

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Tlemcen



Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English
Section of English

Gameplay Meets Narrative Innovation in Don't Nod's *Life is Strange* (2015)

*A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as a Partial Fulfilment
of the Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization*

Presented by:

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to the loving memory of my father, Tabti Mourad. You are very much missed, and my dear mother, Sebbane Cherifa, whose love, sacrifice, support, and belief made everything possible. To my sisters: Nassima, Esma, Ilhem, Chahira, and Fatima Zohra, for their constant love, support, and the unique bond that we share. I am grateful for your presence in my life. To my friends, for always being there, sharing laughter and joy. To my online friends, you know who you are. Thank you for the late-night Discord calls, the fun gaming sessions, and your support across time and distance. This also goes to my classmates, who shared this journey with me, and the inspiring gaming community, who show the power of shared worlds and passionate connection.

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Abstract

Storytelling has continuously evolved over the past years with the emergence of interactive narrative-driven video games. In contrast to traditional literature, video games integrate innovative concepts that give the player a full experience inside the game, where he becomes an active participant in the story. This genre of video games emphasizes structures such as non-linear chronology and episodic layouts, where players can radically influence the story and engage in moral dilemmas. This research examines the narrative structures in the innovation of storytelling in video games, particularly through temporality and morality. The study focuses on the 2015 game *Life is Strange*, a five-episode video game created by Don't Nod Entertainment, a French video game developer and publisher company. This study employs a mix of approaches consisting of the theoretical approach, the philosophical approach, and the player-centered approach to gain a thorough grasp of the subject matter.

Key Words: Interactive narrative-driven video games, Storytelling innovation, Narrative Structures, Temporality, Morality.

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General Introduction

Narration in video games differs from narration in conventional narrative media in terms of *interactivity*; the integration of player agency, combined with other narrative structures, transforms the player from a mere observer to an active participant. This narrative experience results from players' direct actions and decisions that later influence the plot.

Additionally, to make interactivity narratively coherent, video games rely on environmental storytelling to tell the story through the game world, where players can collect information and learn more about events, characters, and the backstory. Moreover, video games usually adapt non-linearity, branching storylines, and fragmented timelines that generally require the players to take control over the pacing of the story; in this case, the player agency creates the interplay between chronologies.

Concerning player agency, video games implement morality as a complex structure of values and choices, notably because the players are not merely witnesses of moral dilemmas; they are the ones behind the consequential choices that not only alter the outcome of the story, but also the characters, alongside the game world.

Life is Strange (2015) was released from January 30 to October 20, 2015, in the episodic format with five episodes. It was created by Don't Nod Entertainment (2008), published by Square Enix (2003), and Deck Nine (1997). The game assigns the player the role of the protagonist, Maxine Caulfield, who is a young photography student at Blackwell Academy, a distinguished private senior high school situated in Arcadia Bay, a fictional seaside town in Oregon, the United States. The story is built around the supernatural element of time rewind and a threatening storm. Furthermore, it explores social issues and philosophical views. *Life is Strange* is a good example of video game narration that is achieved through the interplay of player agency, environmental storytelling, and branching morality that shape the ethical and emotional impact. Therefore, this research work seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do narrative-driven video games use the post-modern narratology structures?

- In what ways does *interactivity* change the player's role in narrative-driven video games, from a passive observer into an active participant whose decisions and actions directly influence the narrative structure and the plot progression?
- How do narrative-driven video games structure the game to present morality concepts not only as themes but as structural consequences and functions of player agency?

The following hypotheses attempt to answer the previous research questions:

- Games like *Life is Strange* structurally embed postmodern narratology like non-linear storytelling.
- Player choices shape the plot progression through direct decisions.
- *Life is Strange* introduces ethically charged outcomes based on player agency.

The technique selected to answer these research questions is a mix of approaches consisting of theoretical concepts and empirical research, with a careful examination of *Life is Strange*. The former is used to lay the framework of how narratives are constructed with the study of narratology and ludology (game studies), in addition to the exploration of philosophical concepts in the context of choices and consequences. Whereas, the empirical research is player-centered, consisting of an online survey and in-game players' data, which is used to investigate the emotional response and the moral weight.

This research work is divided into two chapters. The first chapter mainly talks about the evolution of narratives, the role of narratology in the study of narratives, and the emergence of video games as a narrative medium, in addition to the evolution and the process of narration in literature and video games. Subsequently, it shifts to the representation of time in fiction. In addition to narrative post-modernism and the concepts of temporality and morality. The second chapter consists of a close examination of *Life is Strange* and an analysis of its episodic format and non-linear storytelling. In addition to the philosophical concepts and the temporal mechanics' impact on players' morality and emotional response.

Chapter One: The Progression of Player Agency and Narrative Structures in Video Games

1.1 Introduction

Storytelling is considered a vital and one of the most ancient aspects of human culture. Based on *Calenda.org*, it is a universal form of documenting and conserving human history; it reflects and shapes social identities and cultural norms. American author Sue Monk Kidd beautifully expresses it in her novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (2001), where she quotes, “Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here” (90).

With the emergence of video games that introduce interactive elements, players can radically change how stories are written. Storytelling has continuously evolved from media like literature, film, and digital media, adapting to technological developments and changing cultural paradigms. Specifically, how narratives, temporality, and morality merge in storytelling raises questions about how players experience, understand, and interpret stories.

A theoretical basis of understanding how stories are formed can be found in the studies of narratology with American and French theorists Gerald Prince and Gérard Genette, who both contributed to narrative theory by exploring the role of the narratee ¹ And how narrative structures influence interpretation. Hence, these contributions to narratology also include the analysis of narrative discourse (Prince, 179), the distinction of different levels of narration (Prince, 26), and the introduction to the concepts of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration (Genette, 245).

The representation of time in fiction, linearity, and fragmentation are important aspects of storytelling, which are commonly used in traditional fiction to develop the narrative meaning. For instance, in modernist and postmodernist literature, time is frequently manipulated to reflect nonlinearity and rewriting history, like in the novel *Baudolino* (2000) by Italian novelist Umberto Eco. The novelist uses a device to create intrigue and strangeness by foreshadowing the events occurring to the characters (Fedosova, 79). Character development and moral dilemmas are common concepts in

¹ A term coined by Gerald Prince, it refers to the narrator's addressee or the fictive entity which the narrator addresses his narration

storytelling to represent morality; examples are Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1995) or Albert Camus' *The Stranger*² (1942), which explore moral consciousness. In particular, in video games, players are given moral agency where their choices have a direct influence on the game world and require players to make ethical decisions, blurring the lines between good and evil in ways traditional narratives are unable to.

1.2 Narratology and Narration

Narratives are the stories that come from one's imagination, everyday life, gossip, and other written and spoken forms of tales. According to American psychology researcher Colette Daiute, these narratives feature human and non-human characters in different spatial and temporal settings to transmit a meaningful concept (2).

Throughout the years, narratives have been altered in terms of details and form according to the techniques and technologies alongside historical and ideological values. In the opinion of Daiute, narrating is the interaction of expressions and contexts in ways that render relationships among characters and events, prominent even when details of the context are unknown to a reader or listener, narrative likes these points beyond their brevity and pull in the careful reader/listener's curiosity and ideas about the surrounding situation. As a "product of social life and human social activity", narrating is culture in action (Wertsch & Tulviste qtd. in Daiute 551,2).

British author and critic E.M. Forster summarizes Percy Lubbock's idea about the process of narration: the novelist can describe characters externally as an impartial or partial observer as well, besides, he can take on the omniscient point of view to depict them from the inside, as well as positioning himself as one of them and pretending to be ignorant about the other's motivations (Lubbock, qtd. in Forster 55).

Forster's statement stipulates that there are two types of narrators: the one who is outside the story, entirely omniscient, and does not contribute to the development of

² The English translation of "The Outsider" by Mathew Ward in 1989

the story on the one hand. For example, the narrator-character suggests that the narrator is inside the story to take part in the events. The latter can be classified into two subdivisions: the narrator as a protagonist and the narrator as a secondary character in the story. French critic Gérard Genette uses the term "diegetic" (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, 245) to distinguish between two types of narrative processes: "homodiegetic", which refers to the narrator/character, and "heterodiegetic", referring to the narrator outside the story (Genette, 245).

Genette also explains that time is more important than place in narration by providing four types of narration based on their moment of occurrence. Notably, the most common one is subsequent narration, which refers to the classical and common narration that is the most commonly used by authors, in which the story comes before the narration. Correspondingly, prior narration, it predicts and conveys a prophecy or an apocalypse (Genette, 217).

One more type is the simultaneous narration, which is when narration and the story happen one after the other without chronological disruption. And finally, the interpolated narration, which is a combination of subsequent and simultaneous narration, where the narrator describes his day's experience with the inclusion of his current impression of the events (Genette, 217).

From the perspective of English professor and author Monika Fludernik, narrative theory is the study of narrative as a genre, aiming to specify the elements, factors, and combinations that are typical of narrative texts and make clear how these features correspond to one another within theoretical models (8).

