

## HEALING IN *LIFE IS STRANGE*: THE POSSIBILITIES OF DUAL- WITNESSING AS A PLAYER

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article analyzes how an attentive playing of *Life is Strange* may enable the user to successfully dual witness. In doing that, the user enters the narrative of the speaker, generating an account that is mutually witnessed. Then, the player becomes able to help in the healing process of Kate Marsh, who has undergone traumatic events. This reinforces the notion that the participation of the player is essential to the telling and molding of the story presented by games.

**Key-words:** video game studies; trauma; media.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa como uma maneira de jogar atenta pode permitir ao usuário desenvolver com sucesso em *Life is Strange* o processo de *dual-witnessing*. Nele, o interlocutor adentra na narrativa do locutor, produzindo um relato com testemunho mútuo. O usuário torna-se então capaz de ajudar no processo de recuperação de Kate Marsh, que vivenciou eventos traumáticos. Assim, é reforçado que a participação do jogador no desenrolar das histórias de games é essencial.

**Palavras-chave:** estudos de vídeo game; trauma; mídias.

*Life is Strange* (2015) is a five part episodic adventure video game developed by Dontnod Entertainment and published by Square Enix for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360 and Xbox One. Its first episode was released in 2015, on January 30, with each of the subsequent four being released every two months.

In the game, the player controls Max Caulfield, an eighteen-year-old girl who is back in Arcadia Bay—the town where she grew up—after five years away, in order to study photography at Blackwell Academy. One day, when being startled from some type of vision of a tornado hitting the city in the middle of the class, she goes to the restroom to wash her face. There, she witnesses a girl (named Chloe Price, Max’s childhood friend) being shot. Then, Caulfield reaches out screaming and is able to turn back time, waking up in class from the same nightmare again. From that moment to the very end of the game, her character has the power to rewind time, within certain limits and conditions. Time travel, according to

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professor and author Adam Roberts, is precisely one of the most common tropes that tend to lead people into classifying a piece of work as science fiction (ROBERTS, 2006).

*Life is Strange* strongly focuses on its narrative aspect, having won many awards in recognition of its plot, characters and storytelling<sup>2</sup>. It presents players with a choice system that allows them to make a range of decisions, varying from simple dialogue options to choosing who to blame for law violations, and even determining the survival or demise of other characters. The information which players get in order to help in their decision-making process is also diverse. It includes cutscenes presenting events of the story, a voice-over that verbalizes Max's thoughts (which can be regarded as a type of stream of consciousness), conversations with other characters, interactions with scenarios that may uncover clues, texts that can be read on Max's phone, and a journal on which players can read entries about her day, her ideas and her impressions of other characters. In addition, it is possible (except in a few key moments) to rewind time immediately after making a decision in case the players do not approve of the short-term outcome of their choices. In contrast, by the time long-term consequences become known, it is too late to change the decisions that have led to them.

Having all of this information available, in a scattered manner, players need to investigate, analyze, and put together what they find. Furthermore, the very nature of such media demands not only mental commitment, but also the mechanical effort of pressing buttons and taking actions in order to advance in the game, as well as providing responses that will mold the story and allow it to continue. Therefore, it fits into a type of narrative that game studies researcher Espen J. Aarseth calls ergodic, in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (AARSETH, 1997, p. 1). According to the scholar, this is different from nonergodic literature, in which the performance of the reader takes place in her head, because ergodic texts also demand a performance in an extranoematic sense. As Aarseth explains, the user of a cybertext (as he considers adventures games such as *Life is Strange* to be) effectuates a semiotic sequence, which constitutes a physical construction that is not characteristic to nonergodic literature (AARSETH, 1997). Looking at a cybertext as "a machine for the production of variety of expression" (AARSETH, 1997, p. 3), the researcher also proposes that the reader of such a text is constantly reminded of paths not taken, routes

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<sup>2</sup> *Life is Strange* has won over 75 awards, which are listed on the official website of the game.

unseen and stories that will remain unspoken. Every decision made implies that at least one other outcome is left unknown, and what could be might remain a mystery. According to Aarseth (1997), this is different from the ambiguities of a linear text, because it is not semantic ambiguity what we find in a cybertext, but variable expression. Furthermore, he defines this inaccessibility of certain outcomes not as ambiguity “but, rather, an absence of possibility—an aporia” (AARSETH, 1997, p. 3).

