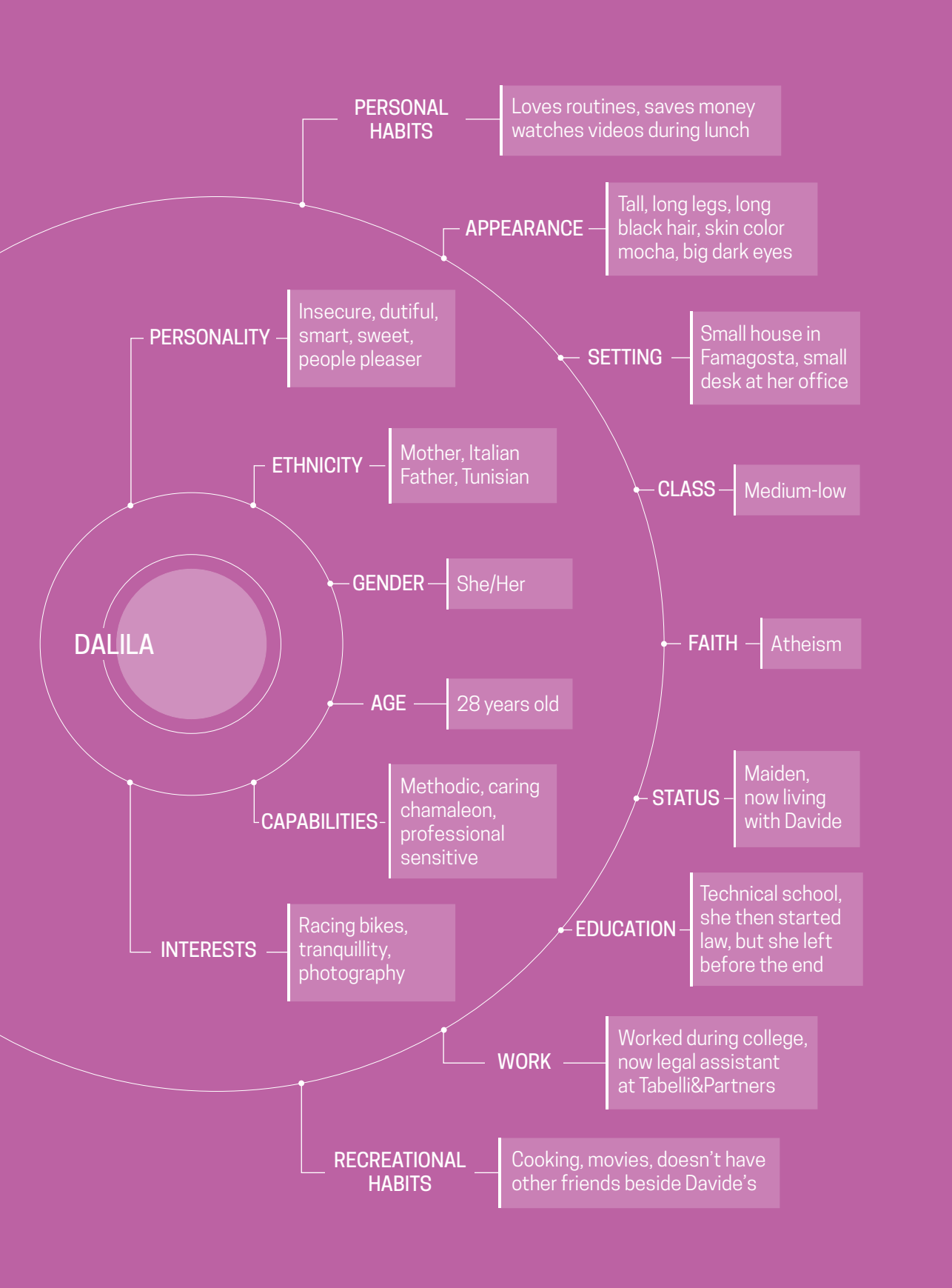
briefly described in the following pages, while the complete version can be found in the Appendix. Moreover, looking at the characters as archetypes, namely «flexible character functions rather than as rigid character types» (Vogler, 1998, pag. 24) can help to free the narrative from certain constraints and build more believable and well-rounded characters.

### DALILA: A SURVIVOR IS A HERO 6.4.3.1

Several narratives created over the course of the past centuries, from mythological tales to Hollywood movies, followed what Campbell (1949) identified as *Hero's Journey*, the story of a person who leaves his/hers ordinary surroundings to explore an unfamiliar world, where she/he faces antagonistic forces, just to come back to the original context as a new, renewed individual (Vogler, 1998). However, since this interactive drama does not aim to portray a heroic quest, but to depict realistic events and circumstances, the narrative will not follow this structure. Therefore Dalila, the protagonist of the story, will not follow the self-sacrifice or growth storylines often linked to the hero's archetypes, but she will undertake its dramatic function aimed at audience identification. She is not to be considered a symbol of change, but a vector to depict real-life experiences. As Vogler (1998) states:

«The dramatic purpose of the Hero is to give the audience a window into the story. Each person hearing a tale or watching a play or movie is invited, in the early stages of the story, to identify with the Hero, to merge with him and see the world of the story through his eyes» (p. 3)

The plot of the narrative revolves around one day in Dalila's life and the player is forced to follow her, to make decisions on her





behalf, to experience the same type of discrimination and abuses that women (especially those living in a violent relationship) go through on a daily basis. By witnessing the toxic behaviours related to gender-based violence, the player is forced to acknowledge their existence as well as to understand the negative impact they can have on a person's life. Within the liminal space of the game, the players can become Dalila, and they are therefore subjugated to her conditions, to the choices she can or cannot make, to the suffering she experiences: this process of identification enables the creation of a bond between them and the character (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019), with the aim of favouring empathic attitudes towards the women living in similar situations. In fact, as stated in par 6.2.2., the emergence of empathy and understanding towards victims and survivors of gender-based violence is one of the objectives that the interactive drama aims to accomplish and that will be assessed during the testing phase, especially by evaluating the relationship created between the players and Dalila.

Fig. 6.8. Dalila's character wheel

### DAVIDE: THE *SHADOW* OF THE 6.4.3.2 PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

According to Vogler (1998), the archetype of the shadow, usually identified in the villains and the antagonists of the story, often represents the way in which repressed feelings, trauma and guilt, usually emotionally hidden by the character, can transform in negative attitudes towards themselves and others. In this interactive drama, the shadow archetype is embodied by Davide, Dalila's abusive and controlling partner. As D.i.Re reports, abusive relationships are always characterised by the male intention to maintain control and superiority over the women, usually through the use of violence and threats (Sdao & Pisanu, 2020). Therefore, Davide's core characteristics within the narrative is this: constant need for control, something he lacked during his adolescence and that now, as an

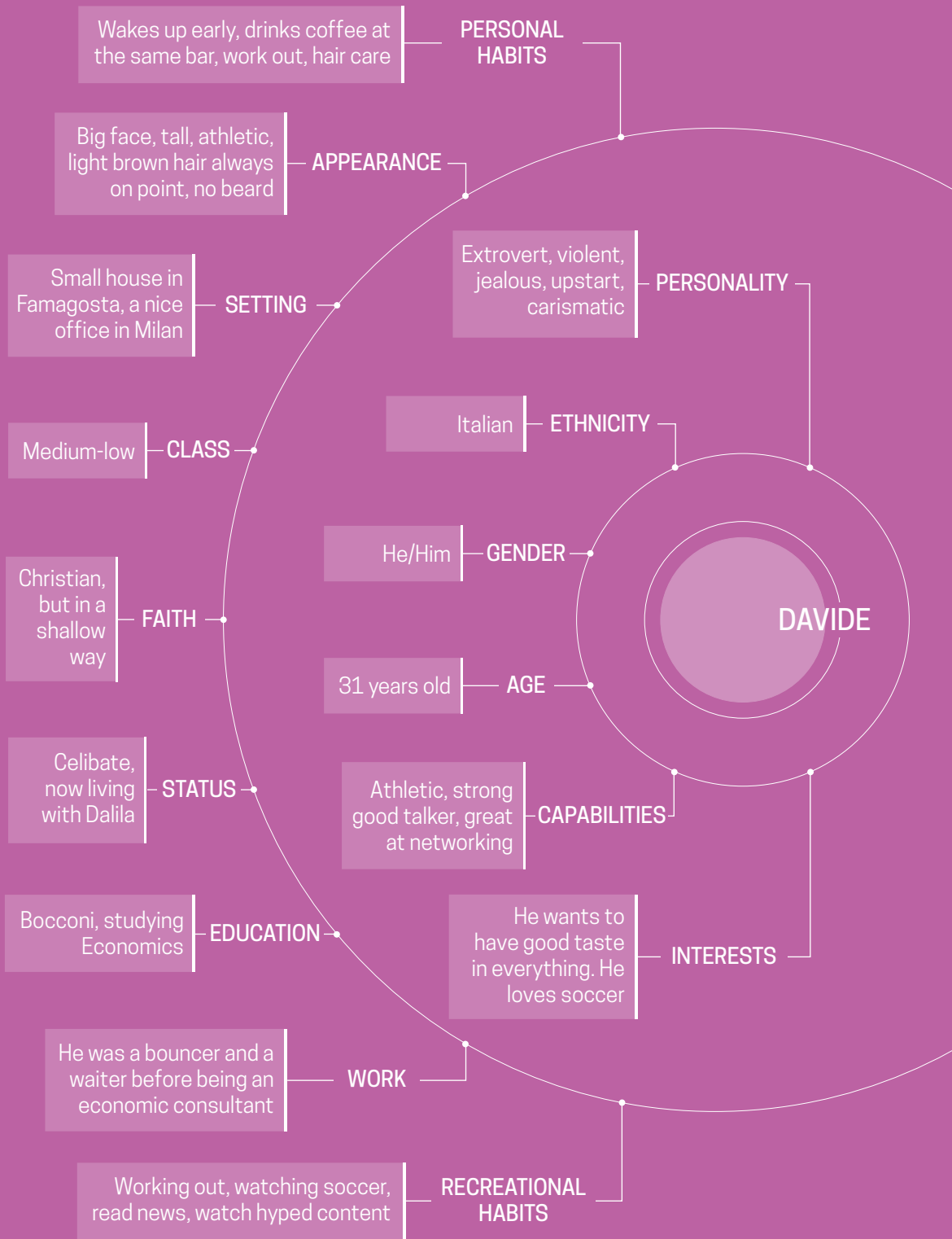
**Fig. 6.9. Davide's character wheel** adult, constantly tries to reinforce on himself and on those who, like Dalila, are part of his life plan.

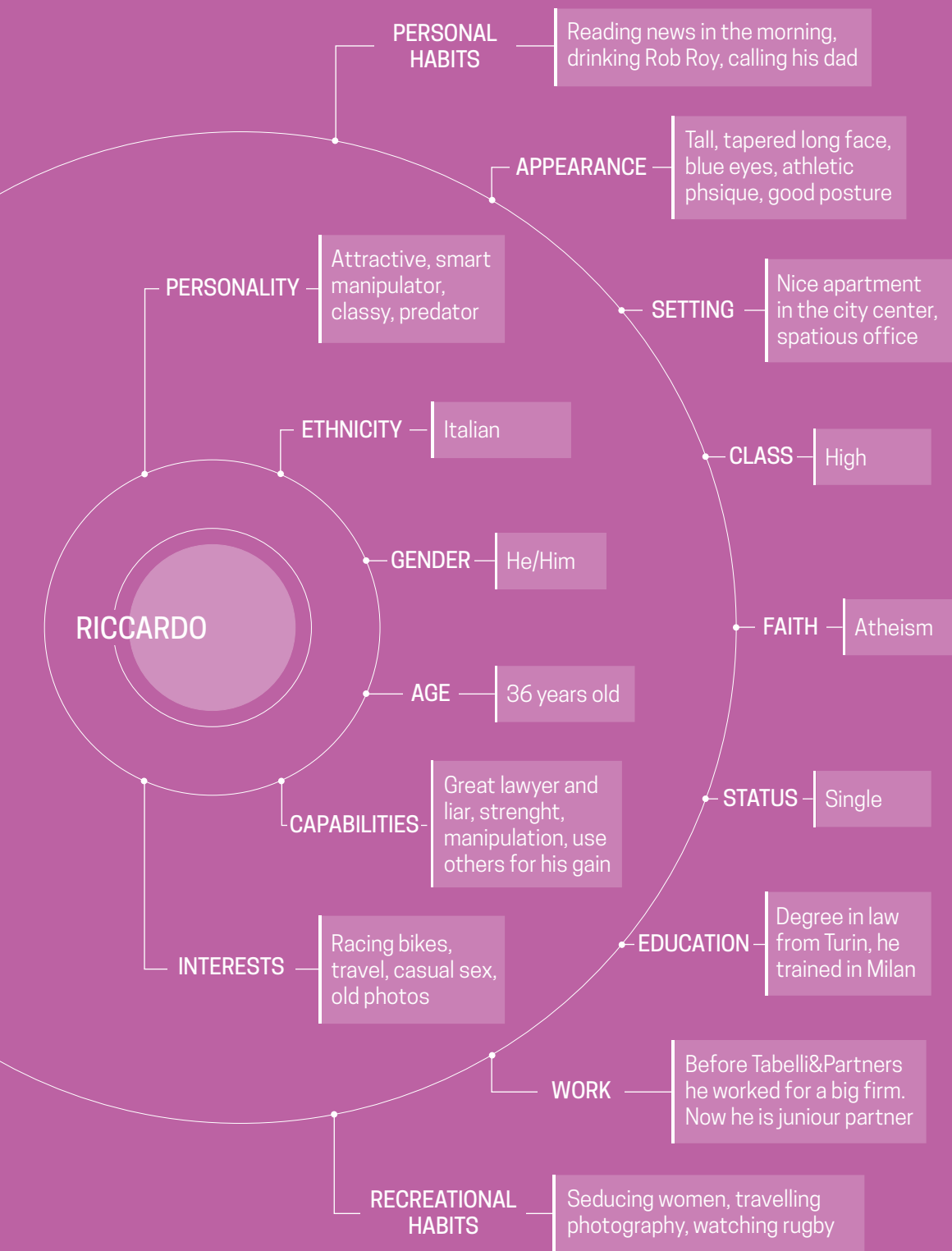
Davide collects not only all the characteristics that the volunteers of the anti-violence centres often find in abusers and perpetrators, but it also embodies the values of the patriarchal society. He thinks of Dalila as a property, a woman whose job is to stand by his side and to help him achieve his vision of a perfect life. His competitiveness and the constant need for attention directly derive from the social disadvantages he experienced as a kid: if during the first two decades of his existence he struggled because of his lower social status and his below-optimal appearance and behaviour, now these are the only things that matter. However, his *mise-en-scène* of a charismatic and athletic man is in reality extremely manufactured: Dalila, the only one whom he lets peek behind the scene, is the sole person who can really see the controlling and worrisome man he is, and she is the one who suffers because of it.

In his mind, Davide is the hero of his story, while he does not realise is the villain in everybody else's.

### 6.4.3.3 RICCARDO: SHAPESHIFTING PERPETRATOR

Another crucial character *Come vetro temperato* is represented by Riccardo, one of Dalila's coworker who in the beginning appear to be helpful and understanding, but in one of the ending is revealed to be a serial sexual predator. This type of behaviour is identified by Vogler (1998, p. 59) as the shapeshifter archetype usually applies to characters who «change appearance or mood, and are difficult for the hero and the audience to pin down». Within the context of the story, Riccardo appears to be Dalila's ally: he tries to mediate between her and their boss, Claudio, and wants to help her become a junior profile in their firm, instead of a mere legal assistant





(which is the only level she can reach, since she never finished her law degree). In three out of the four endings, Riccardo's shapeshifting nature is never revealed, because Dalila does not have a chance to trust him completely. On the other hand, if she does decide to put her faith in Riccardo, he eventually shows his true nature. He is the reason why the fourth ending is to be considered the worst and most hopeless one: when Dalila tries to find comfort and support in Riccardo, he betrays and abuses her instead, leaving the protagonist broken and inducing her to go back to her abuser, Davide, from which she hopes to find peace, even though she knows it will not be possible.

Fig. 6.10. Riccardo's character wheel

### **ALICE: THE FEMINIST COUNTER NARRATIVE** 6.4.3.4

One crucial aspect of the storyworld depicted in *Come vetro temperato* is the presence of a **feminist counternarrative** which fights the hetero-normative patriarchal values that unfortunately still define the context in which Dalila lives. In this story, it is represented by **Alice**, as well as by some other minor character, who we are about to discuss. Alice is Davide's former girlfriend, who is aware of the man's aggressive tendencies and broke up with him before their relationship could degenerate. She is a work psychologist who is still part of Davide and Dalila's friends group, despite the history between the two of them. However, since Davide has always manipulated Dalila into thinking that Alice is a person not to be trusted, the two women never became more than acquaintances.