While narration is focused on the action of telling the story itself and how events and situations are presented, narratology is a study that delivers a better understanding of the methodology and structure behind a narrative. In *Narrative Analysis and Narratology*, Gerald Prince states, "We can all understand narratives more or less fully. Specifically, we can answer correctly at least some questions about a given narrative, and we can determine that at least some answers to these questions are incorrect" (179-180). He uses examples of *Little Red Riding Hood* (2002) and *The*

Good Samaritan (1964) to explain how readers can reiterate, summarize, and analyse the narrative differently and how their interpretations may vary by changing the order of the events, adding or omitting some details (Prince, 181).

According to Prince, narratology studies narratives and tries to explain narrative competence, moreover, it examines the narrative similarities and differences between all narratives; specifically, it is made up of well-organized statements that are meant to be explicit and meant to leave the readers with little discretion regarding how a narrative can be created or processed through the application of specific rules (181). In other words, narratology is the study of the structure, creation, and understanding of stories; it examines what all narratives have in common and what makes them unique, offering clear rules for storytelling and interpretation. Its goal is to explain all the narratives in a manner that fits the mind and communication (Prince).

Dutch theorist and professor Mieke Bal expands this idea by not only considering it an examination of narrative texts but also as a field of study with the ensemble of theories that include the assortment of cultural artefacts such as pictures, spectacles, and events. These elements together form and provide an extensive framework for a better understanding and assessment of various forms of narratives (3).

Bal has selected the following definitions from her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* The fourth edition (2017), she says:

“A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A story is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, injection, and “colouring” of a fabula.” (5) She defines the fabula³ as a sequence of logical and chronological events that are caused and experienced by actors, and according to her, these three definitions constitute the theory her book elaborates on (5).

³ The term defined by the Russian formalists as: the underlying story as a chronology of events, as distinct from the surface level plot or narrative structure.

The fabula is a series of events in which the material or content is built into a story; what is known as the logic of events is a set of rules determining how this series is made (7). If human behaviour is used to describe events, the function of the agents of action, or actors, becomes relevant. The actors can be characterized in terms of the events that occur. Two other elements in a fabula can be identified. An event, no matter how insignificant, always takes up time. This time is often important for the continuation of the fabula and deserves, consequently, to be considered (7).

1.3 The Representation of Time in Fiction

Time is rarely just a neutral backdrop; broadly defined, time is a constitutive element of worlds and a fundamental category of human experience. Strictly speaking, time is not observable, but it becomes manifest and thus perceivable in various changes, like in events (Michael Scheffel et al. 1).

Time is constantly manipulated for thematic, emotional, or artistic purposes. In written narratives, time shapes the narrated world (diegesis), which is constructed through language, the use of tense, deictic expressions, and literary devices (leitmotifs⁴). We distinguish three levels of reference, which are characterized by their temporality: story, discourse, and narrating (Genette qtd in Scheffel, 3). The fictional world's story time (also known as "diegetic time", according to French philosopher Étienne Souriau, is a constitutive phenomenon in the fictional world (Souriau qtd. In Scheffel et al, 2).

Story time, like the narrated world, is the result of narration and is conceptually related to "event", "space", and "character". As a result, story time is not a fixed but rather a relative category that is shaped by the relationship of other narrated world elements (Fraassen qtd. in Scheffel et al 2). Second, "discourse time" refers to the narration time that is set by the text. Thirdly, the time of the narrating act that characterises the spatiotemporal position of the narrative voice is known as "narrating time". (Weixler & Werner qtd. In Scheffel et al 2). Often in literary

⁴A recurrent theme throughout a musical or literary composition, associated with a particular person, idea, or situation

creativity, authors make use of time to explore different themes like memory, identity, and human experiences. This time is represented in different ways, from traditional linear narratives to experimental forms of postmodern fiction.

Time is absolute, linear, and universal in the classical Newtonian⁵ framework. This perspective, which was based on Newtonian physics, shows time as an unchangeable background against which events happen in a predictable order. People believe that time is a constant that moves systematically and cannot be affected by the observer or the events taking place in it. Old fiction stories were impacted by this traditional perspective, which reflected the certainty and stability of Newtonian time by usually following a simple chronological order. However, with the introduction of the theory of relativity by Einstein (*Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, 2019), it reformulated time as being relative and flexible based on the observer's frame of reference.

Before Einstein's theory came to exist, physicists regarded time as absolute in Newtonian mechanics; no matter how time moved fast, it ticked the same for everyone and everywhere, and events occurred in this universal and autonomous system. However, this assumption does not seem correct when thinking carefully about what it means when two events happen at the same time in different locations because of the natural definition of simultaneity, according to Einstein simultaneity is not an absolute fact it rather depends on the observer's frame of reference considering the finite and constant speed of light (6).

In *Time-Travel Fictions and Philosophy* (2001), Alasdair Richmond explores the intersection of philosophy and literature in the context of speculative fiction, which is a literary genre that includes the supernatural and futuristic elements that do not exist in the real world. Furthermore, he discusses the power of time travel in both science fiction and philosophy (305-317), and how it serves as an opportunity to ask questions about time, identity, and causality. In this article, he also investigates the multiple

⁵ The Newtonian perspective is based in reductionism, determinism, materialism, and a reflection-correspondence view of knowledge.

timelines and branching universes, and how this concept is frequently used in novels to navigate through difficulties of altering the past, in which a character may prevent their existence (309).

1.3.1 Postmodern Narrative and Historical Time

The term postmodernism first appeared in the philosophical discourse with French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). American professor of philosophy, Gary Aylesworth, selects five people from France and two people from Italy who are familiar with discussions of philosophical postmodernism in Postmodernism, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015). According to Aylesworth, the French, for instance, apply concepts that emerged during the Paris structuralist revolution in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud's structuralist readings. Hence why they are often referred to as poststructuralists; they also see the events of May 1968 in France as an important turning point for modern thought and its institutions, especially universities.

In contrast, the Italians draw on a tradition of aesthetics and rhetoric that includes the rhetorician philosopher Giambattista Vico and idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce, they focus heavily on history and show no interest in a revolutionary moment, despite their differences both perspectives view postmodernism as an extension of modernity rather than a rejection of it (1).

In the past few years, science fiction has attempted with a degree of success to fight against its marginalization as a lowbrow genre of fiction. According to American professor Claire Sponsler, science fiction has been defended by readers and critics as having a tradition of its own as well as significant parallels with modernist and postmodernist literature. Simultaneously, American theorist Fredric Jameson, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, and American scholar Donna Haraway have turned to Science Fiction as, in British author Annette Kuhn's words, "a privileged cultural site for enactments of the postmodern condition" (178). Several cultural critics believe that science fiction is the best literary genre of the postmodern era because it is the only one

that appears to be able to fully understand the rapidly changing post-industrial, technological, and cultural capitalist society (625).

Science fiction not only reflects the post-modern world, it rather serves as a lens to see the world differently through imaginative, innovative narratives that challenge and change the conception of time and space, whether in the exploration of parallel universes or dystopian futures. Science fiction digs into man's deep fears and anxieties regarding technology, globalization, and the true nature of humanity (Konstantinidis, 2).

“Historiographic metafiction” is a genre that combines fictional storytelling and historiography to study the relationship between literature and history. This term is coined by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). She argues that what we call history is not only what happened objectively but also the stories influenced by the people; just like fiction, the creation of both history and fiction includes language, storytelling techniques, and culture. Moreover, she adds that traditional historiography claims that it tells the truth about history. Postmodernism, however, contradicts this by showing how bias, preference, and shaping stories affect history just as it does fiction (93).

1.4 Video Games as an Emerging Storytelling Medium

Video Games have come a long way from being a medium that was mainly known for and focused on challenges and skills to being considered an authentic storytelling platform, where emotionally engaging and thought-provoking narratives are made that are rich in various themes and achieved through the advancement of technology, in parallel to cameras for cinema and computers for animation, American writer Melissa Somerdin argues that these innovative modes were not immediately recognized as worthy until the art criticism evolved and accepted them as valid literary mediums, despite the lingering debates between ludologists and narratologists. Video games offer storytelling new and improved narrative features with their ongoing media and user interaction and player agency (69). These narrative features

include non-linear time, player-driven character development, and immersive environmental storytelling that emerge from player agency and interactivity (Polydin).

1.5 Narration in Video Games

Through the introduction of player autonomy and interactivity, video games challenge traditional narrative structures in contrast to books and films, which usually follow a predetermined plot (Ikonomi, “Theoretical Background on Video Game Narrative Structure and Techniques”). For instance, video games let the players actively influence the plot. Therefore, it leaves space for scholars to consider how video game narration works.

In some cases of narrative-driven video games, the player gets to play a dual role as both the protagonist and narrator of the story; the game places the player at the center of the narrative, making their decisions and actions crucial to the development of the story. Therefore, the narration process in video games defies the traditional storytelling process, given that it requires the player themselves to participate in the act, for the fact that the environment of the game responds to the players’ choices by telling the story non-verbally. As a result, players assume specific roles in the storytelling; thus, the concepts of narration, characters, events, and time need to be reconsidered in the context of video games (Thabet 4).

