

Life Is Bleak (in Particular for Women Who Exert Power and Try to Change the World): The Poetics and Politics of *Life Is Strange*

Holger Pötzsch, UiT – The Arctic University of Norway

Agata Waszkiewicz, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

Short description

The article conducts a critical reading of Dontnod's 2015-title *Life Is Strange*. Moving from poetics via psychology to politics of games and play, we firstly appreciate the qualities of the devised narrative, before showing how it gradually dismantles and ultimately subverts its initial critical potentials.

Abstract

The present paper conducts a critical analysis of the poetics, psychology, and politics of Dontnod's choice-based and story-driven adventure game *Life Is Strange* (2015). The reading is based on extended periods of play by three different players that were followed by discussions and analyses. The article centres upon the narrative development and framing of the two lead characters that is assessed through the lens of Aristotelian poetics and psychology of trauma. Adjusting focus from poetics and psychology to politics, we then argue for an expansion of the notion of catharsis beyond diegetic frames, thus asserting a political relevance of games and play. The article criticizes *Life Is Strange* for reducing the agency and influence of strong female and queer protagonists by reverting to worn conventions in the last two episodes of the 5-part series, thus ultimately subverting its significant potential for political critique.

Keywords

Life Is Strange, narrative, female characters, queer characters, agency, poetics, politics, psychology, Aristotle, Brecht, empowerment, gamer culture, hegemony, patriarchy

Introduction

Life is Strange is a choice-based and story-driven adventure game developed by the French company Dontnod Entertainment and produced by Tokyo-based SquareEnix. The game was released throughout 2015 in form of five successive episodes. It has received critical acclaim

in particular for its character development and the complexity of its choice architecture and has won a series of awards and nominations (for an overview, see Przybylka, 2019, p. 3). The original game has been followed by the prequel *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine, 2017) that features the same setting and characters but showcases events preceding the first game, and a sequel, *Life Is Strange 2*, with an entirely new set of characters that has been released between September 2018 and December 2019 (Dontnod Entertainment and Square Enix).

Life Is Strange follows Maxine Caulfield, an 18-year old woman who, after five years of absence, returns to her home town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon US, to study photography at the local college. Perceiving the game world through her character, players can navigate a vast environment and engage in dialogues and other forms of interaction with a variety of different characters. Maxine gradually discovers her inexplicable power to rewind time that becomes the key mechanic of the game enabling trial and error-based approaches to problem solving and ethical dilemmas. Game play is predominantly structured through dialogue trees, puzzles, and fetch quests with a few stealth-based challenges.

After using her newly-won powers to save her childhood best-friend Chloe Price from being shot dead, the two reunite and set out to gradually unveil various secrets in their home town, including the disappearance of Chloe's best friend and love interest, Rachel Amber. The game explores physical and social environments as well as the characters of, and relation between, the two main protagonists. In the process, it repeatedly touches upon difficult issues regarding a transition from adolescence to adulthood and addresses the intricacies of gender, class, and family relations. Even though leaving considerable choice to players as to how to solve various in-game challenges, the two endings devised by Dontnod have been criticized for nullifying the consequences of earlier decisions and for tying players to a narrowly structured outcome that implicitly reifies received power structures and subscribes to problematic popular cultural tropes such as the narrow framing of women's agency or the apparently inevitable death of queer characters (Butt and Dunne, 2017; Chan, 2017; Alexandra, 2018; Drouin, 2019).

The following text is a critical appraisal of *Life Is Strange* based on a series of play-throughs by three differently situated European players (distinguished in terms of age, gender, and nationality) between autumn 2016 and summer 2018.ⁱ Through discussions, de-briefings, and joint analyses, we brought together situated subjectivities that were distinct from one another

and therefore brought forth different aspects of game world, narrative, and characters. In this manner, many features that would have escaped the attention of each individual player were brought forth and subjected to critical scrutiny. We all acquired the role of expert players and coresearchers in the sense of Jørgensen (2012) who helped one another with "broadening the study beyond own interpretations" (p. 375). In observations as well as conversations, we discussed and evaluated game narrative and mechanics and thus adjusted "interpretations [...] collectively" (p. 378). The current analysis thus combines three situated player perspectives with an analysis of key features of the game and its narrative.

The critical reading conducted below explains the endings scripted by Dontnod as motivated by the nature of the game as a tragedy. We argue that the final choice in *Life is Strange* is illusionary and that the game is not predominantly about time travel, chaos theory, or crime mysteries, but about human psychology and the nature of, and possible responses to, loss and guilt. It is a neatly devised narrative about a transition to adulthood centred around the realization that wonders do not exist and not everybody can be saved.ⁱⁱ Appreciating the game's intrinsic poetic qualities, we move on to criticize its narrative outcome as disregarding the significance of games for players beyond the act of play. Arguing for a dialectical understanding of the relations between games and world inspired by Brecht we, finally, show why the scripted endings are problematic in terms of a politics of entertainment.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, the poetics of *Life is Strange* is analysed through the lens of Aristotelian theory of tragedy. Secondly, we argue for an illusionary nature of choice in the game and purport that time travel is not a diegetic fact but an illusion conjured up by the main protagonist's mind in an attempt to come to terms with severely traumatic experiences. Finally, we point to unfulfilled potentials of the game to engage with its political themes.

