

Game Narrative Review



Your name: Desiree Cifre
Your school: New York University
Your email: dac264@nyu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: Dec/2016

Game Title: Life is Strange
Platform: PS4 (also on other platforms)
Genre: Episodic Adventure
Release Date: Jan 30 2015 (Episode 1)
Developer: Dontnod Entertainment
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Christian Divine and Jean-Luc Cano

Overview

If you could rewind time to save someone you love, would you? If given that power, should you? Dontnod took this premise and made the distinctive move of putting this power in the hands of a teenaged girl, in a game that tries to make player choice feel truly meaningful. When effective, this seemingly simple mechanic will utterly grip players as they watch to see the consequences of choices play out. However, the pruning of narrative branches results in an unfortunate conclusion that washes away the importance of many prior decisions.

Set in the fictional Pacific Northwest town of Arcadia Bay, the events in the game kick into motion when a teenaged girl witnesses the murder of an old friend and suddenly discovers that she has the power to rewind time and save her. As she learns to control this ability, she uses it to solve the disappearance of a fellow student. Strange ecological events and visions of the future suggest that her meddling with time comes at a price, a butterfly effect that threatens to destroy everyone she cares about. The game's story grounds the fantastical sci-fi premise in a realistic world, addressing issues such as in-person and online bullying, social class struggles, drug use, sexual assault, and suicide.

Characters

- **PROTAGONIST: MAXINE CAULFIELD** – The player character, Max is a budding photographer who has returned to the town she grew up in to attend an elite private academy. Her last name is inspired by the literary character Holden Caulfield, and she is in many ways a typical American teenager, concerned with doing well in a competitive school. She's fond of taking selfies, only with an old-school Polaroid.
- **PRICE FAMILY:** Unlike the privileged students of Blackwell Academy, the members of the Price family are working class townies. Class resentment is expressed by Chloe and David at different points in the story, and we also see William and Joyce struggling with finances.
 1. **CHLOE PRICE** – Chloe is Max's former best friend whose death sparks Max's rewind power. Still mourning the loss of her father William years earlier, Chloe is a rebellious, impulsive kid determined to find her missing friend, Rachel. She felt abandoned by Max when Max's family moved away shortly after William's death, but quickly embraces her old friend as if no time has passed.
 2. **JOYCE PRICE/MADSEN** - Joyce is Chloe's mother, who just wants her daughter and new husband to get along. She works tiring shifts as a waitress at the local diner and while she is stymied by Chloe's downward spiral, she doesn't have the luxury of time to focus on helping her.
 3. **WILLIAM PRICE** - William was Chloe's father, who died in a car accident on his way to pick up Joyce from work. In an alternate timeline where he survives but Chloe is in an accident instead, he creates a high-tech room for her to navigate in her special wheelchair, and struggles to pay her mounting medical bills.
 4. **DAVID MADSEN** - David is the security officer at Blackwell Academy and Chloe's hated stepfather. An ex-military man, his gruff, authoritarian exterior masks sharp investigative instincts and a good heart. He wants to install a controversial security camera system at the school and keeps files on the students.
- **TOWN RESIDENTS**
 1. **FRANK BOWERS** - Frank is the local drug dealer who had a secret relationship with Rachel Amber. He unwittingly supplied the drugs that led to her death, having sold them to Nathan Prescott. Max discovers this when she decodes his secret client list. He threatens Chloe, demanding money she borrowed from him to run away with Rachel.
- **BLACKWELL ACADEMY STUDENTS AND STAFF:** The elite school also reflects class divisions, as the wealthier students belong to an exclusive society called The Vortex Club, and their resources and entitlement give them leverage over their professors and the administration.