Many scholars and intellectuals have debated the study of narration in video games. Based on American professor Janet Murray, video games are an extension of storytelling traditions. In *Hamlet the Holodeck: The future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (2017), she claims others prefer to consider games as abstract systems, distinct from the real world and the cultural and narrative dimensions of representation, such as emotions, ideology, and character identification. While other individuals, including herself, think that digital games can be perceived within the same rich cultural frameworks as other works of artistic imagination (19).

Furthermore, Dutch professor and author Jan Simons reinforces the idea that novels and fiction films are generally considered as prototypical examples of narrative by narratologists, while game studies scholars generally follow the Dutch cultural

historian Johan Huizinga and French writer Roger Caillois in separating games from “serious” activities (Huizinga & Caillois qtd in Simons). He adds, “However, just as narrative is not confined to fictional discourse, games are not always fictional either” (“Narrative, Games, and Theory”).

1.5.1 Emergent vs Embedded Narration in Video Games

In contrast to traditional media like films with fixed storylines, video games incorporate interactivity that allows players to influence and shape the course of the narrative. This interaction has led scholars in game design and ludology to distinguish between two primary types of narration: emergent and embedded (Amiri 1). According to Amiri, emergent narration is a system-based form of storytelling in which the author's role is reduced to allow the users to freely interact and develop their own narrative experience.

Embedded narration, by contrast, is pre-developed and scripted material such as backstories and lore that the user learns throughout the game (1). Emergent narrative is most prominent in open-ended simulation games, or Sandbox games⁶ (Amiri 3), such as *Minecraft* (2011), developed by *Mojang Studios* (2009), and *The Sims 4* (2014), developed by *Maxis* (1987). In such games, the players make their own stories through exploration and decision-making.

British academic Sandy Louchart et al. define this type of narration in their paper *Authoring Emergent Narrative-Based Games* (2014), as a new genre of interactive narrative in which the role of narrator is split between the game designer and the player (1). Louchart suggests several characteristics that denote emergent narration: the perception of the story as a dynamic process instead of an analytical one; he also argues that the story's plot is hypothetical for its composition of hypothetical plot elements. He asserts that the storyline develops as a consequence of different characters interactions. Additionally, for emotional engagement, characters

⁶ a video game or part of a video game in which the player is not constrained to achieving specific goals and has a large degree of freedom to explore, interact with, or modify the game environment

must be written with interaction in mind. And finally, instead of a spectator, the user must be considered as a participant.

Based on these principles, emergent narration is most likely to occur in games with non-linear game design and multiple endings, shaped by diverse forms of gameplay as well as open-ended game design (Amiri 4). Conversely, embedded narration is used in games that guide players through a framed and scripted story with little deviation. Titles such as *The Last of Us* (2013) from *Naughty Dog* (1984) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) from *Rockstar Games* (1998) are designed with pre-established stories that unfold as the player progresses. Embedded tales, as Amiri defines them, are inspirational devices that prompt the players to perform some actions that move the narrative forward (3). Others are minimalists in their approach to narrative, offering players a general backstory that runs from the past into the present and encouraging players to uncover the plot through interactions with objects and events in the game world. Amiri argues that the evolution of game mechanics during the late 1990s and early 2000s brought the hybrid narrative model that combines embedded and emergent techniques into being (4). *Life is Strange* (2015) developed by *Dont Nod Entertainment* (2008) is a strong example of video game of mixed narrative where both emergent narration and embedded narration are blended, in this game players' choices can shape character relationships, dialogue, and outcomes, making each playthrough personal while still having a structured, pre-written plot.

1.6 Temporality in Video Games

Video games introduce a new aspect to temporality by allowing players to interact and experience with time, by gaining agency over time players can influence, manipulate or even disrupt the story's temporal flow, as in *The Stanley Parable* (2013), *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018).

Chilean professor Jose Zagal and American professor Michael Mateas investigate how video games engage with time differently compared to other media. In their study "Time in Video games: A Survey and Analysis"(2010), they put together

game time into multiple stages: a real-world time where events occur in the real (physical) world, game world time where events happen inside the simulated game world including the gameplay actions associated with the events, “coordination time (events that coordinate the players’ actions and agents) and fictive time with the use of sociocultural labels to events as well as narrated events sequences” (1). This study of time in video games reveals the various approaches in which video games interact with time and its classifications, revealing how these complex structures impact the users’ experiences.

The player and his actions play a crucial role in realizing the temporality in a video game, and the sense of experienced time is determined by the actions carried out by the player, together with the events enacted by the controlling program. (Aarseth qtd in Zagal and Mateas 18).

Norwegian academic Espen Aarseth and Danish researcher Christian Elverdam identify two temporal Meta categories, External Time and Internal Time, roughly corresponding to our real-world and game world temporal frames (some of their categories refer to the interaction between these frames). External Time has two categories, Teleology⁷ and Representation. Teleology is either finite (game ends at a specific time or after a specific duration) or infinite (game can go on forever) (3-22).

Aarseth and Elverdam’s definition of Internal and External Time in video games draws attention to how digital narratives and players’ gameplay are organized concerning their real-world temporal frame. According to them with the distinction between Teleology and Representation video games create meaningful temporal structures, they use examples of video games such as *Half-Life* (1998) in which time is forward and ends at specific events (finite) whereas games like *World of Warcraft* (2004) which has no fixed time of termination and players cannot “win” them (infinite) (10).

⁷An explanation of something that refers to its end, purpose or goal.

1.7 Morality in Video Games

Morality is an inner system that directs a person's decision-making and subsequent actions, it is also influenced by both societal and personal values. according to Aristotle's ethics, *eudaimonia*, "flourishing" or "wellbeing," can only be attained by morality and moral choices which are essential to everyday life. (Aristotle et al qtd in Wright and Denisova 2), (Arli and Pekerti, 82–98), (Heidt,998–1002) (Cohen and Morse, 43–61).

As an artistic and immersive medium, video games offer players and professionals a one-of-a-kind opportunity to engage with complex dilemmas and moral choices unlike other mediums, games provide a safe and controlled space in which players can explore and experiment with different scenarios and outcomes to encourage them into deeper thinking and ethical decision-making (1).

According to British researcher Sophie Wright and Australian researcher Alena Denisova despite the popularity of video games offering moral dilemmas; examples *Mass Effect* series (2007–2017) and *Life is Strange* series (2015–2022,) it is still unclear how video games precisely promote moral decision-making and which game features and mechanics exactly encourage or hinder the players' capacity to do so as previous research was mainly focused on individual games (Holl and Melzer) or individual mechanics (Formosa et al 89–121), (Ryan et al 142).

Wright and Denisova believe that *eudaimonia* is attained by leading a righteous, proper life and consistently making moral decisions that help people develop the type of character that results in a fulfilling life that balances both societal and individual well-being. They claim that the use of moral dilemmas as a narrative device has increased (Tancred et al Qtd. in Wright and Denisova 2) in video games like *The Witcher 3* (2015) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) where players get the opportunity to engage in moral dilemmas via moral decision making (Holl & Melzer Qtd. in Wright and Denisova 2). However, the relationship between in-game and real-life morality is still up for debate despite research showing that players use their morals (Arrambide et al, Boyan et al., Iten et al., Weaver & Lewis Qtd. in Wright and Denisova 2).

Studies reveal that players hesitate when given immoral tasks, which can point out the conflict with their moral principles. Yet, this hesitancy does not always translate into a direct relationship between in-game actions and real-life personal morals. A phenomenon explained by moral disengagement theory suggests that players may justify their immoral actions by distancing these actions from internal moral values while playing video games. Moreover, this self-awareness of the player's character actions during the game may lead to moral disengagement (Bandura, Moore, Cicchirillo Qtd. in Wright and Denisova 2).

1.8 Conclusion

Storytelling has evolved from written and oral traditions to digital interactivity, where an ordinary reader becomes an active co-author of the narrative. Video games are not just a new storytelling medium; they represent a significant shift in the conception, creation, and consumption of narratives. In this context, the player is not merely an observer or consumer; they can shape the narrative through their choices and the consequences that arise from agency, interactivity, temporal manipulation, and moral engagement. Through video games, people challenge and broaden traditional narrative conventions.

In video games, players are given a degree of control over time, and this time turns into a flexible mechanic that defies traditional fragmentation, which can be used to explore different temporal frames. Moreover, some video game narratives place players in situations where they have to make moral decisions that often lead to irreversible outcomes, where the players have to live with dilemmas and reflect on their choices as a result.

Morality functions as both a narrative theme and a gameplay mechanic. Video games provide a new narrative ontology, where players' agency serves as a methodology rather than merely a metaphor, time functions not just as a setting but as a crucial component, and morality transcends being merely a theme to become a tangible outcome. This basic understanding concludes that the revolution of digital storytelling is not coming; it is already present in every narrative-driven video game

with decision-making plots, permanent consequences, and every moral choice that makes us consider the potential of storytelling.

