SUBJECT TO CHANGE:
Queer Coming-of-age Narratives in Award-winning Video games

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Pelitutkimusta on jo pitkään kiinnostanut, miten valtavirtapelit esittävät aliedustettuja ihmisryhmiä. Sukupuoli- ja seksuaalivähemmistöjen kehityskertomusten tutkimus on verrattain olematonta. The Game Awards (TGA) -peligaala ja Games for Change (G4C) -järjestö ovat kuitenkin jo vuosien ajan antaneet tunnustusta useille indie- ja AA-peleille niiden tavoista lähestyä aihetta. Ottaen huomioon palkintogaalojen tuoman näkyvyyden voittajapelejä on syytä tarkastella lähemmin.

Tutkielma pyrkii vakiinnuttamaan uudenlaisia narratiiveja tuottamalla tietoa vaihtoehtoisista esitys- ja kerrontatavoista. Tutkielma tarkastelee sukupuoli- ja seksuaalivähemmistöjä käsitteleviä kehityskertomuksia videopeleissä, joille on vuosien varrella myönnetty jompikumpi seuraavista palkinnoista: Games for Impact (TGA) tai Most Significant Impact (G4C). Hyödyntäen kriittisen ja multimodaalisen diskurssintutkimuksen menettelytapoja tutkielma selvittää, minkälaisia ideologioita hahmoesityksiin ja -kehityksiin kiteytyy.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, minkälaisia pelejä pelialan kaupalliset ja ei-kaupalliset järjestöt pitävät merkittävinä. Tarkastellut pelit vastustavat vakiintuneita kerrontatapoja ja niihin liittyviä sukupuolittuneita aikuisuuden määritelmiä. Peleissä korostuvat yhteisöllisyyden ja yhteenkuuluvuuden merkitys. Tavanomaisesta nuoren miehen kehityskertomuksesta poiketen pelit palkitsevat miessukupuoliset pelaajahahmot, jotka vaalivat ihmissuhteita; lisäksi naispelaajahahmot, jotka eivät noudata sosiaalisesti hyväksyttyä aikuistumisen ja naiseuden mallia, pystyvät tästä huolimatta saavuttamaan yhtenäisen ja vakaan aikuisidentiteetin. Valtavirtapelien tavoin pelaajahahmojen seksuaalista identiteettiä käsitellään pääsääntöisesti valinnaisten romanssien yhteydessä. Vastaavaan nuorisokirjallisuuteen verrattaessa merkittävin ero on biseksuaalisten protagonistien määrä.

Asiasanat – Keywords independent video game, gender, sexuality, coming of age, coming out, multimodal critical discourse analysis

Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX

Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the video game industry made a record-breaking $43.4 billion in revenue in the United States alone, surpassing every other form of entertainment (The Entertainment Software Association 2018). Recent studies (Nielsen 2018; Mediakix 2018), however, lead to believe that major video game companies are losing money due to a disparity between the video game developers and the players: while the average player is more likely to be a woman of colour, the gaming industry, largely consisting of white men, continues to ignore the shifting demographics of its audience. A multitude of scholars have addressed the integral misogyny and sexism of the gaming culture (Fox & Tang 2014), and, in similar vein, the topic of queerness in mainstream video games has attracted an ever-increasing amount of academic interest (Shaw & Friesem 2016). However, there exists a large diversity of independent video games that have been ignored in favour of mainstream (or AAA) titles. Up until recently, that is.

The widespread success of some recently published independent video games, such as *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine 2017), *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall 2017), and *Butterfly Soup* (Lei 2017), suggests a growing interest in the seemingly niche genre of queer coming-of-age stories. More generally speaking, it may also indicate a demand for video games that explore human complexity through multilayered characters and interpersonal relationships. As many mainstream video games boast an abundance of white, straight, cisgender, male characters; use non-player characters (NPCs) solely as "action ciphers" (Gray 2017); or treat

romance and sex as commodities and achievements (Good 2009), queer coming-of-narratives are rarely represented and, consequently, subjected to analysis.

As feminist literary scholars (Abel, Hirsch, & Langland 1983) have re-envisioned the coming-of-age genre through the lens of gender, or as Asian American studies scholars (Ho 2013) have through ethnicity, the present study seeks not only to address the ways in which a nonnormative sexual orientation or gender identity impacts the protagonist's transition to adulthood but also to extend the discussion to the video game medium as well. More specifically, this study identifies the ways in which independent video games reproduce and subvert the prevailing tropes of the genre in terms of the overall character development. As one would expect, the study also discusses any prevalent coming-out narratives. It is also noted if the core gameplay mechanics compliment the protagonist's character arc in a meaningful way.

Since the early 2010s, the video game industry has recognised narratives that are deemed socially impactful by the way of awards. The scope of the present study is limited to video games that have been awarded at least one of the two such awards: Games for Impact (The Game Awards) or Most Significant Impact (Games for Change). Not only does this provide clear boundaries but one is also able to see what kind of queer coming-of-age narratives are given visibility. By utilising multimodal critical ciscourse analysis, this study seeks to provide a deep and cohesive understanding of a much-neglected topic.

2 QUEER GAME STUDIES AND THE COMING-OF-AGE GENRE

In order to have a clear and readily comprehensible discussion of the topic at hand, this study will first provide a brief summary and evaluation of the previous, relevant research. First, Section 2.1 will examine some related aspects of the video game industry, while Section 2.2 discusses relevant studies on the coming-of-age genre, focusing on the ways in which the genre of *Bildungsroman* has been reimagined by feminist and marginalised authors.

2.1 Queerness in video games

First, this section will make a distinction between "independent" and "indie", as applied to the video game industry, and define any other elusive classifications, such as "AA". Next, I will briefly describe the relevant awards shows and the award categories, including the ways in which the winners are selected. Afterwards, I will discuss the theoretical background of the present study. To conclude this section on video games, I will recount the variety of ways in which queerness has been represented in video games throughout the history of gaming from the vile, homophobic caricatures to the multifaceted queer protagonists of the late 2010s.

