The Education University of Hong Kong

ENG4424 Honors Project II Research Report

An Honors Project entitled

'I own the power of life itself.': Life and Death in the context of Time Travel in *Life is Strange*

Submitted by

Wong Tsz Ching

Supervised by

Dr. WANG Ying, Jamie

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Declaration

I, Wong Tsz Ching, declare that this research project represents my own work under

the supervision of Dr. Wang Ying, Jamie, and that it has not been submitted

previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signed

Wong Tsz Ching

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Introduction

Life is Strange is a 2015 video game developed by Dontnod Entertainment and published by Square Enix. The game has won awards in some of the most prestigious awards in the game industry, including The Game Awards' Games for Impact Award in 2015, which is an award for "a thought-provoking game with a pro-social meaning or message" (The Game Awards). Life is Strange is a five-episode story-based game that allows the player to choose their preferred actions and dialogues which would lead to different consequences. The story is about Maxine 'Max' Caulfield, an 18-year-old high school student living in Arcadia Bay who has gained the power to rewind time, trying to save lives by making changes to past events. She discovered her power by accidentally activating it to save the life of her childhood best friend, Chloe Price, after taking a picture of a blue butterfly. Then, they proceed to investigate the case of the missing student Rachel Amber and deal with problems in school and the possible destruction of Arcadia Bay. The game discusses themes such as suicide, bullying, chaos theory, human psychology as well as philosophical ideas.

In an interview, game director Raoul Barbet mentioned that they wanted to explore those topics because they are unavoidable as a teenager (Pickard). However,

very few look into the theme of life and death in the story even though it is featured

throughout the story and is in the unique context of time travel. Therefore, it is crucial

that this theme of the game shall be discussed.

Literature Review

Scholars like Cogburn and Silcox try to explain the philosophy in video games,

they suggest that it is surprising that philosophers pay little attention to video games,

considering how "philosophy itself is a game" (vii). For Life is Strange, the different

topics this game featured gained the interest of many scholars.

Butt and Dunne argue that the choice of either choosing the "rebel girl" character

Chloe over the world or sacrificing her for the "greater good", is a sign of punishing

rebel women (435). They also suggest that women being sacrificed is a form of

sexism and it enforces the domination over women (445). Although the theme of life

and death is touched on in their argument, they did not have a deep discussion on this

topic.

De Miranda chose philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's script for the movie Les Jeux Sont Faits as a copilot to look into the theme of existentialism in Life is Strange, he suggests that video games can be simulators of philosophical ideas, as they allow "players to simulate heavy ethical or emotional choices without irreversible consequences" (836). While most of the unwanted progress in the game can be avoided by choosing to rewind time and approach the incident differently, being in other words, "reversible", some of the choices are in fact irreversible. These choices are related to life and death, for example, if the player failed to persuade the character Kate Marsh to not commit suicide, she would die and this is irreversible, players cannot save her life with the rewinding ability Max possessed nor by reloading the checkpoint in "Options". Therefore, most choices can indeed be arguably made "without irreversible consequences", however, the ones that are related to life and death are designed with unique mechanics, proving that this theme is worth looking into.

Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz propose that the game was a representation of human psychology (3). However, while they made points about loss and grief, they ultimately suggested that the time travel elements were imagined by Max as a

psychological defense mechanism (6). This claim was not supported by the ending of the game. In episode 5 of the game, the culprit of the missing cases was revealed and it was the teacher, Mark Jefferson. At the end of the game, if you chose to sacrifice Chloe by rewinding time to the very beginning and not saving her, there would be pictures showing Mark Jefferson being arrested soon. Due to the fact that Mark Jefferson being the culprit in both the current timeline and the timeline Max had experienced in her time-traveling experiences, this proves that her time-traveling ability was not imagined, as Max would not know it was Mark Jefferson who is responsible for the missing cases if she never investigated the case with Chloe in the erased timeline. Another evidence would be the distant relationship between Max and Chloe at the start of the game, if her time-traveling experiences were imagined, Max would not have known anything about the present Chloe as well as her relationship with Rachel due to the fact that they have not met each other for years, Max would not even have recognized her in the bathroom where she was killed and cried for her death in there due to how different Chloe's appearance is compared to when they were best friends. Hence, Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz have made some questionable claims with the perspective of human psychological conditions, and they have not elaborated on their thoughts on the life and death elements in this game.

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It is clear that while there are studies done about several topics and themes that this game features, including the women in the game, human psychology, existentialism, and dealing with consequences, surprisingly, there was not one that focuses on the theme of life and death in this game. Even if this theme was mentioned, a deep analysis or discussion is not present. A possible reason for this is that the game is still fairly new compared to other forms of literature, as it was published in 2015. As a result, not many had given their thoughts on the topics featured in the game, let alone analyzing the theme of life and death in this game. Moreover, it seems that many points made were questionable and details were also not observed cautiously, especially when it comes to details that are related to life and death. Furthermore, the relationships between time travel and life and death are also often overlooked.

