Choosing to be gay: Authentic outcomes, agency and identity in Life Is Strange

by

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Note: This article is part of doctoral work in progress looking at narrative game construction, interactivity and agency.

Abstract

Life is Strange is a modern classic of storytelling in games that allows players to make consequential choices at the level of action as well as at the level of narrative. But does it also allow players to play as their authentic selves, or does it constrain them within frameworks of ethics that are assumed by its authors? This study uses an approach that combines elements of ludology; the focus on games as systems that are altered by players through a mechanistic interface, and the application of structuralist narratology. The latter allows us to textually analyse Life is Strange as a case study of a progression game with emergence characteristics, in which mechanics are treated as functional units of narrative. In addition, we draw from a unique quantitative source. Every choice made by players of Life is Strange is recorded and available to see in the public domain. This allows us to compare the narrative structure encoded into the game at the level of action, with the choices players made at the level of narrative. The outcome shows that players subverted hegemonic expectations, within affordances created for them by the game developers, demonstrating an unexpected level of player agency

Keywords

Agency, identity, narratology, ludology, video games, textual analysis, structural analysis, game studies

Body

The 2015 third-person video game Life Is Strange (Dontnod Entertainment 2015) is a ‘narrative adventure’ that tackles controversial subjects in the lives of its teen protagonists. Players experience a linear story but have spatial, character and plot choices to make along the way. This is explicit from the game’s opening screen: ‘Life Is Strange is a story-based game that features player choice, the consequences of all your in-game actions and decisions will impact the past, present and future. Choose wisely’ (Dontnod Entertainment 2015: n.pag.).

Among those choices, players can decide the main character's sexual orientation, which can change the game's ending in what we will define and consider separately as functional and indicative ways. This is not a character choice in the 'role-playing' sense of the word. Players do not build a persona from scratch. Instead, the choice is made explicitly and implicitly through gameplay and the options offered. As we discuss these choices, we will test the limits of agency within Life Is Strange and consider the political will behind those limits to play and identify as our 'authentic' selves.

Methods

This work deploys a mixed methodological approach. It begins with a structural analysis derived from narratology to create critical readings of Life Is Strange from the perspective of structure and content (Barthes 1977: 87). Barthes's work on narrative units, first explained in Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives, informs this research element (1977: 79). '[T]he first task is to divide up narrative and determine the segments of narrative discourse that can be distributed into a limited number of classes; in a word, we have to define the smallest narrative units' (Barthes 1977: 88).

Narrative units have different properties. Functions (further divided into catalysers and cardinal functions) are the raw material of story, the consequential events that occur. Indices (split into indices proper and informants) are the details essential to world-building, emotion and atmosphere; they place us – and the character – within a text. This taxonomy has been used widely to analyse narratives in written texts, music, images and film. Though conceived before consoles and personal computers, there are also similar approaches in the works of Diane Carr (2009, 2014) and Dan Pinchbeck (2009), who examine narratives in interactive video games. Carr argues that games can be seen as 'systems' – like Barthes's narrative structures – with one significant difference. Games are systems with the potential to change. 'The difference would be that the positions of units in a game, and the relationships between these units, might not be constant, stable or consistent' (Carr 2014: 507).

If narrative units can change depending on player interaction, so can narratives. Carr's method – described in Textual Analysis, Digital Games, Zombies (2009: 4) – was to play through a target game three times – a first playthrough 'for pleasure' at the time of release; then another full playthrough in preparation for analysis; a final playthrough concentrated on a section of a game or 'set-piece' selected as representative. In this final playthrough, Carr paused the game to take notes as she played. Our analysis uses an adapted version of this approach. The first chapter of Life Is Strange was released in 2015 when the first playthrough occurred for this study. A second preparatory playthrough took place in 2021. The third partial playthrough in November 2022 was recorded using Fraps, an open-source

software for screen recording. We focused on ‘Episode 1: Chrysalis’, the opening of the game and the closing sections of ‘Episode 5: Polarized’ (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). Rather than playing and pausing, as Carr did in her analysis of Resident Evil (2009), we made audio notes on the screen recording using a gaming headset as we played. We then reviewed the video afterwards to make further notes. We also referred to the recorded playthroughs of other players published on public platforms and the Life Is Strange wiki on fandom.com to identify gameplay choices that we missed in our own experiences of the game.