At the beginning of the second act, Dalila is given the opportunity to get to know Alice better. If the players decide, through a long conversation, to fully trust her, they will reach the first, more hopeful ending, in which Alice eventually offers to help her reach an anti-violence centre. Alice is understanding and easygoing, yet a bit sceptical towards Dalila, especially in the beginning: if the play-

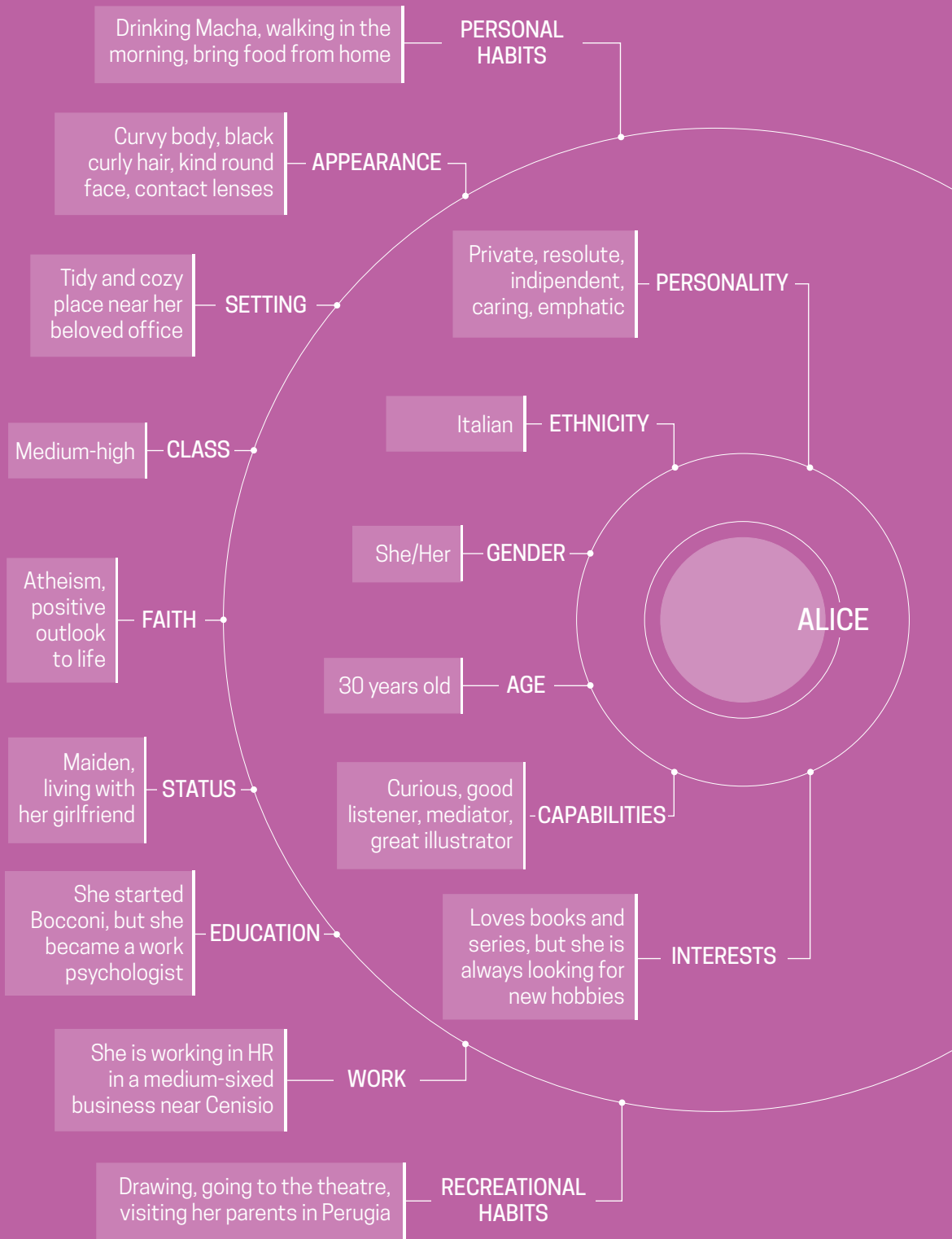
Fig. 6.11. Alice's character wheel

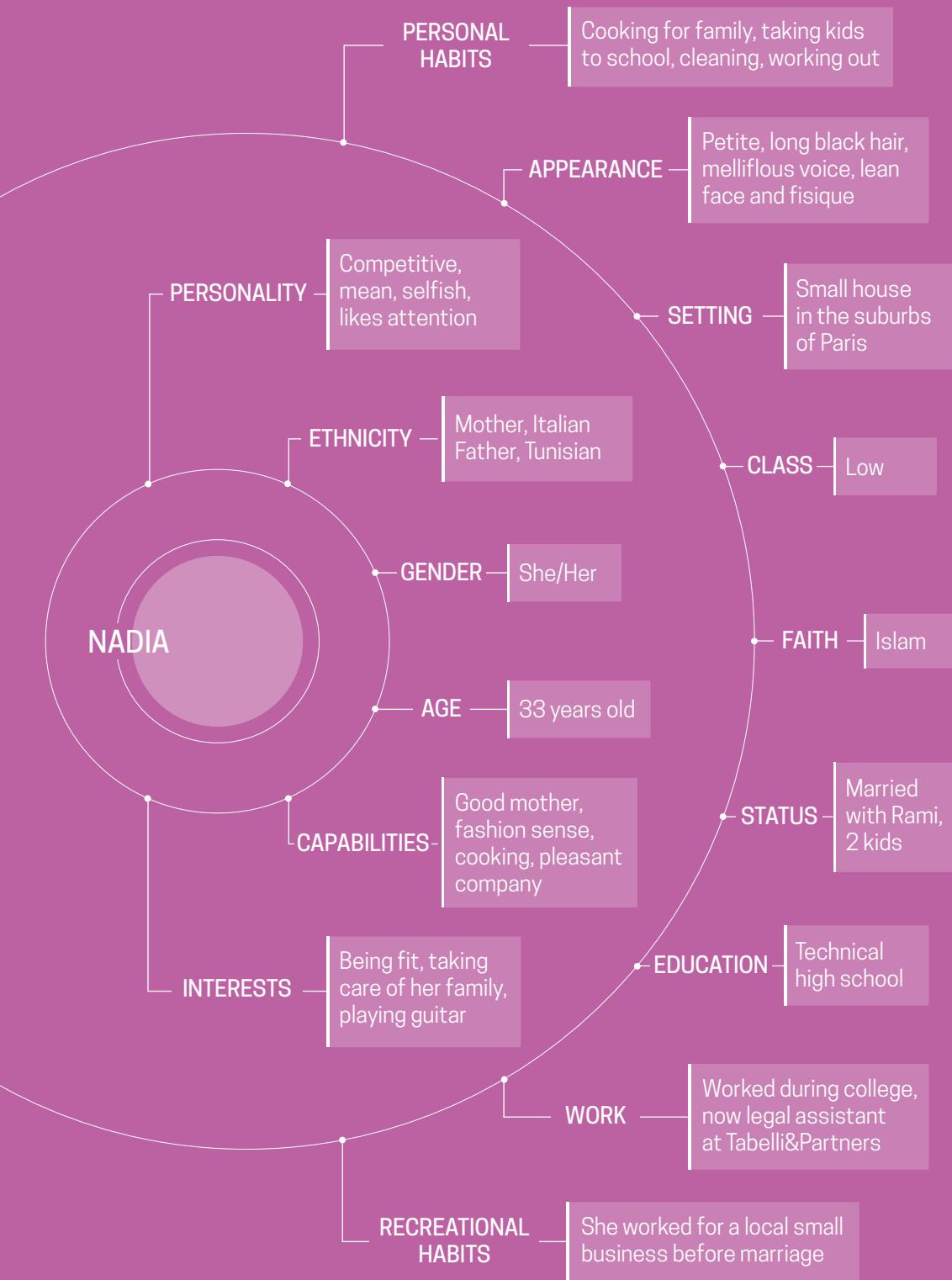
er slowly decides to trust her, by revealing information about the nature of their relationship with Davide, eventually Alice will fully embody her role of **mentor**. Moreover, the feminist counternarrative is also represented, on a lesser degree, by a few minor characters: Eng. Federica Nerini, a woman who stands up for herself when Claudio, the firm founder, undervalues her qualifications, and Sonia and her friends, the group of people who defend Dalila when she is approached by a few men on the street.

### 6.4.3.5 NADIA AND KAAMIL: THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

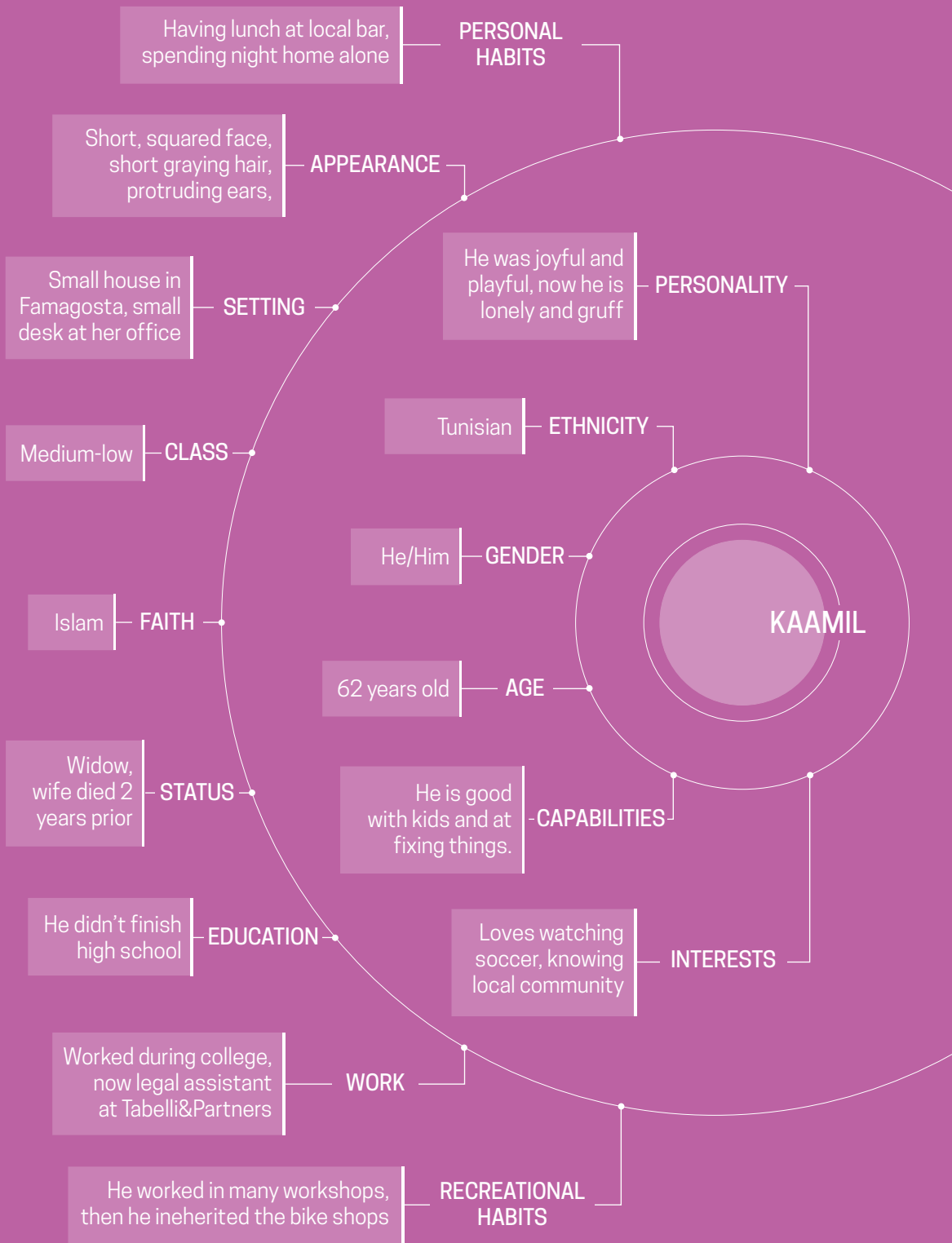
Fig. 6.12. Kaamil and Nadia's character wheels (see next two pages)

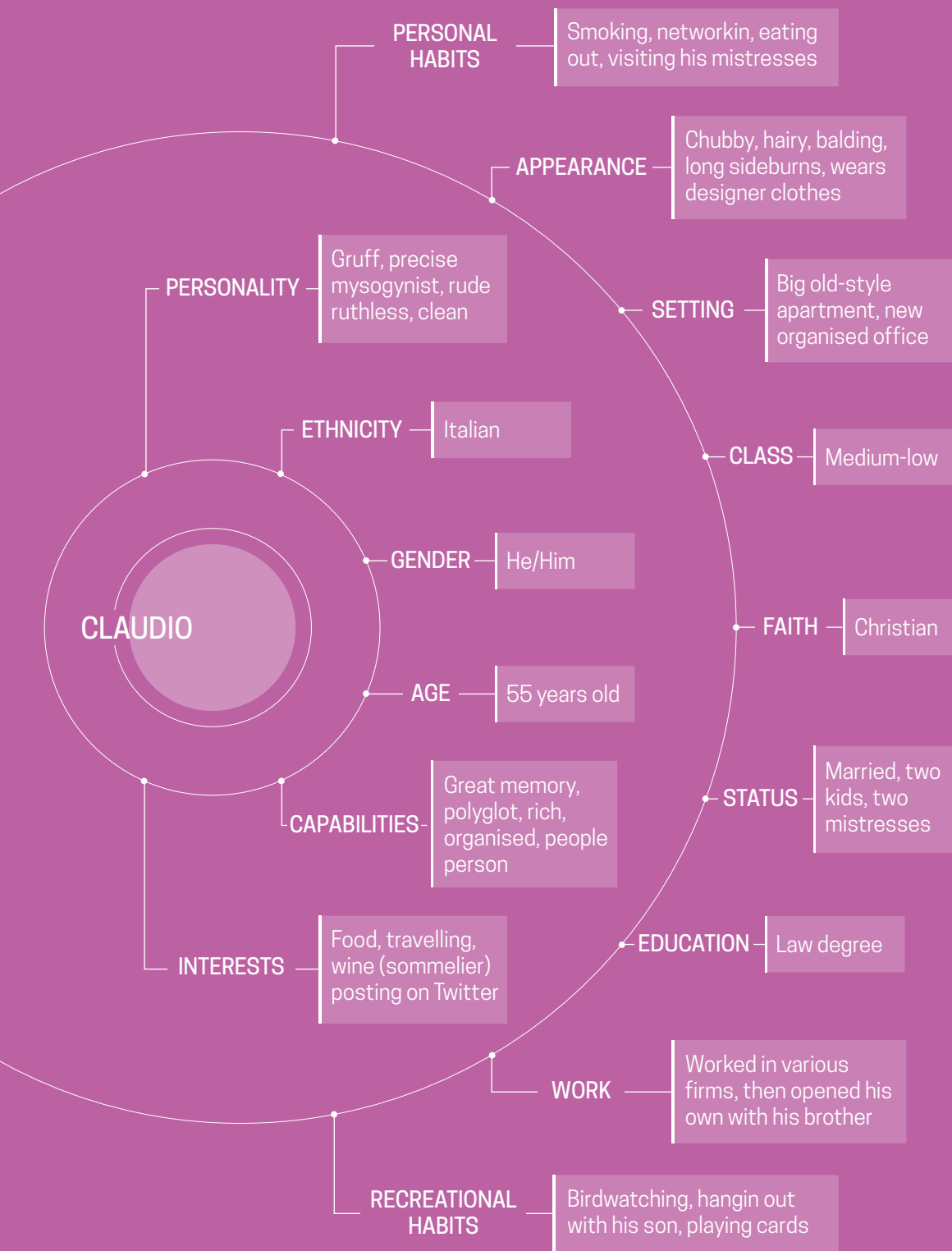
As anticipated in par 6.2.1, women's **support systems** play a crucial role in the creation of a safe space in which victims and survivors can find the courage and personal strength to speak up and ask for help. However, it was also discussed [[→ 6.4](#)] how when this support system fails, the consequences for the victim's wellbeing and mental health can be incredibly severe. In this narrative, since Dalila's only friends are also Davide's, her support system consists of her close family members: her father **Kaamil** and her older sister **Nadia**. These two characters partially embody the archetype of the **threshold guardian**: they are not on Davide's sides, but their neglecting behaviours, whether is carried out willingly (in Nadia's case) or unwillingly (by Kaamil) enable the **enforcement of the abuser's control** and **worsen Dalila's mental state**.











### CLAUDIO AND TOXIC MASCULINITY 6.4.3.6

Finally, the last main character in the story is Claudio, Dalila's boss and co-founder of the legal firm Tabelli & Partners. At the beginning of the story, Claudio is the first to perform one of the toxic behaviours depicted within the narrative: when Dalila is still at home, he asks her to dress provocatively to impress a prospective client. He embodies the first warning sign that this is not going to be an exciting adventure, and rather an anguished portrayal of real-life occurrences. In doing this, he kick-starts the story, playing the role of *negative herald*, the character who presents the hero with a challenge that forces him/her to get involved (Vogler, 1998).