2.1.1. Beyond the mainstream

According to a popular definition, an independent video game is a game that has been financed by the developer or crowdfunding rather than a major publisher. However, a game that is, above all, trying to provide a new, innovative experience for the player is often considered to be independent, regardless of its source of funding (Gril 2008). While some independent games set out to experiment with or improve existing concepts, others provide for a niche market that has been left unfulfilled by the mainstream developers (Carroll 2004).

Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) seek to provide a more tangible definition; While the video game industry frequently uses "independent game" interchangeably with "indie game", they argue that, despite the etymology, the latter is best understood not as an abbreviation of the former but as a label for a specific kind of independent game that emerged in the mid-2000s in the United States. In contrast, Garda and Grabarczyk use the notion of an "independent game" to refer to any game that is independent of at least one of the following parameters: investors, publishers, or the intended audience. For the purpose of the present study, this is worth elaborating: Garda and Grabarczyk's broad notion of investors extents to private companies and individuals who stand to gain profit as well as institutions that finance non-commercial projects, like national funding sources. By creative independence, they mean that the developers themselves are the intended audience. They note that the investor of the game can also be its intended audience, as is the case with crowdfunded games. Finally, the game is independent whenever the developer and publisher are the same entity. As for "indie" games, Garda and Grabarczyk have identified a set of "indie markers" that apply to a specific kind of games: in addition to the aforementioned experimental nature, these markers include digital distribution, modest budget and price, small size, small developer team, retro pixel art, distinguishing values, criticism of mainstream corporations,

and the kinship to one's peers in the indie community. In conclusion, a video game may be classified as independent despite not having any of the "indie markers".

As previously mentioned, this study employs Garda and Grabarczyk's (2016) classification, but, as it is not adopted by the game industry at large, the broader, popular definition is also taken into consideration. The need to consider alternative classifications is best demonstrated by examining the ways in which *Life Is Strange* has been classified by its developers, critics, and players: The developer Dontnod Entertainment self-identifies as an "independent" studio that makes "AA" games (DONTNOD Entertainment n.d.), meaning that *Life Is Strange* falls somewhere between a mainstream AAA game and an independent game. Still, *Life Is Strange* is commonly thought of as an independent or indie game. One of the game designers, Alejandro Arque explained that Dontnod Entertainment was not bothered by the idea that some would critise *Life Is Strange* for being "too indie" (Blackwell Podcast 2016): "I mean, it's not a big triple-A game, yeah, but that was never the intention anyway. So we wanted to do something that felt indie." Therefore, it is to be expected that some people would classify the *Life Is Strange* games as independent or indie, and they are not entirely wrong for doing so.

2.1.2. The Game Awards and Games for Change

It is a common belief that the video game industry suffers from an inferiority complex in comparison to more established forms of entertainment, such as film or literary works. After all, the artistic merit of video games is the topic of an age-old debate. (Haydn 2017.) In an effort to add to the legitimacy of the video game industry, a video game journalist Geoff Keighley founded the Game Awards in 2014, effectively giving the industry its own Academy Awards (Gene 2019). According to the official website (The Game Awards 2020d.), the awards show reached a record-breaking audience of 83 million in 2020. The selection criteria is also explained on the website (The Game Awards 2020b & 2020c): Nominees are

selected by a jury that consists of over 95 news outlets with a "history of critical evaluation of video games". Winners are then determined by a blended vote between the jury (90%) and the fans (10%). The award Games for Impact is awarded to "a thought-provoking game with a pro-social meaning or message".

In contrast, Games for Change (G4C) is nonprofit organization that, according to their website (Games for Change n.d.), "curates digital and non-digital games that engage contemporary social issues in a meaningful way". In addition, G4C also acknowledges these games by the way of awards. As explained on their website, winners are chosen by a panel of jurors, including experts on game development, social impact, technology, learning, and more. It is also explained that the G4C award for Most Significant Impact recognizes games that address a specific social issue in a way that achieves a real-life impact.

According to Kidd (2007, as cited in Jiménez 2015: 406), the literary landscape in the United States is in part shaped by book awards. There is no obvious reason for which the same could not be true for video game awards as well. According to their mission statements (The Game Awards 2020a; Games for Change n.d.), both the Game Awards and G4C exist to amplify video games and their developers. While the exact numbers have not been publicly reported, one can imagine the impact that being showcased in front of 83 million viewers (The Game Awards 2020d) has on the game's sales.

2.1.3. Video games as an object of humanities research

Game studies is a field that encompasses many different disciplines and approaches. Mäyrä (2008: 157) identifies discourse analysis as one of the most notable humanities approaches to have contributed to the field:

> …the emphasis is on uncovering how conventions in language […] make certain ways of representing or thinking to appear as self-evident and natural, even if they carry certain power relations within them. Within such

> approaches, intertextual or intermedial comparisons are used to highlight hidden similarities and differences between games, or areas of media and culture, thereby extending the range of interpretation.

What is more, Mäyrä (2008: 157) states that humanistic video game analysis often employs conceptual tools provided by literary and media studies: these include, but are not limited to, characterisation, narration, dramatic structure, point of view, cutscene, and camerawork.

Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009: 14–15) elaborate that the purpose of discourse analysis is to study not only the ways in which a given phenomenon is given meaning but also the consequences for doing so. Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009: 26—28) use discourse to refer to any semiotic activities that have interactional and social norms and consequences. In similar vein, Çoşkun (2015: 41) states that a "[d]iscourse reproduces the social status quo and contributes to transforming it". Likewise, Gee (2011: 29) defines *Discourse* as the "ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity". Gee (2015: 106—108) further explains that Discourses and avatars, or in other words, the players' physical representations in the game world, are much the same, in that both are ways to "enact and recognize" these "socially meaningful identities". Gee goes on to argue that one can inspect both playable avatars and non-playable avatars to determine what kind of meanings, or Discourses, are attached to them through multimodal resources. It is worth clarifying that Gee's definition of an avatar also extends to playable characters that have set identities and backstories rather than just customisable characters created by the player.

