

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Life is Strange

Platform: PS3, PS4, XBox 360, XBox One, PC

Genre: Episodic Adventure/Exploration Game

Release Date: January 29, 2015

Developer: DONTNOD Entertainment

Publisher: Square Enix

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Raoul Barbet, Michael Koch

Overview

After waking from a nightmare where a massive tornado destroys her hometown of Arcadia Bay, Max Caulfield, a shy photography student, discovers that she has the ability to manipulate and rewind time and change the timeline via the butterfly effect after witnessing a murder while hiding out in the girls' bathroom. After rewinding time and saving the girl, she discovers that the would-be murder victim is Chloe Price, her childhood best friend whom she had not been in contact with for several years. With Max's newfound ability, the two set out to find out what happened to Rachel Amber, a missing student and Chloe's new best friend after Max moved away.

As Max and Chloe begin to reconnect, they come closer and closer to discovering the mystery surrounding Rachel Amber's disappearance and testing out Max's new powers, using them to play with the timeline and experiment with different choices, seeing which one has the most favorable outcome. At the climax of the game, Max realizes that by meddling with the timeline and saving Chloe, she has inadvertently caused the tornado that threatens to wipe out Arcadia Bay, and she must decide whether to go back in time and let Chloe die to save the town, or sacrifice the town to save her friend.

Characters

- Max Caulfield – Max, the protagonist and player character of Life is Strange, is a shy and indecisive 18-year-old photography student at Blackwell Academy. Upon witnessing the murder of her childhood best friend, she discovers that she has the ability to rewind time and is able to prevent her friend's death and reconnect with her. Despite her shy and introverted nature, she genuinely cares about her classmates and wants to get to know them better. Max is also a rather nosy character, often snooping through her classmates' rooms and lockers, and using her rewind powers when her classmates get frustrated with her for doing so.
- Chloe Price – Chloe is the deuteragonist of Life is Strange. She is angsty and rebellious, as well as hot-headed, and will often blame others for her problem. She also struggles with abandonment issues as a result of her father's death when she was young and Max moving away shortly after. Despite her flaws, she is a loyal friend to Max and offers to help her test out her new powers. Because of Chloe's impulsive nature and rebellious attitude, she can often get herself and Max into trouble with the other citizens of Arcadia Bay.
- Kate Walsh – Kate is a religious and highly depressed student at Blackwell Academy, having recently been the target of intense cyberbullying. Prior to the beginning of the game, she was drugged at a party, blacking out and making out with several different guys, all of which was recorded and posted on the internet. As her mental state begins to deteriorate, she becomes suicidal, resulting in a suicide attempt at the climax of the second episode of the game. Depending on choices players make throughout the first two episodes, players can save or fail to save Kate during her suicide attempt.
- Rachel Amber – While we never directly interact with Rachel Amber in this game, she serves as the story's catalyst, as the game's main plot surrounds Max and Chloe investigating her disappearance. Throughout conversations, we know that she and Chloe were extremely close, with Chloe claiming that Rachel saved her life after her father died and Max moved away, and that Rachel was highly ambitious, aspiring to work as a model.

Breakdown

One of the strongest elements with any game that has a branching narrative is the ability to allow player agency within the story, and *Life is Strange* takes that idea and runs with it. By introducing the rewind mechanic, DONTNOD gave the player even more agency with the story by allowing players to experiment with their actions (or inactions) and see the immediate outcome before deciding which route they want to take. While players are unable to rewind past certain points, only being able to rewind to when they first entered the area, the game never rushes the player and encourages them to take their time to explore the area completely before progressing the story. Because this mechanic is so carefully intertwined within the story, it doesn't break the players immersion with the story, and even helps the player become even *more* immersed into the story because it makes sense for Max as a character to be exploring the different outcomes, as she is rather indecisive, unsure, and a bit of a perfectionist. Whenever an important choice is made, Max will second guess herself, wondering if the choice she just made was the right one.