However, Claudio also represents what we previously described as toxic masculinity [[→ 3.2.2](#)]: he is an aggressive, misogynistic man who carries out several of the wrongful behaviours that the narrative tries to expose. Even though *his attitudes are never violent in nature*, they prove to be terribly damaging as well: he not only sexualises Dalila, arguing that “that’s the only thing she is useful for”, he also diminishes another woman’s qualifications, and proceeds to declare sexist comments once she leaves the room. He is an aggressive, self-absorbed business man, who likes to think of himself as part of the better generation. He constantly performs actions of *conservative masculinity*, devaluing emotions and dismissing women’s work and hustles. Claudio represents that segment of the Italian population that has strong and rooted antiquated views of what it means to “be a man”: it is difficult to change their minds, and therefore it is crucial to educate and sensitise younger generations to prevent the transmission of the same misogynistic values.

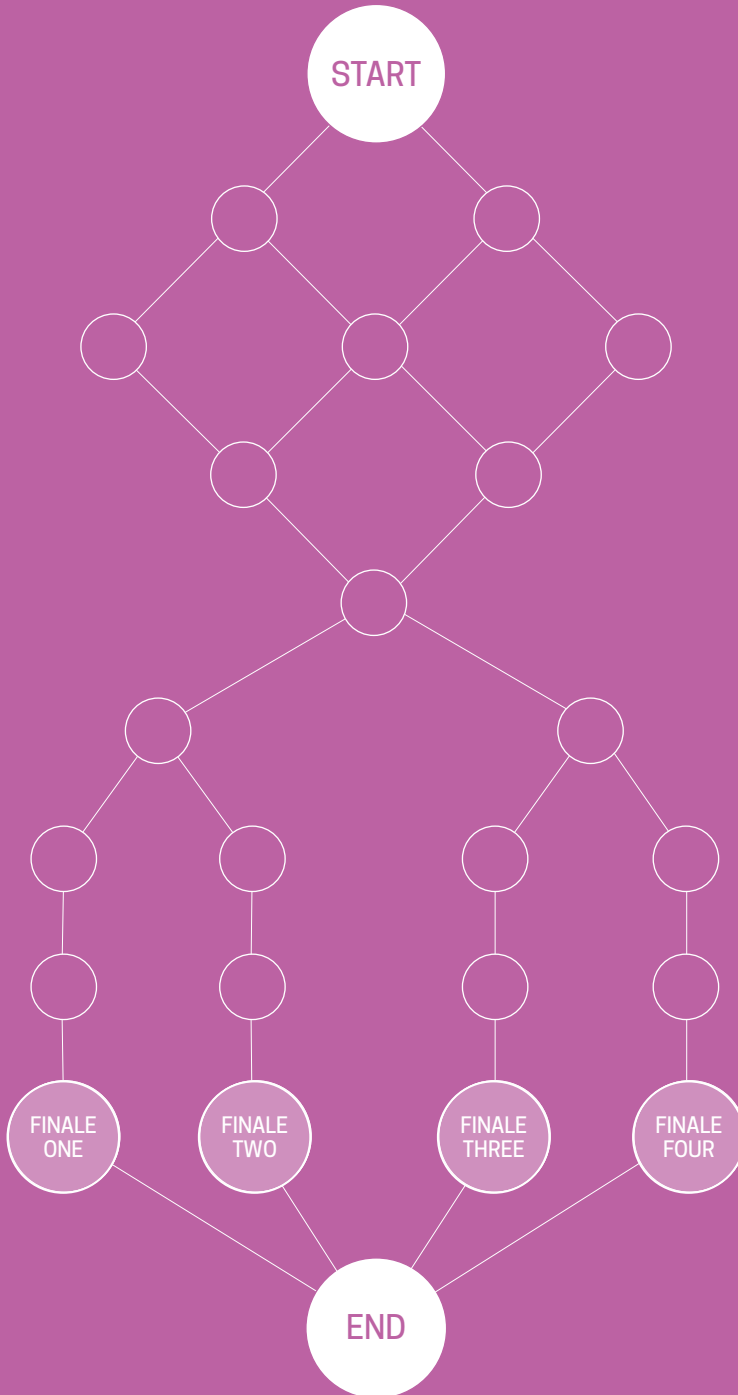
**Fig. 6.13.** Claudio's character wheel

#### 6.4.4 A TWOFOLD NARRATIVE STRUCTURE TO FAVOUR PROGRESSIVE IMMERSION

As previously mentioned [→ 5.4.1], another important aspect of the design process was defining the structure of the interactive drama, to favour immersion while safeguarding the audience's well-being. In par. 1.3.3, it has been analysed how, when creating an interactive media that discusses sensitive topics, it is crucial to ensure that the audience has the possibility to avoid possibly traumatic events within the game, that may trigger unpleasant reactions and ruin their experience. In particular, during the 2021 *Games for Change Virtual Festival*, Dunlap explained that for the creators of those games who aim to question players' emotions, it is important to learn to walk the fine line between games that activate challenging feelings while minimising the risk of psychological distress.

Following Dunlap's suggestions (2021), *Come vetro temperato* provides the audience, before the beginning of the game, a specific trigger warning, listing the potential triggering events and behaviours mentioned in the narrative as well as a reflection on the importance of mental health. However, there was the need to further protect the audience from trauma, without interrupting the process of immersion. This was possible through an authorial design process applied to the structure of the narrative [→ Fig. 6.14]. In fact the interactive drama is divided in two acts, which discuss different aspects of gender-based violence. In the first act, the narrative focuses on toxic behaviours related to VAWG, which enable the normalisation of this issue and worsen the daily lives of victims and women everywhere. This first part of the narrative presents a *foldback story* structure (Adams & Rollings, 2006): this means that the players, despite the decisions they make, cannot avoid certain specific plot points. The players are forced to experience instances of cat-calling or workplace sexism, and therefore are gradually immersed into the narrative: they are given the possibility to slowly test the water, to

Fig. 6.14. Overview of the interactive drama's structure



**ACT 1**  
Foldback  
narrative

**ACT 2**  
Branching  
narrative

assess whether this narrative is something they can handle or if it can only trigger discomfort and the memory of traumatic events.

In fact, the second part of the narrative is more centred around the more severe sides of the issue, focusing in particular on the reality of abusive and violent relationships. In this act, the choices made by the players actively define the outcome of the story: the second part of the interactive drama has in fact a branching narrative structure, with four possible endings of varying severity and length. The four endings explore different aspects of the abusive relationship and the impact that other people can have on the victim's life and the outcome of their story. Even though all endings present similar final reflections, the text of the last passage slightly changes, to focus on the specific impact that the various characters had on the conclusion of Dalila's story. This final page reroutes the player to a landing page discussing what can really be done for women living in this kind of situation, and the work of Italian anti-violence centres.

### 6.4.5 PLOT SUMMARY

As previously mentioned, the interactive drama describes one day in the life of Dalila, a young woman, who is experiencing abuse and gender-based discrimination in both her private and her professional life. However, the narrative starts with a home page, with a brief description of what the user is about to experience and a link to the trigger warning page, which encourages people who suffered from gender-based abuse to opt out of the game because of the explicit content depicted in the narrative. The homepage cites:

This is not a happy story. It is not real, but it is realistic. It is the story of many women, but it is also the story of one. This narrative is about gender-based violence, so please read the trigger warning before beginning.

Any references to actual events and/or real people are purely coincidental.

A complete overview of the plot can be found at p. 252. The game starts with Dalila waking up in her apartment, next to Davide, who is still sleeping. The first act of the game, which takes place during the morning, depicts numerous instances of toxic behaviours related to gender-based violence, to which the player, as Dalila, can decide how to react.

→ Sexualisation: When Dalila is getting ready, her boss, Claudio, sends her a text asking her to wear a short skirt, to impress some of the clients they have to meet. The player can choose whether to do as Claudio asks (in order not to lose her job) or to ignore the texts and wear pants. This choice will influence what happens in the subway later on. Moreover, if she decides to wear the skirt, the clients will comment on it, making Dalila extremely uncomfortable;

→ Victim blaming: Dalila finds an article with a title which blames a victim of sexual assault for what happened to her. The player can choose whether to read the article and to dwell on its content. Victim blaming also appears in case Dalila is harassed on the subway and she chooses to react: in this case, two bystanders criticise her for what she was wearing;

→ Cat-calling: if Dalila chooses to have breakfast in a bar instead of at home, a couple of construction workers verbally harass her: she can choose whether to react (in this case she is supported by a group of people) or to ignore them;

→ Workplace harrassment: if Dalila decides to have breakfast in a bar, Sara, the barista, asks her advice about her manager, who is sexually harrasing her and the other female employ-

ee. She is afraid to speak up because her contract is off-the-book and she does not want to lose her job. The player can decide whether to advise Sara to speak up or to ignore the manager. During the second act, the barista will text Dalila the outcome of the story: if she has suggested Sara should speak up, the other employee eventually joins in, threatening to sue the manager together; on the other hand, if the player has advised Sara to ignore the boss, the situation will only get worse;

→ **Street harassment**: when Dalila takes the subway, men will make eyes at her and subtly comment on her attractiveness. However, if the player has decided to wear a skirt, a man will get close to Dalila and touch her inappropriately. If before this event Dalila made some feminist decisions (e.g. standing up to the cat-callers, ignoring the article, etc), she will be able to yell at the aggressor. On the other hand, if her previous decisions have been more passive, she will only escape from the man by getting off the subway at the wrong stop.

The second act is more focused on the **dynamics of the abusive relationship** and how other characters can be helpful or unsympathetic and obstructive towards Dalila. According to the person the player decides to trust, the ending will change. At the beginning of the second act, Dalila meets Alice, Davide's ex girlfriend. If Dalila chooses to trust her, the player will end up in the first or second ending; on the other hand if she does not, she will go back to the office, where she will meet Riccardo, her nice and fascinating co-worker who is offering her a new job. Depending on whether the players put their faith in Riccardo, they will reach the third or fourth endings. The **four conclusions** are briefly described here.

→ **Finale 1 - Dalila trusts Alice**: Through a long conversation, eventually Dalila manages to open up to Alice, who confesses



that one of her co-workers was actually killed by her husband. Dalila tells everything to Alice, and confesses that she is pregnant due Davide's sexually violent behaviours. Alice eventually helps Dalila reach an anti-violence centre;

→ **Finale 2** - Davide comes to the bar: Dalila does not trust Alice completely and eventually Davide, in a fit of jealous rage, arrives at the bar and attacks the two women. Dalila loses consciousness, while Alice calls the police.

→ **Finale 3** - Dalila goes home to Davide: if Dalila refuses Riccardo's help, she tries to reach out to her family (her dad and her sister), but they are unable or unwilling to support her. Once she gets home, she tries to gently tell Davide she would like to go back to university to finish her law degree, but they end up fighting. Eventually, Davide prevails and abuses her, even after Dalila has confessed she is already pregnant with his child.

→ **Finale 4** - Riccardo rapes Dalila: if Dalila decides to go out with Riccardo to discuss her new job perspectives, on the way back he takes her to a secluded place where he rapes her, threatening to fire her if she ever spoke up. Dalila, completely destroyed, goes back home, hoping to find comfort in Davide and the child she is bearing, even though she knows everything will only make her more miserable.

All the endings converge in a **final passage** that reflects on the interactive drama, with a particular hint to the specific finale reached by the player. The final sentence of the page will link to the **landing page** with all the information regarding Italian anti-violence centres and their activities to help and support victims and survivors of gender-based violence. The final text (in this case for the fourth ending) cites:

This is not the end. This is not the end for Delilah, and it will not be the end for you, who have suffered this day with her.

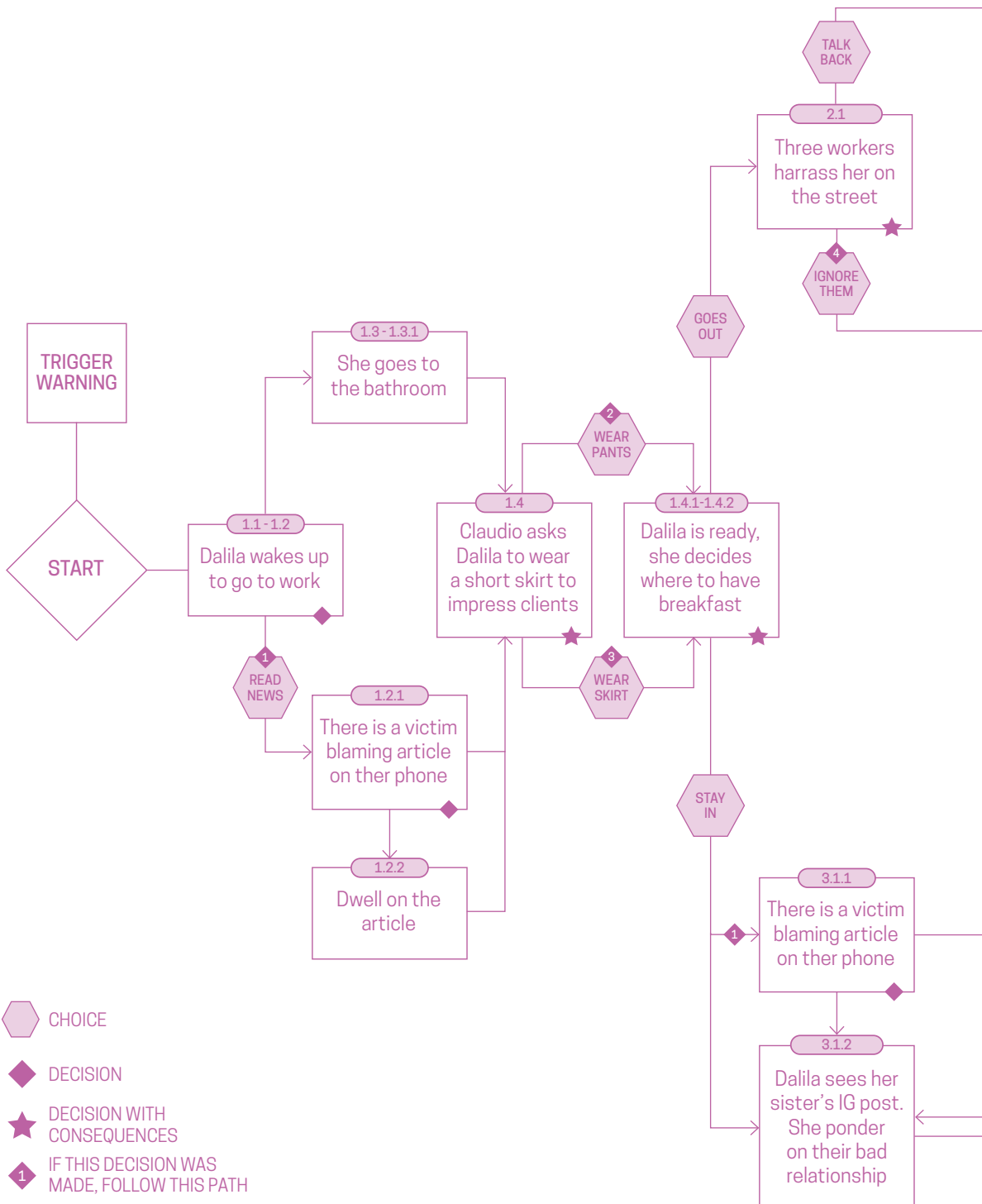
You have made many choices up to this point, but none of your decisions caused what happened to you. Violence is always a choice of the perpetrator.

