

Skye McCashion

Professor Bertozzi

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Rewinding Players into a State of Confusion in Life is Strange

Choice-based games are centered around a general illusion of choice, as game developers have their main story in mind that they want the player to play through. This type of game is already complex to build, but giving the player full agency over what choices they make and the option to change those choices in the game throws a wrench into the operation. This produces the game *Life is Strange*, where the player uses time travel as a core mechanic in the game. The game is highly acclaimed as innovative and interesting due to this mechanic, but, much like every mechanic in every game, it has its flaws. Players have been left confused by the rewind ability due to them noticing continuity errors that have little to no effect on the game world. There are also restrictions on this mechanic that also cause players to scratch their heads in confusion. The rewind mechanic in this game may have been innovative for gameplay experiences in the gaming world, but it allows for plot holes in players' experiences that are never easy to ignore.

One of the issues with the mechanic is seen primarily from a game developer's perspective, which is the idea of "save scumming". When playing a challenging game, it's common for players to seemingly abuse the save function and save right before major events in the game. This allows the player to load up their previous save file and try again with all the information they gained from their first try. For some developers and players, the rewind

mechanic “for all intents and purposes emulates save scumming. At any point in the game you have an option to hit a button, and go back to an earlier state, allowing you to undo mistakes and change important decisions”(Maciak). While this is what the game is centered around, in many scenes of the game, the player is encouraged to abuse this power. There are many different encounters with other students throughout this game, and Max, the main character, can have characters tell her one thing and immediately go back in time and bring it up before they do, essentially turning the conversation in her favor for seemingly insignificant conversations. Newer games try to prevent the player from doing this by implementing checkpoint saves through scene changes or only being able to save when the player sees a certain object in the game. While some players enjoy taking full advantage of save scumming in video games to make their gameplay easier or to get their preferred outcomes, most developers have tried to steer away from this ability in gameplay for their games because it can strip away the authenticity of the game, which is what the rewind mechanic is walking the line of.

Another issue with the rewind ability is the fact that Max stays in her current position when turning back time. This part of the mechanic seems necessary, as in some points of the game, like when Kate is attempting suicide, the player needs to keep reversing time to be able to reach Kate before she jumps off the ledge. However, there’s still an issue with continuity for the other characters in the game. When reversing, the player can see everyone moving backward in time, even Max as a shadowy version of herself can be seen moving in the background. Once the player stops, Max is in a completely different location than she was before. To the characters around her, this wouldn’t make sense, as she was just across the schoolyard seconds ago, and now she has seemingly teleported to inside the school. Reddit user Unbalancedopinion notices this too and explains a scenario from the supporting character’s point of view: “The best example

of what I mean is the scene on the train tracks. Chloe is looking at Max when she realizes she's stuck and the player gains control. The solution is that you run up the hill, grab a crowbar, force the door of the shack, find wire cutters, and run down the hill to cut the correct wire on the switch box. You rewind whenever time runs out since you keep your position and any items. Imagine how this looks from Chloe's perspective: One second Max is looking down at her, alarmed, the next she disappears and is standing next to the switch box with wirecutters”(Unbalancedopinion). In the game, Chloe knows about Max's powers, so this thought may not be as frightening to her. However, the player is able to rewind time even with other people around, leaving the player wondering if all they see is Max disappear and whether or not they have a second thought about it. This can be a substantial continuity error for players, as some plot holes in games cause the player to think of that slip up while they're playing and wonder how it could have been fixed when away from the game.

One way this issue could be solved is a restraint on when the player can use the ability. The restraint would be that no one should be able to see Max rewind that doesn't know about her powers in insignificant situations. For example, instead of the player being able to rewind time while everyone is in the hallway walking around and talking, the player would have to find somewhere secluded like a closet and use her ability there, just so no one becomes suspicious of her sudden disappearances and her ability for being scarily punctual. This could be a minor fix to the game, as players would still be able to rewind time when talking to someone or when around Chloe alone since she already knows and is used to it. This restriction could also be ignored in dire situations, like when Chloe is almost killed on the train tracks mentioned previously. This relatively small restraint could allow for more strategy on the player's part as they'd need to figure out where they can go and be hidden quickly before Max can't rewind to a critical point

anymore. It can also give the player less to ponder over in their free time about whether or not college students would notice, or care about, a girl disappearing and reappearing at random amongst the crazy things already happening at their school.

The player uses different forms of time travel throughout the game. One form is when Max can look at a photo that was taken in the past and jump to when that photo was taken, which is usually much further back than the rewind ability allows for in regular gameplay. The first issue with this ability is the lack of explanation where this power came from. The entire idea of a girl gaining time control abilities from outstretching her hand in a life-threatening situation is already bizarre enough, but adding this mini-puzzle to add more interesting scenes in the game is never explained and Max simply does it for the first time like she's known that this would come with the rewind ability. Since this was added for the plot in the later episodes, it can be overlooked by the player due to the already unrealistic world the developers have dropped them in. Also, this ability can't be used as often as the generic rewind. However, there are some parts of the game in which Max can reverse time like this, and sometimes her decisions don't line up with players' trains of thought. For example, Reddit user Unbalanceopinion shared their thoughts on this subject too, explaining that in one scene, Max reverses time because she wasn't with Chloe during the apocalyptic storm and wanted to change that. In order to do that, they noticed, Max had to prevent herself from winning a photo contest for her school. Somehow, they said, this prevents Max entirely from reporting her teacher to the authorities about shady businesses he's been involved in and she finds herself tied up as his hostage. They claimed the whole scenario didn't make sense, as Max could have gained other proof to report the teacher, and going back in time to destroy a photo doesn't line up with the chain of events. This is just one example of continuity errors that come about because of this mechanic, but there are also other

instances where things don't seem to add up, like how when Max jumps forward in time from out of a picture, she sometimes ends up in an entirely different time than when she was when she jumped back. It appears that mechanics that defy physics and the world as we know them are hard to process for players and fully make-sense-of by developers.

Life is Strange revolves around its rewind mechanic, but maybe it doesn't need to. A solution to these continuity issues could be to add in the idea of stopping time entirely. The game can still exist with the generic rewind ability, but Max could also have the power to stop time. This could solve the issue of save-scumming during dialogue scenes, as the player could only be able to stop time to think about dialogue choices rather than rewind and start over. It could also be interesting for the player to try and balance between the two abilities and be constantly thinking about whether they should rewind or stop time to further their experience and complete tasks. This ability could also be used in secluded areas or with Chloe, like the solution proposed for the rewinding position dilemma. Since this mechanic could become a big portion of the game and introduce new and interesting puzzles for the player to solve, the picture-rewind ability could have been scrapped, allowing for more focus on the present and changing the actions of the immediate past. While this change would completely alter the gameplay experience, it could have been a good solution to continuity errors that the developers may have missed while making the game.

Continuity errors seem to be the biggest issue for players with the rewind mechanic. Players can easily miss plot holes in the game on their first playthrough because so much happens in the game they need to keep track of. However, during multiple run-throughs, it can be hard to ignore the missing details in certain scenes and can be a distraction from players immersing themselves in the game. Like the developers said in my previous paper, the game

could have been a simple point-and-click adventure with choices and it could have been very interesting on its own like that. Since the rewind ability adds to the game's value, however, it's clear to see why they chose to keep certain elements about time travel in the game. When inventing scenarios set in modern-day times, it can be difficult to flesh out all of the issues with how these scenarios would affect the world outside the characters and how they line up with modern-day science. Regardless of these flaws, *Life is Strange* was able to weasel its way into the hearts of players and still become a successful game, and the developers were proud of what they accomplished along the way.

Works Cited

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