Quantitative data-gathering

Statistical data gathered algorithmically by the game’s developer Dontnod is accessible in the game itself from a dedicated ‘world statistics’ section of the user interface (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). These pages collate the choices made during thousands of playthroughs by the game’s community over several years and allow us to see what percentage of players made which choice during the game. The data is ‘live’ and available for every significant narrative choice in the game. As the original version of Life Is Strange is now close to eight years old, the current data is stable. Life Is Strange also contains a generative series of in-game diaries, which document the choices made by an individual player. When referring to player statistics and diary entries, we refer to this in-game content.

It is important to note that this is a structural analysis of a game that has already been thoroughly and critically interrogated through the lens of queer theory by others. We draw from those texts, but this research is more interested in agency, the mechanics that enable agency and the democracy of fandom. It does not claim to be a queer reading of the text. Though we review how the opportunity to make these choices has been praised and vilified in queer analyses of the game, it is most interested in the process of encoding/decoding and the effects of choice on player agency.

Agency in video games

Carr’s characterization of games as systems with the potential to change is crucial to understanding the concept of player agency. In simple terms, games are ‘a series of interesting decisions’ (Meier 2012), a maxim that holds whether we are discussing games that are rich in story elements (like Life Is Strange) or entirely based on rules and mechanics (like Tetris). However, in narrative-rich games, player decisions lead to particular encoded outcomes, and to play is to participate in shared authorship. This observation is central to definitions of player agency in games, dating back to two key texts, Janet H. Murray’s Hamlet on the Holodeck and Espen Aarseth’s Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.

For Murray, agency in games allows players to influence and shape story (2017: 114). Aarseth observes that the player's ability to make 'nontrivial' decisions is a defining characteristic (1997: 1). For Aarseth (and others, notably Jesper Juul), effort is an essential component of agency. Players must overcome challenges and obstacles to progress in a game (Juul 2011: 20). In static texts, progression through challenges is hard-coded into dramatic structure for readers by authors. In games, there is a level of co-authorship or shared authorship, of branching choice, problem-solving and activity. Both the game's design and the player's decisions contribute to the experience of story unfolding.

However, player agency has limits in these definitions. If it is a product of nontrivial decisions, then we are only considering functional choices that actively change story outcomes and the state machine of the game. Using an approach informed by structural analysis allows us to consider indicative choices too; our feelings, our interpretation of narrative, our own identity and the things that locate us – as players who control characters – both in the game and our world.

Narrative choice and mechanics in adventure games

Though Life Is Strange is a modern 3D game, it descends from a genre that has been with us for decades. 1976's Colossal Cave Adventure is an interactive fiction where players explore a space described in simple paragraphs of text (Crowther and Woods 1976). It is one of the first video games ever created, where players could navigate from one area to another by typing commands like 'go West' or 'exit'. As the player explored caves, forests and valleys, they encountered puzzles and collected objects to complete challenges. In sequence, these formed a system made of narrative units. For example, the player may encounter a door requiring a key. To acquire the key, they must travel to a castle. To get to the castle, they need to hire a carriage and, for that, they will need to find some money. Each of these events is a functional unit of narrative.

However, these player–machine interactions and the objects that enable them are also known in game development (and the study of games) as 'mechanics'. They are things that enable players to change the 'game state' (Sicart 2008). For example, when we unlock a door, we change its 'state' from locked to unlocked. The sequence of mechanics described above, taken together, constitutes 'gameplay'. Game mechanics are both discrete units and interoperating components of systems. Discrete in that they have an identifiable function (a key locks a door) and interoperable in that they are part of something greater (the door remains open).