Main Argument

Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz propose that Life is Strange is not predominantly about time travel, rather the game is about human psychology. In their account, Max's time-traveling ability is merely her hallucinations (6). While I agree with the first part

of the statement, I disagree with the second part as I find their arguments

questionable. I argue that the game Life is Strange is not predominantly about time

travel, instead, time travel is used as a unique context to examine how players would

react and grapple with life and death situations as well as the consequences if they are

offered almost "absolute" control. The level of control offered seem absolute, but at

the same time there are limitations to its use, creating an illusion of control for

players. This game creates a hypothetical context where players would make

decisions about life and death while possessing this rather flawed power. This

argument was made because many like Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz suggest different

theories on the meaning of Max's time-traveling abilities, such as it being

hallucinations and relating her abilities with trauma. However, none has related her

abilities with her purpose of using those abilities, which is saving lives. Considering

the fact that her abilities were activated due to the death of Chloe and her usage of her

abilities was to change the fates of different people, looking at the game from the

perspective of life and death makes sense. As for the reason why time travel should be

discussed with the theme of life and death, it is clear that time-travelling abilities are

selected on purpose for players to struggle during their gameplay, resulting in

valuable reflections. Unlike abilities like resurrection which would have given players

absolute control, time-travelling abilities as I have mentioned, have limitations,

causing an illusion of control. This high level of control may cause players to react

differently compared to what they would do if the same events happened in real life,

while at the same time, the illusion of control in some of those events may have

caused players to fail tasks they would originally success in.

The three research questions of this project are listed below:

1. How is life and death related to time travel in the game?

2. How does the control and mastery granted by time-travelling abilities affect our

values and actions towards life and death in the game?

3. How are the life and death consequences caused by the illusion of control presented

in the game?

Research Design & Methodology

The main body of this project will be divided into three main parts, each corresponding to one of the research questions. With the first research question, I aim to analyze the relationship between time travelling and the theme of life and death. Its corresponding part aims to prove 1.) the game is not mainly about time travel, it is only a context, 2.) the analysis in the following two parts is indeed unique under the context of time travel and 3.) the relationship between time travel and life and death is established on purpose. As for the second question, I aim to analyze how players with high level control would react differently compared to what they would have probably do if they encounter the same events in real life. In the third part, I aim to show that this level of control leads to players have an illusion of absolute control and how this feeling would affect the life and death of others.

Since this paper aims to analyze how players would react to life and death situations in the game, my experience as a player and game statistics of major choices chose by players in the world would be examined.

To analyze our decisions, Shelly Kagan's views and interpretations on life and death from his book, Death, will be engaged with. His views on the value of life, the

badness of death as well as suicide would be used for the analysis. Moreover, the

scholars' discussion on life and death recorded in the Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy would also be taken into consideration. In the encyclopedia, the scholars'

discussions on topics such as suicide will also be extremely relevant and useful for my

reading of the game.

Additionally, interpretations and theories about time travel will be used to help

analyze players' actions and the consequences of their actions. The edited volume

Time Travel in Popular Media: Essays on Film, Television, Literature and Video

Games edited by Matthew Jones and Joan Ormrod consist of numerous articles about

time travel in popular media, explaining the unique features time travel offers. Travis

L. Martin and Owen R. Horton explained how time travel promises mastery and how

time travelers are in control (198). These articles would provide some valuable

insights as well. Psychology theories would also be used to analyze player's

behaviours.

Research Question 1: How is life and death related to time travel in the game?

Time Travel as a Unique Context

One of the most intriguing elements of the game is time travel. In the game, Max witnessed the argument between Chloe and Nathan in the bathroom after taking a photo of a blue butterfly. Right after Nathan accidentally shot Chloe in the conflict, Max's temporal rewind ability was activated, sending her back to where she was a few minutes ago. As the story progresses, she was also able to time travel to the different moments in the past temporarily using the photos that captured those moments. She was able to make changes when she travelled back in time, and she used these abilities throughout the entire story. However, the changes she made caused butterfly effects and resulted in a disaster that would later destroy the entire town.

The element of "time travel" is the central gameplay mechanic of the game. However, while the game did explore the potential consequences of time travel, in my opinion, the butterfly effects of time travelling itself are not the main focus of the game. From my perspective as the player of the game, the butterfly effects caused by the act of excessive time travelling itself generally lack importance in the story. For example, the excessive times of Max using her time-travelling abilities caused butterfly effects such as whale mass strandings and the existence of two moons. These effects were stunning for sure, but they only served as warnings of her excessive use of her abilities. None of them has a significant effect to the plot, except for the

supernatural storm at the end of the story. Max was able to continue to use her abilities regardless. Even with the strongest butterfly effect, which is the supernatural storm that destroys the town, players can make the decision of ignoring the storm and escaping the town with Chloe. By taking this "selfish" act, the storm, being the consequence of the act of time travelling and the most significant butterfly effect, would have served no purpose. Therefore, it is not sufficient to think that this story mainly features the effects of the act of time travelling. An example in popular culture where the effects of the act of time travelling itself had clear significance to the plot would be the *Androids Saga* from the manga series *Dragon Ball*. The character Trunks travelled back in time with his time machine to warn the main characters about the androids destroying humanity in the future. However, this resulted in Cell, one of the androids from another future, travelled to the past using Trunks's own time machine in that timeline, threatening the fate of the world in the past as well. In this example, the consequences of the act of time travel itself was highlighted. It suggests that the act of time travelling itself is so harmful that the simple existence of time machines can already potentially lead to more harm, despite that the original intention of the time machine's creation is good. However, Trunks' life-saving actions in the past such as saving the lives of the main character Son Goku, his own mother and his

younger self, had led to nothing but positive consequences. It is clear that for *Dragon Ball*, the consequences and problems of the act of time travelling itself are highlighted rather than the lives time travellers affected during their journey to the past. It is the complete opposite of *Life is Strange* as the effects caused by the act of time travelling itself was not as important in the game, the life and death of characters though are the centre of the story. Max's concerns in these decisions were never on whether or not to use her time-travelling powers but instead on how to save the people she cares about. And sometimes, the ability to rewind time was not the key to achieving her goal, rather it may even affect her (the player) psychologically and lead to potential failures. Therefore, it becomes evident that the primary focus of *Life is Strange* was not the act of time travelling itself.

