Women Are People, More at Eleven: The Female Relationship in *Life is Strange*

by Brittany Larsen

When people think of video games, they typically think of violence, quests, and teenage boys screaming at each other over Xbox Live. However, because of the unique relationship a player forms with the protagonist they're playing as, there is also a great potential for impactful storytelling in video games. Several game developers and players have caught on to this potential and have thus begun introducing more narrative-driven games which bring to light stories previously untold. Many of these untold stories include those focused on female characters, and more specifically, the deep relationships, both platonic and romantic, between these characters.

One such game is *Life is Strange*. Not only does this game feature a female protagonist, but a majority of the plot hinges on the deep relationships between female characters in the game. In a male-dominated industry, one would think that female stories would be left untold, or would be portrayed inaccurately. However, *Life is Strange* uses the mechanics of video games expertly to show the depth of female relationships in the game, as well as to show a true coming of age story from the female perspective, a genre not typically explored.

To begin, *Life is Strange* is a video game which revolves around Max Caulfield, a teenage photographer at an art school called Blackwell Academy. After witnessing an old friend being shot in her school, she discovers she has the power to reverse time and therefore change the past. Through a series of convoluted events, she learns that no matter what choices you make, life is never perfect and every choice has both positive and negative consequences. Throughout the game, the player has the opportunity to develop Max's relationships in differing ways with many characters, but especially the characters of Chloe, Kate, and Victoria. Additionally, these relationships differ because of the choice mechanism of the game. Throughout the game, the

player is given choices to make for Max. All of these choices have consequences on the story, some small, some large, some short term and immediately foreseeable and some that you do not see the impact of until far later in the game. Through this mechanism, the game merges third- and- first person attributes because the character is making choices as "Max," but who Max turns out to be is a direct result of the player's individual choices and morals. We are simultaneously Max and ourselves.

Therefore, in order to understand why *Life is Strange* is so emotionally impactful, we have to understand what assumptions and expectations we as the player bring to the game. The study of these expectations and how they shape our experiences with fiction is typically called Reader Response Theory. Reader Response Theory suggests "that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text" (Tyson 170). In other words, when we experience any type of narrative, the consumer of media brings their own expectations and prior experiences to the table in a way that subsequently impacts the meaning they find in the narrative. For example, a reader may like a character others hate because they have a similar home life. This relates to *Life is Strange* because of the choice based mechanism of the game. Different players will bring different life experiences that inform and change what choices they will make and how they will see the characters. Thus, each player will have a different experience with the game and the characters because of their unique life experiences.

In *Life is Strange,* the relationship that holds the most weight both narratively and emotionally is Max's relationship with Chloe. Chloe is Max's ex best friend whom she reconnects with at the beginning of the story after nearly seeing her get shot. Max and Chloe have not spoken for five years and Chloe holds quite a bit of resentment towards Max for this

fact because Max leaving occurred right after the death of Chloe's father, to whom Chloe was very close to. Chloe acts as the companion to Max's protagonist. The narrative is rife with allusions to traditional male coming of age stories such as *Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road*, but this story is unique because the protagonist coming of age and the companion are both female. The narrative had the option to include a male voice by putting Max with a male student, Warren, but they refrained. Even if the player chooses to encourage his flirtations, Warren is an afterthought. Instead, Max goes through the narrative with Chloe, a character who fits the archetype of the "anti-hero." Anti-heroes are characters who, while primarily working for good, follow unconventional definitions of morality and do not exhibit what we expect out of heroes ("Anti-Hero"). Chloe, with her dark past, lack of social graces, and twisted sense of morality, such as stealing money from the handicapped, fits all these characteristics. What makes her portrayal interesting is that anti-heroes are typically male, where Chloe is female. This changes our perception of her, because players do not often expect women to exhibit these traits. For example, while a male character that exhibits these traits is often seen as aloof or troubled, many player's initial reactions to Chloe are that she is abrasive and unlikable. Such impressions of Chloe are one example of the different standards held between female and male characters in narratives. However, as players move through the game, the relationship between Max and Chloe grows and players become more invested in Chloe's storyline.

The first decision that impacts the player's relationship with Chloe and informs and shapes our view of Chloe is when we are in Chloe's room and she tells us to hide from David, her stepfather and a security guard at Blackwell. We hide in the closet and, as we watch, things escalate to a point where David hits Chloe. The game then gives us the option of either leaving the closet to stand up for Chloe or standing by and watching it happen. While this decision does

not seem significant at the time, since we've only just met Chloe and don't have a significant attachment to her, it is an important decision because it lays the groundwork for how our actions affect others that we care about in the game. The story continues regardless of which choice we make. The decision of whether to stand up for her is all our own and the narrative does not favor one or the other. This explains the emotional impact of the quasi-third person perspective on the narrative, but in terms of relationships between female characters, this scene also shows us the divide between Chloe and Max and the deep hurt that has come from their five year separation. This shows us that a relationship between two women can hurt just as much as the abandonment by a spouse or family member. Female friendships, often shown as immature or superficial, are shown in *Life is Strange* to be lasting and deep.