A door can remain unlocked even though it is virtual because video games are, ultimately, 'state machines' (Juul 2011: 60). They are computer programmes that store and process

changes in the states of things: object locations, the player's progress and other variable conditions (whether or not doors are unlocked or a purse of coins is taken). Some of those states are immutable, and some can be altered. What a mechanic is for, what it can and cannot be used to do, is best summarized as an 'affordance'. Borrowing a term from Don Norman's work on object design, affordances tell us what capabilities are built into objects and, subsequently, the spaces and systems within which they exist (2013: 11). A purse can hold coins, for example, but it cannot hold a brick. Similarly, a game mechanic can only do what it was designed to do. However, a system of game mechanics may not be as predictable. Affordances are not the objects themselves; they are the relationship between 'agents' (people who interact with objects) and the properties of objects (Norman 2013: 11). For example, 'speed running' in games requires players to find 'exploits' and glitches in game mechanics to subvert them. Any playthrough that seeks to subvert gameplay does so by seeking out and exploiting the affordances that allow this. Norman expands on this, explaining that there are two sites of knowledge: knowledge in the head and knowledge in the world (2013: 75). We can apply this to mechanics, too, as virtual objects with capabilities built in. It allows us to see that affordances are dynamic and potentially ideological; their outcomes depend on the player and the mechanic.

The mechanics and gameplay described earlier, influenced by fantasy fiction and their journey-based narratives, are now common to a genre of games that take their name from the original and are widely known as 'adventure games'. Crucially though, early interactive fictions lacked player characterization. The player has no name in Colossal Cave Adventure – they are referred to with the second-person 'you'. Interactions with characters in the world are limited and entirely serve the plot. When we ask players to interact as a first- or third-person character, we introduce a new layer of choice: whether to play as our authentic selves or as someone else (a character we might identify with or temporarily embody – a second, imaginary self in the game).

Life Is Strange, released 40 years after Colossal Cave Adventure, is a more sophisticated and unusual iteration of the adventure template in which the player controls a specific third-person character. Their avatar in the game world is Maxine Caulfield, or 'Max', an 18-year-old in her senior year at school. Set in Arcadia Bay, a small coastal town, there are sequences of action, dialogue and investigation followed by periods of quiet contemplation. Secondary themes explore tropes familiar to coming-of-age stories: the search for self, conflict with parents and falling in love. As the player progresses, they must decide who Max is – and what choices Max should make. At this level, the game becomes as much about identity and ideological alignment as it is about choice and ethics.

Games of progression and emergence

Adventure games are what ludologist Jesper Juul would call ‘games of progression’ (2011: 81). They have narratives that unfold as players interact with the game. They have become more complex as a genre over the decades, from the earliest text-adventures to Life Is Strange, but are still authored stories, branching, with predetermined plots that are ‘told’ to the player and that have fixed outcomes.

The flip side of this are ‘games of emergence’, games that feature ‘a number of simple rules combining to form interesting variation’ (Juul 2011: 5). Many simulators and arcade action games are pure games of emergence. Juul states that the taxonomy exists along a spectrum. There are pure games of emergence and pure games of progression, but there are also progression games with elements of emergence. These include first-person shooters: games with a simple backstory and sequential routes players take through 3D levels. An example might be the classic Doom (iD Software 1993). The game has a narrative set-up (satanic demons have overrun a Mars research base) but a basic set of game mechanics and rules (finding key cards, clearing levels of enemies, getting to the exit).[1]

Juul believes ‘emergent narrative is a nearly meaningless term’ (2011: 159). We suggest that when Juul talks about ‘narrative’, he means a story’s functional events. However, a narrative is more than just a sequence of events; it is an interpretation of a sequence of events by a player or reader. Life Is Strange is, on the surface, a game of progression, but a player’s narrative experience can differ from one playthrough to the next, one player to the next and one ideology to the next. To play Life Is Strange is to engage with a series of choices and identities, functions and indices. Some make no difference to the story. Some may change how we think about characters and our future interactions. Some change the game’s actual outcomes. Narrative may emerge from any of these actions and the player’s experience of the story.

Functional choices

We can differentiate between functional and indicative choices in game mechanics. Some choices are functions (inciting events, things players can do and actions propelling the story forward). Others are indices (information that locates us in the game, adds atmosphere or tells us about character).

[1] Emergence games can also have progression components. Juul’s example is of an open-world role-playing game (RPG) like World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), where play is largely driven by mechanics (acquiring wealth and power, levelling up a character), but there may be story-driven quests to complete at various character levels.