According to Gee (2015: 1—4), many video games incorporate social activity as a core gameplay mechanic; even single-player video games can be highly social, considering that they are often discussed with other members of the gaming community. Moreover, as cultural artefacts, video games reflect the sociocultural

context in which they exist. For these reasons, Gee advocates for video games, including single-player games, to be studied as a form of communication, or, as he puts it, worlds to have conversations with. Since discourse analysis interrogates language as a social activity (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 14–15), it is well-suited for the purpose of analysing video games.

Given that meanings are context-dependent and potentially negotiable, Fairclough (2001: 3) argues that it is possible to resist and change any prevalent assumptions by inspecting the ways in which language and power are intertwined. By this logic, the ways in which video games represent queer narratives can potentially be altered by calling attention to the underlying power dynamics and by offering alternative representations. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the necessary means to do so. Since the purpose of this study is to provide insight into the ways underrepresented groups are depicted, it stands to reason that the study utilises CDA for the way it concerns itself with the role that discourse plays in enacting, reproducing, and resisting inequality in society (van Dijk 2004: 352).

As video games are, by definition, multimodal products (Gee 2015: 56), it is highly recommended, if not downright required, that one considers an approach that recognises the challenges that are imposed by the nature of medium. According to Ventola, Charles, and Kaltenbacher (2004: 1–2), a multimodal approach to discourse analysis is concerned with decoding the various "modes" of meaning-making, including, but not limited to, linguistic, aural and visual resources. In video games, the linguistic and aural elements are typically present in dialogue, quest objectives, codex entries, journals, soundtrack, et cetera. The visual elements include nonverbal elements, such as images, animations, and gestures, which are usually present in cutscenes, cinematics, and gameplay. Seeing that these modes do not occur singly, Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala (2017: 7–8) argue that one must consider the ways in which semiotic modes synergise with one another. To achive the desired result, an approach that combines multimodal discourse analysis and CDA is chosen.

According to Machin and Mayr (2012: 9–10), multimodal critical discouse analysis (MCDA) seeks to expose any and all underlying ideologies by revealing "ideas, absences and taken-for-graned assumptions" not only in linguistics text but in visual texts as well. More specifically, MCDA considers the ways in which some people are "indivualized or collectivized, made specific, generic, personalized or impersonalized, objectivated, anonymised [sic] aggregated and suppressed" by the linguistic and visual semiotic resources present in the text (Çoşkun 2015: 42). Therefore, the integration of both CDA and multimodal discouse analysis is well-suited for the purpose of analysing the ways in which historically underrepresented groups are being represented.

According to Carr (2014, as cited in Bateman et al. 2017: 367), a multimodal analysis of video games requires that we differentiate the medium from other media forms. For example, books can be considered an interactive medium, too, as the readers are required to create various sensory elements in their heads (Shaw 2014: 3). However, video games are unique in that they alter their worlds according to the actions taken by the players (Chmielarz 2013). While Mäyrä (2008: 157) argues that intermedial comparisons may provide further insights, Bateman et al. (ibid.) stress that video games should not be analysed solely by locating differences between video games and other artistic forms of expression.

Finally, let us point out some of the pitfalls that previous studies have reportedly fallen into. Jenson and de Castell (2010) have identified three recurring issues that hinder the study of gender in video games, two of which are relevant to the present study: First, previous research tends to conflate one's biological sex with the socially constructed notion of gender (American Psychological Association 2011) and consequently fails to consider the latter. Secondly, gender is often dismissed as insignificant, which in turn leads to inconsequential results.

2.1.4. Queer representations in video games

Clark (1969, as cited in Raley and Lucas 2006: 19, 23) identifies four chronological stages in which minority groups are represented in different types of media: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Clark defines the first stage as an outright exclusion from the media. During the second stage, the group is frequently represented as a stereotypical object of ridicule. Afterwards, its members are represented in limited, socially acceptable roles, until they are finally represented in the vast variety of roles, both positive and negative, that the members of the group occupy in real life. Li (2008, as cited in Zhang 2014: 71–72) has established a similar model for the development of gay figures in film: after being initially used for comic relief, gay characters are given regular supporting roles, followed by leading roles in films centred on homosexuality, and ultimately, leading roles in mainstream action, science fiction, and mystery films. If one observes as Feminist Frequency (2019) recounts queer tropes in video games throughout the history of gaming, one notices that both models can be applied to video games as well: Feminist Frequency notes that games like *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!* (Sierra On-Line 1993) and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games 2004) represents gay men and transgender women as stereotypical caricatures. The next stage of Li's model is evident in many games that give queer characters supporting roles as allies to the protagonist in action-adventure games, such as *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Ubisoft Montreal 2010), *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012), and *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013). Again, falling in line with Li's model, the latest instalments in the aforementioned series, including *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* (Arkane Studios 2017), and *The Last of Us Part II* (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2020), have evolved to have queer protagonists: Instead of featuring one playable male character, the latest action-adventure *Assassin's Creed* games, including *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, allow the player to choose either a male or female playable character and pursue romantic relationships with NPCs regardless of gender. *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* features a black, bisexual female character in her 40s as the main character. In *The*

Last of Us Part II, Ellie, the lesbian deuteragonist of the original game, is given a leading role.

As Feminist Frequency (2019) notes, straight romance has been an inescapable aspect of thousands of video games ever since *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo EAD 1985). They also point out that queer relationships are treated as an optional "detour" that the player must deliberately seek out: for example, a male NPC may not flirt with a male player character until the player selects a dialogue option that initiates the romance route. According to Feminist Frequency, this kind of approach to queer romance enforces the cultural perception of straightness as the default. Some AAA games have defied this notion by having the players confront queerness head-on. For instance, in BioWare's *Dragon Age II* (2010), one of the two bisexual male companions flirts with the player character regardless of gender and without first being flirted to; as the lead writer, David Gaider, recounts, some players felt as if they were being personally insulted by being forced to acknowledge that homosexuality exists (Karmali 2014). The consensus among game developers seems to be that representation must not clash with the core mechanics of the game, for which reason Shaw (2009: 246) argues that queerness is often incorporated into choice-based games and other role-playing games with branching storylines, such as *Dragon Age II*.

