

Ludology is Strange: Temporal Experience in Gaming and *Life is Strange*

Introduction

In this presentation I will draw on anthropology and philosophy to present a way of thinking and talking about the experience of time in games. Many gamers have had the experience of looking up from a particularly engrossing session only to find that far more time has passed than they thought. Conversely, a death or failure that is felt to be unfair can make the time required to progress again seem like a never ending imposition rather than a pleasurable pastime. Probably everyone knows the frustration of the ‘pixel hunt’ where they can’t find the way to progress the game and wander about pressing random things in an effort to get to the next part: time in these points can seem to stand still. In discussing the complex question of time in gaming, the concept of the ‘endgame’ will be a key point of reference. As a test case and in respect to time limits for this paper, I will largely limit the discussion to single-player narratives with a close look at narrative in Dontnod Entertainment’s 2015 game *Life is Strange*. This game both thematizes temporality and performs an auto-critique of gaming as a whole, making it a suitable case study for this paper.

Diachrony: Play and Temporality

The videogame concept of the ‘endgame’ is similar to the formulation ‘end of the game’, which appears as a pivotal concept in the Italian writer Giorgio Agamben’s essay on play. Agamben draws on the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) and the linguist Émile Benveniste. According to Benveniste, playful experience forms a polar opposite to the experience of the sacred that we can observe in rituals. This somewhat speculative point makes an intuitive kind of sense: the noisy world of play is as far from the quiet and contemplative floor of a church as can be imagined.

This is the point of ‘Playland’ in *Pinocchio*, where children run riot: play involves the ‘paralysis and destruction of the calendar’ (Agamben 1993: 68) into an eternal and unending holiday – every day is a Sunday, and there is no end to the game.

The ritual object draws two time periods together – that is, it *synchronises* the past as attested to in the myth, and the present time in which the ritual is being conducted. This helps bring the stories of past times into the experience of the present. Play tends to produce signifiers of diachrony (turning structures into events), while ritual tends to foster signifiers of synchrony (turning events into structures).

A key area of interest is the kind of objects that are traditionally found in these spaces: on the one hand, the ritual object, and on the other, the toy. Anthropology tells us that sacred objects in many cultures are carefully secreted away or hidden from sight when they are not being used in a ritual. Such objects seem out of place and almost embarrassing when they leave their appropriate setting – think of the legends of the Holy Grail, which requires a difficult quest to find, and vanishes soon after you find it.

Like the ritual object (only diametrically opposite), the toy only makes sense in a certain context. Outside those contexts both the toy and the ritual object become symbols of the fact that the diachronic and synchronic experiences they create are provisional and cannot be completed.

Agamben says that toys and ritual objects are ‘unstable signifiers’ with volatile temporal symbolism. Through them we can see the complexity of time, and this gives us some sense of the importance of the seemingly frivolous activity of play. Furthermore, because play and ritual both act on unstable signifiers, there are certain proximities, affinities and crossing-points between the two poles. Think for example of funerary games, or the common presence of toys and miniatures in tombs.

Game Time

So, to summarise: we have two temporal ‘directions’ or movements called diachrony and synchrony. Play tends to produce the former, while ritual produces the latter. In practice, however, neither is fully achievable. Also, we have objects that tend towards one or the other operation, but when they leave the appropriate space, become reminders of the impossibility of their basic gesture. Agamben calls these ‘unstable signifiers’ to indicate their volatile nature: they act as switching points between diachronic and synchronic experience.

How might all this be connected with gaming and how videogames affect our experience of time? We can posit that games have their own unstable signifiers: points of transformation between the production of synchrony and diachrony. Videogame performances act on these signifiers to change their temporal signification. Videogames, then, are programs for producing diachronic and synchronic experiences – only by using computers, they can present us with far more unstable signifiers than in the ritual or playful contexts of the historical past we’ve been talking about so far.

