Article

Life Is Strange and "Games Are Made": A Philosophical Interpretation of a Multiple-Choice Existential Simulator With Copilot Sartre

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Abstract

The multiple-choice video game *Life is Strange* was described by its French developers as a metaphor for the inner conflicts experienced by a teenager in trying to become an adult. In psychological work with adolescents, there is a stark similarity between what they experience and some concepts of existentialist philosophy. Sartre's script for the movie *Les Jeux Sont Faits* (literally "games are made") uses the same narrative strategy as *Life is Strange*—the capacity for the main characters to travel back in time to change their own existence—in order to stimulate philosophical, ethical, and political thinking and also to effectively simulate existential "limit situations." This article is a dialogue between Sartre's views and *Life is Strange* in order to examine to what extent questions such as what is freedom? what is choice? what is autonomy and responsibility? can be interpreted anew in hybrid digital–human—"anthrobotic"—environments.

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Introduction: Choice of/in *Life is Strange* (*LIS*) and Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre was not only a philosopher and a political activist. He was indeed actively interested in popular forms of art. Were he alive today, his biography and bibliography suggest that he would be likely to consider some video games as an interesting way of communicating philosophical ideas and questions to a larger audience.

LIS (*Dontnod*, Square Enix, 2015) is an episodic, interactive, and cinematic video game that attained commercial and critical success worldwide (Calvin, 2016). It narrates the existential maturation of an adolescent girl. For the purpose of this article, I have experienced all five episodes and conducted a 1-hr interview with the directors and coauthors of the game, Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch. They confirmed their intention to look into the heart of adolescence and understand why we often view this period of life with fascination or nostalgia (de Miranda, 2015). They wanted

> to create a coming of age story that would be anchored in reality in a way that we could talk about characters dealing with real life issues and facing difficult choices—a kind of slice of life at its core. (Calvin, 2016)

LIS has been described by its developers as a set of thought-provoking metaphors for the inner conflicts experienced by teenage protagonist Maxine Caulfield in trying to become a more or less self-determined adult (de Miranda, 2015; Lemne, 2015). Adolescence is a time filled with existential conflict and changes, among which are an increase in freedom of choice (Fitzgerald, 2005). Each episode of *LIS* starts with the following incipit written in white letters on a black screen: "*Life is Strange* is a story-based game that features player choice. The consequences of all of your in-game actions and decisions will impact the past, present, and future. Choose wisely . . . "

My choice of Sartre as copilot to interpret *LIS* might seem self-evident for those who consider that the French philosopher's central responses to these questions— what is freedom? what is choice? what is responsibility?—"are the unacknowledged spectres that haunt the present generation" (Sherman, 2003, p. 163). One could even argue that today's generation of French game creators is at least superficially famil-iar with Sartre in particular and philosophy in general, as a consequence of the notorious compulsory high school course called "Bac Philosophie," "an ingrained part of French consciousness" (Gobry, 2015).

However, it would be exaggeration to imply that the game developers were consciously aware of the deep correlations between Sartre's Existentialism and *LIS*. Artists are not philosophers: They sense more than they quote or analyze. My interviewees did not know, for example, that Sartre's screenplay for the 1947 movie *Les Jeux Sont Faits* (literally *games are made*; less literally *the die is cast* or *the chips are down*; Sartre, 1947/1956) proposed the same core narrative idea as *LIS*: the fantastic possibility, for the main characters, to go back in time to try and edit their

own existence for emotional reasons (love, friendship, intersubjective care). Sartre's metaphorical script imagines a heavenly deterministic bureau and suggests the following message: Even if everything is coded in the game of life by a godlike scriptwriter, human agents can still rebel against alienation. They must cocreate a meaning that is not always rationally predictable, evaluate their existence, and form projects. This is an illustration of Sartre's famous claim: Humans are "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1946/1970, p. 37).

To avoid superficiality, our argument will focus on Sartre's commonly called existentialist works and leave aside the perspective of other "existentialists" (e.g., Camus, Heidegger, or Kierkegaard). It would take the length of a book to explain the nuances of Existentialism, a label contested even by some of its proponents (Gallie, 1956; Macquarrie, 1973). Existentialism can be associated with various and sometimes even contradictory notions, such as the absurd, nihilism, worry, the need for God, freedom, choice, and responsibility. Before becoming a tentative Hegelian-Marxist in the second part of his life, Sartre himself was sometimes reluctant to be called an existentialist because he felt the word was "so loosely applied and so extensively that it no longer means anything at all" (Sartre, 1946/1970, p. 16). Yet he never ceased to defend that "it is the exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that distinguishes man" (Macquarie, 1973, p. 16). As we will see in detail, *LIS* is a rich thought experiment about freedom of choice that mirrors Sartre's existentialist period, "a philosophy whose sole dogma is the affirmation of human freedom" (Follesdal, 1981, p. 372). By freedom (*liberté*), Sartre meant "autonomy of choice," and by *engagement*, he meant choice as an actualization, an act, a "doing" (*faire*; Sartre, 1943/2012, p. 563). Despite further moments of self-criticism motivated by an increased sensibility to the themes of alienation and social determinism, Sartre still declared at the end of his life: "We are free, but we have to free ourselves, and so freedom must revolt against all forms of alienation" (Sartre, 1977, p. 88).

