

Individual Academic Report Game Analysis/Review of ‘Life is Strange’

L4: Game Design & History

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1. Introduction

The game 'Life is Strange' is a narrative story-based game developed by DONTNOD Entertainment and published by Square Enix and was released in early 2015 [1]. The game is a prime example of narrative-driven gaming and contains episodic storytelling with interactive choices. The game achieved significant critical and commercial success, surpassing twenty million players many years after its original release [2]. The story follows Max Caulfield, who finds herself with the ability to rewind time and must use this ability to save her childhood best friend Chloe Price, while solving mysteries and preventing disaster in the game's setting of Arcadia Bay.



2. Genre

The genre of 'Life is Strange' is difficult to define. While the game is classified as Adventure due to its explorative and puzzle-solving elements, the narrative is much more nuanced. The story follows the player's character 'Max' solving mysteries in her town such as the disappearance of fellow students, Max's time manipulation abilities, and the morality and consequences of player. These elements grant the story of 'Life is Strange' elements of various genres such as thriller, mystery, and supernatural fantasy [3]. The game prioritizes narrative depth and player choice over traditional action-oriented gameplay, aligning with theories that suggest immersion and narrative cohesion are central to user engagement in adventure games [4]. By focusing on the emotional storytelling and character development, Life is Strange expanded its reach to audiences interested in narrative-heavy experiences rather than action.



3. Visual Style

'Life is Strange' has a very distinctive visual style which complements its story fantastically. Much of the game's art style has rich texture but is slightly stylised in a cartoon-reminiscent way. Rather than a hyper-realistic style, most of the game is depicted with relatively soft, painterly aesthetic which is very reminiscent of Max's own photography style. The backgrounds and scenes tend to have muted, soft colour palettes which gives a nostalgic and dreamy vibe to the game. Lighting tends to be soft and warm, lending a cinematic and calming atmosphere to gameplay. Almost any moment of gameplay itself could be captured and shown as an example of the artistic style, which again lends itself to Max's photography focus, in which she tends to capture candid every-day moments of beauty. This symbiosis between the artistic style of the game and the story itself can help immerse players in the world and setting, making them more invested in the characters, choices, and outcomes of the game [5]



Figure 1 - In-game screenshot of Blackwell Academy



Figure 2 - In-game screenshot of Chloe's room

While the game's artistic style fits the narrative elements very well, it can occasionally undercut some of the more serious moments. Since much of the character design uses more simplistic, cartoon-based models, very serious topics discussed in the game such as the murder and assault of a young girl, or the suicide of a fellow classmate and friend, can feel less impactful. However, it could also be argued that this is a limitation of the game engine itself.

4. Intended Demographic

The game takes place in Blackwell Academy, a private high school located in Oregon, USA. With the main character Maxine Caulfield being an eighteen-year-old student, it is generally assumed that this is the target demographic for players of the game. The game seems to be aimed at teenagers and young adults, as the setting of a school/college environment would resonate with them. The game's darker themes do indicate that the target age group is older teenagers and young adults, given that serious topics such as drug abuse, mental health, youth violence, and crime are all major plot points in the game [6].

Despite the game's main protagonists being young women, the game resonated with many different demographics of players upon release. While still being dominated by a younger age group, players of many ages have reported playing and enjoying the game. There is also a large demographic of male players who enjoy the game, as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community who feel represented by the diverse characters. The game still may not be suitable for younger audiences due to the violent and more adult themes present in the story, but despite the school setting it has managed to resonate with a massive and diverse group of gamers across the globe.



5. Audio & Visual Feedback

The audio of 'Life is Strange' massively impacts the gameplay and story elements. Featuring a thematic soundtrack of indie music, each background track resonates with the emotional tone of the story and current situation. Certain audio tones and sound effects are also used to add to the sense of atmosphere, and to give sound cues to the player, such as the very prominent 'butterfly' sound effect which plays every time the player makes an important decision.

