"This Action Will Have Consequences": How the Video Game Life Is Strange Balances Entertainment with Empathy

Brittany Nicole Vance
Brigham Young University

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"This Action Will Have Consequences": How the Video Game Life Is Strange Balances Entertainment with Empathy

Brittany Nicole Vance

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Benjamin J. Thevenin, Chair
Wade James Hollingshaus
Amy Petersen Jensen

Department of Theatre and Media Arts
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

"This Action Will Have Consequences": How the Video Game Life Is Strange Balances Entertainment with Empathy

Brittany Nicole Vance
Department of Theatre and Media Arts, BYU
Master of Arts

This paper examines how the video game Life Is Strange balances the aims of an entertainment game with themes that are more typically found in serious games. Drawing from scholars like Belman, Flanagan and Bogost, the paper explores the capability for entertainment games to foster empathy within players. Finally, the paper attempts to reinforce frameworks for analyzing entertainment games.

Keywords: video games, empathy, entertainment, serious games
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I am so lucky for all the family, friends and faculty who helped me reach this goal. I would also like to thank Kit for being the first to play *Life Is Strange* alongside me. That action had more consequences than either of us could have ever imagined – including the creation of this thesis – and I could not be more grateful.
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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the video game industry has grown rapidly. *WePC* (2018) records that the value of the PC gaming market has almost doubled since 2011, projecting over $310 million in 2019 revenue for PC games alone. Along with the growth of the industry, there has also been an increasing number of interesting new games that push the limits of what popular games could be – games like *Journey* (2012), *Gone Home* (2013), and *Celeste* (2018) have brought new playstyles and storylines to life. Now, more than ever before, independent game developers have the power to create games that run contrary to the genre of “gruesome and grisly video games,” which are typically the types of games referenced in politics and the news (Timm, 2019). Many of these new games, usually produced by smaller development companies, branch out to explore themes like racial tensions, mental health and sexual assault. With this sort of new subject matter growing in popularity, it is worth examining how these video games might bridge the divide between entertaining players and using the game to encourage players to develop and practice empathy.

Much of the academic research that has been done regarding video games that provide empathetic depictions of difficult themes typically centers around a certain genre of video game known as ‘serious games.’ These typically address social issues, resist typical enjoyment through potential discomfort and are often small scale; many are even free to play. The broad definition for serious games comes from Clark Abt (1975): “these games have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (p. 9). While other scholars have worked to create more specific definitions, none has made it into broad academic use (Breuer and Bente, 2010). For the sake of this paper, the term ‘serious games’ will not refer to educational games, but instead games that utilize an emotional
connection in order to teach players about serious themes. Examples of this include *Darfur is Dying* (2006), which focuses on the struggles of a fictional family displaced by the Darfur conflict and *Loved* (2010), which provides a glimpse of abuse from loved ones. When discussing *Loved*, creator Alexander Ocias (2010) explains, “I wanted to build something confrontational, that would engage players to give thought to what they are doing both in and out of game.” Some serious games set out to make audiences uncomfortable as a way to teach a lesson or to empathize with experiences outside their own.

Because serious games are often free and take relatively little time to play, they are typically more accessible to players, which in turn makes it easier to create uncomfortable gameplay. These games rarely try to capture the attention of a player for longer than half an hour. Unfortunately, because many serious games contain uncomfortable gameplay, often have niche subject matter and depend on small companies or grants in order to be produced, they typically reach a smaller audience than other games.

The characteristics of serious games set them apart from the much more common entertainment video games; entertainment games are created to garner a profit, which means they are also typically designed to be enjoyed by a wide audience. From mobile hits like *Candy Crush* to well-known console titles like *Call of Duty*, entertainment games are rarely, if ever, designed to be uncomfortable. In fact, many entertainment games are purposely designed with hidden tricks to minimize frustration and maximize enjoyment (Scheurle, 2017). With the most lucrative games being designed solely for making a profit, it makes sense why many would avoid spending much of their gameplay tackling heavy subjects.

That said, with the explosion of independently produced games in the last decade, there are popular games that have also branched out to tackle difficult themes. For instance, there are
game series like TellTale’s *The Walking Dead*, which boasts difficult decisions that affect the storyline, or BioWare’s *Mass Effect*, which offers choices and charts players’ ‘moral’ progress with two scales, “paragon” and “renegade” (BioWare, 2007). However, many of the ‘choices matter’ games, like both series listed above, tend to feature powerful characters who spend the majority of gameplay enacting violence. That is not to say that violence and serious themes are mutually exclusive, but when a game encourages and rewards large amounts of violence, it can often undermine other potential themes. This is part of the reason why many academics direct much of their study to serious games rather than entertainment games, because serious games can put most, if not all, of the focus on difficult themes.

This paper centers on a specific entertainment game: DONTNOD’s *Life is Strange* (2015), an addition to the genre of ‘choices matter’ games that stands out due to its focus on difficult themes and the push for players to empathize with them. Although *Life is Strange* is commonly marketed as a mashup of time travel mystery and high school drama, the realities portrayed in the game are far less pretty, tackling everything from bullying to sexual assault (GameSpot, 2015). The result is, in the roughly 20 hours it takes to complete *Life is Strange*, there are many moments that are designed to be uncomfortable depictions of real world struggles. While it is not the only game to combine entertainment with serious themes, *Life is Strange* provides an interesting case study into the ways popular games can utilize strategies typically employed by serious games in order to nudge players into empathizing with experiences that might be different than their own. *Life is Strange* attempts to balance entertainment with fostering empathy through priming players, modeling desired behaviors, creating opportunities for emotional empathy and making connections between the players and
the game world. Finally, this paper will also revise and build upon past frameworks for analyzing how games can foster empathy.

