Violence in the Hands of Women: An Analysis of Gendered Violence in Life is Strange and Before the Storm

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Violence in the Hands of Women: An Analysis of Gendered Violence in *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm*

By

Mitchi Anne Maja

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Honors from the South Carolina Honors College

May 11th, 2019

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of the video games *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* and how they serve to reflect social expectations and norms placed upon both women and men even today. Cultural studies recently accepted video games as a form of media to study, especially with the prevalence and accessibility of video games in various platforms. Violence in video games is culturally associated with men and the male audience; my analysis focuses on violence in the hands of women. By analyzing the choices I made as a player and how these games present their narratives and characters, I conclude that these video games, which are thus a reflection of society, still hold both women and men to a traditionalist standard. Prominent female characters in these games use violence to protect and as a last resort while prominent male characters are already violent, aggressive, and antagonistic. Violence and how these characters choose to use it are gendered. While the strides made in the name of female empowerment and feminism are not to be ignored, cultural products still work to promote mainstream values.

Keywords: feminism, video games, patriarchy, cultural studies, violence, gender
INTRODUCTION

*Life is Strange* is an award-winning, critically acclaimed video game developed by the company Dontnod Entertainment.¹ It was internationally lauded for its narrative storytelling and character development. For a small development company, their success came as a huge surprise. The creators revealed in an interview their difficulties in marketing the game; various publishers told both Dontnod co-founder, Jean-Maxime Moris, and producer, Luc Baghadoust, to “make [a] male lead character” instead of their proposed female lead (Lebeouf). After various rejections, the game was eventually picked up by Square Enix, a major video game publisher who was already known to market games with notable female characters such as *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Remember Me*, and the *Tomb Raider* series.² With Square Enix heralding *Life is Strange*’s marketing, the game was made available on various platforms such as the Playstation consoles, the Xbox consoles, iOS, and Android. The game was so well-received that the company made, and continues to do so, spinoffs, sequels, and prequels.

As of writing this, *Life is Strange 2* released their second episode, and the company itself even listed a tentative timeline for the release of the rest. Just like its predecessor, the story takes place in a span of five episodes. Other spin-offs and the like that resulted from their success was the prequel, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, and another free game named *The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit*. Comic book spinoffs and a possible digital series in the works also represent the popularity garnered through the video game community. *Before the Storm* got

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¹ The game won awards such as the Peabody-Facebook Futures of Media Awards in Excellence and Innovation in Digital Storytelling; the Game Awards for Best Game for Impact; the Develop Industry Excellence Award for Use of Narrative, and much more.

relatively minor exposure as compared to its predecessor, but it also garnered nominations. It is obvious that this franchise of games would not have existed save for the people that were instrumental in its formation and marketing.

*Life is Strange* follows the story of Max Caulfield, a photography student at Blackwell Academy. She stumbles upon a strange ability where she could rewind time when she saves her best friend, Chloe Price, from her death. The disappearance of Chloe’s friend, Rachel Amber, sparks the story as both Chloe and Max investigate the circumstances and peer into the darker side of their town, Arcadia Bay, with the help of Max’s rewind power. After all, they were sure they had all the time in the world and the invincibility to tackle on this dangerous endeavor. With Max’s traveling through time, she quickly realizes that changing the past drastically alters her present, and ultimately, her future. The prequel released after this, *Before the Storm*, starts through Chloe Price’s point of view. Just sixteen years old, she forms an unlikely friendship with Blackwell’s well-loved Rachel Amber and navigates her own feelings on her father’s sudden death and Rachel’s family secret. While this game does not feature a time-travelling ability, Chloe’s ability is to use her words and wit to get what she wants, when she wants it. Compared to the first game, there are no rewind options and no do-overs. The player is stuck with their first choice.

My analysis of these video games should show how much of an influence they have in our lives, and the presence of female-led characters is notable because of the pervasive stereotype of video game culture as initially a male space. With these two games, I aim to analyze the use of violence as perpetrated by each gender, with an emphasis on female

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3 The game won awards such as the GamesRadar’s Best of E3, the Golden Joystick Award for Best Soundtrack and Most Touching Moment, and the 2018 Games for Change Award for both Game of the Year and Most Significant Impact.
characters. I seek to show that even though we are in another stage of feminism where American women are generally given more freedoms than their former counterparts, these games still uphold and promote traditional views of women’s place in society as caregivers and nurturers. Doing so also promotes the role of men in society as aggressors and natural leaders. In the rest of the section, I lay out the pillars of my thesis and how they aim to relate to greater society: the definition of violence, video games as a study of culture, feminism in the modern era, and the patriarchy. I investigate what the definition of violence is to analyze these characters’ actions in these games. Much like film and literature, video games are now considered another means to study social norms as presented by scholars such as Ian Bogost and Eugene Provenzo. In another vein, I tie in female violence and video games as a culture product into feminist theory. Violence in these video games is gendered, and that has ramifications for the current wave of feminism. The concept of the patriarchy and, particularly, its downfall serves as the main goal of feminist movement as well. I play through all five episodes of Life is Strange and all three episodes of Before the Storm and investigate the ramifications for society based on the choices I made and what I observed.⁴

Video games and their influence continue to be both celebrated and criticized in greater society today. The polarity on video games garnered enough attention for academics such as Eugene Provenzo, Jr., Ian Bogost, and Matthew Southern to talk about how these games are “...part of popular culture, [and thus] can play an intrinsic part in shaping our outlook, our role and our lives” (Southern). Provenzo and Bogost notably highlight the influence of Nintendo in capturing their target audience with their products, and there is a growing sentiment within

⁴ These games highlight the importance of choice. I have no doubt that other players will have a different experience when playing these games and only highlight my own experience with them.
academia where they legitimize video games as a reflection of society, just as much as their media and literary counterparts. As noted by Southern, video games are “beneath popular culture”; he defined popular culture as what most Westerners would consider to be knowledgeable and accustomed to the ‘classics’ (2). Because of this social belief, video games, more so than any other form of popular media, was met with “rampant prejudice, legislation, and stigma” (Southern 1). This just makes a more compelling argument for the study of video games as a reflection of culture.

Provenzo first notes the influence video games has on our lives, citing authors such as Terri Toles and Marshall McLuhan, summarizing their findings by saying that games are “an extension of social man…games are extensions, not of our private but of our social selves” (72). Players often choose the games they want to dedicate their time to because they feel as if they are free of social expectations and norms, at least for a moment. It is important to note that what baggage these players bring with them is reflected in how they play and interact with the games, whether they are playing a single-player, narrative campaign or a multiplayer game with a shared goal. Bogost notes this phenomenon through his essay “The Rhetoric of Video Games” and says that the values that these games promote exist outside the game as well (119). This ties in wonderfully with the feminist movement and its backlash, portrayed through Provenzo’s analysis of female character leads on video game covers in the 1980s (Hint: none were found). Bogost goes on to argue that video games are “deliberate expressions of particular perspectives” (119). Video games make claims or assumptions about what we, as a society, value most, and then markets it to us to capitalize on both our time and money as players and gamers. In this thesis, I look at how society perceives women and the feminist movement through the creation and interaction with both Life is Strange and Before the Storm.
In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Video Games*, the authors note in the introduction that “in many ways, digital games seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms” (Malkowski and Russworm 2). Various essays in this edited volume note the lack of racial minorities, sexual minorities, and gender minorities at the forefront of a game. Often, games have been, and continue to be, marketed with a strong, buff, white male lead. The climate is changing recently, with games such as *Tomb Raider* where female characters are at the forefront. There is a consensus that there is a long way to go, and this study serves to analyze the image of female characters in a game where the narrative is pushed by women. Do we see feminist leanings in the representation of these characters? Does the gender of the player matter in the cases of single-player narrative, female-fronting games? Keep in mind that technology and programs are biased as they are made by humans who may have their own convictions and beliefs about the world as they work on it, whether they be conscientious or not (Bogost 128).

To investigate the representation of women, I also chose to analyze their relationship with violence. While the goal is to view how female characters use violence to pursue their means, there is still much to be said about what it means when male characters choose to be violent toward their female counterparts. I had to come up with a definition of violence that would fit what I was looking for, as I found out that violence was gendered through my experience of the game.