The game also utilises cinematic techniques, such as camera angles, slow-motion sequences, and close-ups, to heighten the feeling of dramatic moments. These elements emphasize character emotions and help players to become more invested and immersed in the game. Symbolic imagery and visual cues are also used throughout the game to foreshadow events or highlight themes. For example, motifs like butterflies and photographs are tied to the game's central themes of time, memory, and choices. A small butterfly icon will also appear with the game's signature decision sound effect, alongside text that says "This action will have consequences..." [1]. This audio and icon are small features, but they help the player to understand when they have made an important decision and can be widely recognised by fans of the game even in other contexts.

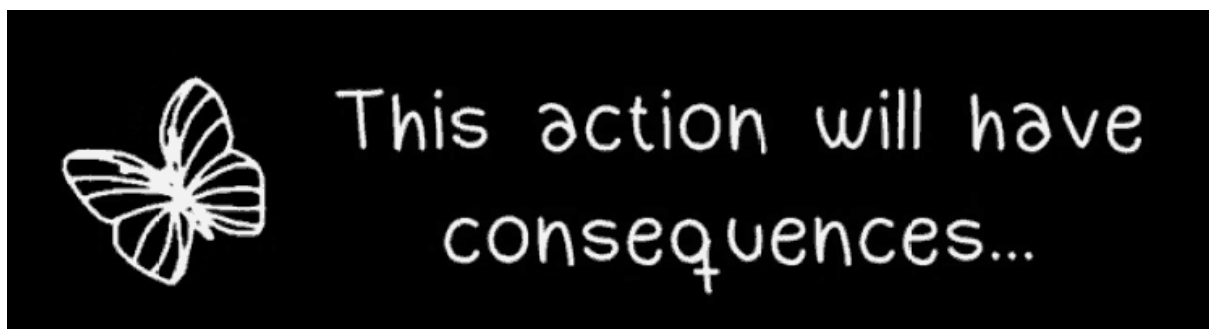


Figure 3 - Consequences message when making decision



6. Game Structure

The structure of 'Life is Strange' is episodic and driven by player choices. Each episode presents its own narrative arc while contributing to the overarching storyline, allowing for both immediate and delayed gratification in storytelling and provides a sense of contribution for the player when they see their decisions impacting the plot. The absence of traditional scoring or lives systems emphasizes exploration and character interactions over point accumulation, making 'Life is Strange' feel much more like a story than a traditional game. The game takes place across five distinct episodes, each with escalating stakes and story hooks, and with the player's choices in previous episodes affecting how the new ones might play out.

While the main storyline is linear in the sense that each episode continues where the last one left off, the time-manipulation ability causes the actual plot to be a lot less linear and more fragmented. The player can use Max's time rewinding abilities to change previous decisions, revisit previous episodes events, and even visit events far preceding the start of the game's main storyline. As the game prioritises story over standard game aspects such as 'points' or 'winning', it may not appeal to players who prefer more competitive elements. However, it has been suggested that almost all types of gamers still like to explore options and choices available to them, especially if they are unconventional or unique to a game [7].



7. Challenges

The game's main premise is the consequences of choices, and this is reflected in all the challenges within the game itself. Max discovers early in the game that she can rewind time, but mastering this power isn't straightforward. She struggles with the physical toll it takes on her, as each use of her power causes nosebleeds, headaches, and eventual exhaustion. This provides the player with the dilemma of whether to use Max's powers sparingly which gives much more weight and significance to their choices, or whether to use these powers liberally and risk Max's wellbeing. This serves as an immersive way to balance the time-manipulation ability, which would normally be quite an overpowered mechanic. The player must also be cognizant of how their decisions impact the world around them, and the consequences of everything they do or say. Much of the choices presented to the character do not have a 'right' or 'wrong' outcome, and instead is highly dependent on the personal morality of the player. This means the player must be careful with their actions and words and plan their approach to obstacles as they could have unforeseen consequences in future episodes.