The Poetics of Tragedy in *Life Is Strange*

The core narrative of *Life Is Strange* is structured in implicit correspondence with key principles of Aristotle's *Poetics*. According to him, salient features of tragedy as a dramatic form are *hamartia*, that is errors of judgement by the main protagonist that imply *peripety*--unfulfilled expectations and unintended negative outcomes of the hero's actions. This peripety, then, requires *anagnorisis*--a form of knowledge about true conditions and relations gained through

introspection of the main protagonist that leads to *catharsis*--contentment with a natural state of affairs in spite of negative outcomes, that enable subsequent emotional relief in the audience. In Aristotle's thinking, tragedy is the result of an inevitability of forces larger than man that, regardless the striving of key characters, should not (and indeed cannot) be challenged. Through insight into one's own limitations (anagnorisis), the main character understands that certain conditions need to be accepted for the sake of a greater good even if this implies catastrophic consequences at a personal level.

Life Is Strange was released in five episodes that follow a similar structure of the game narrative. Episode 1--*Chrysalis*--serves as an exposition introducing the setting, main protagonists, and key contradictions. Players learn about the characters and mutual relation of Max Caulfield and Chloe Price, and are introduced to the key mechanic of rewinding time. The narrative's most important antagonists--the troubled son of a powerful local family Nathan Prescott, the apparently friendly and supportive art teacher Mark Jefferson, and Chloe's steeply conservative and authoritarian stepfather David Madsen--are presented and connected to the key mystery of the narrative, that is the disappearance of Chloe's close friend and love interest Rachel Amber. It is interesting to note that the episode title, *Chrysalis*, refers to the pupa stage of a butterfly thereby pointing to a transition that can be seen as an evolution towards a higher order.

Episode 2--*Out of Time*--features raising action, complication, and opposition. Max Caulfield is surprised by negative aspects of her rewinding power (instances of *hamartia*). At a key moment in the game, when fellow student and online bullying victim Kate Marsh attempts to commit suicide, Max's ability fails making the death of Kate a possible outcome. Episode 3--*Chaos Theory*--features more raising action, where the main protagonists find new clues to the key mystery and Max discovers a new power allowing her to use any photograph to travel back in time. She uses this ability to save Chloe's father from dying in a car accident, however only to discover that she has created an alternative timeline where Chloe will be tied to a wheelchair until her untimely death.ⁱⁱⁱ This moment is a key instance of peripety in the game showing that the ability to rewind time does not really empower Max, as such reversing many of the expectations connected to the main protagonist's special abilities. In episode 4--*Dark Room*--the story comes to its climax with the Rachel Amber mystery solved and the teacher Mark Jefferson unveiled as the main antagonist to be overcome, while episode 5--*Polarized*--features falling action and resolution with Max escaping Jefferson's grasp. The final sequence of the

game then features a moment of *anagnorisis* where Max understands that her attempts to undo Chloe's death entail destructive consequences for the diegetic world. The player is then left with the decision to either succumb to this insight and sacrifice Chloe, or to ignore this knowledge, let her live, and doom the town of Arcadia Bay to destruction.^{iv}

The ending where the player sacrifices Chloe (and saves Arcadia Bay) is very depressing. Seeing Max crouched against the wall of a dimly lit toilet with hands in front of her face, shedding silent tears at the inevitable death of Chloe and realizing that there is nothing she can do to save or even comfort her friend, is devastating. Perceiving this ending in light of all the engaging and empowering moments the game had created between the two women invites deep emotional responses on a par with the most iconic moments of love, loss, and death in literary and film history. The powerful emotional impact of the game is reflected in extended discussions and player confessions on relevant *YouTube* channels and other online fora (see for example Steam forum for *Life is Strange*). Such observations lead de Miranda (2016, p. 12) to describe *Life Is Strange* "not only as a personal existential simulator but also [...] a collective one."

In the second option ending the game, the player can choose to sacrifice the whole town of Arcadia Bay. This choice saves Chloe's life but refuses *anagnorisis*--the moment of insight into the logics of *harmatia* and *peripety* pre-structuring the tragic hero's agency (in Max's case implying the necessity to accept the inevitability of death). As a result, this decision destroys the diegetic world and kills all other in-game characters that were encountered throughout the narrative including Chloe's mother and close friends of Max. When choosing this option, both girls watch the storm destroy the town with Chloe holding Max tight when they promise each other to be together forever. Beautiful and defiant (and even consoling) as this ending might appear, a strange last scene sows doubt regarding this choice option's status in the diegetic universe of the game.