Some story-changing functional choices can seem huge in Life Is Strange but have a limited effect on outcomes. For example, in Episode 2, a storyline with Kate (a significant secondary character) leads to a scene where she may take her own life. Max has an opportunity to talk her out of it – and can fail at that task. Although this seems like a pivotal moment, it has no consequential effect on the end of the game. In Barthes's terms, it is a catalyser (1977: 93), a functional event complementary to the story's central actions. Whether Kate lives or dies, Max's story progresses towards the same final decisions. If 'story' was all that mattered, then that is where the discussion would end. However, playing a game is not just about experiencing a story but experiencing a narrative. Kate's death ripples through the rest of the game and is part of a broader meditation on the nature of life-and-death choices. Other functional choices lead to fundamentally different outcomes, particularly the final choices afforded at the end of the game.

Indicative choices

Some choices add atmospheric, emotional or character information to the narrative rather than taking the plot forward. Barthes calls narrative units that do this 'indices', so we will call these indicative choices. For example, in an early Life Is Strange scene, Max must decide between pancakes and bacon for breakfast. Inconsequential in story terms but this decision is remembered and returns in dialogue.

Some choices determine which indices we will encounter later. Max has a dream where other characters berate her for the player's choices towards the end of Life Is Strange. For example, Max has an opportunity to kiss her school friend Warren in the same episode. Chloe will tell Warren that Max is 'trying to play us both' if she does. Warren will say he did not want to kiss Max anyway if she does not. Though the earlier choice does not change the functional outcome of the story, it adds narrative depth to the characters and helps us codify Max's sexual orientation. In turn, it makes many of the smaller choices we selected earlier indicative, informing character and narrative rather than story outcomes. Some indices are experienced through gameplay rather than through choice. There are key locations we return to, for example. The lighthouse overlooking Arcadia Bay is an index of location in the game that we travel to repeatedly. We also return to Chloe's house and Max's school throughout the game.

The game also has indicative storytelling mechanics parallel to the 3D environment. Characters send text messages to Max throughout the game. She can reply to or ignore texts, like text messages in real life. The SMSs add character background rather than propelling the story forward, so these are indices when ignored by the player. However,

interaction with these (returning the messages) may turn them into functions as responding can change how characters engage with Max.

Rewinding time as a mechanic of agency

Choice mechanics are at the core of Life Is Strange. Without them, the game would be a computer-animated film. Instead, the game is a sophisticated state machine with binary decision points, dialogue trees, object interaction and exploration. There are moments in the game when Max faces a decision, and the action pauses. The player will be required to choose between one of two outcomes. Dialogue trees are a more sophisticated version of these 'decision points' where Max can 'speak' to or text with other characters, choosing from an evolving menu of responses. Navigating a dialogue tree can lead to a functional outcome. Something significant in the story may or may not happen – as is the case with Kate's suicide – or the player may receive practical information that might be useful later. However, one mechanic elevates Life Is Strange above other adventure games, adding depth to the player's illusion of agency.

The game opens with Max in a forest clearing with wind and rain whipping around her, an index of conflict and chaos. She climbs to a lighthouse and sees the storm destroying the town in the bay below. Objects are swirling in the tornado: cars and boats (like in The Wizard of Oz). Then, something is thrown from the cyclone towards Max, and she passes out. When she reawakens, she is in class at her desk. She worries that the storm is too real to be a dream, foreshadowing a game mechanic we are about to learn.

The bell rings for the end of class, and Max exits into the corridor. In the voice-over, she tells us we should find the bathroom. Once there, Max sees a blue butterfly and walks around the stalls to photograph it. While there, a pre-animated section – a 'cut scene' – takes over. A young man, Nathan Prescott, enters the toilet block, raging and babbling to himself. Max hides, afraid. A blue-haired girl enters and begins to argue with Nathan. He pulls out a gun and, in the ensuing struggle, Chloe is shot and killed. The cut scene continues as Max reaches out to Chloe, and time reverses. Max saves Chloe and finds herself back in the classroom. This is how the story begins.

