

## Game Narrative Review

**Your Name:** Kaleb Nekumanesh  
**Your School:** DigiPen Institute of Technology  
**Your Email:** kaleb.nekumanesh@digipen.edu  
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**Game Title:** Life Is Strange  
**Platforms:** PC / Mac / Linux / Xbox 360 / Xbox One / PS3 / PS4  
**Genre:** Interactive Drama / Branching Narrative  
**Release Date:** January 2016  
**Developer:** Dontnod Entertainment  
**Publisher:** Square Enix  
**Game Directors:** Raoul Barbet / Michel Koch

*“What if a great power...would do more harm than good?”*

### Overview

*Life Is Strange* is a five part episodic interactive narrative with a branching storyline where the player's choices have a great impact on the story and characters. The player takes the role of Max Caulfield, an aspiring photographer returning to her hometown, Arcadia Bay, to study at the prestigious Blackwell Academy. When she witnesses her best friend, Chloe Price, get shot, she discovers that she has the ability to rewind time. In addition, Max receives a vision that a tornado will wipe out Arcadia Bay in five days. Max will then have to use her power to find a way to stop the tornado from destroying the city while trying to uncover the mystery behind the disappearance of Chloe's friend, Rachel Amber. Important ethical and social topics that are discussed today like bullying, suicide, euthanasia, determinism, loss of innocence/youth, and homosexuality/bisexuality.

### Characters

- Max Caulfield –
  - Max is the playable character in *Life Is Strange* and an aspiring photographer. She is an introverted and shy student at Blackwell Academy. When it comes to her photography and her choices, she is very self-conscious. After discovering she has the power to rewind time, she decides that she will try to use her powers for good. She teams up with her reunited childhood friend, Chloe Price to find a missing student and Chloe's best friend, Rachel Amber. Events complicate as the mystery of missing students reveals corruptions in the school and government and Max is forced to make choices that will impact later events and her relationships with others. After using her power to get what she wants and “do good”, she wonders if she has been doing the right thing, or just catering to her own self-interests. Based on player choice, Max's romantic interest will be either Chloe Price or William Graham.

*“Did I make the right decision?”*

- Chloe Price –
  - Chloe is the secondary main character in *Life Is Strange*. Ever since the death of her father and the abandonment of her best friend, Max, she feels alone. She is stubborn and rebellious and likely suffering from depression. She references moments of insomnia and suicidal thoughts and feels that Rachel Amber saved her life and she will do anything to find out where Rachel has gone. She often blames other people for everything wrong in her life. After spending the week with Max, however, she becomes happier than she has ever been since before her father died. After the return of her best friend, Max, she shows affection to her. The game uses the act of saving Chloe and character development to make the last decision of the game a difficult one.

*“Since you are the mysterious super hero, I will be your faithful shofer and companion.”*

- Kate Marsh –
  - Kate is a depressed student at Blackwell Academy and is a target of bullying. After a video goes viral documenting her partying and performing sexual acts while drugged, her depression worsens and she becomes suicidal. Later, she attempts suicide by jumping off the roof of the school and the player must convince Kate to not take her own life. Based on the player choices before and during this event, these will ultimately determine whether Kate will live or die.

*“I’m in a nightmare and I can’t wake up...unless I put myself to sleep.”*

- Mark Jefferson –
  - Mark Jefferson is Max's photography professor at Blackwell Academy. Jefferson is someone that Max looks up to as she is inspired by his work. It is later discovered that Jefferson is the man behind the disappearance of many Blackwell Students. His obsession with capturing the moment where innocence evolves into corruption pushes him to drug students and take photos of them while they are slightly unconscious. He believes that models are cynical and unconscious models are much more open and honest. Jefferson drugs and kidnaps Max and she will be forced to use her power to get herself out.

*“I could frame any one of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation.”*

## **Breakdown**

Within the seemingly simple gameplay of *Life Is Strange* is a game that delivers a powerful message about choice and how it will effect the lives of others. Unlike other time travel stories, *Life Is Strange's* time travel elements are not explained and is much stronger for it. Rather than wasting time discussing what causes the time travel, the game focuses on the characters and the struggles they face. While the game has only two major possible endings, the choices the character makes will greatly determine how the story will unfold. Because the player plays through the perspective of Max Caulfield, the player will experience the relationships and choices the player makes directly through her eyes and see how it effects her and the people around her. The time travel and clue based puzzles along with dialogue options pushes players into this world and discusses important topics like bullying, suicide, and euthanasia.

