

Do Choices Matter?

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Decision-making in Video Games and its Effect on
Storytelling, Immersion, and Player Interactivity



LIFE IS STRANGE



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1 July 2018

Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities

MA Literary Studies: English Literature and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Video games form one of the latest media in which stories can be told. The duality between video games as storytelling media and video games as a distinct media removed from narrative has been a large debate within the field of game studies. Yet, little to no research has been done so far on the relationship between storytelling and interactivity in choice-driven video games. This type of video game has become increasingly popular over the last decade. Video game developers like Supermassive Games, Quantic Dream, and Telltale Games have developed multiple games within this genre, offering players interactive experiences in which the progression and outcome of the narrative can be altered based on decisions made by players. Thus, players appear to play an integral role in the development of the story. However, the close relationship between player interactivity and storytelling is not unique to choice-driven video games. Role-playing games (RPGs), inspired by the table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons*, share this relationship, though not every RPG offers the same amount of freedom. While especially choice-driven video games are marketed as allowing players freedom and control, the consequences of the players' actions are often overplayed. More often than not, scripted events serve as boundaries limiting the extent players are actually able to alter narratives, which becomes more apparent the more players replay such a video game and the structure of these video games is laid bare. For this reason, I propose that on first playthrough, choice-driven video games and RPGs provide players with the illusion that their choices, decisions, and actions are significant to the outcome of the video game they are playing. This illusion is conjured through clever use of mechanics that provides players the chance to immerse themselves in these video games. In order to support this, I have analysed three video games: *Until Dawn* (2015) and *Life Is Strange* (2015) are both choice-driven video games, while *Undertale* (2015) is an RPG. All three of these video games highlight the

link between choice and narrative, which makes them appropriate case studies to analyse the relationship between player interactivity, storytelling, and immersion.

The first chapter of this thesis serves as a brief introduction to the big developments within the field of game studies in which my own research is set, namely the ludology/narratology debate and the debate regarding the magic circle. Furthermore, I argue how choice-driven video games contest both the ludology/narratology debate and the magic circle theory and how they provide a happy medium in their combination of player interactivity and storytelling. Additionally, I argue how choice-driven video games are not the only type of video games in which these two features are combined, as role-playing games have done so since the release of the table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons*. The chapter ends with a methodological segment in which I explain how I have prepared for my analysis and executed it.

Chapters two, three, and four are the interdisciplinary analysis of the video games mentioned earlier: *Until Dawn*, *Life Is Strange*, and *Undertale*. In these chapters I aim to answer my questions regarding the relationship between storytelling, player interactivity (notably regarding choice), and immersion. Each of these chapters is divided into five main parts: an introduction to the video game, an overview of its narrative, an analysis of its gameplay, an analysis of its main mechanics, and a conclusion. The analysis on the video game mechanics is further divided into multiple parts, each with a different focus.

This thesis finishes with a conclusion in which I comment on the results of my analysis on these video games overall. I also suggest what kind of research can be done in the future to further examine the relationship between storytelling, player interactivity, and immersion in video games. The appendices contain larger overviews of the video games' narratives for those who are unfamiliar with them.

CHAPTER ONE: GAME THEORY AND GAME ANALYSIS

Even though the video game industry is a big multi-billion dollar industry, and video games in general have become a fixture in the daily lives of many households, the research field of game studies is fairly young compared to other fields such as film and literary studies. The first academic journal covering the study of games, *Game Studies*, published their first issue in 2001. In the Netherlands, courses focused on the study of games are limited. Leiden University, for instance, offers only a minor in game studies, which was established as recent as 2014. In The Netherlands in general, degrees in video games are almost always geared towards game design and not necessarily the theoretical study of video games. Moreover, these degrees are not found at universities, but at mbo and hbo courses. As a result, the amount and accessibility of the academic scholarship published in the field is limited in the Netherlands.

On top of the limited availability of resources in the Netherlands, it is also important for students of game studies to understand that this field appears to be disparate. At the moment, the field of game studies includes an assortment of varying academic theories about the nature of video games and critical methods utilized to study the medium. Even the term “video games” is not universally applied. Other terms such as “digital games,” “computer games,” or “electronic games” are frequently used in the literature extant. Which terminology is used depends on the aim and approach of the scholar. “Games” would include non-electronic games such as board games, whereas “computer games” would only include games which can be played on one’s PC. For this thesis, I will use the term “video games” for multiple reasons. It encompasses games that can be played either on consoles or on PC, while it excludes electronic children’s toys. Moreover, it both refers to the visual and interactive

parts that are integral to their definition. Finally, it is the most comprehensive term to use for the type of games I analyse in this thesis.

1.1 Video Games and Traditional Media: The Ludology/Narratology Debate

A notable debate in the field of game studies is the “ludology-narratology debate” discussed by both Frans Mäyrä and Ian Bogost in their books *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008) and *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2008) respectively. The big question here is whether video games should be understood on their own terms, with a focus on the rules of a game, or whether they should be analysed as a new form of narrative with representational elements that convey meaning. Ludologists¹ are in favour of the former, while narratologists prefer the latter. One of the most prominent ludologists in the field is the Danish researcher Jesper Juul, who elaborates on the same subject in his piece for the first issue of *Game Studies* called “Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives.” Juul dissects the arguments for and against approaching video games as narratives. He proposes that video games are narratives under the following three conditions: 1) “people use narratives for everything”; 2) “most games feature narrative introductions and back-stories”; and 3) “games share some traits with narratives” (“Games Telling Stories?”). He debunks the first argument by arguing that not everything should, or has to be a narrative, or described in narrative terms (Juul). The second argument does not hold true for all video games. Video games like *Tetris* or *Space Invaders* have little to no backstory. One could argue that *Space Invaders* is about an evil alien race invading earth and that the player must stop this invasion, as suggested by the title. However, the game can never be truly won or completed, as the aliens continuously come in new waves. There is no conclusion to its “narrative” (Juul). As for the final argument, Juul believes that it ignores the active

¹ Ludologists are scholars who study games; their movement began as a reactional “critique [to] sloppy scholarship (in which key terms are not defined), one-sided focus and poor theorizing” (Aarseth “2. Ludology vs. Narrativism”).

participation of the player in a video game, which stands in contrast to the passivity of the reader or viewer of a more traditional literary or cinematic narrative. This is also one of his main counter arguments against the view that video games should be treated similarly to (traditional) narrative-driven media. In popular culture, narratives need a character with whom readers or viewers can identify because they are commercial products. Sympathetic characters, especially a protagonist, sell better. Video games do not necessarily have to have characters. To bring back the Tetris example, there is no “visible actor” (Juul), but still provides a source of entertainment, because video games “[evaluate] the player’s performance” (Juul). In other words, testing out their skills serves as a proper motivator for players to make this particular time investment. Moreover, players are a part of the video game as they issue out² controls, whereas readers or viewers are always outside of the narrative and have no control.

Henry Jenkins bridges the divide between ludologists and narratologists within the game studies community. He agrees with Juul that not every video game tells a story, and that those who do not, need to be analysed using different tools, such as “interface design” and “expressive movement” (119). However, he goes on to explain that many games do aspire to tell a story as they affect the player’s psyche and emotions. This is not very unusual from a commercial point of view, because a company wants their customer to be engaged with their product in order to boost sales. Even though video games may tell a story – contain a narrative – this method of storytelling does not have to be similar to prose fiction or cinematic narratives. This is why Jenkins proposes to widen the perspective of what a narrative can be and how it can be applied to video games. For instance, an entire video game does not have to tell a story, but certain sections of the video game can have narrative elements “at a more localized level” (121). His main argument, however, is to introduce “spatiality” as a third term

² A game term used for the act of pressing buttons on a controller or keyboard so that the controllable character on screen will perform the action assigned to those buttons.

to use when discussing video games. A video game's space – level design, game world, etc. – is a source of information through which the player traverses. How these spaces are structured is integral to what kind of narrative the video game presents. Jenkins discusses four types of narratives: evoked narratives, enacted narratives, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives (123-29). Evoked narratives use a game space, which builds upon a well-known story or genre. These video games do not have a distinct story of their own, but they draw upon the previous story and expect the player to fill in the blanks with their own knowledge (123). These narratives use transmedia storytelling in which the video game simply becomes a part of “a larger narrative economy” (124) – a story told across multiple platforms. Examples of this type of video game are the many video games that have been adapted from films, such as the *Harry Potter* video games. These do not tell the entire story – not that the films themselves do, because they are adaptations of the novels – but cherry pick certain sections of the narrative and expect the player who knows the whole story to start such a video game with all that knowledge. An evocative space or narrative, however, does not have to be unoriginal. For example, they can use a source text or film and put their own spin on it like video game designer American McGee has done with *American McGee's Alice* and *Alice: Madness Returns*. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* is used and twisted into a macabre, psychological horror story.

Enacted narratives feature narrative on two levels: “in terms of broadly defined goals or conflicts and on the level of localized incidents” (Jenkins 124). A video game tells a spatial story, and these stories develop through the player moving their character through the game world, triggering narrative events. There is an emphasis on exploration rather than the overall plot. Elements in the game world either help or hinder the player from moving forward and through exploration – i.e. searching for solutions – the player is able to further the narrative (125), similar to a classic heroic fantasy plot. As for the localized incidents, “micronarratives”

(125) come into play. These micronarratives are often heavily packed with emotional scenes, though they do not have to be cutscenes. While for the overall story they may not always be important, they do aid in the emotional investment and immersion of the player or offer a different perspective of the overall game world.

Choice-driven video games use another type of narrative called embedded narratives. These feature game spaces filled with clues in the form of collectible items or notes that offer the player information. Based on the gathered information, players develop hypotheses about how the story will develop and what actions they should take in order to reach a favourable ending. These hypotheses are tested by the choices the player makes and the outcome of those choices determines whether they are on the right path or not (Jenkins 126). An insufficient amount of clues would therefore be detrimental to the survival of the video game's characters. *Until Dawn*, which will be discussed in more detail later, exemplifies this with scattering totems throughout the video game's space depicting premonitions of possible events. Players can then make their decisions accordingly.

Emergent narratives use gameplay to tell their story. The story is not predetermined; rather they unfold as the player continues to play the video game. *The Sims* series uses this type of narrative. Players start with a blank canvas, which they can fill in, in whatever way they desire. They can choose their own goals – their Sim could become a master chef or a successful musician – and structure their days however, they like allowing them to shape their own story (Jenkins 128).

Even though the “ludology-narratology debate” has quieted down and most scholars have come to a consensus that video games can be analysed in a multitude of manners, I still found it important to discuss this debate. With a background in literary studies, it seems logical only to look at the storytelling properties of video games – and specifically choice-

driven video games for this thesis. Nevertheless, video games as a medium are too multi-faceted for me to ignore the other properties of them such as the game world, level design, and gameplay. This is the reason why I chose to discuss Jenkins' theories as well, as they offer a bridge between ludology and narratology from which I can build my own research.

1.2 The Magic Circle: Player Interactivity and Immersion

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1970) is often seen as the groundwork for later studies on games. While his text predates the emergence of video games, it explores how the act of "play" is intrinsic to human beings (66). He identifies play as the following: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (47). This definition holds true to video games. People willingly dedicate a certain amount of time to play their video game of choice, while their decision to do so simultaneously restricts them to either a computer or a television and console system set-up. Playing video games is generally done for leisure, but the difficulty of the game will affect the player's emotional reactions. Whatever part they are struggling with can be a cause of frustration, but overcoming that part can bring a sense of triumph and joy. Video games are different from ordinary life in the sense that they do not necessarily share the same rules or laws. No one is able to grow in size after eating a mushroom like the characters in the Mario Bros. universe.

I would like to expand the discussion on the final part of Huizinga's definition of "play," namely the fact that "play" supposedly provides a space within "the ordinary world" and therefore is linked to that world, but also separated because it has its own specific set of

rules (29-30). This is another example of the disparity within the field of game studies. He describes a phenomenon here he coined as the “magic circle.” The normal rules of everyday life are suspended within that magic circle and replaced by the artificial reality of the game world. Huizinga’s theory, however, could not possibly have included video games as the first video game was created three years after the publication of *Homo Ludens*. Be that as it may, there are still scholars, such as Jaakko Stenros, who believe that the magic circle can still be applied to video games, even though others, like Mia Consalvo, argue how the theory does not take into account how real life influences video games.

A video game series like *The Sims* is a prime example of how video games can be heavily influenced by real life. The games actually emulate daily life in the sense that the characters you create have all the basic needs that humans have: they need regular amounts of food and sleep, visit the bathroom or take a shower every so often for example. Moreover, they can go job searching and once they have a job, they will be at their workplace for a large portion of their weeks. Bills have to be paid, their house needs upkeep; their daily life needs to be navigated. Of course, real life does not have a fast-forward button or cheat codes, but the game-world shows many parallels to the world in which the game’s players live out their daily lives.

Consalvo argues that players “modding” video games eliminates the boundary between video games and the real life world (411). “Modding” is a term in the video game world used for players “modifying” certain aspects of a video game. For *The Sims*, this could include adding a variety of new furniture or clothing options for players to try out. Some other “mods” that are mostly popular with older games are texture or graphic overhauls that make video games more aesthetically pleasing to contemporary high-tech standards. If they allow it, video games will be altered by the players in whatever way they please once they engage with

the virtual world that makes up the game. Thus, “modders” are able to insert their work into the video game world and subsequently break the barrier between the two worlds.

Another argument Consalvo makes about why the magic circle is not applicable to video games, is the fact that players can bring prior knowledge from games they have previously played to new ones (413). Much like literature and film, video games can be categorised into certain genres. These genres have characteristics specific to that genre. Due to these genre-specific characteristics, video games play similarly to the others of the same genre. Therefore, players bring outside knowledge to a new video game world that will allow them to come up with, for example, various strategies in order to progress within the new video game.

Additionally, the immersive capabilities of video games contest the existence of the magic circle. Immersion in video games is similar to spatial presence in media. It is when “media contents are perceived as ‘real’ in the sense that media users experience a sensation of being spatially located in the mediated environment” (Wissmath, Weibel, and Groner qtd. in Madigan “The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”). The player feels as if they have positioned themselves inside the video game world. This feeling in turn influences their decision-making, as they tend to choose according to what would “make sense in the context of the [video game] world” (Madigan “The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”).

How spatial presence works has been theorised by scholar Werner Wirth amongst others. First, the player forms a mental copy of the world the video game presents them “by looking at [features such as images, movement, and sounds]” (Madigan “The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”). Second, the player decides, either consciously or subconsciously, whether they are in that “imagined world or the real one” (“The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”). Spatial presence translates into immersive gameplay through the following means: “characteristic of games that [create a rich mental model of the game

environment] and [characteristics that create consistency between the things in that environment]” (“The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”). In terms of richness, one could think of the visuals and audio being in concord or creating sequences of gameplay in which the player has to focus all their attention on whatever is happening on the screen and how to navigate through these sequences. The former aspect ensures that multiple of the player’s senses are stimulated and aid in completing their mental copy of the video game world, whereas the latter ensures that the player’s thought process is kept pre-occupied and therefore unable to notice discrepancies within the video game world. When it comes to consistency, anything that can cause the player to break their connection to the mental copy of the video game world and reminds them that they are still playing a video game must be avoided. Features like loading screens, video game menus, or pop-up messages tend to pull players out of their experience (“The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games”).

Can the magic circle be seen as something more porous rather than rigid? Possibly, but I am more inclined to agree with Consalvo that the magic circle has no place in video games. While certain rules are in effect within video games that are specific to that video game, it does not mean rules outside of the video game have no impact. If something as basic as a player’s aptitude can influence their style of playing, then one could not possibly turn a blind eye to the impact of real life on a player’s experience of a video game – especially when immersion is included in this debate.

1.3 Choice-Driven Video Games: The Happy Medium (Choice-Driven vs. RPG)

Choice-driven video games could then be the happy medium between storytelling and player interactivity. Video game developer *Quantic Dream* describes and markets its video games as “interactive dramas,” in which storytelling, emotions and innovation are emphasised. Choice-driven video games are all about the telling of a story – their narrative –, which contains a cast

of characters with which players can empathise, sympathise or be at odds with. There is an emotional investment in playing such a video game, as there is in reading a novel or watching a film. In playing a choice-driven video game, this investment is arguably greater, as the player is part of the drama as an active participant. Perhaps interactivity and narration can co-exist within a single entertainment medium, despite Juul's claims that "it is impossible to influence something that has already happened." *Life Is Strange* is a prime example of a video game in which the player is able to manipulate past events, because the player is able to go back in time in order to remake choices or redo actions whenever they doubt if they did right.

Furthermore, the reason why I brought up the magic circle debate is that choice-driven video games provide a good example of how real life affects the game world. It is precisely the choices the player has to make which illustrates this impact. The choices further the narrative and often these choices encompass moral dilemmas. For instance, in *Until Dawn* the player has to choose several times whom they wish to save and who will die. In *Life Is Strange*, the player has to choose whether they will steal money from the headmaster's office, money intended for a fund for the handicapped, so that their friend Chloe can potentially settle a debt with a dangerous man. These choices can be made through various motivations. Players can go for the choice they think is in line with the character's personality in order to preserve the so-called canon of the video game. However, players are also able to choose according to their own ethical codes. In the *Until Dawn* example, someone will always die. As for the *Life Is Strange* example, stealing money is morally wrong. This does not mean that these types of choices are never made. Players could have a desire to preserve certain relationships and therefore choose in such a fashion that it would score them points with the character they like the most. The *Life Is Strange* example presents this more clearly, because if you choose to steal the money, Chloe will be more appreciative towards you and you are less likely to be in a dangerous situation later on, despite the feelings of guilt. There is a third

motivator, however, for people like me who examine these video games, or for those who simply wish to play the game in every way possible: pick the choices you have not yet picked in a previous playthrough. This would be the only way to experience all that a choice-driven video game has to offer. In the coming chapters I will examine these types of choices more closely, in order to determine whether picking different choices actually lead to another narrative or if the overarching story remains largely unaltered despite of them.

Choice-driven video games are not the only genre of video games in which interactivity and storytelling are combined.³ Role-playing games (RPGs) are known for their rich world-building⁴ and storytelling. This type of game is not only found digitally. The fantasy table-top role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first commercially available game, which featured a blend of player activity and storytelling. It was designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and published in 1974. At its core, the game is about creating a character and joining your friends to tell a story together as you guide your characters through numerous quests led by a person called the “dungeon master.”⁵ Players come across a multitude of events, such as robberies or brawls, and they can respond to these situations however they like. Active engagement, decision-making, and immersion play a huge part in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and subsequently of RPGs in general. This type of play has been emulated in the RPG video games,⁶ which is why I have decided to also analyse an RPG together with choice-driven video games, to find out whether they differ in terms of their

³ The term “genre” is applied a bit differently to video games compared to prose fiction. In prose fiction, genre categorises the type of story and setting. In video games, genre also categorises the type of gameplay superposed on the story. For example, a science-fiction story could be translated into two different games like an action-adventure or a stealth video game. The former dictates that progression in the video game occurs through exploration and combat, whereas the latter dictates that progression occurs through finding ways to avoid detection and therefore combat. Thus choice-driven can both be a gameplay aspect and a genre.

⁴ A game term used to refer to the creation of the in-game world.

⁵ The dungeon master, or DM, is the person who oversees the game and ties everyone’s part of the story together; essentially leading them through their journey.

⁶ However, not every RPG allows the player to create their own character. Some only feature playable characters designed by the developer.

immersive capabilities, how they allow the player to move freely in the video game world, and how choices affect both story and player.

1.4 Methodology

In contrast to literary and film studies, the field of game studies does not have a canon per se.⁷ Indeed, there are video games which are highly regarded and seen as the pinnacle or groundbreaking in their respective genre. However, video games are a relatively young medium and with the ever-changing technology, the criteria for a video game to be worthy of belonging in the canon will always change. Moreover, in order to form a representative canon, one must be aware of every different innovation video games offer, which will lead to a long list that is continuously re-evaluated. Therefore, each of the chapters that will discuss and analyse a specific game will start with the aforementioned introduction to the video game, as I do not assume that many readers will be familiar with them. Context is important here and as I am using Fernández-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* as a guideline for my own analyses, I will start with providing the context of each video game in their respective chapters. As it might sound too extensive to some, I have decided only to present an abbreviated version of the narrative overview in the chapters themselves. A more detailed account can be found in appendix A through C. Additionally, stills and quoted dialogue from each game are used to support my arguments. I have played each of these video games multiple times, some of them even on multiple platforms. For the sake of this thesis, and to keep it streamlined, I will only discuss the PlayStation 4 versions of these video games.

⁷ There is, however, the Game canon as proposed by Henry Lowood. He announced it during the 2007 Game Developers Conference. The list consisted of only ten video games (Ransom-Wiley "10 most important video games of all time, as judges by 2 designers, 2 academics, and 1 lowly blogger."), but was contested and criticised for its lack of representation (Mensah "Canon 2.0"). As of 2018, there is no talk of an universal video game canon.

CHAPTER TWO: *UNTIL DAWN*

“The past is beyond our control. You have to accept this in order to move forward. But there is freedom in this revelation. Everything you do, every decision you make from now on, will open doors to the future. I want you to remember this. I want you to remember this as you play your game. Every single choice will affect your fate, and the fate of those around you.” – Dr. Hill (Until Dawn)

Until Dawn (2015) is a single-player, choice-driven video game which features characteristics of both the survival-horror and adventure genre. The video game was developed by Supermassive Games who are also known for developing the *LittleBigPlanet* series. One of their latest video games is called *Hidden Agenda*. *Until Dawn* had its global release on August 25th 2015. It was published by Sony Computer Entertainment, and met with positive critical acclaim. The video game is a PlayStation 4-exclusive title, which means that it is only playable on a PlayStation 4 console and has no other platform support. Initially, it was supposed to be released as a PlayStation 3 title in 2013, which would utilise the PlayStation Move controller until it got its re-introduction in 2014 as a PlayStation 4 exclusive title.

Until Dawn is played from a third-person perspective and players are able to alternately control nine characters in total, with one of them only playable in the video game’s prologue. Aside from the prologue, there are ten chapters in total, which are divided into several segments. Each segment allows the player to play with and/or control a different (set of) character(s). In each segment, the player has to make decisions that will affect the course of the advancing story. Therefore, each different decision the player makes will lead to a different scenario. Thus, supposedly, players are able to experience a different progression of

the story from their fellow gaming peers depending on the choices made whilst playing the video game.



Figure 1.1 A still taken from the *Until Dawn* launch trailer (Sony Computer Entertainment <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NcF7EOnjow>).

The freedom of choice is foregrounded in *Until Dawn*'s launch trailer (see figure 1.1), which opens with the promise that “every decision and every single action affects your fate and the fate of those around you” (“*Until Dawn* – Launch Trailer | PS4”). The trailer goes on to question whether the viewer would be “able to live with the consequences of their decisions” and states, “only [their] decisions will determine who will survive” (“*Until Dawn* – Launch Trailer | PS4”). Apparently, the player's decisions are of the utmost importance to the fate of the characters, raising the expectation that the player is central to the outcome of *Until Dawn*. However, whether these expectations are met is up for debate. This chapter will discuss the player's decision-making in regards to unfolding *Until Dawn*'s story in relation to the ever-shifting narrative and the player's immersion. While the player's choices do little in changing *Until Dawn*'s plot or ending, which becomes more evident when the video game is played multiple times, their choices do aid in the immersive capability of the video game which then tricks the player into believing they have controlled the flow and outcome of the narrative. The purpose of this chapter is to examine *Until Dawn*'s story and how the player is able to influence the flow of its narrative through choices they can make. Based on how the player is able to interact with the video game, conclusions will be drawn on how immersive it is.