As many have observed, homophobia is rampant in the gaming culture. In-game, homophobia and transphobia typically manifest as the perpetuation of vile stereotypes. (Ruberg 2018.) For example, in *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!* (Sierra On-Line 1993), the player controls a sex-obsessed man whose goal is to seduce as many women as possible. As Larry is about to have sex with a woman named Shablee, it is revealed that she is transgender; Larry responds by screaming and washing his mouth in disgust. A more contemporary example would be the transphobic imagery of CD Projekt Red's long-awaited role-playing video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020): The game's the futuristic Night City is plastered with advertisements, one of which depicts a transgender model holding a soft drink with

the slogan "mix it up". One of the art directors of the game explained that the ad was intended as a commentary on the hypersexualised advertising that is used by real corporations. However, given that *Cyberpunk 2077* fails to examine the topic of being transgender or capitalism in any meaningful way, and also not forgetting the transphobic jokes made by the game's official Twitter account, the in-game ad comes off as a fetishising joke on the expense of transgender people. (Hall 2019.) Perhaps most notably, queerphobia is present among the players. Blizzard Entertainment's announcements that Tracer and Soldier 76, two of the key characters in the popular first-person shooter *Overwatch* (2016), are lesbian and gay respectively, prompted a sizable homophobic backlash (Shepard 2019). In *Overwatch*, players can unlock images that they can then "spray" on surfaces. To this date, the only in-game representation of Soldier 76's sexuality is a comradely spray depicting young Soldier 76 and his ex-boyfriend. One queer video game journalist reports that whenever he used the spray, other players would try to cover it or shoot at it:

> I stopped using that particular spray openly, despite it being the only in-game representation of Soldier 76's sexuality. I started putting it up in places that were harder to see or find. […] Every time I've done that, I felt a pang of shame. I'm using the same "out of sight, out of mind" approach to queerness that let's Blizzard get praise for canonical inclusion without making its characters' identities a meaningful part of the game. (Shepard 2019.)

Not only does the discussion surrounding Soldier 76's sexuality display the vehement homophobia among the gaming community but also the limits of queer representation in AAA games: *Overwatch* exemplifies the ways in which queerness is quarantined in side stories and barely referenced in the game itself.

Whereas white, straight, cisgender male players are often considered as the sole consumers of video games, and treated as such, (Fron et. al. 2007), queer players are very much expected to stay in the metaphoric closet (Condis 2014: 199). In similar vein, Ruberg (2018) observes that straightness is a fundamental part of the gamer identity. They also point out that some queer video games have managed to achieve a widespread success even among players who have otherwise proven themselves

hostile towards diversity. Although some have intepreted this as sign of shifting attitudes, Ruberg (2018) argues that some players are "disavowing [the game's] queer elements and remaking it as a game that conforms to the values of gamer masculinity" by erasing and reframing its queer key aspects. Ruberg suggests that the complete normalization of queerness may in fact make the game susceptible to this kind of "straightwashing". In other words, straight players may overlook the queer elements of a given game if it does not push its players to confront queerness beyond acknowledging the mere existence of queer people. According to Ruberg, straightwashing can be combated by depicting prejudice, whether it be externalized or internalized. However, it must be noted that Ruberg by no means condemns writers for representing a "queer utopia" (Ruelos 2017, as cited in Ruberg 2018), or in other words, a society in which queerness is fully normalized.

2.2 Re-imagining the coming-of-age genre

Defining *Bildungsroman* as a genre is a challenging task to say the least. Hardin (1991: xiii) proclaims that "hardly any other term is applied more frequently to a novelistic form and scarcely any is used more imprecisely". Hardin (ibid.) himself defines *bildung* as follows:

> …the intellectual and social development of a central figure who, after going out into the world and experiencing both defeats and triumphs, comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world.

According to Bakhtin (1986: 21, as cited in Bubíková 2011: 10), *Bildungsroman* depicts the "image of *man in the process of becoming*". Ho (2013: 7) offers a similar definition for a classic coming-of-age story: "…a young boy journeys beyond the neighbourhood of his youth, encounters adventure, romance, and tragedy, and finally returns home wiser, richer […], and integrated as an adult into the larger society". While the traditional *Bildungsroman* features a male protagonist, its otherwise broad definition lends the genre for countless reinterpretations. While some may resist the broad application of the term (see Hardin ibid.), Bubíková

(2011) credits the longevity and timelessness of the genre to its flexibility. In similar vein, Ho notes that various feminist and Asian American scholars have celebrated its lack of specificity and sought to further examine the ways in which the gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class of the protagonist or the author influence the *bildung* narrative.

The importance of understanding *Bildungsroman* either through a reinterpreation of gender, ethnicity, or both, is explained by Abel et. al. (1983: 13):

> Although the primary assumption underlying the Bildungsroman – the evolution of a coherent self – has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, this assumption remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs.

As we look at the increasing amount of queer narratives, the sentiment remains relevant. Scholars like Abel, Hirsch, and Langland (1983: 14) have sought to re-envision the genre as "a more flexible category whose validity lies in its usefulness as a conceptual tool". For instance, their analyses acknowledge the unique challenges that gender imposes on its female protagonists. Similarily, Rishoi (2003: 65—67, 71) finds that many coming-of-age narratives steer the protagonist towards gendered adulthood: "[B]oys must repudiate their mothers to become men, but girls must identify with their mothers to become women." In other words, boys are often expected to gain emotional independence from their parents, especially their mother, while girls are expected to uphold their emotional ties to their family. According to Rishoi, characters who deviate from the norm may face "social approbation or even ostracization". Rishoi also suggests that the way in which a character negotiates their passage to adulthood may also unintentionally reflect the gender of the author. However, there exists a number of female coming-of-age narratives that deliberately defy the above-mentioned, gendered dichotomy:

> The autonomous [male] individual is profoundly alone and lonely. In contrast, women, who have long labored under the expectation that they *must* cultivate relationships to the exclusion of all else, have created a rite of passage in the coming-of-age narrative that refuses the binary opposition and