Chapter Two: The Intersection of Player Agency and Narrative Structures in *Life is Strange* (2015)

2.1 Introduction

As a result of the convergence of interactive media and narrative theory, critical discussions about the connection between player agency and the structures supporting video game storytelling have notably emerged. Furthermore, this evolution highlights how player choices can significantly influence narrative outcomes, therefore enriching the overall gaming experience. Consequently, understanding this relationship is essential for both game developers and players alike. A conflict between the player's control over how events transpire and the limitations imposed by preset narrative frameworks is at the center of this intersection. Examining how narrative structures are modified to allow for player agency and how agency is framed within the larger framework of interactive storytelling is necessary to comprehend this dynamic.

Broadly speaking, player agency is the ability of the player to make significant choices within the diegetic world of a game, choices that affect the plot's conclusion, character growth, or event sequence (Murray, 126; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 18). This idea stands in contrast to conventional, linear narrative structures that follow predetermined cause-and-effect sequences. Plot, character, temporality, and causality are examples of narrative elements that are arranged into logical patterns to form narrative structures, especially as defined by classical narratology (Genette, 25; Bal, 7).

To allow for interaction, these structures are frequently modified into branching, emergent, or modular forms in video games. Finding a balance between emergent player-driven outcomes and authored narrative coherence is one of the main challenges of incorporating player agency into narrative structures. This process was famously described by Murray as the "balancing act" between interactivity and narrative immersion (133). Although there is some freedom for players, this freedom is always framed within what Espen Aarseth called the game's textual machine, a set of rules and restrictions that both allow and restrict player choices (Aarseth, 3).

The intersection of player agency and narrative structures in video games is characterized by a positive tension between authorship and improvisation, freedom and control. Players can influence stories in games by making choices and taking actions, but these opportunities are filtered through structured systems that preserve thematic integrity, emotional resonance, and coherence. Understanding this interaction draws attention to the unique narrative affordances of video games as a medium and improves the study of interactive narrative. As game design and narrative theory continue to evolve, so too will the models and methods for investigating the relationship between agency and narrative in interactive storytelling.

2.2 Introduction to *Life is Strange* (2015)

Life is Strange (2015) is an exemplary type of interactive narrative experience developed by Don't Nod Entertainment and published by Square Enix, an independent video game developer and publisher based in Paris and Montreal. It is a five-episode story game written by French writer Jean Luc Cano, American co-writer Christian Divine and French art director Michel Koch, when asked about the importance of the storyline in video games in an interview Michel Koch stated that nowadays video games focus on delivering meaningful storylines more than gameplay with the increase of players demanding rich narrative driven video games.

He believes that video games are powerful media that blend everything that combines interactivity, which puts the player inside the story as a participant. He adds that video games can offer more than movies and TV shows, with interactivity and an introduction to great characters. He also talks about the challenges faced when including themes of cyberbullying and suicide in the story, and how important it is to make sure it is talked about rightfully (“*Life is Strange's* Michel Koch on the importance of story in games”). In other interviews, the directors and co-authors expressed that their aim for *Life is Strange* is to create a realistic coming-of-age story about characters struggling with real-life issues and hard decision-making, a slice of life at its core (Calvin).

The story revolves around Maxine Caulfield, known as Max, an introverted teenager who studies photography in Blackwell Academy, exactly in Arcadia Bay, a fictional seaside town in Oregon, United States. As the story unfolds, Max discovers her time-rewind superpower after witnessing the tragic death of her estranged childhood friend Chloe Price, a rebellious and defiant teenager. Max's time rewinding power is not only a feature that is part of the gameplay, but rather one of the most crucial mechanics that allows players to explore different consequences with Max and her friend Chloe Price solving puzzles, avoiding dangers by revisiting the past, and facing dilemmas in a town full of mysteries (Dont Nod Entertainment, *Life is Strange*).

2.2.1 Narration in *Life is Strange*

When designing and structuring the narrative of *Life is Strange*, the creative director and writer aimed for a different way to tell a story. So, they came up with the episodic format to explore a newer way to narrate a story in video games inspired by tv shows, by which they learned to create the puzzles and the gameplay elements on a production and creative point of view, in ways to fit each episode and make sure that the player has the control over the pacing of the story (LiU).

The French co-game directors, Michel Koch and Raoul Barbet of DontNod company, spoke about the release of the game in the episodic format in an interview, revealing that the episodic structure keeps players engaged within the storyline. They explain that the format's slower pacing allows the players to explore the environment, connect with the characters, and make decisions. It also allows them to better construct characters' arcs for each episode. Koch elaborates on this by pointing out the cliff-hangers between each episode that build up suspense and create anticipation among the community (*Life is Strange*, *Chrysalis- Polarized*). With the themes of consequence and time, the player can sit with the emotional weight and reflect instead of rushing forward. Together, the co-directors agree that the episodic format is necessary to create tension, enhance character-driven storytelling, and make the player a participant in the narrative (Mior).

The three-act structure is a narrative tool that is used in films by screenwriters that can also be applied to video games. American author and screenwriter Syd Field coined this term in his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (1979). This structure goes way back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle's work *Poetics* (384-322 B.C.E.), which claims that a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and an end. according to Syd Field, the three-act structure breaks the story into three parts.

The episodes can be divided into three acts, episode one to episode two are Act one, where the game introduces the main character, her super power, her relationships (her best friend and other students), the mysteries of the town (missing person), and the first major consequence of time manipulation. From the point of view of Kelly Bender, a Canadian narrative designer and game writer, the first action of any medium is to introduce the setting, the conflict, and the characters (*Game Design Skills*).

Episodes three to four are Act two, representing the Rising Action, where time manipulation consequences lead to threats and danger with the revelation of antagonists and gruesome discoveries. For Bender, this act puts the player to the test as the difficulty increases and the majority of the gameplay takes place. He argues that after Act one, when the main character ends what they thought was the issue, the resolution of that problem reveals a darker and sinister obstacle (“How to Apply the Three-Act Structure in Video Games”).

The fifth episode is Act three, the finale that represents the Climax and Resolution, where characters face their fate, and the player has to make the final critical choice. *Life is Strange* applies non-linear storytelling, which is another narrative technique that is an intentional distortion of time. In Genette's terms, this technique is called an anachrony; he defines it as the term used to describe all forms of discordance between two temporal orders of story and narrative (40).

Anachronies are the flashbacks and the flashforwards that Genette refers to as Analepsis and Prolepsis. In the game, the time reversal mechanic lets the player revisit past events and alter them. For example, in the first episode, when Max saves her best friend Chloe from a gunshot by rewinding time and intervening. In Episode three,

Chaos Theory, Max can travel back in time and save Chloe's dad from the car accident; these are flashbacks that create alternate timelines and are considered Analepsis. Prolepsis is the vision of the raging storm that Max has at the start of the first episode, which foreshadows the chaos that is ahead.

Episode five, known as the nightmare sequence, is a section that rejects chronology and dissolves time, and is more driven by emotional themes of guilt, fear, and memories. This sequence is called an achrony, which, as mentioned by Genette, is an anachrony deprived of all temporal connection (84).

In Act one (Episode one) Max's time rewind power disrupts chronology, allowing the players to toy with time and manipulate it as they bond with Chloe and unravel the town's mysteries, the player transitions to Act two that raises anxiety and suspense (episode two and three) through alternative timelines and the moral dilemmas using analepsis and prolepsis. By act three (episode four and five), the chronology is completely abandoned (achrony), leaving Max, the protagonist lives a sequence of guilt and ineluctability as she has to face the ultimate binary choice, leaving the players uneasy about the non-linear paths they have taken and bringing the narrative to its conclusion.

2.2.2 The Butterfly Effect in *Life is Strange*

The butterfly effect⁸ is a concept present in narratives like the 1952 short story *A Sound of Thunder* by American author Ray Bradbury of which the main message is that small actions can have bigger consequences, illustrating this concept through the accidental killing of a butterfly that led to a catastrophe, and how tampering with complex systems might endanger the fragile ties that hold humanity together.

This concept was named by American mathematician Edward Norton Lorenz in the 1960s while he was working as a professor of meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. he was working with a computer that was meant to replicate

⁸ a phenomenon and a theory-based concept named after a chaos theory metaphor that says that a butterfly wing flap could cause a typhoon, which indicates that a small event can have a significant impact on a much larger complex system

different weather patterns, and while rerunning a previous simulation, he made a minor alteration that led the program to produce a different weather simulation (Pilat and Sekoul – “The Butterfly Effect” *The Decision Lab*)

The first episode of *Life is Strange*, titled *Chrysalis*⁹ starts with Max lying on the floor in the middle of a raging storm where she starts questioning the situation she was in and how she ended up in that place, she is then guided by the player towards a lighthouse overlooking a massive tornado approaching the town, just then a boat flies down on her before the screen turns white and Max is back to her photography class (*Life is Strange, Chrysalis*).

Later in the episode, the game introduces a blue butterfly in a cutscene where Max enters the girls’ bathroom, escaping from the noise of the school hallway and the pressure of her photography class, she washes her face. She ends up tearing up a photograph she was supposed to submit for a contest. The blue butterfly appears, entering from an open window, catching Max’s attention, where she says, “When a door closes, a window opens... Or, something like that” (*Life is Strange, Chrysalis*).