2.1 Narrative Overview⁸

Until Dawn's setting is the fictional *Blackwood Mountain*⁹ located in between British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. The prologue details the events of 2014, a year prior to the video game's main events. Josh and his twin sisters Hannah and Beth invite their mutual friends Sam, Chris, Mike, Jessica, Matt, Emily, and Ashley to their family's lodge for the winter holiday. Hannah rushes out of the lodge after part of the group has played a prank on her. Beth runs after her to console her. Quickly after Beth has found Hannah, they both hear strange noises in the forest and notice that they are pursued. They are soon cornered at a cliff, which is where they fall down to their apparent deaths unbeknownst to the rest of the group. On the one-year anniversary of Hannah and Beth's disappearance, Josh invites the group back to the Washington lodge in order to put the past behind them. However, his invitation is part of an elaborate scheme he has set up to prank the group as payback for his sisters' disappearance. As his friends separate to enjoy their getaway by themselves, he starts to terrorise them – donning the disguise of “The Psycho.” What no one knows is that the mountain is home to the wendigos: evil spirits that take possession of lost and hungry humans until they become consumed by their hunger and feast on human flesh. A fellow resident of the mountain informs them of the existence of the wendigos after it has been revealed that Josh is The Psycho, but is killed by a wendigo shortly after warning the group. The group now has to survive and find a way to get off the mountain.

⁸ Refer to appendix A for the complete version of this narrative overview.

⁹ The name “Blackwood” is a reference to the English short story author Algernon Blackwood. In 1910 he published his novella *The Wendigo*, which first appeared in *The Lost Valley and Other Stories*. In *Until Dawn* the primary antagonists are also wendigos, which gives more credit to this reference (*Until Dawn* IMDb Trivia).

2.2 Gameplay



Figure 1.2 *Until Dawn*'s third-person perspective when the player can control a character. Pictured are Chris (background) and Ashley (foreground), with Ashley as the one controlled by the player (*Until Dawn*).

As mentioned earlier, *Until Dawn* is played from mostly a third-person perspective (see figure 1.2) and players alternately control one of the nine playable characters. The camera angle changes into a medium shot¹⁰ during cutscenes (see figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3 *Until Dawn*'s medium shot during cutscenes. Pictured are Sam (left) and Josh (right) (*Until Dawn*).

¹⁰ The medium shot, which is “also referred to as a ‘semi-close shot’ or ‘mid-shot’” is a shot in which actors are shot “from the waist up and is typically used in dialogue scenes.” The aim of this shot is “to capture subtle facial expressions combined with their body language or surrounding environment that may be necessary to provide context” (“12 of the Most Popular Camera Shots all Actors Should Know” New York Film Academy).

Players are able to control the characters using the PlayStation 4 controller, with which the left-hand analog stick allows them to move the characters around the different areas of *Until Dawn* and the X-button is used to interact with properties of these areas. Throughout the video game, players are prompted to make a decision between two choices using either the left- or right-hand analog stick. Some of these decisions have a time limit, urging the player to make their decision based on either a guess or a gut feeling. However, players cannot freely explore every area with every character all of the time. Each segment of each chapter highlights a different area and a different (set of) character(s). While the different areas are connected to one another as seen on an in-game map, it still feels as if players play through a different level because of the lack of free exploration. Nonetheless, some areas are revisited, or cannot be explored at all, depending on the characters players have managed to keep alive. The fact that some areas cannot be revisited is important, because all of these areas have a set amount of clues, which can be found. The clues give the player information on three different



Figure 1.4 Clues regarding the “Mystery Man” as seen in *Until Dawn*’s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).

subjects: the Mystery Man (which is The Psycho/Josh), the Washington Twins, and the mining accident in 1952 (see figures 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6).



Figure 1.5 Clues regarding “The Twins” as seen in *Until Dawn*’s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).



Figure 1.6 Clues regarding the “1952” mining incident as seen in *Until Dawn*’s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).

Aside from these clues, players are also able to find totems scattered around the mountain. These totems provide visions of possible future events. These totems are divided into five categories with a corresponding colour (see figure 1.7): death (black), danger (red), loss (brown), guidance (yellow), and fortune (white). The totems serve as a guide for the player, alerting them of what is to come in the form of visions of the future (see figure 1.8).



Figure 1.7 All the totems as seen in *Until Dawn*'s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).

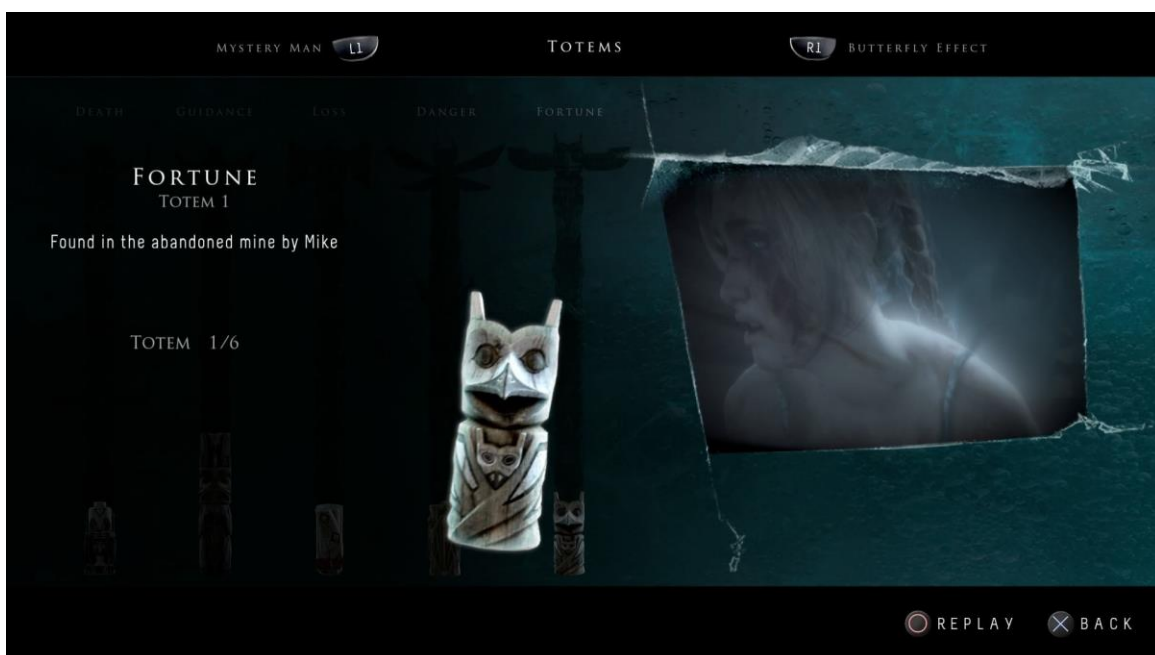


Figure 1.8 A vision given by a totem as seen in *Until Dawn*'s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).

The fact that some of these areas cannot be revisited means that some of these clues can be missed. In turn, it leaves the player with less information available to them than they could possibly have. Through these clues, players are able to uncover the secrets of *Until Dawn*, which will aid them in making the right decisions throughout the game. Therefore, thorough exploration is encouraged in order to obtain the correct information. The right-hand analog

stick is used in decision-making; whereas the X-, Circle-, Square-, and Triangle-button are used during Quick Time Events¹¹ (QTEs) (see figures 1.9 and 1.10).



Figure 1.9 Sam climbing a wall during a QTE, which calls for the Circle-button to be pressed in order to execute the action successfully (*Until Dawn*).



Figure 1.10 A different QTE command requested to continue Sam's climb (*Until Dawn*).

In terms of gameplay, *Until Dawn* is an immersive experience to some degree. The decision-making and the reaction speed directly affect the characters' survival. Going left where the player should have gone right or pressing a button too late can cause a character to be killed, directly by the threat on screen, or indirectly by the player themselves. Moreover, the timers add a sense of urgency. Players cannot wait too long before making their decision. The urgency the characters feel by the threat and the urgency players feel by their desire to

¹¹ Quick Time Events are a gameplay method in which players have to perform actions on their controller within a certain time-limit when they have appeared on screen. This gameplay method allows players to have limited control during cinematic sequences within a video game. In *Until Dawn*, failing to perform the correct actions in time may result in the death of certain characters.

keep the characters alive are in accord – creating an immersive experience in which players may feel like they are the ones who are in danger themselves. This desire then spurs them on to find as many clues as possible to better their chances at survival, consequently continuously interacting with the world of *Until Dawn*. Be that as it may, the life-or-death situations in *Until Dawn* only occur in cutscenes during which players can only interact with the video game whenever they are prompted to make a decision. Unlike in, for instance, action or adventure video games, players cannot manoeuvre the characters during these situations. Active engagement is forgone until there is a prompt, which requires the player to act, decreasing the immersion. Moreover, these prompts themselves affect the immersion, as the player is reminded that they are playing a video game. Text and images of the PS4 controller's buttons show up on screen, distorting the world of *Until Dawn*.

2.3 Key Video Game Mechanic: Butterfly Effect

The video game features a mechanic called the “Butterfly Effect,”¹² which is explained in the introduction of *Until Dawn* (see figure 1.11). The mechanic features an image of a butterfly with veins on its wings. These veins symbolise the different paths the player is able to take. Choices diverge these paths in which the chosen paths are highlighted while the other paths darken. The contrast in the veins signifies that the player is not able to change paths and that the story will simply unfold according to their choices. Every choice or action the player makes is recorded, all of which may cause unforeseen consequences in later chapters of the video game. For example, handing over a flare gun to another character may allow the player

¹² Evidently this is an allusion to the scientific theory of the “butterfly effect” in which a small change can have great consequences – “[a] tiny butterfly flapping its wings today may lead to a devastating hurricane weeks from now” (*Until Dawn*; “Until Dawn™ Butterfly Effect Intro”). The metaphor of the butterfly was created by the pioneer of chaos theory Edward Norton Lorenz. In popular culture, the butterfly effect has come to mean that every event can be traced back to small changes which have caused a rippling effect (Dizikes “The meaning of the butterfly”). By alluding to the theory of the butterfly effect, the choices in *Until Dawn* should all follow the same butterfly-hurricane analogy: they cause small changes (in the narrative) that ripple out into bigger events and/or consequences.

to have a better chance in ensuring that the character to which the flare gun was given remains alive during a chase sequence in a later chapter.

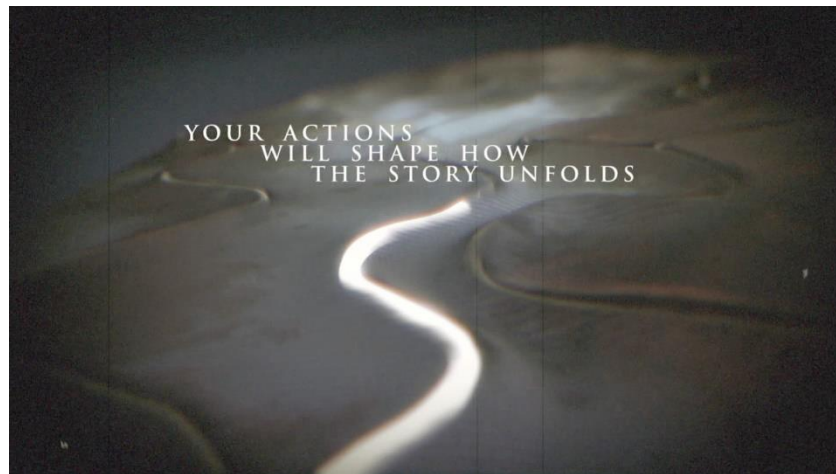


Figure 1.11 A still taken from *Until Dawn*'s introduction illustrating the butterfly effect (*Until Dawn*).

Essentially, the sum of all the choices and actions made determine the outcome of *Until Dawn*. The video game does not allow you to go back or change your choices, as the video game automatically auto-saves your decisions. Due to this auto-save system, the player is unable to reload previous save files either. The only way to change your choices is either to quit and start again from the beginning, or to finish a playthrough and use the “Chapter Select” option from the main menu to replay the video game from a certain chapter onwards. Players are able to keep track of their choices and the consequences of their choices in the game menu under “Butterfly Effect” (see figure 1.12). They are shaped like a butterfly and each wing is filled in with a screenshot from the video game. The left wing shows the choice the player has made and the right wing shows the consequence of their choice (see figure 1.13). However, some choices have multiple consequences. For these choices, the consequences are featured in the subsequent wings of the butterfly through which the player can flip through like pages of a book. Not only do these choices affect the outcome of certain scenarios within the video game, they also affect the character’s traits and relationships with the other characters. In total, there are twenty-two different choice sequences. However, it is

possible that some of these will never occur, because either they require certain events to have transpired prior to the particular butterfly effect or a character integral to the particular butterfly effect has already died in an earlier chapter. Due to this particular mechanic of *Until Dawn*, players are encouraged to play the video game multiple times. Considering that this mechanic is the core of *Until Dawn*'s relation between narrative and player interactivity, one would expect that they play a big role. They do, but the consequences of the player's choices are minor to the outcome of the story, as I will elaborate in 2.3.1 and 2.3.3.

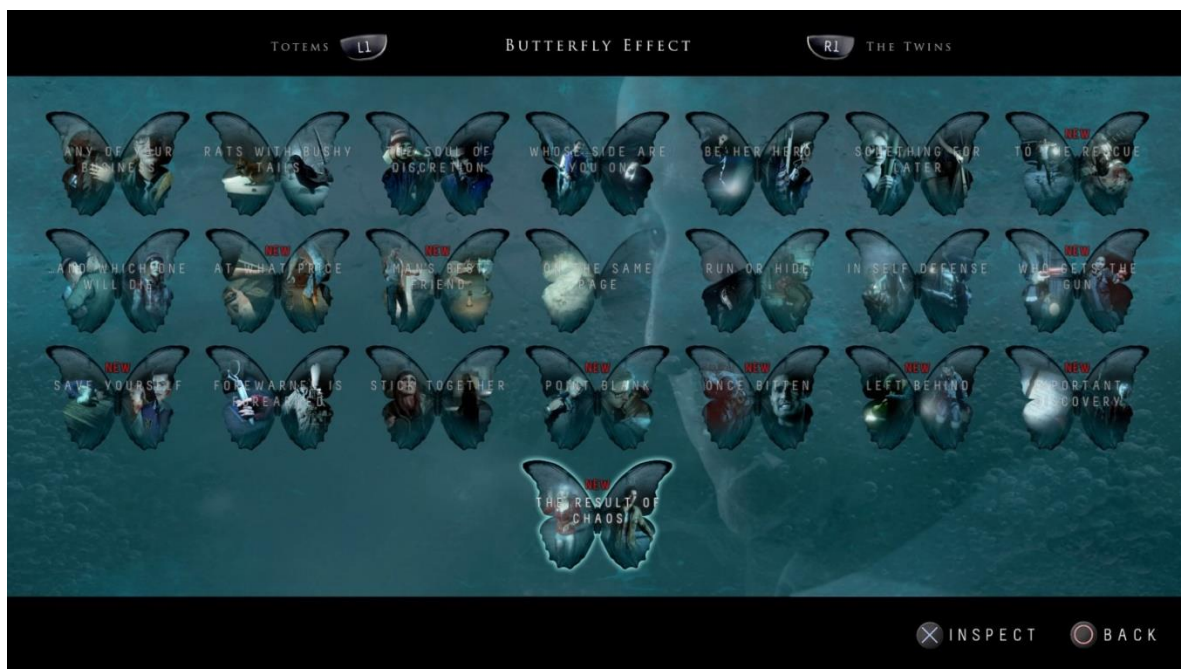


Figure 1.12 All twenty-two butterfly effects as seen in *Until Dawn*'s menu screen (*Until Dawn*).



Figure 1.13 A detail of one of the butterfly effect choices and its consequence (*Until Dawn*).

2.3.1 Personality Features: Traits and Relationships

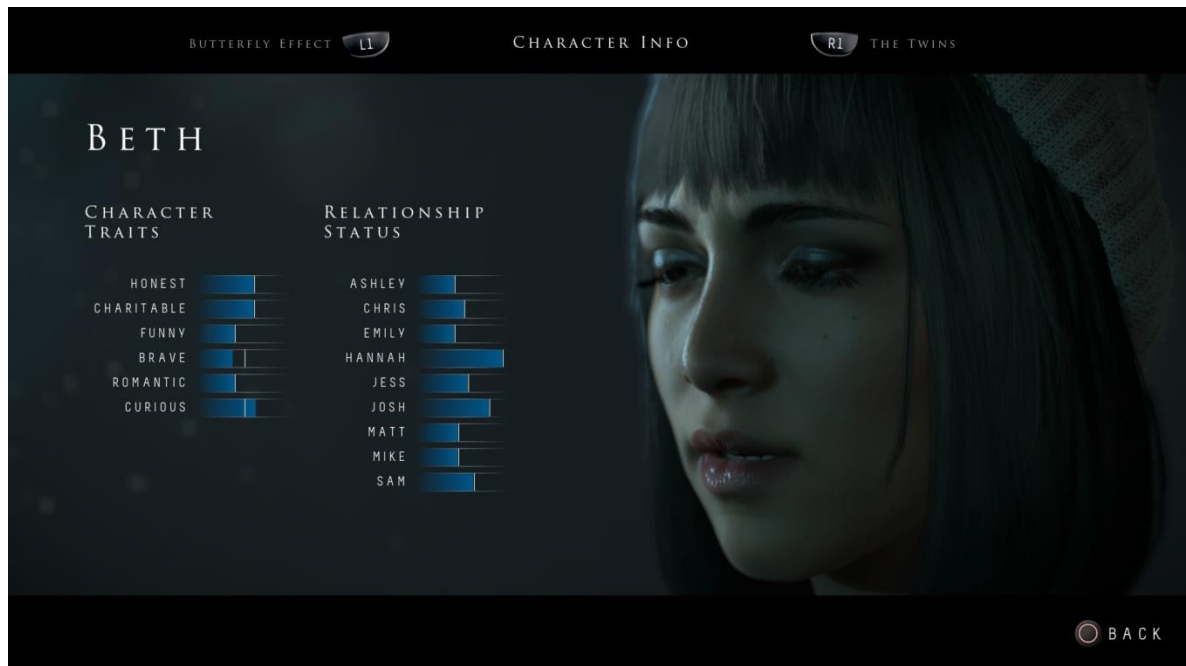


Figure 1.14 The character menu screen which gives information on a character's traits and their relationship status with the other characters (*Until Dawn*).

Similar to the recorded choices, information on a character's traits and relationship status with other characters can be found in the video game menu (see figure 1.14). The traits are divided as follows: honest, charitable, funny, brave, romantic, and curious. While these traits will allow the player to choose actions accordingly, they are still restricted by just these six choices provided by the developers. For example, there are no clumsy choices or aggressive choices, unless one counts shooting at an attacking wendigo out of self-defence and survival as an aggressive choice. Next to the traits and names of the characters are horizontal bars. The lengths of these bars fluctuate depending on choices made by the player while they control a character. For example, during the first chapter in which the player controls Sam, they will hear a phone ringing inside an open backpack on a bench near the cable car station. The player is given two options: respect the privacy of the phone's owner and zip the backpack shut or snoop and see who is calling. The first choice results in an increase in Sam's honesty, charity, and her relationship status with Chris who is the phone's owner, whereas the second choice will decrease these.

A player is likely to think that these increases and decreases in character traits and a character's relationship status with respect to the others will have a profound effect on how the video game will play out. However, this is not the case. For example, when a player controls a character and opts to go for choices that are deemed humorous or charitable, they still get the same choice prompts in future chapters as if they had gone for choices that would have made the character appear mean-spirited. Past dialogue choices do not cause a change in future dialogue options. Furthermore, successfully completing chase sequences does not require a particular amount of bravery either. Moreover, a character can act rudely to another character, but this will not affect further interactions with that character in any meaningful way, despite their relationship status decreasing – the only exception is in the first chapter in which Sam can snoop on Chris' phone. Chris will be offended and call her out on her nosiness in a following interaction when they meet up with Jessica. However, the in-game couples remain together, even when they are nasty to each other, the developers decided that they would have interactions and playable sections as a couple in future chapters, especially because a fight between the couples causes the group to split. Moreover, the developers likely predicted that the player would want the couples to get along well with each other and stick together either way because of the immersive quality of video games – a quality that will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

The fluctuations in character traits and relationship status are purely cosmetic in the sense that they only affect the length of the bar corresponding to these traits and the relationship status. It is a video game mechanic that seems to give more weight to the decision-making without actually doing so. Should the player become aware of the lack of importance of these traits and statuses, the immersion will break because they know that the reactions of other characters or the outcomes of events are not based on them. Their choices are in this regard inconsequential.

2.3.2 Psychiatric Evaluation



Figure 1.15 Meeting Dr. Hill during one of his sessions (*Until Dawn*).

Another aspect of *Until Dawn*, which features choices that are only purely cosmetic, and do not impact the overall story are the sessions with Dr. Hill (see figure 1.15), a psychiatrist, interspersed throughout the video game. These sessions seem as if they are directed to the player themselves, but they later find out that the person sitting opposite of Dr. Hill is The Psycho, Josh Washington in disguise. Moreover, these sessions are later revealed to be a part of Josh' hallucinations – a warped version of the sessions he had with the real Dr. Hill when he was still in treatment for his depression. These sessions with Dr. Hill take the form of various exercises in which the player has to choose answers to Dr. Hill's questions.

Dr. Hill is introduced right after the player has finished the prologue. While the player has no control over what has happened in the past, they are able to shape their characters' future through the choices they will make throughout the video game. This first session only affects the title of the first chapter. The player is shown a card, which has an image of a cornfield containing a cottage and a scarecrow. Should the player choose that the image makes them feel happy and that they would gladly stay in the cottage, the first chapter will be called "Friendship" and otherwise "Memento Mori" if any of the other answers are given by

the player. The change in name has no impact on how that chapter will play out as only the choices made in that chapter do. The only real effect the chapter's name could have is on the player's expectations. "Friendship" decidedly sounds lighter than "Memento Mori." With the former title, the player could start the chapter expecting an enjoyable getaway in the mountains despite last year's events in which friendships are reconciled. Contrastingly, with the latter one the player could expect that this year's events will not turn out favourable either. This argument is speculative because a player's reaction cannot be assumed based purely on what they are presented, but considering *Until Dawn* only shows minor changes based on how the player has performed, I still thought it beneficial to add it. Ultimately, on the level of the video game and its story there are no changes to speak of, because only the player is affected.

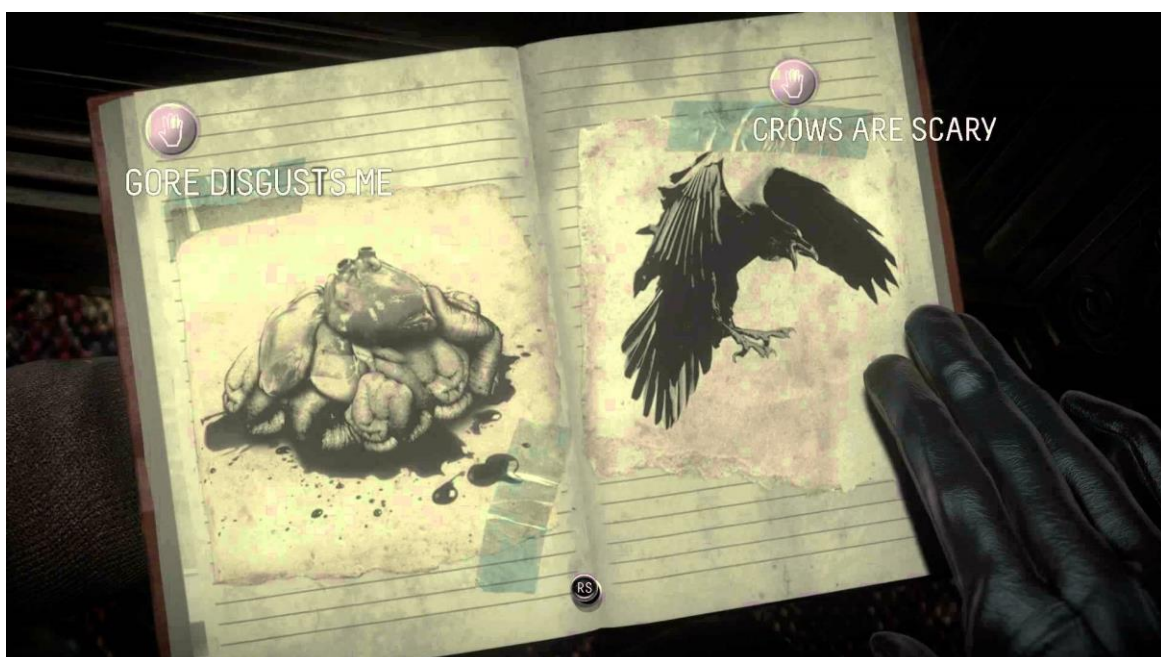


Figure 1.16 One of the questions asked by Dr. Hill during one of his sessions (*Until Dawn*).