One reason that the player feels like they have so much agency is the consequences certain actions can have, both in the short and long term. The game is filled with decisions, many of which have a variety of outcomes and to different levels. Not only that, but the decisions made may take several episodes for their consequences to become apparent. For example, Alyssa, another student at Blackwell Academy, is very accident prone, with a scene taking place in every episode where she gets hurt. Max can step in and prevent her from getting hurt, or ignore it and let these accidents happen to her. In the final episode when Max is navigating through Arcadia Bay while the storm rages on, she sees Alyssa trapped in a building and in need of help. If Max helped her avoid these bouts of bad luck, Alyssa will accept her help and will be rescued, but if Max ignored her in the previous episodes, she will blame Max for her bad luck and will accidentally fall to her death while trying to avoid Max. In the short term, Alyssa, will be either grateful for Max's help or frustrated and snippy with Max for getting hurt, clueing players that this action has consequences simply based on Alyssa's reaction, and how these seemingly small and insignificant choices can mean the difference between Alyssa living or dying. Another perfect example of how choices can have consequences is during Episode 2: Out of Time during Kate Marsh's suicide attempt. Choices as simple as wiping off a link to an embarrassing video of Kate or answering a phone call from her when she needs help influence if Max is able to save Kate or not; however, not all choices carry consequences with this much weight. Sometimes the consequences can be how characters interact with Max or with other characters, either improving or worsen their relationships. The entire concept behind the consequences is the game is rooted in the butterfly effect, a theory that states that a simple action can have astronomically huge results, such as a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world can cause a tornado in a completely different part of the world.

A large appeal of *Life is Strange* comes from its large cast of characters, and how each character feels grounded in reality. When creating these characters, DONTNOD based them off of archetypal teenagers from western media, and it becomes clear when looking at Max, Chloe, Victoria, and Kate, the shy, awkward wallflower, the rebel without a cause, the rich bully, and the religious social outcast respectively. Even though these characters were based off of these cliches and tropes, DONTNOD didn't stop there, choosing to dive in deeper and take a closer look at the characters to really bring them to life. While Chloe might seem like a stereotypical punk, we learn that she is struggling with abandonment issues, still grieving the loss of her father, and living with a physically abusive and obsessive step-father. Victoria, while she may seem to be arrogant and snobby, struggles with self-confidence and self-worth, choosing to bully others to overcompensate for her own feelings of doubt and jealousy. It's the accurate portrayals of young adolescents who are trying to figure out who they are that really solidifies this game as a great coming of age story. When you meet a character in *Life is Strange*, you know that what you see is not going to be what you get. Another thing that DONTNOD did well when it came to their characters was their character development, especially in regards to the rewind mechanic. Not only does Max have power over how the story is shaped, she also has a degree of influence over how characters are shaped as well as time progresses. Because players are given the opportunity to explore different outcomes, outcomes that affect other characters around Arcadia Bay, they are also able to explore the ways a character will react to these outcomes.

Not only is the game great in regards to its amazing cast of characters, mechanics, and choice system, but another reason the game shines is because of the mature topics that it is unafraid to talk about, topics which many adolescents face at some point throughout their lifetime. Topics covered within *Life is Strange* include bullying, depression, suicide, sexual assault, blended families, death, and abandonment. Because of these powerful messages and topics, audiences are quickly able to find a part of the story, whether it's a specific moment or certain character, that they are able to relate to, helping to solidifying the game and its story as a great one.

Strongest Element

One of the strongest elements in *Life is Strange* has to be the main mechanic of Max's rewind power, and how this helps to give the player more agency over how the story unfolds. While most games with a branching story give players some agency over the story, in most cases, once you are on a certain branch, the only way to go back after a choice has been made is to reload from the past save, start the game over in its entirety, or watch a playthrough where that choice was made; however, this is not an issue with *Life is Strange*. Because Max has the ability to rewind time, players are able to fully explore the world and all of the different choices that Max is able to make throughout the story. This means that if players do not like the immediate outcome of a choice they made, they are able to rewind time and undo that choice, making a different choice in its place. Because of this, players are able to engage with the story that they want to engage with.