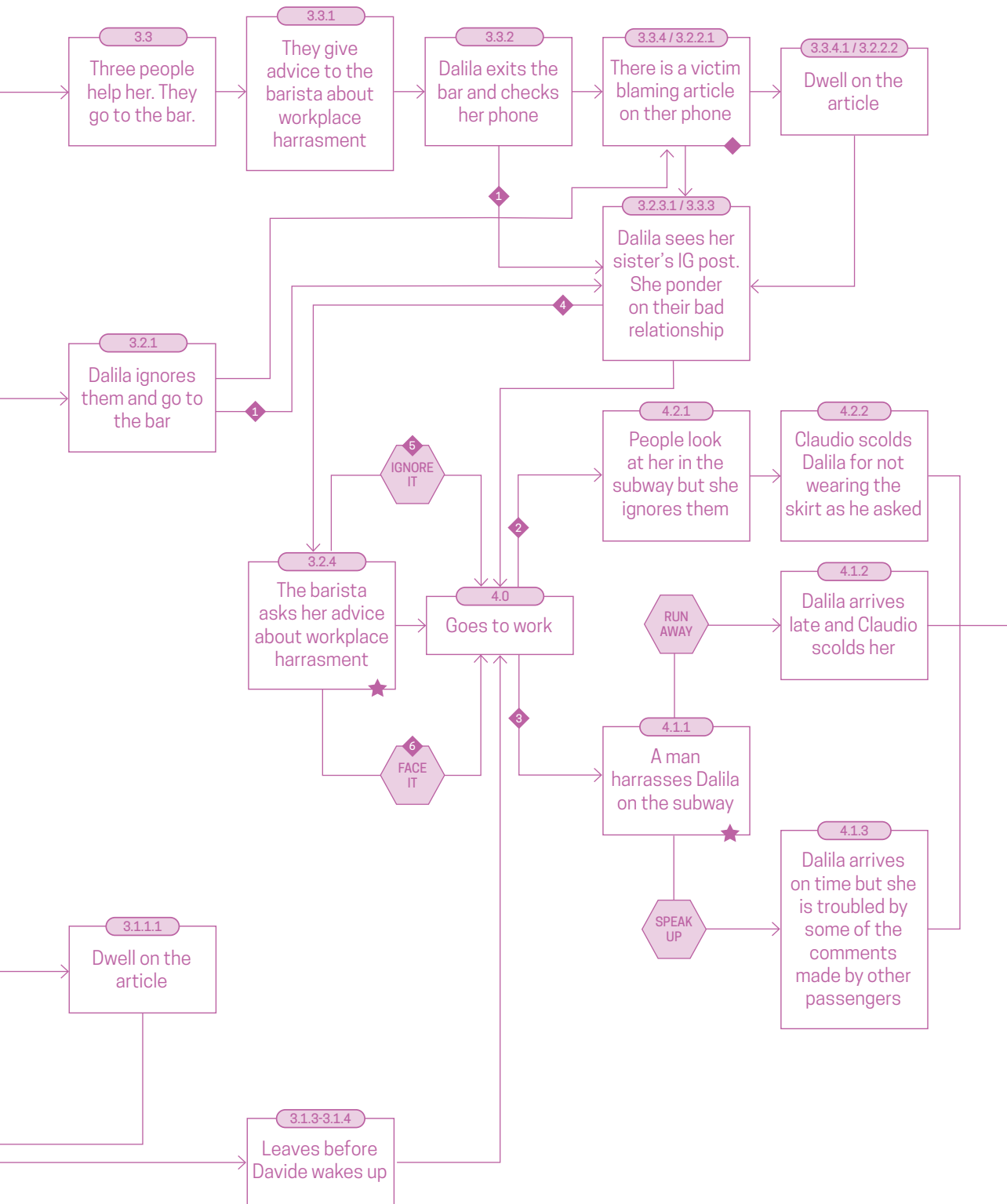
**The violence was not your fault.**

However, this does not mean that your choices are over. You can still choose to ask for help, or you can help someone else do so. You can still make sure that people like David and Richard never ruin another woman's life again. You can be the support system that Delilah's family failed to be.

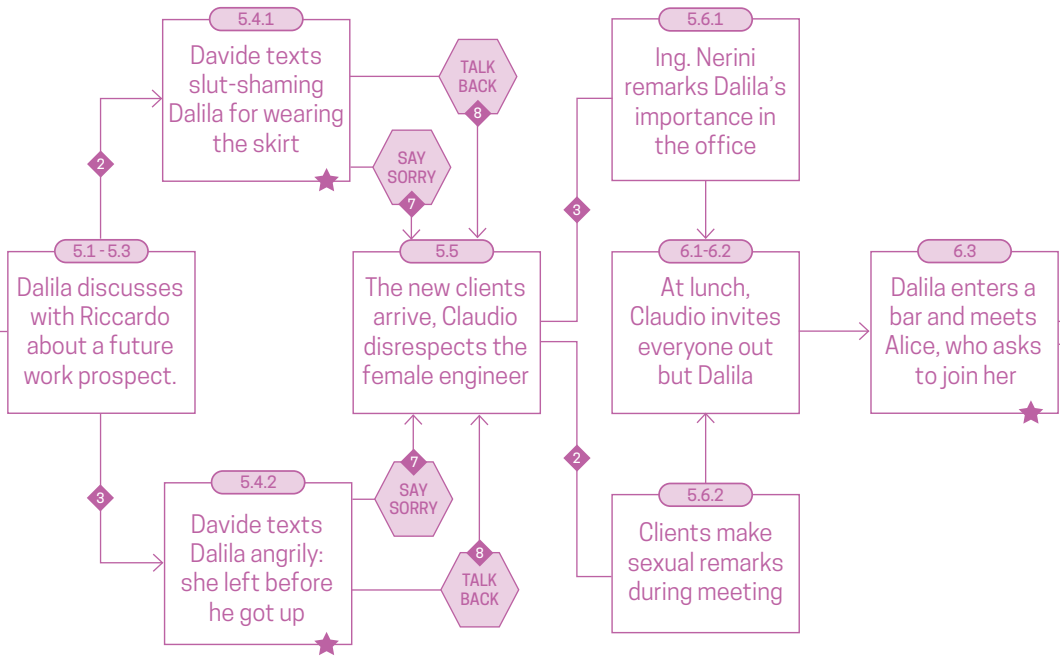
**Because for every woman who chooses to ask for help, there will always be someone ready to answer.**

# ACT 1 SCENE 1- 4





# ACT 1-2 SCENE 5 - 6 - 8

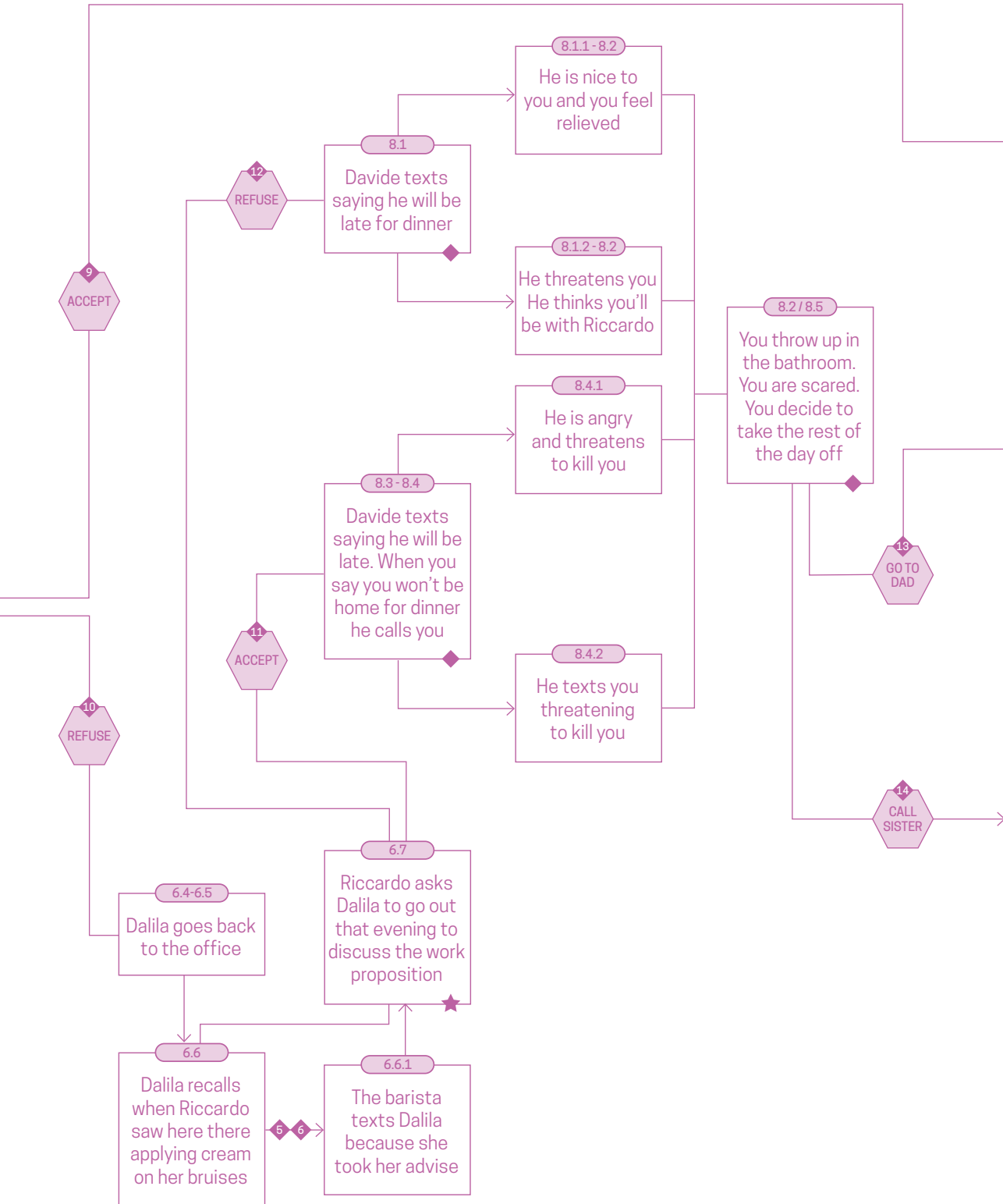


CHOICE

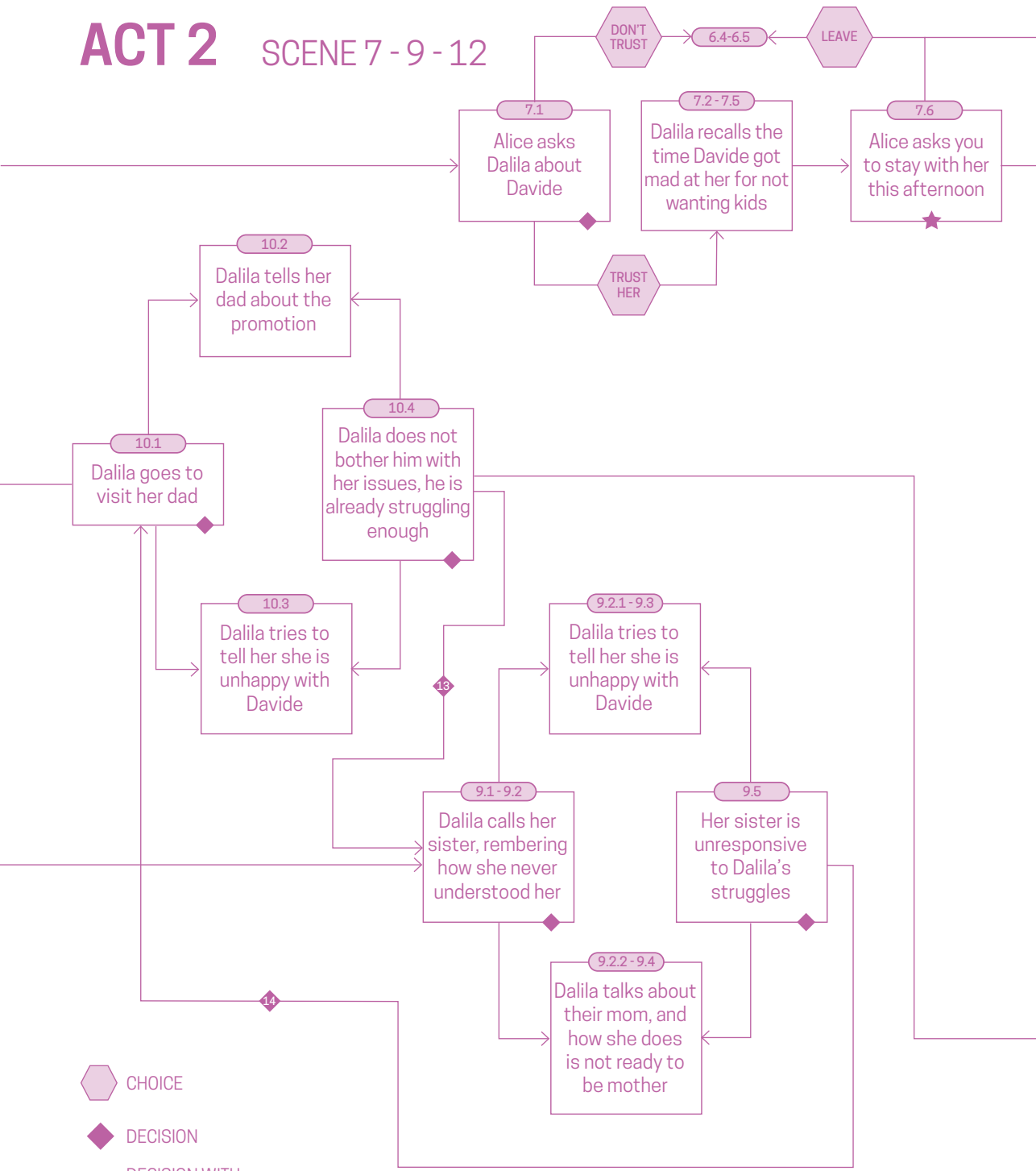
DECISION

DECISION WITH CONSEQUENCES

IF THIS DECISION WAS MADE, FOLLOW THIS PATH



# ACT 2 SCENE 7 - 9 - 12



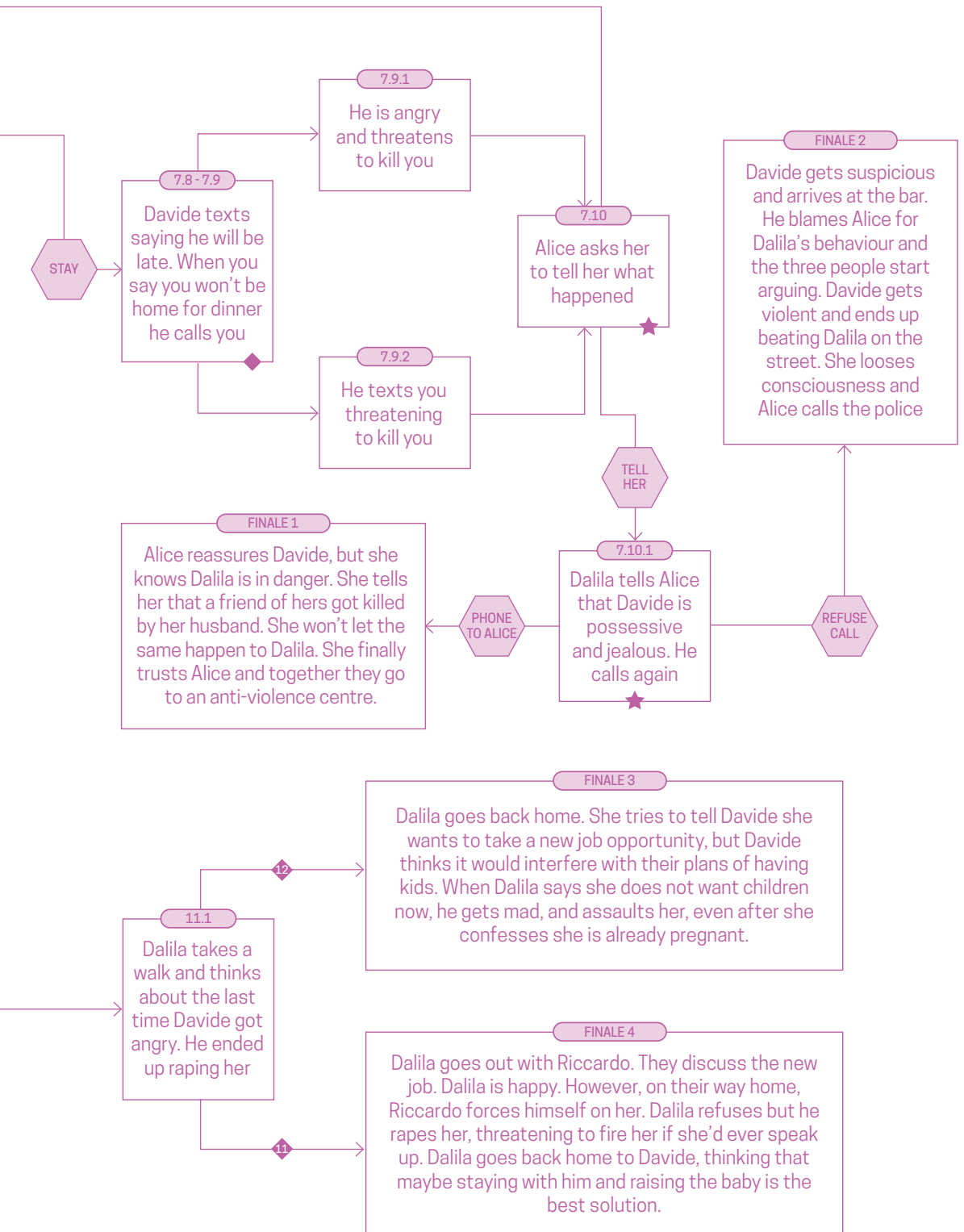
CHOICE

DECISION

DECISION WITH CONSEQUENCES

IF THIS DECISION WAS MADE, FOLLOW THIS PATH





STAY

7.8-7.9

Davide texts saying he will be late. When you say you won't be home for dinner he calls you

7.9.1

He is angry and threatens to kill you

7.9.2

He texts you threatening to kill you

7.10

Alice asks her to tell her what happened

TELL HER

7.10.1

Dalila tells Alice that Davide is possessive and jealous. He calls again

PHONE TO ALICE

FINALE 1

Alice reassures Davide, but she knows Dalila is in danger. She tells her that a friend of hers got killed by her husband. She won't let the same happen to Dalila. She finally trusts Alice and together they go to an anti-violence centre.