What is violence? This question has and continually stumps academics and intellectuals today. There are issues in pushing for either too narrow or too broad of a definition, and Robert

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5 In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, there are various essays written on the lack of representation for minorities. They are encapsulated in Lisa Nakamura’s essay on “Racism, Sexism, and Gaming’s Cruel Optimism” which is an afterword to the book itself.
Audi expands on these in his essay, “On the Meaning and Justification of Violence” (Audi). Violence is portrayed in two different ways, either as force or as violation. Vittorio Buffachi summarizes the difference in “Two Concepts of Violence,” also quoting and expanding upon Audi’s definitions. Violence as force is portrayed through destructive and harmful behavior, through means such as physical contact. Buffachi notes, though, that force can also include forces of nature, which can and has been destructive in terms of its effect on humans, and violence is rather evaluative than the word “force” which is regarded as neutral especially in terms of physics and the nature example mentioned before (195-196). Audi attempts in making his definition more specific in that he states, “violence in this sense is always done, and it is always done to something, typically a person, animal or piece of property” (50). Nature as a force, and in this definition would be classified as violent, even if nature may not intend to wreak such destruction.

Violence can also be defined as a violation, referencing the etymology of the word itself. The word “violence” is believed to come from the Latin violentia or violare, the former meaning “vehemence” and the latter conflated with the word “violation” (Buffacchi 194). Violence in terms of violation simply means that the action made is infringing or transgressing one’s rights. This includes verbal threats and emotional abuse. It is important to note that the violent intent of such actions may be called into question because of the lack of physical markers, such as bruises, cuts, or scratches. More modern definitions of violence do include personal violations, especially with the rise of domestic abuse cases particularly in the US. Buffachi also makes it clear that the broader the definition of violence is in terms of violation, then the more prevalent and inescapable violence is (197). There is also the question of human rights; while the violation of human rights is a characteristic of violence that academics can agree on, what specific rights
should be broken for it to be considered violence? Does violence include the infringement of rights (notably American) such as the right to free speech or the right to private property? The rights given to citizens depends on their country of residence as well. If any act can be pinned down to a violation of someone’s human rights, then violence is meaningless.

Audi’s definition of violence notably expands to include psychological dimensions, while also keeping in line its physical aspect as well. Buffachi comes up with CCV, namely Comprehensive Conception of Violence, in his attempt to broaden the definition of violence to include non-physicalities (198). Even then, Buffachi notes the complications of this more comprehensive definition: Audi’s definition includes the words ‘vigorous psychological abuses’, but it is relative to how vigorous these abuses may be (60).

There seems to be no agreement on its definition, but for the purposes of this analysis, the definition of violence used will also include psychological abuses, as the forms of violence that each gender utilizes is different. To keep the use of violence through each gender as brief as possible, I will use the terms “male violence” and “female violence” to both mean how characters of each gender utilizes violence to reach their goals. I also question the existence or absence of violence in the cases of suicide, attempted suicide, and euthanasia and whether the question of self-inflicted violence also serves to complicate the definition of violence already highly contested.  

Violence and gender have a deep-rooted relationship, enough so that they gave rise to the feminist movement as we know today. To reference back to Bogost and Provenzo’s claims about video games, they serve as a mirror to society. Are feminist ideals present in this video games and what do they look like? Feminism has gone through multiple waves over the years, changing

6 Lots of scholarship exist on this matter, see Hook’s “In defense of voluntary euthanasia” and Welchman’s “Is ecosabotage civil disobedience?”. 
to fit the issues that they might view as of great significance for that time. Scholars such as Anthea Taylor and Kathrina Giltre have a rather pessimistic view on today’s feminism, notably called “commodified” feminism (Taylor 189; Giltre 19). While they both laud the progress women have made, in the sense that Girl Power, for example, has pushed women to be more comfortable with however they dress and however they present themselves, Taylor specifically pins on the consumerism of the trend (192). Giltre, through her analysis of 90s romantic comedic films, has shown that there were still expectations put upon women that they need to fulfill, even if that woman may be married to her work or adamant on pursuing her own goals (19). In the end, they both claim that women still serve to uphold the patriarchy in a more underhanded and insidious way (Giltre 28; Taylor 195). This does not necessarily mean that women know that their actions serve the patriarchy, but it is packaged neatly enough that the patriarchal leanings behind them seem benign. Taylor notes that mass advertising celebrates a specific brand of femininity, represented through floral dresses and expensive jewelry (186). Giltre, in her analysis of the movie What Women Want notes that the career-oriented, successful female lead in the movie still feels empty; what satisfies her is her relationship with a man (24). It is understandable that these seem like negative outlooks on today’s feminism, but both scholars still end their analyses with the hope that the inclusion and embrace of female bodies in public spaces means progress and not necessarily regression. In my analysis of these games, I can see what point of view these scholars were coming from and will note the traditional expectations that either are upheld or subverted. In the same vein, I still consider any effort towards equality between genders as a step forward, no matter how small.

Patriarchy is a concept mentioned in the formation of the feminist movement, and I analyze its representation and function in these video games, even when they are both marketed
and praised as having female leads. Gerda Lerner made an intensive analysis on the formation and preservation of the patriarchy in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Her analysis and critique of this system illustrates the central role patriarchy played in the emergence and perseverance of feminism. According to Lerner, how patriarchy came into being is due to Traditionalists pushing the belief that women’s subordination is universal or natural, and thus this system of oppression is unable to change and “it need not be questioned” (Lerner 16). In this same vein, male dominance is and continues to be viewed as universal and natural as well. The sexual division of labor, biological determinism, and psychological claims made by people such as Freud were designed to keep women subordinate to men. 

The patriarchy has proven to be amazingly resilient throughout the years as these values and claims are still present in our customs, laws, and social roles: “Women *always and to this day* lived in a relatively greater state of un-freedom than did men” (Lerner 214). Lerner applies a more pessimistic view of the feminist movement by describing strides made by women for equality as “improvements in the degree in which their situation affords them opportunities to exert some leverage within the system of patriarchy” (217). The patriarchy was able to persevere for so long because it includes the consent and cooperation of women themselves in its preservation.

“The Position of Women in Video Game Culture: Perez and Day’s Twitter Incident”, by Sam Tomkinson and Tauel Harper, sheds light on the position of women in video game culture, a culture that is often compared to the patriarchy (Malkowski; Bogost; Provenzo). Felicia Day is a video game icon today, previously known for her acting career in the television series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. Tomkinson and Harper give her credit for making video games more accessible

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7 “Freud’s normal human was male; the female was by his definition a deviant human being lacking a penis, whose entire psychological structure supposedly centered on the struggle to compensate for this deficiency... it was Freud’s dictum that for the female ‘anatomy is destiny’ which gave new life and strength to the male supremacist argument” (Lerner 19).
to what was considered a minority: women. She voiced several video game characters in successful franchises such as *Dragon Age*, *Fallout*, and *Guild Wars*; she also is known to make parodies of video game culture and reports in the independent video game market on YouTube.\(^8\)

She remains active in the game community today and makes sure to highlight the fact that she is female through her work, a feat that is unusual in video game culture itself. Her popularity and her gender notwithstanding, this means that she is often the target of harassment and exclusion, typically from the male members of the video game community. The increase of female gamers coincides with increased misogyny in the community, which often include rape threats and death threats, some directed towards their families and friends. Tomkinson and Harper chose to study a specific incident of misogyny in online video game spaces. A former *Destructoid* associate editor, Ryan Perez, made tweets criticizing Day’s contributions to the community.\(^9\) The tweets were derogatory, calling her “nothing more than a glorified booth babe.”\(^10\) While the backlash was swift and many of Day’s notable male associates were able to shut him down and there was an apology made, a later article that he wrote questions the validity of diversity and whether there is a need for such in modern video games.\(^11\) While there was a public admittance of fault, there is still a long way to go in terms of changing the culture when it comes to women entering men’s spaces.

The backlash of female leads in video games are a great reflection of how feminism, violence, and the patriarchy are intertwined in modern society. While the presence of female

\(^8\) Tomkinson and Harper have a dedicated section on Felicia Day in their paper, “The position of women in video game culture”.

\(^9\) *Destructoid* is a video game news website that was founded initially as a blog with a focus on video games by Yanier Gonzalez.

