

Life Is Strange: The Role of Consequences in Player Decisions and Character Development

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Game Title: *Life Is Strange*

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, Linux, OSX

Genre: Episodic Graphic Adventure

Release Date: January 30, 2015

Developer: Dontnod Entertainment

Publisher: Square Enix

Creative Director: Raoul Barbet, Michel Koch

Overview

Photography student Max Caulfield has returned to her hometown of Arcadia Bay after a several year absence. She's enrolled herself in the seniors-only Blackwell Academy of arts and sciences, motivated by her interest in famous photography instructor, Mark Jefferson. Max is soon witness to a shooting by Nathan Prescott against her childhood friend Chloe Price, and gains the ability to turn back time. With her new powers, Max prevents the shooting and reconnects with Chloe, who brings the murder and abuse of several women in town to Max's attention, including the disappearance of her close friend, Rachel Amber.

The connection between Max and Chloe continues to grow as their investigation continues, but Max's abilities begin to pose a threat to herself and the world around her. Eventually, it is made clear that Mark Jefferson was behind Rachel's disappearance, and he kidnaps Max, who frees herself and jumps back in time to prevent Chloe's death at his hands. Max reunites with Chloe again, and she must decide if she will try to keep her alive, or turn back time once more and sacrifice Chloe to save Arcadia Bay.

Characters

- **MAXINE CAULFIELD** – The player character, Max is a senior photography student at the highly acclaimed Blackwell Academy. She was born in Arcadia Bay, and was very close with Chloe Price, but left for Seattle with her parents in her early teens. Somewhat reserved, but highly responsible and observant, Max is searching for what makes her unique, while also trying to ingratiate herself into an environment where she often feels she is merely an observer.

- **CHLOE PRICE** – An emotionally charged and brazen punk rocker, Chloe was one of Max’s closest friends when she was still living in Arcadia Bay. Chloe stayed in the area with her mother following her father’s death. She was romantically involved before the events of the game with Rachel Amber, and is highly motivated to solving her disappearance. She acts as the primary partner and foil to Max throughout the narrative.
- **MARK JEFFERSON** – The charismatic and attractive photography teacher at Blackwell Academy, as well as the primary antagonist of the narrative. It’s shown in the final episodes that Mark Jefferson has a sociopathic devotion to his craft, which leads him to kidnapping, drugging, and often killing female students of Blackwell, using Nathan Prescott’s resources and influence to carry out his desires.
- **KATE MARSH** – Extremely kind and sensitive, but highly depressed, Kate Marsh is one of the few out and out friends that Max has at Blackwell before meeting Chloe. Devoutly religious, she’s become emotionally distraught following the release of a viral video showing her making out with several members of the Vortex Club, an event she only remembers in flashes. These events, and the depression that follows in their wake, eventually pushes her to attempt suicide.
- **NATHAN PRESCOTT** – Highly unstable and emotionally neglected, Nathan is the only son of the Prescott family, who own a significant amount of Arcadia Bay and have strong ties to Blackwell Academy. Aggressive, spoiled, and quick to anger, he conducts acts of emotional and physical violence against those he feels cross him, and acts as the focus for Max and Chloe’s investigation into Rachel’s disappearance.
- **RACHEL AMBER** – Chloe’s close friend and romantic interest, Rachel is presented primarily through conversation, having died before the events of the game. She was clearly ambitious and intelligent, but was regarded very differently by all of those who knew her; Chloe refers to her as “an angel,” while Nathan calls her a “fiend on her own.” Her death and disappearance are the catalysts that lead to the events of the narrative.

Breakdown

As branching game narratives continue to expand in scope, allowing a multitude of varied endings and expressed characters, the impact of each player choice in these branching paths can be lost, or made frivolous in the wider view of the game as a whole. In effective narratives, character (and in this case, player) choices must have consequences in the long and short term, which affect both the character themselves and those around them. *Life Is Strange*, in providing the player with the ability to undo the immediate consequences of these decisions, allows the character of Max to be better developed by the player moment to moment, while still allowing long term consequences to determine how her character arc will come to a close overall.

The relationship the player and Max share is one that is becoming increasingly common in narrative driven games- Max is her own, separate entity, defined by her own circumstances and interests, rather than directly by the player. However, the player’s choices are also Max’s, and through those choices her development as a character is given greater weight.