She proceeds to take a photograph of the blue butterfly, an action that seems unimportant but becomes the changing point of the story because what follows is a significant moment where Max’s superpower is unleashed for the first time to save her best friend, the Butterfly Effect takes place for the first time when Max Caulfield triggers the fire alarm to cause her friend to escape her murderer, a decision that leads to a series of small decisions that alter the course of the entire narrative.

Through *Chrysalis*, the game sets up themes of Coming-of-age and identity with the story of the main character, Max Caulfield, the shy teenager who returns to her hometown to attend her senior high school, where she reconnects with her childhood friend, Chloe Price, filling the episode with nostalgia. From Max’s perspective, the player explores matters of identity, belonging, and the anxieties of adolescence (Dont Nod Entertainment, *Life is Strange*). On top of Max’s moments, the game is centered

⁹ a moth or butterfly at the stage of development when it is covered by a hard case, before it becomes an adult insect with wings, or the case itself.

on the time-reverse mechanic that sets out the themes of the choices and the consequences, with decisions that, no matter how minor they seem, have an impact on the plot.

2.2.3 Player Agency and Limitations in *Life is Strange*

The story moves forward to Max and Chloe rebuilding their close friendship, with Max showing off her time-reverse superpower, embarking on a journey to explore this new ability. This fun activity is cut short with problems and strains in the second episode, titled *Out of Time* where the game puts Max in another situation where she must save Chloe, trapped on train tracks, using her ability for the second time.

Kate Marsh is a devout Christian who gets caught in a scandal after a video of her goes viral at her school (*Life is Strange, Chrysalis*). Through Max's interactions with her, she discovers that in addition to her friends' bullying and harassment, Kate receives humiliating messages from her family, which pushes her to feel isolated and distressed.

That same day, Max witnesses Kate on the edge of the academy rooftop, ready to take her own life. Kate is seen jumping, and Max attempts to use her power to stop her from falling; however, in this part of the game, the player finds himself unable to use the mechanic of time reversal. Eventually, the player discovers that Max can hold time in place, making it on time to the rooftop. Furthermore, whether Max is successful in saving Kate depends on the player's previous actions, like intervening to help her, picking up her call, or gathering information in her room. If the player has not done any of the earlier actions, it will make Kate agitated, and she will commit suicide (*Life is Strange, Out of Time*).



Figure 1: Max witnessing Kate's suicide

The game's limitation on Max's power is a method introduced by the game to noticeably make the game more challenging, where the player must make the right choices instead of rewinding time whenever a mistake occurs, encouraging the player to engage deeply in the narrative, particularly in risky situations. It also foreshadows the risks and the costs of time manipulation and its consequences.

Out of Time is the second episode of *Life is Strange*, it reveals the appalling consequences of online harassment, with the story of Kate Marsh, who becomes a victim of bullying and public shaming both in person and online. With its dive into themes of mental health and personal issues, it highlights the weight of decision-making, where Kate's fate lies in the hands of Max, with her words and deeds.

2.3 *Life is Strange* Player Response Survey

Life is Strange has completely changed the narrative-driven genre of video games due to its emphasis on complex decisions, intricate characters, and thought-provoking storytelling, furthermore, to investigate how players feel about the choices, the characters, and the consequences, as well as investigating the players' retention and emotional response, the survey was created by a user by the name of Ale and filled out by 714 respondents. 533 of the participants were born between 1930 and 2001, with 74,7 %, while 181 were born between 2002-2005+, representing 25,3%. with 284 of them being Americans, representing 39,7%, while 266 were Europeans,

with 37,2%. With 164 of the participants being from the rest of the world (North America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, East, and Oceania), 421 out of 714 were identified as males, with 59%, while only 251 participants were females, with 35,2%.

These demographic questions aim to investigate whether *Life is Strange* has effectively targeted the coming-of-age genre themes to its teen and young adult audience across the world. Additional questions have been selected that closely examine the main themes and address the players' decisions in *Life is Strange* as they relate to emotions, philosophy, and storytelling, and explore players' motivations and moral interpretations regarding the final decision of the game.

2.3.1 Survey Analysis

The survey's first two questions "What was your ending choice in your first playthrough?" and "Do you think you would make the same choice if the situation were real?" are to find out whether participants value the emotional attachment over moral principles in their final choice, secondly, it aims to find out whether players separate reality from fiction, and finally, it explores whether the decisions made by players in the fictional world of Arcadia Bay would be thought twice if applied to a real-life situation.

The fourth question, "Did you change your mind over time? Would you make a different choice now?" intends to investigate whether players reconsider the decisions made during the game and compare them to their present-day perspective, the sixth question, "In your first playthrough, how long did you think about it before deciding your final choice?" aims to obtain an indicator of numbers of the estimated significance and difficulty of the final choice, the level of hesitancy, and narrative immersion through the hesitating time.

The eighth and twenty-eighth questions: "Did the ending you picked make you cry?" and "How well do you know the game?", aim to evaluate the game's emotional impact and the narrative effectiveness through players' responses. It also aims to

collect data regarding how familiar players are with the game and their level of engagement

“How do you feel about the game?” (Question twenty-nine) and “Did you see character arc development for Max and Chloe?” (Question thirty-five) aim to gather more information about the players’ long-lasting impressions and their opinions of the game, it also serves as a tool to evaluate the narrative thematic implementations and its characters’ development.

2.3.2 Survey Results

The survey reveals unexpected results regarding the gender representation in Life is Strange, which is centered on two female characters.

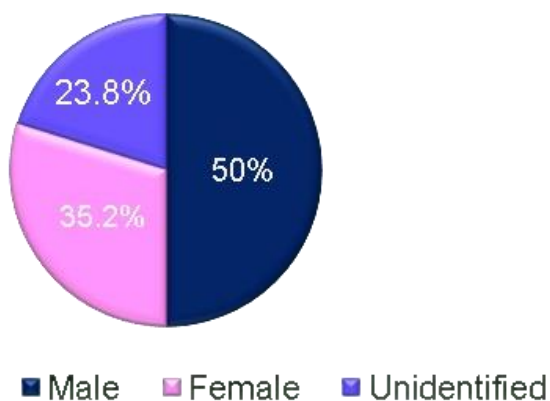


Figure 2: The Gender Composition

The pie chart above reveals that only 35,2% of participants are females, while 59% are males. Though it can be considered a gender imbalance, yet, this proves that Life is Strange is a narrative that resonates across all genders.

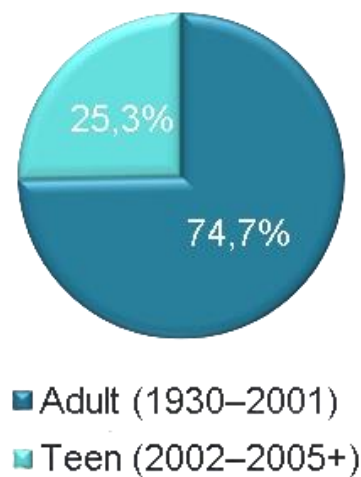


Figure 3: The Age Distribution

The pie above reveals that the 4,7% were above eighteen years old in 2020, while younger participants represented 25,3%. Despite being a small audience, this still proves how well younger players engage with topics like bullying and identity.

This confirms the hypothesis that *Life is Strange* transcends targeting teens and young adults, revealing that the theme of coming-of-age evokes nostalgia and past experiences that resonate with older players.



Figure 4: The Geographic Spread

As shown in the pie chart above, 39,7% of the participants identified as Americans (284 out of 714), representing the majority of the participants, likely because the game takes place in Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, which contributes to their sense of familiarity (American high schools, landscapes,

and gun culture), moreover, 37,2% of the participants identify as European, representing 164 out of 714.

The 2,5% difference between the two proves that *Life is Strange* goes beyond the regional selectivity due to its focus on universal themes like loss, friendship, with 23.1% of the participants representing other regions, indicating the game's global success.

The participants' answers to the first question about what their ending choice was in their first playthrough were between two suggestions: to sacrifice Chloe and save Arcadia Bay (301), with 42,2%, to sacrifice Arcadia Bay and save Chloe (413), with 57,8%. The findings indicate that the majority of the players value character attachment to Chloe, considering her as an important individual over the inhabitants of Arcadia Bay, representing the abstract group, indicating that the majority of *Life is Strange* players stayed emotionally loyal to Chloe, overshadowing utilitarian considerations.

The question of whether they would make the same choice if the situation were real had 413 responding "Probably yes" with 57,8%, this result matches the participants who chose the decision to sacrifice Arcadia Bay in the first question. 182 responded that they had no idea what they would do, corresponding to 25,5%, they recognize that this choice is real and is complicated due to other factors like guilt and consequences, on the other hand, 119 responded with "Probably no," representing 16,7%, implying that the game's intangible consequences shield some players from fully experiencing emotional impact of the game.

The question of whether they changed their mind over time and whether they would have made a different choice then, 81,1% of the participants disagreed, proving that the majority maintained their previous choice of whether to save Chloe or save Arcadia Bay, this confirms the idea that *Life is Strange* evokes emotional and ethical dilemmas, while 18,9% of respondents admitted to changing their mind, suggesting that some participants regret their previous choice after moments of contemplation,

likely due to feelings of guilts either about sacrificing the people of the town or sacrificing Chloe.