In the final cut scene of this ending, Chloe and Max are seen driving out of Arcadia Bay. Surprisingly, the two women seem not to care for possible survivors at all, and never even attempt to find close relatives or friends in the rubbles remaining of their former home town. This behaviour seems strongly at odds with both characters who, throughout the game, were presented as constantly struggling for justice and almost always tried to help and save others. In addition, their mood seems to have changed from rebellious self-confidence and honest

engagement to silent sorrow and distanced passivity. As, among others, Alex Henderson (2019) and Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt and Daniel Dunne (2017) have pointed out, such aspects together with the brevity and apparent carelessness of the scene imply its status as a non-canonical ending. This way the ultimately revisionist outcome of the sacrifice Chloe option that reinstates a received status-quo is implicitly reified as the "proper" outcome of the story. In the end, *peripety* has led to successful *anagnorisis* and the world falls into place again tearing down agentic female and queer characters in the process. In our reading, even the apparently rebellious and defiant conclusion that saves Chloe (and sacrifices the world) ultimately points to the same docile and revisionist political message. To understand why, we need now to turn to the complex psychology of the game's main protagonist.

The Psychology of *Life Is Strange*: Into the Mind of the Tragic Hero

Counter-intuitive as it may sound, we want to argue that in *Life is Strange* time travel is not a diegetic fact--it does not really exist in the universe of the game. Maxine Caulfield does not rewind actual diegetic time. Rather, after having witnessed her childhood best friend being shot dead in the girls' restroom, she conjures up an alternative world that exists only in her mind where she has the power to go back in time and fix everything. The counter-intuitive deployment of a magic ability in an otherwise realistic setting or the increasing inclusion of outright fantastic elements are indicators that support this reading, as is the absence of magic in the prequel *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*. In our reading, Max's time travels become conceivable as the consequence of a psychological defence mechanism protecting the vulnerable mind of an adolescent girl from the uncontrollable onslaught of deeply traumatic experiences too troubling for her to cope with or process.

A variety of concepts from psychology can explain such defence mechanisms caused by severe stress and deeply shocking events. Starting with Sigmund Freud's (1936) ideas of trauma as repressed memories of events that are too difficult to consciously process, a range of mental defences has been identified that enable a gradual adjustment of human psyche to extreme challenges. George Vaillant (2014, pp. 367-368) offers a comprehensive list that includes such categories as "psychotic defenses" (e.g. delusional projection, psychotic denial, and psychotic distortion), "immature defenses" (e.g. acting out, passive aggression, dissociation including out-of-body experiences, and projection or paranoia), "neurotic defenses" (e.g. displacement or

repression), and “mature defenses” (e.g. sublimation, suppression, humor). Max’s imagined time travels can be seen as the result of a combination of such psychological factors. In particular, Vaillant’s categories of projection, denial, and out-of-body experience appear relevant for an understanding of the main protagonist’s deteriorating mental state that increasingly mixes reality and fantasy. As a consequence, Max becomes an unreliable character-focalizer--a stylistic device that creates an uncanny ambivalence regarding the ontological status of displayed in-game actions and events.

Another interesting aspect of the game that can be explained with reference to psychological dynamics are the recurrent failures and almost compulsive repetitions that are characteristic of Max’s delusions. According to Martin Seligman and Steven Maier (1976, pp. 3-4), deep-felt despair is an important factor for the development of what they term “learned helplessness”--a reaction to multiple aversive stimuli which one has no control over and which cannot be avoided, and that in the long run lead to hopelessness and passive acceptance of an apparently unavoidable state. Drawing upon this approach, James Larson (1977) argues that one is more prone to experiencing such learned helplessness if the source of failure is internalized rather than perceived as a feature of the outside world (e.g. inaptitude of others, faulty equipment, unfair world). This again seems to fit Max’s mental state. She not only sees her best friend being shot dead, but also feels guilt for Chloe’s apparent loneliness and despair that lead up this outcome. Constant imagined repetition of Chloe’s death in various forms and frames throughout the game can be seen as constituting precisely such a repetitive replay of failure caused by a feeling of guilt that in the end leads to despair and passive acceptance (in the save-Arcadia-Bay choice) or a psychotic hallucinatory state (in the save-Chloe option). Furthermore, it could be argued that the peculiar rewind-time-mechanic ultimately implies a constant re-living of failure as Max seems unable to escape the death of Chloe. This is the poetic psychology of tragedy in *Life Is Strange*.

If time travel in *Life Is Strange* is not diegetically-speaking real, but a mere delusion conjured up by Max’s tortured mind, the status of the main protagonist switches from reliable to unreliable. Greta Olson (2003, pp. 101-104) distinguishes between two main types of unreliability in narrative; “untrustworthiness” and a “fallibility”. In the first case, shortcomings in a narrator’s personality are the reason for unreliability (e.g. deliberate cheating or lies), in the second external circumstances constitute the main cause (unintentional errors of judgement). In our reading of *Life Is Strange* Max becomes a fallible character-focalizer. She

conjures up magical powers to defend herself against the onslaught of traumatic experiences too extreme to process. This implies that, in the pre-set tragic plot of the game, her interventions do not matter in the end.