A different session with Dr. Hill, which only causes cosmetic changes to the video game, is the one after the first chapter. In this session, the player is asked a set of thirteen questions regarding their anxiety. They have to choose what scares them the most out of the two choices given to each question (see figure 1.16). Some of these questions repeat answers the player has given in a previous question, only adding a different answer to choose from

next to their previous choice. Should the player choose a clown, scarecrow, or a zombie as one of the answers to the question of what they fear the most, a mannequin resembling their choice will appear in one of the later sessions in the background. Furthermore, their choice will appear as a jump scare¹³ when the player controls Chris in chapter 4 as they explore the forest. Likewise, either choosing gore, needles, cockroaches, rats, snakes, or spiders will make them appear on Dr. Hill's desk in later sessions.

The choices made during this exercise do not affect the outcome of the video game whatsoever. Chris reacts similarly to the jump scare whether it is a clown, scarecrow or a zombie. These choices affect, again, only the player's experience of the video game on an aesthetic level. They are there for immersive purposes only to heighten the player's emotional response. When immersion is taken into consideration, *Until Dawn* encourages the player to answer the questions during this particular session truthfully because it would make the most sense to them. Due to the first-person perspective during these sessions, *Until Dawn* creates the illusion that the questions are directed at the player themselves rather than a character. Thus, the appropriate answers should increase the levels of tension and fear that the player experiences during their playthrough. While the story remains unaffected, the player's experience does not per se. How impactful the choices made during these sessions with Dr. Hill are is purely subjective to how much the player feels influenced by them, i.e. how immersed the player is.

Moreover, the setting in which players play *Until Dawn* is crucial to the impact of the choices and aids in the immersion as well. The game developers considered that a player who plays *Until Dawn* on their own and/or in a darkened room is perhaps more prone to the effects of these cosmetic changes than a player who plays it with their friends and/or in a room with

¹³ Jump scares are moments intended to surprise and scare the audience with a sudden shift or change in event, which often are accompanied by a loud or even scary noise. These moments are frequent in horror movies, for instance when the murderer suddenly appears behind the protagonist unbeknownst to them. It is no coincidence therefore that jump scares appear in *Until Dawn*, considering it belongs to the horror genre.

the lights on. The bonus content video “The Science of Fear” shows how the game developers experimented with different sections of *Until Dawn* to see how these sections affect the player. The experiment features an arbitrary selection of people who have to play through a variety of sections of *Until Dawn* in a darkened room while wearing a bracelet, which monitors their emotional response. After the experiment was done, they had to do a final interview to share their thoughts on their experience. Therefore, it is evident that the game developers took great care to ensure that *Until Dawn* would be experienced as scary and that immersion was integral to achieve the desired response, but the amount of influence the player has regarding the experience is minimal at best aside from the aforementioned sessions with Dr. Hill.

2.3.3 Divergent Roads to One Ending

Until Dawn's structure and mechanics suggest that the player's decisions are an integral aspect in determining the story's outcome. Each decision they make changes the way in which the various scenarios unfold or even whether characters actually survive to be seen again in following chapters. This aspect of the game is highlighted by the Butterfly Effect mechanic described earlier in the chapter. The use of the term “butterfly effect” and the iconography regarding this concept alludes to great consequences as a result of the player's decisions as well. It is true that the player's dialogue decisions affect how other characters will respond to them or decisions regarding actions affect how events unfold, but the barebones story is scripted and cannot change. The player's diligence in exploring the different areas determines how much information they gain which subsequently colours their following decisions. A player who does not have the right clues to the past and present events on Blackwood Mountain is more likely to cause a character's death. What this means is that, yes, certain sections of the video game may be left un-played because the character who was supposed to

be controlled during that section is no longer alive. A character's death has little to no effect on the video game's plot or ending. Should a character die in the company of others, the other characters may comment on it during the credits when the player has finished the video game. Characters that die when they are on their own are deemed missing: the rescue party comments during the credits that they have not found any signs of them yet. The player is the only one who knows that these characters have died. The lack of effect on either plot or ending is odd, because smaller changes such as picking up a pair of scissors or shooting a squirrel instead of a sandbag at the shooting range do cause a shift in narrative. One would expect a more dramatic event like a character dying would have a greater impact on the narrative, rather than none at all.

Nevertheless, as divergent as the player's roads to the ending may be, they all lead to the same climax (see figures 1.17, 1.18, and 1.19). This ending is ensured by the fact that Sam and Mike can only be killed during the video game's final events. These two will return without fault to the Washington Lodge in the final chapter of *Until Dawn* chased by the wendigos, only to realise one of them has entered the living area of the lodge already. The solution for their escape is revealed through a cutscene: they have to cause an explosion by creating a gas leak and an electrical malfunction as they rush out of the lodge and quickly turn the switch of the lights on their way out. How many of the other characters are at the lodge during these events depends on how successful the player was in ensuring their survival up to that point. The same goes for how many characters will safely escape the lodge during the attempt to blow the place up. The fact that Sam and Mike will always survive up until this moment, means that the player will have to go through this particular section every single time they play *Until Dawn*. Furthermore, because the characters decide on their method of escape during a cut scene, the player cannot opt for a different method either. Thus, this scene will always play out similarly. The only difference being how many survivors are left after the

explosion. The explosion will always occur no matter what. The player is not given any other option. There is no moment in which they can decide to just throw caution in the wind and just take off to the cable car station and leave the mountain. *Until Dawn* simply does not allow it as it would disrupt the horror aspect of the video game. The tension must be maintained until the climax.

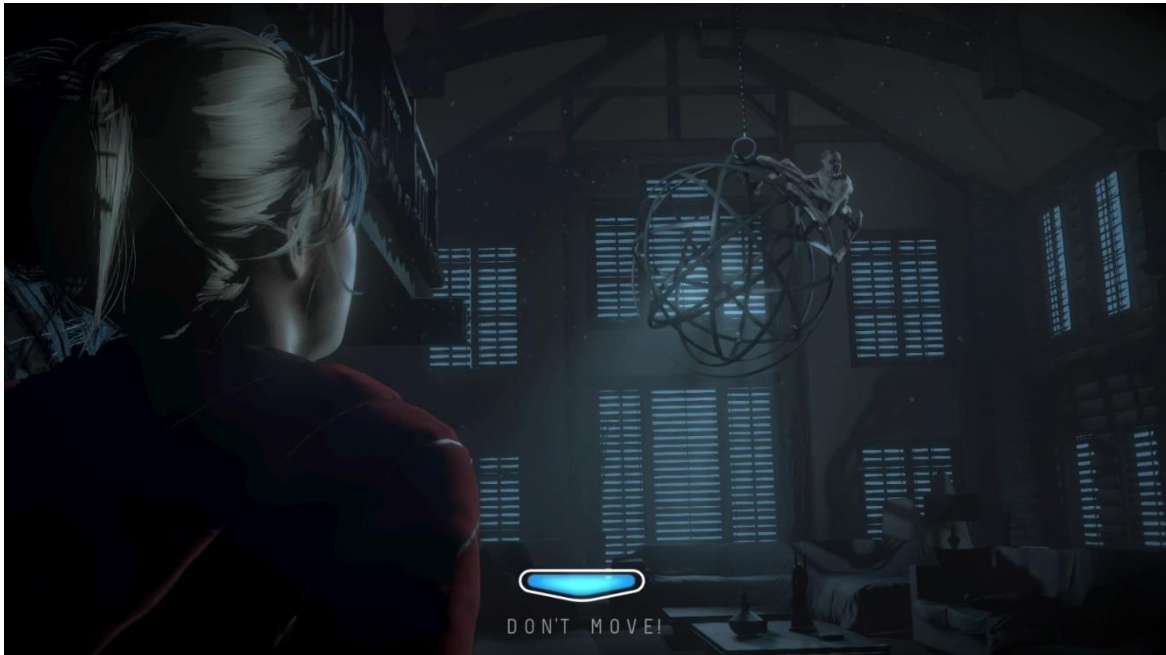


Figure 1.17 A still taken from *Until Dawn*'s climax (*Until Dawn*).



Figure 1.18 A still taken from *Until Dawn*'s climax (*Until Dawn*).



Figure 1.19 A still taken from *Until Dawn*'s climax (*Until Dawn*).

There is another consequence of Sam's and Mike's scripted survival until the finale. In previous chapters, there were several moments in which their lives were supposedly at risk, such as: Sam being chased by the Psycho, or Mike's journey through the wendigo-infested Sanatorium. Due to their scripted survival, choices made during these events do not really matter. *Until Dawn* makes players believe these characters are in danger, but they are not. There are no bad decisions to be made. There is plenty of room for error, because they will survive either way. In a similar fashion, the prologue will always play out the same as well. The player is unable to save the twins, no matter what they decide to do. Their deaths are scripted, which makes sense from a plot perspective. Their deaths, or rather their disappearance, are the catalyst of the video game's main events. Had they survived and returned to the lodge, none of the following events would have occurred as they have. There would be no game left to play. While these observations can only be made in hindsight, they are no less true. Thus, the player is limited in their ability to shape the story of *Until Dawn*.

There is a relationship between the player's ability of choice, the video game's narrative, and the player's immersion. Claims on the player's choices affecting the narrative of *Until Dawn* have now largely been debunked. There are only a few arbitrary choices that affect the fate of one of the protagonists. Furthermore, characters like Sam and Mike are only able to die during the video game's climax, which causes the previous sequences in which they were supposedly in danger to lessen in tension in subsequent playthroughs. The use of the term "butterfly effect" appears to be used as a means to cover how inconsequential most choices in *Until Dawn* are. Even the dialogue choices have little to no effect, as the traits and relationship status mechanics do not alter the outcome of *Until Dawn*. Rather than having a profound effect on the narrative, the player's choices determine how immersed players become in *Until Dawn*. The psychiatric session with Dr. Hill highlights the effect on immersion – the player is directly asked how they feel or what they fear. Their fears then are represented with imagery in future chapters, such as when the player chooses "zombie" as one of their main fears, Dr. Hill appears to decompose in future sessions, or the Psycho/Josh will terrorise the others with syringes instead of gas when the player has chosen "needles" are one of their main fears. These little changes in the video game's scenery increase the immersive capabilities of *Until Dawn*, as the video game caters to the player's fears. Additionally, the player is more inclined to pick the choices that seem to make the most sense in the video game world. An example would be the dialogues between the couples, as immersed players tend to go for the choices that are beneficial in maintaining the relationships. Even though *Supermassive Games* encourages players to play *Until Dawn* multiple times because of the many different endings, the video game only provides the player the illusion that they have control over the outcome during the first playthrough. When they become aware of *Until Dawn*'s gimmick, the illusion is broken.

2.4 Conclusion

Until Dawn promises freedom for the player to act however they would like, and that their decisions will change the fate of the characters. Through interactive gameplay with the choice-prompts and the QTEs, players are able to ensure either the survival or death of a character. By designating these choice with the name “Butterfly Effect,” referencing to the scientific theory of the same name, the game developers have added a weight to the player’s decisions. The fluctuating traits and relationships aim to add to this weight. Despite its promises and mechanics, *Until Dawn* falls flat when it is played multiple times. Some choices barely affect the video game’s outcome at all, such as either agreeing or disagreeing with another character. Others do ensure the survival or death of characters, but the overarching story is left unaltered. The video game only has one ending and players will always arrive at the place where the video game’s climax plays out due to the ensured survival of Sam and Mike. Therefore, *Until Dawn*’s strength lies in the suggestion that the player is in control. A player who is not familiar with its mechanics will always think that the events on the screen are a result of their decisions. Immersion plays a big part in this illusion, which is aided by the sessions with Dr. Hill and the timer placed on the decision-making. The former features questions seemingly directed towards players themselves and results in the incorporation of their real-life fears, whereas the latter simulates the stress and urgency of the in-game characters. Consequently, the desire to ensure the characters’ survival will cause players to actively, and immersively, engage with *Until Dawn*.

CHAPTER THREE: *LIFE IS STRANGE*

“I changed fate and destiny so much that... I actually did alter the course of everything. And all I really created was just death and destruction!” – Max Caulfield (Life Is Strange)

Life Is Strange (2015) is another single-player, choice-driven video game with graphic adventure¹⁴ elements. It differs from *Until Dawn* in the fact that *Life Is Strange* is an episodic video game. Rather than a full video game release, *Life Is Strange* was digitally released in five episodes spanning from January 30, 2015 until October 20, 2015. It had its physical release in North America on January 19, 2016 and in Europe on January 22, 2016. The video game was released on multiple platforms, including PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, and a mobile version for iOS devices. A mobile version of the video game for Android devices is set to release in July 2018. *Life Is Strange* was developed by Dontnod Entertainment and published by Square Enix. It was met with critical acclaim, resulting in both a prequel and a sequel. The prequel, *Life Is Strange: Before The Storm*, was released in three episodic instalments near the end of 2017, with a bonus chapter called “Farewell” released on March 6, 2018. This prequel was developed by another company – Deck Nine – as Dontnod Entertainment is currently developing the sequel to *Life Is Strange*, which will feature a new cast and setting. Their latest release is a new title, *Vampyr*, released on June 5, 2018.¹⁵

¹⁴ Graphic adventure is a genre in video games in which the player controls a character while playing through a set storyline which is often linear. The player helps out the playable character by solving puzzles so that they are able to reach the end of the game (Moss “A truly graphic adventure: the 25-year rise and fall of a beloved genre”). The fact that the graphic adventure genre is characterised by a linear storyline with little room for deviation already questions the importance of the player’s decision-making in any video game of the genre.

¹⁵ Dontnod Entertainment’s only other release is *Remember Me* (2013) which was met with mixed reviews, and led the company into a tricky financial situation prior to *Life Is Strange*’s success.

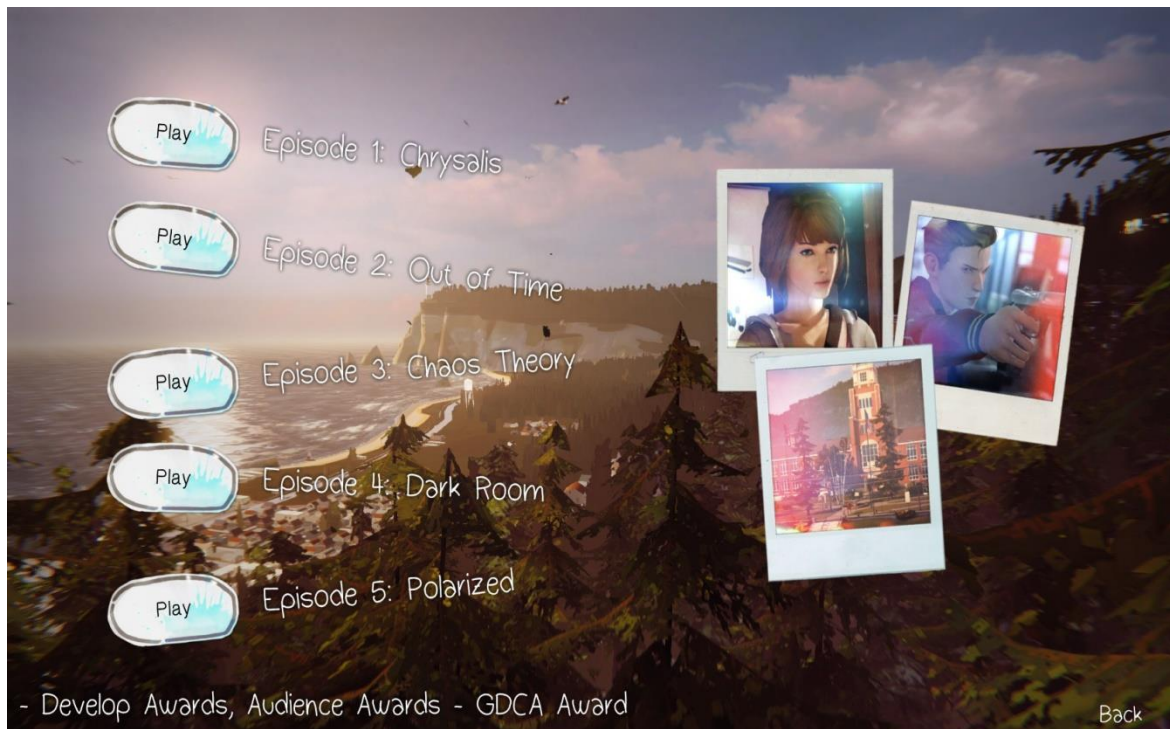


Figure 2.1 The *Life Is Strange* menu screen featuring each of the five episodes (*Life Is Strange*).

Life Is Strange is played from a third-person perspective. The player is only able to control one character as opposed to *Until Dawn*'s nine. This character is the protagonist Maxine "Max" Caulfield who is a photography student at Blackwell Academy in the fictional town Arcadia Bay. As said earlier, *Life Is Strange* is divided into five episodes (see figure 2.1): "Chrysalis," "Out of Time," "Chaos Theory," "Dark Room," and "Polarized." Each episode has its own set of events that contribute to the overall story of the video game. Each episode also features its own set of choices the player is able to make. These choices are divided into minor and major choices. Both types will result in the video game mentioning, "This action will have consequences..." at the top-left of the screen paired with the image of a butterfly flapping its wings (see figure 2.2). Thus *Life Is Strange*, like *Until Dawn*, includes the butterfly effect as a video game mechanic. Choices made by the player affect scenarios within the episode, but also in future episodes. For instance, if the player chooses to report Nathan to principal Wells in episode one, Nathan will vandalise Max's dorm room and leave

a disturbing photo collage in the beginning of episode two. The vandalism does not happen when the player has decided not to report Nathan to principal Wells.



Figure 2.2 Still taken from *Life Is Strange* which features the “This action will have consequences...” message. Pictured are Max Caulfield (left) and Chloe Price (right) (*Life Is Strange*).

However, there is still a difference between the minor and major choices. Prompts when the player can make minor choices occur throughout the episode and usually come up in conversations or daily activities, as the player plays through the episode. These choices can be missed, which will cause *Life Is Strange* to behave as if the player has decided not to perform that particular action. For example, the player is able to let Daniel, another Blackwell student, to draw Max’s portrait in the first episode. The video game equals not speaking to Daniel to a negative response in relation to whether Max allows Daniel to draw her portrait. However, major choices cannot be missed. *Life Is Strange* will always remind the player that they have some unfinished business they have to take care of, which often revolves around these major choices. As these choice comes up, the scene stops, the screen freezes with an overlay, and there is a change in music (see figure 2.3). This freeze-frame allows the player to take their time while they make their decision. The video game will only continue after the player has

made their choice. Like the previous chapter, this chapter will analyse the relationship between the player's choices and the video game's narrative to determine how impactful these choices are to the flow of the narrative. Moreover, it will discuss to what degree the player has control over the video game or if immersion conjures the illusion that they have control.

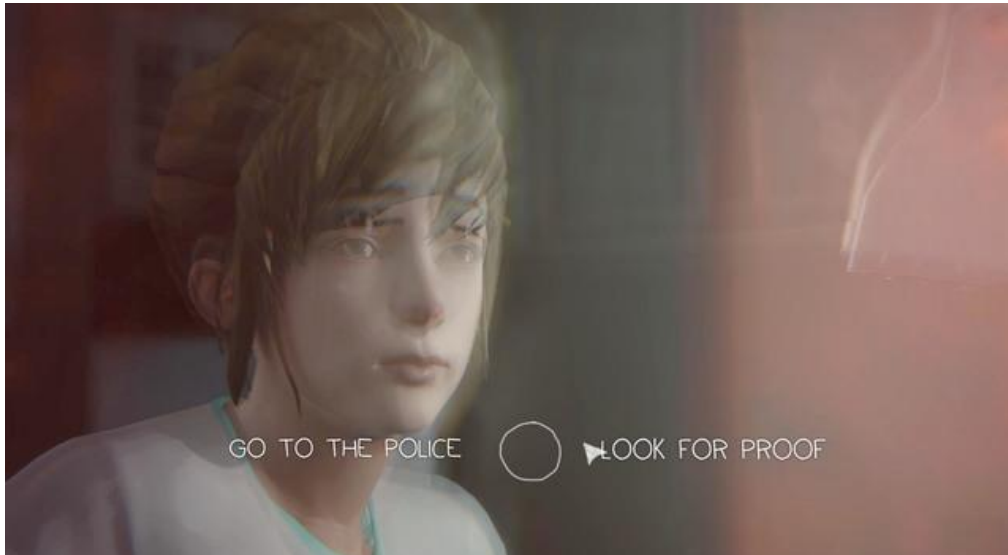


Figure 2.3 A still taken during one of the major choices in *Life Is Strange*. Pictured is Kate Marsh (*Life Is Strange*).

3.1 Narrative Overview¹⁶



Figure 2.4 The tornado in Max's vision on its way to destroy Arcadia Bay (*Life Is Strange*).

Max Caulfield, a photography student of Blackwell Academy, wakes up from a nightmare in the middle of class. In the nightmare, she saw a tornado making its way to destroy her

¹⁶ Refer to appendix B for the complete version of this narrative overview.

hometown Arcadia Bay (see figure 2.4). Disturbed by her nightmare, she goes to the restroom after class. In the restroom, she witnesses how her classmate Nathan Prescott murders a girl (see figure 2.5). She tries to stop him, and in her effort, she rewinds time and returns to the earlier class. As she realises that she has suddenly gained temporal rewind powers, she rushes back to the restroom to stop the murder from happening.



Figure 2.5 Nathan Prescott about to kill Chloe Price (*Life Is Strange*).

It turns out that the girl Max saves is actually her childhood friend Chloe Price whom she has not spoken to in almost five years after Max having moved to Seattle. As the two friends reunite, Max tells Chloe of her powers. Max blacks out and has another vision of the tornado when the two head to the lighthouse to hang out. In the vision, she finds a newspaper from October 11, 2013, the date of the upcoming Friday. She now realises that the nightmares are actually visions from the future. Meanwhile, the two friends also investigate the sudden disappearance of another Blackwell Academy student, Rachel Amber (see figure 2.6), one of Chloe's best friends after Max left Arcadia Bay. During the rest of the video game, Max has to find a way to use her powers to find clues regarding Rachel's disappearance, help her friends, and keep the storm from destroying Arcadia Bay. During her journey, Max will have

to try to keep her classmate Kate Marsh from committing suicide by jumping off the dormitory's roof. Her suicide attempt was caused by the continuous harassment from her fellow classmates. Furthermore, Max and Chloe have to break into the principal's office and the local drug dealer's van to find out more information regarding Rachel Amber. Simultaneously, Max jumps in and out of alternate timelines as she tries to master her newfound powers. In the end, she finds out that her teacher, Mark Jefferson, and to a lesser degree Nathan Prescott, is responsible for the disappearance of Rachel Amber. After he has been taken care of, Max is left with a final decision after she realises that she is the one responsible for the storm by saving Chloe in the restroom. Will Max sacrifice Arcadia Bay or her friend Chloe Price?



Figure 2.6 A missing person's poster featuring Rachel Amber (*Life Is Strange*).