From that moment on, Max can rewind time at crucial decision points and choose other outcomes or – more significantly, from our point of view – replay a scene and interact with it differently. This mechanic offers players an apparent degree of independence, unusual even in narrative adventure games. Though the game has other choice mechanics, this one offers the most powerful illusion of agency. We use the word 'illusion' here carefully because there

is a clear division between what a player can affect and cannot and what influence on story outcome they do and do not have.[2]

Analysis: Save the bae or save the bay

In functional terms, Life Is Strange always ends the same way. Whenever Max uses her rewind power, it disrupts the fabric of reality around Arcadia Bay. This eventually creates a cyclonic storm that threatens to destroy the whole town. So Max's final, functional choice is to either rewind to the first time she used her power and allow Chloe to die to save the town, or flee the town with Chloe and let Arcadia Bay be obliterated. If Max chooses the second option, she will kill everyone else she has encountered in the game. In fandom, the choice is known as 'save the bay or save the bae'; in-game, the on-screen choices are 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay' or 'Sacrifice Chloe'.

Though there are only two functional choices at the end of the game, one significant variation exists in how Max reacts to them. Wooing Chloe earlier in the game (responding to her texts, taking her side in decisions, kissing her in a game of dare) will trigger a specific binary condition that changes the 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending, and the two girls will kiss. If this condition is not triggered, Chloe and Max will not kiss, and the ending may read as though they are best friends. These outcomes depend directly on earlier functional and indicative choices that seemed inconsequential. In the 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay' ending, players can ensure that Max and Chloe end up together unequivocally. In that ending, the pair hold hands as Chloe pledges to stay with Max forever – and they then drive off into a new life through the town's wreckage.

With all these combinations, players can make several indicative choices on the way to the game's conclusion that alter their experience of the narrative. The nature of choice in computer games means it is possible to play heteronormatively (with a male character as Max's love interest) or assume Max is gay (with Chloe as Max's love interest). It is possible to play aromantically (with the player declining all romantic overtures from NPCs) or panromantically (with the player accepting all romantic overtures from NPCs). This reading has three functional story outcomes, but ten possible narrative experiences, as shown in Figure 1. Each operates within a spectrum of indicative choices associated with identity and

[2] The inclusion of rewind as a player mechanic at a diegetic level is not entirely unique. Braid, a critically lauded independent platform puzzle game (Blow 2008), uses a rewind and 'fast-forward' mechanic on the level of both story and discourse, to further the narrative within the game and to enable complex puzzle-solving that relies on foreknowledge. The same is true of Jordan Mechner's 3D platform game Prince of Persia: Sands of Time (Mechner 2003).

ideology. The differences in experience go beyond the mechanical and the state of the game. They depend on the intent of the player.

	Sacrifice Arcadia Bay	Sacrifice Chloe	Sacrifice Chloe (kiss)
Heteronormative	✓	✓	
Gay	✓	✓	✓
Aromantic	✓	✓	
Panromatic	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1: The ten possible narrative experiences of Life is Strange depending on player intent

Saving Warren: A heteronormative playthrough

There are two potential 'love interests' in Life Is Strange. We have already discussed Chloe Price, a rebellious friend from Max's past. Her classmate Warren Graham is the heteronormative option: a nerdy, awkward young man. Max's early journal entries suggest that though she is close to Warren, she sees him as a 'supercool geek brother' (Dontnod Entertainment 2015).

Warren is a secondary character, but it is possible to play through the game with him as Max's main love interest and make indicative choices that will support that until the game's conclusion. For example, an early indicative choice for Max is whether to accept Warren's invitation to a movie marathon – a date. Although they never go on this date, accepting the invitation will trigger a series of flirty text exchanges between Max and Warren. Later, dialogue choices allow her to express affection, friendship or irritation with Warren. For example, in Episode 3, she can remark that 'Warren is nice' when Chloe teases Max about him – or she can respond that it is 'gross' to think of him romantically. These choices do not seem consequential in play – they read as complementary to story (as catalysers). However, every time a choice is made, a flag is set in the game's state machine that will have a functional effect later.

In the final chapter, as a cyclonic storm caused by Max's supernatural powers batters the town, Max finds Warren sheltering in a local diner. Before she leaves to tackle the cause of the storm and make her final decision, Max has the indicative choice of hugging Warren, kissing him or leaving without showing affection. In a heteronormative or panromantic playthrough, the result on the story is minimal – it does not affect the game's state machine but is consequential on the narrative experience. This kiss is the apogee of their romantic thread. The narrative experience becomes one where Max is courted by a boy who cares about her and whom she falls for because he is sensitive and 'nice'. If Max makes that choice, we hear her internal monologue: 'At least I kissed Warren once to let him know how I feel'.

