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2017

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Caught in Time:
A Close Reading of



Life is Strange

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Introduction

Time and tide wait for no-one. In the real world, this truism is the subject of many works of traditional narrative. From classics such as H.G Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, all the way to modern works like 2014's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North, traditional media have explored time and the atypical movement and experiences of people through it. Within the popular *Star Trek* universe, for example, temporal paradoxes and time-travelling spaceships are used as plot devices on a regular basis .

Many digital games, too, have explored the subject of time - these games expand across multiple genres, including *Singularity* (Raven Software, 2010), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, 2010), and *Space Quest IV* (Sierra On-Line, 1991). Digital games offer a unique perspective as they allow the consumer to interact and affect the media; some digital games have even constructed gameplay mechanics around the manipulation of time, allowing the player to directly affect the passage of time within the gameworld. One notable example of this is Jonathan Blow's 2008 title *Braid*, which requires the player to co-ordinate time reversal with the character's movement within the gameworld to complete puzzles.

In January of 2015, French developer Dontnod Entertainment launched *Life is Strange,* an interactive fiction digital game, that also dealt with time as a gameplay mechanic. The game tells the coming-of-age story of Max, a teenager attending high school at the prestigious Blackwell Academy in the small fictional town of Arcadia Bay. When Max's best friend Chloe is killed in a school shooting, Max discovers that she is able to reverse time on command, setting her on a race to uncover the truth behind Blackwell Academy's cast of suspicious characters.

Major themes within *Life is Strange* deal specifically with time travel, as well as more human experiential concerns: specifically those dealing with teenaged experience, not often explored within mainstream games. In the style of a classic coming-of-age story, *Life is Strange* addresses struggles with bullying, depression, and finding oneself in a strange world. The game also explores photography in great detail, blending the ideas of the art of capturing a single moment in time with concepts of temporality and time travel. While this research does not specifically look at this aspect, future research would likely prove enlightening.

This research presents a close reading of *Life is Strange*, specifically the interactive nature of its narrative, as well as its temporal flexibility and structure. *Life is Strange* is interesting in that the narrative is integrated into the game play itself. The player and the character navigate various conversation pathways as one would a physical maze, primarily using the core mechanic of Rewinding time. In the same way that the player might backtrack in a physical maze, the narrative can be rewound and replayed by the player, and in the gameworld the character performs (and experiences) the act of reversing time around her. These characteristics combine to create a useful case study into the design of narrative structures in digital games that can create stories that are, if maybe not quite singular, still uniquely engaging. Such designs create stories that can appropriately react to player input so as to immerse them in the story without the need for giant branching narrative paths. In order to accomplish this analysis, the core mechanisms of gameplay will be explored, followed by a detailed breakdown of the

story that will be presented in order to lay out the structure of the narrative. An example from one storyline will be used to showcase how the player's various choices during a pivotal moment in the story are used as input to create different outcomes, each with very different emotional themes, without creating wildly different story branches. . The narrative frameworks that will be used in the analysis of *Life is Strange'*s story and narrative elements will then be detailed. The game's critical reception will be briefly discussed before, finally, an examination of the narrative structure that has been used in the game will highlight the way in which future game narratives can be structured in order to create engaging storylines that are able to react to player choices without the need to create burdensome branching narratives.

History of Dontnod Entertainment

Dontnod Entertainment was founded by five friends who wanted to make original games with more personal stories than most AAA titles. Their first major release, *Remember Me (2013)*, received mixed reviews (with a Metacritic average of 69 across all platforms), and was not a commercial success, although it would seem to be well liked by gamers over time, with the current user rating on Steam at roughly 85% positive with over 700,000 sales (Steamspy, Feb 2017). The game focused on Nilin, a Memory Hunter in Neo-Paris, and dealt with issues around the surveillance corporate-state, and the implications of sharing and editing one's memories through technology. Dontnod experienced issues with publishers when they pitched a female lead, as studio marketers concluded that female protagonists do not 'sell' games effectively (Eurogamer, 2013). Sony were initially going to publish *Remember Me*, but budget constraints and lack of faith in a first-time developer with a female lead led to their passing on the deal, prompting Dontnod to release the game eventually with Capcom with a smaller budget. Large parts of the story were removed and features were left unpolished due to the budget and release schedule requirements from Capcom. One of the most praised gameplay elements of *Remember Me* were the "Memory Remixes" where the player would rewind NPCs' memories and alter aspects of the scene so that the memory played out differently. With *Life is Strange*, Dontnod wanted to use some of the same mechanics to tell a much more personal story, drawing on their love of American television in the 1990's and 2000's to create a nostalgic setting as the backdrop for a story that would have a real impact on people (Siliconera, 2015). However, finding a publisher for their new game would once again prove difficult.

On Relatable and Feminist Narrative Themes

In 2014, a bitter and heated debate enveloped gaming culture and those who formed part of it. Known as 'Gamergate', the furore began as the harassment of female game developer Zoe Quinn after the release of her small hypertext adventure *Depression Quest* (2013). The controversy soon grew and enveloped others, chief among which was Anita Sarkeesian - an outspoken activist against misogyny in both games and gaming culture. Both women (and others) received multiple threats of violence for their outspoken feminist perspectives. While supporters of the movement tried to pivot the core of the debate to highlight a perceived lack of ethics in game journalism, it was clear that a significant proportion of the mainstream gaming community was openly toxic towards the presence of women in the industry, both as critics or consumers.

One of the few positive outcomes of Gamergate was the opening of the market's eyes to the large divide between the typical marketer's perspective of the average gamer and reality. Large publishers tend to only focus on the audience of males under the age of 18, where that age group only comprises 17 - 20% of the market, according to the 2016 demographics report from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) (ESA, 2016). Female gamers over the age of 18 form more than 30% of the games market, yet, as an audience, are woefully ignored by marketers. This is reflected in another shocking fact that emerged during Gamergate: large game publishing companies do not provide equal development and marketing budgets to games with female or non-binary gendered protagonists. Specifically, Penny Arcade reported in 2014 that data from the game-research company EEDAR showed that games with female-only protagonists might receive only 40% of the marketing budget of a game with a male-only protagonist (Penny Arcade, 2014).

When Dontnod pitched *Life is Strange* to multiple publishers, they were told that a female protagonist would not be viable (as they had been told for *Remember Me*). Unwilling to change their minds, Dontnod sought out Square Enix, who were excited about the game and took on the publishing with barely any requested changes (Polygon, 2015).

While still released by a large publisher, the game would not be considered a AAA title, with a lower development budget than many of Square Enix's other published titles, such as *Murdered: Soul Suspect* (Airtight Games, 2014) or *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2013). Despite its limited budget (Red Bull Gaming, 2015), *Life is Strange* has managed to gain both critical acclaim as well as commercial success - over one million copies of the game were purchased within 6 months of release (Polygon, 2015; Gamezone, 2015), and it achieved a Metacritic score of 83 (Metacritic, 2017).

While a modern digital game typically contains more dramatic narrative elements than older games, often these narrative elements are squeezed into 'cut scenes', removing the player from the control they normally enjoy. This can easily lead to gameplay that is divorced from narrative, essentially creating two halves of an experience (Jenkins, 2003). Even when these narrative elements coalesce into a coherent story, these stories are often grandiose "epic" tales that usually boil down to "kill all the baddies and save the world"; such stories rarely revolve around relatable human experiences.

Life is Strange is certainly strange in that it attempts to challenge mainstream conventions while still avoiding a dense intellectualism described by Marie-Laure Ryan as the North Pole of the cultural spectrum (Ryan, 2005). Ryan laid out a simple metaphorical scale that used the description of climate to differentiate between popular, mainstream art pieces, and more artistically interesting (but less approachable) pieces. Those works that were palatable to larger audiences she described as the Tropics, as they are warm, comfortable, and popular tourist destinations. On the other end of the spectrum, works that were deemed "cool" or intellectually engaging she defined as the North Pole.

The story in *Life is Strange* is a raw and personal one, with strong feminist themes, revolving around an awkward teenage girl (Maxine Caulfield, or Max for short) and her rebellious and estranged best friend Chloe. They are a far cry from the standard-issue muscular male platoon in power armor. The game's main coming-of-age narrative

themes center around time, the "butterfly effect", love, friendship, and photography. These themes not only combine to create a deeply engaging story, but are also built within an intriguing narrative structure that allows the character and the player to navigate narrative paths by dynamically overwriting the narrative again and again. While not completely devoid of cut-scenes, much of the narrative is woven into the gameplay itself.

Many of the struggles experienced by high-school protagonists are dealt with in a realistic and emotional manner. This is rare in the mainstream, and, combined with its experimental narrative structure, risked *Life is Strange* falling onto the North Pole end of Ryan's spectrum. The story is, however, not completely without high stakes drama, with the fate of Max's small town possibly resting in her hands. Dontnod also presents the town within the nostalgic Pacific NorthWest and includes a number of licensed music tracks in order to 'warm' the game toward the Tropics. This is, therefore, a title that falls within Ryan's Temperate zone, bridging the gap between the mainstream and the experimental (Ryan, 2005).

Released in the beginning of 2015, *Life is Strange* was well positioned to take advantage of the growing feminist sentiment that followed Gamergate, and its success no doubt furthered the argument that large publishers needed to reflect on the types of games they were creating in a post-Gamergate market.

Narrative Flexibility

Because the player is able to navigate the narrative as if it were a physical maze, full of doors and keys, this research report examines the ways in which developers can use more interesting storytelling methods to create experiences that are more engaging than straight A to B 'on-rails' stories so common in the mainstream. In a typical game, once the story has played out it cannot be changed without breaking the immersion of the player in the gameworld by their reloading from a previous save point. Because Max is able to rewind time, she can experience multiple narrative paths by rewinding actions, conversations, and their consequences. Each path can be reversed and replayed before making the decision as to which path should be left to become the final, or 'Prime' timeline. Being able to rewind and replay as part of the gameplay mechanic allows interesting interactions with the game's temporality (the role of time and the temporal relationships between actors) that detaches the character from the gameworld. Importantly, it is not only the player that experiences this rewind, but the character, herself experiences the rewind and the multiple paths that branch out from her decisions. The narrative therefore becomes a gameplay mechanic that enhances the synergy between character and player.

Interactive narratives are often associated with complex hypertext works, and this kind of experimental narrative is rare in mainstream digital games. With some notable exceptions, such as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) or the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2008 - 2012), mainstream digital game narratives tend to unfold (if one exists at all) in a linear progression that does not deviate from a single path.

Figure 4 (pg. 30) in the Narrative Analysis section describes a specific example of how player choices can create differentiated narrative experiences without requiring a massive exercise in story branches. The main plot still continues to the same key touch

points, but with subtle differences that react to the actions of the player. Further exploration and academic discussion of narrative flexibility will be beneficial, even essential, in the understanding of how digital games can use experimental narrative forms in a successful manner.

This close reading will attempt to highlight how interactive narratives such as that in *Life is Strange* can greatly add to the impact of the story of a game. It will also be argued that more game developers should be including more interesting narrative structures in their games if they wish to engage an audience on an emotional level.

The episodic release structure of *Life is Strange* works to create a compartmentalised narrative, drawing a direct comparison to narrative styles inherent in television. Much of the inspiration behind *Life is Strange* is deeply rooted in television, and the episodic nature of its release solidifies that homage and comparison. From a marketing strategy it is interesting too. As noted by Tschang (2007), there is a tension between consumers wanting familiar IP and seeking new experiences.With lower marketing budgets, it is therefore harder for games within a new IP to attract players to invest full price for an unknown game. Especially when that new IP may lie outside their typical genre (Tshang, 2007). With an episodic release that charges a small amount per episode the initial cost for the consumer is lowered to the point where they may invest because even if they do not enjoy the title, they are not out-of-pocket for the full retail price.

Not only does this allow earlier episodes to fund the development of later episodes, (it is also a common release practice for other interactive narrative adventure games, particularly those made by Telltale Games), but narratively, it can add dramatic 'cliff-hangers' that add to the impact of the story.

Methodology

Close readings of games must be a labour of love. Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum note in their 2011 paper on relevant techniques (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011) that the digital game offers three unique challenges to those performing a close reading that must be overcome: Indeterminacy, Scope, and Difficulty.

The issue of Indeterminacy is particularly true for *Life is Strange* where each playthrough may produce different results, or at least create a different experience each time it is played.

Secondly, Scope can have an impact on the reader, as there can be so much content to analyse that it may prove impractical to view it all. This is less of a problem for *Life is Strange* than it is for an open world game, but even in such a contained single-player game, it can be onerous to examine every corner of every map or follow every tree option in every conversation. Despite this, the average playthrough for myself was approximately twelve hours long.

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum's third challenge to the close reading of digital games is Difficulty. In the case of *Life is Strange*, however, the gameplay itself does not rely heavily on luck, hand-eye co-ordination and reaction times, or strategy. The 'difficulty' in *Life is Strange* is more in making choices that may all seem to have negative or morally ambiguous consequences.