FINALE 2

Davide gets suspicious and arrives at the bar. He blames Alice for Dalila's behaviour and the three people start arguing. Davide gets violent and ends up beating Dalila on the street. She loses consciousness and Alice calls the police

REFUSE CALL

FINALE 3

Dalila goes back home. She tries to tell Davide she wants to take a new job opportunity, but Davide thinks it would interfere with their plans of having kids. When Dalila says she does not want children now, he gets mad, and assaults her, even after she confesses she is already pregnant.

11.1

Dalila takes a walk and thinks about the last time Davide got angry. He ended up raping her

FINALE 4

Dalila goes out with Riccardo. They discuss the new job. Dalila is happy. However, on their way home, Riccardo forces himself on her. Dalila refuses but he rapes her, threatening to fire her if she'd ever speak up. Dalila goes back home to Davide, thinking that maybe staying with him and raising the baby is the best solution.

12

11

### 6.4.6 REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE: A LANDING PAGE FOR ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES.

As anticipated in the previous section, the final part of the narrative links to a landing page which aims to show to the players the presence of anti-violence centres and the services they can provide to women who are suffering from abuse. As shown by the pre-experience surveys [→ 6.6.1], the majority of the population does not have a clear idea of what do anti-violence centres do, or if there are any in the area in which they are living. Raising awareness about the work of the professionals and trained volunteers in these centres is crucial to help bystanders to direct victims to these safe spaces, in which they can start a process of regaining personal strength to leave the abuser or changing the dynamics of an unequal relationship.

The landing page provides short and concise information with regards to all the Italian centres that are part of D.i.Re and their activities, but it also concerns the aim of the project and the context of development. A few call-to-actions buttons are included to encourage the players to support the work of anti-violence centres as well as the victims of gender-based violence, by donating to D.i.Re (as it has been done for projects such as *Darfur is Dying*) (Peng et al., 2010) or by sharing the interactive drama with others (as in the case of *Spent*).

## **COME VETRO TEMPERATO**

<b>Title:</b>	<i>Come vetro temperato</i> (literally <i>As tempered glass</i> )
<b>Genre:</b>	Drama, Realist fiction
<b>Goal:</b>	To inspire empathy towards victims of abuse, prompting dialogue with regards of gender-based violence and raising awareness about italian anti-violence centres
<b>Structure:</b>	Foldback story / branching narrative
<b>Audience:</b>	Bystanders, from 18 to 35 years old.
<b>Platform:</b>	Browser
<b>Media:</b>	Interactive drama
<b>Game mode:</b>	Individual gameplay
<b>Duration:</b>	15-35 minutes

## 6.5 COME VETRO TEMPERATO: DESIGNING AN IMMERSIVE INTERACTIVE DRAMA

As aforementioned [→ 6.4], *Come vetro temperato* is an online interactive drama directed to 18 to 35 years old people who never underwent traumatic experiences of gender-based abuse. The game, a branching narrative with four possible endings, aims to encourage social change in relation to gender-based violence, by informing the audience about anti-violence centres and inspiring empathy towards victims of abuse. The game is meant to be played alone in 15 to 35 minutes, according to the branching plot chosen by the user.

The interactive drama was inspired and motivated by the research developed over the course of 8 months, and its design process followed a set of steps necessary for the construction of the narrative. After having defined the aims and the target audience of the project, the first steps entailed the creation of the characters and the storyworld respectively through the *Character Wheel* (Piredda et al., 2015) [→ 6.4.3] and the *Storyworld Canvas* (Ciancia et. al, 2019)<sup>10</sup> [→ 6.4.1]. The narrative was developed on a *Miro board*, which enabled the creation of passages and intersections [→ 6.4.4], which were later implemented in *Twine*, together with the final text of the story, the background illustrations and the soundtrack created to favour players' immersion. The prototype of the interactive drama, employed during the testing phase, was uploaded on *GitHub*.

This section will discuss more thoroughly the second part of the design process, namely textual and visual style of the final prototype and its relative landing page.

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<sup>10</sup> Further detailed discussion on these tools can be found in parr. 6.3.1 and 6.3.3

## WRITING STYLE: A FRAGMENTED 6.5.1 PAINFUL EXPERIENCE

In order not to bore the players with useless details, but to favour immersion in the same time, the writing style of the narrative is supposed to express Dalila's point of view in a concise, yet emotional way. The text is written in second person: as Salter (2016, p. 4) argues, the use of "you" often recurs in Twine games not only because it recalls *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, but also because it «casts the player in the moment, asking the player to participate in moments of emotional struggle». The second person actively draws the player in, but it does not force the role-taking process as the first person would do. It slightly protects the players, while also enabling their immersion: the use of "you" enables the users to understand that they are experiencing the narrative not as themselves but as a specific character. The narrative in fact presents Dalila's point of view, and the players cannot detach themselves from Dalila's characteristics and limitations: they are forced to experience the events as the protagonist, reading her thoughts, reminiscing her memories, feeling her reactions.

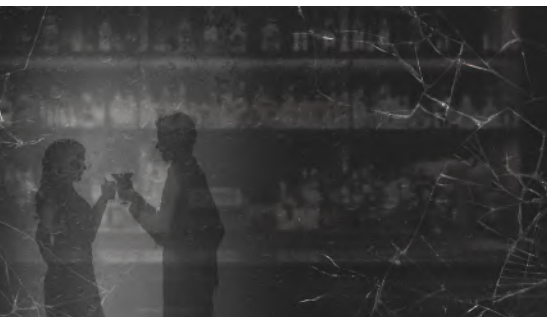
Moreover, the writing style of the narrative aims to mimic the struggles Dalila is living: especially when it comes to describe past traumatic experiences (such as the first sexual assault Davide initiated), her memory is erratic, her narration is fragmented. Survivors often have a hard time verbally recalling upsetting events and this is why emphatic reactions are crucial to help them work on their trauma (Moor, 2007). The writing style aims to help the users dive into victims' often self-sabotaging thoughts, their self-blame, their suffering, to enable the creation of a stronger connection between player and characters and to inspire emphatic reactions towards women who are experiencing these situations.

## 6.5.2 VIOLENCE IS A SHATTERING EXPERIENCE: THE BACKGROUND ILLUSTRATIONS

As anticipated in par. 6.3, the title of the narrative was inspired by a quote from *Don Quixote*, which compares women to glass, resistant yet still breakable and difficult to piece back together once shattered. The concept of breakable glass is revived in the visual part of the narrative, namely the background images of each passage. Every section of the story is in fact accompanied by an illustration, silhouettes drawn on a foggy window, which however still reveals the setting of the scene. The background images create the atmosphere for the narration and provide a simple representation of the events: the silhouettes allow a more inclusive representation of the characters (skin colour, physical characteristics, etc. are not depicted) yet enable to set the scene for the narrative. However, it is crucial to underline that the backgrounds created for those scenes that concern acts of physical and sexual violence, in particular those who take place during the day (and are not flashbacks of past abuses), are empty: the scenery, the foggy glass and its cracks are still present, but the silhouettes are not depicted, to avoid any representation that these severe and traumatic events. This project does not aim to portray violence, only to help bystanders understand the consequences that these acts have on women.

When present, the silhouettes are proportional to the background image (the theoretical physical space behind the foggy glass), so they appear to be directly inserted in the scene. The background setting can vary from street views, to offices to restaurants, according to where each scene takes place. Nonetheless, the most crucial aspect of the background images is the progressive cracks [→ Fig. 6.16] in the glass. In fact, the more the player dives into the game, the more traumatic events Dalila will experience: this will be mirrored by the cracks in the background glass, which slowly becomes more and more broken. The progressive increase of the cracks is

Fig. 6.15. Collection of some of the illustrations created for *Come vetro temperato*







a metaphorical representation of the effect that gender-based violence and the toxic behaviours related to VAWG have on a woman, especially on someone who is already living in a difficult situation. The background images aim to resonate what the textual part of the narrative describes, to reinforce the messages conveyed by the story and to favour a more immersive and emotional experience for the users.

Fig. 6.16. Progressive sequence of the shattering of the glass

### AMBIENT NOISE: 6.5.3 AN IMMERSIVE JOURNEY

The third crucial aspect of the prototype is the audio. To favour immersion, yet without distracting the players from the narrative, the prototype presents in the majority of the passages a background audio track, which evokes the setting in which the scene takes place (e.g. the office, a restaurant, a parking lot, etc.). As proven by Gormanley (2013, p. 121), «players can be immersed through the use of audio and that different applications of audio can induce different levels of immersion». In this specific case, audio was used to help players immerse themselves in the situation and to enhance the relationship between them and Dalila. However, it is worth mentioning to additional use of background audio to convey specific messages:

→ Static audio is employed during the homepage as well as the final passage, to underline the difference between the events of the narrative and the creators comments and suggestions about it. Moreover, a static track is also employed in case the passages which describe memories of violence, to convey the idea that for victims something it is hard to clearly depict and recount what happened, because of the trauma these events entailed;

→ Silence is forced in the scenes which concern occurrences of physical and sexual violence during the day in which the story takes place, to underline the dramatic force of the event.

The majority of the audio tracks were mixed to fit the scene and to accompany the players' experience. A complete list of the attribution for the sound mixed can be found among the references.

## 6.5.4 USER INTERFACE AND FONT USAGE

The interface of the game was maintained simple in order to favour immersion and to help players focus on the plot of the story. The interface consisted of three main elements: the background image, the text and the interactive buttons. The textual part of the narrative with its relative buttons is positioned on the right side of the screen, while the left part is left empty to show the illustrations. Two fonts are employed in the prototype: *El Messiri*, a modern Arabic typeface created by Mohamed Gaber, and *Assistant*, a Hebrew and Latin sans serif font designed by Ben Nathan. *El Messiri* was used for titles in both the game and the landing page, while *Assistant* was employed for texts and the buttons, due to its higher legibility on screen.

Fig. 6.17. UI wireframe

**Aa** ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
 abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
 0123456789 .,:;!/?&#

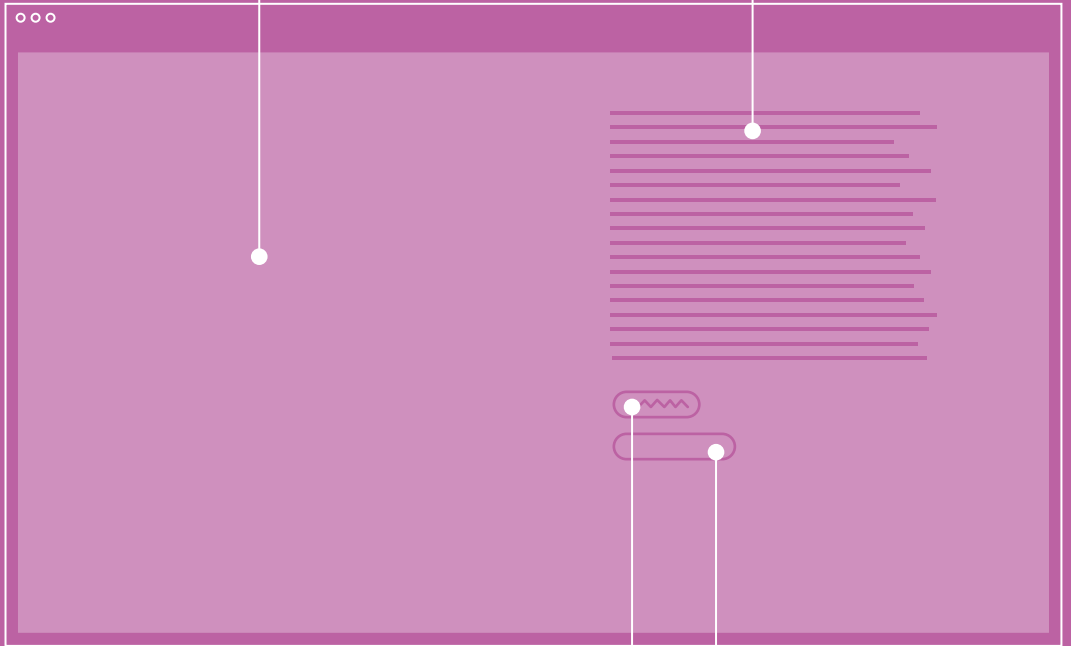
Bold · EL MESSIRI

**Aa** ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
 abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
 0123456789 .,:;!/?&#

Regular · ASSISTANT

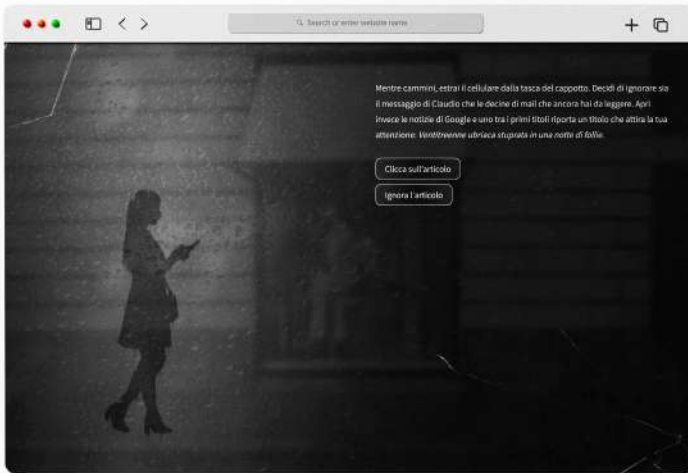
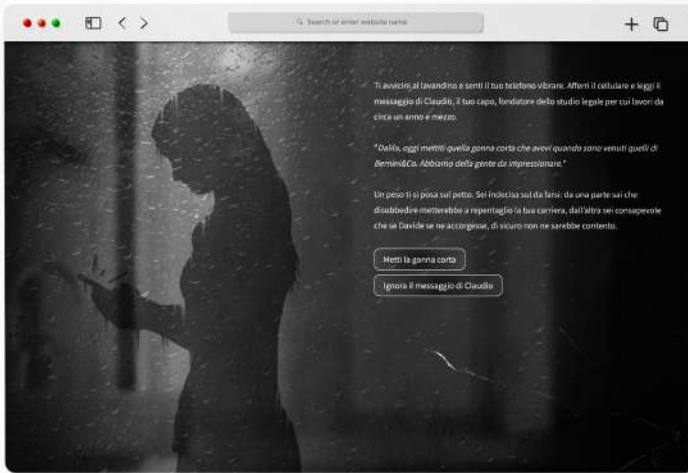
ILLUSTRATION

PASSAGE TEXT



AVAILABLE  
CHOICE

UNAVAILABLE  
CHOICE



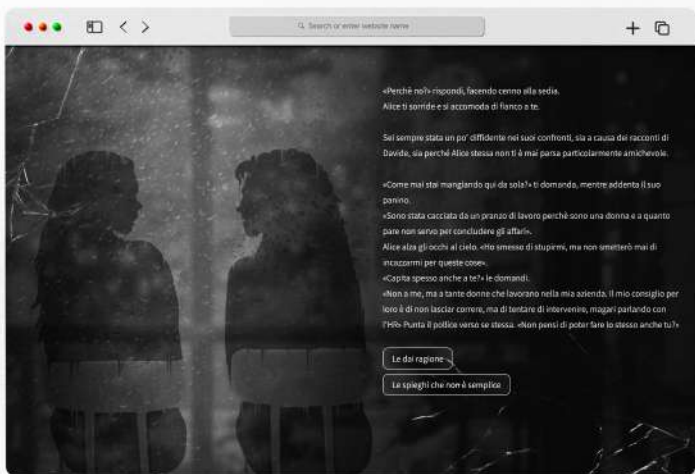
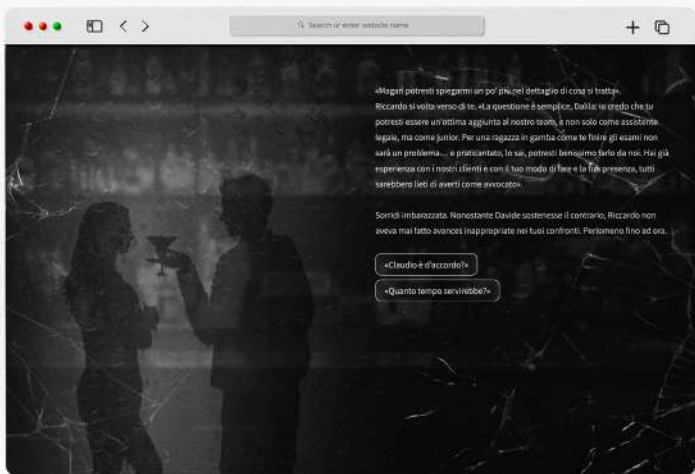