Then, what is the significance of time travel in the game? De Miranda suggested that video games can be simulators of philosophical ideas, as they allow "players to simulate heavy ethical or emotional choices without irreversible consequences" (836). In my opinion, the element of time travel, like the genre of video game itself, is a simulator. It is used to create a hypothetical context where players make decisions about life and death while possessing the power of time travel. No one has the ability to control whether someone lives or dies. Yet, with the power

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of rewinding time, by making different decisions and actions, the fate of people can be changed. This power offers players a certain degree of control, hence, leads to players potentially making choices that would be different from what they normally would do. In this case, this hypothetical context enables us to examine how people behave differently when they have control over human lives.

However, this form of control granted by time travelling abilities is unique compared to the control of life and death granted by other forms of power as it has limitations. Unlike the power to resurrect life, time travellers have to work and think of strategies to save lives, the results they may achieve are uncertain, as changing one thing in the past may not automatically lead to the result they want. Also, unlike the power to directly sense when someone would die, time travellers do not actually have full knowledge with one's lifespan as they only have knowledge on their known history. Every decision or action they made in the past would just lead to a new future and new events, so time travellers have to constantly deal with uncertainty when it comes to life and death as they have to keep trying, again and again. This hints that this form of power is associated with repetition. Repeating tasks again and again could dull one's sense in the process, causing time travellers to be careless and potentially overlooking details, hence, leading to more possible failures with

following events, meaning that they may not be as in control as they think since time-travelling abilities exploit the weaknesses of humans. Therefore, instead of being absolutely in control, time travellers have an illusion of control. This form of power is flawed when it comes to life and death.

Relationship between Time Travelling and Life and Death

Time travel has had a long history with life and death. In many popular cultures with time travel, saving lives is often the main goal of travelling to the past. In *Dragon Ball*, one of the Trunks's main goals of travelling to the past is to save the main character, Son Goku's life. In *Avengers: Endgame* (1:06:33), the main characters travel to the past to gather the Infinity Stones in order to save the billions of lives killed by Thanos. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (00:41:09), the T-800 cyborg is sent to the past to protect John Connor from being killed by the T-1000. It is clear that saving lives is a popular goal for time travelling in popular culture, time travelling is usually associated with life and death.

In this game, Max's ability is activated under two conditions, taking a picture of a blue butterfly and witnessing the death of her friend, Chloe (see figure 1 and figure 2). The first thing she did with her power was to save the life of Chloe. Throughout the story, she has prevented the deaths of Chloe multiple times, while also potentially

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saving other characters such as Kate. At the end of the story, Chloe's existence

becomes the determining factor whether everyone in the town would be killed by the

storm. Hence, there is no doubt that the main purposes of Max's time travelling

powers was to save lives.

 Figure 1:

Condition 1: Taking a photo of the blue butterfly.

Figure 2:

Condition 2: Witnessing the death of Chloe.

Furthermore, the game cleverly made use of the symbolization of the blue butterfly. Butterflies has been related to both time travel and life and death. The symbolization of butterfly relating to time travel is evident with the famous butterfly effect of chaos theory. At the end of the game, a supernatural storm destroying the town is a reference to Edward Norton Lorenz's "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" in 1972. In addition, butterflies have symbolic meanings associated with life and death according to Costa and Soares. In Greek mythology, the Goddess of Soul, Psyche, is drawn with butterfly wings. The Greek term psych, which comes from psyche, means "breath, breath of

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life, soul" (Costa and Soares, 633). Also, the life cycle of this insect consists of the several stages, which includes caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly, which signify life, death and resurrection respectively, similar to the Christian metamorphosis (633). In Germond P. Le papillon's "un marqueur symbolique de la renaissance du défunt ?" (qtd. in Costa and Soares 633), it is said that the butterfly is the symbol of a life that is constantly renewing itself, it is a sign of rebirth following death. At the end of the game, if the player decided to sacrifice Chloe, the blue butterfly would appear again and land on Chloe's coffin, signifying that the butterfly is Chloe's spirit. Moreover, I argue that the color choice of the butterfly in the game have important symbolizations as well. The color blue is usually associated with death, scholars point out that the color blue is usually used by poets with ghosts and spirits in the form of lights or flames, which are known as "corpse candles" (V. Jacobs and W. Jacobs, 39-41). Meanwhile, blue is also a color that is regularly used during the time travelling sequences in popular culture such as the animated series like *Doraemon* (see figure 3) as well as movies like *Avengers: Endgame* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (see figure 4 and figure 5). Posters from movies like *The Butterfly Effect* also primarily used the color blue (see figure 6). Therefore, the game masterfully evokes the symbolizations of the blue butterfly to link life and death and time travel together.