3.2 Gameplay



Figure 2.7 A still taken from *Life Is Strange* featuring its third-person perspective together with the photo-command (*Life Is Strange*).

Life Is Strange features a third-person perspective (see figure 2.7) similar to *Until Dawn* with a view on the controllable character: Max Caulfield. Another similarity is the change in camera angle during cutscenes, as these scenes are shot in medium shot as well. Max Caulfield is controlled by using the PlayStation 4 controller; the left-hand analog stick allows the player to move her around the various areas in Arcadia Bay, while the X-button is used to interact with properties within these areas or to initiate conversations with her fellow students or the other town residents. These various areas also provide the option to take photographs of scenes (see figure 2.7), such as graffiti on school desks or the wreck of a school bus at the junkyard. Each episode has a total of ten different sceneries that can be photographed. The prompt to take a photograph is shown with the Square-button. These photographs are then stored in Max's journal, which also features journal entries in which Max writes about the events in Arcadia Bay (see figures 2.8 and 2.9). These entries can slightly alter depending on the player's choices and the subsequent outcomes of events. Finally, the L2-button is used in order to activate Max's temporal rewind powers.

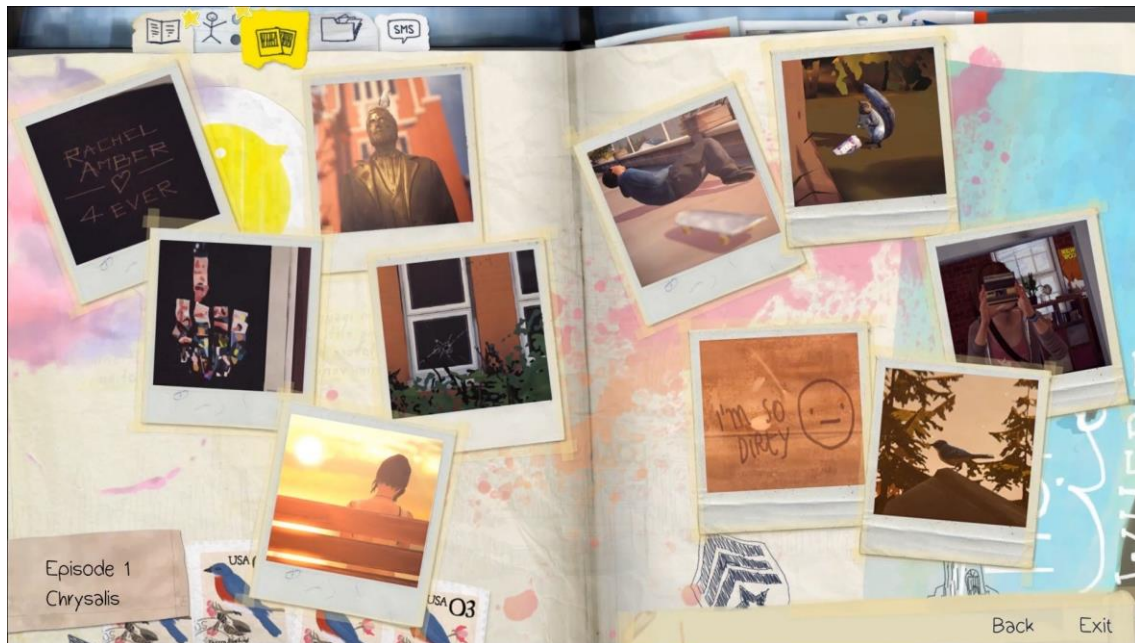


Figure 2.8 The photographs Max was able to take during the first episode stored in her journal (*Life Is Strange*).

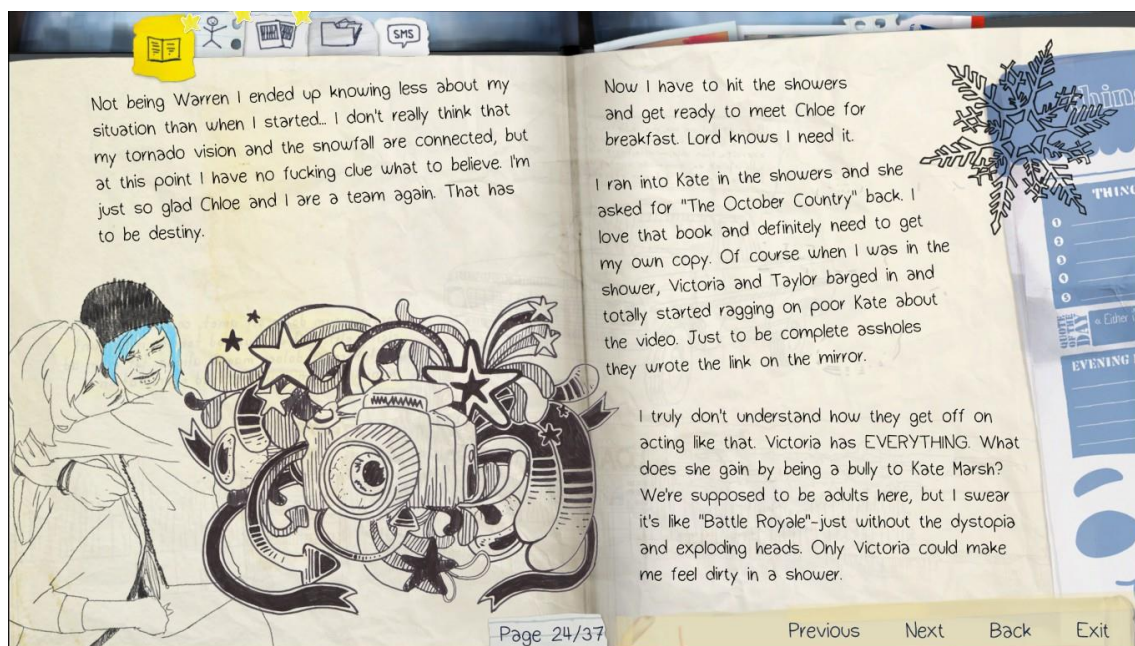


Figure 2.9 A page from Max's journal (*Life Is Strange*).

The video game is linear in its gameplay, which means that the player is restricted in their ability to move around within the game. It is built around scripted events that always occur, which are only slightly altered in their outcome due to the player's choices. However, in between these moments the player is able to freely explore the areas and can choose to interact with the environment as much as they want. Thus, they can choose to speak with all

the characters or choose to ignore them completely – the video game can be played as slowly or as quickly as the player desires. Moreover, Max’s powers break the linearity by going back in time to revisit conversations or actions. Thus, the various choices the player is able to make and Max’s powers both provide the illusion that *Life Is Strange* appears less linear than it seems.

Life Is Strange differs from *Until Dawn* in the sense that it does not rely as much on clues. The player has to make most of their decisions based on what they deduce from conversations with other characters together with their own ethical codes. A prominent exception is Kate’s suicide attempt. The player is able to explore Kate’s dorm room at the beginning of the second episode. In her room, the player can gather information on Kate’s life, which can later be used in order to talk Kate off the ledge. Another difference is that changes in Max’s relationships with the other characters are more subtle, but also more impactful than the changes in *Until Dawn*. In *Until Dawn*, these changes are more overt due to the game menu in which they are shown (see figure 1.14 in the previous chapter), but ultimately have little effect on future interactions with the characters. In *Life Is Strange*, dialogue choices do affect future interactions with other characters, which I will discuss more in section 3.3.

Life Is Strange does not feature choices explicitly linked to the player, such as those during the sessions with Dr. Hill in *Until Dawn*. Thus, immersion is not located in such choices either. Rather, the manner in which the video game is played determines how immersed a player will be in *Life Is Strange*. The world of *Life Is Strange* is filled with numerous points of interest. These points of interest can either be examined or interacted with through Max. In the first episode alone, there are about 300 different points of interest. All of them offer insight to what kind of person Max Caulfield is, or what she thinks of the others around her. For example, when she looks at a poster promoting the “Everyday Heroes

Contest,” she comments: “Here’s the poster for the contest... Mr Jefferson really expects me to enter. Why? I don’t know if I’m ready for my 15 minutes of infamy” (*Life Is Strange*) (see figure 2.10). Her comment informs the player that she feels somewhat pressured by her teacher to enter a contest she does not feel ready for. Moreover, it is suggested that she perhaps does not believe in her own photography skills as good enough to produce work worth to be exhibited. The use of the word “infamy” should be noted as well, as it suggests Max has a cynical outlook on fame (through photography). From this interaction alone it can be concluded that Max is fairly introverted and self-conscious – which is most likely why photography suits her: she gets to “be a part of the world at a safe distance” (*Life Is Strange*).



Figure 2.10 A still featuring Max who comments on the “Everyday Heroes” contest poster (*Life Is Strange*).

Together, all these interactions form Max’s position in her world and the manner in which she navigates it. In turn, through Max, this is the position the player takes in the world of *Life Is Strange* – and this excludes all the possible conversations that add even more detail to the story and its setting. *Life Is Strange* is as rich and as immersive of an experience as the extent to which the player is curious and interested to find out more. The fact that the player can be invested in Arcadia Bay, in the people who live there and be a part of their lives is what makes the final decision between saving Arcadia Bay or saving Chloe Price difficult. When

Life Is Strange is rushed through, the main storyline is not affected per se, but a lot of Arcadia Bay and its people would be left undiscovered. In turn, the environment will feel emptier than it has to. The more the player takes their time to explore and converse with Arcadia Bay's residents, the more immersive their experience of *Life Is Strange* becomes because of their active engagement with the video game world.

3.3 Key Video Game Mechanic: Temporal Rewind and its Relation to the Butterfly Effect and Choices

Max's ability to rewind time is one of the main mechanics in *Life Is Strange*. It is both a feature of gameplay and an integral part of the story. Whenever the player gains new information – i.e. interacting with objects or specific conversations – the player can rewind time and use the new information to change the outcome to Max's advantage. A simple example: when Max is asked a question in class during the first episode, the only choices the player can make at that moment are: "You're asking me?" and "I did know..." (*Life Is Strange*). Once the correct answer is known, which is when Victoria provides the correct answer – "daguerreotypes," – the player can rewind time and give the correct answer themselves. Thus, Max appears as more knowledgeable. Whenever the player has gained new information that they can use to alter their previous conversations, an icon of a speech bubble with ellipsis appears top-right on the screen (see figure 2.11). Furthermore, whenever the player rewinds time, an icon of a spiral appears top-left on the screen (see figure 2.12). Dots in this spiral indicate recent conversations or actions. Should the player wish to alter the outcome of these events, they would have to rewind to these dots. When it comes to choices, the player can rewind time and pick different choices indefinitely until they leave the area and enter another, including both minor and major choices. As soon as they leave an area, the

video game auto-saves and the choices made up until then are registered and subsequent events are affected by these choices.

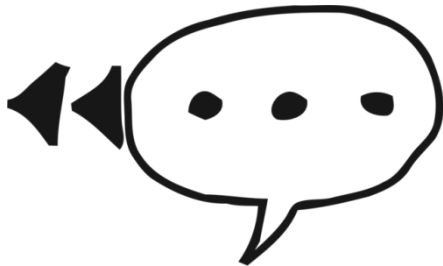


Figure 2.11 The speech bubble icon that appears on the top-left of the screen whenever new usable information is gained (*Life Is Strange*).



Figure 2.12 The spiral icon that appears on the top-left of the screen whenever time is rewound (*Life Is Strange*).

Max's temporal rewind powers are connected to the butterfly effect in two ways: the butterfly icon, which appears on the screen whenever an influential choice has been made and the upcoming tornado that will cause the destruction of Arcadia Bay. The player can use Max's powers to rewind time and go over their decisions indefinitely until they believe they have chosen the best course of action. Often, whenever a decision is made, Max will comment on the outcome of the decision in a voice-over. One of the possible comments will be along the lines of uncertainty whether she has made the best decision. The player, agreeing with Max's comment, can then decide to go back in time and choose differently. Sometimes, outcomes are evidently negative and Max will comment: "Damn, I better rewind" (*Life Is Strange*), or something similar, which suggests that the player should probably go back in time. The immersive capabilities of video games, as discussed in the previous chapter, tend to persuade the player to choose according to the provided context. Therefore, the instances in which Max thinks it is better to use her rewind powers and go about her actions differently are examples when the immersion of *Life Is Strange* becomes apparent. Players are included in Max's thought process, which makes Max come across as more human to players, but also persuades them to act as Max would, and not necessarily how they would act themselves. Other instances, however, suggest otherwise. After the player has made their decision during

a major choice event, comments made by Max are purposefully vague. Of the possible choices, neither seems good nor bad. These instances provide the player more freedom to choose according to what they believe is the most correct answer or action, because players are not swayed by Max's thoughts; and thus these instances strengthen the illusion that the player is in control.

Nevertheless, Max's powers do affect the impact of the decision-making in the video game. Choices seem to matter less than in *Until Dawn*, because the player can just rewind time. Even though there are still consequences to the choices, some of which are only seen in future episodes, these consequences seem less severe in nature because it is not final until the player deems it fit to further the story. However arbitrary, minor choices in *Life Is Strange* can have a big impact on certain events, unlike in *Until Dawn*. Whereas decisions regarding the fate of the protagonists often occur shortly prior to the events in which they can die, due to the video game's survival-horror genre, these types of decisions can occur much earlier in *Life Is Strange*. For instance, in order to get into the dormitories in episode one, Max has to get Victoria and her friends away from the entrance in order to pass. To do so, she has to create a sequence of events that culminates in a bucket of paint falling down on Victoria and spilling on her clothes. The player then gets the choice whether they will make fun of her or comfort her. If the player makes fun of her in episode one, she will not believe Max's warning about the dark room in episode four, which keeps her safe and away from Mark Jefferson in episode five, and results in Victoria staying alive. However, if the player comforts her in episode one, Victoria will be more likely to believe her warnings in episode four, which causes her to seek help from Mark Jefferson in episode five, ultimately resulting in her death by Jefferson's hands. *Life Is Strange* does not only allow players control over the fate of its characters as *Until Dawn* does, but over entire sequences of events prior to their survival or demise. Consequently, the player has much more control over the flow of the narrative.

Examples of minor choices that have a big impact on the player's experience of the video game are the moments in which players can help Alyssa, a minor character in the video game, throughout the episodes. Events in which Alyssa is affected happen at various moments, but may not be noticed by the player because they are busy with the task at hand and the camera is, therefore, not necessarily directed at Alyssa. In episode one, a football hits her on the head. Using her temporal powers, Max can warn her before this happens. If the player is not aware that they can help Alyssa, they will not know that they can save her life during the final episode in which the storm has already caused some destruction to Arcadia Bay's boulevard. Moreover, these moments with Alyssa add an immersive layer to Max's journey in *Life Is Strange*. Max will feel good about the fact that she can use her powers to help people, which in turn makes the player feel good and feel like they are contributing to the colouring of the story. It positively affects their experience of *Life Is Strange*.

The difference in the impact of minor choices on the narrative in *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange* can be attributed to the difference in genre of the two video games. As *Life Is Strange* is a mystery video game and not survival-horror like *Until Dawn*, the results of important decisions should not be instantaneously apparent. Furthermore, *Life Is Strange*'s approach to the choices and their consequences on the narrative is more in line with the butterfly effect theory. The importance of minor choices in terms of their consequences follows the analogy of the butterfly flapping its wings, which causes a minor change in the present, but a devastating hurricane in the future. This analogy perfectly describes what happens in *Life Is Strange*: Max is the butterfly who created the hurricane or tornado in this case. One of the video game's endings illustrates that the act of going back in time to save Chloe in the bathroom is the event that has caused the tornado to form. Chloe Price was meant to die in that bathroom and because Max intervened, the current timeline creates the big storm which will destroy Arcadia Bay and its inhabitants, which would include Chloe. When Max

goes back in time for the final time and lets the events in the bathroom play out, Chloe will die by the hands of Nathan Prescott. There will be no signs of the incoming storm and *Life Is Strange* will end with Chloe's burial during which a blue butterfly will flutter down onto Chloe's coffin. The story has come full circle then, Max uses her powers to return to the event in which her powers were triggered and has to decide against using them. When the player has chosen to sacrifice Arcadia Bay rather than Chloe, the storm will destroy the town and the video game ends with the two leaving town in Chloe's truck. It is unknown whether Max will have to continue to use her powers to keep Chloe safe from death in the future.

3.3.1 All for Nothing?

Arguably, *Life Is Strange* lives up to the expectation that the player is really able to alter the narrative through their choices, more than *Until Dawn*. There are many examples of choices that affect the story events in *Life Is Strange*, but some of the most notable ones are the ones regarding Kate's suicide attempt. For instance, almost all the interactions Max can have with Kate Marsh will have an effect on how Kate's suicide attempt will play out. If Max intervenes in Kate's confrontation with David Madsen in the first episode, it will be easier to keep Kate from killing herself at the end of the second episode, as two options will be given to the player, which will not upset Kate and cause her to move closer the edge of the roof. If Max takes a photo of their confrontation, only one such option is given instead.¹⁷

Moreover, certain sections of the video game change depending on whether Max has succeeded in saving Kate or Kate has committed suicide. If Max is successful, the ending scene of the second episode will include a scene in which Kate is shown lying on a hospital bed surrounded by balloons given to her by her fellow students. In the third episode, Max's social media pages are filled with praise for her heroic deed and she will be thanked by Kate

¹⁷ The conversation between Max and Kate will differ depending on all the choices made prior to the suicide attempt, as both will comment on Max's decisions.

and her father for helping her. In the fourth episode, Max will visit Kate in the hospital and Kate can be asked for help in order to find Nathan's room so that Max can search it for clues. Finally, in the fifth episode, Max will be able to ask Mark Jefferson about his involvement in Kate's dosing and abduction during the Vortex Club party where she was filmed. However, if Kate was successful in her suicide attempt, these events do not occur. In their stead, the ending scene of the second episode will feature a shot of a memorial for Kate. The third episode will feature two memorial spots for Kate, one in front of her dorm room door and another at the entrance to the dormitories. In the fourth episode, Max will receive a text message from Kate's father who informs her of Kate's funeral. Moreover, she cannot receive help from Kate in finding Nathan's dorm room number. Finally, rather than asking about Mark's involvement, Max can actually blame him for Kate's death in the fifth episode. Additionally, whether Kate is still alive or not by the end of *Life Is Strange* may factor in the final decision between saving Chloe or Arcadia Bay. If the player saves Chloe, it is likely that Kate, together with the other characters, will die because of the storm and tornado.¹⁸ My analysis suggests that the reason why *Life Is Strange* allows the player more control over the flow of the narrative than *Until Dawn* is that it emphasises its story rather than its interactive gameplay. Max and Chloe cannot die throughout the video game. It is only at the video game's finale when Chloe's life can be forfeited to ensure that the tornado does not appear and destroy Arcadia Bay. Therefore, players are not preoccupied by their attempts to keep characters alive as in *Until Dawn*. Rather, they can focus on the mysteries surrounding the upcoming storm and Rachel Amber's disappearance, which forms the bulk of the video game. Consequently, choices will matter more in regards to the narrative and accordingly allow players more control over the narrative.

¹⁸ There are fan theories, however, that Kate would survive no matter what final decision is made, because hospitals are likely to have bunkers in case of a natural disaster. Moreover, the hospital is not seen on the map of Arcadia Bay, which suggests that the hospital is outside of town and therefore will not be hit by the tornado.

Nevertheless, there are still limitations to the freedom and control the player can exercise. The major events in *Life Is Strange* are scripted. Kate will always attempt to commit suicide. Max will always go back in time through a photograph, save William and create the alternative timeline in which William is alive, but Chloe is paralysed. Max and Chloe will always find Rachel Amber's body at the junkyard. At the junkyard at the end of fourth episode, Max will always be sedated and Chloe will be shot dead, thus the fifth episode will always open with Max held captive at the bunker by Mark Jefferson. Ultimately, Max will always have to choose between Arcadia Bay and Chloe Price in the end (see figure 2.13). Any choice made before does not affect this final choice. Whereas the prior events slightly alter depending on decisions made before, the moments before *Life Is Strange*'s climax will always play out the same. This type of a video game may be interactive to the point that players are able to change the outcome, but at the end of the day, the writers and developers of these games still want to tell a story of their own design.

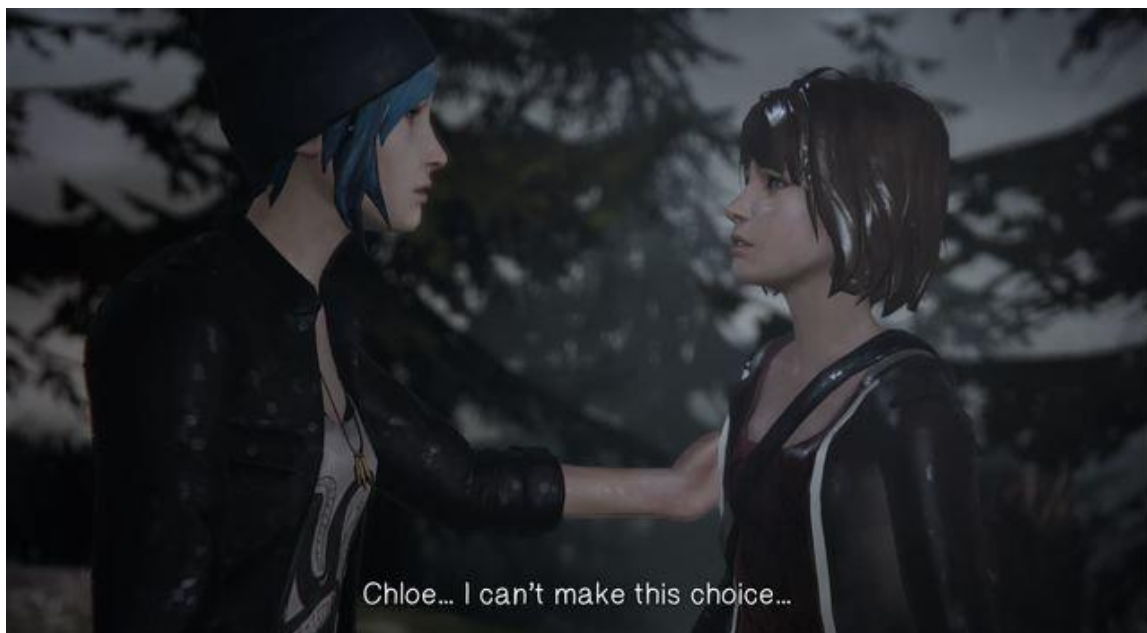


Figure 2.13 A still taken from one of the final moments between Max and Chloe prior to the ending of the video game (*Life Is Strange*).

3.4 Conclusion

Life Is Strange is more successful in its approach to combine player interactivity and storytelling than *Until Dawn*, because even minor choices affect the story. In terms of immersion, each has its own approach. *Until Dawn* feeds on the player's fears and sense of urgency to suck them into its world and story using chase sequences and timers. *Life Is Strange* is more slow-paced, which allows players to leisurely explore each area and interact with points of interest. Max's thoughts give the player more insight to Arcadia Bay and all its inhabitants, which in turn makes the world of *Life Is Strange* more alive than the one in *Until Dawn*. *Until Dawn* is immersive because of its gameplay elements, *Life Is Strange* is immersive because of its world-building and story. That is not to say that *Life Is Strange*'s approach to choice-driven gameplay is without fault. The temporal rewind ability affects the importance of decision-making, because players can continuously re-choose. Finally, while *Life Is Strange* has more replay value because more choices affect its narrative, both video games will reach the same finale despite of the choices; *Life Is Strange* just offers two endings instead of *Until Dawn*'s one.