Several aspects of the game support such a reading. During the course of events, Max's perspective on the world gradually becomes more and more questionable and unstable hinting at a lack of reliability of her point of view. She suffers from repeated inexplicable nosebleeds and the game includes increasingly fantastic elements ranging from snowflakes in summer, via stranded whales, to repeated visions of a deer leading her to a light-house, premonitions of a hurricane, and the appearance of a second moon in the night-sky. These hints culminate in the outright unreal and nightmarish scenes that make for a major part of chapter 5. Such devices signal with increasing urgency that something in the diegetic universe is not right and insert gnawing doubts about the status of Max's perspective on the game world.

The game supports such a reading also through its choice of music. In particular the lyrics of "Spanish Sahara" by *Foals* which accompanies crucial moments of the game, including the save-Arcadia-Bay ending, point to the relevance of fantasy and hallucination for certain aspects of the game. For instance, the calm and emotional song contains the lines: "I'm the fury in your head / I'm the fury in your bed / I'm the ghost in the back of your head / 'Cause I am / Forget the horror here / Leave it all down here." It quite clearly refers to a space inside someone's head to which one can retreat and leave undefined horrors behind. We read this as alluding to the mental state of Max who attempts to create exactly such a safe space inside her own mind. In our interpretation, these and other features of the game frame the save-Chloe end game option as diegetically unreal--as the hallucination of a traumatized girl rather than a defiant act of empowerment and rebellion with impact on authentic challenges in a diegetic real.

In sum, in our reading, the changes Max--and her players--make throughout the game are never real. They are products of the main protagonist's imagination. Real in-game events inform these fantasies but are always coloured by her imagination. With this in mind, both endings scripted by Dontnod lead to the same depressing conclusion. Both are equally bleak and equally troubling as they either take away the female and queer lead characters' agency or relocate their defiant acts of self-perseverance into the realm of delusional fantasies.^v

The ending where Max returns to the girls' restroom to witness Chloe being shot dead signals that the main protagonist has successfully gone through Aristotelian anagnorisis. She has reflected upon her position in the world and found her proper place that implies acceptance of an implicitly naturalized state of affairs--the inevitable loss of Chloe. In this ending, Max has successfully processed the tragic events, is ready to give in, and move on. The decision to save Chloe, on the other hand, is essentially the decision of Max to refuse anagnoristic insight, to stay in wonderland, and to continue pretending to be somewhere else where she has used supernatural powers to change fate and save her best friend/love interest. In this ending, Max recedes into her dream world where she rebuilds "a pirate fort to keep the world out", as she puts it herself in episode 2. Letting the game end with an apparently unmotivated scene where the two girls drive off into the unknown in a seemingly unpopulated world without caring for anything or anyone makes perfect sense when perceived from this vantage point.

Irrespective of the poetic qualities of the tragic ending(s) devised by Dontnod, we found the game's scripted closure problematic. To understand why, one has to move from an Aristotelian to a Brechtian understanding of drama (and, by extension, of digital games) and extend the notion of catharsis beyond the boundary of the play.

The Politics of *Life Is Strange*: Heroines, Agency, and the Pitfalls of Tragedy

For Bertolt Brecht (1957), the world and the stage were intrinsically connected. The main function of theatre is to 1) educate spectators about their real interests (that in capitalist society normally remain shrouded in ideology), and 2) in doing so, facilitate active challenges of a received hegemonic order. These two directions are captured in his didactic and dialectical understanding of the stage. Brecht has criticized Aristotelian theory of tragedy for an inherently conservative outlook that takes received power structures for granted as it converges on a plot line that implies the gradual realization of the main protagonist that a prevailing order is natural and for the sake of societal and indeed ontological stability should not be dismantled even in circumstances where this implies the tragic fate of a hero.^{vi}

In relation to digital games, Brenda Laurel (1991, p. 31) has made a similar point and argued for the necessity of Brechtian theories of the stage for analysis of potential political functions of complex narrative games--a point that was later reiterated by Gonzalo Frasca (2004), Lars

deWildt (2014), or Pötzsch (2017), among others. As such, when perceiving *Life Is Strange* in terms of Brechtian dialectics, rather than Aristotelian poetics, attention can be redirected towards the question of how the characters, settings, and events of the game factor into the real lives of players, player culture, and ultimately a politics of entertainment.

Games do not only communicate at diegetic and ludic levels (Domsch, 2017), but also convey meaning at a political level. In Miguel Sicart's (2009, p. 73) words, "there is a connection between the player-subject and the other subjectivities present in our daily lives." According to the author, this is a key factor when determining for instance ethical aspects of games and play. As Ian Bogost (2006, p. 135) observes in his work on procedural rhetoric, when entering and exiting virtual worlds, players take and leave "their residue in both directions." Similar considerations have led Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014, p.9) to highlight the necessity of building ethical values such as "fairness, equality, and sustainability" into games and have constituted the basis of for instance Chess's (2017) critique of normative gender identities coded into mainstream titles that implicitly reinforce hegemonic ideals. In these frameworks, game universes and events emerge as closely related to actual players' real-life problems and challenges. Games and play are not mere entertainment but also political activities that are directed at and interact with the actual world. In the case of *Life Is Strange* this implies that issues of gender become one key focal point of attention.^{vii}

Brecht's didactic and dialectical theatre requires a series of stylistic tools that first estrange spectators from the events displayed on stage before conveying facts that lead to a change in consciousness among audiences. Brecht (1957) describes specific theatrical devices at such levels as stage setting, acting, plot development, uses of music or choirs, or a deliberate breaking up of the fourth wall separating the audience from the events presented on stage. In all cases, the main purpose is to create a V-effect that distances the spectator and thereby enables critical reflection that is necessary for the facilitation of direct political action. In contrast to Aristotle's thinking, for Brecht immersion in the play is not only not the objective, but has to be avoided altogether if one attempts to effectuate actual change.

