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Omori, Playing With Trauma. A Case Study.

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Abstract

OMOCAT's video game *Omori* presents itself as a significant tool in exploring the complex intersections between education, adolescence and trauma. This paper offers a pedagogical analysis by using it as a case study to examine how much the video game medium is present in the current cultural arena. Through its narrative and graphic representation, the article becomes the means to investigate the impact that today's games can have in the emotional representation of traumatic events. Special attention is paid to mediaeducational management in the complex adolescent group. In the current context, gamification serves as a reflexive tool, illustrating a universe in which the metaphorical elements of games become opportunities to empathize with playful experiences that can come close to reality. The analysis aims to encourage the use of popular video games to initiate intergenerational dialogues to learn more about the virtual environments that young gamers experience.

Keywords

Omori; gamification; adolescent discomfort; case study; Media Education.

1. Introduction

Technology-mediated educational action is gaining an increasingly significant role in pedagogy and education, serving as a counterweight to the biases commonly associated with video games (Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Ranieri *et al.*, 2021; Nesti, 2017; Ferri, 2014; Tobias *et al.*, 2014; Prensky, 2003), tools increasingly used in training and management of real-world experiences (Sartori & Gatti, 2013). Released on December 25, 2020, Omori, a psychological RPG developed by OMOCAT[1], entered the global gaming landscape, dealing for the first time, through a novel storyline, with themes of suffering, loneliness, and adolescent depression, following the familiar style of oriental gameplay in two dimensions (Cilurzo, 2022). Started in 2012 independently as a webcomic on the social network Tumblr, through a fundraising effort launched in April 2014 on Kickstarter it managed to raise from 5,910 donors more than 203.300$[2], quickly establishing itself as a modern cult game (Ludici, 2021). Purchasable today from all major platforms, in both digital and physical versions, it has sold more than one million copies, receiving numerous praises from audiences and critics in recent years for its narrative style, soundtrack, and its goal *in nuce*, namely the possibility of "playing" with trauma, depression, and guilt, and understanding them through identification (xDal-Lio, 2021).

Video games such as Omori, Gee (2007) argues, can be powerful educational tools, offering rich and engaging environments where players experience and learn through action and problem solving felt as firsthand. In the specific case of Omori (2020), the gamer encounters situations that dovetail with deep psychological and social issues, a practice that Simon Mayr and Paolo Petta (2013) identify as an effective means of dealing with complex issues through the playful context of serious games.

Among the main topics, adolescent depression and dealing with traumatic experience emerge, two pregnant variables in the universe of the game's protagonist, who moves between a realistic and a fantasy world (the Playground and White Space, respectively). In both scenarios, the need for escape and fear toward the truth describe the emotions of a teenage perpetrator of an unintentional murder that will change his life. The story is not soon told, and it evolves between the 72 hours of gameplay, in a continuous exchange between dream and reality, until the protagonist becomes aware that his sister Mari's death occurred because of him (Latino Mega Knight, 2021).

Now far from the confirmation bias that previously considered video games among the causes of adolescent malaise, we now find in the virtual environment that games represent immersive and sometimes socializing experiences in which young people, but also adults, can learn in unconventional ways (Maestri *et al.*, 2018). These virtual worlds not only provide a playful context, but also become dynamic spaces where alternative forms of learning can be experienced (Landers, 2014).

In an age mediated by widespread virtuality, video games serve as interactive educational tools, offering opportunities for the development of social, cognitive and emotional skills in ways that analog methods fail to capture (Villani *et al.*, 2018).

Through complex narratives, strategic challenges and collaborative environments, video game design can encourage the development of certain skills, such as

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[1] The game's official website can be accessed via the following link: https://www.omori-game.com/en

[2] For a summary of the fundraising initiated on the Kickstarter platform:
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/omocat/omori?lang=it

problem solving, critical thinking and emotion management, contributing to learning that is as informal as it is lifelong (Trinchero, 2014).