After this decision, no matter what the player chose, Max and Chloe's relationship grows closer and we learn more about Chloe's past and the problems that have stemmed from her father dying, Max leaving in the wake of that, and subsequently finding and losing her close friend Rachel. At one point, we are led to go back in time using Max's powers to stop Chloe's father from dying. We succeed, but in the process, we end up creating a universe where Chloe is a quadriplegic. We reconnect with her, and in the end of the scene, Chloe ends up asking Max to help her commit suicide by overdosing her on morphine. This choice is significant for several reasons. First, the scene is significant for the player because this decision is placed solely on our shoulders. It takes place in an alternate timeline, so there are not necessarily lasting consequences in the gameplay for making either decision. Therefore, this decision shows the reader that they cannot disconnect from Max in the game. There is no tactical move to make in this scene. The player has to act based solely on their own morals.

Second, the decision we make depends a great deal on our own personal perceptions of both the situation and our relationship with Chloe and how we see Max and Chloe's relationship. Either way the player chooses, this scene showcases the deep relationship between Max and Chloe. If Max does kill Chloe, Chloe thanks Max profusely and we see their relationship grow in this final moment because Max is there to comfort Chloe and that Chloe trusts Max with the biggest decision of her life. This is significant in terms of the game's portrayal of female relationships because it shows how the relationship between Chloe and Max is deeper than any other relationships in each other's lives. One might think that Chloe would have trusted her parents to do this, or in another narrative Chloe may have had a boyfriend she trusted with this decision. But this game chose to have Max be the one to decide, and that shows that female relationships can be deep enough to impact life and death decisions. Similarly, if you choose not to help Chloe commit suicide, she gets incredibly angry and talks about how Max is abandoning her just as she has in the past and is just another person taking choice away from Chloe. They end up parting on negative terms. This outcome still shows the depth of relationship between Chloe and Max because it highlights how deeply Max leaving in any universe hurt Chloe. In a world where female relationships are typically shown as fickle and surface level, seeing how Max's leaving had as much impact as a family member or significant other leaving shows how female relationships hold just as much priority in women's lives as any other relationship.

The decision of whether to kill Chloe or not is a kind of foreshadowing to the final decision of the game, in which the player comes face to face with the fact that Max's time traveling has led to a giant storm over Arcadia Bay and that in order to make things right, either Chloe has to sacrifice herself or we have to let Arcadia Bay be taken by the storm. This choice blends the emotional response of the reader in how close we've grown to Chloe through Max and

also the examination and interpretation of Chloe and Max's relationship. The trope of the one being sacrificed for the many, and the hero sacrificing themselves for the good of others, appears again and again in fiction, but here, the hero is Chloe and we and Max are left as the maiden to be left behind.

Therefore, we the player, and Max are left with quite a quandary. In a traditional quest narrative, the answer would be simple: sacrifice Chloe and save the town. However, the unique choice based mechanism of the game has led us to grow close to Chloe along with Max, so the option to save Chloe and leave the town in ruins is equally valid. In fact, when the player views the statistical breakdown at the end of the game which tells us what choices other players made, the percentage difference between those who sacrificed Chloe and those that sacrificed Arcadia Bay is nearly split in half. This tells us that the emotional impact of the mechanism in strengthening our view of the relationship between Chloe and Max was successful. What's more, in having players genuinely unsure of whether they are willing to sacrifice Chloe, we see that a relationship between two women, in a video game, managed to have the emotional reaction that matches, if not surpasses, that of the emotional reaction to the same sacrifice between a relationship comprised of two males or a man and a woman, as is common in most coming of age or quest stories.

While it may seem like a small difference, the fact that a relationship, whether the player perceives it as platonic or romantic, between two women can be seen as just as emotionally impactful as any other relationship, in a video game no less, is staggering. The video game industry's typical portrayal of women consists of women dressed for the male gaze, with a primarily male audience in mind. This game, however, not only features varied and complex female characters, with Max, Chloe, Kate, and Victoria, but also avoids pitting them against each

other or developing their relationships for the male gaze. Scenes that could have been very easily sexualized are not and Max and Chloe's relationship is treated as just as deep and complex as the male relationships in other coming of age stories. They go on the same adventures and never talk about the subjects we typically associate with female friendship. The game's success and apparent emotional impact speaks volumes about where the video game industry is going.

Life is Strange not only tells a story about female characters, but does so in a way that illuminates how meaningful female relationships are and helps the player feel a deep empathy with both Max and Chloe, even if they themselves are nothing like Max or Chloe. This empathy would not be found as easily in a narrative form other than a video game. Therefore, every aspect of *Life is Strange* works together to form a female-centric coming of age story. With *Life is Strange* and other similar games leading the way, the world of video games will hopefully soon become more open to the female experience and provide gamers with a rich other world to explore.

Word Count: 2,211

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