In *Life Is Strange* players are densely woven into a neatly devised tragic plot that gradually transforms the apparently progressive politics of the game into its opposite (Butt and Dunne, 2017; Oktavanya and Panjaitan, 2019). Precisely therefore the title far more easily lends itself to analysis via Aristotelian dramatic theory, rather than Brechtian didactics. Dondod's tragic

end choice enabling only one, almost unbearably bleak, closure of the game is a necessary consequence of the outlined Aristotelian heritage. However, this poetic frame also keeps the politics of the game implicit. By forcing both players and game characters back in line, *Life Is Strange* implicitly subscribes to a received order based on precisely the power structures and socio-economic relations so vehemently criticized in parts 1-3 of the game narrative. Rather than strategically deploying V-effects to estrange players from the narrative setting and highlight the political relevance of depicted characters and events for real life, the game reverts to a poetics of tragedy immersing players in a diegetic world securely detached from everyday life.

Our critical reading of the poetics and politics of *Life Is Strange* is by and large in line with the critiques levelled against the game by Butt and Dunne (2017), Henderson (2019), and Ridanti Oktavanya and Yasmine Anabel Panjaitan (2019), among others. These authors argue that the game's choice architecture is inherently flawed and that the two end game options punish agentic and rebellious female and queer characters thereby implicitly reiterating an inherently patriarchist world view. According to Butt and Dunne, the alternatives of either sacrificing the agency and individual interests of the main protagonists, or causing death and destruction, essentially "reveal the game mechanic as a propagation of a conservative status quo" (p. 6). In Henderson's (2019) terms, in *Life Is Strange* "the association between queerness and tragedy still clings to the story" (p. 6). Such narrative tropes and logics, however, are not a feature that is in any way unique to *Life Is Strange*.

Unfortunately, the basic storyline of *Life Is Strange* criticized in this article is not a mistake or exception, but a received convention of much of popular culture including digital games (Dietz, 1998; Williams et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2016; Hahn, 2017). As Murray (2017, pp. 82-83) expresses it, "retrograde images of women as hyper-sexualized or passive, as well as dehumanizing racial and queer images still pervade the mainstream industry." In spite of games' "remarkable potential for experimentation in what, where, and whom is shown" (Westcott, 2016, p. 234), they still narrowly frame non-masculine characters and subjectivities as secondary, problematic, or inherently monstrous (Summers and Miller, 2014; Perreault, et al., 2016; Stang, 2018, 2019a). Bury-your-gays and other reactionary tropes appear to be alive and kicking still (Henderson, 2019).

Most quantitative studies on female characters in games are based on rough binary categorisations of the type damsel/evil or active/passive and do not allow for an adequate understanding of gradual changes (and usually reductions) of female characters' agency throughout complex narrative games such as the ones occurring in *Life Is Strange*. Because of such reasons, Butt and Dunne (2017, p. 3) argue for the importance of moving "the discussion of representation beyond how women are physically depicted in games" and instead "focus on how the lives of these women are treated" Only such qualitative approaches can assess the specific narrative and/or mechanical details that often tacitly limit the paradigm of possible actions available to apparently active and agentic female (and, by extension, queer) characters.

Indeed, according to co-founder and creative director at Dontnod, Jean-Maxime Moris, finding a publisher willing to engage with a game with only female main characters proved challenging with only Square Enix refraining from making any demands for change in this matter (Maiberg, 2015; LeBoeuf, 2015; Przybylka, 2019). This fact both underlines the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes in parts of the games industry and at the same time reiterates that Dontnod really missed an opportunity when they decided to either unmake the world as-we-know-it or destroy both Max and Chloe.

Life Is Strange appears as a critical title. At the level of physical representation, the game refrains from overall simplifications and overt stereotyping (Przybylka, 2019). Even a nightly swimming sequence formally avoids the pitfalls of inserting intrusive and voyeuristic shots on naked or half-naked bodies.^{viii} Max and Chloe are not presented as objects for a hegemonic male or predatory queer gaze and it is possible to finish the game without Max entering into a love relation with either Chloe or the potential male partner, Warren. This absence of a narrow framing at the level of visual representation is important as it invites identification with autonomous and empowered female and queer characters that might serve as inspirations for players also beyond the immediate experience of play. However, it also stands in stark contrast to how the game subsequently treats the lives of these women.