The player, as Max, can make choices that are ultimately wrong, that only serve to hurt Max in the long term. But the player has a limited window wherein they can exert their influence, and once the decision is made, it's final. When Max chooses to stand up for Chloe against her step-father, or ignores a call for help from her depressive friend Kate Marsh, or any other of a number of decisions made throughout *Life Is Strange*, the player is choosing to define her character through their decisions, in the long and short term. They are determining who "their" Max is, and what she values and desires when all the cards are on the table. Max is uniquely situated to undo her mistakes, to manipulate each moment in the narrative to as perfect an outcome as she can possibly achieve. And it is through this manipulation that her and the player's relationship with each other, and the consequences of the game overall, are brought into focus.

Max laments her perceived "role" in the world of Arcadia Bay. She is an observer, someone watching from the outside, and it's only when Chloe is put in danger, and her new ability becomes apparent, that she begins to directly intervene in the events unfolding around her. Max is a photographer, and her desire to make each moment "perfect" is as evident in her craft as it is in how she reacts to the consequences of Chloe's death. But she cannot be both observer and manipulator- the two cannot coincide. She, at every turn, is deciding who is more or less important to her than everyone else. When she prevents Chloe's death time and time again, despite a ceaseless barrage of evidence that her actions are destroying the world around her, she is screaming out for the player to hear, "Chloe is more important than everyone, than all of Arcadia Bay."

And from this Chloe emerges as Max's primary foil. Max sees confidence and spontaneity in Chloe, the self-assurance to walk into a room and become the center of attention. But beyond even that, Chloe is ready to change everything, to exert her will onto a world that has dealt her the worst possible hand. This willingness feeds into Max over time, and it is only through Chloe accepting the consequences of the world around her that she can impart this onto Max. But Max will interpret this acceptance in different ways, all based around how the player chooses to play as, and thus interpret, Max as a character.

It's from there that it becomes clear that, for every decision the player makes, *Life Is Strange* is adamant about who Max is as a character. From the very start of the game, when Nathan Prescott fires a gun into Chloe's stomach, Max cannot accept her death, and this is true for the majority of the narrative. It is her primary motivation, and the sticking point that comes up over and over as she tries to turn back time to reach the consequences that she is willing to endure. And the player has power over which of these consequences occur; but their reach only extends so far. This limit, on how much and for how long the player can truly change the outcome of every decision, is the dilemma to which Max must ultimately either succumb or accept the consequences of. She's not perfect, she's human. And she can only do so much.

Despite her best intentions, Max is a force of chaos in Arcadia Bay. When all of space-time is rendered the plaything of a high school student, the consequences must reach beyond her, beyond a murder investigation, and it is the overwhelming nature of this responsibility and the consequences that come with it that underlie Max's struggle. She can only see what comes right

after her decisions in any given moment, and it is because of her immaturity as a character that she fights so desperately to leave it behind every time.

It is her view of these moments, that they can be discarded and rendered null with the flick of a wrist, that betrays how limited Max's scope of how she affects other truly is. As said by Chloe about her dead father, "It has to be somebody's fault, otherwise it's all mine. Fuck that!" Max cannot defend against that statement, when her view of the world and the little decisions that change everything around her has become so prominent. All of these short-term consequences are kept within the reach of Max herself, within an understandable scope, until very suddenly her effect on the world is shown to be much deeper than anticipated. The narrative of *Life Is Strange* constantly plays with this, and makes certain that the player is engaged by this dilemma every time they turn back time, whether in response to a major decision, or merely idle chatter with students at Blackwell.

At one point in the narrative, Max is able to completely undo the events of Chloe's life, turning back time to when they were children and Chloe's father was killed. Her decision, however, leaves Chloe paralyzed from the neck down, with slowly failing lungs. This Chloe, a Chloe that Max has only really "known" for a few hours, asks her provide her with an assisted suicide. Max, eventually, leaves behind this timeline for her own, but the consequences of her decisions here are inescapable. The game even presents a third option during this pivotal branch, the only one in the entire narrative- "I don't know." It doesn't allow the player to back away, and doubles down if they try. They must take responsibility for this moment, for what Max has done. Max's desire to escape the consequences of all of her decisions are impossible, simply because she cannot escape herself. Who Max is, at her core, is as determined by the consequences of her decisions as by the decisions themselves.

Yes, she can return to where she was, in the short term. She can return to the investigation with Chloe, in the short term. But she created a world where Chloe was suffering, deeply in pain, and is forced to decide how she will address that pain. In some way, that Chloe's timeline still exists, and Max knows it. In the long term, she's leaving a wake in her footsteps, as she abandons timeline after timeline, trying to find the one where she and Chloe can be together without consequence. She will never find it, and she is forced to confront this as the game draws to a climax.