A critic could argue that Heidegger also wrote—and perhaps more powerfully—on freedom and choice in *Being and Time* (1927/1996), but what he meant by freedom and "choice to choose oneself" is "somewhat mysterious" (Han-Pile, 2013, p. 291) when compared to the pedagogic simplicity and secular optimism of Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1946/1970): I have chosen to focus—mainly but not only—on this short text to tackle the themes of *LIS* because I believe it could be easily read by most video game players or developers as a companion text to the present article.

But why only *LIS* and why not focus on another video game or on a set of them? *Until Dawn* (*Supermassive*, Sony, 2014) is also a game about adolescence with a rich choice-and-consequence mechanic—but it contains thriller and horror elements that divert our attention from existential matters. *The Stanley Parable* (*Galactic Cafe*, 2011) is also a thought-provoking mediation on choice—but with much less intersubjective emotional themes and focus on human relationships. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (*Eidos*, 2011) also features strong moral dilemmas—but it does not

concern a quotidian adolescent life. *Beyond: Two Souls* (*Quantic Dream*, Sony, 2013) is also very emotional, deals with adolescent soul searching via rich multi-choice, possesses a philosophical title, and is also French made—but it does not use biographical time travel as a core metaphor. Ultimately this article will not only concentrate on *LIS* and Sartre's existentialism for lack of space. The relation of the game and of *Les Jeux Sont Faits* to the narrative possibility of changing the past reveals what might be the strongest problem of a philosophy of freedom: If our existential choices were predetermined like in a video game, according to a deterministic destiny implying an omniscient divine programmer or a very strong form of social class determinism, then we would be mere automata.

In what follows I have intentionally chosen not to introduce Sartre and his philosophical ideas separately from how they can be illustrated in the game. By examining the philosophical form of interaction between player and game, we will be able to approach the players "as a distinct aspect of the interaction, a part of the process that cannot be reduced to the execution of software protocols and machinic operations" (Voorhees, 2009, p. 258). Jumping between existentialism and *LIS* is more faithful, if not to the phenomenology of the player's experience, then at least to the broader horizon of this article: to eventually suggest some ideas toward a definition of autonomy for the 21st century.

"We are Choice"

We are choice (1943/2012, p. 368) writes Sartre in order to define the essence of human freedom. Each episode of *LIS* starts with the above-mentioned incipit regarding "player choice" and the need to "choose wisely." Existential autonomy and significance of choice is the central theme of both the game and Sartre's philosophy.

Adolescence is often described as a "transitional period between puberty and adulthood in human development" (Fitzgerald, 2005). In Episode 2 (*LIS*; Dontnod, 2015), a student tells Max: "Don't let life pass you by, Max. [...] You came to Blackwell to discover yourself, not hide in your dorm." In the first episode entitled "Chrysalis," the main character Max writes in her diary: "I am trying to climb out of my cocoon"—*LIS*'s developers have chosen to illustrate this idea with the recurrent appearance of a butterfly all along the game. When at the end of the final episode Max grabs a newspaper, the name of the daily journal is revealed to be *The Independent*. Many other clues intentionally displayed by the designers of the game (de Miranda, 2015) confirm that *LIS*'s main character is trying to become "independent" and "evolve" toward a form of existential autonomy.

The difficulty of this maturation process, the fear of the future, and the turmoil of adolescence are also symbolized by the recurrent presence of a giant tornado threatening Arcadia Bay, where Max resides and studies. The perspective of adultlike freedom is a frightening situation for her. The imminence of a more or less personal form of autonomy—suggested not only by the fact that she is 18 but also by the progressively refined "superpower" of traveling to her past and changing it—

challenges her sense of responsibility. Sartre suggests that freedom can be frightening because of the burden of choice that it assigns to humans: "In the end, aren't we scared by the fact that the doctrine I will try to explain leaves us with the possibility of choice?" (1946/1970, p. 15). In Episode 2, Max's narrative defends the existentialist idea that choice is a mayhem of emotions in part because of acts that need include attention to others: her lack of care for Kate, a bullied comrade, is, for example, followed in a version of the multiple-choice game screenplay by Kate's suicide. In an alternative version, Max convinces her not to kill herself. Characters in the game more often than not say that Max has a "good heart," and the players themselves are increasingly led to care for the others through her dialogues. Such care is not a whimpering form of sentimentalism: It can sometimes imply hard decisions such as euthanasia, as demonstrated in Episode 4. The game writers wanted Max to be on a quest for a nonsolipsistic, even prosocial form of freedom. Such a freedom was Sartre's core philosophical preoccupation: "When we say that man chooses himself, we mean that each person chooses himself, but also that by choosing himself, a person chooses all humans" (1946/1970, p. 16).