\(^10\) Tomkinson and Harper have a dedicated section to screenshots of said tweets in their paper.

leads in *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* show that there are strides made for female representation and inclusion in a heavily male space, is their representation enough? To answer this question, I divide the next main parts into Female Violence and Male Violence (each part corresponding to characters in each gender as they used violence or became violent) as I observed in these games. With my observations, I aim to find out whether the prevalence of female characters and their relationship with violence either undermines the institution of patriarchy or if they are lacking and how we, as a video game community, can move forward to address the issues that are entrenched in both society (and thus, in our video games as well).
METHOD AND GAMEPLAY

My personal experience with video games started when I was very young. My family moved to Japan right after I was born, and my father shared the same love for them as I did. He was the one who bought the original PlayStation 1 when it hit stores in Japan. Since then, I have mostly played on consoles such as the Xbox, the later iterations of the PlayStation, and the Nintendo Switch. My experience with choice-based games is relatively new; this genre of game developed more recently with games and companies, such as Telltale Games, who focus on the desirability of choice as the main marketing aspect of their games. Giving players a choice in games is not new and many games give players the option to choose to do side-missions or not. Most of the video games I played before Life is Strange and Before the Storm had a clear goal and there are times when I could choose to do side-missions or not. I generally do since it gives me a better picture of the world these creators wanted to push and promote through their game.

![Fig. 1](image1.png)

**Fig. 1.** Chloe confronts Max/the player as to how she was able to save her from being killed in the girls’ bathroom from Nathan. The player/Max can choose to implicate themselves, which leads them to explain their newfound power to Chloe. The choices are represented by buttons on the controller. *(Life is Strange 2015)*

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12 Telltale Games are notable for games such as *The Walking Dead* and *Minecraft: Story Mode*, the former based upon the hit tv show and the latter based on a widely known video game.
To analyze these video games, I mainly streamed and recorded myself playing through them, which also includes my commentary on what I observed based on game design, the motives and reasons behind my choices, how other characters reacted to my choices and how all these aspects work together to push the plot. I used a PlayStation 4 and played these games with a controller, with similar buttons on the controller corresponding to the response or action I want to make (See Fig. 1).

![Image](image1.jpg)

**Fig. 2.** Max is tasked to find glass beer bottles for Chloe to practice using a gun. The buttons on the bottom represent how fast the player can rewind and whether the player wants to skip the rewind animation altogether. The spiral on the top left shows the span of time Max can turn back to. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

Other buttons correspond to whether Max/the player wants or needs to use her rewind power, with the limits of how far she can go back represented with a spiral on the top left of the screen, the point in time we were in as a small circular dot making its way through the spiral. The other buttons on the screen help either speed up or slow down the rewind power, with another one providing a way to skip the return animation if it gets too tedious (See Fig. 2). As mentioned before, there are limits to how far back the player/Max can go back in time, as shown with a black and white version of her surroundings with time on pause (See Fig. 3). It is interesting to note that even though she is given this power that most people would want to have,
there are limitations. Max tries to reconcile her newfound power and its limits to how far she can go with her investigation of the town and its dark secrets.

Fig. 3. Max is pushed to her limit (and often cannot just rewind time) at key points in the game. This is right after Kate Marsh commits suicide and, in a panic, Max rewinds time only to find herself just stopping time right before Kate jumps off. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

Major decisions in the story of both games are represented through two to three choices, with the background shifting focus which is reminiscent of what physical photos looked like when they were processed in darkrooms (See Fig. 4). The player/Max can rewind back to a point in time right before the major choice if they wanted to see how each choice played out. Once the character moves to a new area, though, the choice is considered permanent.
Fig. 4. Max/the player faces a major choice on whether they want to be mean to Victoria or choose to comfort her from an accident (that Max notably caused with her powers). The background shifts in focus and the choices are often written in all capital letters.

Fig. 5. Max goes into the dorm room of a classmate to look for something she borrowed from her. There are items that the player can interact with, if they are close enough to see the names associated with them. *(Life is Strange 2015)*

To explore the world and the surroundings in both these games, the left joystick provides movement while the right shifts the camera. Certain items that the player can interact with are highlighted with an arrow and a name of the item itself (See Fig. 5). There are many options as to what the player can do with objects or people, with the top choice mostly resulting in the characters’ observation of the object itself and the bottom choice mostly a way to interact with the object in question (See Fig. 6).

In *Before the Storm*, the way the player interacts with objects and other people is similar, but Chloe does not have the power to go through time. Instead, she uses her biting words to get her way, and this is represented with a response flanked by blue conversation bubbles with symbols most often associated with the censoring of expletives (See Fig. 7). I observed that Chloe’s interactions with the people around her is more detailed and more nuanced than Max’s power. The goal of the conversation minigame is for Chloe to hit the middle circle of the dotted
line through her responses without going over or hitting the end of the line. while Max can simply just go to a former point in time, Chloe must choose what words she needs to use to do what she needs to do. I found myself having difficulty a few times in hitting the middle circle, and sometimes went over, with the results going awry (See Fig. 8).

![Image](image1.png)

**Fig. 6.** Chloe is expelled from Blackwell and is told to clear out her locker. Before she leaves, the player can decide whether to sign her name with the others who held the locker before her. Different ways to interact are portrayed by different buttons. (*Before the Storm 2017*)

![Image](image2.png)

**Fig. 7.** Chloe tries to get in to a concert that is notably for adults. The different responses she can say correspond with a different button. To activate her ability, which is notably called “Backtalk”, the player must choose the response that is flanked by the blue conversation bubbles. (*Before the Storm 2017*)
Fig. 8. Chloe in “backtalk-mode” to gain entry. The dotted line on the bottom updates depending on what response the player chooses. The player must make sure they hit the center circle rather than hitting the other end of the line. (Before the Storm 2017)

One aspect of these games that made it easier for me to remember what choices I made are the choice summary pages which are given at the end of each episode. The first page shows the major choices the player makes in the game, with percentages of how many people made the same choice (See Fig. 9).\textsuperscript{13} It is interesting to guess what values and reasons other people may have when they made these choices, as they may differ from mine, especially in terms of the kind of society and culture they grew up in. The representations of gender ideologies are more in line with the kind of audience the creators the game wanted to reach, which is notably Western and America-centric. This game was made by a French-Canadian company that takes place in Oregon, USA. While the usual consumer of video games is notably male, the inclusion of female characters and female-fronting stories subverts the stereotypical gaming audience.

\textsuperscript{13} The percentage differs based on the platform the player uses to play these games. I played on a PS4 and got different percentage results from a friend who played on his PC.
Fig. 9. This is the results page of the first episode, Chrysalis. The check marks represent the choices that I made through my playthrough while also showing the percentage of people that chose the same. (Life is Strange 2015)

The second page of the choice summary pages lists the minor decisions the player can make throughout the episode (See Fig. 10). Some of these choices can be missed, and they mostly focus on the characters’ relationships with the people around them rather than the overarching story itself. This could prove to be a mirror to how players interact with the people around them, although it is important that what a player may choose to do in a game is not necessarily reminiscent of the values that they choose to uphold and promote.

How I made these choices as compared to other players may differ; I chose to make choices that I would do if I were put in that situation. If there was not a choice that directly reflected my feelings on a situation, then I would pick the next best thing. Most of my choices worked for the betterment of the characters around me, but I also wanted to see the extent of violent acts I can make these female characters do. I tried to make a balance between the two goals of this thesis. Given more time, I would make various playthroughs and analyze the reactions of characters with each other in terms of what choices I make in how I interacted with the game world in general.
Fig. 10 This is the second results page of the second episode, Out of Time. The check marks represent the choices that I made. These choices are minimal and do not do much to further the plot. This could also be presented to show the illusion of choice. (*Life is Strange* 2015)
FEMALE VIOLENCE

Chloe Price is considered the catalyst for *Life is Strange*. Max’s choices are all tinged with the intent to keep Chloe safe. In both these games, Chloe grows from a shy, withdrawn teenager to a loud, notorious (at least around her town) teen developed from between the time Max moves away from Arcadia Bay and then comes back to study Photography at Blackwell Academy. Chloe notably has dry humor and uses her biting words as a form of affection. She still considers Max to be her best friend, even when there was little contact between the two in the years between. In *Before the Storm*, the game portrays Max as moving forward with her life in the form of unanswered texts and missed calls. Chloe is overtly jealous about how Max chose to simply move on with her life while she herself is bogged down with interpersonal issues and a rocky family life. At Max’s return to Arcadia Bay in *Life is Strange*, Chloe continues to frame Max as her one friend and would do anything for her, which includes putting herself in danger (See Fig. 11).