When thinking of the differences between a reader of nonergodic literature and a reader of ergodic literature, Aarseth argues that the first, even if fully engaged in a narrative, is not able to change its direction. She can, of course, interpret what she reads in different ways and find meanings that are not explicit or evident—but she is ultimately powerless to alter outcomes. In the scholar’s words, “the reader’s pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent” (AARSETH, 1997, p. 4). As for the reader of a cybertext, Aarseth considers that she “is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. The cybertext puts it would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection” (AARSETH, 1997, p. 4). The games researcher explains that the effort demanded of a cybertext reader (who can be called a player or a user) is not only one of interpretation, but also of intervention—which requires improvisation that might result in success or failure when trying to reach certain goals (AARSETH, 1997). As he explains,

The tensions at work in a cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control: “I want this text to tell *my* story; the story that *could not be* without me.” In some cases this is literally true. In other cases, perhaps most, the sense of individual outcome is illusory, but nevertheless the aspect of coercion and manipulation is real. (AARSETH, 1997, p. 4).

Aarseth’s studies indicate that the participation of the player in telling and molding the story presented by a cybertext is essential to its very progression and may be determinant to its outcome—or at least it “feels like” it is—. Considering this, the present work aims to analyze how attentive playing (which is more accurate to the type of media than *attentive reading*) of *Life is Strange* can enable the player to successfully act as a helpful second witness who is able to assist in the healing process of the character Kate Marsh.

## 1. Traumatic experiences and *Life is Strange*: The case of Kate Marsh

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), scholar and professor Cathy Caruth presents the “most general definition of trauma” as

an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (CARUTH, 1996, p. 11).

Originally, during the twentieth century, these notions were most often associated with soldiers who had witnessed massive death and relived such scenes in their nightmares. As noted by Caruth (1996), a rising number of overwhelming war experiences and other types of catastrophic responses in the three last decades of the twentieth century led physicians and psychiatrists to start reshaping their ideas about physical and mental experience, including as catalysts for posttraumatic stress disorder events such as rape, child abuse, accidents, etc. In the same book, the scholar discusses some of Sigmund Freud’s works, including the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which the psychoanalyst “wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them” and at how those people are subjected to those painful repetitions, having absolute no control over them (CARUTH, 1996, p. 1-2). As an example of repetition, Freud uses the story of Tancred and Clorinda in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved while she is disguised as an enemy. Later, while striking a tree with his sword, he hears Clorinda’s voice complaining that Tancred has hurt her again, for her soul is imprisoned in that tree (CARUTH, 1996). Expanding Freud’s interpretation of the story as “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind”, Caruth also sees it as an example of how posttraumatic stress disorder is born from an event that cannot be known or witnessed at the time it occurs—since Tancred can only hear Clorinda’s voice after he has hurt her the second time (CARUTH, 1996, p. 2). As she puts it,

Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (CARUTH, 1996, p. 4).

Therefore, we can understand that what overwhelms the victim is not only the violent event itself, but the way its violence has not yet been fully known or understood (CARUTH, 1996).

As psychiatrist and psychotraumatologist Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain in “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma”, “lack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories” (KOLK; HART, 1995, p. 163). They also note that, when people are exposed to trauma, they cannot organize the experience at a linguistic level. The failure to arrange the event in words leaves it to be organized at a somatosensory or iconic level, being manifested as nightmares, flashbacks, behavioral reenactments, etc. (KOLK; HART, 1995). In the article “Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma”, Kolk states that traumatic events present such horror and threat to people that they may affect their coping ability, their biological threat perception, and the ideas that they have of themselves (KOLK, 2000). The scholar also notes that Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in which the victims’ consciousness is haunted by the memory of the traumatic event—interfering with their ability to find meaning and pleasure in life—, is frequently diagnosed in traumatized individuals. When listing symptoms of PTSD, the psychiatrist includes aggression against self and others, amnesia and dissociation, depression, shame, distrust and self-hatred. The diagnosis of the disorder is made by three major elements: repeated reliving of traumatic memories—which tends to include sensory and visual memories, often accompanied by feelings of distress—, avoidance of reminders of the event—which usually results in detachment and emotional numbing, rendering the victim unable to experience pleasure and joy and making them withdraw from engaging with life—, and a pattern of increased arousal—which manifests itself as irritability, concentration problems, startled responses, etc. (KOLK, 2000).