Such awareness implies a demanding ethics of goodwill in a manner reminiscent of Kant's metaphysics of morals (1785/1993): By creating the person we wish to be, we are suggesting a possible universal image of human community. If I choose not to help a person who appears or claims to be in need, this is not an isolated fact: It is for Sartre an interconnected social act that involves a generalizing valuation. To choose to be this or that, to actually do this or that, is simultaneously to affirm the good value of what we are doing or refraining from doing (Sartre, 1946/1970, p. 25). If, in a given situation, for example, when Max's paralyzed best friend Chloe asks Max to euthanize her, Max—and the players themselves through her character—chooses a form of renunciation, she affirms that such form of renunciation is valid for analogous situations. Our choices are constantly sketching the face of today's humanity in an entwined relationship with other people's choices: "An individual act engages all humanity" (Sartre, 1946/1970, p. 25).

A critic might argue this resume of Sartre's ethics of responsibility does not fit with the complexity of real-life situations: Our acts as adults might be less significant or more causally determined. Each existential predicament might be specific and nongeneralizable. Moreover, to consider the values manifested by our choices as generalizable and universalizing might eventually result in the kind of reification of values that Sartre seems to criticize elsewhere, as we will see. However, what we can write at this point is that the overestimation of personal choices displayed in some of Sartre's texts mirrors greatly the occidental structure of the adolescent mind. Adolescence tends to be an age of self-centration when humans wonder, sometimes anxiously, who they are in relation to others, and who they might become in the future: "In clinical work with adolescents there is a stark similarity between what they experience and the concepts of existentialism" (Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 793).

Metaphorical thinking, a floating transition between sensations, facts, and analytic thinking, can also be seen as characteristic of adolescent thinking (Breen, 2005).

As mentioned in our introduction, *LIS* was conceived as a set of existential meta-phors regarding teenagers. Jean-Maxime Moris, one of the founders of Dontnod studio, is unambiguous about the creative intention in the game: ''There are super-natural things, but they are only there to be a metaphor for what is going on inside the characters, their inner conflict'' (Lemne, 2015). Metaphors can be ambivalent and polysemic, like existence itself: The metaphor of the stormy vortex in the game or the frequent appearance of a butterfly can according to *LIS*'s developers be inter-preted as a psychological illustration of the famous ''butterfly effect'' (de Miranda, 2015; Lorenz, 1972). *Chaos Theory* is the title of one of the *LIS*'s episodes. Butter-flies of small individual choices can be seen as cocreating the larger narrative of a human community or even epoch. Each of us is for Sartre a constant and more or less conscious ''legislator'' of human social conventions (1946/1970, p. 28). This is what the affirmation that we are choice means: Humanity is constantly choosing, desiring, defining itself, or at least trying to define itself in each of its localized subjectivities.

Beyond Good and Evil: Affirming Humanity

Max ''cares,'' but she is confronted by life's many adversities because her kindness is often undefined and too abstract, at least in the first episodes. Yet she progres-sively learns when to say yes and when to say no, sometimes beyond traditional morals of good and evil—for example, the imperative *not to kill*. In the last episode of the game, significantly entitled *Polarized*, Max is faced with her most difficult choice: She can either save her soulmate Chloe from death or save the Arcadia Bay community from destruction and sacrifice her friend. On one hand, she wants to save her best friend; on the other, she does not want to selfishly provoke the extermination of an entire community (the outcomes of the two choices are ''playable'' in the game).

Similarly, Sartre gives the example (1946/1970) of a young man who came to him to ask for advice during World War II. This student had the choice of either joining the Free French Forces to fight against Germany or remaining in occupied France and taking care of his lonely old mother. The young man was debating between two sorts of actions: ''One concrete, immediate, but [apparently] addressed only to one individual, the second an action concerning an infinitely wider whole'' (p. 28). The first temptation of the young man was to try and follow his feelings. But how are we to determine the value of a feeling before we enact it? Sentiments are both defined and revealed by our actions. Feelings can be deceitful and volatile, and any attempt to uncover our true essential nature is according to Sartre a metamorphic chimera. The strength of a choice relies on the fact we stand up for it in intersubjective situations. The preeminence of the love for a mother over the love for a collective, or vice versa, is a self-construct that defines me in the social world: ''There is no other love than the love that is being constructed. [. . .] You are nothing else than your life,'' and not choosing, letting others decide, or opting for the status quo, is still choosing (pp. 56–58). Michel Koch, one of the creators of *LIS*, explains:

"Throughout the game, Max is finding ways to change everything, to find a perfect ending, but there is no perfect ending. [. . .] You have to focus more on what comes next than what came before" (Skrebels, 2016).