*Fig. 11.* Max uses her rewind power to save Chloe from being killed by Nathan Prescott. This is only one of the various times she uses her powers to save her. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

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14 In the prequel, *Before the Storm*, she is framed as the main protagonist instead.
15 This is highlighted in Chloe’s journal entries and texts to Max in *Before the Storm*. Her entries are letters to Max; she herself decided to never send these to her.
16 In both *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm*, Chloe references to her dad’s death due to a car crash. Her mother falls in love with an overtly strict man, which makes her family life rather rocky.
Chloe’s one form of violence is the usage of taunts and a gun when she has access to it. She also often steals and breaks into places as her form of fighting back against the authority figures in her life. She often uses her words and wit to get her way, and this is used as a skill to progress the story in *Before the Storm*. She most particularly jabs at male insecurities with examples such as “paranoid,” “loser,” “bratty rich kid” among others. Her actions are stereotypically masculine: she straightens herself up and speaks louder if people try to talk over her.\(^{17}\) Chloe’s usage of a gun is not a new phenomenon, especially in video games. In an exchange with Max, she sums up quite perfectly her stance on gun control, especially as it became a more divisive topic in our culture today: “I thought you believed in gun control.” “I believe I should control the gun. It’s the men who should be checked”.\(^{18}\)

![Fig 12. Photo of Chloe’s birthday shown when Max teleports to her own timeline where Chloe’s dad dies from an accident. Madsen and Chloe continue to be antagonistic towards each other, to the point that Max, and I as the player, is asked to pick a side in one of their many arguments. (*Life is Strange* 2015)](image)

\(^{17}\) The trope of the “bossy woman” is a more recent stereotype as a backlash to the feminist movement. While I do classify her actions as masculine, the culture is quickly changing.

\(^{18}\) Chloe steals a gun from her step-father’s gun cabinet and shows it off to Max. Max is averse to such weapons and expresses her discontent. Chloe, however, would rather have a gun herself than the men in her life have one. This could be viewed as a jab at America’s rates of gun violence, particularly among domestic abuse rates.
If I were to look at the source of her violence, the game pinpoints it to the accidental death of her dad. Chloe considers her dad to be her best friend; her transformation between these two games shows the drastic change she made, notably of her appearance, after his death.\(^{19}\) The fact that Max moved away with little to no contact sustained between them at the wake of her father’s death, and the sudden entrance of a new father figure in her life exacerbated her pain and anger (Fig. 12). This unchecked anger and loss push her to fight tooth and nail for the ones that chose to or continued to stay in her life. When she finds out that Rachel, who is implied as her first love, was seeing someone else during the duration of their relationship, she drives off in a rush with red-stained eyes.\(^{20}\) Max tells her to “…stop blaming me and everybody for everything wrong in [her] life.” Chloe only retorts with what I consider to truly reflect the choices behind her actions: “I gotta blame somebody. Otherwise it’s all my fault. Fuck that… ever since [my dad] died, my life has been dipped in shit.” The anger in her words is what propels her life choices in both games.

Max Caulfield is the main protagonist that the player controls in *Life is Strange*. The story progresses because she stumbles upon the power to travel back in time. She can make whatever choices she wanted to benefit from and save the people around her, especially Chloe Price. She is mostly a shy, withdrawn teenager who manages to find her voice when she realizes that she has what she thought to be a virtually endless amount of “do-overs” from her time-traveling powers. It is noted, at the end of the game that Jefferson, a photography professor at Blackwell Academy that turns out to be the antagonist of *Life is Strange*, “…noticed that [she’s] been more…fearless this week than maybe [her] whole life.” She goes to Blackwell Academy to

\(^{19}\) Chloe used to have long, blonde hair and rather looked plain prior to her dad’s death. Afterwards, she cuts her hair short, dyes it blue, and promptly changes her wardrobe to include grunge-like aesthetics.

\(^{20}\) Chloe and Rachel’s relationship has more of a development in the prequel; a choice the player can make is to kiss her and let her know that you were interested in something more than a friendship.
pursue her dream of becoming a professional photographer after learning that her favorite photographer, Jefferson, was coming to Blackwell to teach.

Max is given more leeway and permission to implement violence, the player knowing that her powers can get her out of most situations when it goes wrong. The game, though, implements restrictions and limits on when we could use the game mechanic. There are some instances and choices where we are not able to rewind back to, and the player finds out that there are mortal limits to the use of her power as Max becomes lethargic and has a nosebleed when her abilities push her to the limit.

She uses her hands, does not typically use weapons but can use a gun when needed, and, like Chloe, also uses her words and wit to achieve a certain result. When she uses her hands, Max mostly uses them to shield herself. There are a few times when she pushes and scratches other people in the name of self-defense. In an instance where she protects herself from Nathan Prescott, she scratches his face leaving permanent scars that pervade through the rest of the episode. She also uses a gun in the name of self-preservation; I, as the player, chose to pull the trigger on a drug dealer when he threatens Chloe with a knife. While the gun proved to be out of bullets, that same drug dealer’s actions when dealing with Max and Chloe for the rest of the game shifts because he now knows that Max will do almost anything to save Chloe.\(^{21}\)

An analysis of the first two forms of violence Max uses shows that she is and only will be willing to use violence if it meant keeping loved ones safe. Max uses her hands often, and my initial analysis framed her use of them as “animal-like”. Catwoman is an example of a female heroine who uses her hands, notably her claws, to achieve her goals. No male heroes or characters are known to have fended off their attackers with just their nails or, in Catwoman’s

\(^{21}\) In an altercation later in the game, the drug dealer is more aggressive with Max and the player, remembering that she had the guts to openly shoot a stranger if it meant protecting Chloe. The drug dealer dies in this timeline.
case, their claws. Examples such as X-Men’s Wolverine do implement claws, but they are viewed as a separate entity from Wolverine himself. While the story goes that these metal parts are genetically engineered to contract and retract according to his will, Catwoman’s nails are more associated with the stereotypical feminine nails: long and straight. No stereotypical man, either in today’s world or even in media, would be seen with long nails. Max’s case serves to gender her form of violence, even when there may be less of inequality gap than there was a hundred or so years ago.

One aspect of Max and her violent actions that I do want to highlight is the player’s choice. The player ultimately has a choice in whether she decides to act out or not. There is one choice that I would most particularly like to talk about, and that is one of euthanasia. I previously noted how euthanasia fit in our definition of violence. In Life is Strange’s case, Max goes back to a time where she was able to save Chloe’s dad from a car accident. That choice, in turn, results in an alternate timeline where Chloe herself gets into a car accident and is thus paralyzed from the waist down. Chloe tells Max how hard the medical bills have been on the family and that she does not have much time left. She thus implores her to end her life. If the player hesitates in their decision, Max tells Chloe how another friend of hers tried to end her own life, and that she did not want to go through that kind of emotional turmoil again: “How can I be responsible for ending [your life]” (See Fig. 13). Chloe turns the conversation around on her and mentions how Max has choices when it comes to her life. The car accident only served to limit her choices and strain the relationship she has with her family: “At least you have a choice. When you want to

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22 Contemporary views on long nails have changed, with the rise and prevalence of drag queens and an embrace of feminine aspects by queer members of the LGBT community. Mainstream men still hold this belief otherwise.
make a decision, you can just do it. Look at me, I’m at the mercy of...everybody”.\textsuperscript{23} It is interesting to note the desirability of choice in a choice-based game.\textsuperscript{24}

![Fig. 13. In *Life is Strange*, the player can either succeed or fail in saving a friend, named Kate, from taking her own life. This is contingent on the player being aware of their surroundings, particularly during an altercation where you talk to said friend beforehand (closed blinds, darkened room, upsetting images on walls because of people bullying her). I succeeded in saving her life. Max references this moment in her life when she is faced with a similar situation, albeit in a different timeline. Max, and the player, is given the choice to end or keep Chloe (in this timeline, she is greatly paralyzed and was told that her organs would shut down soon) alive for the sake of her family and their financial situation. (*Life is Strange 2015*)](image)

As mentioned before, what pushes Max to engage in violent acts is a need to protect.\textsuperscript{25} Chloe’s life is, virtually, in her hands right from when she first saw her killed in the girl’s bathroom, right up to the end, where the hurricane threatens to clear out Arcadia Bay from the map. Max views Chloe as the one link to her old life, where she believed everything to be carefree and not rife with drama. Viewing the motives behind Max’s actions, I argue that *Life is Strange*, and thus society, still expects women to hold up to the traditional motherly image as

\textsuperscript{23} I chose to take her life, with hesitation.