CHAPTER FOUR: *UNDERTALE*

“No..? Hmmm... How curious. You must have misunderstood. SINCE WHEN WERE YOU THE ONE IN CONTROL?” – Chara (*Undertale*)

Undertale (2015) is a role-playing video game. Officially, it does not belong to the choice-driven genre, but choices that alter the direction of the narrative in the video game are still at the heart of it. *Undertale* was developed by independent developer Toby Fox, who also composed the video game’s soundtrack and published the video game.¹⁹ It was released digitally on September 15, 2015 for Microsoft Windows and OS X, and on July 17, 2016 for Linux. On August 5, 2017, *Undertale* was digitally released on the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation Vita. A release for the Nintendo Switch was announced in March 2018, but no release date has been given. *Undertale* was met with critical acclaim and considered a favourite as it amassed a large online following. So far, *Undertale* is the only game Toby Fox has developed and there is no news of any future releases.

Undertale is a two-dimensional video game that uses a top-down perspective (see figure 3.1).²⁰ The player controls Frisk,²¹ a child of undetermined gender who has fallen down into the Underground. The Underground is a subterranean cave system consisting of multiple areas where the monsters, who once lived in harmony with the humans, have been banished after the war. The Underground has been sealed from the surface by a barrier. The player will have to find a way for Frisk to reach the surface again.

¹⁹ Temmie Chang, a freelance animator and illustrator, provided additional art for *Undertale*.

²⁰ Top-down perspective is a perspective in which the camera is placed above the character which the player controls and their surroundings. This type of perspective was quite common, most notably with the earlier *Pokémon* games on Nintendo’s handheld consoles.

²¹ The child’s name is unknown until the player has nearly finished a “True Pacifist” playthrough. When the player plays the game for the first time, they are prompted to name the “fallen human,” but the fallen human does not refer to the controllable character. Instead, it refers to the first human child who has fallen down into the Underground. I will explain these features – the “True Pacifist” playthrough, the naming, and the fallen human children – in more detail when I discuss the narrative overview.



Figure 3.1 The top-down perspective of *Undertale*. Pictured is the protagonist (Frisk) standing in front of a flower field (*Undertale*).

Undertale differs from *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange* in its approach to choices.

Undertale is, in a sense, less dialogue-heavy. Frisk seems to be mute²² and the player is not able to choose how they would like to respond. Rather, other characters will react according to Frisk's facial expressions. However, their expression never changes for the player and is permanently blank. *Undertale*'s focus regarding choice is on play style. There are three different "routes" the player can take to play the game: "Neutral," "True Pacifist," and "Genocide." What route the player will take depends on how many of the monsters that inhabit the Underground the player kills. However, the True Pacifist route cannot initially be taken until the player has finished a Neutral route. These routes determine what kind of dialogue²³ or events happen throughout the video game. Furthermore, they even determine what type of ending *Undertale* finishes on and what music is played throughout the various areas in the Underground. *Undertale* invites the player to play an RPG – a genre of video games known for players having to kill numerous enemies in order to gain experience, level up, and grow stronger without killing anything. Therefore, the player's choice, or rather decision, in their play style is of high significance to the overall experience of *Undertale*.

²² There is no visible dialogue spoken by Frisk, but the other characters react to Frisk as if they are speaking. Ellipses are used to indicate that others are "listening" to what Frisk is "saying." Therefore, Frisk appears to be mute, even though this is not exactly the case, which makes this aspect of Frisk rather confusing.

²³ I use the term "dialogue" here to indicate all that is said by the characters in *Undertale*. As Frisk at least appears to be mute, as elaborated in the previous footnote, the term "dialogue" may not be applicable in the traditional sense. However, due to the theatrical connotations to the term "monologue" and the fact that in video games the term "monologue" is rarely – if ever – used, I have opted for "dialogue" instead. Actually, dialogue is always used when referring to a characters speech in video games.

Like the other chapters, this chapter will analyse to what extent the narrative of this video game is changed depending on the player's choices. Furthermore, it will explore in what ways immersion is integrated in the decision-making. Finally, this chapter will analyse whether *Undertale*, as a video game that does not belong to the choice-driven genre is comparatively more successful in its attempt to provide the player with the illusion of control over the story and its outcome. As *Undertale* has three routes and therefore three different narratives, or rather two-and-a-half as I will explain, the following section of the narrative overview will be divided into three segments: 1) the Neutral route; 2) the True Pacifist route; and 3) the Genocide route.

4.1 Narrative Overview²⁴

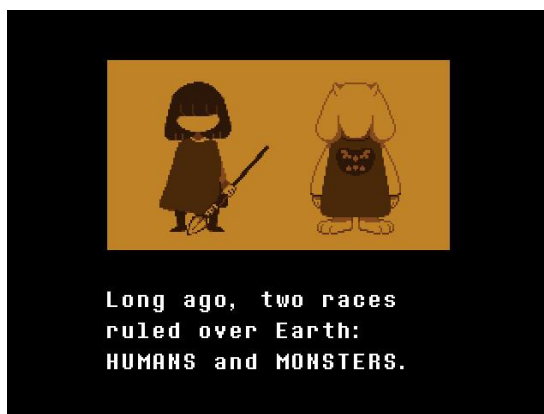


Figure 3.2 Part of the opening sequence to *Undertale* (*Undertale*).

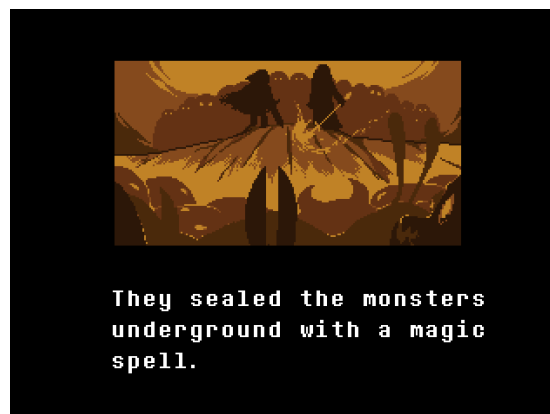


Figure 3.3 Another part of the opening sequence to *Undertale* (*Undertale*).

Prior to the video game's events there were two races, which ruled over the earth: humans and monsters (see figures 3.2 and 3.3). However, one day, a war broke out between the two races which the monsters lost. Subsequently, they were sealed underground by a magic barrier – the Underground. However, there is another opening, a hole on Mt. Ebott, through which eight human children have fallen. The player plays as the eighth human child who is of

²⁴ As the different routes also have different storylines with many varying details, I would like to refer the reader to appendix C where an extended version of the narrative overview of *Undertale* can be found. *Undertale*'s narrative can be quite convoluted, thus reading the extended version is advised if you are unfamiliar with the video game.

undetermined gender, later known to be named Frisk. *Undertale* starts at the beginning of an area called the Ruins. This area functions as a tutorial area to the rest of the Underground. In here, they encounter a sentient golden flower named Flowey, who seemingly is friendly towards the protagonist and introduces the player to the video game's mechanics (see figure 3.4).

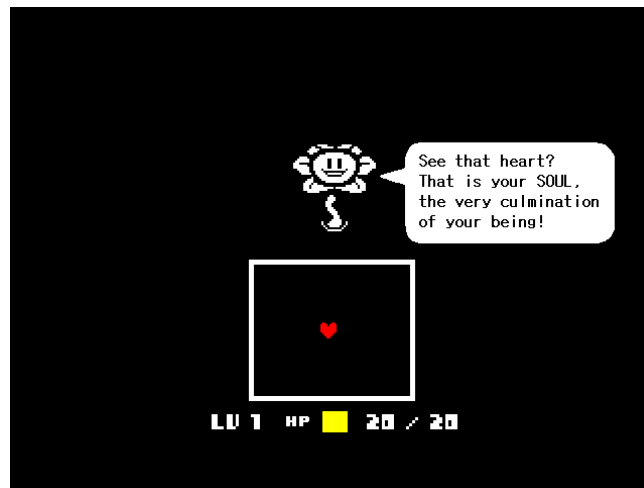


Figure 3.4 Flowey introducing the player to *Undertale*'s mechanics (*Undertale*).

However, Flowey tries to trick and kill Frisk as he reveals his philosophy of “**KILL or BE KILLED**” (*Undertale*). Before Flowey can kill the human, Toriel saves them. She then acts as a guide to the player and explains the rest of the mechanics of *Undertale*. Throughout their journey in the Underground, the player will randomly encounter numerous monsters. Toriel explains that they do not have to fight them and encourages the player to resolve the encounter through conversation and subsequently sparing them. The player's goal is to reach the end of the Underground and find a way back to the surface. How they do that is dependent on their actions. They can kill a few monsters, but ultimately spare most of them and reach behind the barrier after they have defeated the final two “bosses”²⁵: Asgore, who is the king of the Underground, and a mutated version of Flowey called Photoshop Flowey. Winning both these fights will bring the Neutral route to completion. Players can also opt to be merciful to

²⁵ In general, bosses (and minibosses) in video games refer to larger enemies which are notoriously more difficult to defeat than others. These monsters usually mark the end of a level in a video game and their defeat is a requirement for the player's progression.

every monster they encounter. If they have completed a Neutral route before, the video game will end differently. Instead of Asgore and Photoshop Flowey, the final encounter will be with Asriel Dreemurr, the late son of Asgore and Toriel. Afterwards, the monsters will be freed from the Underground and everyone can go back to the Surface and the True Pacifist ending will be achieved. However, players can also decide to play *Undertale* like any other RPG and continuously kill the monsters they encounter. Should they do this repeatedly, it will cause genocide. When every monster has been killed, the first fallen human, Chara, will appear before the protagonist/player and destroy the world, which ends the Genocide route.

4.2 Gameplay

Undertale has different gameplay than the previous video games I have analysed, which is mostly because it is an RPG. *Undertale* features the aforementioned top-down perspective with a view on the controllable character: Frisk. This video game, unlike the other two, does not feature cutscenes. Frisk is controlled by using the PlayStation 4 controller; the left-hand analog stick allows the player to move them around the Underground, while the X-button is used to interact with properties within the Underground or to initiate conversations with its inhabitants, the monsters. The Triangle-button is used to pop up the video game menu. The menu is divided in several sections (see figure 3.5).

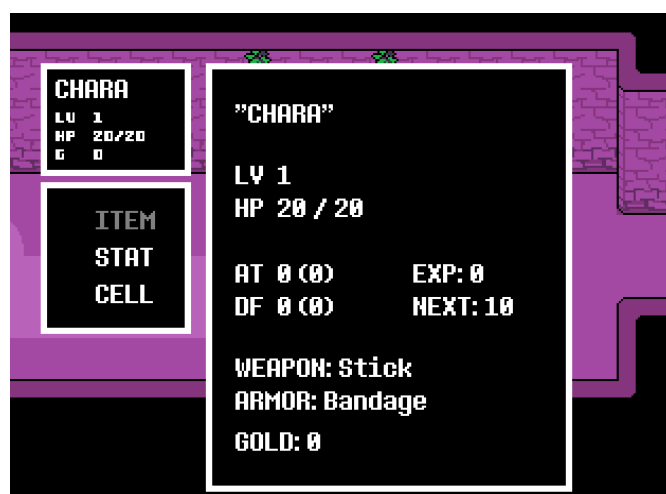


Figure 3.5 The in-game menu screen (*Undertale*).

The upper-left corner features the name the player has chosen at the beginning of the game, together with the player's LV, HP, and the amount of gold (G) they possess. The menu also gives players access to the items they have accumulated, their stats and the cellphone. The inventory houses consumable items the player either has found or bought at vendors. These items can restore the player's HP in and out of battle, though some can also increase the player's attack or speed. Additionally, the inventory houses equippable²⁶ items, as well as miscellaneous items such as keys and letters. The equippable items include weapons and armour which can either be found or bought. All of them belong in sets and are associated with each of the eight fallen human children, including Frisk and Chara.²⁷ Each item has a description, which can be accessed by clicking on an item and then on "INFO." The inventory allows a maximum of eight items, but items can also be dropped or stored in of the dimensional boxes scattered throughout the Underground until Alphys upgrades the phone for remote access to these boxes. The cell phone allows the player to contact friends they have made on their journey: Toriel, Papyrus, and Undyne.²⁸

As an RPG, *Undertale* features battles with monsters called "encounters." Encounters occur randomly as the player traverses the underground, except for the bosses. Usually, players would have to either fight the monsters or flee from the battle. *Undertale*, however, provides two different options for a more pacifist approach: "ACT" and "MERCY" (see figure 3.6). ACT allows the player to finish an encounter peacefully. Each monster has its

²⁶ "Equippable" is another term in video games which is used to describe items which can be assigned to characters as their equipment; therefore they are equippable items. Equipment is usually divided into three types: weapons, armour, and accessories. Equipment is a key feature in RPGs as they provide the characters with extra benefits, such as an increased attack or defence. Generally, the equipment encountered in a video game gets progressively better the further along a player is. Even though in most RPGs, each different piece of equipment actually looks different, there are no cosmetic changes in *Undertale* whenever the player switches equipment. Therefore, the only reasons to change equipment are the better benefits. Whereas the player would want to increase their defence as much as possible in all routes to fare better in encounters, an increased attack is only beneficiary in the Genocide route. Players would want to survive as long as possible in encounters no matter the route, but killing is only repeatedly done in the Genocide route.

²⁷ Photoshop Flowey uses the power of absorbed souls of the human children to attack Frisk. Each time he uses one of the human souls to attack Frisk, the weapon associated with the attack is used during it.

²⁸ Toriel can only be called inside the Ruins. Once the protagonist leaves them, she will no longer respond to their calls.

own specific ACT options that should be used to successfully finish the encounter paired with one, which is universal for all monsters: “Check,” which provides additional information on the monster. If the correct options are chosen, the monster’s name will turn from white to yellow, after which the monster can be spared with MERCY. These encounters occur on a turn-based system,²⁹ which means that the player and the opponents each have a separate turn during which they can choose their next move. *Undertale* mixes the turn-based battle system with a system used in “bullet hell” video games.³⁰ During the monster’s turn, the player has to dodge the monster’s attack by moving their soul, represented by a heart-shape, around what is unofficially called the “bullet board” (see figure 3.7) by the players. The bullet board is the area in which the player is able to move around during an encounter.

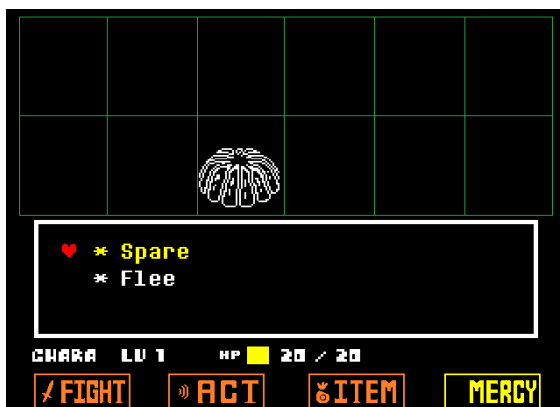


Figure 3.6 The battle menu screen. Pictured is an encounter with a Moldsmal (*Undertale*).

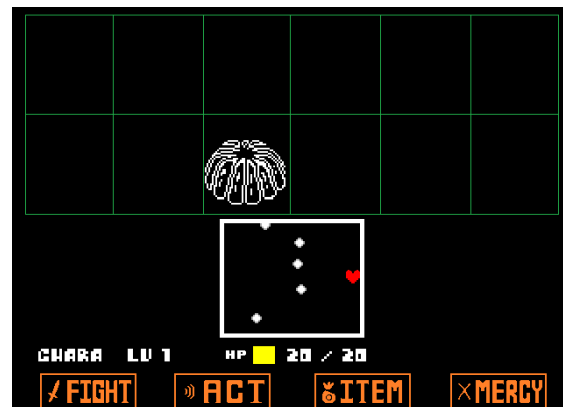


Figure 3.7 The bullet board (*Undertale*).

Another distinct feature of *Undertale* not found in the previous games is the fact that the player is able to name their character. The video game starts off with the player having to name “the fallen human” (see figure 3.8). Whereas in *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange*, the playable characters have all already been assigned names, players are free to give one to the playable character in *Undertale*.

²⁹ This type of battle system was popularised by the earlier games in the *Final Fantasy* series up until its tenth instalment; excluding spin-offs.

³⁰ Bullet hell video games require the player to dodge a barrage of attacks from enemies in the form of bullets. Fox was inspired by the *Touhou Project* series in particular for this aspect of *Undertale*’s battle system (Bogos “*Undertale* Dev: ‘Every Monster Should Feel Like an Individual’”)

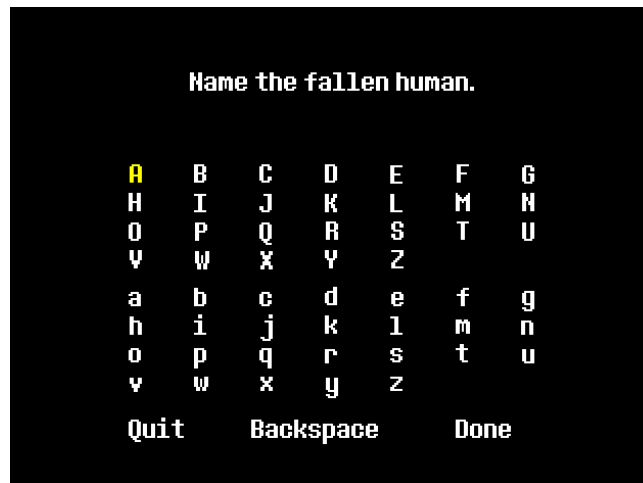


Figure 3.8 Name the fallen human (*Undertale*).

Additionally, the naming feature is an important one in terms of the narrative as well. Players would expect that when they are asked to name a character, that they are naming the protagonist; the character they would play as. This is not the case in *Undertale*. Players actually name the first fallen human, who is canonically named “Chara.” However, they will remain unaware of this fact until they have reached the end of the game. Moreover, the protagonist’s true name – Frisk – is unknown until the player has reached the True Pacifist ending (see footnote 21).

The naming feature also contributes to the active engagement of the player. As the player is able to choose any name they want, they can even type in their own name, which makes them ever more part of the video game world. That way, the player is does not control just a character, the character shares their name and represents them. Additionally, the naming feature ties in with the video game’s narrative. As the canonical name of the first fallen human is Chara, choosing that name prompts the message “The true name” (see figure 3.9). Moreover, there are more names that prompt different messages addressed to the player, namely those of other in-game characters like Toriel or Sans, consequently these names are not allowed to be used.³¹ The naming feature thus also operates on a metafictional level, as it

³¹ There are some exceptions to this rule, but they are not significant to this thesis’ arguments and therefore I will not list them.

is self-referential and breaks the fourth wall, which, to my knowledge, is a unique feature of *Undertale* not seen in other RPGs. Finally, choice is integrated in both mechanics: players choose how to manage the encounters and how to name the character – both of which offer a sense of freedom to players.



Figure 3.9 The message shown when players choose the name “Chara” (*Undertale*).

Arguably, *Undertale* offers a more immersive gameplay than *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange* despite its less realistic graphics. The battle system offers players encounters with a variety of monsters, each of which has a different personality. Players have to choose their “ACTs” accordingly in order to finish these encounters in a pacifist manner while they dodge the monster’s attacks when it is their turn. Therefore, each encounter feels different and it provides the monsters with a human quality, which makes killing them an actual hardship. *Undertale*’s battle system together with the naming feature produce active engagement for the player; subsequently it supplies more opportunities for them to become immersed. Yet, the encounters can also cause the immersion to lessen, as they break the flow of the video game. Whenever an encounter occurs, the area changes into the bullet board together with the battle menu screen (see figures 3.6 and 3.7). Taken out of the world and into the encounter, the player is made aware that they are playing a video game despite how immersed they felt before – their journey disrupted. Considering that these encounters are frequent, the disruption of immersion is as well.

4.3 Key Video Game Mechanic: True Pacifist or Genocide

Undertale does not allow players much choice when it comes to dialogue. They cannot actively choose the response they want to give to other characters during conversations. The only exceptions are during the ending when they can make the decision to either kill or spare Asgore and Flowey in a Neutral playthrough, the decision between staying with Toriel or going on your own way at the end of a True Pacifist playthrough, or the decision between erasing or letting the world remain as it is in a Genocide playthrough. Furthermore, the video game is mostly linear; this linearity is only broken up when the player has to travel back to Papyrus, Undyne, and Alphys in order to meet the requirements for the True Pacifist ending. Therefore, it is understandable to think that *Undertale*, as a whole, does not offer the player much freedom. However, *Undertale*'s choices do not reside in its dialogue, but in its mechanics and gameplay, and the plot and the outcome of its narrative is heavily dependent on the player's decisions regarding play style. The dialogue will change accordingly together with the video game's soundtrack – the Genocide route features many of the same tracks, but slowed down and with a lower pitch which provide a different atmosphere to the video game.

All of the routes have different endings, some of which even have variances based on choices made within *Undertale*. True Pacifist has two endings, one that is spent with Toriel, and another, which is spent with the protagonist by themselves as the player watches monsters live on the surface, and ends with a photograph featuring Frisk and his friends (see figures 3.10 and 3.11). Neutral will always end with a phone call from Sans, but its contents are variable depending on who the player has killed, or if they have used items in battle amongst other variables. Genocide technically only has one ending, unless the player decides not to trade the protagonist's soul for the restoration of the Underground and refrains from playing the game ever again. Otherwise, it will always end with Chara destroying the Underground and later restoring it in exchange for the soul of the protagonist.

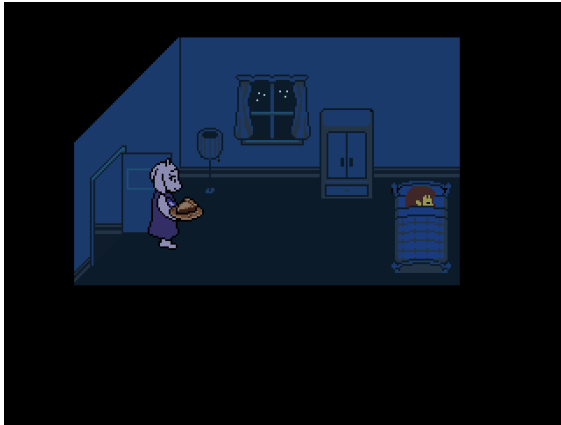


Figure 3.10 True Pacifist ending when the player has decided to stay with Toriel (left) (*Undertale*).



Figure 3.11 True Pacifist ending when the player goes their own way; the ending finishes with a photograph of Frisk and the friends they made in the Underground. Pictured from left to right are: Papyrus, Toriel, Sans, Frisk, Asgore, Dr. Alphys, and Undyne (*Undertale*).

Any True Pacifist playthrough played after a Genocide playthrough will be forever affected by the lack of a soul: Chara takes over the body of Frisk; the ending with Toriel will end with the protagonist opening their eyes revealing Chara's red ones, whereas in the other ending the faces of Frisk's friends are crossed out with red Xs and Frisk has been replaced by Chara on the photograph (see figures 3.12 and 3.13).



Figure 3.12 The "soulless" True Pacifist ending when the player has decided to stay with Toriel. Chara has taken over Frisk's body (*Undertale*).



Figure 3.13 The "soulless" True Pacifist ending when the player goes their own way; the ending finishes with a photograph of Chara who has taken over Frisk's body. Frisk's friends have their faces crossed out in red (*Undertale*).

If a Genocide playthrough is done right after another Genocide playthrough, Chara will have different dialogue during the ending. Not only does the dialogue differ during the

ending, but also throughout the video game, interactions with objects in the Underground will prompt different messages in a Genocide playthrough than in a Neutral or True Pacifist one. A Genocide playthrough even offers a new video game mechanic – the kill counter – and different versions of certain tracks in the video game’s soundtrack. Consequently, these features make *Undertale* the most diverse video game of the three analysed in this thesis in terms of the relationship between choice and narrative. Likewise, the features enhance the immersion and the illusion of the player in control of the narrative, because their play style directly affects the narrative.