Fig. 6.18. Screens from Come vetro temperato

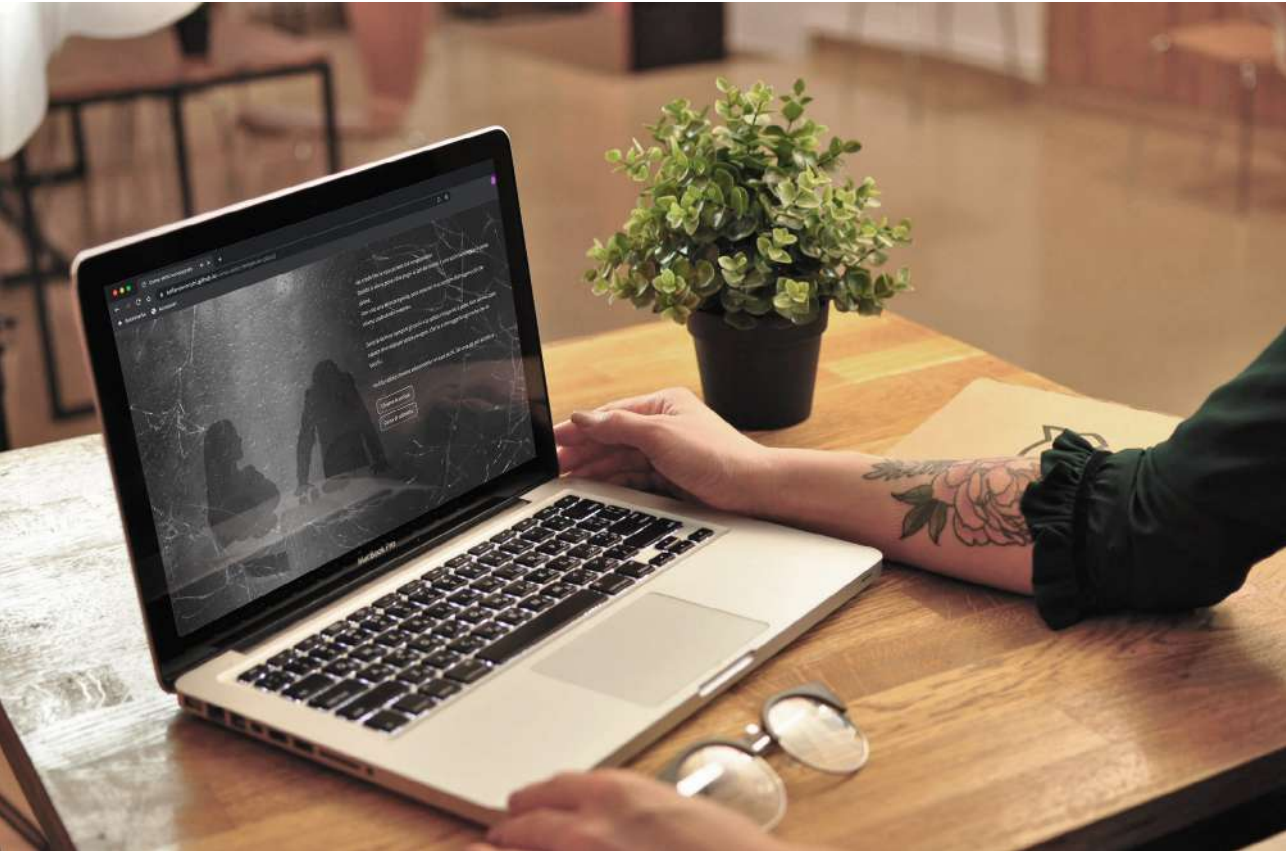




Fig. 6.19. Screens from Come vetro temperato

### 6.5.5 IT'S ALWAYS DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN: DESIGNING THE LANDING PAGE

The final part of the prototype entailed the creation of a landing page which, as mentioned in par. 6.3.5, aims to provide information with regards to Italian anti-violence centres and their activities to support victims and survivors of gender based violence as well as to educate the public about this issue, starting with younger generations. The website wanted to be different from the narrative, yet recalls some of its visual aspects. The entire interactive drama presents an overall dark and ominous outlook, in order to convey the sense of anguish and oppression victims experience on a daily basis. On the other hand, the website reports all the information about the volunteers and professionals, those people who can offer hope and a new beginning to women who are suffering because of abuse.

For this reason, the website presents a white background (in contrast with the dark nature of the background images of the interactive drama), but it employs the violet used in the narrative (for the buttons in hover or the links in the homepage) as the main colour. Moreover the interactive drama's style is recalled by the illustrations, which still present a foggy and wet glass texture, but this time in a violet shade. The typefaces employed in the website are the same used in the interactive narrative: *Assistant* and *El Messiri*.

Fig. 6.20. Landing page layout



## Scegli il Centro contro la violenza

La rete dei Centri Antiviolenza Italiani cerca la prima linea di contrasto contro la violenza maschile. Sempre, con ogni donna.

[Visualizza](#) [Filtra](#)



### Contro la violenza c'è molto da DIRE

Riconoscere i segni della violenza di genere non è sempre facile, ma se lo vedi in una persona che conosci, ti affida e ti regala il Centro Antiviolenza più vicino a te, non lo guardi più.

La Rete Nazionale dei Centri Antiviolenza è più di 20 anni forte per il supporto alle donne maltrattate, e ha anche affinato il supporto necessario alle donne che ancora soffrono il trauma di oggi.

[Scopri di più](#)

## I servizi dei CAV

I Centri Antiviolenza Italiani offrono una gamma variata di servizi, a seconda delle esigenze delle donne vulnerabili e persecutorie, per sostenere le donne nel processo di liberazione dalla violenza.



### Accoglienza

L'accoglienza può essere informale, o all'interno di case rifugio (anche con indirizzo segreto).



### Supporto legale

Supporto nel navigare gli iter giudiziari, e sicurezza delle situazioni in tutte le fasi della donna.



### Supporto psicologico

Offerta di supporto per ristabilire la donna e la sicurezza e ripulire la vita personale, emotiva e psicologica.



### Ricerca e Sensibilizzazione

Progetti di ricerca, studi, pubblicazioni e attività di sensibilizzazione nelle scuole.



### Consulenza genitoriale

Processo di sostegno psicologico per i minori che hanno subito violenza e programmi di genitorialità coordinata per le madri.



### Consulenza immigrazione

Sostegno per donne straniere in una cultura di dialogo con il sistema socio, sanitario e politico locale.



### Gruppi di autoaiuto

Spazio che si sostengono a vicenda e insieme si attivano per lottare contro la violenza maschile.



### Orientamento al lavoro

Accompagnamento ai centri di servizi del lavoro e dell'istruzione per guidare le donne vulnerabili e trovare un luogo di lavoro.



### Formazione

Spazi di educazione media e sessuale (per scuole superiori, del mondo giovanile e della forza del lavoro).

## Sostieni i CAV Sostieni le donne

Il nostro lavoro continua in oltre 100 Centri Antiviolenza con grande cuore per tutte le donne, ma questo non basta. Servono anche fondi per poter essere all'altezza delle sfide che fronteggiamo ogni giorno.

È così che il prossimo, perché non a guidare sempre più donne in difficoltà per una donna che vuole costruire una relazione salutare.

[Donazioni](#)



## 6.6 AUDIENCE TESTING AND OVERALL RESPONSE

As described in par. 6.2.2, the testing for the Twine prototype was performed in three steps: a more technical testing, a narrative testing with the volunteers of Parma's anti-violence centre, and an audience testing, divided in four different sessions. While the first two steps of the testing were crucial to assess and correct issues at a technical and narrative level, the sessions with the audience aimed to answer the research questions and to evaluate the efficiency of the interactive drama with regards to its objectives.

This section will analyse and compare the information gathered from the participants before and after the experience, and assess the results in relation to the defined objectives and the expected results to the research questions. Moreover, from the acquired findings, further inquiries with regards to possible developments and exposed issues will be explained in Chapter 7. For the purpose of assessing the efficiency of the project, various people were involved in different testing sessions:

- Two online calls organised on 21 and 22 February 2022, during which a group of 35 people (20 and 10 respectively divided onto two dates, plus 5 participants who completed the experience autonomously)
- An in-presence session, performed on 28 February 2022, during Prof. Mariani and Prof. Ciancia's course *Complex Artefacts And System Design Studio*: out of the 48 students of the class, 34 people completed both surveys as well as the interactive experience;
- Another in-presence testing was conducted on 15 March 2022 during Prof. Valeria Bucchetti's course *Communication Design and Gender Culture*, with a class of 14 Italian students.

The materials used for testing, such as the complete list of the survey questions, can be found in the Appendix.

## PRE-EXPERIENCE ASSESSMENT 6.6.1

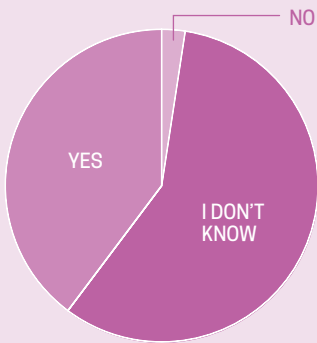
The pre-experience survey was to define the participants' demographic, their overall opinions about gender-based violence and the response they usually have when passively consuming media about the topic. Moreover, the survey was also designed to test their knowledge with regards to anti-violence centres. The questionnaire was completed by 106 people, but since the post-experience survey was filled out by 83 participants, the un-matched results have not been considered for calculating the results of the testing.

The first section of the questionnaire was dedicated to defining the profile of the participants. Since the target audience was restricted to 18 to 35 years old bystanders, the people engaged in the testing belonged to this age range, with an average of 24,5 years old. 66% of the participants (n=55) were women, 30% were men (n=25), 2 people identified themselves as non-binary, and one selected "other". Moreover, since the majority of the people who joined the testing were students from Politecnico di Milano or my acquaintances, most of the participants are currently living in Parma (n=20) or Milano (n=31). Furthermore, 57 participants reported undergraduate degree as their higher level of education, while 20 people indicated an even higher qualification (master's degree or PhD): having an audience which such academic accomplishments may have influenced the overall positive response to the game [→ 6.6.2], and testing sessions with a more differentiated crowd may benefit further research<sup>11</sup>.

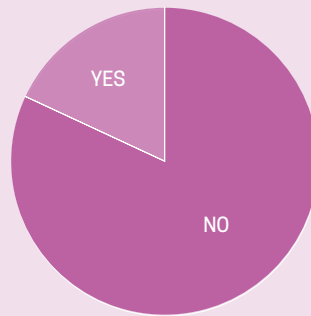
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<sup>11</sup> Further reflections on this topic can be found in par. 7.4.1

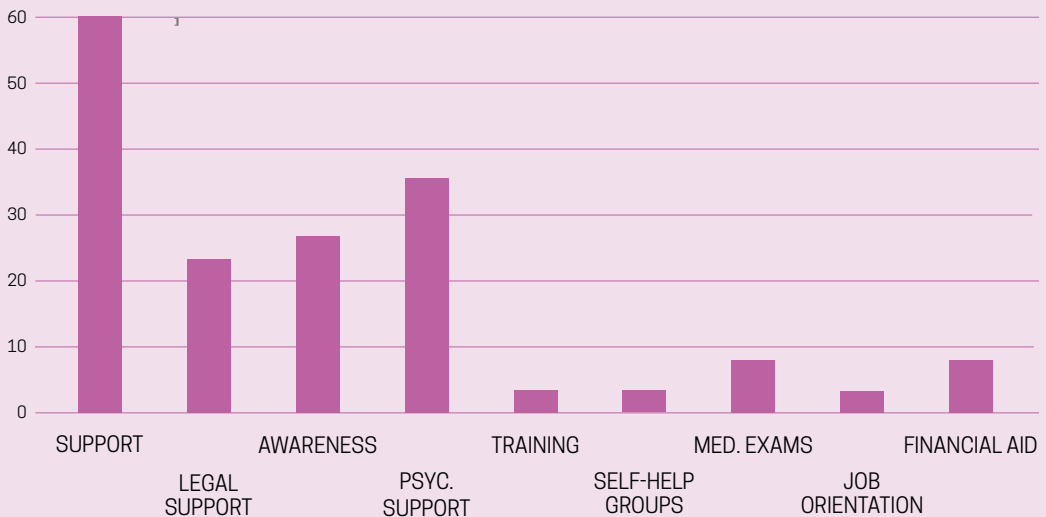
# AUDIENCE'S KNOWLEDGE OF ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES



IS THERE AN ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRE IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY?



HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INTERESTED IN ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES ACTIVITIES?



WHICH SERVICES DO ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES OFFER?

The second part of the survey was dedicated to the participants' interest in anti-violence centres and their activities. According to the results [→ Fig. 6.21], 57,8% of the respondents (n=48) did not know whether in their municipality there were anti-violence centres, while 42% (n=35) indicated a positive or negative response. Nonetheless, only 18% of the participants (n=15) stated to have already been interested in their activities. However, the question regarding the said activities showed the participants' confusion on what anti-violence centres actually do [→ Fig. 6.21]. Even though the majority of the respondents (72%, n=60) identified these entities as places where women who suffered from gender-based violence can go to be listened to or to be welcomed in safe houses, some of the other activities were less known to the audience. For instance, only 42% of them (n=35) identified psychological support as one of the services offered by the centres, while raising awareness on the topic was mentioned only by 32,5% (n=27). Furthermore, other crucial services anti-violence centres provide were only merely mentioned, such as legal support (27,7%), work orientation (3,6%), self-help groups (3,6%) and training (3,6%). On the other hand, activities which are not performed by anti-violence centres, such as medical examinations (7%) and financial support (2,4%), were mentioned by the participants. This section of the survey was crucial to understand the confusion and lack of information with regards to the presence of anti-violence centres in local communities and the activities they offer to women who underwent gender-based violence.

Fig. 6.21. Overview of the participants knowledge and interest about anti-violence centre.

The third part of the survey was dedicated to the perception of gender-based violence related behaviours as well as the level of empathy inspired by passive descriptions of the topic. As expected, the numbers of the people who reported to have witnessed or underwent toxic behaviours were very high, especially with regards to the “less” traumatic attitudes, such as gender stereotypes (82%, n=68), catcalling (72,3%, n=60) or sexism (62,6%, n=52). None-

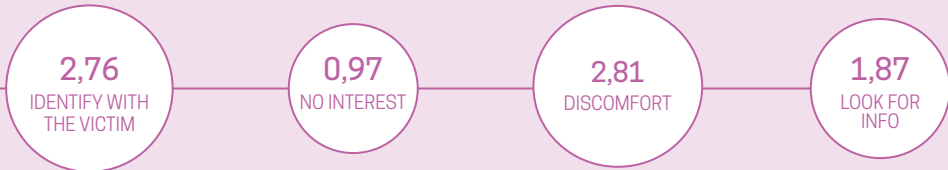


**Fig. 6.22.** Average scores from the Likert scale concerning the reaction to an article about an occurrence of gender-based violence

theless, rape myths, victim blaming and slut-shaming also reported a fairly high rate, respectively 31,3%, 30% and 25,3%. Gathering information with regards to the toxic behaviour suffered or recognised by the audience was crucial to compare them with the numbers declared after the experience, to understand whether the portrayal of these wrongful conducts in the game enabled a better understanding of these attitudes in the players.

On the other hand, when asked about the emotions that arise from the passive fruition of articles about cases of gender-based violence, through the use of a Likert scale (from 0 to 5) [→ Fig. 6.22], empathy towards the victim and anger against the abuser reported a high average evaluation, respectively 4,13 and 3,34); however, the process of role-taking and identification as well as discomfort both received a lower score (2,76 and 2,81).

Finally, in the last section of the survey the participants were asked to define their level of agreement with a series of statements concerning gender-based violence. The results were fairly unani-



mous, except maybe on the statements regarding advising victims to go to the police (with the average score of 3,29) and the idea that people can always get out of a toxic relationship by themselves (with a 1,2 average evaluation).

The pre-experience survey showed an overall knowledgeable and interested audience with regards to the issue of gender-based violence, which may have of course influenced the results of the game. Nonetheless, their idea of anti-violence centre and their awareness of these organisations' presence was fairly low. Moreover they demonstrated that their level of role-taking and emotional engagement (with exception of empathy) when consuming passive media concerning gender-based violence could be improved. The data gathered in the pre-experience survey is to be compared to the results obtained after the interactive experience.



Fig. 6.23. Screen from the online testing



## POST-EXPERIENCE EVALUATION 6.6.2

After having completed the interactive drama and having visited the final landing page, the participants were asked to complete a post-experience survey, in order to analyse a possible change with regards to the same element and / or topics discussed in the previous questionnaire, while also evaluating user satisfaction and comprehension of the game. All the participants concluded the experience and they were able to fill out the questionnaire, whose results are presented here.

### NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION 6.6.2.1 AND OVERALL RESPONSE

Since the interactive drama's second act was structured as a branching narrative, the audience reached different endings of the story, which sometimes inspired different reactions in their response to the questionnaire. While the first three endings were achieved by a similar number of users (respectively 14, 15 and 20), the last ending, namely the cruellest and most dramatic one, was reached by the highest number of players (34). Nonetheless, the different endings did not seem to have affected the clarity and the overall response to the interactive drama.