Overall, in *Life is Strange*, Dontnod has created a very convincing cast of characters. Even the many side-characters populating the fictitious town of Arcadia Bay appear wholesome and realistic with a series of available responses and personal traits. The main protagonists are fully-fledged individuals with a (shared but differently understood) history of their own and a convincing development of their identities and mutual relation in correspondence with events

and choices throughout the game. They appear as flawed and tough, struggling with a past that only gradually emerges and as successfully fending for themselves as they together set out to slowly dismantle the secrets and received power structures of Arcadia Bay. Confronting a variety of authorities such as school principals and teachers, authoritarian and aggressive males, town elites, and received family roles and frames, they form a truly loveable pair one would like to see far more of.

Life Is Strange enables the player to manoeuvre two, multi-faceted and constantly evolving, young women through a realist setting treating topics that are usually eschewed in products of popular culture aimed at global mainstream audiences. As such, Max and Chloe deal with drug use and abuse, class relations and exploitation, gender and family roles, capitalism and poverty, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancies, online and other forms of bullying, unemployment, and so forth. The game, however, refrains from making these themes the main focus of the narrative, rather using them to create a convincing and realistic background that occasionally emerges and asserts its relevance for main protagonists and players. As such, the game also enables a tackling of gender-specific issues without asserting that these with necessity and always need to be foregrounded in narratives centring upon women.

The two main protagonists of Dontnod's game are not first and foremost *female* or *queer* characters, but simply *characters* that actively deal with a variety of authentic challenges including gender-specific ones. In addition, both Max and Chloe do not passively endure, but actively respond to the problems they are confronted with in a confident and often inspiring manner. Max and Chloe are truly loveable rebels, and successful ones at that. They are courageous women who support each other, actively confront injustices, and who unravel the major mystery of Rachel Amber's disappearance against the odds and against the interests of powerful actors. Precisely such aspects make the game point beyond itself and create the various bridges to contemporary political and societal struggles that lie at the core of a Brechtian understanding of a cultural sphere.

As Drouin (2019) shows, even though players can avoid romantic relationships altogether or choose to make Max engage with either Chloe or Warren, the diary entries of Max still reveal her as a genuinely queer character predominantly occupied with her relationship with Chloe. By these and similar means, *Life Is Strange* presents female and queer perspectives on important contemporary issues and makes these appear relevant (Przybylka, 2019, p. 5). With a few

notable exceptions (e.g. Warren), boys remain mere background features creating problems or brainlessly throwing rugby balls around, getting drunk, and brawling. In *Life Is Strange*, girls are the main focus as they repeatedly have to deal with the consequences of boys' thoughtless or malign actions and do so in an assertive and matter-of-factly manner.

Then, instead of letting the characters of Max and Chloe thrive, succeed in their endeavours, save the day, and find themselves (and potentially each other), from then on to populate the imaginations and fantasies of thousands of players meeting comparable challenges and restraints regarding their own emerging identities, mutual relations, and other issues of coming to age, Dontnod decided to crush both Max and Chloe, to ensnare them in a predetermined tragic narrative of loss and guilt robbing them of agency rather than letting them enjoy their powers and capabilities as an inspiration for others. When seen in the light of a Brechtian dialectics of politics and play, this choice is unforgiving.

In spite of the positive advances in episodes 1-3, at the level of overall narrative progression, *Life Is Strange* gradually limits the agency of the female main protagonists and in the end re-frames their actions as either futile or devastating for their community. As such, in line with many mainstream games, Dontnod's title ends up scripting Max and Chloe as either deeply irresponsible--rejecting *anagnorisis*--or emotionally crushed and dead (the tragic hero's fate). This fact is the pitfall of tragedy as it presents "the sacrifices of rebellious women as fated, natural, and for the greater good" (Butt and Dunne, 2017, p. 3) thus implicitly re-inscribing an inherently patriarchal status quo.

Much of the potential of *Life is Strange* was lost in the last two episodes -- *Dark Room* and *Polarized*. The end of episode three, where Max travels back to her childhood and saves Chloe's father from dying in a car crash just to find out that her well-intentioned deed had tied Chloe to a wheelchair until her early death can be seen as a genuine climax of the game. After this moment, however, the narrative gradually evaporates the agency and capabilities of the main protagonists and removes the various ambivalences and multiple perspectives of the first three episodes that made it difficult to simply hate bullies such as Nathan or Victoria as each of them was humanized showing their vulnerability and insecurity as the root of apparently evil actions (e.g. Przybylka, 2019, p. 10).

The end of episode three featuring a quadriplegic Chloe constitutes a climax that questions the value of Max's supernatural abilities. However, this scene does not only invite peripety that then leads to the main protagonist's anagnorisis, but also invites perceptions of the game's narrative, characters, and settings as realistic, and therefore, as pointing beyond diegetic and ludic frames towards the actual world. Rather than simply assigning Max her proper place as a tragic hero in an implicitly reified order that becomes accessible through allegedly correct reasoning, the scene with Chloe in a wheelchair enables a peculiar form of empowerment--a disconnection of the heroine's agency from her quasi-magical powers and a turn from psychological introspection to political action. The game here creates the possibility that the main protagonists can succeed in their various endeavours without taking recourse to time travel or other magic tricks (as happened in the prequel *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*), and could have raised the stakes of in-game decision-making considerably.