This perspective is supported by studies such as that of Di Paolo and colleagues (2023), which have highlighted the social benefits of serious games, including their ability to improve social inclusion and cognition. This paradigmatic shift is supported by other research work, which has identified video games as potentially useful resources for the development of cognitive and emotional skills (Clark, 2007). Erikson (1968) himself had stressed the importance of play in the process of identity formation during adolescence. Given the recent transformations in youth habits, psychologist Matteo Lancini in *Cosa serve ai nostri ragazzi. I nuovi adolescenti spiegati ai genitori, agli insegnanti, agli adulti* (2020) reminds us how much the conception of ludic entertainment has changed, as have the very new adolescents who use it, often favoring online games. Avoiding falling into easy conclusions, admitting that we are experiencing a transformation that has deep roots rooted in the change of today's society helps to understand how these new habits must be accepted to open dialogues and remain close to the worlds that boys and girls inhabit, often remaining alone or solely with peers, in the absence of adult figures capable of being close to them.

Considering that Omori has become one of the most popular video games in the world in recent years, it fits into this paper as a functional case study to disquisition the waning interaction between youth and adults, children and parents, students and teachers, in environments that risk separating rather than uniting, thus causing relational and emotional barriers. Becoming aware of the impact that video games can have in the education of their users invites the adult to understand how they can be incorporated into a broader pedagogical design that considers all living spaces (Ypsilanti *et al.*, 2014), including those within consoles such as Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox. Iwabuchi's (2002) research on the globalization of Asian media provided the basis for understanding the cultural influence of video games in the global context, which invests, regardless of spatiality, all people who use contemporary video game products, responding to one of the attributes of the last Alpha generation (McCrindle & Fell, 2021), namely "global".

Through Omori's analysis (Fig. 1), the study puts further emphasis on how video games can be used to address complex psycho-pedagogical issues and how these media fit into the global dialogue on mental health education and representation.

Fig. 1: Omori video game initial interface

2. Trauma as a plot of a game

The main contemporary clinical psychology manuals focus on the important task of outlining coordinates for understanding the complex nature of trauma (Castonguay *et al.*, 2021; Gobbard, 2015). The view they report, characterized by psychopathology and psychodynamics, describes its diagnostic character while leaving out that of intervention in educational settings. The conception of trauma as an interdisciplinary construct helps emphasize the importance of different professionalities as useful agents in treating it systemically. For example, the articulation of intervention strategies that also consider pedagogical tools can offer accompanying modalities complementary to therapy (Riva, 1993).

The multidisciplinary approach to trauma can offer a deeper and more multifaceted mode of intervention, allowing helping relationship professionals to provide personalized and culturally sensitive treatment in which every tool can come in handy in the work of processing (Mancaniello, 2023). This is especially relevant in an age when new generations also develop their identity through video game platforms, which are often explored independently without adequate accompaniment (Triberti & Argenton, 2013). In the case of Omori, the generic definition of trauma, i.e., internal or external injury caused by an adverse experience or event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), becomes the co-player of the game itself. Leaning on this concept through gameplay has allowed more than one million users to explore the psychological imagery of trauma-related emotions, cross-culturally interrogating the forms of alexithymia prevalent in younger people (Lavanco, 2021).

The very definition of subjective trauma conceives of it as closely related to an event that had the force to interrupt the processing capacity, activating some protective and defensive mechanisms towards the negative episode (Gabbard, 2015). An experience that is difficult to experience in the third person, much less to observe with the ability to control it, which alone a video game cannot provide.

Experiencing negative experiences filtered through other stories, similar to or different from one's own, could lead on the one hand to emotional processing work on the part of the subject (Wolf, 2018), but on the other hand it could push the subject to fail to govern difficult emotions (Storr, 2019). The absence of specific figures for the work of filtering and conducting such stories may cause the generation of intrusive thoughts, anxieties or feelings in the adolescent mind (Cohen *et al.*, 2006). It is good to remember that today's video games have moved beyond their entertainment function to more complex narrative languages (Maietti, 2017). Omori is an example of how a video game with at times childlike graphics (Fig. 2) can touch deep emotional levels, with the risk of introducing the young gamer to critical situations in loneliness.