As players, we take the synchronic structures of the game rules and diachronise them in the process of play. Gameplay involves understanding which signifiers are unstable and capable of transformation from synchrony to diachrony (that is, those signifiers that are ‘playable’), much as, in a FPS we scan a screen full of detail to acquire and eliminate targets under precise time pressures. It is the precise relation between diachrony and synchrony that gives a videogame its particular temporal ‘feel’.

A question arises at this point: if, for Agamben and Benveniste, play is associated with the production of diachrony, shouldn't we see only diachronically-oriented processes in videogames? This qualified concept of play and diachrony is in fact to be expected, as for Agamben the association between diachrony and play is subject to the observation that the pure event does not exist: there is, even in the most diachronic operations of play, always a synchronic remainder.

Synchrony in gaming takes many forms. It is precisely because the temporal structures of gaming involve unique modulations of diachrony *and* synchrony that a distinctive terminology can arise in order to discuss performances in specific games. Terms like 'ticks' (referring to the sound of a clock), 'rounds' (a certain time interval in which characters have a defined capacity to act), 'dots' (damage over time) and 'dps' (damage per second) all indicate the strange sectioning of time effected by performances and framing devices in games.

The ultimate synchronic effect in a videogame is the 'end of the game'. The critical point to draw from Agamben's discussion is that there can be no complete synchronic intuition of the game's full set of performances; the pure structure, as such, does not exist: at any one time, the process of play actualizes a particular (and hence, diachronic) performance. However, while the Game Over cannot be directly *experienced*, it can be *represented*. As they make their way through a game, players form a kind of mental model of the total set of performances that the game will involve.

At the beginning of the game, the Game Over is experienced as a relatively pure diachrony: the game's signs represent the duration of the immediate play experience and the promise of more play. Think about the experience of looking out over an open world game and feeling the vastness, the urge to explore this vast set of unstable signifiers all waiting for transformation.

The temporal margin here takes the form of anticipation about the game's gameplay possibilities, storyline, characterization, multiplayer modes, and any other systems that may be present. From this fresh point of view, the Game Over appears as a pure 'yet-to-be-played'. As play progresses and players habituate themselves to the title's particular performative multiplicity, expectations arise as to which signs are volatile framing devices and are thus liable, at the end of the game, to change their signification from highly diachronic ('yet-to-be-played') to a diachronic-synchronic balance ('can-be-played-with') or to highly synchronic ('always-will-be-played'). These can be identified with ludological elements, which signify the diachronic-synchronic balance of 'can-be-played-with' and narratological elements, which begin in a diachronic 'yet-to-be-played' and come to signify an 'always-will-be-played'.

Synchrony offers a powerful way to think about one of the most enduring problems in discussing videogames: the place of narrative. Some games, such as Tetris, have minimal narrative, whereas others, such as any Metal Gear game, have a lot. How can we think about narrative given these vast variations across the videogame form?

From the point of view developed so far, narrative — barring sequence breaking, modifications, glitches or other departures from the ‘orthodox’ game text — can be rigorously defined as *a structure that synchronizes all full performances of a game*. All performances of the *Mass Effect* series will task players with choosing the death of a crewmember. All performances of *Planescape: Torment* will begin with The Nameless One waking in the Sigil Mortuary. All performances of *Alien: Isolation* will involve Ripley making her way to the supercomputer at the center of Sevastopol space station. These narrative devices act as synchronizing ‘anchors’ across any performance of a given game. It is this temporal function that has the most similarities to the development of fragmented narrative form in film, television, and postmodern literature, albeit it is deployed in a different way.

Interestingly, although I won’t have time to go into it in this context, synchrony also gives us a means for accounting for the ‘rules’ of the game: they are another, different form of synchronizing the performances that a game is capable of producing. From a performative point of view, then, game rules and game narrative are not essentially different but variations on the ways that game structure temporal experience.