Core Concepts

While there are games specifically designed for educational purposes, in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee (2003) explores the ways entertainment games might be seen as teaching tools, arguing that the way games are structured helps promote problem-solving and new ways of thinking. Interestingly, entertainment focuses on levity and fun, typically only utilizing discomfort when it leads to greater pleasant feelings later (Mitgutsch, 2009). Gee’s discussion revolves around games that were popular at the time, like *Tomb Raider* and *Pikmin*, which do not fall under such categories as serious games or educational games; similarly, *Life is Strange* is an accessible and popular game, making Gee’s discussion especially relevant.

While Gee discusses the general application of teaching within games, Flanagan and Nissenbaum explore a more specific goal: promoting empathy in players. In their book, Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2010) open with: “All games express and embody human values… Many elements of games reveal the underlying beliefs and values of their designers and players… they may not only reflect and express but also activate these beliefs and values in powerful ways” (p. 3). Scholars also argue that purposefully designed games might help audiences foster empathy for other individuals and situations (Shrier, 2014). These scholars then go on to explore values expressed by games as innocuous as *Farmville* (2009) or *Angry Birds* (2009) to games with more pointed values like *Hush* (2007) or *Layoff* (2009). Essentially, all games place value on something, whether it is intentional or not: *Angry Birds*, for example, while likely not intentional, might be read as placing value on themes like destruction, violence and humor (Nissenbaum and
Flanagan, 2014, p. 25). When it comes to a game’s values, there are two levels to examine: what a game says (explicit values) and what a game does (implicit values). Take the earlier example of *Mass Effect*: although the dialogue might explicitly point players into valuing life and peace, much of the gameplay itself – shooting down hundreds of faceless enemies – implicitly does not seem to place as much value on peace. It is important to examine how implicit values interact with explicit values in games, especially when examining the potential for promoting empathy.

There are games that do try to promote specific ideals and values, however, and Flanagan and Belman discuss methods that game designers can use purposely to encourage empathy in players. Although their work is primarily to inform the creation of video games, rather than academic research, the following four principles still provide a useful framework for ways games can be designed to help foster empathy.

“Principle 1: Players are likely to empathize only when they make an intentional effort to do so when the game begins. The game may… more subtly encourage them to take on a focused empathetic posture” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 9). In order to analyze a game for its potential to promote empathy, it is necessary to observe when and how the game attempts to prepare players to engage with the content; by providing either explicit or subtle reminders at the beginning, as well as throughout the game, games increase chances that players will continue to play with an empathetic perspective.

“Principle Two: Give players specific recommendations about how their actions can address issues represented in the game” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 10). With this principle, Belman and Flanagan remind game designers not to leave their audience in the dark: if a game wants players to interact with the world in a non-violent way, for example, then that should be accounted for in the design. That is not to imply that games should be overly didactic, but there
should be some frameworks in place to guide players to certain conclusions. These could be as simple as “be aware of others,” but it might also be more complex, like providing specific examples for ways players could help a non-playable character (NPC) who has suicidal ideation.

The article goes on to add that, “desired behaviors can be modeled through game mechanics” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 10). If a game, for example, wants to encourage respectful conversations with others, it should allow, and even potentially reward, respectful dialogue within the game. Games might also highlight instances where players’ use of certain mechanics is desirable, giving players a clue to what they ought to do within the game. That said, desired behaviors might also be modeled through actions players are unable to make. A game about the value of life, for example, might not include violence as a part of gameplay. As such, both the abilities and lack thereof should be examined when exploring the empathetic potential of video games.

“Principle 3: A short burst of emotional empathy works well if desired outcomes do not require significant shifts in players’ beliefs” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 10). In the article, Belman and Flanagan list two kinds of empathy: cognitive and emotional. Cognitive empathy is perspective taking, individuals put themselves in the shoes of someone else and imagine what it might be like in that situation. The trouble with games is that identification is complicated. Flanagan (2002) herself explores how players can simultaneously take on first and third person perspectives will playing games, sliding between I did this and the avatar did this (p. 425–454). As such, it cannot be assumed that players are taking on the perspective of their avatars while playing games, even serious ones. What is easily trackable, however, are the emotional beats that could be used as points to trigger the “short burst of emotional empathy,” that Flanagan and Belman discuss with the game design principle. Emotional empathy focuses on how players feel
towards individuals or situations: if a player were to watch a character get bullied, they might have a parallel reaction (feeling what the character feels, like sadness) or a reactive reaction (feeling something different from what the character feels, like pity), but either way, they have an emotional response to the scene. (Stephan and Finlay, 1999). Because this kind of empathy is often connected to emotional narrative beats, it is easier to track within gameplay.

“Principle Four: Emphasize points of similarity between the player and people or groups with whom she is supposed to empathize, but beware of provoking defensive avoidance” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 11). Although it is impossible to force a player to empathize, there are ways to try to initiate connection between the player and the characters in the game. As such, it is important to explore how the game seeks to immerse players in another world and how it forges connections to other individuals inside the game space. Players are more likely to find empathy for people or causes that are similar to them, so it is also important to create points of connection between the player and their character (Belman and Flanagan, 2010). In part, this comes through making characters, whether NPCs or playable characters, seem more three dimensional: an avatar with a backstory and opinions, for example, will often offer more potential points of connection than a generic, customized avatar. Although games cannot fully account for audience backgrounds, it can try to provide an immersive environment filled with characters that, even if they are not necessarily relatable, at least seem more like characters and less like board game pieces.