Figure 3: Time Travelling scenes from the "Doraemon" animated series

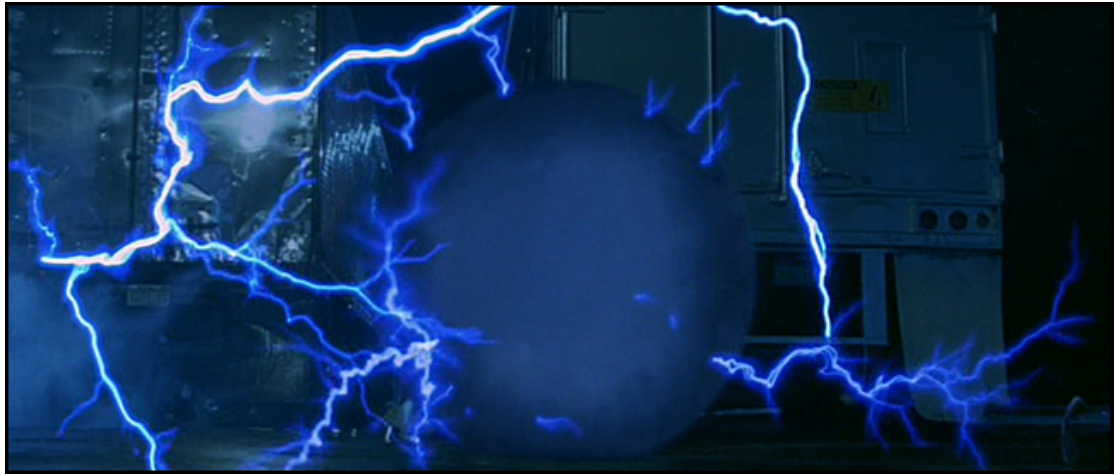*Figure 4: Time Travelling scene from" Avengers: Endgame" (1:08:01)*

Figure 5: Time Travelling scene from "Terminator 2: Judgement Day" (00:06:17)
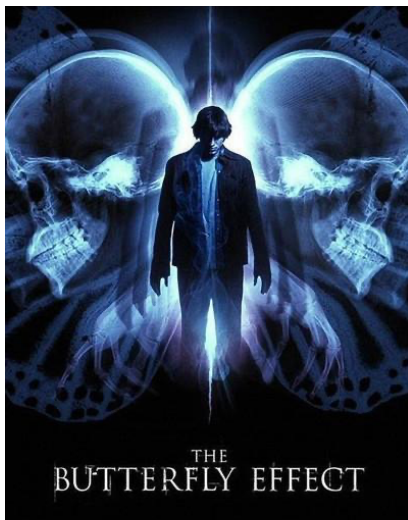

Figure 6: Poster of the movie "The Butterfly Effect"

It is evident that time travel is indeed closely associated with life and death in this game. The following section will discuss how exactly the control and mastery granted by the ability to rewind time affect our values and actions towards life and death.

Research Question 2: How does the control and mastery granted by time-travelling abilities affect our values and actions towards life and death in the game?

Effects on our Values and Actions caused by Control

The ability of time travel offers time travellers a level of control due to the fact that they have a certain degree of knowledge of what has happened, and they can make changes to what was originally taking place. As most time travellers in popular media do want to make changes, they would indeed make a different decision when they travelled to the past. Therefore, this brings us to the question, in terms of doing things differently, how differently would these actions and decisions be? Would it be so different that these actions and decisions are morally wrong in order to make things right in the end? This would be discussed in the following.

Prioritizing Control over Human Lives

The side character Alyssa is a quiet, kind girl who stands up for her friends in need. She is bullied in the story by some of the characters from the school. In every episode, Alyssa would face an incident that would require Max to rewind time to warn her in order to avoid it. However, helping her or not is not significant to the plot and Alyssa's life is not in danger except for the event in the last episode. At first, due

to her personality and my own sympathy toward the character, I would rewind time to warn her of those events. However, I grew tired of it in Episode 3. Knowing that she would not be in any actual danger but just experience some minor inconvenience or pain, I decided to ignore events related to her ever since. In this case, I am in control as I know what would happen to her, and because of this control, I decided to not help her because I know she would be largely fine, which completely contradicts my usual beliefs of helping people in need.

However, there is a game mechanic set for her events. If players do not help her in even just one of her events, there would be a minor reversible consequence. In the last episode, as the supernatural storm has destroyed half the town, Max has to time travel through Warren's photo and stop them from being captured by the antagonist Mark in order to create a new timeline. When Max was going to where Warren was, Alyssa was stuck in a building because of the storm. If the player decides not to help her in one of her earlier events, she will think that whenever Max is present, she experiences unfortunate events (she would think differently and see Max as her hero if Max helped her in all her events as all her encounters with Max would be positive). Therefore, in my play, she ended up walking away from Max and then accidentally fell to her death. Her death is reversible due to the fact that you can choose to save her