1. **MARK JEFFERSON** - Mr. Jefferson is the hip, charismatic photography professor at the school, later revealed to be the villain of the story. He drugged several of the students in his pursuit of capturing “innocence” on film, including Kate, leading to the viral video that compels her to attempt suicide, and Rachel, who died. He manipulated one of his students, Nathan, so that suspicion would fall on him, and used Nathan’s family property and money to create the dark room where he took the girls.
2. **NATHAN PRESCOTT** - Nathan is the privileged bully who kills Chloe at the beginning of the game during a drug deal gone bad. While directly responsible for Rachel’s death via overdose, he was really Jefferson’s pawn, a vulnerable boy looking for the approval of a father figure. When Max is captured by Mr. Jefferson, he tells her he murdered Nathan and disposed of his body to cover his tracks.
3. **RACHEL AMBER** - Rachel, the missing girl, is an enigmatic character who is never seen alive, but who haunts many of the characters. Her face is plastered on the walls in missing posters by her best friend/lover Chloe, who had no idea that she also had a relationship with the local drug dealer Frank. At times, Max feels jealous of the closeness of Chloe and Rachel’s relationship, but she’s also glad that Chloe had a close friend to fill in her role after she moved away. Rachel’s spirit is represented by the apparition of a deer that appears to Max at several points in the story.
4. **VICTORIA CHASE** - Victoria is a close friend of Nathan, and hides her insecurities by tormenting lower status students like Kate Marsh. Max acknowledges that Victoria, while rich, is also very talented and one of the school’s top photographers. Late in the game, when Max tries to warn Victoria about Nathan, she will believe Max if Max has acted compassionately towards her despite her terrible treatment of others.
5. **KATE MARSH** - Kate is the deeply religious social outcast whose shame at a sexual viral video causes her to threaten suicide midway through the story. While the popular students see her as a hypocrite, Max and some of her friends express concern about Kate. Depending on how Max treats Kate and remembers personal clues from Kate’s room, Max may or may not be able to save Kate from jumping to her death. Whether she lives or dies, the attempt makes a big impact at the school, as the students ponder their responsibility for contributing to her despair, and as the faculty looks for someone to blame. Max will have a choice to blame Mr. Jefferson, David Madsen, or Nathan Prescott, with different outcomes for each possibility.
6. **WARREN GRAHAM** - Warren is Max’s good friend at the school and the only person other than Chloe she trusts enough to confide some details of what is happening with her. A sci-fi geek and gifted science student, Warren explains Chaos Theory to Max. He has a crush on Max and asks her to movie dates, attacks Nathan Prescott when he threatens her, and helps her create a bomb to break into the principal’s office.

7. **SAMUEL TAYLOR** - Samuel is the custodian at the school. He's a gentle soul who enjoys nature, although the students find him odd because of his behavior, such as the way he talks to squirrels. He has a stash of Rachel's pictures and may be a red herring suspect in her disappearance. He seems to be the only person who senses that there is something special about Max, and that she might be directly related to the strange natural events happening.
8. **PRINCIPAL RAY WELLS** - One of a small handful of African American characters in the game, Principal Wells manages the stress of his job at Blackwell by drinking. While he would like to expel Nathan for his erratic behavior, he is unable to do so because of the contributions the Prescott family has made to the school's endowment.

Breakdown

Max Caulfield ascends a cliff towards a lighthouse. As she reaches the top, she sees a gigantic dark hurricane funnel come inland to destroy her seaside town, Arcadia Bay. She awakens with a jolt in her classroom. Moments later, she witnesses a murder in the girls' bathroom, and realizes she can rewind time to save the victim's life. As the story progresses, it is strongly suggested that Max's meddling with time is having a disastrous effect on the natural order of things, and that she is the one responsible for the oncoming storm.

The game was originally released episodically, with a few months wait between each installment. The serialization of adventure game stories was made popular by Telltale Studios and their Walking Dead series, and it worked well here, breaking the larger story into five digestible blocks. The game suggests moments you can rewind with the blue butterfly symbol shown at the top of this review, and there is usually a limited amount of time in which you can rewind in a given moment, such as the length of a single conversation. Choices were retained within and between episodes, with the most significant choices being denoted by a freezing of time with an exaggerated photographic exposure effect. Once Max changes locations or makes a significant choice, she is unable to rewind. The game is very clear on when you can or can't rewind. Max uses her power to solve puzzles, usually in the form of obtaining information from other characters, although she also must use it to solve more traditional physical puzzles as well. The more successful of these hinges on her ability to use what she has learned to influence others, while the less so involve tedious fetch quests or, at the conclusion, a low-stakes stealth level. As is typical for an adventure game, exploring the environment yields clues, and also background on the characters and their relationships. The environment is highly interactive and players can truly immerse themselves in small but well-considered details, which adds to the game's depth and makes the world feel like a living place. Often events in the narrative will affect the environment, such as the writings on the girl's boards outside their dorm rooms, graffiti in the bathroom, and at one point (depending on your choices), threats scrawled on Max's bedroom wall.