Life is Strange

Let’s look at an extended example of using diachrony and synchrony to examine a game. This game is one of the many that use temporal mechanics in its structure. The game is *Life is Strange*. Protagonist and player character Max Caulfield has a gallery of her own photographs in her room that she calls her ‘cocoon’. Her use analog photography links her to specific spatial and temporal contexts: a polaroid’s photochemical processes cannot be manipulated with the same facility as digital images. The analog quality to her photography is reflected in the game’s art style, which almost has a painterly quality. It’s as if we see everything through Max’s ‘eye’: “If I’m not looking through a viewfinder, I’m looking through a window. Always looking.”

That eye is talented: Max is a student at a prestigious art school called Blackwell Academy in the fictional town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon. Her gallery selfie was to be her submission to the prestigious ‘Everyday Heroes’ competition, the reward for which is exhibition in San Francisco’s Zeitgeist Gallery. Her charismatic and accomplished teacher Mark Jefferson, who is fond of Hitchcock’s maxim that film is ‘little pieces of time’, has been urging her to enter a photograph. However, Max has confidence issues and is reluctant to enter her selfie for judgment. After suffering a terrifying dream in which she witnesses a tornado destroying

Arcadia Bay, a shaken Max heads to the bathroom where she finds and takes a photo of a striking blue butterfly.

As if this is not enough, she then witnesses an altercation between a blue-haired girl and an unstable student which ends with the girl being shot. It is at this moment of shock that she discovers that she has the power to rewind time, appearing back in Jefferson's class. Forewarned, she is able to save the life of the girl in the bathroom, who she later recognizes as her childhood friend Chloe. The pair begin to explore Max's powers (as she tells herself, "It's time to be an everyday hero"), and the *Twin Peaks*-esque mysteries of the seemingly quiet town. Their investigations are propelled by the case of a missing student called Rachel Amber and a viral video of another student, Kate Marsh, who had been drugged against her will.

Max quickly finds that her rewind ability allows her to approach social and other situations with newfound confidence. If a situation goes awry, Max can simply rewind and try again. This capability only extends into the relatively recent past, however: if overused, Max starts to feel ill and blots reminiscent of photochemical overexposure blur the screen. The sleuthing she undertakes with this ability comes naturally — as many characters note, she is a very nosy person (Chloe's mother Joyce jokingly calls her 'Nancy Drew'). As is quite typical of adventure games, players can have her wander about blithely reading people's email and other private documents. The flipside is that she is capable of gaining a more complete view of the context for people's actions and behaviors, a tendency that her power accentuates.

The time span she is capable of rewinding appears in the game interface as a spiral. While the spiral is analog (reversed animations play out as Max rewinds), it is marked with dots which represent digital and diachronic potentials. Essentially, each spiral represents a 'a little piece of time' — a temporal eddy. The spiral designates a perludic act that Max can resynchronize again and again, 'developing' the performative multiplicity in what is truly her own time.

Later in the game, Max discovers another temporal ability: the capacity to travel back even further in time through focusing on polaroid photographs. Where her rewind spiral is limited to the immediate past, her ability to enter an instant photograph is bounded in space: she cannot leave the photographed scene. It is also prone to the common time-travel trope of unintended consequences: she cannot predict how her adjustments of the past scene will diachronize the present when she returns through the polaroid. She isn't even sure if the timelines she is traversing rearrange one world, or if each represents a completely separate reality.

Players are warned that certain performances have a diachronic effect that is beyond the scope of Max's immediate rewind ability by the appearance of a butterfly motif and the message 'This action will have consequences...'. Essentially, the butterfly motif indicates that a certain performance is an unstable signifier. Where the basic rewind is more like a snapshot with relatively simple outcomes (whether a conversation goes well, for example),

the butterfly motif represents more sustained causal threads. The signifier in question was liable to remain unstable for quite some time for players who, if they were playing as each episode was released across 2015, would have to await future instalments. As in *Alien: Isolation* and *Dark Souls*, the save-game mechanic is incorporated into the diegetic world and the ludological structure of the game, informing Max's experience of her world and dramatizing her difficulties negotiating between observation and action.