The participants' answers about the duration and the thought process before deciding their final choice in their first playthrough show that 28,7% of them decided immediately and did not take much time to decide; combined with 38,9% who took from one minute to four minutes to decide, this proves that most of the participants chose to follow their instinct and prioritize their emotions and loyalty over morality, whereas 32,4% took longer than four minutes, with the inclusion of the 2,4% who paused the game for hours, reflecting the moral weight of decisions in *Life is Strange*.

The results of the question whether the ending they picked made them cry reveal many emotional responses from the participants, by combining the answers: "yes, a lot" (23.7%) and "yes, moderately" (16.9%), with "a few tears" 15.5%. It is revealed that 56,1% had shed tears. Whereas, 43.9% reported not crying, with 11.8% expressing emotions such as the feeling of emptiness and shock.

The participants expressed great admiration and praise from the majority of the participants regarding how they feel about the game, with 91.9% combining the 44% responses "very special" and 42% "masterpiece," and 5.9% reporting that it's "better than any game." Even the minority respondents with neutral responses like "like but not crazy about it and meh" acknowledged the game's cultural impact, whereas 0.4% expressed their dislike.

70,2% is the majority of respondents that reported being quite well familiar with the game, responding to the question about their knowledge about the game, combined with 43,6% claiming that they know it quite well, and 26,6% stating that they know it extremely well, the remaining responses were "average" with 25,2%, and 4,6 % respondents who report having minimal memories of the game.

The question about whether respondents grasped the character arc development for Max and Chloe was answered by 82.5% of players, who said that Max and Chloe made significant progress. Only 4.6% responded with only Chloe's arc, probably related to her trauma journey more than, while 8.4% of respondents saw

only Max's arc, indicating that Chloe never changed during the game. 4.5% of respondents rejected any development for any of the two characters. The answer of the majority of the respondents proves that the creators of *Life is Strange* effectively gave their characters significant arcs.

2.4 Exploring Chaos Theory in *Life is Strange*

According to American mathematician Robert L. Devaney, Chaos Theory is the concept that slight alterations now can have significant effects later on. This field of study is applied in many fields of mathematics, including physics, engineering, economics, and biology (Devaney, *Chaos and Fractals: The Mathematics behind the Computer Graphics*). According to David Nolte, a professor of physics and astronomy at Purdue University, Chaos theory got its start in the early twentieth century with French science philosopher and mathematician Henri Poincaré's work, which heavily influenced Edward Lorenz's discovery in the scientific field. In an article, he wrote that Chaos Theory shows systems that appear to behave randomly have hidden patterns and structures which scientists call "strange attractors" (Nolte, "A Short History of Chaos Theory"), which reveal important information to researchers on how systems operate over time and the behaviours they display.

In *Life is Strange* episode three titled "Chaos Theory" Max and Chloe decide to investigate one of Blackwell's mysteries, the disappearance of Chloe's close friend Rachel Amber, a young girl who went missing six months before Max's return to Arcadia Bay, her missing person posters are seen all over Blackwell Academy campus. Max and Chloe are determined to investigate more about Rachel's disappearance by sneaking out at night to break into the principal's office to gather clues about not only Rachel Amber but also the other students, like Kate and Nathan Prescott, the boy who shot Chloe in the bathroom. In the office, they obtain students' files and make a disturbing discovery of a file containing a bizarre drawing that belongs to Nathan that says "Rachel in the dark room" repeated over and over, which they find psychotic and confirm that Nathan has something to do with Rachel's disappearance.

After Max spends the night at Chloe's house, she uncovers more secrets and clues related to Rachel Amber and Kate Marsh in Chloe's stepdad's garage, which exposes some dark and hidden connections within Arcadia Bay. French philosopher and novelist Luis De Miranda reveals that butterflies of minor choice are considered to contribute to a larger narrative for human society and era (6).

Therefore, a small decision will have a far more reaching consequence, like later in the episode when Max travels to a different timeline through an old photograph of her and Chloe when they were children, she is physically teleported to the day William Price, Chloe's dad was going to die in a fatal car accident, Max tries to warn Chloe and her dad. However, preventing William's death resulted in the creation of an alternative timeline where Chloe is bound to a chair, paralyzed from her upper to her toes. Later on, she asks Max to euthanize her. This scene exemplifies chaos theory, in which Arcadia Bay functions as a system that is nonlinear and prone to different outcomes, where William's survival works as the change of the variable in the system that resulted from another variable, which is Chloe's life.

"Chaos Theory" shifts to themes of rebellion and agency with Max and Chloe challenging authority figures and their pursuit of the truth while exposing the layers of corruption and abuse inside Arcadia Bay's institutions. As well as the terrible repercussions of the alternate realities that are based on the conflict between free will and determinism, as Max's rewind power creates chaos more than order.

2.5 Free Will in the Normal World Versus the Chaotic World

Free will represents the form of control that individuals have over their behaviours, this concept emerged over the last two thousand years and sparked debate throughout history of philosophy among many philosophers like Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and Augustine with questions concerning the origin, nature of this control and its significance (O'Connor et. Al – "Free Will" *Stanford Encyclopaedias of Philosophy*).

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Free will in science and philosophy is the idea that humans can choose or act independently from past events or condition of the universe, to justify free will people have based it on the subjective

perception of freedom, feelings of guilt, religion, and on the wide belief of the moral and personal responsibility that is the foundation of motivation, reward, punishment and the law.

In a normal world led by determinism and order, Free will is conceptualized by compatibilism, where causal necessity and freedom of choice coexist. In *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*, Robert Kane draws the picture on the problem of Free Will and Determinism when concluding that all human actions are the inevitable results of past events according to natural laws, meaning that they could have not acted otherwise, which further weakens the basis of morality (5-7). Kane introduces the idea of libertarian Free will by defining it as the view that free will and determinism are incompatible (incompatibilism), then he affirms that Free will exists, and lastly, he claims that determinism is false (32). He also considers Alternative Possibilities (AP) as a requirement for the problem of Free will, a libertarian concept that supports the ability to choose differently (6).

This concept can be applied to a normal universe where human choices are led by reason or social structures, and one can still wonder if they could have done otherwise. In another chaotic universe like Arcadia Bay, consequences are unstable as well as time, which makes alternative possibilities more relevant because the game introduces different possibilities. Kane also introduces self-forming actions (SFA's) as "the actions in our lives by which we form our character and motives (i.e., our wills) and make ourselves into the kinds of persons we are" (130), he explains that if humans never made or experienced an undetermined action in their lives, they would not have free will or be responsible for their actions, and for their moral responsibility to exist some of their choices must at least be genuine (131).

2.6 Personal Player Decisions

During all the episodes of *Life is Strange*, the player is assigned the decision-maker role through the main character Max Caulfield, who starts as a shy teenager who later becomes a confident and responsible young woman. The player experiences personal and emotionally charged decisions that not only impact Max and her

relationship with other characters but also directly impact the player by facing moral dilemmas that mirror real-life situations.

DontNod's writer Christian Divine, the co-writer of *Life is Strange* discusses the emotional response that was received from the players, which he describes as "the most amazing thing about the game "and watching people cry while reacting to the game was something they did not expect but at the same time, were hoping to give players these emotions (Game Developers Conference, "Life Is Strange: The Blue Age of Storytelling"). He thinks the reason behind this response is the involvement of the player in Max's personality, while playing her and being within her world, develops into a bonding that results in the player's emotional connection to the characters, At the end of each episode, the game reveals statistics of each global player's choices made in the game, with the percentage of each major decision. This post-game feature quantifies the emotional impact and response of the narrative.

2.6.1 Reporting Nathan or Hiding the Truth

In episode one, in a scene where Max is in the girls' bathroom, she overhears a heated argument between Nathan Prescott and Chloe Price. The situation escalates, and Nathan pulls a gun in a panic and shoots Chloe. Max rewinds time and travels back to the time she was in her photography class. After executing her plan to prevent Nathan from shooting Chloe using her time rewind power, Max is confronted by the security guard upon exiting the girls' bathroom until the principal intervenes. With Max visibly stressed and sweating, the principal starts interrogating her. After pointing out her distress and her suspicious behaviour, he asks her if she's done something wrong and demands that she talk to him (*Life is Strange, Chrysalis*).

The game introduces the decision point where Max has to choose between two options: A. Report Nathan, and B. Hide the Truth. When the choice interface appears, the image is slightly blurred with faded-desaturated colours that resemble an instant camera photograph. The game also includes a suspenseful track in the background when introducing a critical choice, the player has to make (*Life is Strange*)



Figure 5: The Principal confronts Max

If the player chooses the first option, A. Report Nathan, the principal's demeanour changes to evasive when talking about the son of the wealthy family that actively donates to the academy, and he ends up dismissing her allegations. This option was picked by 61% of the global players, if they choose the second option B. Hide the Truth, the principal's reaction will be neutral and more polite. When Max does not share information with him, he lets go of the topic. This option was picked by 39% of the global players.