Building off of the concept of all games having values, Bogost and Wright (2010) further discuss the possibility for games to send conflicting messages, exploring some different frameworks games use to encourage certain behaviors, including a strict moral binary or rewards systems for specific actions. Although there are some games that deal with ‘moral uncertainty,’
most games stick to broad claims about good and bad behavior (Bogost and Wright, 2010). A game with a strict moral binary might label killing as good or bad, while a game with moral uncertainty might include a scenario where killing someone might save another character’s life, complicating whether or not murder is purely terrible or good. That said, when examining games as whole systems, rather than simply the values they explicitly express, Bogost and Wright explain that games are at risk of promoting conflicting values. For example, although *Mass Effect* offers a binary morality system, even on the good route, players spend quite a bit of time gunning down faceless enemies. In a case like this, although *Mass Effect* might have been trying to show its players ways to react more peacefully and kindly to situations, in the end, the amount of violence involved muddies that peaceable persona players are trying to craft. *Mass Effect* is far from the only example; entertainment games in general are susceptible to conflicting messages, especially while trying to balance potentially opposing goals of serious themes and entertaining gameplay.

Furthermore, in exploring ways that video games might foster empathy, Bogost (2011) introduces the concept of utilizing ‘operationalized weakness,’ which means giving players some sort of notable weakness in order to bring attention to uncomfortable situations others have to live through (p. 19–20). ‘Operationalized weakness’ is a unique characteristic within games, especially because many video games often aim to fill a power fantasy; in these games, characters are weak simply because they have not leveled up yet, but grow to become powerful. In games with ‘operationalized weakness,’ players must instead adapt to the permanent weaknesses of their playable character, which can sometimes cause discomfort. Although their approaches differ, both Flanagan and Bogost argue that carefully crafted games have the power to utilize perspective-taking to encourage an empathetic response to something in the real world.
There is an advocacy in these responses that is vital to the framework used to dissect *Life is Strange*, especially as this game tackles many real-world problems.

**Life is Strange: A Case Study**

*Life is Strange* makes a good case study for many reasons: not only does it tackle subjects like sexual assault, it does so with a young female protagonist who has the unique power to rewind time. The game begins with a reminder that actions have consequences: “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, 2015).

![Opening lines. (Life Is Strange, 2015)](image)

This might seem like a pointless reminder: of course actions in games have consequences within the game, that is the appeal of playing video games. What this opening ultimately does, however, is set the tone for the remainder of the game, preparing players to interact mindfully with the material. *Life is Strange* is a ‘choices matter’ game that revolves around Max Caulfield, a mild-mannered high school girl who saves a friend’s life and, in doing so, discovers she has the power to reverse time. Players are able – and even encouraged – to use the rewind power often, whether in high stakes scenarios or casual conversations with NPCs. Just like with many ‘choices matter’ games, players’ decisions affect the outcome of the overall narrative, which is divided into five
“episodes.” Some consequences come immediately, while the effects of other decisions are not felt until several episodes later.

Equally as distinct as the rewind mechanic in *Life is Strange* is the thoughtful focus on sexual violence against women. It is fairly safe to say that the general atmosphere in the video game community has not always been welcoming to women: this can be seen in the Dickwolves controversy and later in Gamergate. In both events, women were targets of threats, many of which included sexual violence (Blodgett and Saltar, 2012). More recently, the gaming industry underwent its own #MeToo moment as women within the industry shared their stories of harassment and assault (Orr, 2019). Popular games themselves have also included displays of sexism, sometimes even rewarding players for enacting sexual violence. As such, *Life is Strange* is a unique addition to a field that has a tendency toward sexist attitudes toward women.

*Life is Strange*’s focus on sexual violence – especially now in the #MeToo era – is particularly timely. Sexual assault is a complex issue that, unfortunately, many women will face in their lifetimes. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the United States’ largest anti-sexual violence organization, an American is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds (Department of Justice, 2019) and only five in 1,000 sexual assault perpetrators are put in jail (Department of Justice, 2017). With the system seemingly stacked against them, it makes sense that victims of assault often face complicated decisions with navigating recovery. An entertainment game trying to dive into some of the difficulties assault victims face is therefore interesting and worthy of study.

As such, as an entertainment game designed by a reasonably established company tackling themes of sexual assault, *Life is Strange* creates an interesting juxtaposition in its gameplay. This paper uses an analysis of *Life is Strange* in relation to the principles of
empathetic game design forwarded by Belman and Flanagan to explore strengths and limitations in using entertainment games to promote empathy among players.

The analysis of Life is Strange is based on multiple playthroughs, which provide exploration of the numerous consequences available throughout the story in order to discover the affordances and limitations that Life is Strange, and entertainment games in general, have when trying to create situations that help promote empathetic behavior. The playthroughs are examined using Belman and Flanagan’s four principles of empathetic game design. Although these are intended to be used for the creation of games, they do create a helpful starting point for examining empathy within a game.

**Priming Players**

Scholars highlight the importance of priming players before gameplay to prepare them for more serious gameplay (Jenkins, 2006; Belman and Flanagan, 2010). Life is Strange attempts a version of this principle at the very beginning of the game as a whole, as well as the beginning of each individual episode, with a reminder that players’ actions have consequences (DONTNOD, 2015). This idea is reinforced with a short musical motif and an icon of fluttering butterflies in the corner of the screen, followed by the phrase “this action will have consequences,” which occurs in a number of places, including conversations with NPCs, as well as minor and major decisions players can make. Through this repeated motif, users are primed to think critically about how their decisions might affect the world around them. By using this reminder often, Life is Strange also gives merit to thoughtfully considering seemingly small decisions. Although major decisions are further signposted and marked by a freeze frame, smaller choices, like watering a plant or having a conversation are also deemed important – and sometimes even affect greater decisions down the line. Through this regular motif, Life is
Strange reminds players to be thoughtful in all actions. While this might not push hard enough into empathy, it does exist to nudge players into assessing whether or not the consequences of their actions are worth whatever short-term gain might have been achieved.