\textsuperscript{24} Discussion could be made on the case of the connection between euthanasia and violence in the hands of women. Women are stereotypically known to employ subtle methods of killing (i.e. poison, see: the history of the hairpin and its usage as a weapon, etc.)

\textsuperscript{25} While I do observe this throughout the general plot of the story, players can choose to not be violent if they wished. There is a question of whether more subtle ways of obtaining goals as violent in their implementation.
portrayed through both Bogost’s and Provost’s claims that video games serve as a reflection of society. Max often feels guilt for abandoning Chloe at her time of need, so she seeks to compensate by putting herself in danger and using her power to keep her safe. For Max, protecting is instinctive and natural. Chloe, in turn, still tries to protect Max but does ultimately defend herself because of how tumultuous her life has been up to that point. Chloe learns, early on, that the only person that she can truly rely on is herself, but that does not stop her from protecting Max, Rachel, and her mom. As much as the other female characters in this game serve to pursue their own goals and motivations, this expectation of being the caretaker and the protector of the weak still falls on them.  

Few other female characters in both *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* demonstrate their autonomy. To demonstrate this, I chose two specific characters as examples: Rachel Amber in *Before the Storm* and Victoria Chase, who appears in both games. Rachel Amber serves as the catalyst for Chloe’s growth in *Before the Storm*. She often stands up for herself in various situations; in the beginning of the game, she saves Chloe from a group of drunk, touchy guys who were threatening her. She uses her words and sometimes weaponizes the things around her. Items that she uses includes empty bottles, a plank of wood, and even her fists.

Rachel’s reasons for her resorting to violence could be described through what most other people in the game say about her: “a flame that is just destined to burn out.” Even though she is considered popular at Blackwell and well-loved by many teachers and authority figures, that does not stop various people from coming up to Chloe to tell her to be careful of Rachel: “She...
has a tendency to burn herself and everyone else around her.”

When Chloe does ask Rachel for her reasons to her reactions, Rachel responds in turn with the fact that she feels alone in the world and that no one would understand her. The reasons behind her actions are often glossed over or at the mercy of the people around her (See Fig 4).

Fig 14. A representation of what Chloe hears and has been warned about Rachel manifesting itself in her dreams. Rachel is pictured on fire, a car door just separating them. *(Before the Storm 2017)*

Victoria Chase is a similar character in that she uses her wits and the resources at her disposal to get what she wants. She is portrayed as having a huge sense of ego, a character trait that is rarely found in most other female characters (with sometimes the exception of Rachel). She often employs subversive tactics as well; one example is when she puts muscle relaxant in Rachel’s tea before the play just so that she, the understudy, could take her role on the stage instead. She soon climbs up the social ladder after Rachel’s disappearance and at the beginning of *Life is Strange*, she is described as “bitchy” and “cold.” Her actions have prodded another student at Blackwell to commit suicide. She soon tells Max/the player that she chooses to do certain things because of a need to overcompensate and a need to be on top, otherwise she would be devoured whole by the industry that she chose to put herself in which was photography, like

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28 Reminiscent of the female burn-out trope in media.
Max’s studies (See Fig. 15). Like Rachel, Victoria is given not much of a leeway in terms of the reasoning behind her actions.

**Fig. 15.** At a school function, Max confronts Victoria to find out where Nathan is. Victoria admits that her actions and motivations are due to her insecurities as a budding photographer. She mentions that both her parents are famous photographers and she feels inclined to be as great as they are. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

If we were to compare Chloe and Max to Rachel and Victoria, the differences are somewhat clear. The former two are given whole backstories, whole scenes dedicated to their character growth and motivations behind their actions. There are numerous scenes in both *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* where Chloe does relive the day when she sees her dad for the last time. It is a recurring theme in *Before the Storm* more particularly; Chloe often has dreams where she talks with her dad in the car that he supposedly dies in. Max’s ability to go back in time and relive certain days gives her the ability to go back to the point where she saves Chloe’s dad from the car accident. When the timeframes begin to loop out of control, she tells Chloe that she “…thinks [her] help is hurting.” The ultimate choice at the end gives her the choice between choosing the safety of Chloe over the safety of the whole town.\(^{29}\) Events leading up to that point almost made it seem that Chloe was truly destined to die, and that Max was the only person

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\(^{29}\) Chloe, at the climax of the game, says “Maybe you’ve just been delaying my real destiny… Look at how many times I’ve almost died or actually died around you. Look at what’s happened in Arcadia Bay ever since you first saved me… for once I think I should accept my fate”.
delaying the inevitable.\footnote{Chloe ultimately seen as disposable, even with countless times Max and I, as the player, worked so hard to keep her alive and safe.} Chloe and Max’s motivations behind their actions are easier to explain, and thus easier for greater society to digest, as compared to Rachel and Victoria. When I look at Chloe and Max, I see them as two women wanting to keep each other safe from a life that seems to let them down repeatedly. Mainstream society would much rather see stories of women taking care of the poor and the weak, rather than stories where women are given full autonomy and make choices based on what would most benefit themselves.

Rachel and Victoria barely have much of a backstory (or even an epilogue) to build upon. It is difficult for society to understand actions that women take for themselves, which is why I see their characters as dismissed or put in the background. While Before the Storm does focus on Rachel’s family dynamics and how she came to be in Arcadia Bay, there was no deliberation on the choices she makes.\footnote{Rachel grapples with her identity as the District Attorney’s daughter; she also soon finds out that her real mother was a drug addict and aims to meet up with her in the rest of Before the Storm. Her father tries all his best to prevent the two from meeting.} If she knows what she wants, she will do anything to get it. The same can be said about Victoria. There are only a handful of times in Life is Strange where she seems to care about the people around her.\footnote{A few instances show her physically caring for her friend, Nathan Prescott. She isn’t shown to comfort her female friends, notably.} In one of the latter episodes, Victoria tells Max that the reasoning behind her actions was because she wanted to be on the same level as her parents, who were famous photographers. If anything, her actions stem from a level of insecurity. Both the games make it seem as if women to pursue their goals through any means possible should not be given much importance.

All these characters’ usage of weapons is only framed in the sense that they needed to for self-defense. There are few examples of any of these women using weapons to deliberately threaten or harm anyone. Most of the time, these women use weapons to keep others safe. This
harkens back to Max’s character and the traditional motherly image that she exudes when she puts Chloe’s well-being above hers. Other kinds of weapons could be termed as subversive, such as drugs. These women would not be found hounding people with guns and knives, which is a theme when it comes to the male characters in these two games.

The portrayal of characters like Rachel and Victoria make it seem as if these kinds of women, independent, egotistic, etc., are often pushed to the side to make way for characters such as Max and Chloe, the latter two being examples of traditional motherhood and a woman in grief, respectively. Various women like Victoria and Rachel are found in the real world, often called “bitchy” or “misunderstood”, mostly by other characters in the game. These kinds of women are viewed as isolated, and thus excluded from mainstream womanhood. Through a feminist lens, these kinds of women are termed as “independent” or “self-autonomous.” The brunt of the description heavily falls on the kind of people around them. I would term the game’s treatment of these female characters as “safe subversion.”

Women like them are not what people want to hear stories or play games about. This compromised empowerment only serves to attempt at subverting gender norms; independent women deserve to have their stories heard alongside other women such as the mother, the teacher, and even the caretaker (Taylor).