These two options both have later consequences that will be revealed in later episodes. For example, if the player chooses the first option, A. Report Nathan, paired with another choice of blaming Nathan for Kate's suicide attempt, will result in the suspension of Nathan in later episodes. It will also push Nathan to destroy Max's "Photo Memorial Wall" and leave a disturbing picture of Max, who later receives a threatening message from Nathan's father in episode two.

2.6.2 Comfort or Make Fun of

Later in the episode, in a scene where Max has to go to the girls' dormitory, Victoria Chase, the mean girl, and her clique block Max from entering the dorm. Max comes up with a devious plan, exploiting her environment. She uses her rewind power to execute her plan unnoticed and ends up ruining Victoria's outfit and humiliating her. Once the plan is successful, the game lets you approach the situation with two options. Just like in the previous decision, the interface appears with the same

distortion of the image and the desaturated colours. The player has to choose between the two options, A. Make Fun of or B. Comfort.



Figure 6: Max's choice whether to make fun of or comfort Victoria

If the player chooses option A. To make fun of Victoria, Max will take a humiliating photograph of her, which will result in Victoria taking her revenge by drawing hateful graffiti on Max's room mirror, vandalizing her room, and stealing the photograph Max took later in episode two. This option was made by 23% of the global players. If the player ends up choosing the second option B. to comfort her instead, she will soften and slightly open up to Max later in the episode. This option was made by 77% of the players globally.

2.6.3 Intervene or Take a Picture

While exiting the girls' dormitory, Max witnesses her classmate Kate Marsh getting harassed by the security guard David Madsen. The game gives the player, again, the two options: A. to intervene or B. to take a picture of the harassment as evidence.



Figure 4: Max witnesses Kate getting harassed by the security guard

If the player chooses to intervene to help Kate, she will appreciate it, and it will make it easier for the player to persuade her not to jump from the roof in the second episode. This option was taken by 87% of the players globally. Choosing to take the picture with the withdrawal from the situation will result in upsetting Kate, and the picture taken can be used to testify against David Madsen if the player chooses to blame him for Kate's suicidal attempt in episode two. This option was made by 13 % of the players globally.

2.6.4 Saving Kate

After a day full of occurrences and a hangout between Max and Chloe, Max goes back to her class at Blackwell Academy, before Mr. Jefferson starts the lecture. Max would notice Kate walking somewhere outside in the rain. When a student barges in and informs the students about something happening in the girl's dorm, all the students exit the classroom to see what's happening, including Max, who is met with a dark and rainy atmosphere where all the students and faculty members are gathered in the middle of the campus looking up in shock at Kate Marsh standing on the edge of the rooftop, only a moment later she would jump with the students screams in the background.

At this moment, Max uses her time rewind power to stop her until she reaches the academy's rooftop to persuade her to step back from the edge. As previously mentioned in the chapter, the player's success in saving Kate from jumping depends on attentiveness to details in the game while exploring Kate's room. In the scene where Max gives back her book, the player can interact with the objects and the pictures in Kate's room, like the card from Kate's dad showing her support and the bible notes that inform the player that Kate is a fan of the Matthew 11:28 passage.



Figure 7: Kate appreciates that Max picked up her call

Answering her call while hanging out with Chloe in episode two will help the player persuade Kate. The statistics reveal that 71% of the players were able to save Kate, while 29 % were not successful.

2.6.5 The Weight of Time

In the previous episode of *Life is Strange*, Max opens a portal to another timeline that takes her back to the day Chloe's dad died in a car accident. By preventing this accident from happening, Max ends up creating an alternate universe where Chloe, her best friend, is handicapped.

In episode four, titled "The Dark Room", Max teleports back to the timeline where she and Chloe are kids again, where Max will not interfere with Chloe's dad's fate. She travels back for the last time to the original reality, where they continue their intense investigation into Rachel Amber's disappearance. After many quests and

violent confrontations, they make a disturbing discovery in an underground secret lair, the dark room, where they find inside a portfolio of drugged girls, including Kate and Rachel Amber. From one of the pictures, Max and Chloe gather a clue about the last time Rachel was seen. They hurry to the junkyard where they make a grim find, Rachel Amber buried under for several days.



Figure 8: Max and Chloe, devastated after finding Rachel's dead body

On the hunt for Nathan, the main suspect of the drugging and murder of Rachel. Max and Chloe find themselves at his “Vortex Club End of the World” party in full chaos with students. Max gets to go around and ask them about Nathan and learn more about him. Among these students is Victoria Chase, with whom Max exchanges conversations about Kate Marsh and Victoria’s behaviour towards her suicide attempt. In this scene, Max gets the chance to bring up the danger surrounding the academy with the two options. A. The Dark Room B. Don’t Warn Her.



Figure 9: The choice whether to warn Victoria about the dark room or not

If the player chooses the first option, Max gets to warn Victoria about Nathan and his evil schemes, convincing Victoria depends on previous interactions. If the player chose to comfort her in the first episode, Victoria will believe Max's warning. 67% of the players were successful in convincing Victoria. If the player chose to mock her in the first episode, Victoria would not believe Max and would call her a "drama queen". 19% of the players failed to convince Victoria. Choosing the second option, not to warn Victoria, will result in Victoria being mean and hostile, arguing that Max is jealous of her. 14% of the players did not warn Victoria.

After an unsuccessful hunt for Nathan, Max and Chloe leave the party only to be texted by Nathan informing them that there will not be evidence left in the junkyard. When Max and Chloe get there in a hurry, they find the body still there, only to realize that it was a trap to lure them, not by Nathan but by Mr. Jefferson instead, who drugs Max and puts a bullet in Chloe's head.

Themes of revelation, manipulation, and morality are emphasized in the fourth episode of the game *The Dark Room*. It subsequently reveals the inscrutabilities surrounding the town of Arcadia Bay, where Max and Chloe face the aftermath of power, choice, and the ruthless search for truth. It uncovers the fate of Rachel Amber, the missing person case, and confirms her death at the hands of Nathan Prescott and

the true antagonist, the photography professor Mark Jefferson, who is revealed to be a sociopath who exploited Nathan's unstable state to execute his evil plan.

2.6.6 *Polarized*: The Impossible Final Choice

The opening scene of the fifth episode, *Polarized*, reveals Max in the dark room, which is Mr. Jefferson's underground secret lair. Max now becomes one of Mr. Jefferson's victims, besides Rachel Amber, Kate Marsh, and many unnamed victims. Victoria's presence with Max in the dark room depends on the player's previous choices, if Victoria believes Max when the player chooses the option to warn her. Her going to Mr. Jefferson for help results in her being drugged and ending up in the dark room with Max, where she will eventually die. if the player chooses the option not to warn her or fail to convince her, she will not go to Mr. Jefferson for help; therefore, she will not end up in the dark room and avoid getting killed (*Life is Strange, Polarized*)

Max realizes the weight of the consequences that were caused by altering fate and playing with time. She makes an effort for the last time to make things right, realizing that there can be only one decision among the two options she has to make. A. Sacrifice Chloe or B. Sacrifice Arcadia Bay.

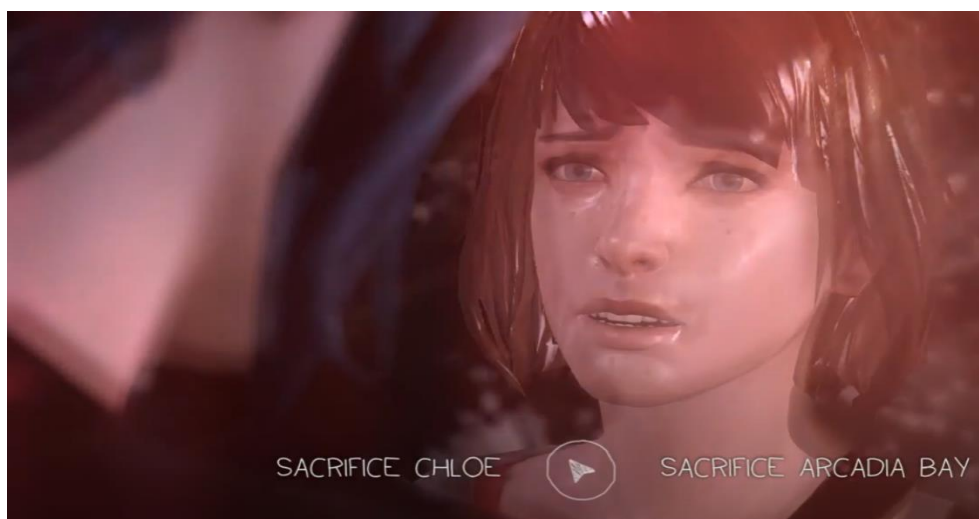


Figure 8: The final choice, whether to sacrifice Chloe or sacrifice Arcadia Bay

The first option, A. Sacrifice Chloe, will result in returning to the scene of the first episode and letting Chloe die at Nathan's hands without interfering. This will

prevent the storm from happening, sparing the people of the town. This option was picked by 44% of the players.