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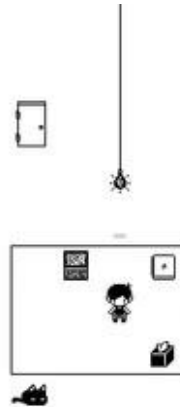editoria scientifica dal 1952

Fig. 2: Omori's gameplay graphic

The concepts of trauma and dissociation are clearly expressed in the unfolding of the video game, leading the user to learn about devastating symptoms and moments through the episodes experienced by the protagonist Omori. Dissociation leads the protagonist to maintain the illusion of a parallel life (the dream) while experiencing a feeling of help-lessness and loss of control in his reality. Dissociative defenses serve the dual function of diverting the subject within the story toward detachment from the traumatic event after it has occurred, and postponing the processing work necessary to place that event in the totality of context (Castonguay *et al.*, 2023). The killing of his sister can be seen as an ab-rupt interruption in the continuity of experience, which consequently leads him to a process of discontinuous storage of memories with respect to the crime committed (*ibid*.). In fact, Omori does not remember well how the events occurred and, at the same time, has difficulty accepting them, despite having acted so that every trace could be dissolved. These decision-making mechanisms are well articulated to make the player gradually realize that the experience has been manipulated to such an extent that it no longer fits into the conscious aspect of the protagonist, as if the incident had never occurred. There is thus a high emphasis on trauma-related symptoms, interpreted as adaptive defenses to be understood as an escape mechanism from reality. Indeed, dissociation is expressed by the ways in which Omori continually goes and returns to her ideal fantasy world, where nothing bad ever happened, and where she even changes her real name to Sunny (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Omori and Sunny, the alias of his parallel life

In addition to expressing contemporary negative phenomena, whether social, such as the plight of hikikomori, bullying, isolation or exclusion from the peer group, or emotional, such as depression, guilt, loneliness, and self-injury (Caresta, 2018), Omori also describes the adolescent needs listed by Siegel (2013) in some slides from the play, which depict the characters in the story in happy, carefree moments (Fig. 4).
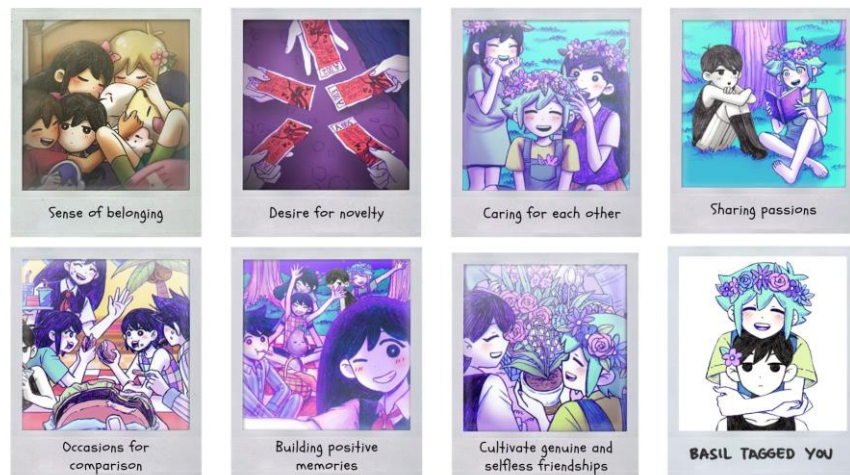

Fig. 4: Re-adaptation of Omori video game snapshots with the social resources of adolescence listed by Siegel

These eight snapshots are present as an in-depth study of the story and can be pedagogically articulated as preventive actions in promoting adolescent well-being and combating negative forms of social exclusion by fitting within broader workshop techniques: brainstorming, focus groups, writing workshops, shared gameplay, working games with images (Lavanco & Novara, 2012).

3. What is being played with

Before we let us download Omori, Nintendo's website gives the following description in the game's technical sheet[3]:

> Explore a bizarre world full of unique friends and foes. Make your way through the wonderful and the mundane to discover a forgotten past. And when the time comes, the path you choose will determine your fate--and perhaps the fate of others. This game deals with themes such as depression, anxiety, and suicide and may not be suitable for every audience. It also includes flashing lights that may cause discomfort and/or seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy. Adult audiences are recommended for use.