> recognizes the multivalent desires of the individual — for relationship *and* for agency. (Rishoi 2003: 18)

As mentioned, Ho's (2003) analysis of coming-of-age novels infers the ways in which ethnicity impacts Asian American protagonists. Ho's study finds that these stories follow a general structure that is similar to the traditional coming-of-age story: a young protagonist sets forth on a journey of self-discovery due to a crisis of identity, and afterwards, they make peace with their Asian-ethnic family and Asian American identity. Whereas Hardin (1991: xxi) asserts that protagonists must "consider an accommodation between the individual and society", Ho (2003: 9.) adds that Asian American protagonists "must not only negotiate their individual selves against the larger Euro-American society, but also against the society of their families" that are in most cases "defined by an Asian-ethnic ancestry in conflict with the hegemonic values of the dominant order". In the absence of further research, let us make the tentative assumption that the same also applies to other ethnical minorities in the United States.

As a matter of fact, there is a general lack of research in the way queer coming-of-age stories are represented not only in video games but in any medium. One of the few studies on the subject was conducted by Jiménez (2015), who found that award-winning, queer literature marketed towards young adults is currently dominated by white, gay, male characters. What is more, none of the novels included in the study had a bisexual protagonist. Given the fact that contemporary young adult fiction at large is trending towards female protagonists, Jiménez finds the dominance of queer male characters curious, but does not offer an explanation. In regards to the overall tone of these narratives, Jiménez notes that lesbian characters are not allowed to have healthy or long-lasting romantic relationships. This is further confirmed by Lee's (1998) study on lesbian coming-out stories, which often end in tragedy; Her step-by-step model for the female protagonists' coming-out process is discussed in more detail in Section 4.1.1. In similar vein, Pötzsh and Waszkiewicz (2019) critise *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2014), which is

one of the video games included the present sample, for the way it enforces the trope of female sacrifice; this matter, too, is best addressed as as a part of the actual analysis.

3 METHODS

This chapter begins with a description of the method chosen to analyse the data (Section 3.1). Specifically, the purpose of this section is to review the strengths and potential weaknesses of this particular approach. Section 3.2 discusses the sample of the study and the selection criteria, and Section 3.3 describes the way in which the data was collected. Then, Section 3.4 discusses the limitations of the present study. Finally, Section 3.5 offers a brief description of each of the analysed games.

3.1 Methods of analysis

As established in Section 2.1.3, multimodal critical discouse analysis is crucial in revealing the ways in which a particular social group is (mis)represented in the video game medium. My analysis will examine the ways in which interconnected linguistic, aural, and visual elements are used to convey queer narratives. For example, I will inspect the ways in which the camerawork, movement, tone of voice, journal entries, objectives, and many other details are used to promote certain readings. What is more, I will attempt to uncover gendered and heteronormative ideologies that are embedded in the aforementioned narratives. The discussion surrounding the narrative structures is facilitated by a number of conceptual tools that video game analysis had adopted from other fields, such as literary studies.

For the purpose of the present study, I have put together a set of qualitative sub-questions, which, ideally, enable me to form a cohesive understanding of the data. The following sub-questions were formed based on the findings that previous research (Jiménez 2015; Lee 1998; Rishoi 2003; Ruberg 2018) found meaningful:

1. How are the player characracter's gender identity and sexual orientation communicated to the player?

2. To what degree is queerness normalised in the in-game world? Is queerness portrayed as a source of anxiety or confusion for the player character? If so, what prompts them to change their outlook?

3. What internal obstacles does the player character encounter on their journey towards adulthood? Are they successful in developing a stable, adult identity? In which ways does player choice affect the outcome?

4. Do the core game mechanics compliment the coming-of-age narrative?

5. Does the player character have any romantic or sexual relationships over the course of the game? Do these relationships play into the coming-of-age narrative?

3.2 Sample

As previously stated, queer coming-of-age narratives are few and far between. At least until recently, that is. The past decade saw quite a few independent games wherein a young, queer protagonist's struggle to achieve a coherent selfhood contributes to the overall plot in a meaningful way. As previously discussed, the game industry has begun to acknowledge these games for their efforts to push for change. In order to be included in the sample, a game needed to meet the following criteria: 1) The game must have an implicitly queer player character. 2) The game must incorporate a coming-of-age narrative. 3) The game must have won an award

that specifically recognizes its social impact; in the video game industry, these awards are the Games for Impact award (The Game Awards) or the award for Most Significant Impact (Games for Change). Finally, the game needed to be easily accessible, or, in other words, released on a platform that I already owned or would be able to borrow; fortunately, there was no need to exclude a game for such practicalities. For the sake of clarity, the video games that were included in the analysis are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample of the study

Title	**Release**	**Developer(s)**	**Publisher(s)**	**Award(s)[1][2]**
Life Is Strange	2014	Dontnod Entertainment	Square Enix	Games for Impact (TGA), Most Significant Impact (G4C)
Life Is Strange: Before the Storm	2017	Deck Nine	Square Enix	Games for Impact (TGA), Most Significant Impact (G4C)
Night in the Woods	2017	Infinite Fall	Finji	Games for Impact (TGA)
Life Is Strange 2	2018	Dontnod Entertainment	Square Enix	Games for Impact (TGA), Most Significant Impact (G4C)
Tell Me Why	2020	Dontnod Entertainment	Xbox Game Studios	Games for Impact (TGA)

[1] Games for Change (n.d.) Awards. [Cited 2.4.2021]. Retrieved from: https://www.gamesforchange.org/festival/awards/
[2] The Game Awards (n.d.). History. [Cited 2.4.2021]. Retrieved from: https://thegameawards.com/history

3.3 Data collection

Consalvo and Dutton (2006) fault previous qualitative studies conducted in the field of game studies for being "less forthcoming about how games were studied, other than the assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author". So, let us be as transparent as possible. While some previous studies (Beasley & Standley 2002) have chosen to limit their analysis to randomly selected cutscenes to make the task a little more manageable, this approach would be detrimental to the purpose of this study. As the protagonist's internal conflicts are rarely resolved before the final act, the game must be examined as a whole. For this reason, the whole game was chosen as the unit of analysis. In order to form a deep understanding of the game and the way that the player's choices impact the story, each game was played to completion at least twice or trice in order to exhaust all the key options and to view all the different ending scenes. Aarseth (2003) refers to this "strata" as "total completion".