by rewinding time. However, even when I was given the choice to save her, I ignored her death as I know that there would be a new timeline. In this case, none of the events I see now would matter as long as I manage to travel to the past and create a new timeline by getting a photograph of the past so I can time travel with it. Reflecting on my decision to not save her, I have committed the immoral act of not saving a life despite having the ability to save her. There is no risk, and the choice has a 100 percent success rate, but I still decided to ignore her death, focusing on the mission. In this case, I would have control over the course of the world and reality itself as long as I manage to gain a photograph. To gain this control, I have prioritized my goal to open a new timeline as soon as possible over human life, this is totally different from what I believe in as I have just let someone "die". According to the game statistics, 50% of the players did not save Alyssa (see figure 7). This is a stunning number, considering the fact that half of the players did not prioritize human life because of their goal. In the 2014 Sci-fi *Edge of Tomorrow*, the main character William Cage is granted the power of resetting time when he dies. Whenever he is killed by an alien, he can return to the time when the army has not engaged with the aliens. His mission is to find the hive of the aliens and destroy them. During his numerous trials, he tries to save his comrades on the battlefield with his knowledge on

what would happen (see figure 8 and figure 9). However, he eventually got frustrated and just left them to die, thinking that the most important thing was to destroy the hive. I believe that the players of *Life is Strange* experienced the same mental journey as William Cage, from valuing human life to prioritizing the mission.

So why do people who are looking to gain control start to ignore their original beliefs and become "immoral"? Kagan suggested that "we have a short span of life relative to how much there is worth aiming for, and how complicated and difficult it can be to achieve those things" (305). He further suggested that we did not have time to try a little of this and that since the main goals are so hard to do it properly (305). Technically, time travellers have all the time in the world as they in theory have unlimited attempts to change the past. However, in my opinion, they may actually feel like they are in a hurry when they do lose control, that is why they prioritize missions over their original beliefs. The reason is that the control they have comes from the ability to restart. Once the timeline is not changed to how the time traveller wants or when the time traveller has failed his or her missions, they switch to the mindset of restarting for a fresh attempt as soon as possible because they feel like they have lost control of the situation and restarting is the only way to gain control, similar to the gaming situation of players losing a large amount of health at the beginning of the

boss battle and just let the boss kill them as quickly as possible because they know that there is no way of winning. Combined with the frustration of failing and the difficulty of the tasks, they may have the urge to restart as quickly as possible because the action of restarting is the action of regaining control. At this point, the time travellers' "span of life" is short, as they are eager to leave this failed timeline as soon as possible because everything they do onwards would not lead to the future they want anyway, their "life" in this timeline is "coming to an end". So, knowing that getting the photograph is the only way of "restarting", many players are in a hurry to get it to regain control and hence, decide to ignore the "smaller things"(Alyssa's life) as they have "no time" for that. In short, this could mean that when people are given the chance to gain "absolute" control, they may prioritize that over even individual human lives.
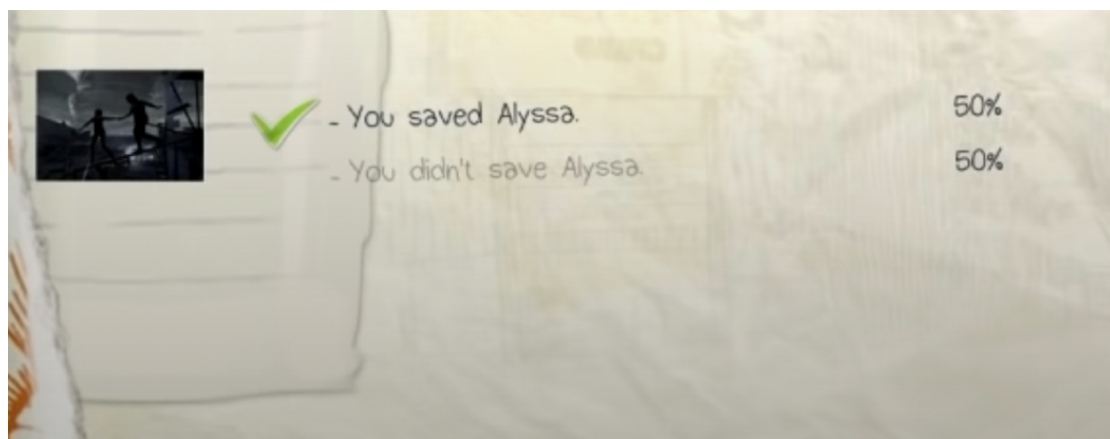

Figure 7: Game statistics of the percentage of players saving Alyssa

Figures 8 & 9: William Cage not trying to save his comrade after multiple trials in

the movie "Edge of Tomorrow". (1:12:25)

Making Major Decisions According to our own Preferences and Emotions

At the end of the final episode, the supernatural storm gradually destroys

Arcadia Bay, the town they live in. The only way to stop the storm is to erase

everything Max has done with time travelling by travelling back to the very beginning and not rewind time to save Chloe's life. Players are given the choice to either do that and save the town or let Chloe live and witness the destruction of the town.

Unlike the "trolley problem" (see Appendix) where both choices can be seen morally correct in different perspectives, choosing Chloe over the town is a morally wrong choice no matter what. If one values the greater good, he or she would definitely choose to sacrifice Chloe in order to save the town. If one values the natural process of things, sacrificing Chloe would be the choice to return everything to its natural order, considering the fact that the storm is a supernatural force caused by Chloe's existence and Chloe's existence was unnatural in the first place as she was supposed to be dead at the beginning of the story. Therefore, it is technically morally wrong to let Chloe live. According to game statistics, 53% of the players chose to sacrifice Arcadia Bay and have Chloe live (see figure 10). So, what could cause more than half of the players to choose a "morally wrong" choice?