The will to do things differently, the desire to go back in time in order to change our biography is perhaps one of the most common existential fantasies. On this matter, Sartre and *LIS* advise us to focus on action rather than reaction. Along this theme of creative acceptance of the past, it could be argued that Sartre, if not *LIS*, is under the influence of the popular philosophy of Nietzsche, a major inspiration for existentialist thought (Guignon, 2004). Nietzsche argued that remorse and *ressentiment* vanish when we experience and embrace *amor fati*, the love of our fate for the purpose of present responsible action. We should conceive that our existence is highly desirable as it is, here and now, because it defines our experience and knowledge, and invites us to value life as rich potential for creative action and world forming, whatever happened in the past: "Never yield to remorse, but at once tell yourself: remorse would simply mean adding to the first act of stupidity a second. If we have done harm we should give thought to how we can do good" (Nietzsche, 1878/ 1986, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," section 323). *LIS* suggests with unambiguous examples that past life editing would not improve our existence. When Max tries to prevent Chloe's father from being killed in a car accident, she generates a new future in which Chloe is left paralyzed and eventually asks Max to euthanize her.

A sovereign figure of self and humanity can emerge through the exercise of embracing the present as a fountainhead of interconnected opportunities in order to remain strong enough to change the future: "If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves neither in things" (Nietzsche, 1901/1967, p. 532). Foreshadowing Sartre's notion of responsibility of choice, Nietzsche advocates a difficult "yes-saying without reservation [. . .], even to everything questionable and *strange* about existence" (1888/1989, p. 272, emphasis added). When Max sacrifices her best friend in the game, she feels sad, but she does not express regret and then moves on. The players are invited to choose between euthanasia or nonintervention and stimulated to think about what this means ethically and how it would feel if such a moral dilemma was personal. Many confess online, for example, on Facebook groups or YouTube comments and videos, that they cried on several occasions along the five episodes, thus revealing a cathartic effect of *LIS*, of which more later.

Attempting to change the past by treating it as a collection of adjustable events, a reified set of unit happenings, does not help to create a better world, since our existence is not made of separate objectified moments but is instead a changing, metamorphic network of intersubjective acts and values. Behind the Nietzschean and Sartrean existentialist ethical imperative lies the grandiose, somewhat grandiloquent (and perhaps potentially intolerant) ideal of a person, so coherent that every decision and act is the pure reflection of how she thinks any free existence ought to be lived.

Bad Faith, Nihilation, and Focus

In Episode 4, at a "Vortex Club party," Max tells schoolmate Brooke that she is trying to lead her life "without all this bullshit" (Dontnod, 2015). Brooke then notices she seems "wise and invincible lately," as if she had "superpowers": "I don't think having superpowers will make my life easier. With great power comes great bullshit," insists Max. She is wondering whether it is possible to become an adult without endorsing the general atmosphere of falsehood she senses is part of human relations. For Sartre, falsehood starts with the mechanism of obliteration of the freedom of our acts or thoughts. Insistence on moral determinism is a form of cowardice. You might not be able to judge me by the choices I make, but you can judge me on the responsibility I take for my choices. To place the responsibility of what I do on the shoulders of other people or past realities is for Sartre a manifestation of "bad faith" (1946/1970, p. 80).

As explained by Harry Frankfurt's scholarly essay, "bullshit" is closer to bad faith than lying because it does not necessarily imply that one knows the truth: "It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 55). A "bullshitter" is what Sartre calls colloquially a "lâche" a "coward," or a "salaud," a "stinker" (1970, pp. 84–85). In *LIS* the figure of the stinker is epitomized by photography teacher Mark Jefferson, who appears to be a nice character at the start of the game but later turns out to be a pervert. In Episode 1, Max writes in her diary how she admires Jefferson's work as a photographer and how "he is pretty hip for his age." Innocence is staged in the game via naive young female characters who can't pretend to be what they are not, as opposed to adults who are able to indulge in duplicity. But such innocence can also be cowardly. Max herself suggests that her taste for photography might be explained by lack of courage: "I've always seen the world through my own lens finder. Maybe it's a way for me to be part of the world, but at a safe distance." Both cowards and stinkers, explains Sartre, have a tendency to manifest "*esprit de sérieux*":

> Seriousness, in the end, happens when the point of departure is the *world*, and when we attribute more reality to the world than to oneself [. . .] All serious thought is a resignation of man in favour of the world. (1983, pp. 394–395)

A critic might argue that such formulations are exaggerated, potentially narcissistic, or anthropocentric. Moreover, isn't there a contradiction or even a double bind (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956) in the fact that I am told by Sartre that each of my choices supposes a universalization of my situated values and that acting according to a fixed exteriorized value can be a form of bad faith? In other words, if I decide today to act in the future according to a defined personally elaborated value, this value will be a more or less independent reality for the person I become in one year. If, in one year from now, I continue to refer to

this value to inspire my acts, how is this different from bad faith, since I will have created a personal determinism?