How a game introduces mechanics is also telling as to its overall objective. In the case of Life is Strange, the very first ability characters are introduced to is the power of observation. Unlike other mystery games, which rely on players guessing what items in a room might be worthy of observation, Life is Strange points out items with an arrow and a label to let players know they can interact with – or more often, simply examine – the object. With each observation, Max voices her thoughts. Some observations are innocuous, more a way to set the scene and immerse players rather than to make any big points, while others act as important insights to the ways Max or other characters are feeling. “Kate used to play the violin every morning…” says Max as she examines a friend’s instrument, “She stopped last week…” (DONTNOD, 2015). Here, players do not only learn that Kate is musically inclined, but that since the assault, she has stopped engaging with her hobbies. Finally, some of these observations can help with puzzles and offer better dialogue options. The game makes such a point of getting players to observe the world around them and learn to become aware of others, modeling behavior not only for the game, but potentially real life.

Similarly, the introduction of Max’s rewind power is telling to how the rest of the game will proceed. Max discovers this ability after watching a young man, Nathan, shoot a young woman, Chloe, in the girl’s bathroom. By framing Max’s newfound powers as a matter of life or death, players are immediately primed to use the power to rewind to help someone else. Furthermore, players are not offered violent ways to stop the attack from happening. There is no fighting back, instead Max must find a non-violent way to stop Chloe’s murder. In short, players
are taught through the gameplay that rewinding time is a way to avoid conflict, whether said conflict is life or death, or someone getting their feelings hurt.

Although Max’s power to rewind time is an interesting facet of gameplay, Max also has limitations that primarily come from her age and gender. Playing as a teenage girl in a society where womanhood can be a liability, players experience ‘operationalized weakness’ firsthand – Max is not strong enough to fight characters, she is not believed by male authority figures and is eventually targeted by a predator. Players must balance their newfound power with this weakness, which is unusual in entertainment video games: “In many cases, these roles fulfill power fantasies” (Bogost, 2011, p. 18). As such, Max having clear struggles is a telling sign of the game’s overall values: Max is not an indomitable superhero, but a teenage girl who happens to have a supernatural advantage. By introducing Max’s weakness alongside her power, the game is priming players to understand that not every supernatural ability can overcome some of the struggles of being female in a patriarchal society.

The interesting thing about Max’s power is that it still requires players to engage at least somewhat mindfully with the game: the rewind power only helps players avoid making the wrong decision, it does not make the problems players face easier to solve. In fact, from the beginning, the game encourages—and sometimes even requires—multiple playthroughs of a situation in order to progress. Through this method, players are pushed to consider a story from multiple perspectives. For example, during Max’s first big decision – whether or not she tells the principal she saw Nathan Prescott in the bathroom with a gun – she will prompt players to rewind and test both options. “Should I rewind and change my story?” Max muses aloud (DONTNOD, 2015). Even when the game hits the final episode, Max still remind players (in way of inner monologue) of the importance of testing consequences.
It should be noted that “consequence” is a neutral word. *Life is Strange* is not trying blatantly to spoon-feed players answers about what is the “correct” choice, especially in cases where the situation is too complicated for a straightforward answer. For example, during a predicament in Episode Two, where Max must help her friend, Kate Marsh, decide whether or not to report being drugged – and potentially much worse – to the police. This is a complicated decision in real life and as such, even if the “right” answer is to go to the police, a game truly trying to create an empathetic situation for characters would not demonize them for choosing to keep quiet instead. “Good job, Dr. Max. She didn’t like what I had to say,” Max reasons aloud after players decide to avoid getting police involved, “but we need more proof of what happened” (DONTNOD, 2015). By utilizing the consequences reminder and taking advantage of Max’s inner monologues after each major decision, *Life is Strange* is constantly priming players to consider the short and long term effects that their decisions will have, both for themselves and for others. Players are forced to grapple with the complications of reporting assault when the date rape drugs make the whole affair difficult to remember, which is, unfortunately, not a problem players can kill with the tap of a button in the game, nor is it the sort of thing that is easily solved in real life.

By not making obvious indications of “good” or “bad” choices, *Life is Strange* opens the door for more emotion based decisions. Players are encouraged, for example, to pay attention to how choices make other characters feel. Later in Episode Two, players must choose between taking a call from Kate, their friend struggling with assault, or ignore the call in favor of another friend. In this case, there is no correct answer. Either way, someone ends up unhappy and it is up to players to weigh the options and make a decision. By providing plenty of low-stakes choices,
players are able to practice empathizing with people in more ordinary situations before making judgements on more difficult decisions.

*Life is Strange* not only primes players to play mindfully, but also provides regular reminders throughout the game. Better yet, this mechanic is not overtly didactic, which can run the risk of alienating players. Instead, *Life is Strange* primes players through its motifs and gameplay options provided to players, while providing valuable lessons through both Max’s rewind power and her limitations as a teenage girl.

**Modeling Behaviors**

After a game primes players, it should ideally model behaviors that it wants players to emulate. In the case of *Life is Strange*, this modeling comes in a few forms: specifically highlighting *why* actions turn out to be good or bad, working to represent characters as human beings who can be affected by actions, rather than objects to be manipulated, and providing statistics of player choices that allows players to compare their decisions to those of the community as a whole.

One of the most interesting ways *Life is Strange* corresponds with the second principle of empathetic game design is the way it addresses Kate’s assault. Belman and Flanagan (2010) argue that, while there can be exceptions, concrete examples of modeled behavior within games are often more helpful for promoting empathy than metaphorical examples of similar behavior. For example, if *Life is Strange* had simply foreshadowed Kate’s depression with the dark lighting and ominous music that occur when players visit Kate’s room, it would not have been as clear as the specific observations Max makes when observing the bedroom, such as multiple remarks on aspects that are unusual, including the increased mess, drawn shades and untouched violin. Here, *Life is Strange* is actually offering a subtle lesson on typical depression warning
signs that can come before suicide, which include loss of interest in old hobbies, decreased energy and socially withdrawing (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). If players choose to examine a pile of clothes on the floor, for instance, Max’s commentary contextualizes the situation: “Kate’s room used to be immaculate” (DON'TNOD, 2015).