As characters, Max and Chloe are inscribed with distinctive temporal significance and conflicting attitudes to memory and futurity: the former's surname references Salinger, and the latter's, the goddess Demeter. Remember that Agamben (1993) argues that the striking co-incidence of playful and funerary phenomena in many cultures is due to both being unstable signifiers: initiates take the place of departed ancestors through ritual. *LiS* draws these themes together through the perennial American preoccupation with teenage years, and Chloe's own penchant for getting herself killed. Also important is the search for the dead Rachel Amber, who is represented by a ghostly doe, and the name Arcadia Bay, which evokes *memento mori* canvases entitled *Et in Arcadia ego* by artists such as Barbieri and Poussin that remind us that death exists even in paradise.

Max's return to Arcadia Bay leaves her feeling guilty for having left Chloe, whose father William died in a car accident during her absence. Chloe has not moved on from this event as attested both by herself and by her mother Joyce: "Chloe chose to remain in the past." These temporal motifs influence their characterization: Max is reserved, and Chloe urges her to make the most of both her artistic and temporal abilities. For her part, Chloe is overconfident to the point of being extremely prone to finding herself in lethal situations. The two friends are linked by a blue butterfly that evokes both the stasis of the cocoon and the potentialities of metamorphosis and Lorenz's 'butterfly effect'.

Tropes and imagery invoking temporal loops and figures of reversal recur as Max explores her old childhood town, including birds flocking in synchronized patterns; vortices; images and locales of the past; a junkyard hideout; time-travel sci-fi; theories of relativity; teen drama and small-town Americana clichés; concerns about surveillance. However, as Max uses her powers over the course of the episodes, increasingly diachronic and non-reversible phenomena start to appear: dead birds, beached whales, meteorological and climactic aberrations such as unseasonal snowfalls, untimely eclipses, double moons. These are all capped by the prophetic vision of the tornado: climate change appears as the paradigmatic diachronic signifier. The episode titles also develop from synchronic to diachronic signifiers: from Episode 1 ('Chrysalis') to the proliferating possibility of Episode 3 ('Chaos Theory') and finally the binary of Episode 5 ('Polarized').

The game's most affecting signifiers of diachrony are the viral video of a drugged Kate Marsh, and the *memento mori* of a vanished Rachel Amber. Unlike Max's reversible vignettes, the pious Kate's exposure to a digital networked public is non-reversible. The strictly religious Kate, tormented by the video's distribution and her inability to remember the night in question, is driven to the roof of the school. Max can help her, but at a time when she

has overtaxed her rewind power: the scene has a strong diachronic quality because players must navigate the outcomes of this conversation without the game mechanic which they had come to take for granted.

Later in the game, Max and Chloe discover Rachel's decomposing body: preventing her death is outside the scope of Max's temporal powers, constituting another moment that is sheerly diachronic by contrast with the game's core mechanic of synchronic loops.

Polaroid Temporality

The increasing tendency to diachrony becomes the basis of *Life is Strange*'s aesthetics theme of failure: the more that Max tries to definitively resolve the temporal complex she has created, the more loose ends and unintended consequences crop up. Failure also obtains at the level of plot, as Max's attempts to uncover who was responsible for what happened to Kate and Rachel lead to a false conclusion, allowing the true culprit – Mark Jefferson – to kill Chloe and kidnap her.

Jefferson turns out to be something of a hammy villain: he is obsessed with photographing what he perceives as the moment of transition between innocence and experience. Max escapes her imprisonment by going back in time through the selfie she took in the game's opening scene, looping back to Jefferson's class with full knowledge of his misdeeds. She ensures that Jefferson is apprehended, preventing him from ever killing Chloe.