The next main challenge faced by Max and the player is solving the various mysteries of Arcadia Bay. With the disappearance of Rachel Amber, the involvement of fellow classmates and school faculty in crime, and learning to understand and utilise Max's powers, the player is faced with many tasks and trials to work through when playing the game. Much of these mysteries incorporate puzzle elements for the player to solve, such as when Max needed to unlock a classmate's locker in episode one [1]. By using the time-manipulation abilities, being observant of the scene, and having character conversations, the player can solve this problem which provides them with an understanding of how to face the challenges waiting for them throughout the rest of the game.



8. Game Flow

'Life is Strange' is structured into five episodes, each with its own narrative arc, allowing the story to unfold gradually. This episodic format means that the game's pacing is designed for players to experience it in segments, making it easy to follow and building suspense across episodes as stakes get higher. Each episode typically follows its own pattern of buildup, climax, and reflection, mirroring the structure of other storytelling formats like movies or TV shows. Each of these episodes then contribute to the greater story, with the choices and consequences of past episodes affecting future ones. This is very fitting with the main theme of the game, as it ties in with the theory of the butterfly effect, [8] which suggests the flap of a butterfly's wings in one country could cause a hurricane in another. This is mostly a symbolic way of demonstrating how such small actions can eventually lead to much greater consequences but is also quite literal in the game. This is evident given Max's first use of her powers is to save Chloe's life after photographing the blue butterfly, but this choice will eventually lead to the hurricane that destroys Arcadia Bay in the final episode.

While this pacing suits the reflective and emotional storytelling, it can feel sluggish to players used to action-oriented gameplay. The slow pace in early episodes may alienate players looking for more immediacy or dramatic intensity from the start [9]. The build-up of tension can also feel uneven, especially in the mid-episodes where stakes seem temporarily lowered to allow some character backstory and side plots to shine. The sudden shifts from slower scenes to emotional peaks can feel jarring when playing, which may damage the immersion of the player.



9. Replay Value

As a choice-based game, 'Life is Strange' inherently has a good replay value. With so many choices and outcomes throughout the game, players are practically encouraged to play the game numerous times to see what their choices and actions can affect. The game is packed with so much content, as well as hidden easter eggs and 'photo opportunities', that it isn't possible to experience everything the game has to offer in one playthrough.

However, given that a major factor in the game is Max's time-rewinding abilities, one could argue that 'Life is Strange' actually lacks replay value, since the player can use this ability to explore the outcomes and consequences of other choices without ever needing to start fresh. While the ability itself is rather limited by previous actions and choices, it allows players a greater sense of freedom and control over their first playthrough as they can explore scenarios and rewind time before making any final decisions, but it can also make subsequent playthroughs blander and more predictable.

This also raises a further fundamental issue with the game, which is the illusion of choice. While it does seem like the player has total control over their actions and choices, subsequent playthroughs will reveal that most choices and plot points will funnel the player towards the same outcome. This technique which is often described as 'railroading' [10] can be essential to make sure the player stays on track with the rest of the plot, but can also be frustrating when limiting their options and outcomes.



10. Conclusion

Overall, 'Life is Strange' excels in its rich storytelling, character development, and thematic depth. Its episodic storytelling format, combined with time-rewind mechanics, allows players to impact outcomes meaningfully while exploring themes of friendship, mental health, and morality. The unique, painterly art style complements the introspective and nostalgic tone, reflecting Max's passion for photography. The audio design and indie soundtrack amplify emotional moments, with symbolic sounds like the "butterfly effect" chime adding gravitas to choices. The game has cinematic techniques and motifs, like butterflies and photographs, which reinforce themes of time and memory. Altogether, the game offers an immersive experience that has resonated widely across diverse demographics, including young adults and LGBTQ+ players, making 'Life is Strange' a relatable, impactful narrative.

The game does have notable limitations, particularly in its visual style and gameplay pacing. While the stylized, cartoonish art enhances the game's charm, it can also detract from the gravity of more intense topics, as certain expressions lack realism. The game's episodic structure and slow pacing in the early chapters may also frustrate players seeking faster plot development. Additionally, while the choice-based mechanics offer some replay value, the game's linear structure and illusion of choice mean that many decisions ultimately funnel players towards the same narrative conclusions. This can make repeated playthroughs feel less rewarding and predictable, slightly diminishing its replayability.



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