In my opinion, this has to do with the players' immersion in the game. After 5 episodes of gameplay, many players are emotionally attached to Chloe as they have fully immersed in the story as Max. Chloe's life was full of misfortune and she felt

like she was punished by the universe (see figure 11). She hated her life to the point

that she wants to end it sometimes. As a result, players have also developed a strong

sense of empathy for her. At the same time, players fully immersed in the character

Max and would think in the way how a person who has this level of control would

think. They would think that if they have the abilities of Max, they possess the power

to time travel anytime if things go south in the future, so if the world does end due to

Chloe not being sacrificed or her death is inevitable, they can in theory make the

choice of sacrificing Chloe when the time comes (even though the game ends right

there and would not show future events). They are deciding as a person who has

almost absolute control and can in theory make the decision whenever they want with

the ability to time travel. Their preferences change as they are in control of the

situation. Another possible reason is that players relate to Chloe's misfortune a lot and

have negative feelings towards the fact that someone who has suffered this much

needs to make the ultimate sacrifice for the world, so they decided to not inhibit their

emotions and let Chloe live as a form of rebel against fate. Therefore, due to these

three reasons related to preferences and emotions, many players decided to sacrifice

the town for Chloe and ignore whether it is morally right or not. So, it is not that

players are making "morally wrong" choices for the sake of being evil, but rather

making their decisions according to their preferences and emotions. This decision can be seen as a decision made according to the players' preferences and emotions from Chloe's perspective as well. During the supernatural storm, it was actually Chloe who gave Max the photograph of the blue butterfly which can be used to time travel to the very beginning and save the town by not saving her life at that time, meaning that she although hated this world, she planned to save the town for the sake of the people there. According to Kupfer (qtd. in Cholbi, 3.6), suicide can be honorable if it is clearly other-regarding, like aiming at protecting the lives or well-being of others, Cholbi suggests in utilitarian views, when an act of suicide will produce more happiness than remaining alive, then that suicide is not only morally permitted, but morally required (3.6). Chloe knows that she has the moral duty to technically "commit suicide" to save the world, meaning that players sacrificing the town are not deciding from her perspective, but theirs. And considering the fact that life has caused nothing but suffering for her and the good things in life, such as her father and her best friend Rachel, were already deprived of her, is keeping her alive no matter what the best choice? In the ending where players chose to sacrifice Chloe to save the town, Max eventually smiled after seeing the blue butterfly landing on Chloe's coffin, in my opinion, this can be interpreted as Max being relieved that Chloe is finally free from

her suffering in life and can roam freely like she wished. Perhaps death, or

reincarnation, would be better for Chloe considering the problems in her life.

However, the control that the players are granted may blind us from seeing things

from Chloe's perspective and making decisions according to our preferences and
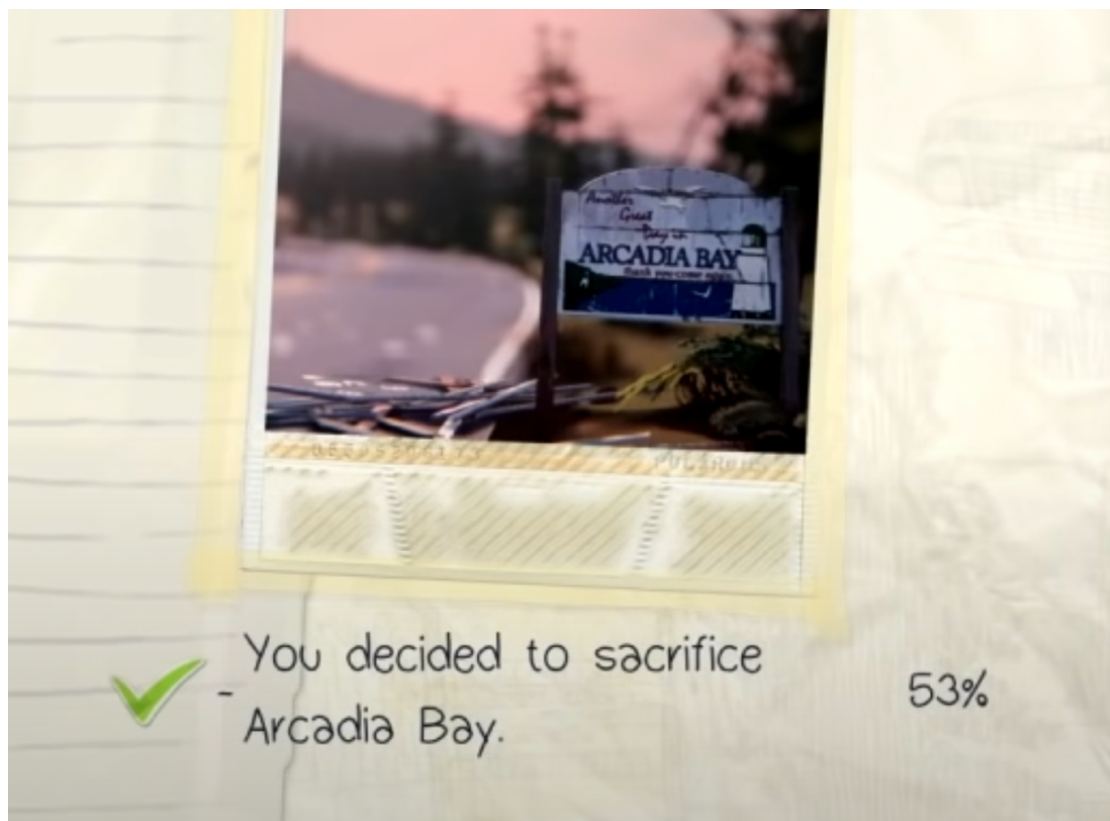
emotions.