She also gains the courage to enter her gallery scene selfie into the Everyday Heroes contest and wins a flight to San Francisco and a career as a feted photographer. Her 'selfie cocoon' has become the gallery scene of a true artist.

Through this gallery scene everything, it seems, is wrapped up in a nice Game Over. However, counter-intuitively in the face of the synchronic expectation, the game keeps going. Hints of the failure of this triumphant plot begin to mount. Max once again struggles with her social anxiety when mixing at the gallery. Another indication that something is wrong is the farcical nature of the gallery scene, which sours the triumphant exhibition by pastiching the art world's denizens as vainglorious and trivial — not really worth networking with in the first place. Finally, Max receives a call from Chloe, who says that the storm has indeed come to destroy Arcadia Bay before being abruptly cut off.

Max chooses to travel back in time through her Everyday Heroes photo in order to destroy it at the moment it was taken. Doing this, she wagers, will ensure that she never wins the competition and remains in Arcadia Bay to help save her friends and family: the loss of a career seems trivial by comparison. However, where previously her trips into the polaroid past have been to scenes bounded by a dreamy white light, now there is the angry blurs,

streaks and mottles of badly developed photographs. “What am I doing to time?” she wonders as she tears apart the selfie.

The resulting timeline is overtly a failure at both narrative and ludic levels as both storyline and gameplay fall apart. Max is forced to re-navigate many scenarios she has performed successfully (or at least, survived) in previous episodes. Reality itself seems to break down: surreal level designs present twisted rehearsals of past events and distorted versions of other characters. Finally, Max finds herself before the very storm with which the game opened, save that this time she is there with Chloe. Chloe argues what they have long suspected, that the temporal anomalies and ultimately the storm arise from the initial rewind that allowed Max to save her from death. Max then faces a choice: sacrifice Chloe to save Arcadia Bay, or sacrifice the town to save Chloe.

Many players received this stark binary ending with sentiments similar to those of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy: a game which had tasked players with deciding the outcomes of so many plotlines and relationships failed, in the end, to play them out in a nuanced and spectacular game-ending cinematic. Here too, the ending was often judged as insufficiently diachronic. The game proper is a genuine possibility space to explore, but this foreshadows an ending which disappoints because it is a mere forking path – to save Chloe or to save Arcadia Bay.

LiS wraps back to a ‘before-the-game’: the moment of Max’s first rewind, a time before time became so crumpled. The polarized choice between Chloe or Arcadia Bay frames all the other choices and temporal complexes in the game, but is not meaningfully diachronized by any of them: ‘At its conclusion, *Life is Strange* leaves players with one of two possible outcomes, and in either case absolutely nothing from earlier in the season matters anymore’ (Sanskrit 2015). These frustrations once more show the complex interplay between ludic and narrative elements, reaffirming the ways in which players actively construct a sense of the Game Teleology in the middle of play. These dynamics are particularly evident with regards to *LiS*, as players produced forum posts and videos outlining their theories of what would occur in forthcoming installments.

These conceptions of the ending of *LiS* as an excess or as wasteful can be put in terms of diachrony and synchrony. As noted, the game builds its aesthetics of failure across each episode as the core game mechanic — seemingly so oriented to synchrony — leads to narrative, thematic and ludic consequences that have increasingly aggravated diachronic qualities. However, it is not as if the successful ending does not exist, so much as that it is subordinated to the dreamlike coda and the final choice. The game has already had its happy ending, Max seems to have resolved her time-hopping problems by travelling back through her gallery selfie, breaking out of her ‘cocoon’ with the ability to solve the town’s problems. Because she can act with the foreknowledge granted by her power, characters comment on how self-confident and capable she has become: a veritable Everyday Hero.