In fact, in the first part of the survey, through a Likert scale from 0 to 5, respondents were asked to evaluate the narrative and its characteristics. The majority of the elements received a positive score: in particular clarity of the story, intelligibility of the message and tone of the narrative reported the higher evaluations (respectively a 4,37, 4,59 and a 4,41 average score) [→ Fig. 6.24]. Moreover, the user felt engaged with the narrative (3,9), they were moved by the story (3,85) and they felt immersed in the plot also thanks to the interface (3,77). The lower scores were reported mainly in two



**Fig. 6.24.** Best average scores with regards to the quality of the experience

categories: the players were not amused by the story (1,69) and in their opinion the unravelling of the plot was not rewarding (2,1): however, given the dramatic endings and the tone of the narrative, these results were to be expected.

### 6.6.2.2 EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

As reported in par 6.3.2, one of the objectives of the narrative was to favour immersion and role-taking processes, as well as to inspire empathy towards survivors and victims of gender-based violence. The second section of the Likert scale was dedicated to determine the emotional response of the audience and compare it to the answers related to the passive consumption of other media, such as articles or documentaries [[→ 7.1.1](#)]. The results of this section are compared to the data gathered in the pre-experience survey [[→ Fig. 6.25](#)], in which the participants were asked to express their interest and emotional response to an article discussing a case of gender-based violence.

The post-experience survey presents a low increase in the average score with regards to the level of empathy towards victims (4,3 against the 4,13), but it reports a higher rise in other emotional responses: the results indicated a 4,07 evaluation for anger (vs. 3,34 in the previous survey) and 3,12 for discomfort (vs 2,81). However, one of the highest increases was reported by the process of role-taking: if with regards to articles concerning gender-based violence,



Fig. 6.25. Likert scales results, comparing the pre and post-experience survey

the participants indicated an average score of 2,76, the interactive drama accounted for 3,26. Moreover, other emotions reported high average scores, such as powerlessness (4,25), emotional affection (3,6), fear (3,4) and indecision (3,38). On the other hand, shame and sympathy for others received low average evaluations, respectively 1,77 and 1,22.

The Likert scale proved the higher emotional response of the interactive drama compared to an article, but this added value was also made explicit by some of the participants in their final comments, reported in the next page.

The game mode allows one to identify sufficiently with a victim of gender-based violence even without having experienced the same seriousness. The possibility of “active” reading helps to maintain a high level of attention and involvement - more than a “just reading” story would. s across a street, around 5 p.m.”

- S. [F], 24 years old

It made me live through these situations in an immersive and interactive way being able to empathise in an even more detailed way with a victim of abuse.

- B. [F], 22 years old

Audio and images help to make the experience immersive. This distinguishes it from many other readings. This creates an atmosphere of strong empathy with Delilah.

- C. [F], 24 years old

It is certainly different, because it is engaging, unlike the more typical forms of information (articles, news, etc.). It allows greater identification and involvement.

- L. [M], 22 years old

It helps a lot to develop empathy for the victim, which is often lacking, especially in the public debate.

- E. [M], 24 years old

### DISCUSSION ON PERSONAL VALUES 6.6.2.3 IN RELATION TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The third section of the Likert scale investigated whether the participants' value system were tested by the narrative and whether the experience offered new and interesting food for thought.

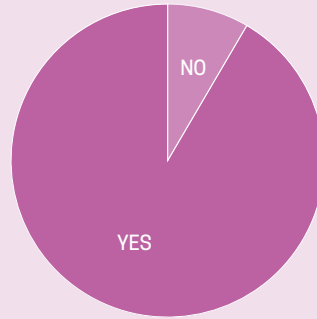
According to the results, the game managed to provide interesting topics (with an average score of 4,01), which participants felt could be shared with others (4,16). Moreover, the game helped the players to reflect on the topic (3,93), by also challenging the cultural value of our society (3,95). On the other hand, a lower average evaluation was reported for the following statements: "my morals have been tested" (2,51) and "the story and its unfolding touched my value system" (2,85). This may be due to the prior predisposition of the audience (as shown by the results of the pre-experience survey) to be interested and educated about gender-based discriminations. Nonetheless, when asked if they thought they did not learn anything, the participants' response was negatively unanimous (0,37).

Fig. 6.26. Likert scales results in the post-experience survey, concerning the values discussed in the interactive drama



# MAIN CONCEPT CONVEYED IN THE PROJECT

In the post-experience survey, the participants were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements.



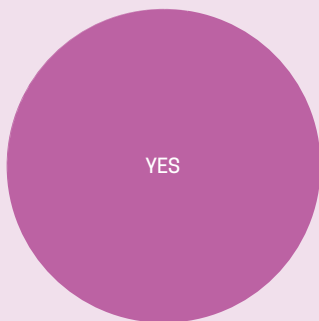
**THE STORY AND ITS UNFOLDING REALISTICALLY AND CLEARLY REPRESENT THE DYNAMICS OF VAWG**



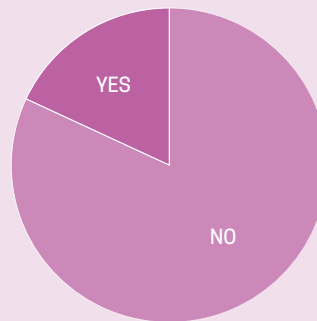
**VIOLENCE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE MADE BY THOSE WHO PERPETRATE IT**



**IF YOU WANT TO, YOU CAN ALWAYS GET OUT OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP ON YOUR OWN.**



**TOXIC BEHAVIOURS CREATE AN OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT AND AFFECT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF VICTIMS**



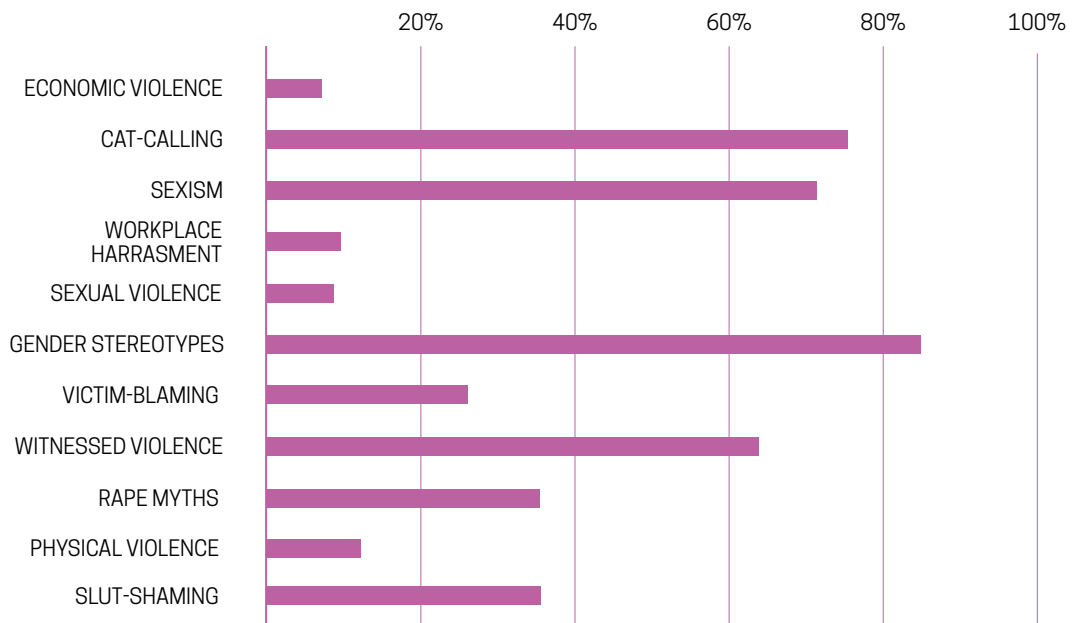
**IF SOMEONE TOLD YOU THAT THEY HAD EXPERIENCED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, YOU WOULD ADVISE THEM TO CONTACT THE ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTER**

Furthermore, the following part of the questionnaire was dedicated to test whether the messages of the project were comprehended by the audience [→ Fig. 6.27]. The responses were mostly unanimous, except for the statement “*If someone told you that they had experienced gender-based violence, you would advise them to contact the nearest Anti-Violence Centre*”: in this case, 82% of the respondents agreed, while the rest would advise the victims to go to the police. This result may not be surprising because law enforcement was not mentioned in the game, and the issues related to victim blaming from public institutions were not described in the narrative.

Fig. 6.27. Audience reception of the main messages conveyed by the narrative

Finally, from the results of the post-experience survey, it is possible to witness a slight change in the participants’ declared experiences in relation to toxic behaviours connected to VAWG [→ Fig. 6.28]. The results show a small increase in the recognition of the less traumatic behaviours, such as slut-shaming, rape myths, gender stereotypes and sexism, and a slight decrease in the report of more severe experiences, such as physical, economic and sexual violence.

Fig. 6.28. Percentages of the respondents that in the post-experience survey stated to have witnessed toxic attitudes related to VAWG in the last year



### 6.6.2.4 RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES

One of the objectives of the interactive drama was to raise awareness about anti-violence centres and their activities, and the pre-experience survey showed a lack of interest and/or knowledge with regards to these entities and the work of their volunteers.

The results of the post-experience survey show an increase not only in the acknowledgment of the presence of anti-violence centres in local areas, but also in the interest in their activities [→ Fig. 6.29]: in fact, if in the pre-experience questionnaire, only 42% of the respondents knew whether there was a centre in their municipality, after the experience that percentage rose to 60%<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, after the interactive drama, 76% of the participants stated that they are willing to join activities organised by anti-violence centres, while in the pre-experience survey 82% of them reported they had never been interested in anything local anti-violence centres had arranged.

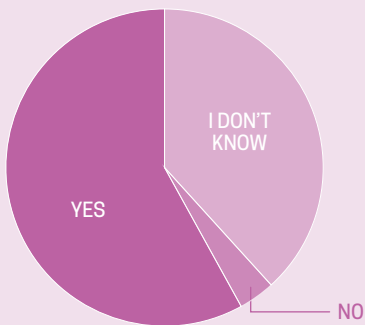
Finally, the survey also showed an increase in the players' awareness concerning the activities performed by these centres [→ Fig. 6.29]: the audience recognised services which were barely identified in the pre-experience survey, such as legal support (from 27,7% to 78,3%), job orientation (from 3,6% to 38,5%), support to find alternative housing (from 0% to 65%), trainings (from 3,6% to 49,4%), counselling for immigrant women (from 0% to 56,6%) and self-help groups (from 3,6% to 73,5%). Nonetheless, the results also show a significant increase in the recognition of services which are not provided by anti-violence centres (medical examinations and financial support), but that were listed to test the audience's attention to the information provided in the landing page.

**Fig. 6.29.** Audience's knowledge concerning anti-violence centres after the interactive experience.

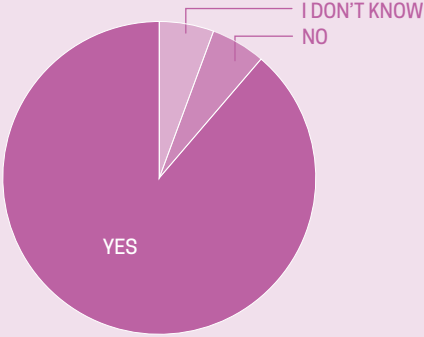
<sup>12</sup> This percentage includes both positive and negative answers, because unfortunately certain provinces still do not have local anti-violence centres.



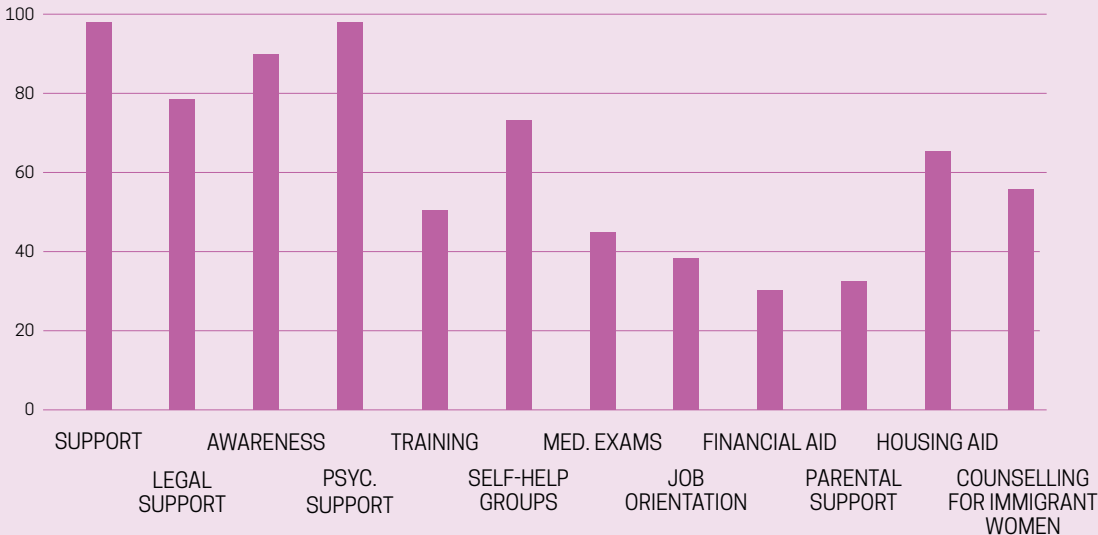
# AUDIENCE'S KNOWLEDGE OF ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES



IS THERE AN ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRE IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY?



WILL YOU BE MORE INTERESTED IN ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES' ACTIVITIES?



WHICH SERVICES DO ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES OFFER?

### 6.6.2.5 PERSONAL OPINIONS

The last part of the survey allowed the audience to write personal opinions with regards to the experience's usefulness and to the people with whom they would share the interactive drama, but also to provide specific comment to the overall project. The experience gathered an overall positive response, since 95% of the participants deemed it a useful / interesting experience and 97,6% of them would share it with somebody else. Moreover, 96,4% of the respondents stated that this interactive narrative is a good tool to engage in discussions concerning gender-based violence. Nonetheless, in spite of the positive response to the project, some major themes emerged from the comments provided by the participants, including a few critiques.

As previously discussed [[→ 6.6.2.2](#)], several users appreciated the immersive nature of the project, identifying the empathic response to Dalila's story as one of the added value for the interactive drama, especially compared to more traditional media, such as articles or movies.

Identifying with a character (even a fictional one) who suffers violence really brings you into the heart of abusive situations, in terms of body language, dialogue, feelings and action/reaction phenomena. This is the only way to really understand what it is like. Experiences like this interactive drama break down stereotypes about different forms of violence and encourage a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

- L. [F], 26 years old

Empathy and immersion are powerful tools. This narrative serves its purpose and succeeds in making the situation of a victim understood even by people who have never experienced a violent relationship. These people often believe prejudices and stereotypes [...]. By empathising with the victims, perhaps they can change their minds.

- M. [F], 24 years old

It made me live through these situations in an immersive and interactive way being able to empathise in an even more detailed way with a victim of abuse

- B. [F], 22 years old

Audio and images help to make the experience immersive. This distinguishes it from many other readings. This creates an atmosphere of strong empathy with Delilah.

- C. [F], 24 years old

It is certainly different, because it is engaging, unlike the more typical forms of information (articles, news, etc.). It allows greater identification and involvement.

- L. [M], 22 years old

It helps a lot to develop empathy for the victim, which is often lacking, especially in the public debate

- E. [M], 24 years old

Moreover, several participants found the interactive drama useful to know more about anti-violence centres, which was one of the main objectives of the project.

It helped me to get to know the anti-violence centres, it made me empathise with a victim, putting me in a position to act in her place: often when reading news about gender-based violence, the content of the articles suggests how the victim should or could have behaved to avoid the incident, through this experience it is evident that none of her behaviours could have led to very different results.

- C. [F], 22 years old

It is interesting because the story is engaging, immersive and well constructed. Several times, when faced with a choice, I was undecided. I found it useful because I know little about the reality of anti-violence centres and the ending made me reflect on the importance of these organisations.

- L. [M], 25 years old

When asked if and with whom the participants would share the interactive drama, several people stated that they would advise anyone to play it, because of the way it described and discusses the topic of VAWG, while others suggested presenting it to students, or to other groups of people. Some respondents also stated that they would recommend this interactive drama to victims of gender-based violence, but as it was explained in par. 6.3.1, an experience like this may only trigger discomfort and emotional distress. These are some of the comments that may combine the most common responses.

[I would recommend it] to friends and acquaintances, because I think it can help to illustrate a topic that is not talked about and is difficult to talk about. Moreover, even for those who already know these realities, the narration can be an interesting and useful experience on a concrete level (to know more about anti-violence centres and what they do).

- S. [F], 24 years old

There is no section of the population (in terms of age, gender, cultural background...) that does not need to rethink these issues, and to question their deep-rooted and (only apparently) 'harmless' preconceptions.

- T. [F], 23 years old

[I would recommend it] to people who can become supporters or receptive about this kind of awareness. I think in general it is really important to talk and talk openly about societal issues like this one. It could be interesting to present it in a workplace to make it more aware about the subject, or to students.

- T. [F], 23 years old

In general I would recommend this game to men, because very often they do not realise that gender-based violence is omnipresent in a woman's life. They tend to think that these are isolated cases and do not take seriously the microaggressions that we suffer daily, and they end up downgrading them to jokes or harmless behaviours.