Although recommended for an age-appropriate audience, it was often downloaded by users without effective age verification; this is one of the weaknesses of major digital platforms, which fail to provide proper protections for young users (Lavanco & Castiglione, 2023). Looking instead at the positive factors of a gamified pedagogy, as early as 1958 sociologist Roger Caillois saw games as the means through which to enhance intellectual faculties through fun and perseverance, thus making complex concepts accessible (Caillois, 2000). Considering that the structuring of modern games has markedly changed from the past, it is necessary to adapt these insights to the contemporary context. It is believed that the choice of video game activity in educational processes must necessarily go through a filtering work, to intercept those virtual environments where young people find themselves, thus going to reach them to maximize the benefits (Lancini, 2023), especially regarding the deep understanding of the issues addressed by some popular gameplays. Through these massive video games, in fact, the young player may experience controversial emotions, with the risk of having to deal with them without proper accompaniment (Zhang *et al.*, 2021).

Continuing to talk about video games as a pedagogical tool, it is crucial to recognize that not all of these turn out to be protected spaces. Just think of fighting products such as *Mortal Kombat 11*, open world action-adventures such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, or even the free-to-play multiplayer warfare *World of Tanks* (2010).

Although they are not inherently educational, their value in the lives of adolescents remains undeniable (Fromme, 2003). As edupreneur Viviana Pinto (2020) has argued, one can use video games as a medium to talk about civics, public policy, political organization, but also history, geography, economics; and even emotions.

In Omori's specific case, the game becomes a powerful tool for addressing sensitive issues related to mental health. Exploring the protagonist's various rooms, one realizes how each has a window into the experience of those suffering from psychological disorders, with the possibility of opening a dialogue on topics often seen as taboo (Figg. 5-8).

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[3] The official page for purchasing the Omori video game in the Nintendo Switch version is available at the following link: https://www.nintendo.it/Giochi/Giochi-per-Nintendo-Switch/OMORI-2090487.html
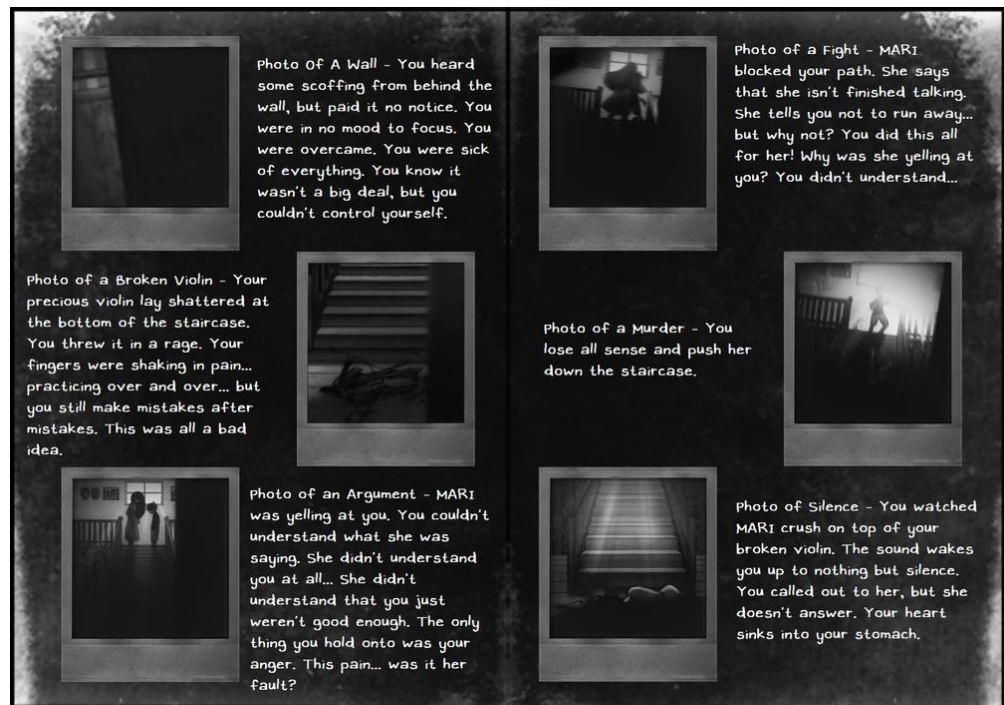
Photo Of A Wall - You heard some scoffing from behind the wall, but paid it no notice. You were in no mood to focus. You were overcame. You were sick of everything. You know it wasn't a big deal, but you couldn't control yourself.