While players try to talk Kate down from the rooftop, the game grows more explicit in its reiteration of what constituted as helpful actions within the game. Take, for example, the following exchange:

Max: Kate, your life is still yours. And we can get through this together... Let me help.
Like I helped by erasing all that crap people wrote on your room slate...
Kate: Thanks for that, but I needed you more when I called to actually talk. That's when I needed a friend. (DON'TNOD, 2015).

During this exchange, which is not an isolated incident throughout the story, the game is more clearly outlining and reviewing past decisions. Here, it points out the importance of small actions that could very well go unnoticed (like erasing a mean message from a whiteboard), as well as the effects of bigger decisions, like whether or not to pick up the phone when Kate called. In these conversations, which often tie NPC behavior to choices made by the players throughout the game, Life is Strange reiterates the concrete examples it provides in earlier gameplay.

The conversation with Kate on the roof also stands out because, for the first time since gaining the supernatural ability, players are unable to use their rewind power. It gives a glimpse into how things operate differently without the buffer that time travel offers, forcing players to become even more thoughtful in their answers. With each step Kate takes back towards the edge of the roof, the game makes a point: small, seemingly innocuous actions could mean the difference between a friend’s life and death. This is done, in part, to amplify the tension of the
scene, but the game is also reinforcing the importance of observation. Players enter the remaining three episodes of the game knowing they will have to work harder to pay attention to the wants and needs of characters, as well as their own surroundings. Outside the game, players might not have the ability to rewind time, but the concrete example of being aware of others enough to pick up on warning signs is an ability that exists both inside the game and outside it.

Though *Life is Strange* often positions itself as an unbiased way for players to make difficult choices, there are cases where it more explicitly models good behavior. For instance, in the fourth episode, Max has a choice: warn Victoria that she is currently a target for assault, or not tell Victoria anything. Unlike other decisions, where Max outlines the good and bad in both choices, this is not a morally grey area and the game subtly signals as much. If players warn Victoria, Max muses, “I’m glad I warned her. I hope she’s okay” (DONTNOD, 2015). Here, there is no mention of turning back time or trying again. Contrast this to the alternative: “Should I have warned Victoria? She might be evil, but…” (DONTNOD, 2015). Here, the response explicitly references the alternate decision and leaves it up to the player to understand the implication of the statement: nobody, much less a teenage girl, deserves assault. Through this and other situations, *Life is Strange* tries to nudge players into making specific decisions in cases where the moral dilemma is far less complicated.

Another way *Life is Strange* models desired behaviors is through the depictions of both Max Caulfield and the victims of the assault. By working to frame the female characters in *Life is Strange* as individuals with lives and feelings, rather than simply objects, it makes it easier for players to develop empathy for their plights. Objectification can begin with how the character’s body and clothing are designed, which for women can include minimal clothing or clothing to enhance a character’s figure, as well as large breasts and curvy hips – sometimes so big they are
outside of a woman’s actual proportions. The trouble with female avatars designed to potentially appeal to the male gaze is that while women often reported feeling empowered while playing female characters, men were titillated, furthering the perception of the character as an object (Mikula, 2003). In Life is Strange, however, Max Caulfield is carefully designed to potentially reduce objectification. First, she is built like a typical high school girl: Max is skinny and small breasted. She also dresses conservatively – t-shirts, hoodies and jeans – which ends up being a fairly androgynous style. While there is no way to account for how every player reacts to Max, her representation does not include some of the common characteristics of female video game characters: neither her body type nor the clothing she wears are overly sexualized.

While design is important, objectification can be more than just how female characters are designed, but how they are presented on camera. In film, the audience cannot control what they see: camera angle, motion and framing is all set by someone else. Although games can resemble film, there are many cases where games give players control over the camera, allowing players to examine things from a variety of angles. That development gives players more agency, but that agency can cater to the male gaze. This can be especially true when players control a male character, providing what Laura Mulvey (1975) referred to as a ‘screen surrogate,’ which allows players to identify with the (typically male) protagonist. By providing a female protagonist instead, Life is Strange removes the male ‘screen surrogate’ from the equation. The game also takes advantage of cut-scenes – where players cannot control the camera – during moments that might otherwise give opportunity for a male gaze. One of the biggest examples comes in Episode Three as Max and Chloe break into the school swimming pool for some late night fun.
As soon as players select the option for Max to swim, they lose control of the camera and can only make the occasional dialogue decision. Although the scene involves two young women swimming in their underwear, it is presented in such a way that contrasts with typical indicators of the male gaze: there is no male ‘screen surrogate’ for players to project onto, the camera does not linger on the girls’ bodies, and the scene serves a greater purpose in the overarching narrative as Max and Chloe share an important and emotional conversation. A game cannot control how players react to its contents, but *Life is Strange*, for all its focus on observation, is at least attempting to reduce opportunities for players to objectify female characters.

*Life is Strange* must also confront the risk of objectification when it comes to the depiction of sexual assault. Rape is a difficult and heavily charged topic, especially for an entertainment game trying to take a stance on the matter, so it makes sense that *Life is Strange* would be cautious in its depiction of assault. Rather than show or even discuss rape, *Life is Strange* tackles assault differently. The high school teacher, Mr. Jefferson, targets his female students, then has them drugged, kidnapped and posed for photographs; it might not be the typical story of assault, but it is still assault. Of course, depicting this sort of assault – which literally objectifies women – without encouraging the audience to relate to Mr. Jefferson, rather than the victims, can be difficult. *Life is Strange* does take steps to carefully discuss and depict
the horrors of assault: first, victims are fully clothed in photos and their poses are not overtly sexual, which helps reduce potential objectification of their bodies. Furthermore, when the photos of victims are introduced, both Max and Chloe react with horror, setting the tone for players that this assault is still a serious violation. Max also makes an important distinction, “Kate wasn’t the first...All those binders are filled with other victims” (DONTNOD, 2015). By labeling the girls as victims, Max explicitly informs players of the severity of the crime committed and models a serious reaction that players ought to have when faced with assault. In taking many steps to attempt to prevent players from objectifying female characters, Life is Strange works to avoid potentially undermining its messages about assault. Although this whole scenario is part of the overarching melodrama, Life is Strange still tries to treat assault with the seriousness it deserves and in turn, encourage players to do the same.