The abrupt re-introduction of the tornado plot amidst what seems to be the denouement of a happy Game Over gives the subsequent gameplay a supplemental character: it seems like an ‘after-the-game’. This is reflected in a surreal breakdown of established game design codes and pretenses to realism. Ludic structures become unmoored and lose their synchronizing reliability. This emphasis on failure and breakdown coincides with a caustic dose of auto-critique: the dream-sequence is the most ‘videogamey’ part of *LiS*. Interspersed among the interpersonal themes, character-centric dialogue and measured pacing that form the main materials of the game are scenarios that seem included mainly in order to incorporate stock videogame mechanics: a fetch quest involving searching for bottles in a junkyard, stealth gameplay avoiding security guards in the academy pool, and door digicode puzzles. Max expresses her exasperation as she encounters belated — almost apologetic — versions of these mechanics in her nightmare: ‘Oh no, bottles... this might be hell’; ‘I’ll be so grateful if this is the last digicode’ and in an unused audio file ‘I’m going to make the designers pay for all these bullshit code puzzles’.

LiS also caricatures another of gaming’s too-easy design tropes in the firearm: use of guns in the game is never powerful or successful, and Chloe even manages to kill herself with a ricochet in one particularly farcical scene. Near the end of her nightmare, Max emerges into a scene set in the town’s familiar diner, in which doppelgängers of most of the characters that she has met throughout the game are assembled. The assembled characters comment critically on players’ decisions, upbraid Max for misusing her powers, mock her pretensions to heroism, or lambast her for missing opportunities to help them.

Finally, she finds a version of herself sitting in a booth: ‘I’m you, dumbass. Or I’m one of many Maxes you’ve left behind... Thought you could control everybody and everything, huh? Twist time around your fingers? You only wanted to be popular. And once you got these amazing powers, your big plan was to trick people into thinking you give a rat’s ass... You’ve left a trail of death and suffering behind you.’

Conclusion

LiS thus leads to a final episode that is overwhelmingly characterized by the aesthetics of failure rather than the triumphant finale so characteristic of gaming. The neat synchronizing loops that players expect from conventional videogames are supplemented by the irreducible diachrony of the game’s final choice, and no amount of rearranging the past will afford an ending that will save both Chloe and Arcadia Bay. Read in this way, *LiS* is an auto-critique and refusal of the player-empowerment mechanics and plots that are so dominant in mainstream game design and indeed in technoculture more broadly. The dismissive attitude to the typical structures mandated by game design (fetch quests and so on) combines with the title of the gallery scene — Everyday Heroes — in order to highlight how samey the typical videogame structures are – a synchrony that operates at the level of the medium itself.

In the oft-criticised refusal to end ‘properly’, *LiS* highlights the difficulty that mainstream videogames have in exploring the everyday: their temporal structure. The form’s obsession with conflict and warfare, with far futures or distant pasts — with heroism that is anything but everyday — means that moments of stillness and reflection are rare indeed. Games which evoke other modes of experience are liable to be derided as ‘walking sims’ and ‘non-games’. *LiS* makes the most typical game mechanical sections seem supplementary and excessive — perhaps even grudging concessions to publishers with certain expectations of what a videogame can and should be — and in this way acts as a provocation not only to the exploration of wider thematics in videogames (adolescence in a networked society, same-sex attraction, abuse of authority and so on) but also to a more sophisticated attitude to the diachronic and synchronic potentials of videogame performance.

Chloe, as *memento mori* and strange performative attractor, insists on the reality of the ragged, threadbare time that has comprised the game, precisely because it has no bearing on the final scene: ‘Wherever I end up after this... in whatever reality, all those moments between us were real, and they’ll always be ours’. Max’s failures (she just really isn’t much good with her either her detective work or her ‘power’) belies the procedural rhetoric of the avatar as a simple channel for player choice or empowerment, operating as a challenge to new ways of designing temporal experience in games.

Games

ALIEN ISOLATION. CREATIVE ASSEMBLY, PS4, 2015.

DARK SOULS. FROM SOFTWARE, PS3 AND XBOX 360, 2011.

LIFE IS STRANGE. Dontnod, PC and PS4, 2015.

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