Until this point, Max has never seemed enthusiastic about Warren's overtures, which makes her seem either aromantic, too preoccupied to care about attachments or just not that into him. This choice changes that reading for the player.

Although heteronormative choices are encoded into Life Is Strange, the story is overwhelmingly about Max's relationship with Chloe – both from a player and authorial perspective, leading to the same final decision point from the beginning. With that in mind, to play through the game heteronormatively or aromantically is to decide whether Chloe is Max's friend or Max's potential girlfriend – and to have the agency to do so. As we will see, that is in doubt.[3]

Sacrificing Chloe: Queer readings of Life Is Strange

A pattern emerges very soon in the first episode of Life Is Strange. In Max's first rewind, she saves Chloe from being shot in a high school toilet block. After that, Max saves Chloe several more times. She saves Chloe from an oncoming train and a ricocheting bullet in a scrapyard. In one notable iteration, the pair meet in an alternate timeline after Chloe has been paralysed in a car crash. Here the ethical dilemma for Max (and the player) is whether to accept Chloe's request to end her life by administering a fatal dose of morphine.

In one reading of this (Butt and Dunne 2017: 434), Chloe is coded as the perpetual 'damsel in distress' of gaming tropes – a queer Princess Peach (the imperilled girlfriend in the Mario games). Others have suggested that this is a coded admonishment of otherness (that Chloe stands in for iconographic, anti-establishment queerness). Indeed, the ending has been

[3] Although we are approaching this from a largely narratological perspective, there is empirical proof that there are two possible end states for Max and Chloe's characters. The file names for Max's final journal entries are either 'friend' or 'love' depending on choices the player made earlier in the game.

criticized for negatively depicting lesbian relationships more broadly in a narrative where 'queer desire is portrayed as destructive to the participating subjects' (Fredenburg 2019: 107). However, every ending in Life Is Strange is destructive for the participants, whether the playthrough is queer, heteronormative, aromantic or panromantic. Metatextually, there is a clear desire elsewhere in the franchise to engage with queer representation.[4]

There is another reading (one that Butt and Dunne acknowledge). Games prepare players for mechanics and their outcomes with 'training levels' that introduce puzzles that players will encounter later in a game, holding their hands as they learn. It feels certain that in developing Life Is Strange, there was a distinct 'right' ending in mind, and that ending is one where Max (1) falls in love with Chloe and (2) sacrifices her at the end. The 'damsel in distress' choices peppered through the game are preparation or rehearsal for this loss, the moment when the player will no longer be able to save Chloe.

The 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending is the most dramatically satisfying – the 'canon' ending. Butt and Dunne point out that it is eleven minutes long. That is four minutes longer than the 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay' option. The status of the longer ending as 'canon' seemed to change after the game was released in comics and other follow-up media. To speculate why that might be the case empirically is interesting. When we do so, it appears to be a response to players exercising their agency en masse – choosing to 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay' in larger numbers than the developers did not expect.

The end of Life Is Strange: By numbers

Every decision players make in Life Is Strange is collated in the cloud and is freely available to examine in the game's 'world statistics' pages (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). Our first observation is that when Max has a choice favouring Chloe, players overwhelmingly choose that outcome. For example, 78 per cent of players, when asked to side with Chloe or her stepfather in an argument, sided with Chloe. The number of players who chose to kiss Chloe when dared to was exactly the same.

Similarly, when choices involved Warren, players selected 'passive' options. For example, Max can leave a flirty message on Warren's slate in his room. Only 20 per cent of players did so. Only 22 per cent of players opted to help Warren with an exam – and so on. The statistics are slightly different for the key choice of whether Max kisses Warren in the diner. Sixty-seven per cent of players chose that option. Max's journal entry frames this as an 'end

[4] Life Is Strange has prequels and sequels where queer relationships are central to story. For example, Life Is Strange: Before the Storm explores Chloe's relationship with Rachel Amber the young woman Max and Chloe are trying to find in the original game.

of the world' moment, which also seems a reasonable interpretation from a player's perspective.