Photography serves throughout the game as a metaphor for identity and memory. Max's search for self-discovery is reflected in her preference for taking selfies, and the player can also choose to capture certain moments throughout the game to keep in her journal. To travel farther into the past, she must use photographs to help her focus on her memories of that moment in time. At key moments, she must destroy photos in order to release herself from the drive to recreate a perfect past.

While the high-concept arc of the game is a detective story about a missing girl, what makes the narrative powerful is not the fact that Max is a sci-fi Nancy Drew. Rather, the relationship between Max and her best friend Chloe is the beating heart of the story. Chloe is a fully realized character. A lesbian teenager with a tough exterior, she has suffered deep loss several times, in the death of her father, Max's abandonment of her, and now with the disappearance of Rachel, her girlfriend. Unfortunately, the game ultimately stumbles in its treatment of Chloe.

Saving Chloe's life initiates the game's primary mechanic, Max's time rewind power, but it quickly becomes clear that keeping Chloe alive will not be an easy task. Chloe is impulsive and keeps getting herself into dangerous situations: she steals her stepfather's gun, gets her foot stuck in a railroad track and must be saved from an oncoming train, and she is shot in the head by the main villain in the penultimate episode of the story. The seeming inevitability of her tragic fate is not only represented narratively, but also procedurally, as the player is given two moments in the game where they must choose whether Chloe lives or dies. The first of these is an alternate timeline where Max has gone back and saved Chloe's father. Instead, Chloe gets in a car accident, and is paralyzed from the neck down. Chloe asks Max to administer a high dose of morphine to end her and her parents' suffering, and the player must choose whether or not to oblige. At first, this seems like a bleak but fair trade, Chloe's life in exchange for her father's. But by the final episode, when Max has saved Chloe three or four times and must again choose whether she lives or dies, it becomes clear that the game has marked Chloe as doomed. She isn't just doomed, her life, and Max's interference with time to save it, is a threat to the town that they live in. To be fair to the writers, the game does actually give the player a real choice here. If Max saves Chloe, the entire town is wiped out and they drive past the wreckage, still together, but only at the ultimate cost. If Max chooses to let her die, she is rewarded with a much longer and more emotionally impactful denouement, implying that this is the ending the developers expected players to choose.

Strongest Element

Above all, what makes the game's rewind mechanic so compelling is its grounding in reality. These very human characters are stand-ins for the universal longing to be able to go back and right wrongs in the past. In a powerful moment, Max is able to go back and save Chloe's father, healing the gaping wound in her friend's heart, but causing unintended consequences when Chloe winds up in an accident instead. *Life Is Strange*

truly shines when little, seemingly mundane moments add up to great import later. Talking with the other characters and remembering details about their lives can endear you to them if they feel that you genuinely care about them. While Max can use her abilities to hurt other characters, she is often more successful when she shows compassion. This is unusual in a games industry that often indulges players' dominance fantasies.

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, in an attempt to make the climax of the game have the highest possible stakes, the game's writers provide two endings that wipe out the significance of anything you have done before. If you save Chloe, then the town and everyone in it presumably dies, including Kate, if you had saved her. If you let Chloe die, then your previous choices are likewise made inconsequential. It's also ironic, in a game where the chief mechanic is making choices, for the "best" ending to be one in which the lead character is passive and does nothing. This is especially problematic as the game started by giving a teenaged girl an incredible amount of agency, only to suggest that she shouldn't use it.