Finally, the game models behavior through the final statistics it provides. After each game, players can review how other players around the world reacted to situations. In many ways, these final statistics act as a way for players to model behaviors for each other, rather than simply have the game model behaviors for players. For example, as of September, 2019, 62% of players told Kate to wait for proof, while 38% chose to counsel Kate to go to the police (DONTNOD, 2015). Although the game rewarded players by telling Kate to go to the police, players can utilize these final statistics to consider why the overwhelming majority decided instead to advise Kate to wait. On the other hand, the final statistics can also reinforce good behaviors: in the case of whether or not to warn Victoria about her assault, an overwhelming 92% of players opted to attempt to warn her (DONTNOD, 2015). Not only does this feature point out aspects of the game that players might have missed, but it also provides an opportunity for players to reflect on their decisions and how those choices compare to the general public.
While this is fun, it can also act as a way to prompt players into reconsidering decisions that might have seemed obvious to them.

Although *Life is Strange* remains relatively neutral, the game actually models ideal behavior for players through dialogue, art style and final statistics. It even does all of this without ceasing to be entertaining. Between discovering and deepening Max’s relationship with NPCs, trying to solve the mystery of Kate’s assault and Rachel’s disappearance, and grappling with time travel abilities, there is more than enough to do between emotional discussions and revelations.

**Emotional Empathy**

Principle three emphasizes the importance of utilizing both cognitive and emotional empathy in game design (Belman and Flanagan, 2010). In order to prime players properly to engage in cognitive empathy, there would need to be some sort of request for players to try to put themselves in Max’s shoes. This does not happen: *Life is Strange* does not primarily exist to teach lessons and many, if not all, of the teachable moments are fairly subtle. Entertainment games are not traditionally didactic, so it makes sense that *Life is Strange* would opt to avoid any blatant teaching moments, like requesting players visualize themselves in Max’s position. While there are few moments for perspective-taking, *Life is Strange* offers many opportunities for emotional empathy. The game does so by encouraging players to inhabit Max's perspective, offering short bursts of empathy, contrasting Kate with stereotypical representations of sexual assault victims, and integrating serious issues with casual interactions.

Although *Life is Strange* does not tell players to try to take on Max’s perspective, by having the audience play as Max, who has her own thoughts and opinions, players are nudged towards taking on her perspective anyway. Of course, even if *Life is Strange* had requested
players take on Max’s perspective, there is no guarantee that the audience would follow through. For example, Flanagan (2002) argues that players are not conscious of how they slip between identifying with the character. Grant Tavinor (2017) takes a different approach, describing ‘identification’ as more of a performance of sorts, where players embody another person and act out scenarios. This is more of a conscious choice on the part of the player, especially as they have to decide between acting how they believe the character would act, or acting how they as an individual would act. Both methods require some semblance of perspective taking.

Regardless of whether or not players actively identify with their characters, some scholars have pointed out the potential flaws in identification within digital spaces (Nakamura, 1997; Shaw, 2014). Nakamura (1997), for example, outlines the potential for ‘identity tourism’ – players embodying a race or gender that is not their own within a digital space – and warns that people might be too quick to say they understand the experiences of minorities simply because of the disembodied experience. To walk away from Life is Strange saying one has an understanding of what it is like to be a victim of sexual assault, or witness a friend commit suicide, would not be a fair assessment because players get to shut off their device and walk away from the game. Despite the difficulties of identification within a digital space, such as Life is Strange, the narrative structure of the game still ensures many opportunities for “short burst[s] of emotional empathy” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 10). One of the best examples actually comes before players are given the choice to warn Victoria about her assault. Here, players are given the choice to learn more about Victoria – if they so choose – and gain an insight into the backstory of a character who has been unpleasant to interact with for the majority of the game. By allowing players to learn about the struggles Victoria faces, the game simulates a short burst of empathy to further push players into choosing to be kind to Victoria. On a grander scale, Kate’s suicide
attempt also serves as a burst of emotional empathy to frame the overarching plot of sexual assault. The heartbreak of Kate’s attempt lingers in the game past the second episode, informing dialogue and decisions for players – Kate provides an emotional, human connection to the issue of assault.

In addition to the use of short bursts of emotion, the way Kate is depicted also provides an important entry point into empathy: Kate purposefully stands in contrast to commonly held misconceptions of sexual assault victims. For example, Kate is clearly religious: she dresses conservatively, reads the Bible, and even wears a cross necklace. In short, she does not fit the role of someone who was “asking for it.” Other victims, like Victoria, who explicitly flirts with Mr. Jefferson, and Rachel, who has a reputation for being a “slut”, fall into roles that tend to be less sympathetic. By first showing the effects that assault can have on an individual who very clearly fell into the “wrong time, wrong place,” category, *Life is Strange* tries to ease players into grappling with heavy themes. Through carefully planned emotional beats, the game eases players into feeling empathy for an assault victim, offering players the chance to connect with the material on an emotional level.

Lastly, the game encourages the practice of emotional empathy through the way emotional experiences within the game are spread out across gameplay: players spend plenty of time on other tasks, like exploring the school or hanging out with Chloe. This is different than many serious games, which often rely on constant emotional beats. With a game like *Life is Strange*, where each episode typically lasts several hours, rather than several minutes, it is uncommon for the game to expect players to feel strong emotions, especially negative emotions like fear and discomfort. In part because this does not make for entertaining gameplay, but also because players can get fatigued and disconnect from the material altogether. The tragedy of
Kate and the horror of sexual assault necessitate emotional pauses, which is why, for example, after players agonize about whether or not to answer Kate’s phone call, they follow up with a fun junk-yard romp with Chloe. By spreading the emotional beats throughout the game, players are able to take emotional breaks, which keeps the game entertaining, as well as empathetic.