4.3.1 Altering the Narrative

Undertale provides a different narrative based on the player’s willingness to kill. This section will discuss the differences in dialogue and “flavour text”³² within the video game’s three routes and how they shape its narrative. Some of them have been discussed in the narrative overview already, most notably Toriel’s dialogue during her battle with the protagonist. During a Neutral or a True Pacifist run, Toriel’s dialogue is centred on her desire to provide for Frisk and protect them from the dangers of the rest of the Underground, especially Asgore. Before the battle starts, she says the following:

Every human that falls down here meets the same fate. I have seen it again and again. They come. They leave. They die. You naive child... If you leave the RUINS... They... ASGORE... Will kill you. I am only protecting you, do you understand? (*Undertale*)

³² “Flavour text” is a term used for additional fragments of text in relation to items or properties within video game areas which do not have any impact on the gameplay. These texts simply provide additional information which can add to the immersive capabilities of a video game or provide more background information to the video game’s narrative.

During her battle, she continues to plead with Frisk to stay with her in the Ruins: “I promise I will take good care of you here. I know we do not have much, but... We can have a good life here” (*Undertale*). These pieces of dialogue are only given if the player continues to spare Toriel. The flavour text when the player checks Toriel reads: “Knows best for you.” The dialogue and flavour text frames the narrative in a positive light. In Toriel’s eyes, Frisk is a young, innocent, and naive child who needs protection and she is willing to provide that for them. As mentioned in the narrative overview, she has prepared a bedroom and baked a pie for them. She genuinely wants them to have a good life with her in the Ruins with her fulfilling a mother-like role. Her view of herself as Frisk’s mother figure becomes more overt at the end of the battle, even if the player kills her during a Neutral route, as she concedes: “If you go beyond this door, [k]eep walking as far as you can. Eventually, you will reach an exit,” “Do not let ASGORE take your soul. His plan cannot be allowed to succeed,” “Be good, won’t you? My child.” This narrative alters completely in a Genocide run, because upon killing Toriel, she will exclaim: “Y... you... really hate me that much? Now I see who I was protecting by keeping you there. Not you... But them! Ha... ha...” Frisk is no longer innocent or naive and certainly does not need Toriel’s protection. Moreover, she even believes that Frisk is actually a danger to the rest of the Underground, rather than the other way around like she thought at first.³³

³³ There is a third alternative dialogue at the end of Toriel’s battle, which is triggered by attacking her when she has stopped talking to you (and will lock the player out of a True Pacifist run): “You... .. at my most vulnerable moment... To think I was worried you wouldn’t fit out in there... Eheheheh!!! You really are no different than them! Ha... Ha...” (*Undertale*). Her view of Frisk is now likened to those of the other monsters in the Underground, rather than worse than the others as her dialogue indicates in a Genocide run.



Figure 3.14 The flavour text in a Genocide playthrough when the player checks the drawers in Toriel's kitchen (*Undertale*).

The flavour text in Toriel's home also changes depending on what route the player is taking. For example, the player can interact with the kitchen drawers. In a Genocide run, this action prompts the following flavour text in red³⁴: "Where are the knives" (*Undertale*) (see figure 3.14), which alludes to the protagonist's murderous intent. When the player checks the oven after they have killed Toriel, it says: "No one will use this anymore..." whereas it otherwise would not say anything. Furthermore, in the hallway is a mirror, which will say, "It's you!" during a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough, whereas it will say, "It's me, <Name given at the start of the video game>" during a Genocide playthrough (see figures 3.15 and 3.16).



Figure 3.15 The flavour text when the player checks the mirror in Toriel's home during a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough (*Undertale*).

³⁴ There are several instances in which sentences are displayed in red. These only occur during a Genocide playthrough and are usually from a first-person perspective. Most of them are found in the areas Home (Toriel's house) and New Home (Asgore's house). The text provided by save points on how many monsters are still left in an area for the player to kill is also highlighted in red. These flavour texts can provide information which Frisk should not have, which suggests that they are from the perspective of the first fallen human, Chara.



Figure 3.16 The Flavour text when the player checks the mirror in Toriel's home during a Genocide playthrough (*Undertale*).

This flavour text, together with “[w]here are the knives” already implies what Flowey later insinuates after Toriel's battle: that the protagonist is not the human Frisk, but Chara reborn. This theory is further realised in New Home. If the player checks the padlocks which block the way to Asgore for the first time if no keys have been used, it will read: “He leaves them in the kitchen and the hallway” in red (see figure 3.17) – information which Frisk should not have because he has never been in Asgore's house before, but Chara has.



Figure 3.17 The flavour text given when the player checks the padlocks for the first time and no keys have been found yet (*Undertale*).



Figure 3.18 The flavour text when the player checks the wardrobe in Chara's and Asriel's bedroom in Asgore's house during a Genocide playthrough (*Undertale*).

Furthermore, when the player checks objects around the bedroom, they will provide further evidence to the protagonist being Chara. For example, checking the closet will yield “[o]ur clothes” and the left bed “[m]y bed” (see figure 3.18). There are even more of such flavour texts, such as a kitchen note which states “I’ve read this already” and a calendar which states “[t]he date I came here.” An especially interesting one can be found in the room with all of the coffins of the fallen humans. The coffin with the red heart on it, the same colour as Frisk’s soul/heart during encounters, says: “It’s as comfortable as it looks” (see figure 3.19). The flavour text suggests that this is the coffin where the first fallen human, Chara, lay, which is now empty. Moreover, it also implies that Frisk shares the colour of his soul/heart with Chara, which would explain their connection.



Figure 3.19 The flavour text when the player checks the coffin during a Genocide playthrough (*Undertale*).

While the flavour texts can be missed entirely and, therefore, are not necessarily needed for *Undertale*'s storylines to come to fruition, they do aid in setting the tone of the narrative and distance the storylines from each other. The dialogue and flavour texts in the Neutral and True Pacifist playthroughs all point out that Frisk is a child who explores the Underground for the first time and is not set on purposefully killing anyone, even if they do end up killing some monsters in a Neutral run. They sincerely wish to help the monsters and return to the surface. In contrast, the dialogue and flavour texts in a Genocide playthrough point out that the protagonist, whose true name is not known because the revelation only occurs during the True Pacifist ending, is by all means intent on wiping out the entire

Underground and is shaped by his hatred and willingness to kill akin to Chara. Both represent a different interpretation to a prophecy, which is stated by a sign in Waterfall: “The Angel... The One Who Has Seen The Surface... They will return. And the underground will go empty” (see figure 3.20 and figure 3.21). Consequently, the significant alterations in narrative caused by the player’s decisions give the impression that each of the three routes is its own story. In fact, *Undertale* feels like two games in one because the Neutral/True Pacifist route and the Genocide route play very differently; strengthened by the changes in music, which I elaborate in the complete version of the narrative overview of this game (see appendix C).

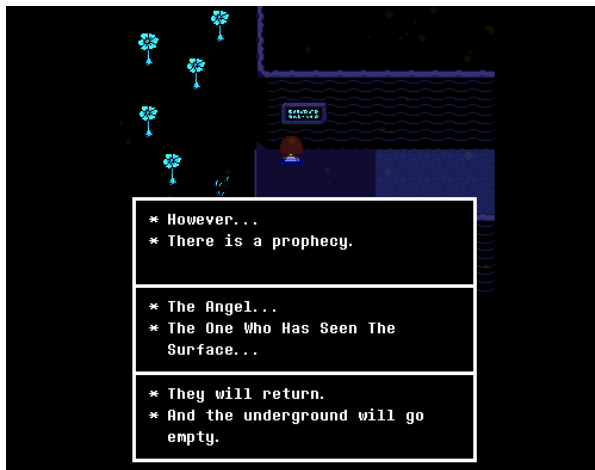


Figure 3.20 The prophecy as told by a sign in Waterfall (the image has been edited to fit more of the dialogue) (*Undertale*).

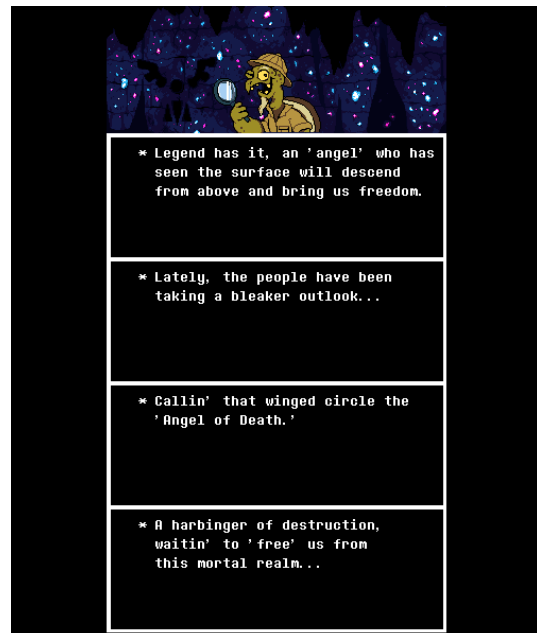


Figure 3.21 The prophecy as told by a vendor in Waterfall (the image has been edited to fit more of the dialogue) (*Undertale*).

4.3.2 *Undertale* Remembers

One of the most significant technical features of *Undertale* is the fact that the video game remembers past actions performed by the player before reloading the save file or even in previous playthroughs. This feature is centred on the protagonist having the ability to “SAVE” and overwrite those save files. The save files are synonymous to different timelines and by saving their game, the player can manipulate these timelines in their favour. Toriel,

again, serves as one of the first examples. If the player has killed Toriel in a previous playthrough, Toriel will say the following before the start of the fight: "...wait. ...why are you looking at me like that? Like you have seen a ghost. Do you know something that I do not? No... That is impossible" (*Undertale*). Her dialogue implies that, while she may not fully be aware that the protagonist has manipulated the save files/timelines, she still hints at it. This theory is made more likely by her dialogue. She says how she felt like she "already knows" human children who have fallen down into the Underground and that she "was seeing an old friend for the first time" when she first saw the protagonist. These pieces of dialogue are only encountered when the player has reset their game.

Sans is another character that is at least slightly aware of the player's actions and the protagonist's ability to manipulate the timelines with their ability to save. His judgement in the "Last Corridor" changes depending on how high the player's LV and EXP are. There is an interesting change in dialogue if the player has killed Papyrus. During his judgement, he says that the protagonist acts "like [they] know what's gonna happen. like [they]'ve experienced it all before" (*Undertale*). He goes on to question that, should the protagonist have a "special power," that it would be their "responsibility to do the right thing[.]" The player can choose to agree with him or not. If they do, he will question why they would then kill his brother (see figure 3.22). If they do not agree with him, he will respond that it is "[their] viewpoint" and he "won't judge [them] for it," ending the judgement with calling the player "[a] dirty brother killer." The first few lines suggest that he is somewhat aware of the fact that the protagonist is capable of manipulating the timelines and therefore knows what is going to happen.



Figure 3.22 Sans' dialogue during his judgement of the protagonist at the Last Corridor when the player has killed his brother Papyrus (the image has been edited to fit all of the dialogue) (*Undertale*).

Afterwards, Sans is presented as a moral compass. His question whether those with a special power to experience events multiple times should take on the responsibility to do the right thing is not only directed to the protagonist inside the video game, but also to the player outside of it, as they have to choose their answer. Their ethical codes are represented by their actions inside *Undertale*. Additionally, Sans' awareness of the timelines is highlighted in his dialogue during his fight in a Genocide run:

our reports showed a massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. timelines jumping left and right, stopping and starting... until suddenly, everything ends. heh heh heh... that's your fault isn't it? you can't understand how this feels. knowing that one day, without any warning... it's all going to be reset. look. i

gave up trying to go back a long time ago. and getting to the surface doesn't really appeals anymore either. cause even if we do... we'll just end up right back here, without any memory of it, right? to be blunt... it makes it kind of hard to give it my all. ...or is that just a poor excuse for being lazy...? hell if i know. all i know is... seeing what comes next... i can't afford not to care anymore. ugh... that being said... you, uh, really like swinging that thing around huh? ... sounds strange, but before all this i was secretly hoping we could be friends. i always thought the anomaly was doing this cause they were unhappy. and when they got what they wanted, they would stop all this. and maybe all they needed was... i dunno. some good food, some bad laughs, some nice friends. but that's ridiculous right? yeah, you're the type of person who won't EVER be happy. you'll keep consuming timelines over and over, until... well. hey. take it from me kid. someday... you gotta learns when to QUIT. and that day's TODAY. (*Undertale*)³⁵

His dialogue does not only show that he is aware of the timelines, he has actually studied them, suggested by the use of the term “reports.” He knows that the protagonist is “the anomaly” in the timespace continuum. While at first, he thought he could be sympathetic towards the anomaly, he now has realised that they must be stopped, which is why he fights them, because “... [they]’ll just keep going. not out of any desire for good or evil.. but just because [they] think [they] can” (*Undertale*). Significantly, his idea of stopping the protagonist from continuing with messing up the timelines is to simply do nothing during one of his turns in battle. If he does not do anything, the player cannot either. Sans is aware that killing the protagonist will only cause them to reload the save file and take another attempt battling him. Letting the protagonist have more turns will only result in them having more of a

³⁵ The block quote does not feature any capitalisation as, in-game, Sans talks in all lowercase.

chance of killing him. Sans uses the gameplay against the player. Even though the player has amassed large amounts of LV and EXP and gained the best weapon and armour set, they still cannot harm Sans as he will continue to jump out of the way until his dialogue is exhausted which eventually leads to Sans “doing nothing” during one of his turns. All of the player’s “hard work” is for naught and the fight is only concluded after Sans has fallen asleep during his turn and the player moves the bullet board towards the “FIGHT” button and attacks during Sans’ turn.

Sans’ type of judgement also plays a role much earlier in the game, namely with Flowey after the fight with Toriel. As mentioned in the narrative overview, Flowey’s dialogue during his initial judgement at the end of the Ruins is changed depending on the player’s actions. For instance, during a Genocide playthrough, he will identify the protagonist as Chara, whereas he would not during a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough. If the player has killed other monsters, but spared Toriel, he will remark on how the protagonist was able to spare “the life of a single person,” but still killed others. He then questions them if the monsters they have killed could have had families or friends, elaborating: “Each one could have been someone else’s Toriel. Selfish brat. Somebody is dead because of you.” However, he also knows when the player has killed Toriel in a previous attempt before sparing her:

Clever. Verrrrryy clever. You think you’re really smart, don’t you? So you were able to play by your own rules. You spared the life of a single person. But don’t act so cocky. I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. Ha ha ha ha... You naive idiot. Do you think you are the only one with that power? The power to reshape the world... Purely by your own determination. The ability to play God! The ability to “SAVE.” I thought I was the only one with that power. But... I can’t SAVE

anymore. Apparently YOUR desires for this world override MINE. Well well.

Enjoy that power while you can. I'll be watching. (*Undertale*)

It seems that Flowey is the only character, who is fully aware of the protagonist's abilities, except for Sans during his battle in a Genocide playthrough, because he himself once had the same abilities.

Besides serving as the main antagonist of the video game, Flowey, together with Sans, serves as a moral compass in *Undertale*. The player is not only confronted with the consequences of their choices and decisions in the form of the outcome of events like in *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange*. The player is made aware that they are constantly being watched. Every action they take is recorded, even if the player decides to retrace their steps and choose differently or in the same manner.³⁶ Even rewriting save files, thus manipulating with the timelines, has consequences. *Life Is Strange* deals with timelines as well, but the video game does not acknowledge that the player is constantly rewinding time in order to better their chances for the desired outcomes. *Undertale* does so relentlessly, which in turn breaks the fourth wall – i.e. metafictionality. Because of the constant reminders, the choices in *Undertale* feel like they carry much more weight than the choices in the other two video games. As I said earlier, the player's ethical codes are represented by their decisions. *Undertale* does not merely provide the illusion that the player is in control of the turn of events. They are in control, and they are judged for it.³⁷

³⁶ Flowey's dialogue has more alterations based on how many times the player has killed Toriel before. If they have killed her a second time, Flowey will call them a "disgusting animal" (*Undertale*), saying that "[they] didn't even TRY to spare her." If they continue to kill her, he will state how "[they] really can't get enough" and how they "remind [him] of [himself]." There is another alternative dialogue when the player kills Toriel after they have spared her before: "Wow, you're utterly repulsive. You spared her life... Then you decided that just wasn't interesting enough for you. So you murdered her just to see what would happen. You killed her out of boredom. Truly disgusting..."

³⁷ The first time the player launches *Undertale* after the credits have rolled, Flowey will seemingly have a special message for the player. He explains how there is nothing left to worry about and that everyone is finally free to go back to the Surface. However, the player is seen as the last threat, as they have the power to erase everything and no one would remember any of it. He implores how Frisk and his friends should be left to live their lives

4.4 Conclusion

Undertale proves that the availability of dialogue options is not necessary in providing a narrative in which the player is seemingly in charge of the outcome of the video game's story – a feature that is common in choice-driven video games as evidenced by *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange*. Its focus on the player's decisions outside of dialogue proves to be an arguably more effective mechanic for divergent storytelling, as *Undertale* truly alternates its narrative based on these decisions all the way to the different endings. Its gameplay is more active than of *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange*, due to the fact that *Undertale* is an RPG, but also to the lack of cutscenes. The player is always able to have control over the video game, even if it is only to advance the dialogue. Moments of action are always played out by players, rather than shown during cutscenes. The different personalities of each of the monsters in the Underground, make them seem more alive and makes the encounters between them and the protagonist unique and immersive. Finally, *Undertale* is able to operate on a metafictional level – it remembers each of the player's decisions or actions, even when the video game has been rebooted prior to saving – which adds a significant importance to these actions and decisions.

happily together. He finishes his speech with “See you later... <Name given at the beginning of the video game>” (*Undertale*).

CONCLUSION

Choice-driven video games claim to offer players freedom to play these video games however they would like. There is much room for player interactivity. The choice-based directive of storytelling allows players to shape the video game's narrative based on decisions they have made throughout the video game, which should make each playthrough a unique experience. However, these experiences can barely be called unique. A video game like *Until Dawn* does not meet its marketing promises. The "Butterfly Effect" mechanic in *Until Dawn* is the core where narrative and player interactivity meet; choices made by the player and the reactionary events are recorded in the menu screen and can be looked at. However, most of them do not affect the outcome of the story. These choices can influence the character's relationships with others and the character traits. The fluctuations in traits and relationships are recorded in the menu screen as well, but besides the cosmetic change of the bars corresponding to these features, they have no effect on the outcome of events. Dialogue choices will almost always remain the same, even if two characters supposedly have a poor relationship. The same holds true for events, as no amount of particular character traits is needed in order to successfully see through them. Players, however, *do* decide the fate of the characters in terms of their survival because that *is* linked to their choices. Nevertheless, these choices occur briefly prior to their possible deaths and more often than not no sequence of events is needed to ensure a character's survival. Moreover, two characters cannot die until the video game's final chapter and only at the final big event of *Until Dawn*. In retrospect, the player is barely in control of *Until Dawn*. Therefore, these video games should be looked at from the perspective of a first playthrough, as the choice-driven status falls apart once players know how their gimmicks work. Through the clever use of immersion techniques players are given the impression that they are in control over the narrative and the outcome of the video game. *Until Dawn* ensures

that players are immersed through the session with Dr. Hill, in which questions are seemingly directly asked to the player when *Until Dawn* has yet to reveal that The Psycho/Josh Washington is the one on the other side of Dr. Hill's desk. The first-person perspective keeps the illusion intact; players are asked to reveal what they fear the most, answers which *Until Dawn* then uses to represent their fears throughout their playthrough. In addition, *Until Dawn* has time limits to certain decisions players have to make, which emulates the sense of urgency the characters in-game feel. Their lives are on the line and the threats are encroaching on them, so decisions have to be made quickly. Therefore, players cannot second-guess themselves; subsequently it leaves no room to doubt their role in *Until Dawn*. To them, they play a significant part in starting and finishing the story.

Life Is Strange takes a different approach to decision-making. While there is still a threat, – the big storm in Max's vision that is set to destroy Arcadia Bay – the sense of urgency is less apparent. The storm will come at a certain date and the dates only advance as the player completes each episode. *Life Is Strange*'s focus is on the world-building and story. Players can take their time and explore each area without feeling as if they are running out of time. In fact, they cannot run out of time, because of Max's temporal rewind powers. While her powers can lessen the importance of decision-making in *Life Is Strange* (because players can indefinitely change their mind and choose differently), often whether a choice they have made is beneficial or not is left ambiguous. Through exploration, players get an impression of Arcadia Bay, its history, and its inhabitants. Max's thoughts, voiced out in the video game, also illustrate how she takes up space inside Arcadia Bay and the lives of her fellow classmates and residents. These features bring a realistic quality to *Life Is Strange*'s world and increase the chance that players will be immersed. Unlike *Until Dawn*, *Life Is Strange* assigns profound consequences to even minor choices, which in turn gives the impression that the player has greater control over the outcome of the story and how it reaches its climax. The

fact that there are only two endings, even though *Until Dawn* only has one, does not seem to matter. A story has to reach an end, and developers cannot be expected to develop multiple video game narratives in one game. In so-called choice-driven video games, it is therefore necessary that the illusion is upheld that the player's choices are integral to the video game's narrative. Interactivity becomes almost synonymous to choice-driven, or at least it becomes a spectrum for video games to gauge how much freedom players have and how significant their playing is to the video game's progression. Choice-driven video games simply offer more room for player interactivity than others. These video games allow players to moderately feel as if they are in control, or at least are given the impression that they are. Additionally, these are video games in which immersion is foregrounded to uphold to impression of control. While choice-driven video games, like other types of video games, are scripted by their developers and their overarching story is set up by them, choice-driven video games allow players to choose how this story unfolds.

That is not to say that choice-driven video games are the only genre that offers a high level of interactivity. RPGs are likewise a genre in video games based on the relationship between player interactivity and storytelling. The origin of the RPG shows this relationship clearly. The table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons* requires players to come up with their own character and join each other in creating their own story filled with quests, led by a dungeon master who oversees the journey. While most video games belonging to the RPG genre do not explicitly feature choices that affect the flow of the narrative, *Undertale* allows players freedom to play in multiple ways. Their playstyle directly affects what kind of story *Undertale* presents due to the three different routes: Neutral, True Pacifist, and Genocide. Based on players' decisions, the perception of the player-controlled character changes together with their role in *Undertale*. Whereas in the True Pacifist route the protagonist is heralded as the saviour of the monsters in the Underground and allows players to befriend

these monsters and highlights the relationships between them, the Genocide route flips the script. The protagonist is the threat and the monsters largely flee from them. Their journey through the Underground is filled with death and eventually leads to the destruction of *Undertale*'s universe. The video game's constant reminders of how players have behaved throughout their playthrough, even if they decided to reload their save file after they regretted their decisions, highlight the responsibility of the player. Moreover, it shows that the player truly is in control over the video game. *Undertale* plays with metafictionality, as it continuously breaks the fourth wall to address the player and question their morality. *Undertale* does not only give the impression that the player is in control; they are and are judged for it. Subsequently, *Undertale* appears more choice-driven, and therefore more interactive, than the actual choice-driven video games *Until Dawn* and *Life Is Strange*.