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum lay out a proposed methodology that relies on the breakdown of Analytical Lenses through which to study a given text:

> *"This often means having to sift through an unwieldy collect of notes, recordings, and observations, which can quickly threaten to overwhelm the researcher. One way to make this process more manageable is to use carefully constructed analytical lenses to constrain and direct the interpretations of the data. … In the same way that a literary theorist might focus on the use of metaphor or imagery in a text, a game scholar may choose to focus on the dynamics of reward and motivation, or the believability of the game's non-player-characters. This constrains the types of analyses that anyone reading may accomplish, allowing game scholars to fruitfully explicate smaller sections of gameplay experiences, rather than attempting to catalogue and evaluate the entirety of a game."*
>
> Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg 10

The concept of Analytical Lenses was used as the basis of this paper's research methodology. It is a useful approach in that it allows the reader to focus on the aspects that they wish to while allowing other elements to simply wash over them.

In order to fully analyse the narrative elements of *Life is Strange*, the required Analytical Lenses were determined. In the case of this research, Henry Jenkins' Environmental Storytelling framework and Jim Bizzocchi's Narrative Elements were used as Analytical Lenses through which to inspect the game. These frameworks are discussed in more detail after the game's story has been explored so that context can be given and

narrative elements from the game's story can be clearly linked back to the respective framework.

For the purposes of an analysis that would cater for these Analytical Lenses across the entire length of the game, a spreadsheet was created with a column for each aspect of the two frameworks. An example of a single scene analysis entry from the analysis spreadsheet can be found in Appendix 1.

Breaking down each scene, *Life is Strange* was played critically, and the following aspects of the scene were noted as it played out:

1. Entry Number
2. Episode Number
3. Scene Name
4. Scene Locale
5. Scene Description

Then, in terms of Jenkins' Framework, where applicable, the following lenses were used to dissect the scene:

1. Enacted Space
2. Embedded Space
3. Evocative Space

Taking what had occurred in the scene, Bizzocchi's narrative elements were also completed, where applicable:

1. Storyworld
2. Characters
3. Character Emotions
4. Player Process Emotion
5. Player Aesthetic Emotion
6. Narrative Interface
7. Micro-Narrative Arc

When Primary Decisions (further discussed on pg. 12) were required by the player, the available choices would be listed, as well as the type of choice that was required. Finally, any additional notes about the scene and how it relates to the overall story and other scenes were recorded. The use of colour was important in the analysis too, as colours on the scene number were used to indicate if the scene executed in an altered temporal reference, such as outside of the 'prime' timeline, or in a nightmare. Primary Decisions were also noted by certain colours on the scene name, as well as when the player was unable to Rewind.

While this process is quite labour intensive, once the game was played through, an extremely detailed picture could be extracted from the data. In the case of this analysis, more than 70 scenes were identified and catalogued, spread over a cross-section of nearly twenty data points.

An example of this researcher's Analytical Lens Breakdown per scene is attached at the end of this paper as Appendix 1. The full spreadsheet is included in the submission as Appendix 2. In the next section, the game's core mechanics will be discussed and examined.

Core Mechanics

Time Reversal 101

In *Life is Strange*, the core game mechanic revolves around Max's ability to rewind game time around her. At most points throughout the game, the player can direct Max to hold out her hand and events that have just occurred will run backwards until the player chooses to stop.

Importantly, it is not the player that rewinds the game and plays it differently, but rather that the character is the one performing the reversal, and is thus not only the actor, but also a spectator to the reversal. The character and the player's temporality are linked, and importantly, it is the player and Max who both experience each Rewind together. By doing so, Dontnod aim to create a closer relationship between player and character, increasing the chance of an emotional attachment forming from player to protagonist.

When performing a Rewind, Max does not simply 'jump' back in time; events taking place in the world around her simply replay in reverse. However, Max herself is not affected by the rewind, as she appears to stand in a bubble of space 'outside' of time. This mechanic differs to other time manipulation mechanics in other games. In *Singularity*, for example, the protagonist does stand outside of the gameworld's time, but can only switch between two particular moments in time (specifically, between the present day and 1955). In contrast, in both *Braid* and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, the player is able to rewind time on command, but the protagonist's actions are rewound at the same time - the Princes do not stand outside of time. *Life is Strange*'s mechanics allow the protagonist to Rewind and play events back while standing outside of the reversal herself.

General Rules

Given Max' position outside of time, the Temporal Mechanics behind Max's Rewind power are coherent, and causality does not appear to be violated. Actions that are performed will still affect the future (enabling a coherent timeline), and consequences from an action that was no longer performed will no longer occur (respecting causality). This means that Max can perform an action (the Cause) that results in a consequence (the Effect), then upon Rewinding, if the Cause never occurs, the Effect will not play out.

For example, in Chloe's bedroom, while reaching for a box on a high shelf, Max can knock over a glass snow globe which falls to the floor and shatters. When she Rewinds, the snow globe (un)falls from the floor and returns to the high shelf because Max has not caused it to fall. The question that of course arises is, did the snow globe ever break?

There do however appear to be some exceptions to an otherwise coherent Causality. While Rewinding appears to command and affect Classical Physics, it does not seem to have an effect on physics at the Quantum level: light, for instance, does not reverse and retrace Max's shadow where she had been standing previously.

Additionally, certain objects that are acted on by Max just before a Rewind can, in some

rare cases, violate Causality. In one of the few instances, watering a pot plant and then rewinding from the other side of the room causes the water in the pot to 'teleport' back into the bottle, despite there being no (reverse) force acting to move the water bottle back to collect the water un-falling into the pot (as Max is unaffected by the reversal, she will not reverse her actions that took place - they will simply have never happened). Max can water and reverse multiple times, but the water in the bottle will never run out.

Limitations

Besides the few minor discrepancies in the spacetime continuum, there are several rules that the game places on Max's Rewind powers. First of all, while Max is rewinding, she has to stand still and cannot interact with anything during the process. However, any objects she carries while rewinding will travel back in time with her.

Max can also only use her Rewind for a short while; after a short amount of time, the effort of the Rewind will cause a splitting head pain in Max, and from the player's perspective, the scene appears to over-expose (in the way that a photograph might) and turns red, indicating that they can rewind no further.

There are also particular instances where Max's Rewind power is limited or cannot be used for dramatic reasons. These are often during moments of high drama to increase the tension of the scene. Furthermore, the player cannot Rewind during a cutscene, or stop Rewinding such that the point at which time is stopped lies within a cutscene - if Rewinding back past the end of a cutscene, the Rewind must continue until the start of the cutscene.

Conversation Choices

The other core mechanic in *Life is Strange* revolves around conversations with Non-Player Characters (NPCs), and the conversation options that Max has at the player's disposal.

When approaching an NPC, one of four scenarios is typical: there may be no dialogue option, a dialogue option is available but the NPC will speak a line without engaging in a conversation, Max and the NPC will begin a conversation, or when speaking to the NPC, a cut-scene may be triggered. When in conversation with an NPC, the player is often given a number of topics or responses that can be picked from to continue the conversation. These choices are contextual and relate to the specific NPC and situation, rather than a list of generic 'types' of responses or topics.

Conversation Keys

When Max speaks with NPCs from whom she requires something, they will often not provide a key piece of information or be persuaded to do something for Max until she comes across a Conversation Key. This is usually a specific piece of information that can be used as a metaphorical key to unlock additional responses or reactions from NPCs. The game provides a visual and audio cue when Max has learned something she could use as a Conversation Key. By rewinding and restarting the same conversation with the NPC, the player will be given a new, highlighted dialogue choice. This can be used to create rapport between Max and the NPC, or as leverage to convince them to do something for her.

Decisions

As is typical for interactive fiction games, within the list of conversation options, the player will occasionally need to make a narrative or action decision by picking between two or more options. These have been classified into three types of choices that are made by the player. Firstly, Primary Decisions affect crucial moments in the narrative and are highlighted uniquely to the player. These are often 'lynchpin' decisions between two major courses of action. Secondary Decisions are usually more opaque, or seemingly more innocuous, but also have consequences. Finally, Tertiary Decisions are self-reflexive - they are less of a decision to make, and more for the player to determine Max's 'truth' in the scene. For example, responding to a favourite movie choice, choosing Belgian Waffles or Bacon Pancakes for breakfast, and loving or hating Seattle. Whatever choice the player makes becomes what Max actually feels or wants.

The most important of these types are the Primary Decisions. When faced with a Primary Decision, the game essentially pauses, and one of two (or sometimes three) options must be picked by the player. The importance of the decision is highlighted by visual and audio cues to the player - the interface changes, with the screen turning a shade of red, and a particular repeating sample of music plays until the player makes their selection. This is one of the few times that the player and Max's temporalities are split apart; the player may sit and wait to make the decision, yet even Max is frozen in time.

Usually, directly after making a Primary Decision, Max will gauge the immediate consequences of her choice and make a comment as an internal monologue. The player will then have the option (in most cases) to Rewind and possibly select a different option. This can be done as often as the player chooses, but once they leave the immediate area the choice becomes final and Max will no longer be able to rewind that far back.

Controls and Interface

Much of the design language in *Life is Strange* revolves around analogue over digital. This is evident from a thematic standpoint in the protagonists preference for instamatic analogue cameras in an age when the digital camera is entirely dominant. Similarly, the game's interface design style mimics hand-drawn elements, including the fonts, interface, feedback sounds, and interaction method. Figure 1, 2 and 3 examine the game menus and in-game interface, respectively.



Figure 1 - Menu screenshot during Episode 4 - The Dark Room

In the menu screen above there are a number of elements that maintain the analogue aesthetic. Firstly the title and the font for the menu items adhere to a hand-drawn style, as does the mouse cursor, which appears to change as if being filled in by hand slightly differently each time. The lines are not exactly straight and the fill occasionally breaks out of the lines. Similarly the menu items are placed haphazardly, and are not strictly aligned.



Figure 2 - Various Menu styles from Episode 1 to Episode 5

The menu backdrop and audio also change depending on which episode the player is currently playing, as shown in Figure 2, above. As the game takes place over the course of five days, the menu scene implies the march of time across episodes, though there is not a one to one correlation between days and episodes. While the view remains the same, the weather and time of day changes to illustrate the progression. By the fifth episode, the storm that has built up for the previous four episodes threatens the coast and lightning dances in the clouds. This adds to the player's immersion in the storyworld by creating a sense that the world changes without the player's involvement. For further discussion on this, see Bizzocchi's narrative elements on page 31.

Interaction

Camera

Life is Strange is played from an over-the-shoulder Third Person perspective. This creates a more concrete sense of Max as a character that stands separately from the player. With many First Person perspectives, the player is often given the impression that they become the character, as they are the focal point of the camera, especially when NPCs interact with that character. Being Third Person, we, the Player, are forced to look at the experience from the perspective of Max, the Character.

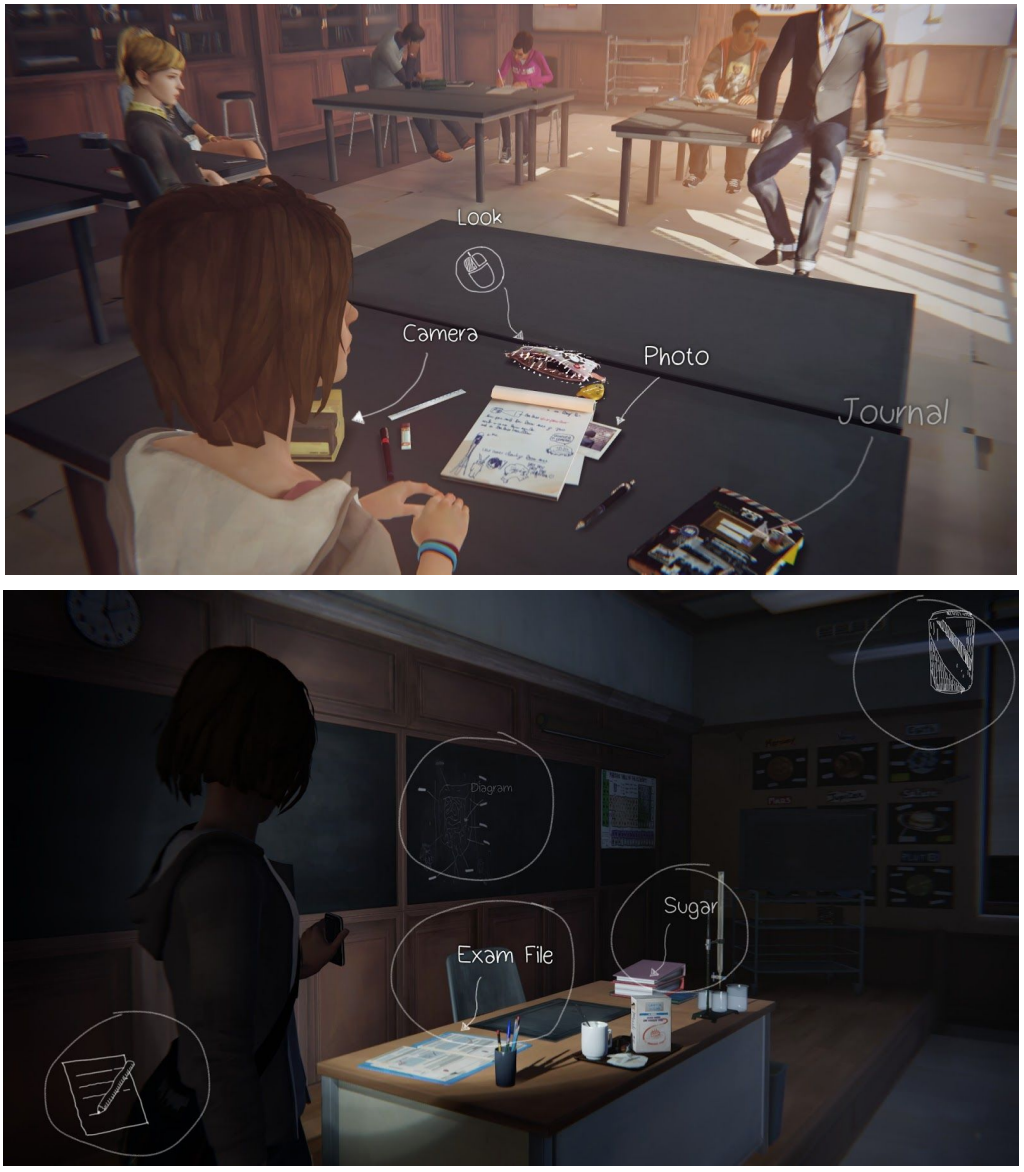

Figure 3 - In-game screenshots from Episode 1 and an annotated one from Episode 3

User Interface

In the above in-game screenshots (Figure 3) there are multiple interface cues that the player can interact with. These too are in an analogue, hand-drawn style and hang in the air in front of the player as Max approaches them. When the player looks directly at the object or person within reach, the label changes to indicate what actions can be performed. There is, however, a slight difference in the PC and console versions of the game in this regard - on the console version, each available action is assigned to a face button on the controller, and merely pushing the appropriate face button selects the option. When using a mouse on a PC, however, the player must click and drag the cursor over the desired action label. Calleja (2011) shows that this kind of kinesthetic involvement can increase immersion, and this mouse action is much more mechanical than the simple console command. This sort of mechanical interaction was notably used successfully in *Heavy Rain* (developed by Quantic Dream and released in 2010). In that game, the mechanical interaction with the joysticks on the controller attempted to immerse the player in the process of play, as well as the aesthetic immersion.