Given this data, it seems relatively few players chose heteronormative or aromantic characterizations for Max, with the majority – around 78 per cent – playing through the game as 'gay' or 'panromantic' or, at the very least, siding closely with Chloe. A statistically significant player base exists, with 3 million downloads by 2017 (Dontnod Entertainment 2017). It suggests that the c.22 per cent of players who persisted with a heteronormative approach did so in a concerted effort to subvert the encoded narrative.

As for the final choice, world stats for Life Is Strange show that 52 per cent of players chose the 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending, and 48 per cent chose 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay'. However, these statistics bear further scrutiny. No separate numbers exist for those who sacrificed Chloe with the final 'in love' condition met, but we can estimate the split confidently. If 22 per cent of players persistently chose not to side with Chloe throughout the game, we can assume that a similar percentage chose the 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending too. That would mean that in around 22 per cent of cases (more or less), Max and Chloe parted as 'best friends' instead of lovers. The remaining 30 per cent chose a version of the 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending where the pair shared a final kiss: the ending strongly encoded into the text as 'canon' (Dontnod Entertainment 2015).

However, that leaves 48 per cent who chose to save Chloe instead of the town and all the 'people' in it. In other words, the largest number of players picked an unambiguously queer conclusion for Chloe and Max, but not the ending developers assumed they would select or had primed them to choose. Butt and Dunne summarize the choice at the end of the game as a variant of the Trolley Problem (2017: 438). In this ethical dilemma, an individual can save five people tied to tramlines by diverting an out-of-control trolley car to a line with a single person tied to it. If the individual acts, one person dies. If they do nothing, five will perish. From a utilitarian perspective, the assumed outcome is that choosing intervention will do the least harm. In the context of the game, there are unsavoury metatextual issues of assumed value: the value of women and queer lives (Butt and Dunne 2017: 445). Despite the game's careful and insistent cajoling of players and the repeated exposure to and rehearsal of Chloe's loss, a substantial proportion of those playing as gay still chose to sacrifice the town.

Follow-up media have doubled down on the statistically popular 'save the bae' ending. In 2018 a series of comics followed Max and Chloe's adventures after the 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay' ending rather than the 'Sacrifice Chloe' ending. A sequel to Life Is Strange – Before the Storm (Deck Nine 2017) – also established a new canon that Chloe's relationship with

Rachel Amber (the missing girl in the original game) was romantic – and did so without vacillation. Whether prompted by fan reaction, the statistics or as a response to accusations of 'queerbaiting' from some sections of the internet, the new canon was apparent; Chloe and Max were intended to end up in a continuing relationship. From this perspective, the game itself is 'counter-hegemonic', subverting 'traditional ways of thinking about gender and sexuality' (Biscop et al. 2019: 35). It is a perspective picked up in other analyses of the ending. Butt and Dunne characterize it as 'an act of rebellion' (2017: 436), and Henderson sees it as 'a defiance of a long history of (the) Buried Gays (trope) in storytelling' (2019: 5).

Encoding and decoding

This leads us to a curious empirical situation where game players, when given a choice, statistically and 'democratically' voted to identify with a textual reading that seems counter-cultural. Players overwhelmingly chose to be gay in both endings. The precise reasons for this, on a granular level, are beyond the scope of the current discussion. However, we can conclude by highlighting reception processes and speculating.

Structural analysis allows us to look at the component levels of interactive stories, challenging the argument that narrative is hard-coded. We can also tackle this at the ideological level of the whole text with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (2012: 137). Hall's position is that 'sign vehicles' are decoded or, in a sense, reconstructed upon reception by the decoder-receiver's frameworks of knowledge or 'structures of understanding'. This leads to the broad adoption of one of three meaning-outcomes – acceptance of the dominant or 'hegemonic' reading, a negotiated reading or an oppositional reading – a spectrum of decoding-reception responses (Hall 2012: 143–44). When we apply reception theory to the outcomes of Life Is Strange, we must reframe our assumptions about power, particularly in a digital narrative age.