For reference, in *Night in the Woods*, the available dialogue options are mostly inconsequential, and the ending scene varies only slightly depending on which one of Mae's two friends the player chose to hang out with over the course of the game. In comparison, *Life Is Strange 2* has four drastically different endings; to view each one of them, the player must complete the game twice and re-play the final segment of the last episode during both playthroughs. If one is being thorough, one playthrough clocks in at approximately 12–20 hours depending on the game.

Mäyrä (2008: 166) notes that a researcher may adopt a play style that is different from the way in which a "typical" player would approach the game, as I have done. While I aimed to be as thorough as possible by exhausting all the key options, I also considered more "typical" or superficial levels of engagement and less advantaged levels of expertise. For this reason, I first played through each game leisurely, as I normally would when playing for fun. While playing, I noted if some content is

easy to miss or hard to access for beginners and casual players. This approach helped to develop a more encompassing comprehension of the games.

As Mäyrä (2008: 165) notes, analytical "utilitarian" play "involves being able to communicate and critically examine one's experiences" and is "different from leisurely play". In practise, analytical play involves making notes and relating games to "wider contexts of historical, conceptual and social range of thought that constitutes game studies and game cultures in their reflexive form". Furthermore, Mäyrä (2008: 165–166) differentiates between the structural gameplay analysis and thematic analysis of games: while the first emphasises the core gameplay, including rules and player interactions, the latter highlights the symbols and messages the game conveys as a cultural medium. While the present study focuses largely on the latter, the game mechanics are taken into consideration when they complement or are in odds with the story.

3.4 Limitations and challenges

Next, let us discuss some of the challenges that are specific to the present study. In comparison to AAA games that can take up to hundreds of hours to complete, the video games included in the sample are significantly smaller. As previously mentioned, one playthrough typically requires no more than 20 hour. However, because of the number of choices and outcomes made available to the player, some of the games are extremely multilayered. To gain a deeper understanding, each game must be completed at least twice, which is no small undertaking for one person. For this reason, it may not be possible to exhaust all the dialogue options and explore all the ways in which different choices interact with each other.

Finally, when it comes to qualitative methods of analysis, one must consider their own subject position and understand the ways in which it may impact the study at hand (Ratner 2002). Had *Life Is Strange* and *Night in the Woods* not been such formative gameplay experiences for me, I may not have thought to study these

video games in the first place. However, as Ratner points out, it is only natural to end up studying something that is impactful to oneself. By now, I hope to have convinced the reader of the significance of the present study beyond my own interest. While I try to be as objective as possible and consider all the possible readings, my perspective is limited to my own lived experiences as a white, (gender)queer, Northern European person. For example, I am acutely aware of my limitations when it comes to discussing the ways in which the ethnic minorities in the United States are represented. Ideally, familiarising myself with research carried out by others has enabled me to comprehend the topic in a considerate and meaningful manner.

3.5 Summaries

3.5.1 *Life Is Strange* and *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*

Life Is Strange (2014 Dontnod Entertainment) is a story-driven adventure game and the first installment in the *Life Is Strange* series. The player controls a 18-year-old Maxine "Max" Caulfield, who has returned to her hometown, Arcadia Bay, to study under a famous photographer.

When Max's childhood best friend, Chloe Price, is shot, Max discovers that she is able to travel back in time. With her new-found power, Max is able to save Chloe's life. Together, the girls begin to investigate the mysterious disappearance of Chloe's friend Rachel Amber as well as other incidents involving female students who are being drugged and kidnapped. Max also gains other abilities, such as being able to return to an any given moment in the past as long as she has a photograph of it. Over the course of the game, Max is forced to make moral decisions that affect those around her.

As the gameplay mechanics are discussed in greater detail later, I will move on to the next game.

Life Is Strange: Before the Storm (Deck Nine 2017) is an adventure game, which consists of three episodes. Taking place three years before the events of *Life Is Strange*, the prequel depicts a 16-year-old Chloe's budding relationship with Rachel Amber and her struggle to come to terms with her father's abrupt death. Given the ambiguous way in which Chloe and Rachel's relationship is depicted in the original game, it is greatly fleshed out in *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*.

After a chance meeting during an illegal rave, Chloe and Rachel, the school delinquent and princess, are instantly drawn to each other and form a deep bond. While skipping school, the girls witness a covert meeting between Rachel's father, James, and an unknown woman. Rachel assumes that her father, whom she worships, is cheating on her mother. Disillusioned, Rachel asks Chloe to run away with her. Chloe, who is feeling neglected by her own mother and belittled by all the other adults in her life, agrees to Rachel's plan.

Before they can leave, Rachel learns that James' mistress, Sera, is in fact her biological mother. James explains that she was not fit to be a mother because of her drug addiction and negligence. Hoping to learn more about Sera, Chloe and Rachel set up a meeting with Chloe's drug dealer, Frank. However, Frank is accompanied to the meeting by a local crime leader. After Rachel is recognized as the distric attorney's daughter, the meeting turns violent and Rachel is stabbed nonfatally.

While Rachel is hospitalised, Chloe continues to investigate Sera by herself. Chloe finds out Sera is in fact rehabilitated and wishes to get joint custody of Rachel. Chloe also discovers that James arranged to have Sera abducted and overdosed in order to keep her from Rachel. Together with Frank, Chloe manages to save Sera, but she is no longer wishes to meet Rachel, convinced that she would not be a good mother and able to provide for her like James. Chloe is given a choice whether to keep James' involvement from Rachel or tell her the truth. If the latter is chosen, the

father-daughter relationship between Rachel and James is destroyed but she may finally meet Sera.