This possible transition had been prepared through an apparent fading of Max's rewinding powers in crucial situations, for instance when her powers fail her when trying to save fellow student Kate Marsh from committing suicide in episode 2, and had been further reiterated in a brief dialogue between Max and Chloe, where the former warns that 'my powers might not last'. The response by Chloe points to considerable narrative potential. She confidently asserts "That's ok. We will." Friendship and trust replace fantastic powers and it becomes apparent that these two characters--and their players--might not even need supernatural abilities to reach their aims--both in-game and ex. A truly empowering turn of events and further transition towards a realistic and politically progressive plot had been possible from this point on. However, this possible transition from Aristotelian tragedy to Brechtian *Lehrstück* never occurred.

Rather, we yet another time, find a capable female and queer character, Max, pacified--tied to chair and exposed to the sadistic games of a middle-aged white male. At this point, the art teacher, Mark Jefferson, emerges as the one-dimensional and unambiguously evil main adversary of the story who together with the psychologically vulnerable student Nathan Prescott secretly drugs and abducts female students to create grotesque photographic art. Representing a predatory male gaze to be symbolically overcome through his later arrest, the character of Mr. Jefferson efficiently wipes out all ambivalences and contingencies of the narrative thus creating a dichotomous moral universe. As such, interesting issues such as college rape cultures or a deeply troubled father-son relationship in the Prescott family that could have invited

interrogations of various forms of masculinity, are successfully defused. The game reverts to a simplistic story-line centred upon a generic evil guy who abuses the boy (Nathan, as we learn, has accidentally killed Rachel Amber) and who plays around with the limp bodies of once self-confidently acting and succeeding women in his high-tech bunker--the dark room. Poetic narrative of loss? Hardly.

This logic extends to the prequel *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* that was developed by Deck 9 and released by Square Enix in three episodes throughout 2017. Set two years earlier, the game tells the story of yet two young female rebels in Arcadia Bay, Chloe and Rachel, but narrowly frames the emerging story by the predetermined fate of both of them as killed by the same man--Nathan Prescott. Again, successful and agentic female and queer characters apparently have a hard time surviving even in games that have the potential to acquire status as counter-cultural classics (Castello, 2018).^{ix}

In sum, the tragedy of both *Life Is Strange* and, by extension, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, is that both games at first articulate the experiences and distinct world views of active and resourceful female and queer characters confronting authentic real-world challenges in a confident and inspiring manner, yet ultimately lapse back into narrowly framing these protagonists' agency and capabilities, in the end reducing them to dead rebels and docile subjectivity reintegrated into an implicitly reiterated apparently timeless and necessary order. As such, rather than challenging and ultimately dismantling received power structures and generic conventions in a genuinely transgressive move, both games use a tragic script to cushion players and player culture against the onslaught of Max, Chloe, and Rachel ensuring that these characters' deeds and articulations won't really matter.

In killing both Rachel and Chloe and in subjecting Max to various forms of abuse and severe emotional stress, *Life Is Strange* also enables the projection of male saviour fantasies upon a formerly strong, but now traumatized and broken, main protagonist in apparent need of protection and support. This is invited for instance through the character of Warren who appears close to a grieving Max during Chloe's funeral even in a scenario where she had previously rejected him and entered a romantic relationship with her now dead friend. Tropes involving female sacrifice and suffering in games are often included to let "the erotic and the violent intersect in the body of the female victim" (Adams, 2017, p. 104), as such catering to an assumed hegemonic male gaze (Dietz, 1998). As such, in the terms suggested by Pötzsch

(2019a), *Life Is Strange* veered back from a “critical form of transgressivity” that would have enabled a genuinely subversive rearticulation of political issues and identities, and instead engaged in pseudo-transgression that apparently challenges hegemonic frames and structures, yet at an underlying level ultimately reinforces an inherently conservative received status quo. In reducing two happy rebels-with-a-cause to dead limb and broken soul, Dontnod cushions the world against the subversive onslaught of Max and Chloe and falls prey to a hegemonic discourse that regularly treats agentic female and queer characters in a similar manner (Butt and Dunne, 2017; Henderson, 2019; Stang, 2018, 2019a).

Conclusion

In the first three episodes of *Life is Strange*, Dontnod made a considerable achievement. They created strong and convincing characters that articulated the life experiences and challenges of two young women who actively manoeuvred themselves through a variety of authentic challenges. In the process the game made palpable difficult political and social issues and could have set standards in particular concerning the representation and agency of female and queer characters in narrative games. The last two episodes, together with the scripted endings, however, reversed much of this empowering potential in that they reverted to a poetic and moving, yet ultimately docile, tragic narrative of suffering and loss crushing both heroes and their aspirations to power and influence.