Unsuccessful Element

While the main focus of the story in *Life is Strange* is Max and Chloe reconnecting while on this adventure, one of the biggest criticisms I've heard about the game is about Chloe being a bad friend towards Max, and Max just ignores it. While there are many sincere and heart-warming moments that the characters share, there are also many moments where Chloe takes things out on Max, blaming her for moving away when she was a child or getting upset if she answers the phone for a friend struggling with suicidal thoughts. Because of these negative traits, a lot of people dislike Chloe; however, I feel that it's because of these negative traits that Chloe's story feels more realistic. Chloe is somebody who is still struggling to cope with the death of her father, the fallout between her and her childhood best friend, as well as the disappearance of Rachel Amber, so for her to lash out in anger makes her character feel more grounded in reality, but it is still something that many fans have criticised about the game. I think by dialing back on these moments where Chloe's grief and abandonment issues shine through may have helped fans to better connect with Chloe, but would have portrayed someone struggling with loss and abandonment less accurately and sincerely.

Highlight

At the climax of the second episode, Max's friend Kate Marsh attempts to commit suicide and Max must attempt to literally talk her down off the ledge, and it was this moment that was most impactful for me when I first played through *Life is Strange*. At this point of the episode, Max has been experimenting with her powers all day and is burnt out, and when she reaches Kate, she discovers that she is unable to use her powers; if she is going to save Kate, she only has one chance to do it. Players must choose the correct dialogue options in order to save Kate, with the amount of errors a player can make depending on what choices were made regarding Kate during the episode. If Max answers Kate's call and encourages Kate to go to the police, Kate will be more trusting of Max, but if Max ignores her call and tells her to not get the authorities involved, she will have a harder time saving Kate. The reason this moment is so impactful is because of the weight of the situation, and it's where gameplay meets the narrative. The gameplay encourages exploration and interacting with characters and items found throughout the world, and by interacting with Kate and items in her room at the beginning of the episode, players can learn about what dialogue options will help to save Kate. Because of the weight of the situation, it also makes choices going forward feel much more important because of the unintended consequences the choices could carry.

Critical Reception

- Mollie Patterson from EGM scored *Life is Strange* with 95/100 on Metacritic saying, "From its opening moment until its final scene plays, *Life is Strange* is a wonderful, beautiful, captivating, touching adventure built upon the undying friendship of two girls trying to find their place in the world."
- Paul Bryant, a writer and reviewer for Gaming Age gave *Life is Strange* a score of 91/100 on Metacritic, saying "If you're on the market for a dramatic and original episodic series with unique gameplay mechanics and an intriguing story to tell, then consider checking out *Life is Strange*. I definitely need to reiterate how impressed I am with Dontnod Entertainment's first foray into the episodic adventure genre, and we're definitely excited to see where they'll be taking us next."
- Christopher Byrd of The Washington Post had high praises for *Life is Strange*, giving it a score of 90/100 and writing "With tremendous cunning, Dontnod's game moves from a teenage super-power fantasy toward a comment on our universal wish to repair time."

Lessons

- **Make Sure The Narrative and Gameplay Complement Each Other**
 - One thing that I love about *Life is Strange* is how well the gameplay and narrative complement each other. With the main mechanic of the game being able to rewind time and undo certain actions, it allows the player to fully interact with the world and see every possible angle before making a decision. This means that players are in control of what direction the narrative, immersing them deeper into the story without the need to sacrifice gameplay.
- **Make It Clear When Choices Are Important**
 - Something that *Life is Strange* does well is alerting the player when an important choice is about to be made. They are able to achieve this by freezing the rest of the outside world and distorting the image on screen, leaving only the options in focus. When this happens, the player knows that the choice they are about to make is an important one. Not only that, but after the choice is made, text will appear to let the player know that their choice will have consequences.
- **You Can Base Characters Off Tropes, But *DON'T* Write Them As Tropes**
 - In *Life is Strange*, almost every character at first glance appears to be some stereotypical highschooler that you would find in any story taking place in a high school; however, everything is not always what it seems. While the characters that populate the world may appear to have been based off of common tropes, each one brings more to the table and subverts audience expectations in some way, making them feel much more realistic.

Summation

Life is Strange is a beautiful game that captures the struggles of adolescence, filled to the brim with a compelling story, realistic characters, and emotional, heart wrenching moments. Not only that, but the game tackles issues that many people struggle with, such as suicide, bullying, sexuality, sexual assault, abandonment, and grief. DONTNOD did not hold back when it came to showing the darker side of growing up, and it's this authenticity that causes so many players to connect with the beautiful story they created.