Photo of a Fight - MARI blocked your path. She says that she isn't finished talking. She tells you not to run away... but why not? You did this all for her! Why was she yelling at you? You didn't understand...

Photo of a Broken Violin - Your precious violin lay shattered at the bottom of the staircase. You threw it in a rage. Your fingers were shaking in pain... practicing over and over... but you still make mistakes after mistakes. This was all a bad idea.

Photo of a Murder - You lose all sense and push her down the staircase.

Photo of an Argument - MARI was yelling at you. You couldn't understand what she was saying. She didn't understand you at all... She didn't understand that you just weren't good enough. The only thing you hold onto was your anger. This pain... was it her fault?

Photo of Silence - You watched MARI crush on top of your broken violin. The sound wakes you up to nothing but silence. You called out to her, but she doesn't answer. Your heart sinks into your stomach.
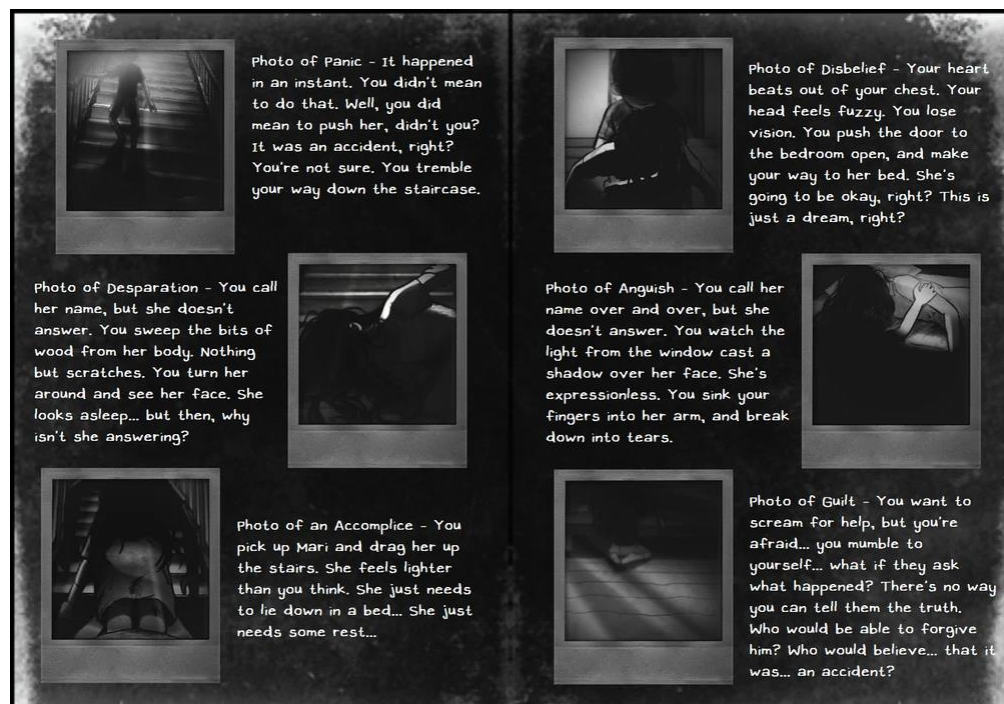
Photo of Panic - It happened in an instant. You didn't mean to do that. Well, you did mean to push her, didn't you? It was an accident, right? You're not sure. You tremble your way down the staircase.

