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Issue 04 (2016)

interviews

Agency and Consequence in *Life is Strange*

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Abstract

Review about the game *Life is Strange*.

Keywords: review, supernatural, ability, consequence, time travel, *Life is Strange*

Life is Strange is an interactive narrative experience, developed by French studio Dontnod Entertainment for publication on Square Enix. The game's five episodes were released in regular intervals between January and October of 2015. The story follows Max – a college level photography student who has recently returned to (fictional) small town Arcadia Bay after having lived elsewhere with her parents for a long time. One day in class, Max discovers that she possesses the ability to rewind time and change the course of events. Soon after, using her ability, she saves the life of her childhood best friend Chloe. The two set out to find out what has really happened to Rachel – another friend of Chloe's, who has mysteriously gone missing. At the same time, teen life at the school causes enough drama to fuel a story line of its own, which eventually intertwine with Max's and Chloe's quest. The contents of the game are highly mature and the game is rated at PEGI 16.

The game deals with some heavy topics taken directly from the real world. For example Kate, a girl at the school, is subjected to bullying after going to a party where someone films her when she's involuntarily drugged and exposed. Chloe is smoking a lot of marijuana and has some shady dealings with the local drug dealer. A teacher at the school turns out to be torturing and raping students. Through Max, the game digs deep into the darker aspects of our modern society, and it is filled with political pointers. Individualism is pitted against constant surveillance; feministic and post-colonial ideas against closemindedness and bigotry. Max's and Chloe's relationship is undefined, but the romantic undertones make it a rare occurrence in video games, especially since this game only has female protagonists and playable characters.

Life is Strange is played from a third person perspective with Max as the only controllable character. Exploring any of the levels provided by the game, the player is consistently privileged to Max's thoughts and feelings. Her inner commentary to the game accompanies the player when inspecting items, persons, while making decisions, and while interacting with NPC's. A large amount of playtime is dedicated to watching the results of player interactions play out in video-like sequences. The game is therefore dialogue-heavy, which resonates nicely with its given genre – "interactive narrative experience".

In the same vein, on top of a few basic mechanics such as walking around the levels, interacting with items, reading notes, and interacting with other characters, *Life is Strange* is largely defined by Max's ability to rewind time. Progression relies heavily – if not exclusively – on this mechanic, and the game successfully turns it into a puzzle-solving ability. For example, in several instances, Max utilizes this ability to obtain information from other characters about for example an item's whereabouts. The

player is then allowed to rewind time, and by cheekily utilizing this newly obtained information, manipulate people and scenarios in the game.

The game constructs a coming-of-age story, or perhaps many coming-of-age stories, the many relatable NPC's included. This is done by exploring and discovering the mindsets and many peculiarities of being half adult, half not. The player is guided through the minds of teenagers who seem to live as if they have nothing to lose, and some people who seem to bear the weight of the world on their shoulders. This juxtaposition creates a winding, complex maze of values and morals that the player is forced to navigate while playing. In the first play-through, the player is faced with choices and arguments that at first seem trivial. Slowly, however, it becomes clear that each decision – however small – can lead to dire consequences. This realization, and the process of obtaining and internalizing experiences, is metaphorical to the progression of the game as a whole. As Max realizes her potential, the degree of stress and the complexity of the time travel conundrum rises. Alongside Max, the player is forced to realize that the choices they make actually matter, and it becomes increasingly difficult to make the right one.

This time-travel mechanic, and the game itself, puts the notion of "choice" – ever-present in the game studies discourse overall – heavily into question. In the end, *Life is Strange* boils down to Max's and the player's understanding of choice, action and consequence. Or rather, to the impossibility of trying to understand action and consequence and embracing the fact that not all things in life are controllable. The game further problematizes this by the way it ends. After all of Max's struggles, backs-and-forths between alternate time-lines, the road leads up to one single choice that is designed to be unavoidable. The player is faced with the ultimate choice – to go back in time, not save Chloe's life, and erase everything that's

happened since the beginning of the game. Alternatively, the player allows Chloe to live, and consequently all of Arcadia Bay to be destroyed by a supernatural, tornado of biblical proportions. At this point in the game, choice instills a sense of predestination, and the only way Max can deviate from the right path is by making an enormous sacrifice.

Thus in the end, the game ends up questioning the meaningfulness of the choices made so far. The origin of Max's time travel ability, as well as any explanation as to the purpose of the devastating tornado, are never fully explained. Perhaps they should be seen as tools by which the designers explore human nature, and the morality by debating what one should do when taking advantage of such an ability. Given that Max can remember the different alternative time-lines she's been down, the journey leading up to the ultimate choice, never becomes fully futile. Should she let Chloe die, she would still have the memories of their time together during the game. As such, *Life is Strange*'s gives perspective on the video game form and agency on a meta level. The mechanics in combination with the contents, poignantly presses on the importance of kindness, selflessness and responsibility in interacting with other humans.

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