To try and solve this apparent contradiction, one can make a distinction between an ethical imperative and an ontological claim. A claim of adaptive behavior is a form of cowardice when it presupposes a robust independent social reality and gives ontological value to the primacy of society over our projects and visions; this is bad faith because it obliterates the ethical freedom we have to rebel against the perceived status quo and create personal maxims toward an alternative social game. I can be faithful to a personal ethical imperative without indulging in bad faith because even if I have chosen this value or set of values one year ago, I still have to constantly reaffirm it here and now and revalidate my choice for each new situation as a free choice rather than only as a determinism or alienation. Moreover, I am always free to change my moral code because I am my own legislator more authentically than I am the value I have chosen to represent.

Human reality is not primarily an objective set, a natural law, it is rather a cocreative practice of commitment, a dynamic network of situated acts manifesting values that are reproducible or generalizable but never absolutely and once and for all true. Sartre does not deny that reality exists, but he affirms that consciousness is creative and social reality mostly cocreated. Freedom is the ability to enact our values and accept or claim responsibility for their unfolding. This normative process of self-determination happens through choosing what we consider the most meaningful and what we conversely consider secondary or even nonexistent via a psychological mechanism called nihilation (“*néantisation*”; 1943/2012).

Nihilation is for Sartre a phenomenological process that involves intentionality. It means to reduce to nothing some aspects of the real. To reduce to *no-thing* is to see society as a flow of values and practices rather than a robust set of objects. Nihilation is the power of our imagination to decide, more or less implicitly, what is valuable and what deserves less focus. Simply put, this means to define, in each situation, what is a central priority for us, whether that process of centration and decentration is completely conscious or only partly so (Piaget, 1972). As a coauthor of *LIS* put it: “You have to focus [. . .] on what comes next” (Skrebels, 2016).

Focus is a polysemic term. Firstly, in photography or film, it designates the clarity, distinctness, and readability of an image. Max is able to travel in time within her own biography when she focuses on a polaroid picture previously taken with her camera. Through her, the player sees an emotionally blurred image which by pressing certain keys or buttons becomes clearer and more distinct in order for biographical time travel to happen. Focus can also designate, via its Latin etymology, the domestic fireplace and the metaphorical idea of home: *Where* we are from and consequently *who* we are. Throughout the game, Max searches in vain for herself, for a deep essential friendship, or for a sense of belonging to the community of Arcadia Bay. I will now argue that she ultimately discovers the reality-creating and world-forming ability that Sartre defines as an active focus on socially embedded values and projects.

From Internal Monologue to Intersubjectivity

One could define *LIS* minimally as belonging to the gaming category of "walking simulators," sometimes also called "first-person feels" (Mackey, 2015). The player moves Max within the environment of her 12th-grade academy in the imaginary North American town of Arcadia Bay. But Max is in constant monologue mode. In the phenomenological experience of being in the world among others, we often hear ourselves answer more or less mechanically, while our internal monologue or psychological focus is detached from the situation. These moments might create an impression of solipsistic dualism, where body and soul are two ontologically different realities, albeit communicating (Voorhees, 2009). However, *LIS* should not be defined like other games (e.g., Sid Meier's *Civilization*) as an enactment of Cartesian *cogito* but rather as an illustration of Sartre's intersubjective *cogito*.

Some strategic first-person games have been said to position the player as a Cartesian subject, a mental existence, the existence of a disembodied solipsistic being that is mostly governed by his thoughts (Seigel, 2005). Max's inner monologue might appear to be written in a way that is suggestive of the Cartesian moment of cogitation that precedes the revelation of the thinking ego. Yet contrary to Descartes, her *cogito* is not methodical. Her adolescent mental wandering is often shaky, echoing less Descartes's *Meditations* than its subversion in Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938/1981): "I am, I exist, I therefore think that I am: I am because I think, why do I think? I do not want to think anymore, I am because I do not want to be" (p. 311). Max's monologue is often distressed until the last episode: "What is going on now? . . . It feels like reality is . . . breaking apart [. . .] I am back here again? [. . .] This is messed up . . . Am I stuck in time? [. . .] This doesn't make sense . . . " Max is not looking for Cartesian mastery over nature but for an intersubjective form of authenticity.