- A. [F], 31 years old

[I would recommend it] to women in unhealthy and oppressive relationships, in order to try to give them support, courage to face the topic and make them aware that violence only leads to a story without a happy ending. Also I would recommend it to young people to educate and prevent

- A. [F], 19 years old

One heavily discussed aspect of the narrative concerned the lack of agency used as a procedural rhetoric to describe the situation of victims of gender-based violence. While some people really appreciated it, others thought it was a bug in the game and did not understand the metaphorical meaning behind it. During the first online trial, in fact, 5 people privately messaged me during the call to ask whether the unavailable choices were a bug or a stylistic choice.

I really enjoyed the narration and it made me feel involved. [...] The thing I liked most were the blocked choices, that sense of impotence in front of the crossed out button, that desire to make her scream the right words but not being able to do it: they made me angry but I also felt compassion for the protagonist, because I understood how a “normal” thing for me - a person who luckily have never suffered this kind of violence - can be much more difficult for someone in Dalila’s situation. Riccardo’s twist turned me around. My “craving” for a happy ending led me to trust him and I absolutely did not expect this ending.

- E. [F], 24 years old

Some choices were crossed out and unplayable so sometimes I couldn't make narrative choices as I wanted to.

- M. [F], 24 years old

I didn't encounter any bugs, but I didn't understand why sometimes some choices were blocked and I was forced to take the remaining ones.

- Z. [F], 23 years old

I think the "unavailable" choices effectively underline how hard it can be to reach for help

- E. [F], 24 years old

I would have added more buttons that cannot be pressed: they are an interesting element that could be exploited more.

- B. [F], 27 years old

The overall response to the game was positive and enthusiastic. Some of the participants, both in the survey and during the discussion that followed the last testing sections, also expressed a few technical or narrative criticisms, which will be addressed in par. 7.3.

# 07

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: EVALUATING THE **EFFICACY** OF *COME VETRO TEMPERATO*

*The final Chapter aims to summarise the results of the testing phase in relation to the research questions defined in Chapter 1. Moreover, this section describes the possible modifications that could be applied to the interactive drama and the future developments for the research.*



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# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF *COME VETRO TEMPERATO*

## 7.1 PROJECT'S IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTION

This final section is dedicated to the discussion of the results presented in the previous chapter, evaluating the impact of the project and the way it responds and relates to its objectives and to the research questions it aimed to answer. As shown in Chapter 2 and 5, in the past decades several scholars and game designers attempted to study and evaluate the use of interactive media to engage with specific audiences and inspire social change with regards to various types of issues. However, this contribution managed to add an additional level to the design process aimed at G4SC: in fact, the co-creation process that involved the volunteers of the anti-violence centres and the painful experiences shared by victims and survivors enabled the creation of an artefact which describes, in a sensible yet truthful way, the reality of gender-based violence and how it affects women living in Italy, to inspire empathic reactions in the audience.

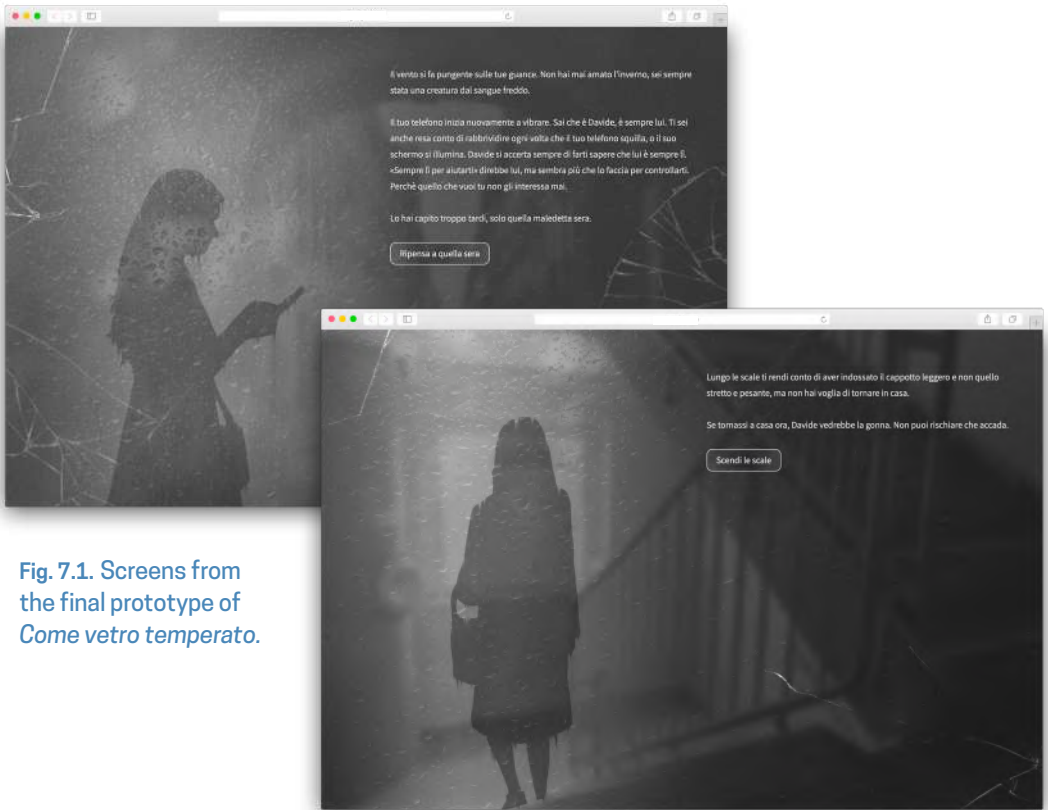


Fig. 7.1. Screens from the final prototype of *Come vetro temperato*.

As described in the previous chapter, the majority of the audience praised the immersive nature of the interactive drama, which was able to inspire strong emotional reactions in the players. This response was enabled not only by the interactive nature of the artefact, but also by the contributions provided by the people who participated in the co-design process. Their input was crucial to create a narrative which was fictional, yet life-like and respectful for those women who had the misfortune to live such traumatic experiences. The creation of feminist-counternarratives and artefacts focused on the experience of victims and survivors, without trivialising or simplifying gender-based violence, are to be considered stepping stones

in the process of engaging bystanders and encouraging them to reflect on the topic with a more empathic mindset towards women who live in these situations.

Nonetheless, the following sections will discuss in detail the way the interactive drama answered the research questions, the further modifications could be applied to the project and what are the potential future developments that could arise from this contribution.

## 7.2 **COME VETRO TEMPERATO: ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As discussed in Chapter 6, the aim of this interactive drama can be understood as an attempt to investigate how interactive media can be employed to discuss gender-based violence, especially targeting a young adult audience, ranging from 18 to 35 years old. In particular, the project attempts to provoke empathic responses towards victims of gender violence, to inspire positive and constructive discussions around the topic and to raise awareness about anti-violence centres and the support they provide. In order to assess whether these objectives have been achieved, the interactive drama was tested in four different sessions, two online and two in presence, with participants belonging to the defined target audience. According to the research questions described in Chapter 1, the thesis aims to consider:

1. The exploitation of interactive narratives to inspire social change, and to trigger empathic responses towards victims of gender-based violence, by highlighting the concept that violence is always a choice made by the perpetrators;
2. Inspiring positive attitudes towards victims, by raising awareness on the presence of anti-violence centres;

3. Encouraging the acknowledgement of the toxic daily behaviours that create a hostile environment for women.

Taking into consideration the specific aims of the interactive drama [[→ 6.3.2](#)] and the results of the testing sessions, the research questions are discussed here.

Thanks to the results of the post-experience survey and the comparison between the data gathered before the audience played the interactive drama, it was possible to determine the empathic responses of the players. Compared to passively-consumed media, the interactive drama reported a slight increase in empathy towards the victim, and a high spike for immersion and role-taking. The majority of the players managed to identify with Dalila, and according to many comments, this enabled a better understanding of the situation and a stronger emotional engagement with the story. It is therefore possible to say that interactive media, used to discuss the issue of VAWG, are able to engage with the audience and to convey specific messages in a more incisive way than traditional media. In fact, as the results of the survey showed, the main concepts embedded in the story, namely that victims are never the one causing the violence, that getting out of a violent relationship alone is difficult and that toxic everyday behaviours can worsen the situations of these women, were clearly identified and understood by the audience (>90%);

The second objective of the interactive drama concerned raising awareness with regards to anti-violence centres and the support they provide. As shown by the comparison among the two surveys, not only is it possible to witness an increased awareness about the presence of these centres in local areas, but also a higher interest in participating in their activities. Moreover, the results also show an increased knowledge with regards to the services performed by the anti-violence centres. Nonetheless, since the post-experience survey provided wrong options in the questions regarding the activities

that take place in the anti-violence centres, several participants identified these answers as legit. This may be due to a lack of attention while filling out the survey or reading the landing page. Either way, the interactive drama proved to be effective in raising awareness about anti-violence centres, without however inspiring the research of specific and accurate information about them. A more focused and interactive design of the landing page or the inclusion of anti-violence centres in the ending of the narrative could help the audience to develop a better understanding of these activities;

The last objective concerned the recognition of toxic behaviours connected to gender-based violence and their impact specifically on the lives of women already living in violent and abusive situations. As discussed in par. 6.6.2.3, the comparison between the results of the two surveys showed slight changes in the recognition of these attitudes: an increase in the identification of more public and “less traumatic” behaviours and a decrease for what concerns more severe episodes of violence. This result may indicate a better understanding of how these behaviours, which may appear less important, are actually connected to gender-based discrimination, and a more specific framing of what severe violent actions can actually entail. Nonetheless, 100% of the participants recognised that these behaviours heavily and negatively affect the wellbeing of women in general, as well as victims of gender-based violence.

Therefore, it is possible to state that, at different degrees, the project managed to answer the research question and gather positive responses with regards to its objectives. The comments provided by the participants and the discussion that followed some of the testing sessions supported the thesis that interactive media, compared to more traditional media, can be a useful resource to discuss sensitive and complex topic such as violence against women, favouring immersion and a greater emotional engagement, able to spark social change at a higher degree.

## ISSUES AND POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS 7.3

As discussed in the previous sections, the testing process, despite the overall positive response to the interactive drama, highlighted some issues that could be improved to further develop the project.

One first critical issue concerned the use of the crossed-out options present in the game, as discussed in par. 6.6.2.5. Since many people reached out to me during the first online test asking me about the unavailable choices, during the second session I explained the metaphorical meaning beyond the limitation of agency. This prevented the misunderstanding, but as pointed out by a couple of participants, it partially spoiled the narrative, by anticipating a crucial element of the immersive experience. In order to solve this conundrum, it could be possible to follow the advice provided by one of the participants:

As I have already said, I really enjoyed this experience and I think it was extremely useful to train and raise awareness about the issue. If I had to make a criticism, even if I found the format very clear and well done, maybe I would explain why some options appeared crossed out and were not selectable. My interpretation is that they are options that a person who has not been a victim of these types of violence would have wanted to select, but the impossibility of doing so is linked to the fact that they are options that are not practicable for the victim, but perhaps an explanation at the end would be useful at a further stage of awareness-raising

-B. [F], 27 years old



Fig. 7.2. Types of options (active and not active) present in the interactive drama.

Including more crossed-out buttons, especially in the first act, would reinforce the concept that certain reasonable actions sometimes are not considered by the victim, who is living in a vicious cycle of psychological and physical distress, without spoiling the experience at the beginning.

Nonetheless, if the interactive drama is tested in a more structured setting, a follow-up debate performed after the experience would also enable the audience to reflect on the metaphorical meaning behind the game mechanics.

A second critique emerged during the discussion that followed the last in presence testing session, but it was also mentioned by a couple of comments gathered in the post-experience survey. During the debate, one female student argued that the lack of male positive role models may discourage the immersion of male players, which would tend to feel attacked and would be less inclined to appreciate the story and the messages it conveys. In the narrative, the only positive male character is one of the people who helps Dalila when she is harassed by a few construction workers, but the players are able to encounter him only if they have performed specific previous actions (deciding to have breakfast at a bar and choosing to speak up against the harassers). The reasons behind the lack of positive male characters are mainly two: the short duration of the narrative and the nature of the anti-violence centres' volunteers. Since the story was kept fairly short to avoid the decrease in the audience's attention, the "positive" character is only one, Alice, which defines the first two endings of the story: since all the volunteers and workers in the anti-violence centres are women, I preferred to create a supportive female character. However, further experimentations would enable the creation of a more complex story able to include new male characters with more depth and positive attitudes, useful to better engage with the male part of the audience.



Finally, the last issue identified during the testing concerned the mobile version of the game. Despite having specified, at the beginning of each testing session, that the interactive drama was optimised only for desktop browsers, a few participants decided to play the game on their phone, finding some issues with the mobile version. The code of the game was in fact not optimised for mobile, and in order to improve shareability and word of mouth, implementing a more accessible version of the game would be crucial.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS 7.4

Considering the positive response to the game and the achievement of the objectives of the narrative, as well as the issues highlighted by the testing, the following section will discuss the possible further development for the project and the results gathered during the research and the testing of this dissertation.

### FURTHER TESTING 7.4.1

As anticipated in par. 6.6.1, the majority of the participants in the testing had at least an undergraduate degree and showed an interest in the topic of gender-based violence, two elements that were to be expected because the sessions included Master's degree students (a part of which enrolled in a class dedicated to gender representation in Communication Design), or people who left their contact after having filled out a survey on the topic. For this reason, it would be interesting to test the interactive drama with a more diversified audience, namely with different educational backgrounds and a lower interest and knowledge on the topic.

Moreover, during the testing of the project, a few people approached me and Dott. Mariani, offering further sessions to try

out the interactive drama. Beside the participants who asked me whether they could share the projects with others, one of the founder of *PoliHERo*, a new student association at Politecnico di Milano, aimed to fight gender inequality, asked me to send the game to other people in the group, with the prospect of organising a more structured workshop, during which the game would be employed. Moreover, the association *Play Res*<sup>13</sup>, in collaboration with *Spazio Sicuro*<sup>14</sup>, a group aimed at the creation of welcoming and safe game spaces, expressed their interest in testing the interactive drama. In particular, this session will be organised after the graduation ceremony during which the project will be presented.

## 7.4.2 INTERACTIVE DRAMAS WITH A MORE INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

During the design process of the interactive narrative, different intersectional perspective were taken in consideration for the creation of the plot, especially in regards to the experience of transgender women and non-binary individuals, as explained in par. 6.4. Nonetheless, given the current policies of anti-violence centres concerning not-cis women, this perspective was excluded from the narrative. Nevertheless, given the positive response to this project and to the use of interactive media to favour empathic response and immersion, the possibility to further develop this artefact or to create a new one with a more intersectional perspective is open. However, in order to accurately portray the reality of gender-based violence affecting non-cis individuals will require not only further literature investigation, but also more field research, including transgender and non-binary people in the co-design process.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/associazioneplayres/> .

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.progetto-spaziosicuro.it> .

Moreover, a new narrative would manage to address some of the criticism that arose during the testing session. For instance, it would be possible to include more positive male role models and to provide more depth to the character presented. Moreover, by focusing more on the intersectional perspective and less on the daily toxic behaviours presented in the first act of the interactive drama, it would be possible to better frame the issue and favour even more the role-taking process.

### CONFERENCES AND PUBLICATIONS 7.4.3

Considering the overall positive response to the project and the successful co-design with the volunteers of Parma's anti-violence centre, the project *Come vetro temperato* and its creation process will be presented during international conference *Design!OPEN*, held in Parma on 5 and 6 May 2022, as part of the narrative track. After the conference, the content of the presentation will be presented in a publication in English, provided with ISBN/ISSN, that should be submitted by the end of August, 2022.



Fig. 7.3. Design!open conference logo, for the track *narratives*

Moreover, the projects and its positive results hope to be included in further publications in game design-related academic settings, such as the GAME (Games as Art, Media, Entertainment), the Italian Journal of Game Studies.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS 7.5

While developing this thesis, I often found myself reflecting on what is the role of a designer when creating projects aimed to engage with the public and inspire social change. I never considered

myself an activist-designer, as Rezai & Khazaei (2017) intend it. This project aimed to transform a real-life painful experience into something immersive, intelligible and engaging for those who never had the misfortune of living such traumatic events, in order to inspire more thoughtful and empathic reactions towards victims and survivors. It is a project regarding a socio-cultural issue, but I do not consider it to be an activist action.

This interactive drama was a story, a provoking and sometimes difficult narrative. However, it is the design process that shaped it and the research that fueled it that made it, hopefully, useful. When creating artefacts like this, as Mariani (2016a) phrased it, a designer becomes «interpreter, mediator and storyteller» (p. 54) at the same time. We tell a story, we mediate to make it comprehensible for a different audience and we transform it into something new. We create a safe way to experience something, while yet leaving a mark in the audience. Without a doubt, social responsibility needs to be discussed and appointed in many fields, and design is surely one of them. Ideas that fuel positive change can take many forms, and a communication designer is the mediator and storyteller capable of creating the right shape for the right audience. After all, as Robert L. Peters (2019) said:

| The design creates culture. Culture shapes values.  
| Values determine the future.



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