In short, *Life is Strange* might not provide cognitive empathy, but by offering different emotional, empathetic beats, the game provides a number of points for players to relate to characters’ experiences – even experiences like sexual assault.

**Making Connections**

Belman and Flanagan’s fourth principle – “Emphasize points of similarity between the player and [the subject]” – is more difficult to utilize in analysis, as it discusses designing games that seem to fit with the missions of non-profit organizations or museums, places that have certain things to say and typically target specific demographics (Belman and Flanagan, 2010, p. 11). Many of these games have an objective outside the game itself – like helping an organization earn donations – and it highlights the very different objectives between serious and entertainment games. Despite a difference in motivation, however, there is one goal both serious and entertainment games typically have: engage the audience. When it comes to difficult themes, games must work to ensure they are not alienating audiences by introducing foreign concepts too quickly, instead connecting to audiences first before introducing hard topics. *Life is Strange* provides a connection between the audience and the world of the game by providing them with a playable character who already has a personality and in-game relationships, as well as slowly easing players into difficult topics.

By having players engage with the game through an avatar who is a fully fleshed out individual, *Life is Strange* essentially gives players a guide to the world. Max Caulfield already
has friendships, opinions and connections to the world that the players do not; through her observations and conversations, Max helps to explain the dynamics of the world to players. As such, Max creates a bridge between players and the world of the game, providing a narration to contextualize and immerse players in the digital world. By giving Max a personality, *Life is Strange* also offers players a better reason to become invested in how the story progresses. Max’s built-in connection to the world offers players a second-hand connection to the world and the characters before making personal assessments.

Another way to make it easier for players to connect with difficult topics is to introduce them slowly. For example, the plot of *Life is Strange* does not begin with the issue of sexual assault, instead spending almost four episodes building slowly towards it as a way to carefully introduce players to difficult things. Rather than start the game by branding Kate as a sexual assault victim, *Life is Strange* initially presents Kate as sweet girl who is bullied for a viral video. This small burst of emotional empathy is especially effective because bullying is likely something that more players have an experience with, whether being bullied themselves or examining it secondhand. After creating emotional ties to Kate with her struggles with bullying, *Life is Strange* allows players to learn about how she is depressed, another fairly relatable struggle, before they discover she was drugged and assaulted. The game then guides players into difficult situations slowly, starting with bullying and ending with sexual assault and suicide.

While there is no perfect way to truly immerse players in a world or identify with a character or characters, Max serves as a bridge to help a wide range of audience members connect to some of the more difficult themes within the story. Although players do not initially know characters within the game, Max does, which brings the situation closer to players. Belman and Flanagan report that people are often more likely to empathize with situations that are closer
to them, which is why making Kate, Max’s – and to some degree, the player’s – friend, brings the issue of sexual assault closer to players than if Kate had simply been a random unknown victim. *Life is Strange* takes time introducing difficult themes, allowing players to slowly familiarize themselves with harder and harder subjects. By humanizing Kate and creating a connection between her and the players through the use of Max Caulfield as the playable character, *Life is Strange* attempts to pull players into the narrative in ways that might have been more difficult if the playable character did not have explicit connections to the world.

**Limitations of Life is Strange as an Empathy Game**

Of course, as a large scale entertainment game, there are places where *Life is Strange* falls short in its attempts at empathy. For example, although time travel is a useful and interesting mechanic in earlier episodes, it is more difficult to motivate players based on consequences by the fifth episode, simply because the game is ending and as such, the only available consequences are short term. To combat this, *Life is Strange* opts to incorporate a string of alternate timelines, some of which are so far removed from reality that it is clear players’ actions held no sway. As such, moments for empathy decrease by the fourth and fifth episodes.

The way Kate’s suicide is portrayed visually is problematic, especially given studies of ‘suicide contagion,’ which have found that both non-fictional and fictional depictions of suicide can increase suicidal ideation in youth (Gould and Lake, 2013). All players watch Kate jump and fall to her death once, and for players who fail to convince Kate off the ledge, they must watch the death again, except this time the fall is closer and in slow motion. While this makes for compelling melodrama, it runs the risk of being potentially very harmful for individuals already struggling with suicidal ideation. It is one of the glaring disconnects between a serious game and an entertaining one: sometimes an attribute that makes the game fun is not one that corresponds
with teaching about heavy themes. Kate’s fall might be dramatic and sad, but the way it is depicted so explicitly on screen runs the risk of causing more harm than good.

Finally, there is the question of the assault in general. Although it was likely a good choice to avoid showing anything rape related on screen, the game’s depiction of assault was sensationalized and doesn’t match typical patterns of assault. Again, this comes from the difference between entertainment and serious games. Assault that includes photography is a fantastic choice for a narrative that heavily involves cameras: not only is Max is a photographer – players are rewarded for taking pictures – but in later episodes of the game she learns to travel through time using old photographs. With this in mind, it makes sense narratively to tie photography into the antagonist’s background as well, creating an interesting juxtaposition between Max’s photography and Mr. Jefferson’s. Unfortunately, it also runs the risk of being so sensationalized in its depiction of assault that it is possible players do not fully grasp the horror of sexual violence.

For all of Life is Strange’s missteps, however, it still provides a serious discussion about sexual assault, which is an important step forwards in the video game industry.

**Interpreting Empathy Games**

The trouble with being prescriptive in how games ought to strike a balance between entertainment and serious themes is that there is still so much unknown in the digital realm; the study of video games is a relatively young field. This paper also hopes to adapt the work of Belman and Flanagan in order to more effectively evaluate the empathetic potential of entertainment video games.