This thesis has only examined the video games themselves to analyse the relationship between player interactivity, narrative, and immersion. There still is room for more research regarding players' responses to playing these types of video games to gauge how they experience their role in these video games. It would, for example, require researchers to set up simulations where players play the video games followed by interviews in which they are questioned regarding their experience. However, these simulations would be time-consuming and the research would therefore span possibly years. A possible solution could be to use the numerous "Let's Play's" found on YouTube. In these Let's Play's, YouTubers film themselves playing video games while they also react and comment to what is happening in-game. While these videos are obviously edited and do not cover the broad spectrum of gaming experience, they can still be used as a first step to measure player reaction and provide more insight to the immersive capabilities of these video games. It would certainly expand the research in the relationship between player interactivity, narrative, and immersion in video games.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Complete Narrative Overview of *Until Dawn*

Until Dawn is set on a fictional mountain called *Blackwood Mountain*³⁸ that is located in between British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. Its prologue is set in 2014, a year prior to the main events of the video game. Josh Washington and his twin sisters Hannah and Beth Washington invite their mutual friends Samantha “Sam” Giddings, Christopher “Chris” Hartley, Michael “Mike” Munroe, Jessica Riley, Matthew “Matt” Taylor, Emily Davis, and Ashley Brown to their lodge for the winter holiday. Part of the group decides to play a prank on Hannah who harbours romantic feelings towards Mike, who is already in a relationship with Emily. He invites Hannah to his room in the lodge while the others hide. Just as Mike has convinced Hannah to undress, Jessica accidentally reveals that she and the others are in the room as well recording the event. Ashamed and humiliated, Hannah runs out of the lodge chased by her twin sister Beth who had just found out about their scheme. Right after she finds Hannah and consoles her, they hear strange noises and run from an unseen pursuer. Cornered at a cliff, they fall down to their apparent deaths unbeknownst to the rest of the group, as the twins are still deemed missing during the main events of the video game.

On the one-year anniversary of Hannah and Beth’s disappearance, Josh invites the group back to the Washington Lodge in order to put the past behind them. Tension rises as either both Matt and Mike or Emily and Jessica (depending on the player’s choices) start fighting. Josh suggests that Mike and Jessica, who are now in a relationship, should head to the guest cabin for some time on their own. As the group separates, their getaway quickly takes a nightmarish turn. At the guest cabin, a strange creature abducts Jessica. Mike pursues them to the entrance of the mines and finds Jessica on the elevator floor. Before he is able to

³⁸ The name “Blackwood” is a reference to the English short story author Algernon Blackwood. In 1910 he published his novella *The Wendigo*, which first appeared in *The Lost Valley and Other Stories*. In *Until Dawn* the primary antagonists are also wendigos, which gives more credit to this reference (*Until Dawn* IMDb Trivia).

check up on her, the elevator falls down and Mike assumes she has died. Mike pursues Jessica's supposed killer to an abandoned sanatorium in the mountains where he discovers information about a mining accident, which happened in 1952. The survivors were studied and treated in the sanatorium.

Meanwhile at the lodge, Josh, Chris, and Ashley have found an Ouija board and decide to contact the dead for fun. They seemingly contact one of the Washington twins who tells them that they should investigate the basement for proof of the twins' death. Josh storms off, convinced that either of the other two is messing with him. As Chris and Ashley start their investigation, spurred by the clues the spirit gave them, they are knocked unconscious by a man called The Psycho, who promptly kidnaps Ashley. As Chris comes to, he realises Ashley is gone and searches for her. He leaves the lodge to continue his search for Ashley and goes towards a wooden shed near the lodge. Chris finds her there together with Josh. Both are tied to a trap with a deadly circular saw. The Psycho's voice is heard over the speakers, explaining that they have become the participants for his experiment. Chris has to choose who will live and who will die. His choice does not matter, because the saw will always move towards Josh until his body is cut in half. Chris and Ashley run out of the shed and find Matt and Emily on their way to the lodge. Chris and Ashley explain what happened and the four of them decide that Chris and Ashley should get everyone back together while Matt and Emily try to get help.

Matt and Emily head to the cable car station and find that the station's interior has been left in a mess with the cable car out of reach. The only way to control the cable car is with a key they do not have. With their only method of getting off the mountain gone they come up with a different plan: to locate the fire tower depicted on a map they saw hanging on one of the station's walls. They believe that the fire tower is bound to have either a radio or a landline that they can use to get in contact with someone. They manage to do so and helicopters will come to get them as soon as the ongoing snowstorm has subsided, which will

not be until dawn at the earliest. During this exchange, something tripped the motion sensor outside of the tower and eventually bangs against the hatch. When the banging stops an unknown figure cuts one of the support cords and the tower starts to collapse. As it collapses, Matt and Emily fall down in different sections of the mines.

Meanwhile, Sam is taking a bath in the lodge while listening to music, fully unaware of all the events that have transpired. She finds out that her clothes have been taken away except for one of her socks. She thinks that the others stole them and she calls out to them as she moves out of the bathroom. Balloons marked with arrows are tied on the many staircases of the lodge. Still believing that the others have set up a prank on her, she moves down towards the basement area. As she enters the cinema room, the Psycho's voice is again heard over the speakers as a recording of herself in the bath and subsequently moving throughout the lodge plays on the screen. Another recording follows this recording, this time it shows how Josh has been cut in two by the saw. The psycho then appears in the room and they chase Sam as she tries to get away. The success of this chase sequence depends on the player's choices. She will later meet up with Mike who managed to get back to the basement area of the lodge through the underground tunnel system of the Blackwood Mountain.

Chris and Ashley first look for Sam. They cannot find her in the upper levels of the lodge, so they head for the basement where the Psycho knocks them out again. They are then tied in chairs across each other with a table separating them. The Psycho introduces that they are taking part in another of his experiments. A circular saw slowly descends upon them. A gun lies on the table and Chris has to choose whether he will shoot Ashley or himself, the one who is left gets to live. The screen cuts to black after Chris shoots the gun.

In the meantime, Sam and Mike have reached the same area as Chris, Ashley and The Psycho. It is then revealed that Josh is The Psycho and that the getaway was orchestrated as his payback for the prank they pulled on Hannah before their disappearance. Their

disappearance caused him to fall into a psychosis, fuelled by depression and schizophrenia, but he was never treated for the latter, which explains why he still suffers from severe hallucinations. Upset because of his harrowing pranks, Mike and Chris haul Josh over to the shed and tie him up there while Mike accuses Josh of killing Jessica. Josh believes he has done nothing to Jessica, but because of his psychosis, they are all unsure. Chris returns to the lodge as Mike guards the tied-up Josh.

During these events, Emily has survived her plunge into the mines and tries to find a way out of them. As she traverses the mines, she sees that a flamethrower is being used in the distance. Deeper in the mines Emily is able to discover more clues regarding the fate of the twins, including Hannah's survival and Beth's death. She is also able to find the severed head of Beth Washington. When she has used one of the mines' elevators she will notice a strange man (who also used the flamethrower earlier) approaching her way. Attempts to hide or run away are futile, because she will be caught regardless of her attempts. The stranger tells her that she has to leave the mines because it is dangerous and supplies her with flares in order to light up her path. On her way out, one of the wendigos pursues her. The player is able to safely flee from the mines through various choices and QTEs – Emily's survival is dependent on these. Often she will be bitten by the wendigo, but still manage to escape safely. However, if she found the flare gun at the fire tower earlier and kept it to herself, the player will be able to use it in order to escape bite-free.

Emily runs for the lodge, alerting the others with her screams. They ask what happened to her and where Matt is. Before the group can begin to understand what Emily is telling them, the strange man from the mines bangs on the front door. He informs the group of the dangers of Blackwood Mountain and tells them of the wendigos.³⁹ The mountain is home

³⁹ The wendigo is a mythical creature and the developers of *Until Dawn* used the folktales from the northern Algonquian tribes in the US as a base for their own depiction. Wendigos are evil spirits that possess humans who are isolated and starving in the cold, turning them into cannibalistic monsters ("What in Hell's Name"). In *Until Dawn*, the most notorious wendigo is the Makkapitew. It is considered to be the strongest of all and the origin of

to the wendigos, which hunt during the night. The wendigos only detect movement and are otherwise blind. Guns only slow them down, but fire can be used to kill them. Killing them is, however, ill-advised because it would only result in releasing the wendigo spirit that is then free to take possession of starving humans. Realising Josh is left on his own, Chris and the stranger head back to the shed. Josh is nowhere to be found, but a wendigo has moved nearby which eventually kills the stranger despite the player's actions. The player then has to ensure Josh' survival through a series of QTEs. When he has safely returned to the lodge, the group decides to move to the basement for safety. In here, Ashley discovers that Emily has been bitten and the group, except for Sam, start questioning Emily and forcing her to leave out of fear of her turning into one of the wendigos. As Emily refuses to do so, Mike has the option to shoot her or let her be. Afterwards, he leaves the basement for the mines in search for Josh, believing he has the cable car key that they then can use to get off the mountain. The others will soon go after him after they have gone through the stranger's journal, which can be found in the basement. Once they have hit a dead-end with only a rock wall to climb up, Sam tells the others to return to the lodge. After climbing up the wall, she reaches the Sanatorium and finds Mike in a fight with two wendigos. After rescuing Mike, they blow up the building in order to get rid of the wendigos. They then head for the mines to search for Josh.

During their exploration, they are able to find Hannah's journal, which reveals the truth about the twins' fate: Hannah survived her fall but has subsequently become possessed by the wendigo spirit after she has dug up her dead twin sister and ate her flesh. Further in the mines they have to open a door which causes the stranger's head (and those of the other characters who have not survived their encounters with the wendigos until now) to roll over the ground. In the room behind the door cages hang from the ceiling containing the bodies of

Blackwood Mountain's curse. Its spirit has possessed Hannah Washington during the main events of *Until Dawn* after she fed off her deceased twin sister Beth.

the deceased.⁴⁰ Afterwards they find Josh having a mental breakdown. In his hallucination, Josh envisions the rotting bodies of his dead sisters who accuse him of their deaths. Sam and Mike console him and snap him back to reality. Sam tells him the truth about what has happened to his sisters and asks for the cable car key. She then splits from the two guys to take a shortcut out of the mines by climbing another rock wall so she can tell the others that they are all alright and able to leave the mountain. Meanwhile, Mike and Josh return the way that Mike and Sam have come. On their path, they encounter a wendigo who turns out to be the possessed Hannah. Depending on Josh' knowledge of his sister's fate he survives the encounter or not – either Hannah crushes his head or she drags him further into the mines. Mike had successfully hidden from the wendigo and goes on his way back to the lodge.

In the meantime, Matt has survived his plunge into the mines as well and explores around. The player finds out that Jessica has survived her fall with the elevator as well (if Mike had reached her in time earlier). Jessica mistakes Matt for someone else and readies to attack him with a shovel before realising who he is. They then continue deeper in order to find an escape. They then hear a wendigo approaching them and they have to run – the player, again, has to go through a series of QTEs in order to ensure their survival. They then break through a wall and see the Washington lodge in the distance.

Both Sam and Mike have found their way back to the lodge. Sam asks Mike where Josh is and he tells her that Hannah got to him. As they approach the basement, they hear the rest yelling and running away from the wendigos. Sam and Mike run after them, only coming to a stop when they see Hannah hanging from the chandelier in the living area. Hannah then starts fighting against the other wendigos. Sam and Mike then come up with a plan to blow up the lodge by causing both a gas leak and an electrical fire. The survival of the group is

⁴⁰ Sam and Mike will always react as if multiple bodies are hanging from the ceiling besides the stranger's, even if the player has been able to keep all the protagonists alive so far. This part of the video game is another in which the developers have been careless in regards to the varying dialogue depending on the outcome of the player's playthrough.

dependent on the player's actions. After the explosion, a helicopter is heard flying over the mountain which locates the survivors, including Jessica and Matt if they have survived even though they are not near the lodge. *Until Dawn* then cuts to the end credits with the rescuers asking the group questions about the events on *Blackwood Mountain*. If Josh' head has not been crushed by Hannah, the rescuers are told to investigate the mines. During their investigation, they find Josh – possessed by the wendigo spirits – feasting on the remains of the stranger.

Appendix B: Complete Narrative Overview of *Life Is Strange*

Life Is Strange is set in the fictional seaside town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon, based on the town Garibaldi, Oregon. Arcadia Bay was founded by Native American tribes. Max Caulfield, who grew up in Arcadia Bay, returns to the town after a few years in which she lived in Seattle. She is now a student at Blackwell Academy with a passion for photography, especially old analog cameras and instant cameras – with an entire wall of her dorm room covered in Polaroid photographs she has taken. Episode one, “Chrysalis,” opens with Max in a nightmare that later turns out to be a vision of the future. In this nightmarish vision, she is in a forest area near a lighthouse, which stands on a cliff overlooking Arcadia Bay. As she reaches this lighthouse, it is destroyed by the bad weather and she sees that a giant tornado is on its way to destroy Arcadia Bay. She wakes up frazzled in her photography class taught by the famous photographer Mark Jefferson. After the bell rings, she heads towards the restroom to regain her composure. Here she witnesses her classmate Nathan Prescott fighting with a blue-haired girl, which escalates when Nathan pulls a gun, ready to kill the girl. In an effort to stop the murder, Max yells out for them to stop, as she simultaneously reaches out to the two. She then finds herself back in Jefferson's classroom reliving the lesson as if nothing has happened. This is when she realises she has somehow gained the ability to rewind time. With her

newfound powers, she returns to the restroom in order to rescue the girl by pushing the button of the fire alarm, which causes the other two to leave the bathroom. While leaving the academy building, Max encounters principal Wells and the player has the choice to report Nathan for gun-possession or not. The choice made here affects the outcome of scenes in future episodes,⁴¹ such as the aforementioned vandalism of Max's dorm room.

Max then heads to her dorm room to retrieve the flash drive of her close friend Warren. On her way to meet Warren, she comes across Kate Marsh, another one of her classmates, who is in a dispute with David Madsen who is the Head of Security at Blackwell Academy. Here the player can choose whether they will intervene or take a photo of the altercation. The outcome of the choice becomes apparent in Episode two, "Out of Time." During her conversation with Warren at the academy's parking lot, Nathan starts harassing Max, accusing her of spying on him during his altercation in the bathroom. Their fight is broken up by an oncoming truck, which is occupied by the blue-haired girl from the bathroom who turns out to be Chloe Price, Max's childhood friend from before her move to Seattle. She escapes with her to her house as they reminisce on their childhood and chat about how Max had cut communication with Chloe after her move. At Chloe's house, they talk about Chloe's friend Rachel Amber, who is at the time deemed missing, and her new stepdad – "stepdouche" as Chloe calls him – who turns out to be David Madsen and with whom she has a tumultuous relationship. They later head over to the lighthouse, the same one from Max's vision, and Max has another vision of the storm. In this vision, she locates a newspaper, which depicts the date of the tornado: the upcoming Friday. She then returns to reality and tells Chloe of her powers and the future destruction of Arcadia Bay, which serves as the premise for the rest of *Life Is Strange*: are they able to save Arcadia Bay from the tornado?

⁴¹ Where necessary, I will briefly touch on the various possible outcomes for completion's sake.

Episode Two, “Out of Time,” opens with Max in her dorm room. While she heads to the bathroom, she speaks with Kate Marsh who is upset over a viral video in which Kate is seen kissing people at a Vortex Club party.⁴² Conversations with Kate Marsh, either in person or via text messages, determine the outcome of this episode’s ending. Fallen into a depression which is reflected by the messy and dark state of her dorm room, Kate discloses Max on what really happened at that party. She believes that Nathan Prescott drugged her prior to the events on the viral video.

Afterwards, Max meet with Chloe at the Two Whales Diner where she has to prove her powers to Chloe by predicting what Chloe has in her pockets and the future events inside the diner. The player will have to travel back in time as Chloe reveals the inside of her pockets and all the events have happened inside the diner to then relay them to Chloe. Afterwards they move to the junkyard where Chloe spends most of her time. At the junkyard, they create a makeshift gun range so that she can practice with the gun she has stolen from David. As soon as Max can try it out, she passes out due to the overuse of her time rewind power. After coming to they have an altercation with Frank Bowers, Chloe’s drug dealer, who wants to settle Chloe’s debt. Upon noticing that Frank is wearing Rachel’s bracelet, she becomes enraged and starts a fight with him. The player can decide whether they will attempt to shoot Frank or not; regardless of the choice, the gun has run out of bullets. Frank leaves, promising that Chloe will hear from him.

Max has to head back to class and on her way she sees Kate and Mark arguing. Mark comes across as unsupportive, causing Kate to run away distraught. Later, the lesson is interrupted when Max learns that Kate is standing on the dormitory’s rooftop, ready to commit suicide. In her attempts to save Kate, her powers fail her and she has to save Kate through natural measures – the choices made during this conversation determine whether Kate

⁴² The Vortex Club is a social group at Blackwell Academy. Cult-like in nature, the club consists of the most popular students of Blackwell and organises most of the academy’s parties, one of which is the “End of the World” party held during the events of Episode Four “Dark Room.”

jumps off the building or not. Despite the outcome of this conversation, Max winds up at the principal's office and is asked who is most at fault regarding Kate's suicide attempt: Nathan, David, or Mark. The episode finishes with Max and Warren discussing what has happened as an unscheduled solar eclipse occurs – an omen for the future.

Episode three, "Chaos Theory," opens with Max who wakes up due to Chloe's text messages. They meet up in the evening at courtyard of Blackwell Academy. Using David's keys, which Chloe has stolen from David, they enter the building in search for clues on Rachel's disappearance and Nathan's situation regarding the drugs at the Vortex Club parties. In the principal's office, they discover e-mails sent by Nathan's father who threatened principal Wells with cutting off his funding for the academy if Nathan does not have a spotless record. Moreover, they also discover creepy drawings made by Nathan with "Rachel in the Dark Room" written on them.

Later when Max has stayed over at Chloe's house, the two girls fight with David. Max can either side with David or Chloe in this fight: siding with David will anger Chloe, but Chloe's mom, Joyce, and David will remain together, while siding with Chloe will result in Joyce and David's break-up. Afterwards, Max proposes that Chloe and she should explore Frank's RV for information on Rachel Amber. They find a coded logbook detailing Frank's drug dealing and evidence regarding a relationship between Frank and Rachel, which upsets Chloe. On their way back to Blackwell Academy, Chloe is in a bad mood and blames her present misfortune on her biological father's, William's, passing and gets angry at Max over the fact that she ditched her right after the death of William Price. In her dorm room, Max thinks about the past while she looks at an old photo of Chloe and her. As she focuses on this photo, she begins to hear voices and promptly travels back in time – another manifestation of her powers. She is now able to change the outcome of William's fate by hiding his car keys, ensuring he never enters the car, which would lead to the car crash and his death. As she

returns to her own time, she discovers that she has entered an alternate timeline. William never entered the vehicle, so he is still alive in this timeline. Instead, Chloe got in a car crash when she was sixteen years old that has left her paralysed and wheelchair-bound.

Episode four, "Dark Room," opens with the alternate timeline in which the previous episode ended. Max learns what has happened to Chloe and that, even though she kept contact through letters, she never visited her after the accident as in the original timeline. Despite her parents' efforts in keeping Chloe in the dark, she is aware of their financial troubles and the fact that her health is rapidly declining. She then asks Max to help her commit suicide by increasing her morphine dosage. Chloe wants to end her and her parents' suffering. It is up to the player whether Max will help Chloe out or not. She is then able to go back in time again by using the same photograph. Unable to stomach Chloe's suffering, she restores the timeline by destroying the photograph and letting William leave in his car, knowing that he will have to die in order for Chloe to stay physically healthy.

Back in the original timeline, Max wakes up in Chloe's bedroom and discovers that everything is back to the way it was. They are in the middle of their investigation of Rachel's disappearance and the culprit behind Kate's drugging. Through combining clues found throughout this episode, they discover that Nathan visited an abandoned barn on the night of the Vortex Club party where Kate was drugged. At the barn, they discover a bunker, which functions as a photography studio and a dark room. Here they find a cabinet filled with folders with names of female Blackwell students written on them, including ones of Kate and Rachel. These folders are filled with photographs taken of the girls in a drugged state. Chloe recognises the junkyard in one of Rachel's photographs and they head over where they find Rachel's remains buried there. Believing that Nathan killed Rachel, they head to the "End of the World" party held by the Vortex Club at Blackwell Academy's swimming pool to confront him. They cannot find him there and after their search, Max receives a text message

from Nathan telling her that there will be no evidence of Rachel Amber once he is done.

Going back to the junkyard, they discover that Rachel's body is still there. As they approach her burial site, Max is injected with a sedative and collapses to the ground. Before she is able to warn Chloe, Chloe is shot in the head by their attacker, who is revealed to be Max's teacher Mark Jefferson.

Episode five, "Polarized," starts back in the dark room. Max is drugged and held captive as Mark takes photos of her. She finds out that Mark has killed Nathan and used his phone to lead her to the junkyard in the previous episode. He intends to use him as a scapegoat for his crimes. Her only method of escape is to travel back in time by using a photograph she has taken in one of his classes. Back in time, she is able to inform David Madsen, who had started his own investigation regarding the happenings around Blackwell, of Mark Jefferson's true nature. This alters the timeline to one in which Mark is caught and prosecuted for his crimes and Max gets the opportunity to go to San Francisco to attend an art gallery in which one of her photographs is displayed. She realises that, despite her efforts, the tornado is still set to destroy Arcadia Bay. Desperate, she again tries to go back in time but she finds herself trapped in a nightmare. As she manages to escape this nightmare, she ends up together with Chloe near the lighthouse. Chloe will realise that in Max saving her, she has caused all the meteorological anomalies that have culminated into the tornado. The player then has to decide whether they go back in time one final time through another photograph, this time letting Chloe die by the hands of Nathan, or tear the photograph and let the tornado destroy Arcadia Bay and most likely leave the rest of its inhabitants, including her friends, to die.

Appendix C: Complete Narrative Overview of *Undertale*

Undertale always starts with the player having to name the fallen human. After they have done that, they will be able to control the main character, later known to be named Frisk, who has fallen down from a hole in Mount Ebott into the Underground. They find themselves inside the Ruins, which functions as the tutorial area of *Undertale*. As they move from the initial section, the player encounters Flowey, a sentient golden flower, who introduces the video game's battle mechanics to the player. He shares what he calls "friendliness pellets" which the player must catch. However, these are actually harmful and reduce the player's Hit Points (HP). Flowey then drops his friendly façade and calls the player an idiot. He believes that the world of *Undertale* operates under the philosophy of "**KILL or BE KILLED**" (*Undertale*). Before Flowey can kill Frisk, Toriel intervenes and saves them. Toriel, who resembles an anthropomorphic Nubian goat, serves as a guide of the Ruins and acts as a mother figure for the protagonist. As she guides Frisk through the first few sections inside the Ruins, she encourages that they should handle monster encounters with compassion rather than violence. During their stroll through these first few sections inside the Ruins, she also gives Frisk a cellphone so that they can keep in contact with each other, as she has to run some errands further inside the Ruins. Frisk is told to stay where they are, but the player will eventually have to disobey her orders, as the video game cannot otherwise continue.

As soon as the player is left alone, they can decide how they want to play *Undertale* and start the different routes. In order to initiate the Neutral route and its ending, the player will have to at least kill one monster or complete the video game without befriending one of the necessary characters. The True Pacifist route and its ending are initiated by sparing all the monsters and befriending all of the necessary characters. The Genocide route is initiated by killing all of the monsters that inhabit the Underground. They would have to purposely trigger encounters with the monsters in every area and kill all of them until the encounters prompt the

“But nobody came” (*Undertale*) message before they defeat the bosses and/or minibosses.⁴³

Regardless of their decisions, the player will eventually meet up with Toriel again and she will take Frisk to her house where she has prepared a room for them. Frisk is told to treat her place as if it is their home. As soon as they ask her about a method of leaving the Ruins, however, Toriel will run downstairs. When Frisk follows her, they are told that they cannot leave the Ruins, because Asgore will kill them. Nevertheless, the Ruins must be left in order to progress the video game and in order to do so the player must battle against Toriel who guards the door to the rest of the Underground. For a Neutral playthrough, the player would have to continuously “spare” her until they have exhausted her dialogue. The player cannot lose this battle, because if the player’s HP has decreased to a certain extent, her attacks will actually avoid them.⁴⁴ Behind the door, Frisk encounters Flowey again who will judge them on their actions inside the Ruins and/or from previous playthroughs without initiating a “True Reset.”⁴⁵ Afterwards they can proceed to the next section of the Underground.