In *Life is Strange*, we meet Kate Marsh in the second scene of the first episode of the game (named “Chrysalis”), when Max is startled from her vision of a tornado hitting Arcadia Bay, and wakes up in class, feeling confused and scared. As the photography teacher Mark Jefferson continues to give his lecture and Max tries to recollect her thoughts, we see a girl on the left side of the classroom throw a paper ball at the face of another girl, who is on the right

side of the room. She is Kate, as we will soon discover. Since we are controlling Max, who is sitting at her desk, we have the opportunity of reading her journal, which includes some relevant information about Marsh. The first entry that mentions the girl is from September 15<sup>th</sup>: “(...) I don’t want to slam everybody. I do like Kate Marsh, she’s down the hall and in one of my classes. She’s so pretty AND sweet and friendly (...)” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Max also mentions that she has borrowed a book from Kate, which makes us to think the two have a good relationship and that Kate is perceived as a nice person by the main character. However, the fact that a paper ball was thrown at the girl hints at something being wrong, which is confirmed once we read Max’s entry about her:

I’ve forgotten if I’ve ever seen Kate Marsh smile or laugh in the past month. She’s really sweet and nice, even though the other students make fun of her abstinence campaign. Even if they act immature, everybody at Blackwell are seniors, not high school freshmen... She gets a lot of shit in fact. I know she’s involved in a lot of religious groups, but she doesn’t preach to me so I don’t care.

But she’s been extra quiet and introverted the past couple weeks. She looks like she’s in zombie mode. I wish I could help her, but I can barely help myself. I wonder if all the bullying has worn her down... I can see how it would. I have to make an effort to talk to her more often, maybe invite her to tea or a movie. (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

Since we eventually find out that the day Max is startled from her vision in class is October 7<sup>th</sup>, we are able to compare the first information we have of Kate (her being sweet and friendly, as noted in the September 15<sup>th</sup> entry) with the changes Max has noted taking place in a period of two to four weeks later. According to the main character, Kate has not smiled or laughed in a while, is acting very quiet and distant, and behaving like “a zombie” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). This suggests that something has happened in the last month that has altered Kate’s behavior. Even though we do not know, at that moment of the game, what exactly transpired with Marsh, the way she is acting matches some of the symptoms Kolk (2000) listed as characteristic of PTSD: depression, distrust, detachment, emotional numbing and withdraw from engaging with life.

Throughout the first episode, it is possible to get some hints about what might have happened to Kate. If the player picks up the paper ball in the classroom, it reads “Dear Kate, we love your porn video. Xoxo Blackwell Academy” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Furthermore, some posters about sexual abstinence that can be found on the murals of the girls’ dormitories

have been scrawled over with the messages “Kate twerks for God” and “see Kate’s video for proof” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). “Will bang 4 Jesus” is written on Marsh’s door slate outside of her room in the dormitory (BAGHADOUST, 2015). With these clues, it is possible to infer that there is a video of Kate circulating among the students, and that it probably involves some sexual content. The confirmation of that comes in the second episode (named “Out of Time”). While Max is using one of the stalls and hidden from view, two of the most popular girls in the school come into the showers to taunt Kate:

Victoria: What's up, Kate?

Kate: School.

Taylor: That's it?

Victoria: That video of you clubbing didn't look like homework...

Kate: Victoria, that wasn't me...

Taylor: Oh, my God. Right.

Victoria: Don't be shy. I think it's awesome you set a tongue record on video...

*(Taylor laughs<sup>3</sup>)*

Kate: You're going to be sorry someday.

*(Kate leaves)*

Victoria: Oh, boohoo, I'm sorry you're a viral slut. I'm sure she had fun.

Taylor: Looks like it.

Victoria: I know Nathan hooked her up. And you know he has the good shit.

Taylor: Preach it, sista. (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

This conversation confirms that a video of Kate kissing people was recorded, and adds the information that the girl was probably drugged before it happened.