Max and the player are kept at a distance from their consequences until the tail end of the narrative as a whole. By and large, very little directly happens to Max, regardless of what she does, until Mr. Jefferson kidnaps her and kills Chloe when the two discover Rachel's remains. And it's here that Jefferson is presented as the pinnacle of ignoring consequence, long and short term, who Max could eventually become. His decisions are incredibly far reaching, and deeply traumatize many of the people he interacts with on a daily basis. Even when confronted with Chloe, Rachel's former lover, he doesn't even break for a moment to consider what impact he's had on her by taking Rachel's life. He is an extreme foil for Max, and one that shapes her character in the game's final moments.

Jefferson is overcome by Max, but his impact on her character development is put in the hands of the player when they are tasked with game's final decision- save Arcadia, or save Chloe. And

Max truly doesn't want to make this final decision. When she escapes Jefferson, she jumps through time, again and again, trying to find that perfect outcome once more- but it doesn't exist. The world is ending outside, her powers leading storms and typhoons to Arcadia Bay, and there is no way she can just leave that behind, and still keep Chloe safe.

At every turn, *Life Is Strange* posits that if Max can undo any decision, then she must, at least at first, perceive the alternative branch as frivolous. If she made Decision A, then Decision B and its own consequences has to be regarded as less valuable to her or her goals overall. But, this is where Max must grow, and view the world from a wider, more mature perspective.

The choices made are just as important as the choices not made- the words spoken are just as important as the words left unsaid. Max's perception of her decisions, in this way, evolves over the course of the narrative. It is how she, as a character, is developed by the events of the narrative and the consequences of her decisions. Even when she leaves her choices behind, as she does continuously throughout the story, or when she literally abandons the alternate timeline, it's being constantly reinforced that her decisions matter, even when she tries to ignore them. "It has to be somebody's fault, otherwise it's all mine." Max can never discount this statement, not completely. But it is when she reaches the end of her arc, that she can accept it.

Max, over the course of the narrative, has changed. It is clear that, no matter what happens to her in the future, even if she rewinds time endlessly, she will never forget the decisions she made, the consequences they incurred, and the people they effected. Throughout their time together, Chloe expresses fear that Max will eventually forget about her, that everyone in her life will abandon her given the chance. This comes to a head when the alternate timeline Chloe is killed- her last words are, "Don't forget about me," as she sinks into eternal rest. Through her power, Max proves Chloe wrong, time and time again. She will never forget about her. These events, no matter what, will always be a part of her. Just because these events, these consequences, can be undone, doesn't mean that they are not valid. And it is upon this point that the player decides how Max will react to this new understanding.

In the final sequence of the game, the player is tasked with saving Arcadia Bay or Chloe. The decision is final. And it is with this decision that they determine how the character arc of Max comes to a close. They can choose to save Chloe, and the two ride off into uncertainty, swallowed by the storm. This decision is the one most reflective of Jefferson's mentality, that consequences can be ignored so long as others are made to suffer in your place. The people of Arcadia Bay, perhaps the whole world, will have to suffer for Max to have her way. Chloe will have to suffer the guilt of being placed above everyone she knew and loved. And this is a valid conclusion to Max's character arc, as presented by *Life Is Strange*. However, it's clear that this is not the outcome the game finds in keeping with its own themes. It's ambiguous, and leaves little for the player to interpret. They must infer their own consequences here- the future is uncertain.

But *Life is Strange* is willing to do this. If Max follows this route, then she is admitting that there is no future for her without Chloe. It is her viewing the decisions she's made as exclusively the correct ones, and leaves no room for her to have been mistaken. It is an inhuman, childish position, and one that is further rebuked should the player choose to have her go back in time, one last time, and allow events to unfold when Nathan shot Chloe at the beginning of the game.

This ending is poignant, and clearly filled with sorrow and anguish. But there is no regret here. Even when Max attends Chloe's funeral, it's clear that she will always have who Chloe was inside of her. She has taken on her foil as closely as she can, and as a character has come full circle. She has seen a world shaped by her decisions, by her consequences, and is ready to give over to those around her. Even if she remains a force of chaos, she will be no less chaotic than everyone around her. *Life Is Strange*, in presenting everything here in this way, finally has an answer for Chloe.

The consequences of each decision here, down to Max choosing to undo it all, was deliberate. And while the long term end of these consequences may never fully come to light, Max can, from here, accept all the decisions she and others make, and the consequences that come with them. It's only by presenting choices that run counter to Max's development that the consequences of each moment are made clear and given any true narrative weight. If all the decisions of the narrative were made without the player's input, they would stand alone, but could not hope to achieve nearly the level of emotional engagement that *Life Is Strange* commands. And though Chloe will have never met with Max in this new timeline, her effect on Max and the player is tantamount to their understanding that she will never be forgotten.