Figure 10: Game statistics of the percentage of players sacrificing the town.

Figure 11: Scene showing that Chloe was depressed with all the misfortunate events in her life.

Other than empathy and emotional attachment, another reason for players to make this decision based on their preferences could be the fact that they have power due to the control they are offered. Cho and Keltner suggest that elevated power is related to increased rewards and freedom according to the approach-inhibition theory of power (196). Guinote concludes that a consequence of power is that it gives the people possessing it greater freedom from constraints and control over their own outcomes and further proposes that powerful individuals' greater freedom and ability to act at will promotes goal-directed behavior (1076). So, in this case, players could become free from moral constraints and have the ability to act at will due to their

elevated power and therefore are more likely to be goal-directed, which is in this case,

catering to their own preference and saving Chloe by sacrificing the town. This theory

could also be used to explain the task-prioritizing behaviour of players in the Alyssa

events as well, as the ignorance of Alyssa's death could be due to players having the

power to be free from moral constraints and can act at will. That results in them being

goal-directed and ignoring human lives. However, considering the fact that players

are trying to regain power instead of possessing elevated power during the Alyssa

event, this theory may be less relevant for the Alyssa event compared to the decision

to sacrifice the town for Chloe.

Research Question 3: How are the life and death consequences caused by the

illusion of control presented in the game?

The Illusion of Control

As I have mentioned in the previous parts, the power of time travelling grants time

travellers a certain degree of control. However, the level of control offered is not

absolute, and we may have overestimated it, causing an illusion of control. In the

following part, the illusion of control would be discussed.

The Unforeseeable Nature of Life and Carelessness

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In Episode 2, the character Kate Marsh, a friend of Max, faced a lot of bullying leading to her wanting to end her life at the end of this episode. During the event of Kate attempting to commit suicide, when Max made it to the girl's dormitory where Kate decided to end her life, Kate has already jumped down from the roof of the building. Max had to rewind time again and again to the point that her body was barely holding on in order to make it to the roof in time, her powers were therefore temporarily unusable when talking to Kate. To persuade Kate, players have to make two very important choices in the dialogues correctly. One of them is to avoid mentioning the family member who does not care about her well-being, which is her mother (see figure 13). The other one is to select her favourite quote from the Bible. Failing either one would lead to Kate jumping off the roof, and to get them correct, players have to pay attention to the details in a scene earlier in the same episode. In that scene, Max was returning a book to Kate, players have to interact with the objects like notes and photographs in Kate's room and the details required for answering those two questions correctly to give her the hope to live later are in those objects. In my play, even though I know that Kate was very emotional, I did not pay too much attention to the details during that scene due to the fact that I have the power to rewind time. In my mind, even if something unexpected happens, I can just rewind

time when I fail to choose the correct dialogues or fail the quick time events. As a result, I was not able to make the correct choice for one of those two questions during the persuasion, causing her to end her life. Moreover, there is no checkpoint to load for this part, meaning that Kate's death is irreversible. According to the game statistics, 43% of the players were not able to save Kate, meaning that almost half of the players did not pay attention to those details (see figure 12). While less than half of the players could not save Kate, considering the high obviousness of the details and the ease of obtaining the information (see figure 13), 43% is a rather high number.

Figure 12: Game statistics of the percentage of players who failed to save Kate.
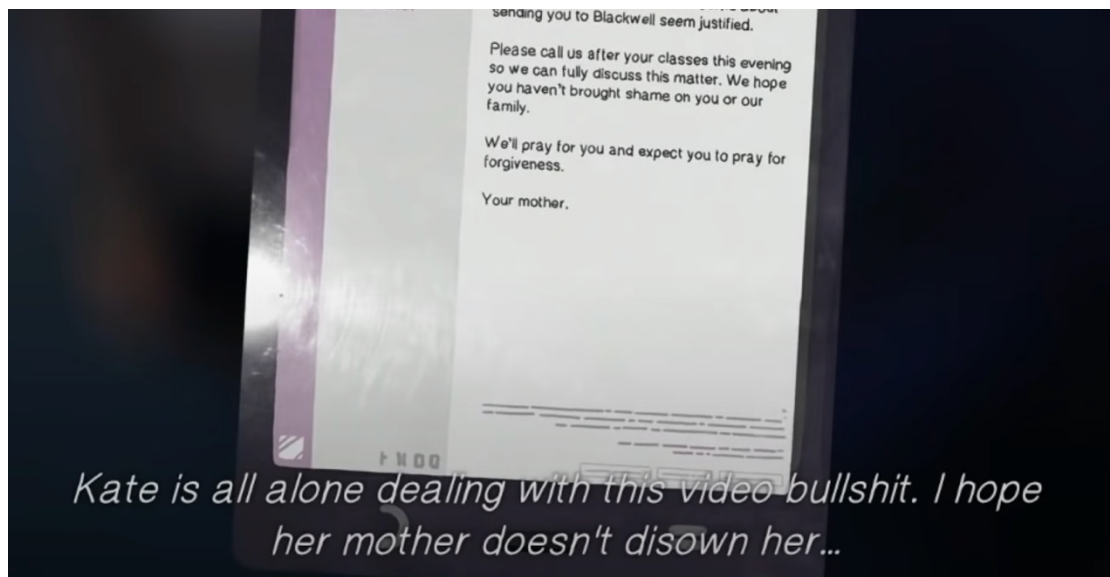
Figure 13: An email from Kate's mother, showing how she cares more about the honor of the family than the well-being of Kate. (For answering one of the two questions)