After taking a shower and getting ready for the day, Max goes to Kate’s room in order to return her book. There, a lot of interactions with the scenario and with Kate herself might reveal very important information. If the player chooses to click the button to look at the mirror, Max notes that it has been covered up and that it may indicate that Kate cannot look at herself. If she clicks at a drawing, the girl says through her voice-over that “Kate’s art is perfect for a children’s book—everything looks so fun and colorful and...positive” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). An interaction with a violin prompts the sentences “Kate used to play the violin every morning... She stopped last week...” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). When looking at a pile of clothes on the floor, Max thinks “Kate’s room is usually immaculate. For her this must be a pigsty...” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). The lights in the room are off, and the curtains are drawn, making the place very dark. When approaching the window, the player

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<sup>3</sup>The italics represent actions the characters take in the scenes.

may click on it, making Max think “It’s way too emo in here. Kate isn’t that gloomy... until lately” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). When looking at a picture of Kate with her sisters, the voice-over says “Almost forgot what Kate looks like when she smiles...” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Looking at Kate herself prompts the sentence “Poor Kate... She doesn’t look good...” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Peeking at the trash can makes Max think “That’s a lot of tears. She’s going to go through boxes” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). All of these interactions help further establish that Marsh has been acting different in the last few weeks, she seems to be depressed, experiencing shame, and revealing a lack of interest in engaging with life, which are all compatible with PTSD symptoms (KOLK, 2000). When the player finally decides to interact with Kate, this is some of the conversation that follows:

(...) Kate: Basically, I went to one Vortex Club party and ended up making out with a bunch of people...and I have no memory of it...  
Max: That's awful. So, how did that happen?  
Kate: It's a long story. I'm still trying to sort it all out...  
Max: You have to tell me more than that. What happened at the party? Did you drink?  
Kate: I swear to God I had one sip of red wine. And then I drank water.  
Max: Not enough to get wasted, is it?  
Kate: I don't get wasted. Ever. I take a sip at church and I don't end up on a viral video, okay?  
Max: Did somebody drug you?  
Kate: I remember...I remember getting sick and dizzy...  
Max: Go on...  
Kate: Then Nathan Prescott said he would take me to the hospital...  
Max: Nathan Prescott? Oh, shit!  
Kate: He was being nice for a change when he offered to help me.  
Max: He's the opposite of nice. What next?  
Kate: All I recall is driving for a long time...then I woke up in a room...I thought it was a hospital because it was so white and bright...  
Max: Go on, I'm listening.  
Kate: Somebody was talking to me in a soft voice...I thought it was a doctor...until I heard Nathan and felt a sharp sting in my neck...and...and...  
Max: And?  
Kate: That's all I remember! I don't know what happened... I woke up outside my dorm room the next day. I didn't have any marks or bruises, but I felt gross.  
Max: So, who took the video of you at the party?  
Kate: I have no idea. Probably Victoria. She was there being her mean self.  
Max: Jesus, Kate, I'm sorry. This is serious shit.  
Kate: How do I get a viral video taken down? I know it's already spreading-- what if my church sees that? I need to know what to do...  
(...)

Kate: I need to find out if Nathan Prescott helped me...or hurt me after that party. (...) (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

This is very important information for different reasons. First, it further confirms that Kate was drugged before kissing a number of people and being recorded on camera. It also indicates that something else has probably occurred after the party. It is hard to tell whether Kate has repressed memories of what happened or was absolutely unconscious during the time of the event. Nevertheless, as explained in “The Tragic Problem of Rohypnol, Roofies, and Trauma” in Michael’s House Treatment website, victims of PTSD who have been drugged struggle with a sense of powerlessness, and are unable to have flashbacks of a real experience, often conjuring very frightening assumptions because they do not know what truly happened (THE TRAGIC, 2019).

It is only by the end of episode four (named “Dark Room”) that the player discovers what really happened to Kate: with the help of easily manipulated and unstable rich kid Nathan Prescott, the photography teacher Mark Jefferson has been drugging teenage girls, abducting them and taking pictures that display them in very vulnerable poses and framing (which he believes to capture the essence of innocence). Through these acts, the two male overdosed and killed a girl named Rachel Amber. This is never directly addressed in the game, but the manipulation of young girls’ bodies, the comments on “innocence and beauty” and the misogyny of the acts leave room for speculation of whether sexual abuse has also taken place in those photography sessions (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

While it is not possible to make a definitive diagnosis of Kate, since the game does not explicitly states that she is suffering from PTSD and we do not know for sure that she experiences intrusive flashbacks, she certainly has undergone a traumatic experience and presents many of the symptoms typical of the disorder. Furthermore, whether she is able to start a healing process and survive is dependent on the player, her choices, and how much of an attentive and helpful listener and second witness she can be, as will be explored in the next section.