There are notable tropes that both these games incorporate that affirm the situation of women that I last noted. A plot point that pushes the story is either the disappearance or the death of women. *TV Tropes* name this trope as the Disposable Woman. Chloe’s constant recollection of Rachel and Rachel’s wanting to meet her elusive mother could shift this term into one called

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33 Whether culture, or culture products, are powerful enough to subvert anything is another question as well.
34 Note that gender norms are difficult to subvert, although the culture is changing recently.
The Lost Lenore. In this case, the disappeared woman continues to have an impact on their choices and actions after they served their purpose of being the catalyst for the story. Before the Storm has a prime example of the Disposable Woman trope, and this is personified in Rachel Amber’s character. As described before, a woman who is so fiery and brilliant is inevitably burned out. In Life is Strange, Chloe serves as this burnout character, albeit her actions are tinged with gray and she is given more leeway in terms of storytelling, in which various people confront Max and tell her to be careful around Chloe. In Before the Storm, Rachel serves as this burnout character albeit this classification is notably blunt in the game’s personification of her. She is credited with starting the massive forest fire in Arcadia Bay that decimates much of the forest surrounding the city; Chloe begins to have dreams of Rachel on fire, or her looking back on the forest fire that continues to be the theme throughout Before the Storm. Analyzing these two tropes together give us a view on women that were analyzed earlier: independent, autonomous girls are inevitably pushed aside and considered dispensable for the sake of these other female characters’ stories, which thus confirms the patriarchy’s bias that women are there to nurture and to weep over other people. Is violence gendered? To answer this question, I analyze how the game presents male characters and how they use violence. In this way, my analysis would serve to demonstrate society’s expectations of men and what that means in the greater context when men choose to use violence in their everyday lives.

MALE VIOLENCE

Nathan Prescott appears in both *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm*. He is framed as the rich, bratty kid who chooses to manipulate the people around him through his money and his father’s influence as the son of one of the most influential families in Arcadia Bay. In *Life is Strange*, the game really tries to portray him as the main antagonist as he constantly gets both in Max and Chloe’s way. He starts off *Life is Strange* by showing up to school with a gun and threatens Chloe to keep her mouth shut about the fact that he’s been pushing drugs throughout the school and that he has been taking advantage of heavily drugged victims, notably female. Max intervenes the moment Nathan pulls the trigger, and that awakens her rewind power, which brings her back to the few minutes before the altercation between Chloe and Nathan. Max’s powers save Chloe for the first time of many numerous times in *Life is Strange*.

Nathan is known to flaunt his father’s money and his social standing at the school. In *Before the Storm*, he is initially bullied for his privilege due to his family fortune and how his family is entwined with the town’s history. It is implied that in the time frame between these two games, he was able to make a stand for himself, more so when he realizes that he is basically untouchable. In a scene where Max and Chloe break into the Principal’s office to find clues on Rachel’s disappearance, Nathan’s academic record was spotless. There was no mention of his frequent, anger-infused outbursts or complaints about his lack of effort in his academic studies. When the player chooses Max to tell the Principal about Nathan’s involvement with a gun, the Principal chooses to dismiss her, noting that Nathan’s family has done a lot for the town: “Mr.

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37 In an altercation with Drew North, a football player at Blackwell Academy, he demeans Prescott’s nervous tics by calling him “twitch” and talks down on Nathan’s photography work, calling it “really weird crap”. He also notes Prescott’s entrance to the football team: “I hate that you’re on the team now. You’re such a loser.”

38 Max and Chloe break into the principal’s office for clues on Rachel’s disappearance. They find reports on all students at the school and see Nathan’s spotless record.
Prescott happens to be from the town’s most distinguished family. And one of Blackwell’s most honored students. So it’s hard for me to see him brandishing a weapon in the girls’ bathroom.”

There are countless times in *Life is Strange* when I, the player as Max, investigates Nathan’s motives for being notably violent. He is seen with a gun at school, and he proceeds to profusely beat up Max’s friend once he heard that she had snitched on him and his concealed weapon. He is also able to break into Max’s room and leave a threatening message on her wall. Towards the end, when both Max and Chloe were getting closer to the truth of Rachel’s disappearance, we break into Nathan’s room (See Fig. 16). We find out that he keeps mementos of his childhood when Nathan’s father paid attention to him and indulged his wishes. It is implied that as he grew older, Nathan’s father became more distant and more aggressive. In an email to Nathan, he notes how he has to clean up his act to take over his father’s place when the time comes: “I know being a Prescott is a burden and I’ll guide you into this room step by step as did my father… This shithole town is going to get an enema along with a fresh brand. Don’t fuck it up, son.” This harkens back to Lerner’s picture of patriarchy, and how violence is implemented and related to the institution. In Lerner’s historical formation of patriarchy, she notes the prevalence of slavery and how societies then obtained slaves. The practice of raping or violating foreign bodies (either male or female) is a long-time practice in warfare, from the second millennium B.C. to the present. This is built into and noted to be essential in the formation of patriarchal institutions as it is a clear use of power from one group over the other (Lerner 80).

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39 Principal Wells says this when I, as Max, tries to report Nathan and told him that Nathan had a gun on campus and was threatening to shoot.

40 I found an award noting “The Best Son” in his room.
There is only one mention of a maternal figure in his life, which was briefly noted in an email from his father. While there is no mention of his mother, Nathan has an older sister who is shown to have moved out of the country to Brazil. She attempts to check up on him in her emails to Nathan, but she is physically so far removed from their family’s issues that her words ring hollow in Nathan’s ears. Even though she reassures him that their father is “…a bully who inherited power not wisdom,” Nathan still actively works to gain his approval. The pressure to rework his narrative as part of the Prescott family ends up pushing him over the edge as he quits taking his psychiatric medicine and continues to support Mr. Jefferson in his drugging of victims for Jefferson’s artistic endeavors.\(^\text{41}\)

In *Before the Storm*, Nathan Prescott is a new student at the school and his initial attempts for him to fit into the status quo was encapsulated in his attempts to try out for Blackwell’s football team. What weighs him down is the fact that 1) he is new, 2) he is the son of an “old money” family, 3) he was able to get into Blackwell due to his connections, and 4) he

\(^{41}\) Nathan’s deferment to a dominant figure could be perceived as a means to make up for the lack of a loving father figure in his life, to the point where he would be violent if it meant acceptance.
continues to struggle with mental illness throughout these two games. It is important to note that
the people around him know that he is mentally ill and do remind him to see his psychiatrist and
take his medicines (See Fig. 17). It is also important that he chooses to do none of those things,
which only serve to demonize his actions even more.\textsuperscript{42} His actions portray him as a lone wolf,
with Victoria Chase often coming to his side to comfort or take care of him in certain parts of the
narrative.

\textbf{Fig. 17.} Max finds bottles of prescription medication in Nathan’s room. They seemed to still be full and
untouched; I assumed that it was a while since he had last taken them. Diazepam is notably used to treat
anxiety and Risperidone is an antipsychotic that is mostly used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.
\textit{(Life is Strange 2015)}

Arcadia Bay is not safe from the opioid epidemic that continues to plague America today.
Drugs push the narrative. \textit{Life is Strange} and \textit{Before the Storm} frames drugs as a poisonous force
that has claimed the lives of various victims, with the latter having more of a focus on addiction
and the routes of escapism that Chloe sees as tingeing Rachel’s whole personality and demeanor.

\textsuperscript{42} More research needed on the prevalence and normalization of mental illness in video games, whether they are
explicit or not. The connection between male violence and mental illness is a topic not really explored in these
games.
Life is Strange’s story starts off with Chloe threatening Nathan for money as he had drugged her and took advantage of her a few nights ago. To save his reputation, Nathan brings a gun hoping to scare Chloe off. Drug dealers around Arcadia Bay know of Nathan Prescott and of the kinds of purchases he makes. They hardly care what Nathan does with the drugs; money pushes their motives. To ensure that their lucrative business is not going away anytime soon, they are often portrayed with weapons such as guns, knives, or attack dogs. They use these kinds of weapons to intimidate others rather than for protection of themselves, which is markedly different from why female characters in the games choose to use weapons.

