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Rewinding Players into a State of Anxiety in *Life Is Strange*

The game *Life is Strange*, developed by Dontnod Entertainment, follows the life of a girl who gains time control abilities in wake of an impending apocalypse. It is primarily story-driven and keeps the player engaged with its “choices have consequences” theme. With the power of time control, however, the player isn’t completely bound by every decision they make in the game, allowing for more scenes to be played and more long-term thinking on the player’s end. Because they can see how each decision plays out in the immediate future, it forces the player to think more carefully about what they are trying to achieve in each scene. While the developers knew this was going to be the mechanic’s primary use, they may have not seen how greatly it would affect the player’s emotional state in an already-emotional game. The rewind ability of *Life is Strange* causes players to overanalyze each seemingly insignificant choice they make out of fear of the long-term consequences that they are unable to rewind from.

The main character, Max Caulfield, gains her mysterious powers while witnessing her old best friend, Chloe Price, get shot in a public bathroom. She was able to save Chloe and eventually befriends her again, causing her to divulge her secret powers to her and explain how she got them. The game follows their story of finding out what happened to a girl that went missing in their town and why anomalies keep occurring that suggest an apocalyptic event. The rewind ability comes in different forms. The first, and most obvious, one is the ability to go back

in time and change their decision if the outcome wasn't desirable. This ability is available for use in almost every scene, as it is a core gameplay mechanic. The player can make Max simply stretch out her hand at any moment and make another selection. These choices in the game seem like they are there to direct you off the main plot of the story momentarily and then bring you back on the game developers' track. However, constant choices have the ability to impact scenes that are shown later. When learning you can control time in the first episode of the game, the



player feels like they are completely in control of this game, as every choice they make is not permanent and can be easily switched. The developers initially wanted this reaction, saying that “we really

wanted to, as a player, feel powerful... and to really feel that you can change the scenes and come back in time”(Playstation, 00:00:53 - 00:01:05). It is easy for players to develop a slight god complex in this first episode, but the developers figured out how to keep that in check in that ladder ones.

With a new mechanic as powerful as this, the developers couldn't let the player have free reign over all time. When reversing time, the player is only limited to the scene they are currently in. If the player is in a particularly long scene, however, their choices are limited even more so. The player is shown a diagram of how far back they can turn time. If Max reaches the end of the swirl, the developers decided to give her a headache as an explanation for why the player can't go back anymore. This is a frustrating part of the gameplay,

as a pivotal choice the player made could be just out of reach to fix. A reason that the player may not immediately rewind a choice they made would be to see how the scene plays out, causing them to later decide that they did not like the outcome of their actions.



While the game gives players almost full control over what actions they choose and what scenes they see, this part of the rewind mechanic establishes a level of consequences for player curiosity, striking worry into the player about whether or not they're able to fix their mistakes after all.

At certain points of this game, Max loses her abilities. This is unlike the times when Max can't rewind far enough to bring the player into a previous scene. The most memorable moment when this happens is when one of Max's friends, Kate, is almost attempting suicide at the top of a building. Upon seeing her friend up there, Max rushes to the rooftop to find that she is unable to rewind. When reading this dialogue, the player's heart drops. This is the most important time to use time travel and say the right things to save Kate's life, but that ability is sadly unavailable. This moment in the game is the most like any other basic choice-based game, in which every choice is a one-time shot and actions truly have consequences. Kate's life is completely held in the player's hands, and the player can only save her if they did enough digging in previous episodes to get to know her character. Patrick Klepek described his feelings during his playthrough where he was unable to save Kate. He wrote, "for a while, I figured this was how it was supposed to go. 'A-ha, the game is giving me the *illusion* of choice, and you were supposed

to watch Kate die, no matter what.’ Of course, that’s not true. You can save Kate, and based on



the stats displayed at the end, lots of people did”(Klepek). The developers could have programmed as Klepek felt and given that scene the illusion of choice, but they

instead wanted the player to play around with the rewind mechanic and either feel good about their choices or immediately rewind and fix them, then strip the player of that ability and have them rely solely on the information they managed to gather while taking advantage of the rewind ability. In this way, they effectively reminded the player that any actions they did in the past still have consequences in the future.

A common feeling for players in choice-based games is the fear of missing out. Choice-based games have numerous possibilities for scenes and endings, and *Life is Strange* is no exception. Since the player also has the ability to reverse their decisions, this means that there are even more possibilities the developers had to program in. The best example of this development is one scene in the fourth episode of the game. Here, Max and Chloe are confronting a man named Frank for information about the missing girl. This scene has three endings: Frank helps the girls look for the girl, Frank reluctantly gives you clues about the girl after being stabbed or shot by Chloe, or Frank and his dog are killed by Chloe. While those are the only endings, there’s much more going on behind the scenes to determine which one the player sees. This

scene uses past encounters with Frank and the girls to determine his mood upon meeting them, such as whether or not Max attempted to shoot Frank earlier or if she knows about his passion for rescuing fighting dogs, and that's just at the beginning of the scene. When going further, "this only gets more complex as the conversation drags on, and players move towards different ways to resolve the situation. When you're simply choosing dialog options, it feels awfully simple, but when laid out in this form it's clear how complicated it becomes for developers"(Klepek). What Klepek is referring to is this decision tree of all of the things the game is keeping track of in this one scene:



Even though the photo is too large to see any of the details, these are all choices from this scene and previous ones that are actively affecting what the player sees. When looking at this, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the number of options the player has. Even though while playing the game you can't see this diagram, the player still feels anxious about what might happen due to Frank's character and how they decided to interact with him in past episodes.

This scene also highlights how *Life is Strange* still uses long-term consequences. Not everything can be rewound and fixed in this game. Since this scene relies heavily on previous ones, the player no longer has as much control over what happens as they once thought they did. This scene takes place in the fourth episode, which is close to the game's conclusion. At this point, the player feels that they no longer have control over how this story will end. All of the seemingly insignificant choices they made are now catching up to them, and the player can only watch when the final scene plays and they see that Chloe has killed the only other person able to

help with the case of the missing girl. It's a frightening realization, and it happens at the worst point in the game and dooms the player to play through an ending they couldn't have predicted.

The rewind ability in *Life is Strange* is what makes the game memorable. This new mechanic shone a new light on all of the new possibilities games could become, especially choice-based ones. These types of games are hard enough to develop but allowing the player to almost infinitely see all the options the developers have provided over and over is almost unthinkable to produce. The developers recognized this fact, saying that "the game could exist without the rewind, it could be another classic adventure game, real interesting, I think, but I think that this new layer allows players to have a different experience"(Playstation, 00:01:05 - 00:01:15). This new experience that they gave their players involved raising anxiety levels. Choice-based games regularly do this, but when a player knows that they had the full potential to change what is happening to characters they've grown attached to, that's one of the scariest experiences for a player.

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