## **2. Healing, games and the possibilities of second witnessing as a player: Saving Kate**

It is frequently noted by trauma scholars that being able to actively tell one's story is helpful for recovering from trauma<sup>4</sup> (CARUTH, 1995; KOLK; HART, 1995). However, as Dartmouth College professor Susan Brison observes in "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self" (1999, p. 46) "in order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them". According to the professor, the process of recovery is very difficult for the survivors when other people are unwilling to listen to what they have been through. In relation to that, she affirms that

(...) how (and even whether) traumatic events are remembered depends on not only how they are initially experienced but also how (whether) they are perceived by others, directly or indirectly, and the extent to which others are able to listen empathically to the survivor's testimony. The traumatic event (...) is shaped and reshaped in memory over time according, at least in part, to how others in the survivor's culture respond. (BRISON, 1999, p. 42).

She also believes that survivors can obtain more control over the traces left by traumatic experiences when they are able to tell their story to others who are empathic enough to listen, and that "just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are able to listen" (BRISON, 1999, p. 48).

In "Come on Brother. Let's Go Home": Dual-witnessing in Toni Morrison's *Home*" (2016), Mount Mercy University professor Eden Wales Freedman proposes a readerly engagement of traumatic literature. Bringing the definition of the word *witness* presented by *The Oxford English Dictionary* into the discussion, Freedman explores the idea of a primary witness as the speaker who bears witness, and a secondary witness as the spectator who bears witness to the speaker's testimony (SIMPSON; WEINER, 1989). He also explains the process he calls dual-witnessing, in which the listener or reader effectively enters into the narrative of the speaker, generating an account that is mutually witnessed. If there is a failure to engage with another's testimony, what happens can be called anti-witnessing (FREEDMAN, 2016). According to the professor, acting as a secondary witness requires the acknowledgment of one's indivisible roles as a potential victimizer, an empathic bystander who stands side by

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<sup>4</sup>The notions of recovery from trauma and healing are here considered a reintegration of traumatic memories into a victim's narrative story, allowing them to make sense of their experience and move on with their lives, even if never fully recovered from the event. See Caruth (1995; 1996).

side with the victim, and a survivor-in-solidarity with the speaker, and a careful navigation of those spaces. Freedman also states that dual-witnessing is a challenging process, and that it requires some psychological finesse and constant practice. However, if successfully maintained, it can offer healing to both speaker and listener or reader (FREEDMAN, 2016).

Nonetheless, as stated before, in *Life is Strange*, we are not exactly readers, but players or users—which prompts the question “how can we be empathic listeners and successfully second witnesses when playing the game?”—. In order to possibly answer that, it is better to discuss a little more of what games theory has to say about story-based choices in video games before proceeding to examine the case of Kate Marsh in *Life is Strange*.

In his book *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* (2013), professor Sebastian Domsch states that, in order for a situation to be considered a choice situation in a video game, there must be at least two different options, and that the player needs to be aware of the existence of these different options. Still according to Domsch, those perceived as the most interesting in a structural sense are those choice situations that provide the player with only incomplete information, when the user has some knowledge about possible outcomes, but no certainties. These are experienced as meaningful choices, because they are likely to have some impact on the story/game universe, and present the player with a feeling of agency (DOMSCH, 2013).

According to Domsch (2013), choices that alter the state of a fictional world (in this case, the gameworld) can be considered narrative events. In those, the player sees the decision as part of the narrative development of the gameworld. Since different choices are likely to imply different outcomes, Domsch (2013, p. 127) states that “to experience a choice in a video game as narrative is to experience that game’s narrative as open”. He also explains that, in order for the decision to be perceived as narratively relevant by the player, it needs to be seen as a “meaningful action that can be described with the semantics of the storyworld”, it is made “by the player also as a choice of a diegetic agent” and it has “consequences on the internal development of a storyworld” (DOMSCH, 2013, p. 127). The scholar also highlights that narrative choices in games have a doubled form of agency: while the player serves as the actual agent of the choice, the decision is also seen by the player as the choice of an agent who is part of the gameworld. This would be the avatar/protagonist that “identifies the player

with one diegetic agent” (DOMSCH, 2013, p. 127). In relation to this identification, Domsch notices that video games have access to what he considers one of the most interesting abilities of fiction: not only creating a difference between the self and the other, but also providing an identificatory perspective on the other. To him, games could go even further than fiction (which presents the perspective of the other), because they can allow the player to play and act as the other (DOMSCH, 2013).