Photo of Disbelief - Your heart beats out of your chest. Your head feels fuzzy. You lose vision. You push the door to the bedroom open, and make your way to her bed. She's going to be okay, right? This is just a dream, right?

Photo of Desparation - You call her name, but she doesn't answer. You sweep the bits of wood from her body. Nothing but scratches. You turn her around and see her face. She looks asleep... but then, why isn't she answering?

Photo of Anguish - You call her name over and over, but she doesn't answer. You watch the light from the window cast a shadow over her face. She's expressionless. You sink your fingers into her arm, and break down into tears.

Photo of an Accomplice - You pick up Mari and drag her up the stairs. She feels lighter than you think. She just needs to lie down in a bed... She just needs some rest...

Photo of Guilt - You want to scream for help, but you're afraid... you mumble to yourself... what if they ask what happened? There's no way you can tell them the truth. Who would be able to forgive him? Who would believe... that it was... an accident?
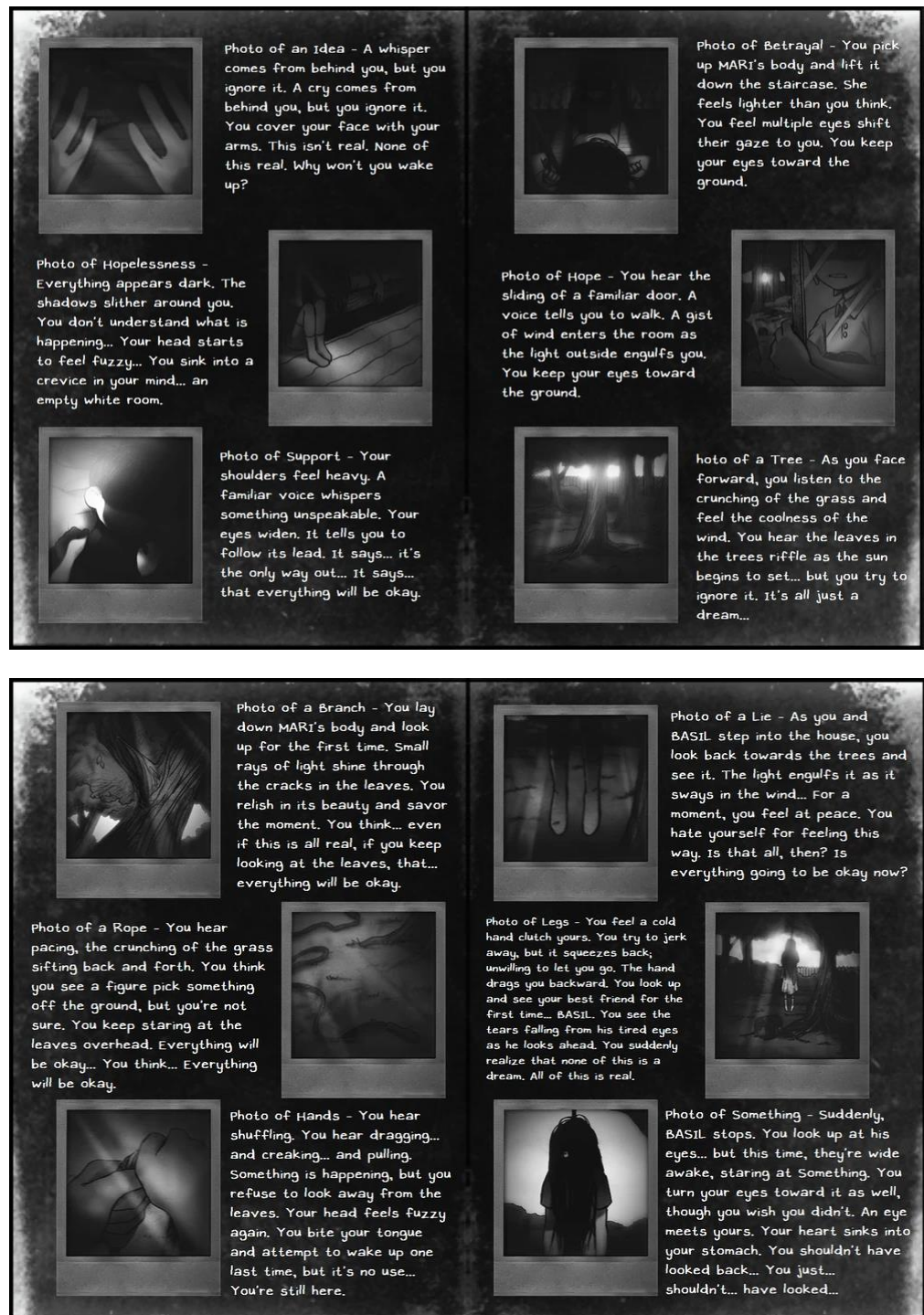
Figg. 5-8: Images extrapolated from the original language video game on the explanation of sister Mari's murder committed by Omori