As can be seen in the second image in Figure 3, object labels fade into view from a distance (as with the 'Diagram' label that is faded in the background compared to the

'Exam Paper' and 'Sugar' labels in the foreground). Again, instead of a digital 'pop-in', the fading of these labels further extends the analogue theme to the user interface . There is also no traditional inventory screen, but when Max does carry something, an image of the object (in the same hand-drawn style of the UI) is displayed in the top right-hand corner of the screen.

Narrative Interface

Apart from NPC conversations, Max's own inner thoughts create an interesting (as well as useful) audio interface with the player. Not only does it create another way for the player to gain insight into (and engage with) the character, but it is also useful for providing gameplay feedback to the player. When Max first discovers her powers, for instance, Max thinks to herself "Okay, if I'm crazy, I might as well go all the way... Can I actually reverse time?" and "What if I rewind again, and give him the right answer?," giving the new player guidance on what they can do. Max's inner thoughts are also essential in guiding the player as to what their next objectives are.

There is a wealth of information in Max's Journal too. Not only do her entries follow along with the story from Max's own perspective, but there are also Max's own write-ups on each of the major characters, a list of locations she visits (and the various articles of interest she finds there). There is even an album of optional photos that can be taken each episode, and a page of SMS texts that Max receives from various characters.

Graphic Style

The analogue design language of Life is Strange carries also to its visual style and graphics. While built in the Unreal Engine (often used for gritty military shooters), each texture is digitally painted, rather than a photo-realistic or hyper-realistic style. Because of the style, *Life is Strange* looks unique and dreamlike - there is no fine detail on small objects so everything around the characters appears to blur out, maintaining the player's attention on the characters and the story.

Overarching Narrative Arc

Within a close reading, description precedes analysis. To facilitate this analysis, the researcher needs to first articulate their full understanding of the text. Therefore, in this chapter all aspects of the narrative are described in detail. This allows insight and clarity into the context of each scene and character that will be examined in the analysis. While Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum's issue of Scope is a key concern in the description of a narrative of this size, it remains a crucial part of the close reading process. The following chapter will dive into the full story in *Life is Strange* in order to explore the finer details within the narrative structure.

Episode 1 - Chrysalis

As the first episode in any series, the main events that happen in Episode 1: Chrysalis are important in setting up the plot for the rest of the series. Most of the major characters are introduced, and their backgrounds can be explored in Max's Journal as she meets them, as well as in conversations with them, and Max's own inner thoughts about them are revealed.

The story of *Life is Strange* begins with Max Caulfield waking up from a nightmare in photography class, listening to her teacher, Mark Jefferson, give a portraiture lecture on an autumn afternoon in October 2013. The nightmare was extremely vivid, leaving her feeling uneasy. In it, wind and rain whip at her and she finds herself near the Arcadia Bay Lighthouse, and instinctively heads to it for safety. As she crests the hill, she sees an enormous tornado heading for the small town of Arcadia Bay. Little does she know that this was more of a premonition than a dream, and the image of the tornado and lighthouse will become recurring narrative and visual anchor points throughout the rest of the game.

Sitting in her seat, Max looks around the class. The player is introduced to the controls by looking at Max's instant polaroid photograph in her diary. The picture is of Max, taken from behind, standing in front of a wall of other polaroids in her dorm room. The photo is meant to be her entry into the Everyday Heroes Contest. Jefferson will be judging the contest, and the winner will be flown to San Francisco later in the week.

On Max's desk lies her instant camera. When the player interacts with it to take a selfie (a self portrait), Jefferson asks her a tough question and she is embarrassed in front of her peers. He asks her to stay after class to discuss her entry into the contest, but Max declines to hand it in. Max can also talk to her friend Kate before leaving class, as it is clear that Kate is upset about something, but Max doesn't know what it is. She suspects it is the bullying from other girls in the class, Victoria and Taylor, that is getting to her.

After class, Max walks through the school hall among her classmates, but separates herself from them by wearing her headphones. Syd Matters' 'To All of You' plays out. The player guides Max to the bathroom to avoid her having a panic attack, and along the way the player is introduced to some of the secondary characters at Blackwell Academy. Max notices a missing persons poster for a former student at Blackwell, Rachel Amber - the poster indicates that Rachel has been missing for a few months. In the bathroom,

Max sees a beautiful blue butterfly fly in through the window and takes a picture of it with her instant camera. As she does, Nathan Prescott enters the women's bathroom. Stowing the photo, she hides and overhears Nathan and a girl Max doesn't recognise argue about money and drugs, eventually escalating until Nathan brandishes a gun, which accidentally fires, shooting the girl. Max instinctively rushes out of hiding to stop Nathan, throwing her hand up as she rushes out - it is the first time that Max experiences time travel.

Max wakes up in class to discover she is sitting in the lecture she had just left, and convinces herself that it was not a dream by recalling all the classroom events that occurred previously. She realises that she can rewind time, and uses her new power to change the class discussion in hopes of leaving class earlier to stop the shooting. This is the first instance of Max's use of a Conversation Key, and Max's inner thoughts guide the player to Rewind and try the conversation again. When learning the correct answer and rewinding to have the conversation again, the player is given an additional conversational choice that is underlined, allowing the conversation to go Max's way. Once again, Jefferson wants to talk about her photo-entry to the Everyday Heroes contest, and this time the player can help Max make a better impression before heading back to the women's bathroom to await Nathan. As before, Nathan and the girl begin to argue but Max hits the fire alarm before the argument escalates, saving the girl and changing the course of time.

On the way out of the bathroom, Max is accosted by David Madsen, Blackwell Academy's over-zealous security chief, until Principal Wells steps in to talk to Max himself. The player is faced with their first Primary Decision. During a Primary Decision the in-game time freezes, Max included, while the player decides which action should be taken. By highlighting certain choices as more 'considered' than others, the player is manipulated into trying to decide the ramifications of each decision path. When Principal Wells presses Max, the player must decide if Max tells the truth (that Nathan had a gun in the bathroom), or if she should hide the truth. After selecting one of the two options, Max asks herself (and thus the player) if she is sure she made the right call, inviting the player to rewind and try a different option before leaving the building. Once the player leaves the area, they will not be able to rewind and choose another path.

Leaving the interior of Blackwell Academy the player can explore the lawns, where multiple students and other secondary characters are gathered to relax. The fountain in the middle of the lawns also give Max (and the player) a time and place to 'step back' from the story and reflect on the narrative that has just played out. There are multiple such opportunities throughout the series for Max to just sit, allowing her (and the player) to step out of the action and contemplate the events that have played out. These "Moments of Calm" are a way for the game to slow the player down, but they are not compulsory. They are also a way for the player to engage with the protagonist - Max's soliloquies during a Moment of Calm are often about the decisions she has made to get to where she is, how she feels about what she (and the player) have experienced, or reflections on recent revelations. There is no time limit to these gameplay breaks - the player decides when to stand up; the scene will continue around Max until the player does so.

On the way to the girl's dorm, Max is blocked from entering the building by Victoria, Taylor and Courtney. The three girls are part of an elite social group known as the Vortex

Club, and from their interactions it is clear that Victoria does not like Max. Max uses time manipulation in order to set up events so that paint splashes on Victoria. The player has to make another Primary Decision: decide to antagonise Victoria, or try to make amends with her. Inside the girls' dorm, Max meets some more secondary characters, namely Dana and Juliet. She must resolve a dispute between the two women before she can leave the dorm and this gives the player an opportunity to get to know these characters.

Max leaves the dorm to meet her friend Warren and on the way spies security chief David interrogating Kate, loudly and aggressively. The player is given another Primary Decision and must choose whether to stop David, or take a picture of the harassment. If the player chooses to take a picture, Kate will be upset with Max immediately afterwards, but if Max intervenes, Kate will be grateful.

Max meets Warren in the parking lot and they talk about the movies they have seen lately. He is clearly romantically interested in Max, but whether or not she returns these feelings is up to the player to decide. Such choices are considered Tertiary Choices in this analysis, as discussed on page 12, and are choices where Max's position and feelings on a topic are up to the player to decide. Whatever the choice, Max will act it out as truth. These choices add another level of depth to the interaction between Max and the player. For instance, if the player responds to Warren's question regarding the movies Max watched by having Max say that she didn't watch them, Max will make the excuse that she didn't get a chance outside of homework. However, if the player responds differently, Max will talk about her favourite scenes.

Before Max has a chance to talk to Warren about her extraordinary experience, Nathan finds and confronts her about what she saw in the bathroom. When Warren tries to stop Nathan, a fight breaks out and Chloe arrives to save the day - it is then that Max realises that the woman who Nathan shot in the bathroom was Chloe. Max escapes with her in her car. This is the first time they have spoken in five years after being best friends before Max and her family moved to Seattle. Max feels regret for never contacting Chloe while she was living in Seattle. She also discovers her camera has broken in the scuffle, so Chloe offers her step-father's tools and drives them back to her house.

In Chloe's room, Chloe smokes a joint and her and Max talk about their lives over the last five years. It is clear from Max's reaction that Chloe is a very different person than when she left for Seattle 5 years earlier. Chloe seems sad, and talks about Rachel Amber (the girl Max has seen on the missing persons poster): how they were best friends, how they were planning on running away to California together, and how Rachel disappeared without saying goodbye. She speaks about her feeling of abandonment when Max left, when her father died, and when Rachel disappeared.

While looking for the tools in the garage, Max discovers that Chloe's step-father is David Madsen, the security chief at Blackwell, and that he has installed surveillance cameras in the house. The player can also discover photos of Kate taken around campus.

Having retrieved the tools she needs, Max returns to Chloe's room and tries to fix her camera. Chloe recognises the picture of the butterfly from the bathroom and realises that Max had been then one to sound the fire alarm. David comes home and confronts Chloe about the joint, and the fact that one of his guns is missing. The player is given a Primary Decision: intervene and take the blame for the joint, or leave Chloe to face the

consequences alone with David. If Max decides to intervene and take the blame for the joint, Chloe will reveal that she did, in fact, steal one of David's guns.

Afterwards, Max and Chloe sneak out of the house and go to the Lighthouse, the same one from Max's dream. Chloe tells Max about why she confronted Nathan in the bathroom; a few weeks earlier, he had spiked her drink, and she had woken up with him taking pictures of her in his dorm room. She was able to escape and instead of reporting Nathan, she decided to blackmail him to repay her debts.

Max faints and falls into the storm nightmare again. This time though an ethereal deer guides her way to the Lighthouse. She finds a scrap of newspaper that is dated four days from now - for that Friday. She wakes from the nightmare in Chloe's arms, her nose bleeding, and tells Chloe about her Rewind power. As she does, in full view of the sunset with barely a cloud in the sky, it begins to snow over Arcadia Bay.

In the outro cutscene, Syd Matters' 'Obstacles' plays while the player is shown small snippets of some of the characters of Arcadia Bay (some we have not met as yet) witnessing the snow. The cutscene shows Kate crying in her dorm room, David installing a security camera at home, Warren studying in the lab at Blackwell, Nathan cleaning his camera on campus, Joyce cleaning a counter at the Two Whales Diner, Frank stepping out of his RV, and finally Jefferson marking papers in his classroom.

At the end of the sequence, a series of red binder folders sitting in a cabinet scan past the camera. Each of them has a woman's name handwritten on the spine. The last one just reads 'Rachel'.