In their article “Playing with Trauma: Interactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game” (2014), Ghent University researcher Toby Smethurst and professor Stef Craps discuss how one important aspect of games that is relevant to trauma studies is complicity, which works as a combination of other two aspects: interactivity (the feedback loop established between player and the state of the gameworld) and empathy. According to them, “due to the unique ways in which players engage with them, games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events” (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014, p. 9). The scholars explain that the media creates in the players a sense of responsibility for what happens on-screen, because they have control over what happens in the game, and that when something bad happens to a character, it is usually because of something that the player has done or failed to do (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014).

In *Life is Strange*, when the player clicks the button that reads “New game”, the following message is exhibited on a black screen:

Life is Strange is a story-based game that features player choice, the consequences of all your in game actions and decisions will impact the past, present and future. Choose wisely... (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

Additionally, in certain moments (when facing important choices or directly interfering with the state of the gameworld, as in erasing a message on a board, for instance), a mysterious tune starts playing and the icon of a butterfly is displayed on the upper left side of the screen, along with the message “This action will have consequences...” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). When this happens, the player knows that she has done something that will possibly alter the state of the storyworld in some yet unknown way. In relation to Kate Marsh, these alterations might mean her survival or her demise, so the attention the player dedicates to listening to her and investigating details of her story are determinant to the

girl's fate—that is, Kate can only be saved if the player is able to successfully second witness, both as a player and as a diegetic agent in the story (Max).

Throughout the gameplay, the player has a few opportunities to try to be supportive of Kate (as Max), asking how she is feeling and whether she wants to spend some time together. However, there are a few key moments that are directly decisive to whether Marsh will be willing to listen to Max (and the player) at the end of episode two, when her fate in the game is sealed. In a scene on the rooftop of one of the school buildings, Kate is about to commit suicide. Due to the exhaustion of using her powers too much during the day, Max is unable to go back in time, but she manages to freeze it until she can reach Kate. This is one of the first times in the game in which the player has to face what Farah Mendlesohn considers to be one of the main focuses of science fiction: the consequences that come with new wonders (MENDLESOHN, 2003). Since Max had overused her powers during the day—frequently in altering trivial decisions and entertaining her friend Chloe—, she is now too exhausted to rewind time when it truly matters. On the rooftop, only two factors will dictate the outcome of Marsh's situation: the decisions made by the player to that point will determine whether Kate trusts Max or not, while the dialogue choices in the conversation will impact the girl positively or negatively. If the player has carefully paid attention when interacting with scenarios and characters, she is more likely to know what to say and save the girl—that is, attentive playing and carefully second witnessing are decisive here. At this point, we truly learn that not all crucial moments in the game will be resolved with Max's powers. Even though she can bend time to her will with a certain frequency, connecting to people is still necessary if she wants to be able to protect them.

The first relevant moment for the outcome of the rooftop scene requires being attentive while exploring the scenario. In the girls' dormitory in episode one, it is possible to interact with the board outside Kate's room, which reads "Will Bang 4 Jesus". The player has the choice to leave it as it is, or erase it and draw a peace symbol instead. If the second is done, Max will bring it up during the dialogue by the end of episode two, and it will make Kate more receptive to her.

The second important scene that influences in Kate's story also takes place in episode one, during a cutscene. When Max is about to leave the girls' dormitory to return to the main

campus, she overhears security guard David Madsen talking to the girl in a way that seems threatening: “David: ... So don’t think I’m blind! I see everything that happens here at Blackwell! Do you understand what I’m saying? / Kate: No, and leave me alone!” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Then, the player can decide between taking a photo of the pair or intervening. If the first option is chosen, this is the dialogue that follows:

David: ... you can't fool me. I know everything about this school. I cover the waterfront. So you better figure out what side you're on...

Kate: Please, leave me alone!

*David leaves and Kate sees Max.*

Kate: Hope you enjoyed the show. Thanks for nothing, Max. (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

However, if the player chooses to intervene, Kate is a lot more pleased:

Max: Hey, why don't you leave her alone?

David: Excuse us, this is official campus business—

Max: Excuse me, you shouldn't be yelling at students. Or bullying them.

David: Hey, hey, nobody is bullying anybody. I'm doing my job.

Max: No, you're not.

David: You're part of the problem, missy. I will remember this conversation.

*David leaves.*

Kate: Oh Max, that was great. I think you scared him for once... I have to go, but thank you. It means a lot.