While Life is Strange appears to balance fostering empathy with entertainment, its unique mechanics, such as the ability to rewind time and its use of commentary to provide players with
more information, makes it especially effective as a means to discuss empathy in ways that other entertainment games might not be able to replicate. Although *Life is Strange* is a unique example of a game that both entertains and encourages empathy among its players, other entertainment games have the potential to strike a similar balance. For example, games like *Celeste* (2018), which, while primarily focused on challenging gameplay, still manages to weave an important discussion about anxiety in between intense levels. Meanwhile, games like *Papers, Please* (2013) are more interested about fostering empathy, putting their discussion about the complexities faced by immigration enforcement in a struggling regime at the forefront of the game, rather than a side note. *Life is Strange*, on the other hand, falls somewhere between these two examples, caught firmly between telling an important story and creating exciting gameplay. All of these games are not only telling vastly different stories, they are doing so with equally varied gameplay and aesthetics.

Because there is such a range for the potential in games that foster empathy, it is worth adapting Belman and Flanagan’s four principles for the purpose of analyzing games based on their potential to encourage empathy among players. For example, in regards to principle one, which discusses the importance of players beginning the game with empathy in mind, there are multiple ways to explore methods that games employ to prompt players into taking an empathetic position. First, some of the most effective empathy games, whether serious or entertainment based, often have some sort of message at the beginning of the game. It is worth examining what players are being primed to focus on within the game, especially as multiple scholars have emphasized the importance of framing intended gameplay early (Jenkins, 2007; Belman and Flanagan, 2010). Furthermore, as most entertainment games are significantly longer
than a serious game, researchers should note how often reminders are included. This might be in character dialogue, in messages on screen, or visual motifs.

Principle two discusses ways games could model intended behavior for players. In addition to addressing how the game models empathetic behaviors, analyses might include an examination of how the game’s mechanics determine for players the behaviors they can choose. Often, this can be done by examining gaming mechanics: what players are and are not allowed to do can tie into the serious themes. Limitations can be just as telling as affordances: opportunities for empathy can also come through what players cannot do within the game, both in terms of ‘operationalized weaknesses,’ as well as ensuring players avoid things the game does not want them to engage with. Many games might offer explicit hints to help players understand why things are happening within the game, whether it is in the form of narration, dialogue, setting, or another game mechanic. It is important to note what the game tries to show players, especially when the game models behaviors or perspectives that it encourages players to take on during gameplay.

Principle three emphasizes the importance of both cognitive and emotional empathy. Although cognitive empathy cannot be feasibly tracked in a textual study, it can be utilized in a quantitative study of a game. Whether or not players actively attempt perspective-taking within an entertainment game is an important aspect of empathy to consider. Even without a qualitative study, it is possible to examine instances of emotional empathy within a game. This concept is effective and providing an emotional connection for players is an important inclusion for games that want to handle serious topics. These emotional portions do not have to be long – in fact, it often works in games’ favor to spread intense moments out throughout gameplay – but they
should tie into the overarching themes of empathy. By providing emotional connections for
players, games can increase the potential for empathetic responses.

Although Belman and Flanagan’s fourth principle, which addresses connecting a target
audience to the subject matter, is useful for serious game designers, it is difficult to apply to the
analysis of games, especially entertainment games, as it relies on a detailed knowledge of the
identity of the intended audience. However, with the proliferation of smaller game companies,
access to game designers might be easier than it has in the past. Even if designers are not
available or willing to discuss their work, however, qualitative studies could be used to
understand perspectives from various demographics. Although it is difficult to utilize in an
exclusively textual analysis, Belman and Flanagan’s fourth principle could apply to broader
examinations of empathy in entertainment games.

In addition to revising Belman and Flanagan’s framework, analysis of games’ capacity to
promote empathy might include the question: how do serious themes fit within the overall
context of the entertainment games? Primarily, this concept examines whether the promotion of
empathy is a central theme within a game, or if it is secondary to the entertainment aspects.
There is no single way to make this balance, games that emphasize entertaining elements over
promoting empathy can still thoughtfully deal with important themes. It is also worth examining
how much players are able to interact directly with difficult themes. For example, do players
have in-game interactions with themes firsthand, like talking to assault victims, or are players
limited to watching cut-scenes, which reduces their engagement? It is also worth noting whether
or not the entertainment aspects add to or detract from the serious themes. In *Life is Strange*, the
concept of time travel worked well with empathetic discussions earlier in the game: players,
aware of the risk of consequences, had to be careful and thoughtful in their decisions and
interactions with other characters. Unfortunately, because these consequences held less weight by the final episode, Life is Strange turned towards other entertaining methods that had less to do with promoting empathy. As such, the balance between entertainment and empathy starts to shift and Life is Strange loses some of its focus on serious issues. It is worth examining how empathetic pieces fit into the game as a whole, especially because entertainment games are created primarily to earn profit, not teach lessons. The amount of entertainment compared to empathetic sequences is less important than how these two ideas interact. By examining how crucial the opportunities for empathy are to the game as a whole, as well as how a game manages to maintain the balance throughout gameplay, it will reveal what the video game prioritizes.

CONCLUSION

There might always be a push and pull between the two seemingly opposing forces of entertainment and empathy, especially with the wide variety of games available. As a greater variety of games are produced, offering a range of perspectives and experiences, it is likely that there will still be games that attempt to strike this difficult balance. Since Life is Strange, there have already been a number of games that discuss empathy in vastly different ways. The field of video games is still in its early stages, especially when compared to other art forms, so it is likely Life is Strange only scratches the surface of what entertainment games could become. It will be exciting to see how future creators continue to tackle the challenge of designing fun, but meaningful, games.
REFERENCES