Episode 2 - Out of Time

Episode 2: Out of Time starts on Tuesday morning with Max waking up in her bed. 'Something Good' by alt-J plays while Max hits the snooze button. Strewn about her room and desk are the notes she made and the books she read the night before, trying to learn about time travel, Chaos Theory, and other possibilities to try and explain what is happening to her. In the bathroom Max sees a website URL written on the mirror in lipstick. The player can actually visit this site outside of the game, which is still hosted as of March 2017 (at http://katesvid.com, the player will find a hosted video that has been "removed by the user").

Max speaks to Kate, and gets her to open up to Max about what's going on. Kate reveals that she was drugged at a Vortex Club party, and that Nathan Prescott offered to drive her to the hospital. She doesn't remember doing it, but there is a video of her kissing multiple students that is being shared around campus (which is the one presumably removed from the katesvid.com site). The player is given a Primary Decision to make: whether to advise Kate to go to the police or to wait for proof first.

Max catches the bus to meet Chloe at the Two Whales Diner for breakfast. While the bus drives through town, her theme, José Gonzalez's 'Crosses' plays over the cutscene. The various sights of Arcadia Bay roll by outside. At the Two Whales, she and Chloe's mother, Joyce, catch up until Chloe arrives. Just as they are about to leave the diner, Max gets a call on her phone from Kate. The player is given a Primary Decision: answer Kate's call, in

which case Chloe and Joyce will get into an argument, or let the call go to voicemail.

At the Junkyard, that Chloe calls "American Rust", they test Max's powers by shooting bottles. While looking for bottles to shoot, Max encounters Chloe and Rachel's 'fort' - a hollowed and abandoned brick structure with trinkets and graffiti and notes and photographs. Max can sit here and contemplate, once again giving the player a chance to take a breather and for her to reflect on events thus far. She can also encounter a ghost-like doe, like the one from her dream, standing in the Junkyard. After so much experimentation with her power, Max nearly faints again from exhaustion and sees another vision of the tornado.

Frank, Chloe's drug dealer, shows up looking for money from Chloe, and when he threatens her with a knife the player must make a Primary Decision whether to try and shoot Frank, or give up the gun. Either way, the gun is not loaded, but Frank's willingness to help Max later in the series will be greatly affected by whether she pulls the trigger or not. It will also determine if Frank takes the gun from Chloe or not. After Frank leaves, Max and Chloe walk along the train tracks to clear their heads. However, a train approaches not long after and Chloe's foot gets caught in the tracks, forcing Max to use her Rewind to find a way to free her. This is the second time Max has had to save Chloe this week.

Later that day, back at Blackwell, Max finds a crowd of people standing in front of the girls' dorm. Kate Marsh stands on the roof of the building, and as Max realises she means to commit suicide, Kate jumps. Max Rewinds, but her head spikes with pain and her nose bleeds again. She is unable to Rewind anymore, but she can hold time in place, enough for her to get to the roof before Kate jumps and convince her down. This is one of the few times that the player does not have access to Max's Rewind power, and if they cannot convince Kate to come down from the edge, Max cannot Rewind to save her. The previous choices that the player has made determines the difficulty in getting Kate to come down. If the player looked around Kate's room earlier in the episode, they may have also gathered some information that would help (these pieces of information are not highlighted though, as with most Conversation Keys). If the player selects ineffective arguments to convince Kate to come down, she will become more and more agitated and desperate until she jumps from the roof.

In the aftermath, Principal Wells sits in his office with Max, Jefferson, David, and Nathan. If Kate did commit suicide, then Officer Berry will also be present. Wells asks Max to explain how she got to the roof and offer up why she thought that Kate was desperate enough to try kill herself. The player is given a Primary Decision, and must choose between blaming Jefferson, David, or Nathan for Kate's breakdown. However, the consequence of each choice will depend on a number of factors, as demonstrated in Figure 4 in the next section.

A cutscene begins with Max and Warren sitting together on the grass outside Blackwell. They talk about all the odd things happening around the school, and Max admits she is trying to discover a way to link Rachel to Kate. They notice the sun is being eclipsed, even though there was no eclipse forecasted. Local Natives' 'Mt. Washington' begins playing, and the camera focuses on the eclipse. As with the ending of Episode 1, while the music plays, the outro cutscene shows snippets of various characters around Arcadia Bay. It shows David and Joyce embracing, Jefferson in his car arguing with

Wells, and Victoria crying in her room as Nathan walks in, smiling. If Kate didn't go through with her suicide attempt, she will be shown in a hospital bed. Frank is shown next, sitting next to the beach with his dog Pompidou. Finally, the scene cuts to Chloe, sitting at the Lighthouse.

At the end of the sequence, a fade cut shows a hidden figure working on another Red Folder; this time though, the pictures are of Kate, bound and gagged.

Episode 3 - Chaos Theory

After the high drama of the second episode, Episode 3: Chaos Theory starts in a relatively calm manner. Late on Tuesday night, Max sneaks out of her dorm to meet Chloe, who has David's spare set of keys to Blackwell that she has stolen. They plan to break into Principle Wells' office in order to look for any incriminating evidence against Nathan Prescott that Wells may be trying to cover up. They believe there may be a conspiracy as Sean Prescott, Nathan's father, is a large donor to the school, and are a powerful family in Arcadia Bay. Just before going inside, they spy Jefferson and Victoria talking as they leave the main hall. Victoria appears to flirt with Jefferson, who rejects her advances with annoyance.

Chloe and Max search Well's office in hopes of finding some clues to the Rachel Amber mystery. They don't find anything conclusive, but they do grab some student files, and find a large envelope of money in Wells' drawer - enough to cover all of Chloe's debts with Frank. Chloe wants to take it, and the player is given a Primary Decision to decide whether they keep it or not. They also print some documents they find on Principal Wells' computer - in particular one disturbing image in Nathan's file, with the words 'RACHEL IN THE DARK ROOM' scrawled again and again, filling the page. There is also a reference to David helping Nathan in a buried report, so Chloe and Max decide they should try get into David's files next.

Their night time caper completed, Chloe dares Max to go swimming with her in the school gymnasium. Just as they get out and get dressed again, security arrives on the scene, looking for the intruders. Scared of getting caught heading back to her dorm, Max spends the night at Chloe's. In the morning, Max borrows some of Rachel's clothes and when Chloe sees her dressed like Rachel, she dares Max to kiss her. Whether or not to kiss Chloe is a Primary Decision for the player, and will impact the relationship between Chloe and Max, as well as between Warren and Max.

Max leaves Chloe to smoke a joint and heads downstairs for breakfast. She finds Joyce in the kitchen, and the two of them talk about Chloe, William (Chloe's late father), and about Rachel. Joyce gives Max a photo of her and Chloe when they were both thirteen years old. "This was the last photo William ever took," Joyce tells Max. Chloe comes down for breakfast and creates a diversion so that Max can get into David's files. She not only discovers more pictures of Kate, but also of herself, of Nathan, and even of Jefferson. David comes home and picks a fight with Max and Chloe defends her, but seems to go too far. Max can choose to side with Chloe, or defend David, being a Secondary Decision for the player. If the player sides with Chloe, Joyce will kick David out of the house, otherwise Chloe will feel betrayed.

Chloe and Max head to Two Whales diner, looking to find information from Frank. Max

uses her time reversal to steal Frank's keys. Distracting Pompidou with a bone, she and Chloe then search Frank's RV for more clues about Rachel. Max finds an account book with photos of Frank and Rachel, as well as love letters. Chloe is upset by this as she did not know about their relationship, and, feeling like Rachel betrayed her too, she storms out of the RV. If Frank had taken David's gun from Max in the last episode, it is possible for the player to find the gun and retrieve it from Frank's RV.

Taking Max back to school, Chloe is melancholy and she and Max argue. Chloe reveals how she is still angry at her father for dying, and that she sees his death as the root of all the problems in her life. Back in her dorm, Max contemplates William's photo that Joyce gave her of herself and Chloe, back when their lives had been less complicated. Suddenly, the photo flashes, and Max can hear the voices of herself and Chloe from the time that the photo was taken. Staring at it, she Focuses on the photo, and falls into the past.

Max awakens as her thirteen year old self, standing with William and Chloe in the kitchen of the Price's, making pancakes. The world around her seems to end just outside of the Price's kitchen and living room. Max realises that this is day that William is killed in a car crash, and that she might be able to save him. She hides his car keys so that he can't drive to fetch Joyce from the shop, avoiding the car crash that would take his life.

The Focus dissolves, and an extended outro cutscene begins with a series of photographs showing events in Chloe's life over-exposing, only to be replaced with new pictures showing a new life where William is alive. Max wakes up on the lawns of Blackwell - inexplicably, she is sitting with the Vortex Club, who are treating her like a close friend. Victoria seems concerned if Max is ok, calling her Maxine. Max realises that she has created an alternate timeline, and senses something has gone horribly wrong. Desperate to find Chloe, Max jumps on a bus (that is driven by David) and heads to the Price's home. 'Mountains' by Message To Bears begins to play as she watches Arcadia Bay slip past. Along the way, she sees that whales have beached themselves all along the coast of Arcadia Bay. Freaking out, she gets off the bus and runs to Chloe's as the music crescendos. When she gets there, William, now alive, opens the door for her, and calls Chloe. When Chloe comes to the door, however, she is in a wheelchair; she is quadriplegic.

Episode 4 - The Dark Room

Despite the ending, as a whole Episode 3 was a more light-hearted adventure with Max and Chloe solidifying their relationship (both as a friendly or as a romantic one, depending on the player's choices), but Episode 4: The Dark Room, as the name implies, is a much more sombre affair. The opening credits are more restrained and the episode's beginning is more about reflection than mystery and adventure - Max walks by the beach, and Chloe follows slowly in her chair. In this alternate timeline, the women have not yet reunited, and the silence between them is clearly uncomfortable. They talk about not seeing each other, and Max tries to appeal to the Chloe she knew in the Prime timeline, but it's obvious that this isn't the same woman. Chloe looks at the beach and remarks, "These beached whales are so sad. I kinda know how they feel." It seems that this timeline is not immune to weird occurrences either.

Rachel Amber is still missing, but her and Chloe have never met in this timeline. Chloe only remarks that she had seen the headlines, but didn't know anything else. Back at the Price's, Max and Chloe watch Bladerunner together, and talk about William and Joyce, and how hard it is for them to look after Chloe. When Chloe asks Max to fetch her Morphine from upstairs, Max explores the house and talks with William and Joyce. The player can discover clues as to how this timeline has played out for the Prices, including a number of overdue bills, and a letter from Chloe's doctor that her condition is deteriorating.

When Max returns, she and Chloe go through old photographs, and Chloe explains that her respiratory system is failing, and she won't get better. She asks Max to help her one last time and end her suffering with good memories. The player is given a Primary Decision to make: she must choose to overdose Chloe and let her friend die, or refuse to assist in her suicide. If the player chooses not to assist her suicide, Max's reasons for refusing will depend on whether she was able to save Kate in Episode 2. Using the same photo to Focus back to 2008 again, Max lets William leave for the last time. She burns the photo of herself and Chloe so that she can never be tempted to come back to this place ever again. As she does, the Focus world burns up around her; Max has learned a very hard lesson about the dangers of interfering with the timeline.

Returning to the Prime timeline on Friday morning, Max is relieved to find Chloe is back to her old self, though the time she had spent in the alternate timeline seems to have passed by in the Prime timeline too. They have compiled some of their evidence in Chloe's room, and are looking for more clues. In David's garage, Max finds additional information that will help their case, and she and Chloe decide to break into Nathan's dorm room to look for evidence.

If Kate was saved in Episode 2, Max will want to visit Kate in the hospital before heading to Blackwell. If Kate was not saved, Max and Chloe head straight to Blackwell to look for clues in Nathan's dorm room. In Nathan's room, Max finds his burner phone he uses to sell drugs to various Blackwell students. On the way out of the boys' dorm, Nathan discovers and threatens them, but Warren appears and fights Nathan. A Primary Decision is given to the player: either to pull Warren off of Nathan before he goes too far, or to let Warren beat Nathan further. If the women stay out of the fight, Chloe will be able to pick up Nathan's gun, otherwise Nathan will collect it as Max pulls Warren off of Nathan.

Realising there is a missing piece of the puzzle, Max and Chloe seek Frank out to help them out with their investigation. The interactions between the player and Frank in previous episodes will have a large impact on this conversation, and Max has to be very careful not to make Frank too angry - if Chloe has either David or Nathan's gun, it will be possible for her to kill or wound Frank in order to get his account book. However, it is possible for Max to rewind this conversation, enabling the player to attempt to navigate their way to a resolution where no one is hurt.

Using all the pieces of information from David's surveillance files, Nathan's phone records, and Frank's account book, Max and Chloe put the pieces together to find out what happened the night Kate went to the Vortex Club party. The player must add clues together to determine when Nathan bought GHB from Frank on the night of the Vortex Club party, and where he took Kate when he offered to drive her to the hospital.

Following the trail, Max and Chloe discover The Dark Room in an old Prescott family barn. Inside, there is a multitude of photographic lights, expensive photo printers and other equipment, as well as the Red Folders seen in the final cutscenes from Episodes 1 and 2. Chloe and Max find photos of Rachel and Kate in which they are lying in the Dark Room. However, the last picture of Rachel is her lying on the ground in the Junkyard with her eyes closed. The women rush there as fast as they can and find the grave of Rachel Amber, and Chloe breaks down sobbing.