It is crucial that young gamers are guided in properly reading the content displayed in products such as Omori. This approach can not only protect them from

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potentially disturbing images, but also turn a pure gaming experience into opportunities to raise awareness.

Looking ahead, integrating video games into pedagogy requires a balanced strategy that considers both the potential and the risks associated with them (Toda *et al.*, 2017).

In accordance with the previous considerations, it is important that educators, teachers and parents be informed and involved in the choice of games, making sure that they are appropriate for the age and emotional maturity of young users. In addition, discussion and debate around the topics covered in modern video games can be a valuable opportunity to initiate generative communication between youth and adults (Baily, 2007), for intergenerational reflection on what to play today.

4. Conclusion

The video game in public opinion, as well as in education, suffers from an inferiority complex compared to other media, and the game itself, how it is played, what games people play, are not aspects considered as particularly relevant (Lupetti, 2023). As suggested by Alexander R. Gallowoy (2004), again understanding how a medium works means understanding for what purposes it is or could be used. Taking back Media Education, as a tool and a method (Rivoltella, 2017), and bringing it back inside the classrooms and the walls of the home, means taking charge of the new environments inhabited by the young people of this generation, valuing their preferences and being close to them not only at the moment of buying a video game, but also inside it, actively participating in the discovery of its contents. It's too simple, and counterproductive, to let adults decide which video games kids should enjoy. Instead, the real challenge remains to meet the preferences of the children and follow them not only physically, but also virtually. Why do they choose that game? What is it about? How is it played? These are just some of the questions that an educator, or caregiver, should ask before coming to easy conclusions or denials. In accordance with Edgar Morin's view, it is believed that it could be very interesting to reason about the content of media and try to convey to children a look that is no longer immediate, but reflective[4]. As Rosy Nardone reminds us. (2023, p. 52):

> The technologies of edutainment are increasingly everyday tools around which we can build relationships between youth and adults, develop educational interactions with which to negotiate and ratify rules, norms, roles, identities, belongings and values, both individual and collective: real distributed digital environments in which we experience sociality and solitude, formal and informal learning, and in which relationships take shape and are maintained. But it is necessary to understand the functions, the peculiarities of their grammars [...], how they are used.

This is why Media Education should still fulfill its original goal: to educate with and about media (Buckingham, 2019); but preferring even the hostile ones, such as the Omori video game might seem at first glance, to which this work wanted to give intentional relevance, so far limited to only one scholarly article published by Aya Younis and Jana Fedtke (2023) in the journal *Games and Culture*.

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[4] Taken from an interview with Edgar Morin Educating the Mass Media, 5/19/1993, https://docuver.se/mirrors/www.mediamente.rai.it/mmold/home/bibliote/intervis/m/morin.htm.html

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editoria scientifica dal 1952

All this to be able to disseminate images and storylines that are often unknown to the adult world, but which are resignifying the way we play today: not only to entertain ourselves, but also to deal with fears and traumatic experiences.

In conclusion, video games, often perceived as a mere pastime, can address deep psychological and emotional issues. Omori, with its engaging storyline and complex characters, is an example of how games can go beyond pure entertainment, serving as an emotional mirror of human experiences. Media Education must therefore not only incorporate these new media, but also challenge pre-existing adult perceptions of what can be considered pedagogically meaningful media content.

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