Unlike Max, Chloe does not have a supernatural power. Instead, she "backtalks" to get out of trouble or to make people to do what she wants: for example, the player can use backtalk to convince a bouncer to let Chloe into an illegal rave, break up a fight, and covertly call 911. Instead of taking photos, Chloe tags buildings, vehicles, et cetera, with a marker.

3.5.2 *Life Is Strange 2*

In *Life Is Strange 2*, the player controls Sean Diaz, a 16-year-old Mexican American boy, who, in the beginning of the game, lives with his immigrant father, Esteban, and his 9-year-old brother, Daniel, in Seattle, Washington. Sean and Daniel's mother is conspiciously absent. The premise of the story is as follows: While getting ready to attend a party, Sean catches the neighbour's racist, teenaged boy harassing Daniel and intervenes. A fight ensues. A patrolling police officer sees Sean push the other boy to the ground, severely injuring him, and pulls a gun on the Diaz brothers. Esteban rushes to the scene and tries to peacefully de-escalate the situation. The police officer shoots Esteban, killing him. As a shock reaction, Daniel unleashes a telekinetic shockwave, which kills the officer. Sean picks up Daniel, who is now unconscious, and runs away from the scene.

Life Is Strange 2 follows the Diaz brothers throughout the "unseen" side of the United States as they make for the Mexican border, hoping to start a new life in their father's hometown, Puerto Lobos. The first episode of the game shows the self-dubbed "Wolf Brothers" as they get accustomed to the life on the run. The brothers hide with their mother's parents in a quiet little town for a while, but they are forced to after being discovered by the police. Soon, Sean and Daniel join a group of young train hoppers: a colourful group of mostly queer misfits led by charismatic Finn.

With them, Sean and Daniel live in the woods while working for a sketchy criminal on a plantation, trying to save enough money to reach the Southern border. The relationship between the brothers is put to test as Sean grows closer with the two possible love interests and Daniel feels neglected and belittled, being the only child in the camp. After Sean and Daniel are unjustifiably fired, Finn comes up with a plan to rob their boss. The heist ends up in a disaster: Sean is hospitalised after losing an eye, leaving Daniel on the road by himself. After escaping the hospital, Sean tracks Daniel down to a religious community, whose leader is exploiting Daniel's powers for profit. While trying to come up with a plan to free Daniel, Sean is reunited with their mother, Karen. After staying with Karen's desert community for a while, the Diaz brothers are finally able to reach their destination. Whether Sean and Daniel manage to cross the border depends on the player's actions taken over the course of the game. The four possible endings are discussed in Section 4.2.3.

As the playable character Sean does not possess a special power, the gameplay centers around making moral decisions that shape his young, impressionable brother. While Daniel possess the power, the player's actions indirectly determine the ways in which he uses it. Much like in *Life Is Strange*, the consequences of each choice, whether big or small, are not evident right away but revealed later: For instance, if Daniel sees his big brother steal necessities, he will later steal a toy from a friend. If Sean does not intervene when Daniel tries to use his powers to kill a cougar, Daniel may choke one of the train hoppers.

3.5.3 *Night in the Woods*

Night in the Woods (Infinite Fall 2017) is a side-scrolling adventure game about Mae Borowski, a 20-year-old anthropomorphic cat, who has returned to her hometown, Possum Springs, to live with her parents after abruptly dropping out of college for an unknown reason. Directionless, Mae tries to return to the carefree days of her teenagerhood, but she soon finds that her old friends, along with Possum Springs,

have changed in her absence. Ever since its coal mining industry was shut down, the town has been in decline, and its residents now face unemployment, debt, and everything else that comes with it. Mae's old partner in crime, Gregg, works at a convenience store, while his boyfriend, Angus, works at a video rental shop; together, they are trying to save up money in order to escape the scrutiny of their hometown and move to a larger city. Meanwhile, Mae's estranged childhood friend, Bea, gave up her dream of going to college in favour of looking after her father and the family business after her mother succumbed to cancer.

The first half of *Night in the Woods* is spent getting to know Possum Springs and its residents. Every day, Mae wakes up, talks to her her mother, goes to hang out with one of her friends, returns home, talks to her dad, and goes to sleep. The inciting incident takes place well into the game: after witnessing a kidnapping of a teenager, Mae sets out to solve the mystery, all the while trying to adapt to her new-old life. Together with her friends, Mae discovers that some of the residents of Possum Springs have been sacrificing its most vulnerable members to an otherworldly entity in an attempt to revive the town's dying economy and bring back its "golden days".

3.5.4 *Tell Me Why*

Tell Me Why (Dontnod Entertainment 2020) is a story-driven adventure game, consisting of three episodes. The point of view alternates between the twins Tyler and Alyson Ronan, who share a telepathic connection called "the Bond".

The overarching mystery of the game centres around an incident that took place ten years before the start of the game: When 10-year-old Tyler, who is a transgender boy, goes to show his new haircut to the twins' mother, Mary-Ann, Tyler finds her in a shed, loading up a shotgun. Thinking that Mary-Ann is angry at him for cutting his hair, Tyler runs away and calls Alyson for help using the Bond. Mary-Ann chases Tyler to a dock, where Tyler begs for her not to kill him. Before she can do

anything, Alyson stabbs her with a pair of scissors. Mary-Ann falls into the lake and drowns. When brought in for questioning, Tyler protects Alyson by telling the police that he attacked Mary-Ann in self-defence. Tyler is sent to a residential centre for ten years, while Alyson is taken in by the local police chief, Eddy Brown, and goes on with her life in their small, Alaskan hometown, Delos Crossing.

In the beginning of *Tell Me Why*, Tyler and Alyson are finally reunited after ten years apart. When the twins return to their childhood home to prepare it to be sold, they notice that they remember some past events differently. The twins discover evidence that suggests that Mary-Ann had accepted Tyler and was looking into ways to support him. Tyler and Alyson begin to further question their recollection of the events that led to Mary-Ann's death. Distressed by the possibility that Mary-Ann might have died for nothing, the twins set out to discover the truth once and for all.