The second option, B. Sacrifice Arcadia Bay, will cause the town to be destroyed by the storm and kill every inhabitant of Arcadia Bay, including Chloe's family and Max's friends. Max and Chloe will flee out of town. 56% of the players have picked this option.

In *Polarized*, the game forces the player to face their journey of time manipulation and its consequences, to decide between emotional loyalty and collective duty in the final decision of the game, which marks the climax of the narrative that is designed to challenge the player's emotions and ethics.

2.7 Linear and Non-Linear Time

In *Life is Strange*, the definition of time serves as a less scientific term and more of a narrative, thematic purpose that embodies the themes of consequence and chaos. Time becomes malleable with the main character's ability to manipulate time by reversing, freezing, and traveling between timelines. Yet, this power has limits and comes at a great price, while the gameplay is centered around the time rewind mechanic, doing so frequently has unforeseen consequences. Time is an active and interconnected system, where decisions constantly affect the world.

If time were linear, the core element of *Life is Strange* would cease to exist, meaning that there will be no time rewind ability, turning the game from a supernatural thriller drama story about time manipulation, fate, and chaos to a tragic fixed decisions and outcomes story with irreversible loss, therefore without Max's superpower, Chloe does not escape her fate and dies instead when Nathan shoots her, therefore the story would end before it begins.

Investigating Rachel Amber's disappearance without the rewind power becomes hard and almost impossible when gathering clues. Max's ability is the essence behind important evidence and puzzles; moreover, it made Max more vulnerable and defenceless against dangerous situations.

The raging thunderstorm that is foreshadowed at the start of the episode, and it taking place in the last episode, is a direct consequence of Max's tampering with time by repeatedly saving Chloe, which implies that in a linear time, this cyclone would not happen.

2.7.1 Its Impact on Players' Morality

As a choice-based video game with a time control ability, *Life is Strange* has fostered one of the most passionate and active gaming communities due to its exploration of bold themes of social issues, such as cyberbullying, domestic violence, and depression, which has devoted a fan base from all over the world to bond over shared experiences.

While this characterisation of time has brought together a significant number of passionate fans, it has also divided them based on different opinions. Sacrificing Chloe or Arcadia Bay is the last decision, which is the most significant decision in the game that splits fans into opposite groups: those who got emotionally attached to the character Chloe Price and those who prioritised the rest of Arcadia Bay characters.

The Steam Community discussion section allows gaming fanbases to exchange conversations about their favourite games and topics. *Life is Strange* discussion category reveals fans' debates and justifications for each decision. A user made a post that was titled "Justify your ending (SPOILERS – DUH", Steam) where he discusses his decision in the finale, which he describes as an "emotional rollercoaster" and "phenomenal." he justifies his decision to sacrifice Arcadia Bay, which he believes is thematically more fitting to the game's exploration of consequences and free will. He debates that the decision to sacrifice Chloe is an action that rejects acceptance, whilst the decision to sacrifice Arcadia Bay applies the moral principle of acceptance.

The comments section contains other users commenting and discussing their different choices, whereas a particular user commented on the post, addressing the two opposite sides. He presents his point of view about the two decisions by framing them as "moral vs human." First, he starts by referring to the choice of "Sacrificing Chloe"

as the moral choice, he agrees that saving hundreds of people instead of one person is a more moral action, while the “Sacrificing Arcadia Bay” decision is the human choice for prioritizing the deep attachment to one person over abstract morality.

2.8 Conclusion

Dont Nod Entertainment’s *Life is Strange* has gone beyond typical gameplay mechanics and has paved its way to become a successful, interactive video game narrative in the digital age. The team behind *Life is Strange* has managed to craft a deep personal experience for players by emphasizing meaningful player agency and emotional engagement by using the episodic format and non-linear storytelling techniques, the game allows players to have control over the pacing of the story, explore the game world and form connections with the characters, which contributes to the development of the narrative.

The game managed to advocate and engage in real-life issues by tackling topics of cyber-bullying, mental issues, and trauma, which they made sure to talk about properly and resonated within the gaming community. Furthermore, *Life is Strange* uses particular mechanics to explore deep philosophical concepts, such as the butterfly effect which is the structural backbone of the *Life is Strange* experience, where choices that seem minor, like Max comforting, or intervening, or a moment of silence, demonstrates how small actions can lead to unforeseen and often significant consequences. The butterfly effect embodies the game’s thematic questions of whether humans can control their destinies.

Inevitably, these questions of human nature usually prompt people to look into the idea of Free will, through the story of how Max discovers her god-like ability, the game eventually shows its drawbacks, both Max and the players realize the heavy weight of changing events, and the consequences of manipulating time. Free will is an idea that influences morality. In the game, the player constantly faces “right” or “wrong” decisions, requiring him to weigh complicated beliefs and navigate difficult topics. However, instead of judging, the game compels players to assess their values and morals as they deal with the consequences they caused.

Overall, Dont Nod Entertainment's *Life is Strange*(2015) demonstrates the great potential of video games as a medium of complex, rich, and impactful narrative experiences by prioritizing deep character engagement and meaningful storytelling, uniquely mirroring the complex human issues in the narrative. It shows the role of interactivity in character-driven storytelling and how it is used for thematic depth, transforming it from merely a tool of entertainment to a space for reflection, introspection, and exploration of human nature.

General Conclusion

As a narrative-driven video game, *Life is Strange* has proven its great potential for video games because of its use of post-modern narratology structures like non-linearity, temporal fragmentation, and episodic format, not only for aesthetic or thematic purposes but also as a basis for player agency and *interactivity*.

Consequently, these structures change the role of the player from a mere observer to a co-author of the narrative and active participant in the narrative; in fact, the game mechanic allows the players to make decisions that shape the plot progression, character development, relationships, and ultimately, the game's ending. Furthermore, it creates a deep attachment between the player and the game. Significantly, the study reveals that morality in the game becomes one of the game's core elements.

Life is Strange forces players to face moral complexities by embedding moral dilemmas within the narrative. With the introduction of the butterfly effect mixed with the game's mechanics, the game ensures that players' decisions have tangible, meaningful consequences.

The research argues that narrative-driven video games like *Life is Strange* use post-modern narratology structures, including non-linearity, temporal fragmentation, to adapt to player agency and interactivity, the latter transforms the player from an observer to an active participant through the player's in-game decisions that ultimately determine the plot progression. Moreover, narrative-driven video games present morality concepts as more than themes by emphasizing the importance of choices, turning them into tangible, often irreversible consequences on plot branching, and character development.

The study demonstrates how narratology and ludology intertwine to create experiences where narrative meaning is achieved through interaction. Additionally, it proves that the power of digital storytelling lies not only in following conventional techniques but also in the capacity of structures to represent choice, consequence, and the ethical complexities of human agency; moreover, it builds a new frontier for narrative expression and experiential engagement. Therefore, the evidence from this

General Conclusion

study suggests that the revolution in narrative form is demonstrably present within the interactive genre of games like *Life is Strange*.

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Appendices

Appendices

Appendix: *Life is Strange* Player Survey (December 2020)

- **Source:** Anonymous online survey of *Life is Strange* players.
- **Responses:** 714 participants.
- **Focus:** Player decisions, emotional engagement, and interpretations of the game's endings.

This survey aimed to investigate player decision-making, emotional responses, and moral reasoning in *Life is Strange*, with emphasis on how players interact with the game's structure and themes.

1. What was your ending choice in your first playthrough?

- SACRIFICE Chloe (SAVE Arcadia Bay)
- SACRIFICE Arcadia Bay (SAVE Chloe)

2. Do you think you would make the same choice if the situation was real?

(If you don't like Chloe, suppose that in the real-life scenario, the person to sacrifice is someone whom you consider a great person and who is "all that matters to you").

- Probably yes
- Probably no
- No idea what I'd do

3. Did you change your mind over time? Would you make a different choice now? (A different choice in the game from the one you made in your first playthrough.)

- No
- Yes, changed my mind over time

4. In your first playthrough, how long did you think about it before deciding your final choice?

- I didn't really have to think about it. Decided immediately

- 1 minute - 4 minutes
 - 4 minutes - 10 minutes
 - More than 10 minutes, but not hours
 - Closed the game and thought about it for hours
 - Closed the game and thought about it for days
5. Did the ending you picked make you cry?
- Yes, A LOT
 - Yes, moderately
 - I shed a few tears
 - Almost managed to suppress it
 - No, I felt more empty and shocked, than anything
 - No, even if I felt emotional
 - No, I didn't feel particularly emotional at the ending
6. How well do you know the game?
- (Optional conversations, details, interviews with people who worked on the game, etc.)
- Extremely well
 - Quite well
 - Average
 - Forgot many things / Didn't play thoroughly
 - I only remember the main events of the plot
7. How do you feel about the game?
- Masterpiece, incredible experience
 - A very special game, unforgettable
 - Love it, better than many games
 - I like it, but I'm not crazy about it
 - Meh, I don't really like it
 - I dislike it
8. Did you see a character arc/development for Max and Chloe?

- Yes, both
- Only Max
- Only Chloe
- No