Seeking revenge, Max and Chloe head to the Vortex Club's End of the World party (which has been advertised prominently in the gameworld since Episode 1) where they know they can find Nathan. Chloe isn't interested in going to the police - in her rage she wants to kill Nathan herself. When they arrive at Blackwell, there are two moons visible against the night sky, but Chloe barely notices. Just outside the party, they meet Warren who is drunk, but glad to see Max, and takes a selfie with her. Max and Chloe head inside and look for Nathan, but no one has seen him.

After gaining entry to the VIP area, Max speaks to Victoria, and the player is given a Primary Decision where they must decide to warn Victoria about Nathan or not. Depending on their relationship, Victoria may not listen to Max's warning, or she may take it seriously. Though they do not find him, Chloe gets a text from Nathan telling her they won't find Rachel's body again. Scared that Nathan will destroy the evidence, they rush back to the Junkyard to stop him, but when they get there, they find Rachel is still buried and her body has not yet been touched.

Out of nowhere, Max is injected with something in the back of the neck. If the player tries to Rewind, the screen will flash red, but the drugs stop Max from Rewinding. This is the second time that Max's Rewind power is disabled for dramatic effect. As the action unfolds in slow motion, Chloe is shot in the head before she can bring her own gun to bare. She falls to the floor, dead beside Rachel. As Max lies on the ground, struggling for consciousness, trying to shout for Chloe, Jefferson walks into her phone's torchlight, and glowers down at her. Instead of the usual extended outro cutscene as in the first three episodes, there is only a small scene showing Jefferson pulling some sort of drug into a syringe, punctuated by a shot of the tornado right at the end.

Episode 5 - Polarized

The final chapter of Max's story begins with Max gaining consciousness in Jefferson's (and not Nathan's) Dark Room bound to a chair. Her wrists and ankles are secured with duct tape. If the player warned Victoria (and she believed Max's warning), Max sees Victoria is bound and gagged and unconscious on the floor next to her. In a twist of fate, in trying to stay safe from Nathan, Victoria will instead approach Jefferson, who will be able to capture her easily.

Max uses various photographs of herself in the Dark Room as Focuses to navigate to a state where she is not bound and is more coherent and conscious. She and Jefferson talk about his 'art'. He is clearly unstable and sociopathic, and monologues about his desire to capture the moment that innocence is lost. He also talks about his pseudo-patriarchal relationship with Nathan Prescott. Jefferson explains how it was in fact Nathan who killed Rachel Amber with an accidental overdose while trying to copy

Jefferson's method. Max spies her journal, and in hopes of finding another Focus, tricks him into showing it to her.

Using her Journal, Max Focuses back to the first class in which the player started the game, creating a Focus-space within another Focus-space. Sitting in Jefferson's lecture again, Max texts David to tip him off about Jefferson and defiantly hands in her photo to Jefferson for the Everyday Heroes contest. The deeper of the two Focuses collapses, but when she returns to the original Focus, she is no longer in The Dark Room, but instead finds herself on a plane to San Francisco, having created a new timeline in which she has won the Everyday Heroes contest.

When the last Focus-space on the plane itself collapses, Max is with Principal Wells at the Zeitgeist Gallery in San Francisco, in the present - it is Friday, around midday. In the gallery, various photographs are on display, including hers. Once she sees her picture though, a vision of the Tornado hits her again. Checking her phone, she realises that Chloe, who is still alive in the new timeline, has been trying to call her - the Tornado is still coming for Arcadia Bay, and Chloe is in danger. Max gives up her dream for Chloe, and Focuses through her photo that hangs on the gallery wall.

Max appears in her dorm room on the day she took her portrait picture. The Focus-space is unstable, and she only has time to make one small change, so she tears up her photo, ensuring she never travels to San Francisco. The timeline changes once again - Max never hands in her photograph, and so she will be with Chloe when the storm hits.

Max returns to the present to find herself, to her horror, in The Dark Room again. Only this time, Jefferson has burned her Journal, leaving no photo to Focus with. David arrives just as Jefferson is about to inject her with a fatal dose of medication, and, with her help, restrains Jefferson.

Max knows she can use the picture of herself and Warren at the End of the World party to warn Chloe that Jefferson is the real threat. Max takes Jefferson's car and drives into town in the middle of the storm. Warren has taken refuge in the Two Whales Diner with Joyce, but between them and Max is a street littered with destruction and debris. She navigates the street, trying to avoid derailed trains, smashed buildings, and cars strewn across the road. Along the way there are citizens of Arcadia Bay that the player can save from the storm. Eventually Max makes it to the diner and finds Joyce, Warren, and Frank (if he is still alive). Max explains her power to Warren, and uses the photo to Focus back to the End of the World party to warn Chloe. Before she leaves, the player must choose how she parts with Warren. A kiss, a hug, or just a goodbye are the options for this Primary Decision.

In the photo-time space, Max warns Chloe that Jefferson is the real threat, and that they should seek David out for help in taking him down. She explains to Chloe how she has travelled back to be able to warn her. Max can also choose to tell Chloe about how she went back originally and saved William, but the price was Chloe's life. The women embrace just as the Focus-space collapses. Max emerges into the present standing on the beach with Chloe, the giant tornado before them. As they start to head up the trail to reach the lighthouse, however, Max falls unconscious.

Max wakes up in class at the beginning of the loop again. All the same scenarios play themselves out: Taylor throws a paper ball at Kate, Stella drops her pencil, and Victoria's phone rings. Suddenly though, dead birds throw themselves against the windows in a series of loud bangs. No one in class reacts, and Max realises she has entered a nightmare, not gone back in time again.

The nightmare scenes that follow take Max on a journey through numerous loops and callbacks to scenes and puzzles from earlier in the series. She walks down the school hall as in the beginning of Episode 1, but all the other characters move and speak in reverse. Subsequent nightmare scenes interrogate Max's inner conflicts and fears. In one scene, Max takes the form of Kate, Victoria, and Rachel as the player must navigate a labyrinth of looping doorways in the girls' dorm. In another, the player must evade malevolent versions of many of the male characters in the story who are hunting her through a fragmented representation of Blackwell halls.

The lighthouse is prominent throughout the nightmare, Max's inner thoughts conveying that if she can make it to the lighthouse, she will be safe. The next scene forces Max to relive her travelling back in time to save William, this time trapped within a snowglobe on the mantelpiece of the Price residence. Towards the end of the nightmare, Max enters the Two Whales Diner, filled with characters from Arcadia Bay, frozen in place, who cajol Max, plead for her to save them, or snub her for not caring. The only person who is animated within the diner is another version of Max, seemingly a representation of her unconscious mind. Max speaks with her unconscious mind, directly, who accuses her of abusing her power, and only doing good deeds to make more friends. Some Tertiary Decisions are presented that allow the player to reflect on how they believe Max (and they) have acted over the series. Chloe suddenly bursts into the booth and calls unconscious Max out on her mind-games. Unconscious Max then freezes, looking at her camera.

The scene refocuses, and Max is standing on a pathway within nothingness - all around her is blackness, save for a path laid out before her. On the path, there is a set-piece 'sculpture' of her and Chloe in Chloe's car, just after Warren and Nathan's first fight in Episode 1. As the player walks Max along the path, she encounters other sculptures, other moment's in time, that tell the story of her and Chloe through their adventures. Once again the lighthouse is a beacon in the distance.

Each sculpture shows a moment where she and Chloe have either bonded or been brought together by adversity. At the end of the path is the last set-piece - she and Chloe, moving up the hill towards the lighthouse. As Max moves closer, Chloe's voice can be heard above the rising cacophony of wind and rain. As she reaches it, she wakes up and leaves the nightmare behind.

Max wakes up properly next to the Lighthouse with Chloe. The women stand on the precipice and watch the Tornado eat at Arcadia Bay. Chloe tells Max that she knows that Max saving her was what caused the storm - pleading with Max to look at the events of the last week, how Chloe had died (or nearly died) so often, that she is sure that it is her fate. She tells Max the only way to stop the storm and save Arcadia Bay is for Max to travel back in time and let Chloe die. Chloe hands her the photo of the butterfly she took in the bathroom at the very beginning of the loop. Max (and the player) must make the final Primary Decision: Does she save Chloe and sacrifice all of Arcadia Bay? Or does she

Focus on the Butterfly photo, travel back, and undo all the changes she has made to save the town, but let Chloe die by Nathan's hand?

Depending on the player's choice, one of two final cutscenes will play out:

Max Sacrifices Chloe for Arcadia Bay

Max and Chloe say their final goodbyes. Depending on their relationship, Max and Chloe will either embrace in a long hug, or will kiss deeply. "Maxine Caulfield. Don't you forget me," Chloe begs. Max Focuses back to the bathroom on Monday afternoon. Foals' 'Spanish Sahara' begins to play. This time she does not intervene, and Nathan shoots Chloe. She dies on the bathroom floor, having never known that Max was even back in Arcadia Bay, still believing that she had been abandoned by both Max and Rachel.

The Focus-space disintigrates, and the sequence of memories being burned up shows Nathan and Jefferson being arrested, Max visiting with Joyce and David, Joyce giving Max all William's old photographs and his camera. All the experiences that Max and Chloe went through burn up, and Max is seen mourning Chloe in various situations. Max returns to the Present standing by the Lighthouse - only this time there is no trace of a storm. The sun shines brightly and the sea gulls swing lazily through the clear air.

At Chloe's funeral, several Blackwell students pay their respects, even Frank. As the cutscene continues and the music crescendos, the Doe (who Max believes to be Rachel) can be seen watching proceedings, and the Butterfly lands on Chloe's casket; Max knows she has done the right thing.

Max Sacrifices Arcadia Bay for Chloe

Max tears up the photograph of the butterfly. They hold each other as the storm destroys the town while Syd Matters' 'Obstacles' begins to play - the Tornado engulfs Arcadia Bay completely.

The next morning, Max and Chloe drive through the ruined streets of Arcadia Bay. There is not another soul in sight. Max looks sadly at her town that is no more, and seems to look as though she worries if she made the wrong choice. Chloe takes her hand, they smile sadly at each other, and drive out of Arcadia Bay for the last time.

Narrative Analysis

The following section evaluates the narrative structural design, the frameworks within which it can be analysed, and how this structure manifests into a coherent story for the player.

Spinning the Web

Rather than a set of tangential narrative paths heading in multiple directions, the overall story remains largely focused around the same key plot points with only some variations - more like a web with support strands than a set of branches. While certainly not the first game to do this, what Life is Strange manages to successfully accomplish with this structure is to utilise dialogue variations and opaque choice consequences to create the illusion of branching narrative paths while maintaining a high degree of authorial control over the narrative as a whole.

Life is Strange is particularly good at this as the initial ramifications of some player choices are not always as they seem. One choice may seem good initially, but later turns out to be the 'wrong' choice. For example, in Episode 4, if Max decides to warn Victoria about Nathan, this action eventually leads to the death of Victoria, who ends up turning to Jefferson for help. This allows him to capture Victoria easily, and in Episode 5 when Max realises that Victoria is lying on the floor next to her, she understands what her actions have caused.

In order to demonstrate the implementation of the narrative web, Figure 4 shows another example from 'Episode 2: Out of Time' to demonstrate how multiple choices can lead to different outcomes, while keeping the major plot touchpoints coherent. The example looks specifically at the final Primary Decision at the end of the episode, after Kate's suicide attempt, when Principal Wells asks Max for her explanation for Kate's state of mind.

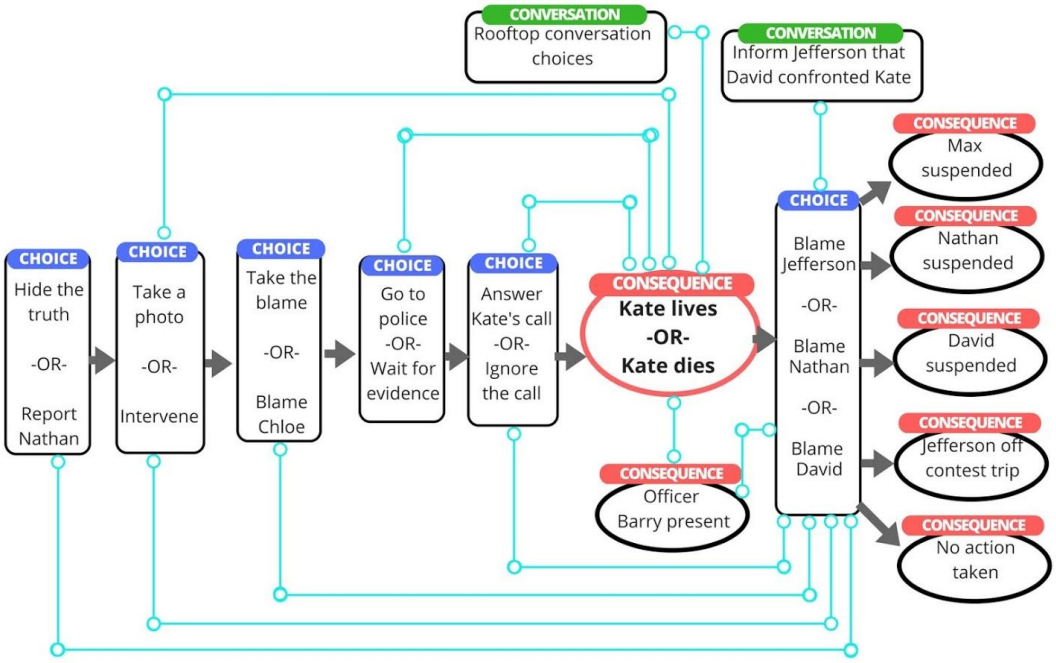

Figure 4 - Narrative Impact - Cause and Effect

The Primary Decisions that have been presented to the player in the game so far are shown in blue (the non-relevant choices are removed for the sake of clarity), with the possible consequences in red. Each of the highlighted choices draws a line of Cause and Effect to a consequence or as an input to another choice. The Figure shows that, for the given choices, there are five possible outcomes at the end of Episode 2. Either Max will be suspended, Nathan will be suspended, David will be placed on temporary leave, Jefferson will no longer travel to San Francisco, or no punitive action will be taken and no one will be suspended.