This scene is constructed in a way that players are actively contributing to the final result. It is clear that the event intended to let players face an irreversible consequence if they rely too much on their time-travelling powers. This simulation of whether people would be more careless with other people when given control is proven somewhat effective, considering the fact that almost half of the players failed the test. In my opinion, this is due to players having an illusion of control. During this episode, I have started to rely on my time-rewinding powers after using it multiple times in episode 1. I started to think I had control over all the coming events as all the choices could be undone by rewinding time up to this point. Along with my reduced

attention due to repeated use of time rewind, I started to become careless and pay less attention to details. In short, I thought I was in control due to the high level of control I was offered and the unawareness of my reduced attention, but in reality, I was not as in control as I thought. And this illusion of control caused me to fail.

This game cleverly exploited the possibility of people having an illusion of control by presenting the unpredictability of life. The irreversible death of Kate is clearly designed to serve as a reminder for those who failed the event that sudden, unexpected, uncontrollable events can happen anytime and we may not be as in control as we think we are. It is life's nature to be unforeseeable. This leads to reflections on our choices in our daily lives on whether or not we are overlooking the signs showing that our loved ones may need our help, as we think everything is under control.

Overestimating Control and Underestimating Butterfly Effects

If the event with Kate shows players how unexpected, uncontrollable events can happen despite we think we have control over the situation, the following event shows players how we may overestimate our level of control over things and underestimate the complexity of life. In this event, the player plans to turn Chloe's life

around by saving her father, William, by travelling to the past. William died in a car accident when Max and Chloe were children, Max thought that Chloe would not turn out the way she is now if William had been there for her all these times. With her newfound powers, Max travelled to the past and hid William's car keys, leading to him avoiding the car accident. However, in the new timeline, Chloe was immobilized, she was in a wheelchair and required the assistance of a tube to breathe. This happened because William bought Chloe a car as a birthday present on one of her birthdays and she ended up having a car accident. The family was suffering with not only guilt but also huge financial pressure as a lot of equipment and medication were needed for Chloe's survival. This ended with Chloe asking Max to end her life, which is up to the player's choice to fulfill her request or not.

This event is also an example of having an illusion of control. The game had Max overestimating her level of control over life and underestimating the effects of a person's existence, leading to an even worse future. Max did not consider enough about the impact of her decision, thinking that one single change in the past would only lead to the future she wanted, nothing else. Furby stated that the situation of the butterfly effect is where "the change made to the past ripples outwards, increasing in magnitude, and can have unforeseen consequences for the present and the future lives

of the perpetrators" (82). In this case, the butterfly effect took place as Max changed events in the past and it had led to unforeseen consequences to the present. The game presented the illusion of control by showing us even if we possess a high level of power and therefore have a certain degree of control, this level of control could be overestimated by us as we may have underestimated how things actually work in life. The reason that we may overestimate our level of control is that we think we may have a strong influence on things while having a certain degree of control, leading to us thinking things would change according to our liking. However, like what Furby suggests, butterfly effects are too complex to be foreseeable, in both time-travelling fiction and reality. This scene is clearly designed to remind players to avoid overestimating the influence and control we actually have and underestimating how things work in life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would seem that under this hypothetical context where people possess the power of time travel, some people would indeed act differently towards life and death compared to how they would act in real life. Some would prioritize their goals over their original beliefs and human lives, some would act according to their preferences and emotions instead of making morally right decisions. These are

due to the control offered by the ability to time travel. While they are not actually always in control due to different reasons, they have an illusion of control which would lead to failures and deaths. With clever designs of game mechanics, the game *Life is Strange* has offered those players a chance to reflect on whether they are indeed blinded by the illusions of control in life. Therefore, it is safe to say that the game *Life is Strange* is not predominantly about time travel, instead, time travel is used as a unique context to examine how players would react and grapple with life and death situations as well as the consequences if they are offered almost absolute control.

Word Count: 7386

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Appendix ("Trolley Problem")

According to Andrade (2019), the "trolley problem" was proposed by Philippa Foot, it

is about a trolley going down the tracks and will run down 5 people, the driver can

choose to divert the trolley onto another track with only 1 person there. Foot answered

that the driver should divert the trolley as it seems ethically acceptable to save 5

people by killing 1 person, but she also argued that there is not morally justified to kill

that one person, as killing is a greater offence than letting die, even if you are letting 5

people die and only 1 would be killed (as cited in Andrade, 2019).

However, in *Life is Strange*, the difference in the decision of letting Chloe live or not

is that Chloe's existence is "killing" the town, her existence is directly related to the

source of the danger while "the trolley" is not related to anyone in the case.

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