*Life Is Strange* explores the world of the seemingly peaceful town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon. The game provides the player a town to explore and interact with that seems innocent, but has a dark underlying theme. The game provides juxtaposition between the moments of calm and exploration and the moments of gut wrenching and emotionally intense scenes, which make those moments all the more meaningful and

effective. As the events of the story unfold, Max quickly learns that there is much more going on in Arcadia Bay than what it seems at first glance. Between her new power to rewind time, the missing students, an approaching tornado, a conspiracy involving the rich Prescotts, and the involvement with the school of Blackwell Academy, Max quickly tries to uncover what is happening while trying to keep her personal and educational life in check, which she quickly learns is a challenge. The game does this by providing gameplay that primarily involves dialogue trees, exploration, and puzzle solving either through dialogue or to progress through the story.

The heuristics of the game are contextual and vary based on what the player is trying to accomplish. The player's heuristics in a dialogue branch is to select the correct dialogue options to get what the player or Max desires. However, the ultimate long term heuristic is to play the story and see how the game narrative concludes. The game uses the short term heuristics to help progress the story as a whole or to explore the other characters of Arcadia Bay. These secondary heuristics are optional, but are provided to help enhance the player's understanding of the narrative and the world it takes place, the long term heuristic.

*Life Is Strange* uses the Catharsis Engagement Type, which is a type of characteristic used in the game to make the game engaging for the groups of people who enjoy that particular Engagement Type. The game structure does not afford a real victory condition to the game and is strictly uses narrativism. Therefore, all the engagement created by the game is purely for the emotional and transformative catharsis the game's narrative provides. Another engagement element is through the challenge and accomplishment of completing a puzzle, whether it is a physical puzzle or a narrative puzzle through dialogue options and the rewind mechanic. Most of the game's choices are not morally binary and are presented to be morally gray. They are not designed to be right or wrong answers, but choices between what Max wants and what others want, which quickly becomes an important theme and is contextual to the last decision of the game.

Chloe's character throughout the story evolves from being selfish and stubborn to being a great friend and companion, and when the narrative comes to a close, she will lose her selfish attitude for the benefit of the ones she loves. Max's journey takes her to several locations and themes. She begins the story as a shy introvert who wants to be cool and popular. But throughout the game, she is encountered with friendship issues, moral dilemmas, and life threatening events that strengthen her character so that when the end of the game arrives, she would've learned about the power of friendship, sacrifice, and the potential dangers of using time to get what you want.

### **Strongest Element**

Several games create branching narrative elements in their stories. Some games use it as an element to their game to support the gameplay and story like Mass Effect. Some games use it as the full structure of the game to control the story like Heavy Rain. *Life Is Strange* is in the later category. There are several advantages of having a branching narrative and *Life Is Strange* needs a branching narrative to create the experience they wanted to create. Having a branching narrative gives the player a sense of agency to the story and makes them feel in control. This can make them feel good, but it can also make them feel bad. *Life Is Strange* uses these elements to give the player emotions that could never be recreated in a non-interactive medium. By creating player agency, the player has a strong emotional reaction to the content provided and the results of the choices the player makes. This emotional reaction is higher than any reaction a person can have in a non-interactive medium strictly because of the element of interactivity. At the end of Episode 2 of *Life Is Strange*, Max's friend, Kate Marsh, is about to commit suicide and Max is not able to rewind time. The player must talk with Kate to convince her to not commit suicide and this event will call back to several decisions made before this event. Based on the player's dialogue choices and previous decisions, Kate will survive or die. Because the fate of Kate is left to the hands of the player and the

choices they make, the player will feel responsible for her death or life, have enhanced feelings because the player will feel that they are responsible for that action. The game provides feedback from this choice to the player several times throughout the game, which is essential to making this moment memorable and important. It is brought up either to reward the player by viewing the consequences of saving Kate or to haunt Max by showing unsettling images of Kate and visualizes Max's insecurity of herself and the choices she's made. This occurs several times throughout the entire game and it is possibly one of the best aspects of *Life Is Strange*.