Max: Anytime, Kate. (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

In case the player decides to tell David to stop harassing Marsh, Max writes an entry in her journal stating that “(...) I felt good about what I did and Kate seemed truly happy that somebody stood up for her.” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Later in the game, Caulfield also gets a text from Kate, which reads “Thx again Max for helping me :)” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). It is clear that Marsh feels happier if the player intervenes on her behalf, and that is reflected on her acting much more receptive to Max’s efforts to discourage her from committing suicide on the rooftop. Nonetheless, the player can still convince Kate that she took the photo as a proof that Kate was being harassed, and depending on other choices throughout the game and in the moment of the conversation, the girl can still be persuaded to step down.

Choosing to take a photo or intervene also has an impact on how Kate reacts to Max in the third crucial moment of her story, when Caulfield meets Marsh in the showers. If the photo was taken, the dialogue that takes place between the two at that moment is the following: “Max: Oh! Uh... Hey, Kate. Sorry about yesterday. / Kate: Yeah, I'm sorry you

didn't do anything to help. But you're just like everybody else here... / Max: That's not true, I wanted to help, but, but-- / Kate: Whatever, it's done..." (BAGHADOUST, 2015). If the player decided to intervene, a nicer conversation happens: "Max: Hey, Kate. How are you doing? / Kate: I'm here. Thanks again for standing up for me yesterday. I needed that. / Max: Anytime. That guy has issues. Kate: Doesn't everybody here?" (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Following that, while Max is behind the shower curtains, she overhears two girls harassing Kate. Before they leave the bathroom, they decide to write the link for Kate's video on the mirror. If the player decides to interact with the scenario, she gets the option to erase the link. Such action will be brought up during the conversation on the rooftop, making Kate more agreeable to what Max has to say.

When exploring Kate's room in episode two, the player might find information that can be decisive for the outcome of the rooftop conversation. There, she can discover that Marsh's mother and aunt are being very harsh on her and judging her for the video, while her father is being accepting and supportive. She can also see a picture of Kate with her two younger sisters. Furthermore, some important details can be found on Marsh's Bible: there is a stick note attached to one of the pages, with the following message highlighted: "Matthew 11:28. 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...'" (BAGHADOUST, 2015). There is also another note, but this one is crossed out: "Proverbs 21:15. 'When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous, but terror to the evildoers'" (BAGHADOUST, 2015).

On the rooftop, there is a moment when Kate says that nobody cares about her. The player has four options to argue against that: mentioning Kate's sisters, mother, father or brothers. Choosing brothers or mother will make Kate take a step back in the direction of the edge, or jump to her death if she has already taken one because of player choices, since she does not have any male siblings and her mother is blaming her for what happened. Choosing sisters or father will make Kate accept Max's hand and go back to safety if she has not taken any steps back yet because of player decisions, or continue unsure of what to do in case she has. If the latter happens, Kate states that God has put her on that roof, to which the user can reply with three different answers: "Proverbs 21:15", "Suicide is a sin", or "Matthew 11:28". The first two will make Kate jump, because she "does not believe in justice anymore" and she

thinks she is “already in hell anyway” (BAGHADOUST, 2015). Only mentioning “Matthew 11:28” will save Kate by that point. It is one of her favorite bible passages, and she is touched that Max knows about it. Therefore, we can see that attentively and empathically playing is also paying attention to the information about the suffering characters that is offered to us in a variety of ways throughout the game.

There are other two major decisions that will make Kate more or less willing to trust Max. One of them is telling her to go to the police or look for proof first when the girl tells Caulfield that she believes she was drugged. The other one is whether or not Max answers her telephone call later in the game, when Max is with Chloe. This decision is complicated by the fact that Chloe feels neglected by Max and pressures her not to answer another person when they are together. On the rooftop, having told Kate to go to the police and having taken the call are the two choices which make the girl more receptive and trusting in Max, and less likely to take a step back towards the edge of the roof (the second step always means that Kate kills herself).

If the user has played the game as attentively as possible and made an effort (as Max) to show Kate that she was willing to listen to her and to pay attention, the rooftop conversation will possibly be<sup>5</sup> like the following:

Kate: Max, seriously, don't come near me. I will jump.

Max: Okay, okay. I'm right here. Kate, please...

Kate: Oh, Max, I know you want to help me... I love that you stepped up to David, but it doesn't matter now. Nothing matters.

Max: You matter. And not just to me.

Kate: I do want to believe that...

Max: Kate, your life is still yours. And we can get through this together... Let me help.

Max: Like I helped by erasing all that crap people wrote on your room slate...

Kate: I'm glad to hear you worry about me... That makes me feel better...