The extent of how the drug industry is intertwined with the students at Blackwell Academy is encapsulated in a log of customers that Max is given, in the hopes that they would find Rachel in the process. The students are given nicknames, and the rate of payment for these drugs range from very cheap to very expensive, based on what these students are getting and how much of it they get. It is important to note that there are no nicknames of people outside of Blackwell Academy; these dealers’ target audience is specifically Blackwell students themselves.43

The reason why these drug dealers choose to resort to violence, as mentioned before, is to promote their aggression. While law enforcement in the town is considerably lax, having Arcadia Bay be known as some sort of a “drug haven” does not do wonders for those who may want to profit off the town’s image themselves, notably Arcadia Bay’s District Attorney in Before the Storm and Nathan’s father in Life is Strange.44

43 Prevalence and usage of drugs at school, not only for recreational purposes, but also for the purposes of even succeeding in school is another topic that could be touched upon.
44 After an explanation of Rachel’s real mother, Rachel’s dad tells this to Chloe: “Sera [Rachel’s mother] brought criminals and drug dealers into our home. She put Rachel in serious danger just to chase her habit.”
Mark Jefferson is a photography teacher at Blackwell Academy. He was one of the main reasons why Max wanted to go back to Arcadia Bay, as she pursued her love for photography. Jefferson noted that Max had a “gift,…a fever to take images, to frame the world only the way [she] envision[s] it.” He is to be framed as the main antagonist of *Life is Strange*, although Nathan Prescott’s involvement makes it difficult for it to seem so. I, as Max, had the choice to accuse Jefferson, Madsen, a security guard at Blackwell, and Nathan for pushing Max’s friend, Kate, to committing suicide (See Fig. 18). His inclusion as a choice confused me at first, as he only served to dismiss Kate’s bullying and social isolation issues. In that case, the game frames it as if he was just one of the many adults who belittle issues that various young people face. It turns out that his involvement in Kate’s drugging and sexual assault was a lot more than what the player perceives in the first place.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 18.** Max/the player is in a meeting with the principal to discuss who may have pushed Kate Marsh to suicide. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

He uses drugs and weapons to subdue his victims and eventually kill them once they are of little use to him. Jefferson comes by the drugs through Nathan’s connections; it is important to look at the reasons why Nathan chose to employ himself under Jefferson’s wing. In the last episode, when Max/the player ends up bound and tied in Jefferson’s bunker studio, he notes
Nathan’s adoration of him. In return for his perceived affection to Nathan, Jefferson was able to have access to the Prescott fortune, and thus was able to get for himself the bunker photography studio. Note that Nathan’s need for a paternal figure and a want to be accepted by one eventually gets him into worse trouble, and eventually death when Jefferson decides that he has no use for Nathan after all. Nathan’s wanting to make Jefferson proud of him leads him to kill Rachel Amber, which then sparks off the events of *Life is Strange*.

The root of Jefferson’s motives for using violence can be pinpointed in his lecture; a replay of the game showed that there have always been clues to Jefferson’s cold motives throughout the game through every interaction with him. In a discussion about capturing the subject’s true essence in a picture, Jefferson notes “I could frame any one of you in a dark corner and capture you in a moment of desperation… What if Arbus chose to capture people at the height of their beauty or innocence? She had a brilliant eye, so she could have taken another approach.”

Jefferson’s dismissal of Kate’s concerns and the implication that he has had sexual relations with students such as Victoria and Rachel only frame him in a harsher light. Yet, the game does not highlight those aspects of him as much as they do to Nathan or the drug dealers. The creators’ choice in doing so is to make the surprise of the true antagonist even more shocking than it is.

Jefferson himself decides to explain to Max why he chooses to take pictures of drugged up victims, as he is sure that Max would not come out of the bunker studio alive after he was done with her: “The slightly unconscious model is often the most open and honest. No vanity or posing, just… pure expression… I love the purity of your own image.” It seems as if there was no other reason as to why he chose to pursue this kind of artistic endeavor. The subjects of his

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45 Diane Arbus was an American photographer who famously worked to normalize marginalized groups and highlighted the importance of proper representation.
photos are women, portrayed as victims, which gives Max (and by extension, me) an incentive to protect the people around them (See Fig. 19). The female image at its raw form, he believes, is one that is frail. The victimization and subjugation of women at the hands of men is not a new concept.

Fig. 19. These photos were found when Chloe and Max find the underground photography studio. Pictured are a drugged-up Kate Marsh on the left and a barely conscious Rachel Amber on the right. (Life is Strange 2015)

Like the relationship between Jefferson and Nathan, various paternal figures in both games are framed as antagonistic. David Madsen is one such figure. He marries Chloe’s widowed mother months after the death of Chloe’s father. He constantly butts heads with Chloe on various issues such as drug use, Chloe’s autonomy, and Chloe’s treatment of authority figures. A possible reason why Madsen chooses to be rough with Chloe is his brief service in the armed forces. It is implied that he has PTSD from his time abroad.\(^{46}\) One of the many arguments

\(^{46}\) Chloe’s mother made a note of his PTSD in her first meeting with David.
between Madsen and Chloe shows his struggle with the loss of a good friend, in the hopes that Chloe might learn as she herself was still grieving from the loss of her father.

James Amber is Rachel Amber’s father and Arcadia Bay’s District Attorney in *Before the Storm*. He serves to be one of the many antagonists in the game, as his involvement has to do with the question of Rachel’s birth mother and the crackdown on drugs in Arcadia Bay. He differs from Madsen in that his love for Rachel and his family is much more apparent, highlighted in a story Rachel tells Chloe about their trip up a mountain. As *Before the Storm* goes on, though, there seems to be another side to James. He chooses to keep quiet about Rachel’s birth mother, Sera Gearhardt, and even devises a plan that he hopes would guarantee no further communications from her. Even when Sera gives him proof that she is successful in keeping herself drug-free the last few years, James chooses to drug her and undermine her efforts to keep clean to keep her from meeting her daughter. I made the choice to tell Rachel her father’s true motives. The game frames it as if her relationship with her father is one worth saving or whether the player values their friendship with Rachel above all else.

As can be seen in the cases of Jefferson, James Amber, Nathan’s father, and David Madsen, all paternal figures are framed in a harsher light than their female counterparts. Maternal figures only appear occasionally, while the mothers of both Chloe and Rachel having more of the spotlight on them than the other characters. It is important to note that Chloe’s relationship with her father before the accident is one that is not of the norm when compared to

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47 When she was younger, she fell and broke her arm after slipping on wet ground from the rain. They were three miles from the car, yet her father simply picked her up and climbed down the mountain with her in his arms, his voice calm as he tried to comfort her the rest of the way down. She felt “safe” then.

48 It is implied that he hired a drug dealer to make sure that she would be disposed of, either through drug poisoning or other methods.

49 I was particularly upset at this point in the game because it seemed as if the game asked me to preserve or undermine the clearly unequal power shift between Rachel and her father. There is no mention of their relationship after I made the choice.
other paternal figures in the game. Chloe continues to call her late father one of her best friends, which may be comparable to how Rachel perceives her father before the events of *Before the Storm*. While Chloe’s father was not given the time to particularly flesh out his motives as a parent, Chloe still wonders whether her father would also follow the same destructive path as James Amber took to keep his family life safe. On the drive to *Before the Storm*’s climax, I can choose whether she wished her father could have told her or rather it was better to not know this way (See Fig. 20). It is implied that Chloe’s father justifies James Amber’s actions since he himself would “…probably do anything to keep [Chloe] safe.”

![Fig. 20. Chloe and her dad talk on Before the Storm right before the climax of the game. Even though he is dead, Chloe often imagines the kinds of conversations they would have, and she wonders whether her father would go to the same lengths to protect his own daughter. (Before the Storm 2017)](image)

Both games really go out of their way to portray these men as very antagonistic and prone to violence. There is a difference between how each gender utilizes violence to reach their goals. Even though the female characters in these games do also employ methods of violence, they do so for the protection of others or as a last resort. For male characters, violence is their first

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50 This is a question that Chloe has asked her father in one of her many dreams as she navigates her own feelings on Rachel’s family dynamic as well. Chloe does not know whether her father would lie to her to keep her safe, and that question has been sitting in the back of her mind since then. She wonders if she would love him less if she knew that he lied to keep her safe.
instinct. One would argue that the treatment of male characters mirrors society’s issue with toxic masculinity, a concept where men overcompensate for their masculinity by reverting to threats, and even violence. As mentioned before, this issue is encapsulated in the “overbearing father figure” trope. With the exclusion of Chloe’s biological father, the paternal or paternal-like figures in these two games serve as an obstacle to the protagonists. This is reminiscent of a patriarchal viewpoint of family and family life: where children are the property of the father to be formed and molded according to what he perceives as best for the family. The games’ automatic characterization of male characters is that they are bad.