### **Unsuccessful Element**

At the end of the game, Max loses consciousness and wakes up in a dream. For about 30 minutes, the game explores this dream. The purpose of the dream sequence is to represent Max's subconscious, recap Max's relationship with Chloe through plot points, and for Max to encounter the people of Arcadia Bay. The purpose of this dream sequence is to prepare you for the last choice of the game. While this sequence tries to make the final choice difficult, and succeeds in that if nothing else, it is hindered by the halt in pace and the out of place and tedious stealth section. The best use of a final boss battle is to take all the elements the player has learned up to that point and create a challenging and compelling conclusion. However, *Life Is Strange* is a narrative focused game, making a challenging ending to a game like this could prove to be difficult. *Life Is Strange* tackles this challenge by creating an emotionally challenging build up to the final decision of the game so that the ending can be challenging in an emotional level rather than a skill based level, and with that, *Life Is Strange* succeeds. However, the developers did want to have challenging gameplay, so they added an instant fail stealth section that is designed to add challenge to the end of the game, instantly converting a narrative based game to a gamist game, adding a way for a player to fail and succeed. This provides a change of gameplay and pace for only a small amount of time, creating a disorienting change where none is needed. This gameplay comes out of nowhere and does not have a purpose in the storyline.

### **Highlight (The Last Decision of the Game)**

What this game does better than most games on the market is character development. Character development and powerful parasocial relationships, or the one way relationships between the player and the character in the game, with the characters are crucial to any game's story that needs to have engaging and relatable characters. In most video games, characters are defined by a single archetype. The character of Chloe Price is exceptionally well developed and her character is entertaining. She has complex emotions that makes her feel more human and more likeable. The player gets to see her laugh, cry, get angry, have fun, and be romantic with someone. That is why when the final decision in the game comes, most players cannot decide what to do. At the end of the game, the tornado is about to wipe out the city and Max realizes that the tornado was created because Max caused time to change. It is then that Chloe realizes that she must stop Max from ever using her power. Max must go back in time when Max first used her power to save Chloe and stop herself from doing so. The player must then choose whether to sacrifice Chloe or sacrifice Arcadia Bay. If the player chooses to sacrifice Arcadia Bay, Chloe will live, but lots of people in Arcadia Bay will die. If the player chooses to sacrifice Chloe, Chloe will die and the player will watch as all the memories between Chloe and Max fade away, but Arcadia Bay will survive. While this does provide an emotionally intense ending that successfully ties up all the narrative elements of the game and takes Max to the end of her character arc, the second ending does not provide these elements and creates an unsatisfying ending.

## **Critical Reception**

In Mitch Dyer's (IGN) review of *Life Is Strange* praised *Life Is Strange* for the grounded drama it conveys about friendship, sacrifice, and remaking your past. In his review, he states, "What I enjoyed most about *Life Is Strange* is it's grounded human drama...conveyed extraordinarily." However, the tedious instant death dream sequence and indecisive tone is a common criticism, both for Dyer and several other sources. In addition, reviewers condemn the bad writing and cartoonish psychopathic villain who, in the final episode, delivers forced exposition and cliches throughout a drawn out dialogue between Max and Mr. Jefferson. Finally, Dyer finalizes his review stating, "[The ending is] a heartfelt, evocative, and long epilogue that ties up loose ends."

## **Lessons**

- Creating player agency using choice can create a great emotional impact on the player and create a different experience for the player.
  - If a narrativist is playing, or someone who values the narrative of the game more than the other elements of the game, choice in video games make the player feel in control of the story, and therefore, feel responsible for what happens. When the character is confronted with a moral choice, they feel a greater emotional impact on the outcome than any film or book can create. In *Life Is Strange*, Max encounters Chloe, who is terminally ill, and she asks you to euthanize her. The player is then given the option to accept or decline her request. If the player accepts this request, the player will feel responsible for Chloe's death and therefore has a greater emotional reaction to the choice. This makes these choices difficult and why the game freezes time to allow the player time to think.
- The power of character development and parasocial relationships can make or break how the player engages with the character.
  - Character development and parasocial relationships are important in any game and can be the difference between the player caring about your characters or not. The choice where Chloe asks Max to euthanize her would be meaningless if the player did not care about Chloe or her feelings. If the relationship with characters are not strong enough, then the choices in the game become meaningless.

## **Summation**

*Life Is Strange* skillfully uses a combination of catharsis and exploration to create a compelling narrative for the player to enjoy. The game creates meaningful and engaging heuristics to immerse the player into the rich world of Arcadia Bay and the lives of Max and Chloe. The game's narrative uses parasocial relationships and character development to make us relate to and enjoy the characters Dontnod created and ultimately care about their experiences and troubles. The game gives the player agency through the choices the game provides, by doing so the player has a stronger emotional reaction to the content than what could be possible in a non-interactive medium. In addition, *Life Is Strange* juxtaposes the calm and exploration moments from the intense and emotional moments so that those moments become increasingly powerful. Dontnod uses these elements to create an emotional roller coaster that keeps players engaged as the game snowballs to the end.