As always, this narrative structure and outcome is the result of conscious decisions taken by producers and developers (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014; Chess, 2017). As a result, things could have been different. For instance, changes in the game’s final scene where Max and Chloe drive through a destroyed Arcadia Bay could not only have relocated the women's defiant acts into a diegetic real, but could also have increased the implied status of the choose-Chloe option making it more attractive to players. Brief encounters with key secondary characters surviving the storm could have canonized this ending as the implied good one, thereby reverting the conservative and inherently patriarchist overall outlook of the game argued for here and identified by Butt and Dunne (2017), Henderson (2019), Oktavanya and Panjaitan (2019), and others. Such an ending would also have highlighted that destroying a received order might indeed sometimes be necessary to enable the creation of a better, more just, and more inclusive alternative.

A massive number of posts on *YouTube* and other channels dedicated to the *Life Is Strange* universe make palpable that many players would have enjoyed such a defiant and ultimately empowering ending. Dedicated fans have spent huge amounts of time on creating and sharing counter-narratives that attempt to mitigate the negative aspects of the scripted plot (see among many others Nick-at-Arcadia-Bay (2017)). In a move resembling a Boalian forum theatre (Boal, 1979) where spectators are put into the position to intervene into the staged play at any moment and change the course of events, the reactions of characters, or the outcome of specific decisions, online fora dedicated to *Life Is Strange* have produced a series of alternative plots and endings loosening the story-line from its conservative scaffolding. Together with reflections and debates in the commentary fields such fan-made contributions redistribute agency from game characters and players to participants in extra-game communities (Stang 2019b) as such forming the core of a possible Boalian forum enabling an opening up and problematizing of previously sealed narrative frames (for the use of Boal for game analysis, see Frasca (2004) and Pöttsch (2017, 2019b)).^x

It stands to hope that the success and well-deserved acclaim of the early episodes of *Life Is Strange* will inspire developers and producers to make critical and empowering games that do things differently. We need titles that allow characters such as Chloe, Max, and Rachel to take control, act, and remain in charge, and that invite players to dismantle received structures of oppression and exploitation in games, in gamer culture, and in politics. Eventually, this might also take the medium where it truly belongs--into the realm of art and critique, rather than allegedly unpolitical entertainment. However, such a move requires courage--courage to divert from received generic scripts and settings, and courage to openly challenge hegemonic players and player cultures. In the spirit of Max and Chloe: Dare to be pirates!

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ⁱ Apart from our own, we also draw upon one play-through by a teenage girl from Norway.

ⁱⁱ According to de Miranda (2016, p. 3), the directors and co-authors of *Life Is Strange*, Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, confirmed that adolescence and nostalgia are the main themes to be explored in the game.

ⁱⁱⁱ Max undoes this action later, thus regaining the original Chloe as a protagonist.

^{iv} Play statistics show that both endings have been chosen by roughly the same number of players with a slight prevalence of 52% for the sacrifice-Chloe option.

^v Stang (2019a, pp. 249-250) reports of a similar case from *Starcraft II: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). She writes that the female character of Kerrigan is fully-fledged and empowered. Comparable to the fate of the heroes in *Life Is Strange*, however, her empowerment comes at the cost of removing her from the mundane world of man by transforming her into a godlike figure in a fantastic realm.

^{vi} As argued above this is encapsulated in the successive stages of Aristotelian tragedy leading the hero from hamartia via peripety to anagnorisis, finally enabling catharsis.

^{vii} The game's first three episodes also open up interesting questions regarding class relations, environmental depreciation, and a neoliberal restructuring of the economy. Issues of race, however, are conspicuously absent from the game.

^{viii} See Oktavanya and Panjaitan (2019) for a competing position that identifies a predatory male gaze at play in *Life Is Strange*.

^{ix} *Before the Storm* successfully defuses the class contradictions highlighted in *Life Is Strange*. The prequel rearticulates the Prescott family as a genuinely benevolent actor for instance paying medical fees for poor coloured students. Along a similar line, the game reiterates the worn trope of the active and angry woman as harbinger of death and destruction. Rachel upon seeing her father, James Amber, with what she believes is a lover, causes a wildfire that threatens Arcadia Bay. Later it emerges that Rachel had been wrong about the incident that was motivated by a loving father afraid of losing his daughter to her real, former drug-addict, mother. By such means, *Before the Storm* partly repositions the patriarchal father figure as the legitimate moral centre of the narrative universe and reframes agentic and subversive female characters as inherently unreliable, irresponsible, and dependent upon male actions and

decision. It is positive to note that, in the end, the player is given the genuine choice to let Chloe unveil the cunning schemes of James Amber to Rachel, as such allowing for a dismantling of his position as benevolent patriarchal father-figure and moral centre (before both girls meet their ultimate fate at the hands of Nathan Prescott).

^x It is interesting to note that a comic series based on the *Life Is Strange* universe (Vieceli and Leonardi, 2019a&b, 2020) continues the narrative of Max and Chloe with the save-Chloe ending as departure point. The comic constantly blends two realities centred upon Max and frequently collides and collapses these into one another. We take this as a further indication for the viability of the interpretation presented in this article.