Frisk enters Snowdin Forest, a snowy forest area as the name suggests. They feel like they are being followed. Their suspicions become true when they hear a branch that has fallen on the road breaking. As they reach the bridge, they are stopped by a mysterious figure who asks them to turn around and shake their hand. The figure plays the whoopee cushion in the hand trick and introduces himself as Sans, a skeleton. Afterwards he tells you about his job – capturing humans – and about his brother, Papyrus,⁴⁶ who wants to capture a human in order to gain recognition from the other monsters inhabiting the Underground and so that he can

⁴³ In general, bosses and minibosses in video games refer to larger enemies which are notoriously more difficult to defeat than others. These monsters usually mark the end of a level in a video game and their defeat is a requirement for the player’s progression.

⁴⁴ The player is still able to die, but they would have to willingly move into Toriel’s attacks. When the player dies, Toriel will be shocked as it was never her intention to kill the player.

⁴⁵ When the player has finished a playthrough with the True Pacifist route, they gain the ability to initiate a True Reset. It completely erases the save file and the video game will act as if the next playthrough is the player’s first one. However, if the player has finished a Genocide playthrough prior to a True Pacifist one, the True Reset will not affect the consequences of the Genocide playthrough. These consequences will be discussed during the section on the narrative overview of this chapter.

⁴⁶ Sans and Papyrus are named after the fonts “Comic Sans” and “Papyrus,” respectively. Their dialogue appears in these fonts as well.

become a real member of the royal guard. Frisk is then pushed behind a “conveniently shaped lamp” before Papyrus enters the area. When Papyrus leaves, Frisk can speak to Sans again who will tell them to play along with Papyrus for him. Moving through the forest, Frisk will meet the skeleton brothers again. This meeting is the first time that Papyrus will see them, which excites him, and he exclaims how he wishes to capture the human. He then runs off in order to prepare for their capture.

The next few areas are filled with puzzles designed to capture Frisk. These do not work very well and are easy to overcome. Soon, Frisk reaches a bridge that houses Papyrus’ final trap: an assortment of weapons ready to be used to attack the protagonist. Papyrus, however, feels that it would be too easy to use this trap and therefore unfair to the human. He then leaves Frisk alone and they can continue towards the next area, which is the town of Snowdin. The town is filled with various buildings and inhabits many monster NPCs, including the skeleton brothers. When Frisk leaves the town, they will encounter Papyrus once again, who exclaims that he wishes to be friends with you, but he knows that he will have to capture you regardless. This dialogue initiates the battle with Papyrus. For a Neutral playthrough, the player will have to, again, continuously spare him until all his different attacks are exhausted. The player can also flirt with him, which results in Papyrus asking Frisk on a date after the battle. If they insult him, the date becomes a regular hangout instead. The player can never lose this battle either. If their HP is lowered to 1, Papyrus will capture them and “lock them up” in a shed next to his house, which can easily be broken out of. Should the player lose numerous times, Papyrus will just let them go through regardless. Afterwards, Papyrus will complain about his inability to capture Frisk. The player can then offer to be his friend in order to cheer up Papyrus. They are then given directions in order to leave the Underground, namely by going through the Barrier, which seals the Underground from the surface. They are also told about the king, Mr. Dreemurr, who is the same person as

the one Toriel mentioned named Asgore. Papyrus thinks he is nice, but the king still wants human souls in order to let the monsters return to the surface. The player can then head back into Snowdin and go to Papyrus' house to initiate a date with him, which is a requirement for the True Pacifist ending, or they can simply proceed to the next area – Waterfall.

As the player moves through the areas of Waterfall, they will enter a dark area with tall grass. As they move into the tall grass, a scene will play between Papyrus and a knight, who turns out to be Undyne, the head of the royal guard. Papyrus tells her that he has met the human, but did not capture them. Undyne announces that she will take the human's soul herself instead. When the player moves out of the tall grass, a monster kid will run out of it as well. He is apparently a big fan of Undyne and will run ahead. In the next few areas, the player will have to solve more puzzles in order to proceed. One of the areas features a dock with signs hanging on the wall. These signs tell about the history of the war between the humans and the monsters. Monsters are capable of taking human souls, which makes them more powerful. In the next area, the lighting dims and Undyne appears. She begins to throw spears at Frisk and they will have to avoid them while they find a way out of the area. Further ahead, the player will enter another area in which Undyne attacks them. This time, the spears will spike from below and the player will have to avoid these as well. Eventually, the player reaches a dead end. Undyne will cut part of the dock, which causes Frisk to tumble down. They find themselves in a garbage dump.

Moving to the next area, the player enters a hub-area. Most of the directions lead to some houses of the monsters that live in Waterfall, including Undyne's. Heading east, there are more signs in the next area, which describe the history of *Undertale*. The humans have sealed the monsters away and only someone with a powerful soul will be able to leave the Underground. The monsters would need seven human souls to break the barrier. One of the next areas features a bridge on which Frisk will encounter the monster kid again. He asks if

Frisk is human and to say something mean to him. The player's choice here does not matter much. As the monster kid leaves, he trips and falls down to the bridge's ledge. At the same moment, Undyne will show up. The player can decide to save Monster Kid or let Undyne do it. Should they save him, he will stand up to Undyne and make her retreat. Otherwise, Undyne will help them and Monster Kid will chastise them for not helping.

In the next area, the battle with Undyne will be initiated. Frisk's soul is the last one Asgore needs as he has six others already. For a Neutral playthrough, the player needs to block Undyne's attacks and flee the battle when they can so that they can run ahead. They need to do this a couple of times until they have left Waterfall for Hotland. In here, Undyne will collapse because of the heat. The player can grab some water from a watercooler nearby in order to revive her – another requirement for the True Pacifist ending. Afterwards she will retreat. The player is able to go back to her house to hang out with her, which is also a requirement for the True Pacifist ending.

Moving further into Hotland, the player will encounter a laboratory. In here, there is a monitor with the protagonist on it. Further inside the laboratory, the player will meet Dr. Alphys, the royal scientist. She has placed cameras throughout the Underground in order to monitor you.⁴⁷ She has become a bit of a fan of the protagonist through watching their journey. She tells them about a robot she has made, Mettaton, which is programmed to destroy any human it encounters. As soon as she mentions him, he bursts through a wall and challenges Frisk in the form of a quiz. The questions are impossible to answer, but Alphys will help Frisk by motioning towards the correct answers. After the quiz, Mettaton leaves and Alphys will upgrade Frisk's phone so that they have now access to social media. Even though they cannot really access it themselves, they will receive periodic updates from Alphys as they journey through Hotland.

⁴⁷ The player can find these cameras if they interact with the surroundings. For instance, one of them is hidden in a bush at the entrance of Snowdin Forest. Another can be found behind one of the waterfalls in the Waterfall area.

In order to traverse Hotland, the player will have to solve even more puzzles. Alphys will try to help them, although her tips are often given after the player has already solved the puzzles. The player will encounter Mettaton a couple of times. The first time he has been waiting for you to star in his cooking show: “Cooking with a Killer Robot.” The player will have to gather the ingredients for a cake. The recipe calls for a human soul, but Alphys convinces Mettaton to not harm the player through the suggestion to use a vegan alternative. The player has to fetch the substitute ingredient. However, the counter on which the ingredient is placed becomes taller and Mettaton announces that the player will have to reach the ingredient in under a minute. Alphys then calls the player to inform them that she has installed a “JETPACK” button on their phone. When they have reached the ingredient, Mettaton will reveal that he has already baked a cake ahead of time and leaves the area.

Further into Hotland are more puzzles for the player to solve and another encounter with Mettaton. This time around, the player is featured on a news broadcast and the player is tasked to find an object to report. However, all objects are bombs in disguise and the player will have to defuse all of them before the time runs out, which it never will, so the player can take all the time they need. Moving further, the player will encounter a large building inhabited by spiders, one of them being Muffet, who will battle you. There is an easy way to win this battle and it is by eating either a “Spider Donut” or “Spider Cider” at the beginning of the battle, both of which can be bought in the “Spider Bake Sale” found in one of the areas of the Ruins and Hotland.⁴⁸ Because you have supported her bake sale, she will let you go. If the player does not have either of these items, they will have to exhaust Muffet’s attacks until she spares you herself. Afterwards, the player will encounter Mettaton again who treats you to a performance before forcing them to solve a puzzle and then battle him. Alphys will help the player during both of these events.

⁴⁸ Buying these items in the Ruins is advised, as the prices are less steep there than in Hotland. In the Ruins, the spider donut sells for 7 gold and the cider for 18 gold. Both items sell for 9999 gold in Hotland, which is a much bigger cost.

In the next area, the player will find themselves at the MTT Resort. In here, they find Sans and can initiate a conversation with him. He will talk about how Frisk is almost at the end of their journey and suggests that they should leave. He also talks about how he has met a woman behind a door in the Ruins who has made him promise to protect any human who exits the Ruins – the sole reason why Frisk is still alive as “[they’d] [otherwise] be dead where [they] stand”⁴⁹ (*Undertale*) otherwise. Leaving the resort, the player will move into the CORE, a facility that provides electricity for the entirety of the Underground. Inside the facility, the player has to fight Mettaton for the final time. Afterwards, Alphys will run up to the protagonist and reveal that she has lied to them. In order to reach the surface, they would need a monster’s soul. Specifically, they would have to kill Asgore. They can continue their journey by taking the elevator up to New Home.

In New Home, the player is told the story of the first human who fell from Mt. Ebbot into the Underground and how Asriel, the son of Asgore, found them and became friends with them. The fallen human got ill and subsequently died. Asriel took their soul and crossed the barrier in order to bring the human’s body back to their village on the surface. The villagers, however, attacked him, as they believed that Asriel killed the human child. As he returned to the Underground with the human’s corpse in their arms, he died as his dust spread around the palace’s garden.

Further in the area, the player will encounter Sans again. He will comment on the player’s progress, especially on the player’s decision to kill monsters. He goes on to explain what the various stats that the protagonist has stand for: EXP and LV/LOVE. Normally in RPGs, these would stand for experience points and level respectively. Players actually want these to be as high as possible, because it would mean that they are strong and will probably

⁴⁹ This piece of dialogue gives a hint to what Sans is actually capable of, which the player is only able to witness during a Genocide playthrough. During a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough, Sans seemingly comes over as someone who is pretty laid-back and passive. In a Genocide playthrough, Sans serves as the final real challenge prior to finishing the video game. His dialogue during such a playthrough offers more insight to him which would otherwise be unknown.

have an easier time defeating their enemies. However, *Undertale* treats these acronyms differently. EXP stands for Execution Points and LV/LOVE stands for Level of Violence. These stats are ways of measuring the player's "[amount of] pain [they] have inflicted on others" and "[their] capacity to hurt" (*Undertale*) respectively. For a Neutral playthrough, these stats should be as low as possible, or 0 if it is the player's first playthrough of *Undertale*. He also informs the player that they have two options now: kill Asgore or be killed by him. After his judgement, the player can continue forwards.

When they enter the throne room, the player will finally encounter Asgore. Before the battle starts, seven containers will rise from the ground. Six of them are filled with six different-coloured souls. The last one serves as the container for Frisk's soul. At the start of the battle, Asgore will destroy the "Mercy" option, which means that the player is forced to fight him. After he has been defeated, Asgore will lament his losses, including his son and wife. He will then offer to let the player take his soul so that they can cross the barrier. The player is now given the option to kill or spare Asgore. They must spare him if they wish to reach the True Pacifist ending. If spared, Asgore will invite you to become part of his family. He is then interrupted by Flowey who kills him, taking his soul and those of the six defeated humans. The game will then intentionally crash and has to be relaunched.

When it is relaunched, the introductory video is corrupted and the save file has been replaced by one created by Flowey. In this save file, Flowey declares how he wants to destroy the world and how the player has helped him by weakening Asgore. Flowey attacks Frisk as he uses the souls to transform into a creepier, surreal version of himself: Photoshop Flowey, the final boss of the Neutral playthrough. This fight does not feature a menu nor a battle board. Instead, Photoshop Flowey's arms frame the area in which the player can move and they have to dodge his erratic attacks until they have fulfilled all of the requirements needed to defeat him – Photoshop Flowey has to go through all his attacks and dialogue before he can

be defeated. After the battle, the player has to decide whether they kill Flowey or spare him. The choice has no effect on the ending this time.

The video game ends with a final phone call from Sans (if the player has killed less than ten monsters and none of the main characters throughout their journey), who tells about what has happened since the protagonist has left the Underground.⁵⁰ Afterwards, Flowey will show up and talk about how this ending is not really such a good ending, as the player has not helped the monsters at all. In fact, with Asgore's death and the human souls gone, their chances of leaving the Underground have been significantly decreased. The player is then given advice on how the player can get the best ending, by becoming friends with Alphys, and lets them load their old save file prior to Asgore's fight. The Neutral playthrough ends here, but by going to Alphys, the player can work to reach the True Pacifist ending if they have not killed a single monster. Other requirements, as said earlier, include befriending both Papyrus and Undyne by hanging out with them, and sparing Asgore.

To befriend Alphys, the player has to travel back to the MTT Resort where they will receive a call from Undyne who asks Frisk to deliver a letter from her to Alphys. When Alphys has read the letter, she goes on a date with the protagonist, as she believes that they have written the letter. During this date, it is revealed that she actually has a crush on Undyne and secretly wishes to date her. Afterwards, Papyrus calls the protagonist and suggest that they should visit Alphys in her laboratory. On the ground near the lab's bathroom is a note in which Alphys discloses that she has done terrible things in the past that she has tried to keep hidden. Should the player want to find out, they would have to head into the door. It turns out it is not a door to the bathroom but an elevator, which soon crashes down to the bottom as it loses its power. The player finds themselves inside the True Laboratory where Alphys has tried to find a way to break the barrier between the Underground and the surface with the use of only monster souls and a power called "Determination." Throughout the True Laboratory,

⁵⁰ The contents of this phone call are prone to change depending on the player's actions in-game.

the player can find information on Alphys' research, including how she has managed to resurrect monsters. There is also a television with a few video tapes that tell more of *Undertale*'s background story; the friendship between Asriel and the fallen human the player had to name at the beginning of the video game. Apparently, the fallen human has died. More panels on the lab's walls tell about Alphys' research and how she has tried to infuse a golden flower with determination – at this point, it is implied that this is the origin story of Flowey. As the player has reached the end of the lab where they can restore the power, numerous monsters appear which have melted together. Alphys keeps them from harming Frisk and explains where these monsters have come from: they are the monsters that she has experimented on with the determination injections. Monsters are seemingly incapable of carrying determination, as it results in their molten forms. Only humans are capable of having determination, which results in their souls being stronger than those of monsters are.

After the revelation, the player ends up back in New Home. They cannot go back as vines block the elevator, so they have to head back to the throne room. Here the player has to initiate the battle with Asgore again, but, before it starts, Asgore will be interrupted by Toriel, who turns out to be his ex-wife, together with all the other main characters: Sans, Papyrus, Undyne and Alphys. Asgore will be convinced that there is no need for fighting, but the group is interrupted by Flowey, who grabs all of the protagonist's friends with his vines before he tries to kill Frisk. However, his attacks are blocked by their friends and numerous monsters who the player has encountered on their journey. Despite their efforts, Flowey gains the upper hand by killing all of the monsters and taking their souls so that he can turn into his true form: Asriel, the late son of Toriel and Asgore. During this battle, the souls of Toriel, Asgore, Sans, Papyrus, Undyne, and Alphys need to be saved in order to progress. Finally, Asriel himself needs to be saved in order to finish the battle. Afterwards, Asriel will use the souls to break

the barrier so that the monsters can finally return to the surface. The screen fades to black and the protagonist will wake up surrounded by their friends.

Before they leave the Underground, Toriel suggests that they should travel back through all the areas, visit all the monsters, and talk to them. If the player travels all the way back to the room where their journey started, they can find Asriel. The player can talk to him and he will reveal what really happened with him and the first fallen human. Apparently, the first fallen human hated humanity and that is why they decided to climb Mt. Ebott. When the two of them combined their souls, the control over their combined body was split. They picked up their own empty body to bring it to the human village. They wanted to use their full power to kill the humans, but Asriel resisted, which resulted in both their deaths. Asriel then tells Frisk to go back to his friends and go with them to the surface.

When the player is ready to end the journey, they can walk through the big door behind the throne room and the video game will ask if they are truly ready to leave. If so, Frisk ends up outside with their friends as they look at the sunrise. The player is then given a final decision: they can stay with Toriel or go on their own way. Should the player decide to stay with Toriel, the video game ends with Toriel who brings Frisk a slice of pie while they are asleep. Should the player decide to go their own way, the video game ends with a picture of Frisk surrounded by all of their friends. Both these endings constitute to *Undertale*'s True Pacifist ending.

A Genocide playthrough turns *Undertale* into a video game with a completely different story. In order to meet the requirements of a Genocide playthrough, the player will have to kill a certain number of monsters in every area until no encounters occur – this method of killing monsters is similar to level-grinding⁵¹ in other RPGs. The extermination

⁵¹ Level-grinding refers to the act of continuously killing enemy monsters in order to gain levels and become stronger. This is a feature specific to RPGs. In RPGs other than *Undertale*, the enemies are infinite in number and will continuously reappear. Moreover, in other RPGs, the monsters actually *do* function as enemies rather than potential friends as in *Undertale*.

needs to be completed before the player engages with the areas' bosses. The numbers of monsters which still need to be killed is presented whenever the player interacts with a save point from the first save point in Snowdin Forest onwards. When all of the monsters have been killed, any subsequent "monster encounter" will simply indicate: "But nobody came." After this message has appeared, the music when travelling through the area changes to a distorted ambient track called "But Nobody Came." Instead of the number of monsters the player still has to kill, save points will now only say: "Determination.", before it allows them to save their game. The Ruins do not feature some of the monster NPCs during a Genocide playthrough that can be encountered during a Neutral or True Pacifist run. Surprisingly, Toriel is not aware of the protagonist's murderous tendencies until she battles you. Should the player try to talk to her during the battle, the video game will say that "[she is] [n]ot worth talking to" (*Undertale*). When they attack her, she will be killed in a single blow. Before she dies, she says in shock: "Y... you... really hate me that much? Now I see who I was protecting by keeping you here. Not you... But them!" (*Undertale*). Passing the door behind where Toriel stood, the player will encounter Flowey as they would during a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough. However, his dialogue has changed. He instead believes that you are actually the first fallen human even though they have been dead for a while. He wants to team up with them again in order to destroy the world.

When the player enters Snowdin Forest, a slowed down and lowered version of the track "Snowy" plays instead of its normal version – another effect of the Genocide route which will continue from here on out. When they meet Sans for the first time, the same whoopee cushion prank occurs, but Sans will comment on how the protagonist does not react at all to it. Moreover, the protagonist does not move behind the "conveniently-shaped lamp" in order to hide from Papyrus as they normally would. Papyrus enters the area and asks Sans if he has found a human yet, which he has, but Papyrus will leave immediately after without

commenting on the protagonist. Afterwards, before the player can leave the area, Sans will ask them if they could help him out by pretending to be human to humour his brother.

Throughout the forest, most of Papyrus' puzzles are completely ignored by the protagonist or have already been completed, presumably by Flowey. During the final one, Papyrus comments how "the human" will just walk through it anyway, whereas during the Neutral and True Pacifist routes he comments how it would be unfair to capture the human this way.

When they have crossed the bridge and talk to Sans, he talks about how the protagonist will probably fight his brother soon and tell them that "[they're] gonna have a bad time" (*Undertale*) should they continue to behave this way.

When the player enters Snowdin Town, they find that everyone has evacuated except for the Monster Kid. The player can steal all of the shopkeeper's wares and money, as they have left town as well. Before the player battles Papyrus, he will tell them how he has noticed that the protagonist has gone on a "dangerous path," but he still sees "great potential" in them; they just need some guidance (*Undertale*). The subsequent battle starts with Papyrus immediately sparing the player. To continue the Genocide playthrough, the player needs to kill him regardless. Attacking Papyrus will result in killing him in a single blow, similar to Toriel. Even in his dying moments, Papyrus still believes that the player can do better.

Similar to the puzzles in Snowdin Forest, the puzzles in Waterfall have all been completed as well. Most NPCs have left Waterfall too. The main difference is near the end of the area at the bridge where the Monster Kid would almost fall off of in the Neutral and True Pacifist playthrough. Instead, the Monster Kid confronts the protagonist and tells them how Undyne has told them what the protagonist has done. A fight is initiated, but before the protagonist is able to kill them, Undyne jumps in front of the Monster Kid. She does not die, though. Instead, she recovers from the fatal blow and turns into Undyne the Undying, which prompts the fight with her. This boss fight is significantly more difficult to beat than the

regular one, as she has more health and more attack patterns than in the other playthroughs. Furthermore, she cannot be killed in a single blow like Toriel and Papyrus. When she has been killed, she will mention that Alphys has been watching and evacuated the monsters ahead of time. Asgore has also been notified to absorb the human souls he has collected so far to break the barrier.

When the player reaches the laboratory, Mettaton will tell them that Alphys has in fact evacuated the monsters to an unreachable place. Almost all the puzzles in the area have been completed and the doors have been opened as well – the monsters have left everything open when they fled. The encounter with Muffet still occurs, but she can be killed in one blow if executed correctly. Mettaton does not appear until the end of the CORE, thus the cooking show and the news report do not make an appearance. During the boss fight with Mettaton, they will transform into their true form: Mettaton NEO. However, they will die in a single hit.

When the player walks through Asgore's House, the player is told the history of the first fallen human in the other playthroughs. Instead, Flowey will tell the story of his life after he had resurrected as a flower and both his and the protagonist's intent to kill during this playthrough. However, he soon realises that protagonist would not hesitate to kill him either and runs off scared. In the next area, the Last Corridor, Sans does not give his judgement of the protagonist. Instead, he will fight them in a final attempt to stop them. This fight is considered to be the most difficult one in the entire video game. Afterwards, the player can enter Asgore's throne room. For some unknown reason, Asgore has not absorbed the human souls in order to break the barrier and leave the Underground. Asgore will say that he has never seen a flower crying. The flower in question refers to Flowey who most likely warns Asgore of the protagonist. Asgore will question what kind of monster the protagonist is, as he does not recognise them to be human. The fight with Asgore is then initiated and he is killed

in one hit. Flowey will then destroy Asgore's soul to appease the protagonist and begs them not to kill him too. His attempts are in vain and he subsequently is killed as well.

Afterwards, the first fallen human, canonically named Chara,⁵² appears on the screen and talks to either the protagonist or the player themselves. They explain how the protagonist's determination has caused them to return. They then offer to destroy the world together at which point the player has to choose between "ERASE" and "DO NOT."

However, the choice does not matter because they will destroy the world regardless.

Nevertheless, choosing "DO NOT" does bring up some interesting dialogue in which Chara questions, "SINCE WHEN WERE YOU THE ONE IN CONTROL?" (*Undertale*).

Afterwards, a large slash animation similar to the ones during battles appears on screen followed by the screen filling up with a series of "9s" which also starts to shake. The world has been killed like the protagonist has killed its population. After several minutes, Chara returns and realises that the player desires to go back to the world they have destroyed and questions whether player believes "[they] are above consequences." (*Undertale*) The player is then offered a deal. Chara will bring back the world in exchange for the protagonist's soul. The player can choose to agree with the terms or not. If they do not, the screen will turn to black for a few minutes until Chara reappears and offers their deal again. Thus, the player can no longer play *Undertale* if they do not agree with Chara's terms, unless they would completely uninstall and reinstall the video game. If they agree, the world is restored and a new playthrough can be started. However, this decision has lasting consequences. The ending of a True Pacifist playthrough will be changed, as it appears that the protagonist's body has been taken over by Chara.

⁵² The name is presumably a shortened version of "character." When the player is asked to name the fallen human at the beginning of *Undertale*, using "Chara" will prompt the message: "The true name" (*Undertale*).