According to Sartre (1946/1970, p. 64), the *I think therefore I am*, the cogito structure of consciousness discovered by Descartes is certainly a central aspect of our subjective condition, but it is not sufficient to define the social beings that we are. Once the self is defined as the absolute atom of human experience, it is difficult for a Cartesian agent to reintegrate the *cogito* of other beings into the system. How can we make sure that the others are not ghosts or *homeless* automata? We discover that we are not *out of focus* when we realize that our mental home is a shared subjectivity. Social beings think through a common language. They make projects among other beings, within a collective process of deliberation, an influential commerce of ideas, emotions, and values. Sartrean cognition is an intersubjective co-metacognition, a socially situated conversation and network of recognitions.

In its last episode, *LIS* offers an original and strikingly simple *mise en abyme* scene which can help understand Sartrean intersubjectivity: Max meets her double in a moment of psychological derealization. She engages in a dialogue with her doppelgänger in which she discovers that her pseudo-self is even more doubtful than she is and even cynical. Max's clone questions Chloe's honesty. In response, the "real"

Max stands up for Chloe and is able to retort in one of the options given to the player: "She is my best friend." A decisive philosophical moment is staged when Max's *ego* is projected outside of the inner dialogue with herself and recognized in the figure of the friend as *alter ego*, thus avoiding the reef of Cartesian solipsism. Chloe might not be Max's best friend *essentially*, especially because they have not always been attentive to each other. What is important is that Max decides to affirm that they are best friends here and now. Sartre wrote (1946/1970): "Through the *I think*, [. . .] I attain myself in front of the other" (p. 66). Can the *cogito* rationally *demonstrate* the existence of a good friend of an alter ego who is not just a reflection of an internal dialogue? It can choose to *recognize* it (1943/2012). I can avoid solipsism through the responsible choice that my alter ego is not only incarnated in my consciousness, in an ambivalent dialogue with myself (*I think*, *I am*), but in the existence of the other, who can potentially become my friend through a process of mutual electing. Our situated human condition is primarily *choice*, choice of ourselves as responsible and choice of the others as existing: "To be is for us to choose ourselves" (Sartre, 1943/2012, p. 368).

The transition between childhood and adulthood coincides with increased awareness that we are social beings (Fitzgerald, 2005). Along with the *being-for-oneself* (être-pour-soi), there is a fundamental mode of existence, the *being-for-others* (être-pour-les-autres; Sartre, 1943/2012). Our choices are always situated and interpersonal, producing humanity at every moment, creating or *nihilating* relationships, ideas, intentions, and connections—hence the perceived immense responsibility and the occasional anxiety. "From Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, the existentialists have provided [. . .] analysis of such feeling states as anxiety, boredom, nausea, and have sought to show that these are not without their significance to philosophy" (Macquarrie, 1973, p. 5). Existentialists are interested in the complex emotional and social life of humans, not just in the rational individual aspect of our being. *LIS* is built on the narrative assumption that existential control is complex, not always rational, and not a facet of an isolated Cartesian mind.

A critic might argue that it is nevertheless absurd to say that a video game with a prewritten menu of choices and precoded in-game consequences can teach us anything about freedom or relationships because its mode of control is limited by the parameters of game design, which limit the possibilities afforded to the player (Voorhees, 2009). The answer to this is that game constraint can be a heuristic analogy to social constraint. *LIS*'s coded determinism simulates quite accurately the experience of bad faith, our general tendency to essentialize reality and to think of society as a rigid game of predetermined conventions that we ought to adapt to in order to survive. Even if Max's monologue and choices are indeed digitally prewritten, player subjectivity—our personal and collective experience with the existential questions raised by the game—is not digitally coded within the game.

The fact that players—often teenagers themselves, but not only—are given an opportunity to decide and exchange about what to do in crucial existential simulated situations transforms the game into a series of philosophical, ethical, emotional, and

collective thought experiments. This valuation-testing process might be inspiring when they find themselves in similar quandaries in real life. Further systematic research should be undertaken on this matter, but my hypothesis is that a game like *LIS* is an *existential simulator*. I don't mean it as a training program toward a balanced and normal adult life because we have understood with Sartre that there is no such thing as an essential model of human normality, but as a way to reflect on our social cocreation of values and relationships. This might explain the global success and popularity of *LIS*, despite gaming graphics that are not the most hyper-realistic: It allows the players to simulate heavy ethical or emotional choices without irreversible consequences. In the end, we know *it's only a game*.