Max: Of course I worry. You're my friend, Kate.

Kate: I did feel better talking to you on the phone. I always feel like you really listen.

Max: Kate, please trust me. Come stand by me, okay? I can help you now. I know I can.

Max: This morning I erased the weblink to the video... It was written on the shower room mirror...

Kate: Are you serious? Thank you so much!

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<sup>5</sup>In order to avoid making this excerpt too long, I only included the dialogue choices I used during the conversation in my own playthrough.

Kate: The fact that you don't care about that video and would come up here to stop me means a lot...

Max: I care about you because I believe you were drugged. We will found out who did this and make them pay.

Kate: You sound so persuasive, Max... If only...

Max: Kate, I believe you. Will you believe me?

Max: Please...you don't have to do this...

Kate: Max, I'm in a nightmare and I can't wake up...unless I put myself to sleep. Then everybody at Blackwell can post pics of my body; I'm already on the internet forever. No wonder they call it a "web"; nothing can ever get out. Like my video... I wish I could go back in time and erase everything...

Max: Kate, this is our chance to beat the bullies. That's the only way we can win against them.

Kate: Can we really, Max? I don't believe in miracles anymore either.

Max: Now I do. You're part of the reason why. If you come down with me, I can tell you more...

Kate: You're such a good person, Max. Even if you're full of crap. But I'll come with you...you're my friend.

Max: Forever. Can we hug on it?

Kate: No...nobody cares about me...nobody...

Max: Kate, I saw that card from your father. You can count on him; he clearly loves you without question.

Kate: Dad does care...even though I hurt him... He's the only one I know who believes in me...

*Max reaches out to Kate, who takes her hand. Max pulls her to safety.*

Kate: I'm sorry...sorry...

Max: What are you talking about? You saved me from talking in class.

*The two girls hug each other as the screen fades to black. (BAGHADOUST, 2015).*

If the player succeeds in saving Kate, there is an extra cutscene with her during episode four, when Max visits her friend at the hospital. Marsh thanks Max for listening to her and being so supportive, because she has made her believe she was not alone. She has also gone back to drawing illustrations for children books, and is acting a lot more chipper. Kate also tells Max that they need to uncover what Nathan did, both in order to learn the whole truth and to save other possible victims.

By the end of the game, if the player chooses to sacrifice Chloe and save Arcadia Bay, time is reversed back to the moment in the bathroom when Max first saved the girl's life and obtained her powers. Then, she lets Nathan kill Chloe. The boy is taken to a psychiatric institution, and the truth about the photos he and Jefferson were taking of unconscious, drugged girls is revealed, and Jefferson is arrested.

When talking about her own traumatic experience, Brison states that having the opportunity to bear witness in the presence of others who actually heard and believed what she had to say was therapeutic. She also says that when her assailant was brought to trial, it was healing to give her testimony and have it confirmed by the police, prosecutor, her lawyer and the jury (BRISON, 1999). Even though we do not get to see that on-screen, we can infer that Kate will now be believed, and will have the chance to tell her story to people who are willing to listen, instead of making fun of her. In addition to that, uncovering the truth about everything that happened to her after the party where she was drugged will make it possible for the girl to start trying to witness her whole traumatic experience, which will probably be very important for her healing process. Furthermore, just like Brison, she is likely to have her testimony believed in and supported by the police and the jury.

Professor Freedman (2016) states that dual-witnessing is a process in which the listener or reader effectively enters into the narrative of the speaker, and that such process can offer healing to those involved. I believe that the same concept can be used for some video games, such as *Life is Strange*. Considering the very nature of the media, it is important to note that not only do we have to pay attention to what traumatized characters tell us with their words, but also to clues distributed through interactions with the scenario, information offered by other characters, and details presented in cutscenes. Dual-witnessing for Kate in *Life is Strange* is not only listening to her, but also putting together everything that the game offers, and reconstructing the girl's narrative through a careful playing. Even though Max has been granted time rewinding powers, such powers alone are not enough to save Kate: spending time with her, truly listening to her, and creating a bond with the girl are still an essential part for having a positive impact in her tale. The social commentary—frequently present in the sci-fi genre—that the game seems to offer is that incredible powers may not be enough to solve problems: affection and human connection are still necessary to our health and survival. Therefore, we can affirm that being attentive and empathic (both as a player and as Max) while playing *Life is Strange* is the way through which the user can offer Kate a chance to start healing and surviving to tell her whole story.

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