Another trope is present, especially when it comes to young, adolescent male characters. While boys like Nathan are also prone to violence, the reasons for his anger seem to be quite clear as compared to other male characters. He was cast away by his biological father and wishes to gain his acceptance, an acceptance he chose to find in something or someone else, whether it be drugs, social popularity, or Mr. Jefferson. Nathan tries to ignore or shift the energy away from his loneliness into something more destructive. His actions all culminate when he attempts to mirror Mr. Jefferson’s photographic technique, which in turn resulted in the death of Rachel Amber (See Fig. 21). Female characters also display these qualities in other forms of media as well.

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Fig. 21. Chloe and Max find a picture of a drugged-up Rachel Amber posed with Nathan Prescott. This picture determines where they find her remains. (*Life is Strange* 2015)

Speaking of Mr. Jefferson, one would notice that most, if not all, of his subjects in his photographs are women. He goes out of his way to choose distinctly vulnerable and innocent women to serve his artistic purpose of seeing and capturing the shift from innocence to corruption. Why he chose to do this in secret is because society knows that there is an ethical question to be asked. Would the pictures turn out to be more authentic if Jefferson told his subjects the goal of his pictures and would they have the same artistic energy if they willingly took drugs for them to look out of it or doped up? The answer that is implied, by Jefferson himself, is no. He worked hard to make sure that he would leave no trace, and eventually put Nathan as a scapegoat. Why he decided to choose female subjects is telling of the dynamics
between male and females that still exist today. His choice only serves to validate the belief that women should be dominated.⁵³

![Max finds a picture of Chloe using a water pipe for recreational purposes.](image)

**Fig. 22.** Max finds a picture of Chloe using a water pipe for recreational purposes.

On the topic of drugs, those who are known to push drugs through the city and even through the school are most often male figures. The only female characters who has had interactions with drugs are Chloe with her recreational use of cannabis and Rachel’s mother, Sera, in *Before the Storm*. The latter is portrayed as a victim of addiction, and some characters view that drug dealers in Arcadia Bay were to blame for her fall from taking her responsibility as Rachel’s mother. There is an insidious connection made when one sees who controls the drug market and how that disproportionately affects female versus male characters. While male characters are viewed as empowered with their recreational use and sale of drugs, the female characters are often unknowingly or unconsciously drugged themselves. Chloe is the exception (See Fig. 22). With this, we can see the two sides of what drugs can do to the general populace.

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⁵³ Could also research women as subjects in photographs throughout history and the prevalence of voyeurism, especially in video games. Note that these women are designed to fit certain expectations – they are notably small (compared to their male counterparts), young, and of a thin figure.
CONCLUSION

*Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm*, as a reflection and representation of society itself, still expect women to hold up to the traditional motherly image and present men in a harsh, antagonistic light. This is highlighted in the main character Max’s motives behind her actions. My analysis of the game shows that her actions are instinctive and natural. She chooses to only use violence, sometimes in the form of weaponry, to protect. On the other hand, Chloe is also portrayed as defending Max, even though she is perceived as fending for herself most of the time. Both their choices fit mainstream values and their choices were given more depth and breadth to them as compared to other characters such as Rachel Amber and Victoria Chase. The latter characters are cast aside. While they are notable examples of independent, autonomous women who choose to act based on their own personal goals, they are inevitably written out of the story and considered dispensable for the sake of other characters’ stories. In this situation, Max and Chloe’s story is given the spotlight. I hold that it was safer for society’s ideals for characters such as Rachel and Victoria to be in the background and term this phenomenon as “safe subversion.” When Rachel and Victoria are given the spotlight in these games, they are perceived as difficult to understand by their peers, which reflects how society considers these types of women. This is also presented in the Disposable Woman trope as seen time and time again on media forms such as film and literature.

Male use of violence is directly linked to the institution of patriarchy. The male characters in these two games are notably antagonistic; the authority figures were notably male. While the role of the mother is one source of female authority, they still bend under their husbands’ wills. Going along with this same train of thought, women are still targeted as victims of male violence, which then leads to these characters’ need to protect. While the games present
very few examples of male victims, female victims still outnumber them by a large margin. More so in *Life is Strange*, the female image is viewed as frail and continually victimized, a justification used for the subordination of women as presented by traditionalists in their conception and formation of the patriarchy. I conclude that *Life is Strange*’s treatment of male characters reflects society and toxic masculinity as well; the game’s automatic representation of male characters is that they are “all bad” and the obstacle to our female characters’ goals, whatever they may be. I assume that Nathan’s choice in stopping his medication is due to the stigma attached to medication, especially in the mental health field. David Madsen chooses to employ harsh punishments on Chloe when she disobeys his orders and does not take the time to listen to her. Jefferson’s works show that the perfect muse is subjugated women and James Amber chooses to ignore his daughter’s pleas to learn more about her birth mother to keep his ideal family safe. Gender norms impact the way each character reaches their goal. Male violence is used for aggression and protection of the patriarchy, while female violence is used for the protection of peers and their loved ones.

With these findings I argue that even though the games are groundbreaking in their employment of female characters as leads, it still promotes traditional beliefs about both men and women. The treatment of male characters shows that men will be violent no matter what, while women’s innate desire to protect is what prods them to utilize violence. While the games do not outright push these beliefs in the players’ faces, the programming and design of the game are made by humans, and as noted by Bogost and Provenzo, Jr., video games are as much a reflection of society just as film and literature. Media push values that mainstream society want to see, and they do this to capture and capitalize on your attention; a major goal of these video game companies is to make their game marketable for their target audiences. So now we ask the
question, is violence necessary in video games? Violence in *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* is an aspect that made this story more compelling, and I analyzed how their use of violence reflects each gender’s relationship with violence.⁵⁴

I do bring up the point, though, that just because a culture product promotes these values does not mean that they necessarily uphold these values. Authors who write a rape scene in their novels do not condone rape, but creators may include these misogynistic plot points as a form of criticism as well. In many aspects, both these games are pro-feminist with the centering and framing of women in major parts of the story; it is difficult to discern the creators’ true intent unless I asked them personally myself. For this thesis, I aim to come up with a simple conclusion as to why these kinds of stories (nurturing women, violent men) are more prevalent and prove to be popular in mainstream culture.

The association between particular qualities and gender tropes is more nuanced than I initially perceived them to be. The gender tropes are framed from a Western, American point of view so much of what I may experience may differ from other players from around the world. The popularity and accessibility of these games makes it so people from other countries are able to play this game and base their choices on their perceptions of women and men in their society.

I do pose more questions in terms of this study. While my experience with the game may be similar to others, not all players who interacted with the game may share the same viewpoints as I do. These games are programmed in a way that certain aspects of the characters are either shown or hidden based on the choices you make, and I avoid considering my experience with the game as an overarching view of how gender norms are handled. There is a straight narrative that these games give us, though, and my analysis hinges on the major choice I was able to make as a

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⁵⁴ Reviewers and players of the game both liked the implementation of violence to drive the storytelling.
player. I also question the differing experiences between single-player and multiplayer games. Single-player games can be nonviolent, with the emergence of games such as *Stardew Valley* and *Slime Rancher*. Most, if not all, multiplayer games such as *Overwatch* and *The Division* highlight a shared goal that players work towards and are often violent in their pursuits. I question whether group affiliation and whether the knowledge of what gender their fellow teammates are affect how they reach their goals as well.

Throughout this paper, I argued that the video game itself represents women and men acting violently. What goes into this argument is the fact that the players make the choices and that I chose to look at the overarching story and how the characters are framed to get to this conclusion. Player interaction is a big part of my analysis and, given more time, I would be able to come up with a more inclusive analysis where I could ask players of other genders and of other cultures to play and see how they react to their choices. Their reactions to how characters in the game are would also be taken into consideration as well. What would be considered violent may range depending on the player as well.

While these games give few options as to how the main characters can react and interact with each other, the illusion of choice is prevalent with the option of minor choices that one can make throughout each other the episodes. A question must be asked as to why players want to play games where their choices are listed out clear as day. In our busy everyday lives, the breadth of choice is often overwhelming and maybe the restriction of choice is something that is welcomed, maybe ironically, in video game culture where video games give players the choice to do virtually anything.
WORKS CITED


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