As can be seen, the major influences in Kate's suicide attempt are the following choices: intervening when David harrasses Kate, telling Kate to go to the police, and answering her phone call at the Two Whales diner. On top of that, the conversation choices that the player makes when trying to talk Kate down from the edge are vitally important, but the number of available choices is affected by the choices made previously. For example, if Max did not answer Kate's call, Kate will refute Max's claim that she cares about Kate. There are four possible responses to this claim, but only if the player directs Max to tell Kate that her phone was on silent will Kate move away from the edge. Otherwise she will move closer to the edge, or jump if she was already at the edge. If Max did answer Kate's call, then Kate will accept Max's statement that she does, in fact, care.

In Principle Wells' office afterwards, whether Kate lives or dies will determine if Officer Berry will be present, and Principal Wells' dialogue is much more sombre and regretful if she dies. If Kate lives, he will praise Max's bravery. However, regardless of whether Kate survives or not, Wells will still call on Max to give her insight into the matter. The Primary Decision to blame Jefferson, David, or Nathan for Kate's desperate actions is the catalyst that brings together the 'inputs' from each of the previous Primary Decisions. The table in Figure 5 shows how the combination of all the choices will affect the outcome.

Choices	Max Suspended		Nathan Suspended	David Suspended	Jefferson Off the Contest	No One Suspended	
Reported Nathan			X				
Hid the truth	X						X
Took Photo				X			
Intervened		X					
Blamed Chloe						X	X
Took the Blame	X	X					
Blame Jefferson					X		
Blame Nathan	X		X				X
Blame David		X		X		X	

Figure 5 - Narrative Impact - Consequences

From the above table, the consequence of each of the salient choices can be seen as well as how each informs the outcome of the decision of who to blame. For example, if the player chooses to blame David for Kate's depression, but they did not take a picture

of David when he was accosting her in Episode 1, David will refute the claim. Without any evidence, David will not be suspended. However, if the Player didn't take the picture and they chose for Max to take the blame for Chloe's marijuana, then David will not only refute the accusation, but will turn it against Max, who will be suspended by Principal Wells. Each choice and consequence is supported by character dialogue in a believable manner which adds to the realism of the both the characters and the world.

As has been demonstrated, this 'webbed' structure for interactive narrative grants the developer the agility to create a narrative that appears to be significantly branched to the player, while in fact they are still being led to each of the major plot points regardless.

Narrative Elements

At the 2006 Canadian Games Study Association Symposium, Jim Bizzocchi presented a new analytic framework for the discussion of narrative within digital games. He aimed to provide a framework that might help ease the minds of ludologists and narratologists who had, until recently, been engaged in an academic debate about how best to frame the study of video games. In simple terms, ludologists argued that games are strictly about the process of play and the rules that govern that play, while narratologists posited that all games can have a story, even if one is not readily accessible. Bizzocchi recognised that both camps found problems with applying the concept of the traditional narrative arc to games. Narrative theorists struggled to parse narrative arcs when the medium, by its nature, has a limited amount of authorial control, while ludologic critics were uncomfortable with the imposition of traditional media ideas onto the new video game media. Instead, he described a method for how narrative elements might be broken down and analysed. His analytical framework avoided the structural progression of the narrative arc (Setup→ Challenge → Development → Climax → Resolution) for a more fluid, elemental framework. Rather than be bound to a predetermined sequence for narratives, especially within a medium that allowed authors and audience to be less constrained, Bizzocchi aimed to identify the core elements that built up the narrative space within a game. Figure 6 examines these narrative elements:

Narrative Element	Description
Storyworld	The environment in which the game takes place. These worlds can be Abstract, Iconic, Incoherent, or Coherent.
Characters	The beings that inhabit and populate the gameworld, including player characters and NPCs.
Emotions	Three major emotional sources are identified: - The emotions of the characters within the story - The emotions experienced by the player as a result of the process of play - The emotional reaction to an aesthetic spectacle
Narrative Interface	Narrative Interface refers to the manipulation of the interaction between player and game that, either actively or passively, conveys additional narrative detail. Additionally, how the controls and interface are designed can add further narrative detail to a story.
Micro-Narrative	A section of gameplay that follows the traditional narrative arc structure that effect a series of narrative outcomes, based on the player's success or failure with a task. This section can be small, or encompass a much broader arc across multiple gameplay sections.

Figure 6: Narrative Elements within Bizzocchi's Game Narrative Analysis Framework

Bizzocchi's Framework is useful in that it allows us to break down a complex and interactive narrative such as *Life is Strange* without attempting to deconstruct each scene and scenario into a series of traditional Narrative Arcs. Instead, we are able to examine each element individually, and then as a whole, analyse how cohesively these elements work together to weave an interesting and engaging narrative.

Storyworld

The world in which Max lives would be described in terms of Bizzocchi's framework as Coherent: it appears to be a real place on Earth, and its citizens seem to carry on their lives without input from the player.

Arcadia Bay is a small fishing town, and, despite being located along the coast of Oregon instead of among the inland mountains of Washington, is an homage to the town of Twin Peaks, featured in the 90's television show of the same name. While steeped in many pop-culture references, *Life is Strange*'s biggest source of inspiration lies in Twin Peaks (1990 - 1991) . The creators were intrigued by the idea of a secluded small town with dark secrets - this allows a narrative blanket to be pulled around the location of the story, instilling a sense that Arcadia Bay is almost a closed-off world of its own. The Pacific Northwest also creates a sense of nostalgia on which Dontnod attempts to capitalise (Reddit, 2015).

Besides fishing, and the famous Arcadia Bay Lighthouse, Arcadia Bay is best known for the prestigious Blackwell Academy, a private art college overlooking the town. Recently, Arcadia Bay has experienced some economic downturn, with the fishing industry being hardest hit. The wealthy Prescott family owns most of the town's beach property, as well various industrial businesses in the area, and are blamed by many common folk as the cause of Arcadia Bay's woes. Their dealings with local authorities seem to indicate some sort of bribery and corruption, and their errant son, Nathan, walks around Blackwell Academy like he owns it - in fact, his family is the largest donor the school has.

Major Characters

This setup allows several television tropes available to Dontnod, who are able to create narrative stereotypes against such backdrops and subvert them. Episode 1 is filled with stereotypical characters, and the player's early interactions with them seems to solidify these tropes. Within the first 30 minutes of the game the player encounters The Teen Queen (Victoria) and her entourage (Taylor and Courtney), The Rich Kid Jock (Nathan), The Nerd Who Likes The Girl (Warren), The Outsider (Alyssa), The Virgin (Kate) and, of course, The Rebel (Chloe). However, as the player navigates her way through the game, the façade is peeled away from each of these characters to reveal substantial depth under the surface.

Maxine Caulfield

Max Caulfield ("Max, never Maxine.") is a typical shy teenager. As the protagonist of the story, Max's story is bound to the player's experience through the narrative. The 'Catcher in the Rye' reference of her surname lends an air of individualism to her character. This is confirmed when we look at Max's personality. While Max is not as standoffish or resentful of society, she does like to march to her own tune, and is often called a 'hipster'

by those at Blackwell who do not like her. As is typical in a coming-of-age story, Max is also caught between adolescence and adulthood, having left home for the first time to return to Arcadia Bay in order to pursue her passion for photography.

Her intrinsic innocence is obvious, in that when Max discovers her ability to Rewind time, her immediate instinct is to save "the poor girl in the bathroom". She also never uses her powers for personal gain, and it is this innocence that Mark Jefferson attempts to exploit. However, there is a deep courage to Max's character, despite her seemingly shy exterior, as is seen when Jefferson kills Chloe and Max fights to save her.

Over the course of five episodes, Max comes to terms with who she is. In the first episode she tears up her Everyday Heroes contest entry, thinking it is not good enough. By the end of the game though, she is fully aware of the power she holds and is brave enough to face the consequences of her actions.

Chloe Price

Max and Chloe were best friends until five years before the start of the game. In that same year, Chloe's father, William, is killed in a car accident, and Max and her family move from Arcadia Bay to Seattle. Max never manages to make contact with Chloe, and in the intervening time Chloe has become a rebellious malcontent, partaking in drugs, cutting and dyeing her hair a bright shade of blue and acting out against her mother, Joyce, and her step-father, David. In a foil to Max's character, Chloe is 'hardcore' on the outside, but is actually insecure and lonely - a side of herself only Rachel and Max are privileged to see.

In Episode 3 we begin to see the cracks in Chloe's suit of emotional armour when she and Max discover Rachel's letter to Frank in his RV. Since William's death, Chloe has felt abandoned and betrayed by those closest to her. In a moment of emotional honesty, she confesses that she still blames William for leaving her, though she seems to recognise that this is not a logical reaction - it is the emotion from childhood that she has clearly never dealt with. Coupled with Max's leaving Arcadia Bay at the same time, and failing to keep in contact while in Seattle, Chloe has clearly developed a pathological fear of abandonment. It is only when Chloe meets Rachel that she begins to feel that she is perhaps not alone in the world. It is therefore natural that Rachel's disappearance would trigger Chloe's feelings of abandonment all over again, spurring her (as is her fashion) to not deal with the abandonment, but instead search for some nefarious reason for it. Unfortunately, Chloe was correct in the end.

Through the course of the game, Chloe is constantly ending up in situations where she nearly dies, or is in fact killed. She points this out to Max in the final scene, as she believes her fate was to die at Nathan's hand. Her acceptance of her fate points to her finally 'growing up' and taking responsibility for her actions; even her surname 'Price' hints at the cost of Max and the player's choice. It could be said that the coming-of-age story in *Life is Strange* might be seen as applying more to Chloe than it does to Max.

Mark Jefferson

Jefferson serves as the story's hidden antagonist, only revealed as such at the end of Episode 4. He is well-dressed, well-spoken, attractive and in good health for his age. He is also generally liked by many of his students, Max included.

After attracting some fame in art photography circles in New York, Jefferson took the position at Blackwell in order to pursue his dark artistic pursuits in a more secluded locale, but he is also a major draw of talented students to Blackwell. This can be seen by the kid-gloves that Principal Wells uses if Max accuses Jefferson of driving Kate to suicide.

While it was not Jefferson who killed Rachel Amber, he was indirectly responsible, after taking Nathan Prescott on as his protégé, who accidentally kills Rachel by overdose. Jefferson was, however, directly responsible for Nathan's (and possibly Victoria's) death. He also shot Chloe, having lured her and Max out to the Junkyard pretending to be Nathan.

The core seduction of Jefferson's work (capturing the moment of innocence lost) is that it is based in artistic purity, and not outright malevolence. While Jefferson argues that he does not kill his victims, and thus his work is justified, this rings hollow once his methods of pursuing his 'art' are evaluated.

Nathan Prescott

The son of powerful businessman Sean Prescott, Nathan is a troubled teen at Blackwell Academy. He falls within the 'jock' spectrum of the social scene, and is a part of the Vortex Club, an elite social club run by select Blackwell students. Nathan is first introduced to the player when he storms into the girl's bathroom and proceeds to accidentally shoot Chloe before Max Rewinds. Nathan appears to be the primary antagonist throughout the first 4 episodes until he is killed by Jefferson in order to cover his own tracks.

Nathan clearly suffers from some mental health problems and it seems as if his medication, if he is even taking them, is not really helping him. Jefferson abuses this and Nathan's strained relationship with his father to take on a pseudo-patriarchal role for Nathan, which he exploits. Using Nathan's wealth, Jefferson is able to build the Dark Room, and uses Nathan to procure the drugs he uses for his 'art',.

For his part, Nathan struggles to live up to the expectations his father has for him. In letters and other correspondence found by the player, Sean Prescott is cold and unsupportive of his son. This has clearly had an effect on Nathan; coupled with his psychological problems, this has seemingly led to a dark and twisted psyche. This is revealed especially when Max breaks into his dorm room. While his photographic eye is keen and technically sound, his style is haunting and malevolent. This helps to ground Nathan as the central antagonist for most of the game, yet he is not a single-dimensional character. In Episode 5, after his death, Max listens, too late, to a voicemail left by Nathan, warning her about Jefferson. Using that message, Dontnod shows a different side of Nathan to the player, revealing him to be trapped in his own way, regretful and sorry for the pain he has caused.