"Games Are Made"

For some speculative digital specialists, the more convincing the simulation feature of video games will be, the closer it will take us to an evolutionary mutation of the human species, where the imaginary and the real become one (Lanier, 2010). But is this fusion really new? In what follows I propose to examine how the visceral popularity of *LIS* could be just a manifestation of what has been known since Aristotle—and used by Sartre in his theater and screenwriting—as the need for a purge of painful, dangerous, or repressed emotions or fears via a spectacular medium, that is, "catharsis seeking" (Ferguson, Oslon, Kutner, & Warner, 2014).

One of the positive impacts of cathartic staging is the public debate that follows (Walmsley, 2013). A game like *LIS* can be seen not only as a personal existential simulator but also as a collective one: In 2015 and 2016, hundreds of thousands of players piloted hundreds of thousands of versions of Max Caulfield. They discussed their experience of the game's existential themes in real life or online between and after each episode, thus even effectively influencing *LIS*'s developers in the ongoing writing of the last episodes (de Miranda, 2015). *LIS* has become a platform of cocreation and collective rhetoric where the differences of, for example, genre or ethnicity could be momentarily abstracted in favor of meaningful dialogue (Dubriwny, 2005; Simons, 1982)—even if the game enacts a Western, mostly White, and relatively bourgeois way of life. As of April 6, 2016, a randomly chosen day, one of the main Facebook groups dedicated to *LIS* numbered 8,155 members. On that day, several wall discussions exhibited a self-reflective mood: "If there is anything *LIS* has taught me, it's to take advantage of the moment before it disappears in time forever"; "The measure of friendship is not physicality but its significance"; "The Max Caulfield dilemma: me trying to act normal around my friends but I start thinking about outer space and my own existence." Other posts are more superficial, but a significant amount of players seem to have expanded their experience of reflective intersubjectivity thanks to the web of beliefs and conversations generated by *LIS*, in which the themes of existential freedom and social constraint appear more often than not.

A critic here could retort: isn't playing video games, despite of their supposed deepness, a form of escapism, the opposite of self-determination? How is *LIS* an existential simulator rather than a way to avoid the challenges of real life? There are effective flight simulators, but human social existence is not an engineered plane which obeys the laws of physics with a globally predictable outcome. If life is stranger than any staging or framing of it, how can we really learn anything from virtually protected simulated choices that are devoid of random unpredictability? How could we ever become more resilient without experiencing the pain of real obstacles, without the psychological benefits of serious risk taking, without undergoing mourning for example? The answer is that these questions are, again, not new—they are not specific to videogames: The same kind of critic was often addressed to poetry, literature, theater, or more recently cinema.

There are substantial similarities between a video game like *LIS* and Sartre's theater or cinema. As explained by Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre proposed a "theatre of freedom where the primacy of free will enables his heroes to break the power of destiny" (Gilbert, 2012, p. 114). He claimed that through his plays or screenplays, he wanted to show "the moment of choice, of free decision," limit situations that could imply a death, invite us to decide or think about what we would do if we were confronted with the same situation (Sartre, 1973, p. 20). A limit situation is a situation where "freedom discovers itself at its highest degree because it accepts to loose itself in order to better affirm itself" (p. 20).

Sartre's movie script *Les Jeux Sont Faits* (1947/1956) is set successively in a form of bureaucratic God-ruled afterlife and in a totalitarian regime on earth, an evocation of German-occupied France during World War II. In the afterlife, Eve and Pierre learn that they were predestined to be loving soulmates in real life. Their encounter was prevented by social class divides and premature violent deaths. Yet, as Max in *LIS*, they are unexpectedly offered the supernatural possibility to go back in time, in their own previous biography. They attempt to edit the course of events in the past in order to experience their predestined love—however, as in *LIS*, nothing happens as expected. Pierre ends up choosing political resistance against totalitarianism, avoiding the determinism of love. Eve decides that letting Pierre join a resistance movement is a proof of love. Despite the apparent fatalism, Sartrean existentialist elements are central in the way Pierre chooses political *engagement* over a predestined love and in the way Eve prefers to interpret love in a personal manner, as self-sacrifice in a collective social background, against the heavenly definition of love as self-sufficient and self-indulgent couple destiny. In *Les Jeux Sont Faits* as in *LIS*, there is a staging of the moral dilemma between freedom for oneself and freedom used sacrificially for others (Gillespie, 1992). Eve, Pierre, and Max recognize that love or a deep friendship might be pleasant desirable states, but not necessarily when a larger community needs you in the context of a historically critical situation. This insistence on the theme of intersubjectivity does not mean that the choice of self-sacrifice is always the right one—opposite choices are playable in the video game and often suggested in the movie—but simply that one ought to be

conscious of the fact that each limit situation is ethically, personally, and socially defined. This was also suggested in *Existentialism and Humanism* by the above-mentioned Sartre's student, who had either to stay with his mother or join the French resistance.