A dominant (or 'hegemonic') reading is one where a reader (or, in this case, a player) fully accepts the 'preferred' reading of the text. However, when considering the gameplay statistics, our structural analysis, intratextual elements and other academic readings, we estimated that only 30 per cent of players selected the ending that developers originally intended to be 'canon'. The ending the developers directed players to was one where Max is in love with Chloe, but sacrifices Chloe to save the town. This challenges the usual sense of the term 'hegemony', conferring a level of power to the author/developer to set a counter-cultural agenda.

An overwhelming number, 48 per cent, chose an ending that Hall characterizes as a 'negotiated' – one where readers or players broadly accept a preferred reading but modify it to fit their own identity and values. It is an ending where most players find it more satisfying

to sacrifice every other character in the game to save one. If we revisit the ‘Trolley Problem’, this negotiation of reading is all the more significant. Rather than seeking a utilitarian solution, most players chose identity and self over conventional ethics, aligning more closely with libertarian values of freedom from collectivism and coercion.

What would traditionally be the ‘hegemonic’ reading is not hegemonic at all. While a player can take a heteronormative approach to playing Life Is Strange, the statistics suggest it was far from popular – perhaps because it was a reading that would take a player an effort of will (and bad faith) to accomplish. The possibility of gay erasure or assimilation into ‘cisgender and heterosexual society’ has consistently been one of the game’s more controversial outcomes (Fredenburg 2019: 107). Whatever claims narrative adventure games make to feature choices with consequences, those consequences have hard limits or affordances built in. A gay outcome for the two main characters is very strongly encoded. The story is told in multiple ways – and the ‘gameplay’ experience is not the only narrative experience. For example, Renee Drouin claims in ‘Games of archiving queerly’ that Max’s in-game journal ‘inputs queerness into the character’ even when playing as a ‘presumed heterosexual character’ (2019: 29). The example given is Max’s response to a point in the story when Chloe dares Max to kiss her. Max can refuse, and the narrative index we might take from that is ‘Max is not interested in Chloe in a romantic way’. In contrast, Max’s journal will say, ‘I would have, but I didn’t like being dared’, continuing that she was more concerned about being tied down – ‘I’m too young for marriage’ – than revealing her sexual orientation. Drouin suggests this is the authentic narrative ‘its sincerity and accuracy about Max’s feelings is unquestionable’ (2019: 29).

Authentic outcomes, identity and agency

A ‘straight’ playthrough of Life Is Strange – with Chloe as the troubled best friend and Warren Graham as a potential boyfriend on the sidelines – produces an oppositional reading (Hall 2012: 143–44). Indeed, any outcome a player experiences where Max is not ‘in love’ with Chloe is oppositional to the author/developer’s preferred reading of the text. However, there is no way to guarantee an ending that reflects the player’s intent without foreknowledge of those endings.

Functional choices directly impact the game’s state machine, leading to one of three different story endings. Indicative choices allow players to shape the tone and emotional impact of the narrative. While players make both kinds of choice, the game mechanics only afford a set of functional outcomes determined by the developer’s encoding of the text. For example, even in the (statistically improbable) circumstance that the player chooses to sacrifice Arcadia Bay instead of Chloe in an otherwise ‘straight’ playthrough, the game will end with Chloe and

Max as romantic partners. In other words, Life Is Strange is queer at the encoding level, is encoded as a counter-hegemonic text, as Biscop observes (Biscop et al. 2019: 38). Any other reading afforded by the text is wilfully inauthentic. Echoing Norman's description of the relationship between objects and agents, heteronormative players are left with the cognitive dissonance of two conflicting state machines – the one in the game and the one in their heads.

It is also clear that of the three 'functional' story endings, the developers strongly favoured one that was hegemonically moral. They wanted players to 'save the bay'. But the authentic choice for many – almost half of all players – was to subvert that hegemony and impose a negotiated counter-reading imbued with queerness as a verb.

Players of Life Is Strange are afforded an etheric illusion of agency, a series of functional choices that allow players to follow branches of story and a series of indicative choices that can strongly tailor narrative experience. Both are enabled within the limits of game mechanics and the relationship players have with them. Players were able to choose an 'alternate ending' in statistically large numbers, but games like Life Is Strange are still a series of interactive and 'interesting decisions' that influence systems of states – in the world of the game and in the player. Those states are finite on both sides of the system divide. Ultimately, the only possible outcome for players of Life Is Strange is inclusive of gay sexual preferences.

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