David Madsen

David is a veteran who now works as Head of Security for Blackwell academy. The player is first introduced to him when he questions Max about triggering the fire alarm. He is Chloe's step-father, having married Joyce a few years after William's death, but

their relationship is strained. The reason for this is two-fold: Chloe's constant rebellion creates tension in the household, but David also seems to have difficulty in readjusting to civilian life after his military service.

David also begins as an antagonist to Max and Chloe, but the further along the series goes, the more David's true colours are revealed. He loves Joyce deeply, and would do anything to protect Chloe (including cold-blooded murder if Max tells him that Jefferson killed her in Episode 5). When Max Focuses out of the Dark Room, David is the first person she contacts in order to discover Jefferson's true identity, and he is the one who eventually saves Max from Jefferson.

David's character is most interesting in that, while he hides surveillance equipment in his own house and stalks Blackwell students around Arcadia Bay, he never actually lies to anyone, yet he is almost never believed due to his paranoid personality. He is often placed in the way of Max and Chloe yet is always trying to help and do what is right (in his own way). He is the false-antagonist of the story.

Narrative Interface

The narrative interface is the method and aether through which narrative elements are passed between the player and the game. In *Life is Strange*, standard mouse and keyboard or game controllers can be used to interact with the game, but the story itself is told primarily through Max's conversations with NPCs, her inner thoughts spoken aloud to the player, and various cutscenes. In particular, Max's inner thoughts solidify her as a character in her own right, standing apart from the player. Unlike a Silent Protagonist such as Gordon Freeman (Half-Life, 1998), Max has her own thoughts, opinions, and insights. Furthermore, whenever Max's journal is updated with additional information, an image of a notebook being written is displayed in the bottom left corner. This can be seen in the annotated screenshot in Figure 3.

Yet Dontnod have allowed the player a way to influence the character (in more than just her movement and actions) by way of Tertiary Decisions, outlined above on page 12. These allow the player to interact with the narrative internal to Max's character.

Dontnod also use an interesting feedback mechanic to inform the player when they have made a decision or created a change in the gameworld that will have an impact on the story outcomes. Whenever such an event occurs, an audio cue plays, and a butterfly appears in the top left corner of the screen with the words "This will have consequences" next to it. This is an obvious metaphor for the 'butterfly effect', the idea that small changes can lead to large effects over time. While the cue will play after many different events (some so small that the seem inconsequential, such as the watering of a plant in Max's room), importantly is does not give any hint as to *what* the consequence might be, only that there will be one. Similarly, there is no differentiation between large consequences or small ones.

One feature that Dontnod borrows from the popular Telltale Studios' own games is the summary of player choices at the end of each episode. The summary displays all Primary choices, as well as some Secondary choices, which the player may not have even been aware they were making. The player's own choices are highlighted with the

percentage of players that made similar choices, both globally as well as compared to their friends (on the applicable platform).

Environmental Storytelling

In 2002, in the midst of the narratology / ludology debate, Henry Jenkins published "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", and attempted to bring a more centrist voice to a divided choir. He proposed an environmental perspective on narrative, and highlighted four ways that it might be analysed within a given context, not only within games. 'Environmental Storytelling', as he describes it, analyses the narrative 'space' that is created in the telling of a story; the dungeon your character finds himself in, the travelling of your token around a physical (or virtual) board game, even the design and imagery on the walls around you in a themed roller-coaster ride in an amusement park.

Jenkins breaks up his storytelling environments thus: Evocative Spaces that evoke memories or emotions related to another, known, narrative or genre archetype. Enacted Spaces are where the story elements are shown to or played out by the player, while Embedded narrative elements are hidden from the player, but discoverable. Finally, Emergent stories are born out of gameplay systems and players' experimentation with mechanics to tell stories that were not envisioned or planned for by the creators. Figure 7 locates these spaces:

Narrative	Active	Passive
Obvious	Enacted	Evocative
Opaque	Emergent	Embedded

Figure 7: Jenkins Narrative Environments

Life is Strange contains examples of Enacted, Evocative, and Embedded stories. The plot of the 'Prime' timeline plays out in an interrupted linear fashion, but neither Max nor the player actually experience this timeline in the same fashion as the rest of the characters in the story. Yet both experiences of the timeline fall within the Enacted storytelling space, even though the actual plot runs in a straight line from Max discovering her powers right until the conclusion of the story, as described in the Overarching Narrative Arc, above.

The game also contains a large number of Embedded narrative elements, the greatest of these being the varying narrative paths that are available in conversations and interactions with Non-Player Characters (NPCs). In order to fully explore the narrative space hidden between characters, Max and the player must navigate the various lines of conversation to discover Conversation Keys. The conversation paths therefore become analogues for physical paths in a maze - different turns and combinations being tried until the puzzle is solved. This is especially true for the confrontation between Max and Chloe, and Frank in Episode 5. In order to find a resolution whereby no one is injured or killed, Max (and thus the player) must navigate the twists and turns of conversation, shaped by past interactions that the characters have had.

Most NPC conversations do not change the course of events, besides Primary Decisions which must be made by the player. However, some Secondary Decisions are hidden

within seemingly minor conversation choices. The player is given no indication what conversation points may have an impact, until suddenly the player is told "This decision will have consequences" with a hand-drawn butterfly in the corner. What those consequences may be, and when they may become to be known, if ever, is another set of Embedded narrative elements. For the most part, *Life is Strange* manages to successfully obfuscate the impact of most decisions until they become relevant in a dramatic situation.

Additionally, the gameworld is populated with Embedded narrative objects (such as letters and notes left in other students' dormitory rooms) and these may be sought out by the player in order to gain insight into the characters and history of Arcadia Bay.

Max's journal is another example of an Embedded narrative space - as the story unfolds, so does Max's journal entries. Not only describing her version of events along the way, Max also adds new character entries as the player meets them and continues to interact with them, expanding each entry until her journal is eventually destroyed by Jefferson near the end of Episode 5. Trying to open the Journal after this point will reveal only burnt pages.

Most of the gameplay within *Life is Strange* is situated within the fictional town of Arcadia Bay. The creators were fans of the show, and wanted to tell their own story within a similar framing.The town, as well as its surrounding woodlands and hills, is purposely built in order to evoke a *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990) connection with the player (Reddit,2015). This prompts the player to subconsciously apply similar narrative themes from *Twin Peaks* to Arcadia Bay; a small town with strange happenings, murder and investigation, powerful families with dark secrets - all are examples of Evocative Narrative spaces. There is also a large number of pop-culture references throughout the game.

For example, each of the cars found in the Blackwell Academy car park, as well as those owned by major characters, have licence plates that reference a 1990's or 2000's television show. Chloe's car licence plate reads 'TWN PKS', Warren's reads 'THX FLS', while Nathan's reads 'SXFTNDR'. These can be described as Embedded Evocative elements, as they are not in plain sight (but not necessarily hidden) yet they also add some Evocative narrative to each character. Chloe's *Twin Peaks* licence plate speaks to her and Max's quest to discover who killed Rachel Amber, much like Dale Cooper searching for Laura Palmer's killer, while Warren's *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993) reference adds to the geeky and sceptical nature of his character. David's own vehicle has the licence plate 'TRDTCTV', a reference to the show *True Detective* (HBO, 2014). In that show, the protagonists are police officers with somewhat ambiguous morals, mirroring David's own transgressions in his surveilling of his own family, yet locating him ultimately with the protagonists.

Nathan Prescott's licence plate may be the most interesting however, as it references 'Six Feet Under', a show revolving loosely around the deceased patriarch of a family beset by emotional troubles. Through various embedded narrative elements surrounding Nathan Prescott, we learn about his strained relationship with his father who has a powerful influence on not only Nathan, but all of Arcadia Bay. While Sean Prescott may not be dead, he certainly seems absent from Nathan's day-to-day life - hence Nathan's attraction to Jefferson as a replacement father-figure.

Other fairly obvious pop-culture references that show up throughout the game include *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2009). While *Twin Peaks* lies at the heart of the setting in *Life is Strange*, its story borrows heavily from key concepts in *The Butterfly Effect* and *Donnie Darko*. In *Donnie Darko*, the title character is represented as a 'chosen one', without any deliberate choice in the matter, and is tasked with restoring the timeline before a cataclysm can strike. Similarly, Max is chosen to be given the power to change time without her knowing why, with the threat of the storm hanging over her and the player from the very first scene. In terms of temporality, Donnie is presumed to be in a tangential universe during the events of the film, outside of the 'prime' universe - in the same way Max's own Focuses are pockets of time outside of the main timeline.

While the idea of the 'butterfly effect' was originally posited and mathematically modelled by Richard Lorentz, it was Ray Bradbury's short story *A Sound of Thunder* that popularised the idea within traditional media. *Life is Strange* creates an immediate association with the 'butterfly effect' by casting a literal butterfly as the hidden force behind Max's powers. Further, a hand-drawn representation of the butterfly is shown (with an accompanying chime) whenever a change or decision is made that will have consequences. This serves as a constant reminder to the player that what they do has impact in the gameworld, solidifying their immersion within it.

Player Impact

Having any story react intelligently and believably to your actions as a player goes a long way towards a deep engagement with the text. This is especially true for digital games, where the player often has an even greater control of the story. What is particularly interesting about *Life is Strange* is not limited to the engagement with the text, but the core mechanics themselves allow the player to mold and experiment with the narrative in a way that they are almost never able to do. By encouraging the player to reverse the narrative and try different paths, the game can disincentivise the player from 'save scumming' (the act of creating multiple save points very often in order to only reload the very latest save and avoid parts of a challenge beaten previously) and rather embrace whatever the story has to offer. This, in turn, leads the player to become more comfortable when making their decisions and more willing to accept the consequences that sprout from them.

Games within the interactive narrative genre (into which *Life is Strange* falls), rely, in general, upon the responsiveness of their stories to player choice as one key measure of success; players seeking these games are often interested in engaging stories rather than photo-realistic graphics or visceral gunplay. This is not to say that games within other genres cannot have engaging or branching storylines (if they have a story at all). However, developers for games whose focus relies on other gameplay aspects may still do well to engage players with their stories, regardless of genre. By using the following lessons gleamed from the analysis, it is proposed that such developers would be able to increase the engagement of their players with their texts by using some or all of the following techniques or strategies for their narratives:

1. Introduce some level of player choice.
   By granting players additional authorial control over the story of the game, you force the player to think about the consequences of their actions. Player choices

might not necessarily involve the explicit selection between two alternatives, but may instead involve evaluating their in-game actions within the context of the storyworld. *Dishonored* (Bethesda Softworks, 2012) is a prime example where the gameworld is affected by the number of NPCs that the player kills (the streets becoming more filled with evil), but is not an overt decision being made by the player.

2. Create both immediate and long-term consequences.
   One of the unique mechanics in Life is Strange is the ability for players to 'test' multiple decisions to see how they each play out. By essentially 'spoiling' the consequences of player actions straight away, Dontnod needed to add repercussions that could not be seen by the player until later in the story in order to retain some mystery to the story. These callbacks later in the story help to solidify the gameworld as a place that can be changed by the player's actions.
3. Make immediate consequences transparent, but long-term outcomes opaque.
   By seeing immediate impact from their decisions, players are able to better identify that they are able to control their story. However, having long term effects that are not necessarily what the player expects (yet make sense within context) sell the storyworld as being Coherent and responding to forces larger than the player. This also creates characters with depth, having their own driving forces behind them.
4. Keep key plot points static, but driving forces agile and believable.
   To avoid building complex narrative structures with multiple branches, building a set of key plot points helps to maintain authorial control over the story and the player's experience. However, if one gives players a set of choices that don't actually change the plot too drastically, it is vital that the apparent forces and motives to reach each plot touchpoint is able to withstand a modicum of critical thought. To do so, variances in certain player dialogues or actions can make the plot points seem the natural destination for these character beliefs and motives.

Reception

Proving The Marketer Wrong

On paper in 2015, *Life is Strange* would have looked to be another *Remember Me* in the eyes of a large publisher. However, "in spite" of its female lead, small-town story and quirky art style, *Life is Strange* was an enormous success for Dontnod Entertainment, both commercially and critically, proving that the gaming market is looking for more than just the yearly cycle of military shooters and reboots. Reading through user comments and reviews shows that *Life is Strange* had an emotional impact on most of those who played it, with many commenters mentioning how they would still be thinking about the ending days after having finished it. One would be hard-pressed to find a recent AAA title that could boast the same sort of impact. It is clear that the story created the desired impact with players, and the flexible, responsive design of the narrative almost certainly contributed greatly to the engagement of the players with the story.

Sales and Market Response

Within 6 months of *Life is Strange's* January 2015 release, the game crossed the 1 million sales mark, cementing the title as a commercial success before the fourth episode was released. On the PC platform, *Life is Strange* was ranked as the 10th most sold game for 2015 on Steam, and still in the top 100 most sold games in 2016. As of February 2017, it is placed among the top 50 PC games of all time, in terms of total sales - Steam Spy reports that there are roughly 3,8m owners of *Life is Strange* on Steam (however, this increase is likely due to the fact that Episode 1 is now available for free on that platform). Unfortunately, sales numbers are notoriously hard to find for XBOX and Playstation, however if the pattern of sales of Console vs PC remains fairly constant, *Life is Strange* would likely have sold approximately 5m copies across all console platforms.