Highlight

The strongest moment of the game is Kate's attempted suicide. After letting the player grow accustomed to having the rewind power, the game abruptly takes it away. Max arrives back at school after an afternoon spent demonstrating her power to Chloe causes her to pass out. While the game has hinted at Kate's despair in interactions Max has either had with her or observed, Max has been so preoccupied with Chloe that she may have not paid Kate enough attention. Max sees Kate jump from the roof of the dorm, and is able to rewind and freeze time long enough to get to the roof to speak with her. Her rewind power suddenly gone, each choice she makes will lead Kate to either come down safely or jump. Never in a game has choosing from dialogue trees created such a pulse pounding moment of suspense - yet it does not feel like the subject of suicide is being treated in a cheap way for entertainment value. Because players have the chance to really get to know Kate both by speaking with her and examining her personal space, she feels like a full, complicated character whose deep torment rings true to life, especially in the modern era of cyberbullying through social media. Likewise, the player's success or failure hinges not on the ability to button mash through a QTE, but on how thoroughly Max has invested time in Kate. Whether the player saves her or not, the outcome feels fair. Although players could reboot the entire episode from the beginning if they just couldn't handle losing Kate, many reported that they preferred to live with the consequences of neglecting her.¹

¹ PsyX99 (2015, March 25). Re: [EP2 SPOILERS] General Discussion Post for Life is Strange Episode 2 - Out of Time [Blog Comment]. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/lifeisstrange/comments/302pqtep2_spoilers_general_discussion_post_for_life_is/#bottom-comments

Critical Reception

Reviewer Colin Campbell at *Polygon*, in a 8.5/10 review of episode two, agrees that the game's setting is refreshing and a reason to play on its own, writing:

I can't figure out why I like this game so much. It's not much of a drama. It's barely even a game. But as a drama-y game or as a gamey drama, it seems to work. This episode wasn't as smash-bang-wallop as the first, and yet it kept me interested all the way through. Why? It's not like the mystery is all that captivating, the characters all that fascinating, the dialog especially scintillating. But I just really like inhabiting this world.²

At Gamespot, Kevin VanOrd scored the first episode a 7/10, feeling that the time rewind mechanic robbed many choices of meaning and diminished the story's impact. He did find the characters engaging, noting:

Some of the characterizations are too on-the-nose... This is storytelling shorthand, but much of it rings beautifully true... These interactions break your heart precisely because you may have had such conversations yourself.³

The game captured many industry nominations and awards thanks to its narrative, including the 2016 GDC Audience award and the Games For Change 2016 Game of the Year award.

Lessons

- **Narrative choices in a game can be compelling enough to form the basis of a game without needing to be dressed up in genre elements or other mechanics.** *Life is Strange* takes relatable characters in a realistic setting and creates a world that is extremely satisfying to explore. There is a narrative incentive for doing so, but when Max is able to make progress with another character due to her observations, the exploration feels really rewarding.
- **Episodic adventure game releases are here to stay.** The model of a serialized game story proved very successful for *Life is Strange*, as players enjoyed discussing plot theories on comment boards between episodes the same way they might for a serial television show like *The Walking Dead* or *Game of Thrones*. Indeed, because of the wait, each episode's conclusion had more impact as players had time to reflect upon it before they could move on to see what happens next.
- **Yes, you can have a wildly successful video game about a teenaged girl.** *Life is Strange* sold over a million copies before the fourth episode was released and is now being turned into a live-action series.

² Campbell, Colin and Megan Farokhmanesh. *Life is Strange: Episode Two - Out of Time Review: Stand By Me*. <http://www.polygon.com/2015/3/25/8291203/life-is-strange-episode-two-review>. Polygon. 25 Mar 2015.

³ VanOrd, Kevin. *Life is Strange, Episode One Review*. <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/life-is-strange-episode-one-review/1900-6416015/>. Gamespot. 29 Jan 2015.

Summation

Life is Strange deserves its acclaim as a groundbreaking game. Through experiencing the life of an ordinary young woman with an extraordinary gift, players get to rewind to that time in our lives when little moments felt like they meant everything. Stepping into Arcadia Bay, you can live a high school experience where this time, you comfort the depressed girl, stand up to the bully, and stand by your oldest friend. In a fast-paced, distracted age, there is something almost indulgent about a game that revels in the details.