Strongest Element

Chloe as a foil to Max is among the most effective elements of storytelling presented in *Life is Strange*. It is rare to see a companion to the main character that so thoroughly reflects what that main character wants to be, but is clearly unable to become. From her sudden and bombastic appearance in Episode One, to the single-minded determination to find and punish those who had taken Rachel in Episode Four, Chloe could be considered the polar opposite of Max if it weren't so clear that the two were changing each other as the events of the game went on. As she grows, Max becomes more daring, more spontaneous, and more passionate. Barely able to speak to others at first, she has the confidence to squeeze information out of Nathan at the diner in Episode Three and accost Jefferson in Episode Five. Chloe also unapologetically contains many negative character traits, which only serve to reinforce just how strong Max's relationship with her is overall. Her philosophy on life and the consequences of others' decisions shape both the player's understanding of the game's themes and Max as a character overall, and the narrative would be much more lacking with her absence. Jefferson could act as a strong counterpoint to Max's journey, but she must be there to represent the game's constant question: do your decisions truly matter?

Unsuccessful Element

The contemporary environment of *Life Is Strange* greatly defines many of the characters and situations throughout. It's only in a world so like our own that death is given significant, lasting meaning, and a character's favorite piece of media tells the player an excessive amount about them. However, the language and phrases used throughout *Life Is Strange* can sometimes be at odds with this environment, and it is clear in many sections that, even if the intention was to make a character seem awkward or immature, the dialogue doesn't land. Pivotal moments can be interrupted and in some cases, undone, because a character used a piece of modern slang just a touch too often. While this may have been intentional in some cases, it happens with too much jarring frequency to be discounted as an aesthetic choice of the writing.

Highlight

When Max is faced with the decision to kiss Chloe in Episode Three, regardless of their decision overall, the player is definitely determining how Max will view Chloe from that point on. Indeed, this is one of the only decisions the player makes regarding their overall relationship, and most importantly, the immediate reaction by Chloe, regardless of their decision, is highly subdued. The short-term consequences of this moment are minor, but it's understood by the player that this moment is only the start of something new for Max. All of this is communicated so subtly, yet so effectively, and implies so much more about the narrative as a whole. And regardless of the decision made at this juncture, it shows an emotional and reckless side to the characters that wasn't immediately evident beforehand.

Critical Reception

While overall *Life Is Strange* was released to critical acclaim (earning the BAFTA Game Award for Best Story, with a Metacritic score of 85/100), each episode garnered different reactions from the review space. Many criticized the slowness of Episode Two, others the sudden shift away

from the new timeline in Episode Three, and others still took great issue with the puzzle construction of Episode Five. However, as a whole, the game received significant acclaim for its writing, characters, and time rewind mechanic, and has gained a strong following, having sold 1.2 million copies worldwide by the end of 2015.

Lessons

- **The player and the player character must be intertwined, yet separate, entities.** Game narratives often struggle with maintaining the illusion of complete player immersion. So many work to keep the player in complete control of who their character is, they are effectively a blank slate or a soulless avatar. Remaining immersed, while still allowing the player character to retain a sense of self, is critical for game narratives going forward.
- **Consequences for each decision must be varied in impact and immediacy.** Predictability, especially in the long-term, is the enemy of any writer not trying to achieve a sense of dramatic irony. Each decision made by the player character must have consequence, but how significant those consequences are and when they appear should feel variable. Make the immediate reaction clear, as best you can, but what is down the road should remain a mystery.
- **Not all choices are created equal.** If the choices of the player leads them to a conclusion that is less in keeping with the themes of narrative or character arc overall, so be it. This is their narrative as much as it is your own, and their participation must be satiated at every turn. However, it is more than acceptable for some choices to lead to more content, to provide a greater character arc, than others. This is not punishment, this is acknowledgement as the writer that you know what will fit for the story overall, rather than for an individual player. Recognize when these choices are not equal, and provide for each as best you can.

Summation

The decisions made by the player through the course of *Life Is Strange* are as impactful on themselves as they are on the player character of Max. The consequences that unfold throughout the game ultimately determine who Max becomes, while also placing the immediate and extended impact of those consequences on the player and their relationship with Max. Each decision can be undone, but no decision can be ignored, and what is chosen is just as significant as what is not. In placing this level of responsibility on the player, to interpret and understand the consequences of Max's decisions on the world of Arcadia Bay, *Life Is Strange* brings the relationship of the player and the player character to the forefront, making Max's character development respond and take the shape of how the player chooses to play as her. This is done to incredible emotional effect, and is only possible by presenting choices or character beats that the player themselves can choose that are less in keeping with Max overall. By providing these choices, and the context to understand them, their consequences are that much more important, and take on a deeper level of meaning in the narrative as a whole.