Based on Steam player reviews, *Life is Strange* attracts an 'Overwhelmingly Positive' review summary, with roughly 96% of reviews rated as Recommended (as of February 2017). Reading through a few pages of user reviews highlights the impact that the game has had on its audience. The Most Helpful user review (as voted for by other players) is indicative of the general remarks and feelings players had toward the game: "I wish I could rewind and play this game for the first time again." (Steam, 2017)

Critics and Reviews

Critical reception of *Life is Strange* was positive. Large publications such Polygon and PC Gamer scored *Life is Strange* 8/10, and Kotaku and Forbes both gave positive initial reviews. Overall, Metacritic scores *Life is Strange* 83/100, putting it in the 90th percentile for games released in 2015 that were scored by Metacritic. Individually, each episode is also rated, with Episode 5: Polarized scoring the highest at 83, and Episode 4: The Dark Room scoring the lowest at 77. All but one (The Dark Room) are placed in the top 100 games released in 2015 (The Dark Room comes in at number 108).

On the Sony PS4, *Life is Strange* was even more highly rated, scoring an 85/100, placing it within the top 25 PS4 games of 2015. Interestingly on PS4, Episode 3: Chaos Theory was the highest rated individual episode at 81/100, and Episode 2: Out of Time was the

lowest scoring at 78. All 5 episodes place within the top 75 games released for 2015 on PS4.

Microsoft's Xbox platform was the lowest performing platform for the game, and *Life is Strange* overall is actually excluded from the primary rankings as it did not receive enough critic reviews overall (on the Xbox platform). But even the individual episodes do not score as highly as on other platforms. Episode 5: Polarized scores the highest at 80/100, and Episode 2: Out of Time was the lowest scoring at 73/100.

By comparison with critic scores, user scores were generally much more favourable. Sorted by user scores on Metacritic, Episode 3: Chaos Theory is the second highest rated release for 2015, second only to *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). As a whole, *Life is Strange* ranks in the top 15 games of 2015, and in the top 250 games of all time.

Awards

Over 2015 and 2016, *Life is Strange* was nominated for more than 50 awards, including nominations for BAFTAs, Peabody Awards, D.I.C.E Awards, and PlayStation Official Magazine. Overall, the game won 20 industry-recognised awards, including a BAFTA for Story, a Peabody award for Excellence and Innovation in Digital Storytelling, and the Performance of the Year for Ashly Burch (as Chloe) at the Golden Joystick Awards. *Life is Strange* was also awarded Game of the Year by Apple, New Statesman, Vulture, The Games for Change Awards, and the Audience Award at the Game Developers Choice Awards.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

While *Life is Strange* is certainly not a perfect game, when absolving minor technical irritants like poor lip-syncing in the early episodes and some plot holes and character decisions that do not make a lot of sense, Dontnod have proved themselves very capable of creating a narrative that is engaging, interesting, and touching. Being a small development house makes the achievement all the more respectable, and proves that one does not need large teams of writers to create a multitude of narrative branches that require an impossibly large testing cycle.

Using a web of narrative flow, rather than distinct branches, still allows for some alternative narratives between playthroughs to occur, without having to try and bring back all loose ends into one neat package arbitrarily (something which the *Mass Effect* series was criticised for, particularly).

Using multiple inputs to inform consequences helps to break players reading an "if X then Y" scenario, which can seem overly simplistic and unrealistic. For instance, even if you don't answer Kate's call, intervene when David confronts her, or tell her to go to the police, it is still possible to save her. It only becomes more difficult, in that the player is rewarded for learning more about Kate before she ever gets to the roof. As an example, one of the final conversation options to bring Kate down from the roof (or send her falling to her death) is to remind Kate to think of her Mother / Father / Brothers / Family. While there is no Conversation Key that would help Max, and no previous conversations with Kate specifically about her family, if the player had investigated Kate's room they might have found several letters and postcards that indicate that Kate is closest with her father. The player would have to remember this themselves, and are thus rewarded for discovering Embedded Narrative elements.

Another good design choice was to ensure that player choices were opaque, and also did not always have the expected consequences (for example, warning Victoria about Nathan actually leads her to be caught by Jefferson, and telling Kate to go to the police does not instigate the cover up or retaliation from the Prescotts that Max expects).

Overall, the flexible narrative design stood Dontnod on solid ground from which a personal story of two teenagers searching for truth could be built. Put simply, a simple story told well can have a far greater impact than a set of grandiose spectacles with no substance.

The Price

While the final Primary Decision is a difficult choice for most, and makes sense within the context of the story, Dontnod did face some criticism for the polar choice at the end of the game. However, game directors Michel Koch and Raoul Barbet defended the decision in an interview with Gamesradar in January 2016, saying:

> *"The way the game ends, with those two choices, two endings, that's really the way we had thought of it from the beginning. Of course, we read some of the criticism, and when you get so invested in anything - a game, a show, a book - you're creating your own ideal version of the ending in your mind. And I guess in some ways what Max is doing is trying to make her*

> *own ideal version of the world. But in the end, you have to face consequences. That's the message of the game, that, in the end, Max has to take one of those two decisions."*
> *Michel Koch & Raoul Barbet, Dontnod Entertainment (Gamesradar, 2016)*

Essentially, sacrificing Chloe wipes the slate clean and undoes all the events that have taken place over the past week. And while Arcadia Bay will be saved, it does mean that Chloe will die not knowing that Rachel hadn't abandoned her, and without getting to see Max again. On the other hand, Koch and Barbet also state that choosing to sacrifice Arcadia Bay will condemn everyone in the town to die in the storm, and the player must choose to accept the death of everyone else they know and love to save Chloe. There can be no middle ground; the decision is the important part, not choice itself.

A New Benchmark

On the question of games being experienced as works of art, Steven Spielberg was famously quoted as saying: "I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at Level 17" (TIME, 2004). While there had been many great stories in games before this, the mainstream perception of digital gaming at the time of Spielberg's insight (in 2004) was still limited to it being a pursuit for children or 'nerds'. At the time, many in the industry were actively trying to change that perception, to create stories that were engaging and mature. A number of games were released over the next few years that aimed to improve the standards of narrative storytelling within the media, including *Indigo Prophecy* (also known as *Fahrenheit*) (Quantic Dream, 2005), *Bioshock* (2k Boston, 2007), and *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2008) among others.

It is difficult to see the decade-spanning cultural shift in attitudes towards gaming as a legitimate artistic media. Yet, a brief look at the Wikipedia article for "List of video games commonly referred to as artistic" (Wikipedia, 2017) is an interesting barometer for the direction of digital games over the last few decades. While the list of games before 2000 is fairly small, the number of listed games grows in each five-year group. Of course, such data is not necessarily reliable on its own, but does reflect the improvement of popular opinion of digital games over the last few years.

An upward trend in the impact of, and player engagement with, game narratives is clear over time. As well as huge technology leaps in graphics and physics simulation, it is evident that developers are constantly pushing the boundaries of storytelling and immersion.

A true branching narrative presents a Herculean task of creating a unique story for every instance of player choice, and is thus rarely used in the digital game media. Using a webbed narrative structure instead allows the key pillars of the plot to remain intact, rather relying on flexible driving forces to steer characters toward those pillars in a way that is believable. By supporting character and player motive with adaptive dialogue and motive, authorial control remains high while the player still feels like their choices create impact in the gameworld.

Not only does *Life is Strange* offer an interesting experience from a mechanics perspective, it also offers an impressive variety of narrative experiences for different players - it is special to each individual player as *they themselves* have crafted it within the bounds of Dontnod's structure. Their ability to tell a nuance, believable story without

muddying the impact of multiple narratives should be held up as the new standard for those in the games development industry who want to tell stories. It is a good game because it is mechanically interesting, and it is a memorable game because it is emotionally impactful.

For their part, Dontnod have succeeded in building a game that does, in fact, bring tears to the eyes. Not only did the author cry at various points of the story, but clearly many of its players did; in 2016, *Life is Strange* was nominated for the inaugural Steam Awards in the "I'm Not Crying, There's Something In My Eye" category (Steam, 2017).

It seems that, at least according to Mr Spielberg, we have finally reached Level 17.

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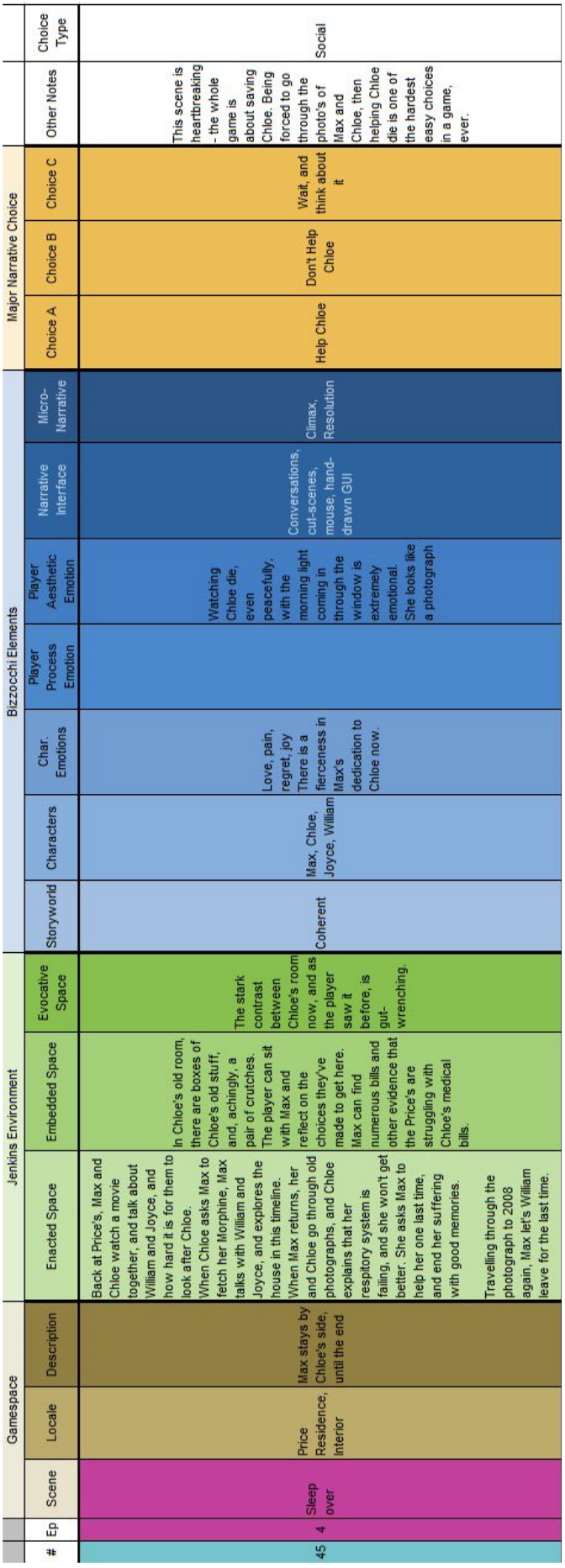
Appendix 1: Analytical Lens Example



#	Ep	Scene	Gamespace: Locale	Gamespace: Description	Jenkins Environment: Enacted Space	Jenkins Environment: Embedded Space	Jenkins Environment: Evocative Space	Bizzocchi Elements: Storyworld	Bizzocchi Elements: Characters	Bizzocchi Elements: Char. Emotions	Bizzocchi Elements: Player Process Emotion	Bizzocchi Elements: Player Aesthetic Emotion	Bizzocchi Elements: Narrative Interface	Bizzocchi Elements: Micro-Narrative	Major Narrative Choice: Choice A	Major Narrative Choice: Choice B	Major Narrative Choice: Choice C	Other Notes	Choice Type
45	4	Sleep over	Price Residence, Interior	Max stays by Chloe's side, until the end	Back at Price's, Max and Chloe watch a movie together, and talk about William and Joyce, and how hard it is for them to look after Chloe. When Chloe asks Max to fetch her Morphine, Max talks with William and Joyce, and explores the house in this timeline. When Max returns, her and Chloe go through old photographs, and Chloe explains that her respitory system is failing, and she won't get better. She asks Max to help her one last time, and end her suffering with good memories. Travelling through the photograph to 2008 again, Max let's William leave for the last time.	In Chloe's old room, there are boxes of Chloe's old stuff, and, achingly, a pair of crutches. The player can sit with Max and reflect on the choices they've made to get here. Max can find numerous bills and other evidence that the Price's are struggling with Chloe's medical bills.	The stark contrast between Chloe's room now, and as the player saw it before, is gut-wrenching.	Coherent	Max, Chloe, Joyce, William	Love, pain, regret, joy There is a fierceness in Max's dedication to Chloe now.		Watching Chloe die, even peacefully, with the morning light coming in through the window is extremely emotional. She looks like a photograph	Conversations, cut-scenes, mouse, hand-drawn GUI	Climax, Resolution	Help Chloe	Don't Help Chloe	Wait, and think about it	This scene is heartbreaking - the whole game is about saving Chloe. Being forced to go through the photo's of Max and Chloe, then helping Chloe die is one of the hardest easy choices in a game, ever.	Social