In *LIS* as in *Les Jeux Sont Faits*, a staged dynamic shows the characters wrestling with the implications of ambivalent beliefs in individual freedom and in collective action, while it is ultimately unimportant for a definition of freedom as valuation to know for sure if human existence is predetermined or not. Even if life is comparable to a prewritten game with made-up choices, there are different ways to experience and interpret each situation. Even if alienation is our first nature, we ought to try and free ourselves. In the last scene of *Les Jeux Sont Faits*, Eve and Pierre are questioned by a young couple who have just discovered they were also predestined to love each other but also failed in their first life: "Can we try to start our life anew? [. . .] Try, advises Pierre. Try anyway, whispers Eve" (Sartre, 1947/1956, p. 143). If social games are *made* ("*les jeux sont faits*"), constructed, cocreated, we can always try and become part of those who cocreate them. Whether we like it or not, we are world formers.

Conclusion: Anthrobotic Autonomy?

Video games can be philosophical stimulators. Explaining philosophy through the practice of video gaming has seen growing interest over the past few years (Cogburn & Silcox, 2008; Gualeni, 2015). The psychological or philosophical depth of video games is a preoccupation of game developers themselves (Koster, 2005). The most obvious philosophical claim of *LIS* is the title affirmation that life *is* indeed strange. Etymologically, *strange* means external, *from the outside of a system*. Life can be strange in this sense because it is a fecund vortex of possibilities not only an actual and limited stock of things but a process of world forming, a constant cocreation of social reality according to certain intentions and valuations. Human freedom is a dynamic construct that originates in a fecund "nothingness" that pervades our sociocultural games (Sartre, 1943/2012).

Sartre described our existence as estranged from any fixed human nature: Because we have no essential nature, because there is no such thing as an authentic origin to which we could go back to, we can enact our autonomy by trying to cocreate our codes, interpretations, and values. In short, we can be conscious world formers. Ethical autonomy, the capacity to interrogate human existence in order to distinguish what is meaningful for the coherence of our actions and what is less so, is an important aspect of freedom that distinguishes us from automata. Yet automated games like *LIS* can help us reflect on such an autonomy, even if they simulate existential situations where limited choices are available.

Video games can be existential simulators. It is too soon to know if an artificial intelligence will ever be able to, if fed with enough stories from a given culture, "reverse-engineer" the values tacitly held by the culture that produced them (Riedl & Harrison, 2015), but we should notice that each episode of *LIS* publicly displays

the constantly updated statistics of the choices that have been made by the anonymous sum of all players in the limit situations offered by the game, thus allowing us to learn about current collective valuations, at least in the players main countries of origin. This allows us to ask for example: What does it mean to social psychology or global ethics that a clear majority of the millions of players have chosen to euthanize Max's best friend Chloe in Episode 4 (Dontnod, 2015)? And why have more than 45% of them decided in the final episode to sacrifice the entire community of Arcadia instead of Chloe? Could such forms of indirectly collected big data on collective valuation through playful limit situations inspire our social policies, or will they be used for more private purposes? Could we develop video games as political simulations?

Eventually our philosophical reading of *LIS* calls for a rethinking of our human autonomy of valuation within our new relationship with simultaneously constraining and enabling hybrid worlds, partly digital, partly human. As existential world formers, we are both producers and products of a dialectic process involving both a desire for freedom and a need for robust protocols. In human worlds that are now cocreated with robotic systems, it is sometimes argued that the horizon of our freedom is a shared autonomy, where user input and machine-like autonomy are combined to achieve goals (Javdani, Srinivasa, & Bagnell, 2015). Our reading of Sartre suggests that human autonomy is different from what is called *autonomy* in digital devices. If it is not the same autonomy, can it be *shared*? This dynamic tension needs to be better understood within the perspective that I have taken to calling ''anthrobotics'' (de Miranda, Rovatsos, & Ramamoorthy, 2016). Anthrobotics starts with the choice to consider the human–machine intertwining as a dynamic union of more or less institutionalized collectives involved in processes of world-forming. The goal is to facilitate the implementation of more plural and harmonious forms of shared natural–artificial forms of live.

As suggested by Sartre, freedom is the capacity to cocreate our future. In the same vein, anthrobotic freedom designates our collective capacity to codesign our hybrid systems made of flesh and circuits to be the world formers of our semi-digital social games. The kind of human autonomy that is needed today is not only a matter of privacy but also a matter of policy and polity in the context of collective systems architecting. As suggested by Sartre, we can sometimes feel a passionate attachment to our determinisms. The relationship between humans and technology can at times resemble an infinite game where the principal outcome is to continue playing (Kelly, 2010). We get ''caught up in the game'' (Sartre, 1943/2012, p. 130), but we can also step back and remember that our sociocultural games are indeed *made-up*. Our worlds are, in a way or another, cocreated by us.

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