The game follows the twins as they try to uncover the secrets of their mother's past. Their search leads them to their biological father, who turns out to be Alyson's employer, Tom Vecchi. The twins also learn that Mary-Ann had lost her firstborn child, which caused her to become extremely overprotective of the twins. Over the years, Mary-Ann's mental health had deteriorated to a point where she was no longer able to care for her children. Eddy had reported Mary-Ann to the child protective services, and because they were friends, he had decided to tell her despite the protocol. Tom, who had witnessed Mary-Ann's death, argues that she had not intended to hurt Tyler. The player must then choose whether to believe the twins' recollection of the events or Tom's. If the player chooses to trust the twins' memory, Tyler and Ronan will believe that Mary-Ann had intended to kill the twins and herself, because she did not want to be separeted from her children. However, if the player decides to trust Tom, the twins conclude that Mary-Ann had only planned to kill herself.

4 ANALYSIS

This chapter will analyse the chosen video games based on the sub-research questions detailed in Section 3.3. First, I will discuss the queer coming-out narratives in each video game starting with the *Life Is Strange* series (Section 4.1). Then, I will move on to discuss the player characters' transition to adulthood, especially the ways in which they defy and enforce the gendered ideals that are traditionally assosiated with the process (Section 4.2). This section will follow the same structure as the previous one. However, as there is little to say about Tyler's coming-of-age narrative beyond what is already discussed in Section 4.1.4, it would have been redundant to include it here as well. Finally, considering the degree to which these video games promote interdependence, I found it necessary to address the topic of togetherness separately (Section 4.3).

4.1 Coming out while coming of age

As Mitchell (2015: 466) puts it, "the coming-out process constructs the identity that it appears to reveal". Moreover, in fictional works, it is often set in motion by one's feelings towards another (Mitchell ibid.). True enough, the present study finds that the protagonists' queerness is often contextualized by their romantic relationships. Furthermore, the way in which the character's queerness is conveyed to the player is, in most cases, undivorceable from any prevailing coming-out narratives. For

these reasons, the topics of coming out and romance are best discussed simultaneously.

Before moving on, it also worth noting that none of the video games are considered coming-out stories per say, but rather coming-of-age stories that incorporate coming-out narratives. Moreover, the scope in which these narratives are depicted varies greatly between games.

4.1.1 *Life Is Strange* and *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*

Life Is Strange does not consider queerness as disruptive to the status quo, or, at the very least, the game does not depict any discrimination based on sexual orientation. Furthermore, the protagonist, Max, is not conflicted about or ashamed of her queerness; if she is, the game does not show it.

While *Life Is Strange* refuses to outright label Max, she is shown as being attracted to boys and girls. Most notably, the player may choose to pursue a romantic relationship either with Max's estranged childhood friend, Chloe (female), or her classmate Warren (male). In addition to these romantic subplots, some subtler moments encourage certain readings of her sexuality. For example, when Max and Chloe decide to break into the school's indoor swimming pool for a midnight swim, the player must choose whether to use the girls' locker room or the boys'. Chloe suggestively asks Max: "Boys or girls?" The choice can be made on the basis of gaining insight into certain character motivations, as the player is able to search the lockers in the chosen room. For instance, in the boys' locker room, the player may find a photograph of Max in Warren's locker, which confirms that he has a crush on Max. However, if the player chooses the girls' locker room, Chloe's surprised "ooh la la" gives away the double entendre of her question. In addition, Max makes many offhand comments about her sexual orientation throughout the game: for instance, in her journal, Max writes about talking about "dumb boys and girls and why they're trouble" with Chloe.

Like its predecessor, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* normalizes queerness by treating the relationship between Chloe and Rachel, or more accurately its queer aspect, as a non-issue in the in-game world. While their parents disapprove of the relationship, even if it established just as a friendship, none of their reservations are founded in homophobia. Furthermore, Steph, an openly lesbian supporting character, is not discriminated either based on her sexual orientation. In fact, Steph is uncomfortable with the idea of making a move on Rachel, the most popular girl in Blackwell Academy, only because Steph suspects that she is already taken.

In *Life Is Strange*, it is unclear whether 18-year-old Max is already aware of her attraction to other girls or if she discovers this aspect of her sexuality only after her reunion with Chloe. In any event, *Life Is Strange* does not portray the confusion that is often associated with the experience of coming to terms with one's nonnormative sexual identity. Similarly, or even more so, 19-year-old Chloe is settled in her identity. However, this was not always the case as shown in the prequel, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, which details 16-year-old Chloe's quest to achieve self-actualization.

According to Lee's (1998: 154) study on early portrayals of lesbian characters in young adult fiction, the coming-out narrative typically involves four distinct steps: First, the female protagonist develops an unidentifiable feeling for another female character. Second, the protagonist admits her feelings to the object of her affection. Third, the girls share a moment of physical intimacy. Fourth, their relationship is forcibly outed to the public. Lee notes that, more often than not, the relationship does not survive the ordeal of being subjected to the scrutiny of others, all leading to a tragic end. At first, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* appears to adhere to Lee's framework for a conventional coming-out narrative, provided that the player, as Chloe, chooses to establish a romantic relationship with the game's deuteragonist, Rachel. It is worth keeping in mind that *Life Is Strange: Before Storm* is not strictly a

coming-out story and, thus, it cannot be expected to follow the same narrative structure as one, especially in the terms of climax.

As the game allows the player to dictate the exact nature of Chloe and Rachel's relationship, be it friendship or something more, let us first discuss the ways in which *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* alludes to Chloe's sexuality if the player decides against pursuing a romance with Rachel: Throughout *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, Chloe pens never-to-be-sent letters, which recapitulate the events of the game and provide further insight into Chloe as a character, effectively serving the same purpose as Max's journal in *Life Is Strange* or Sean's sketchbook in *Life Is Strange 2*. Furthermore, as Chloe addresses each letter to Max, who does not make a physical appearance in the prequel, the letters allow the player to feel Max's presence in her absence. In one of such letters, dated three months before the events of the game, Chloe writes about masturbating to a female movie character: "I mean, at first I was thinking about Deckard and that smolder of his, but then Pris just totally stole the show. Probably nothing there. Think I just want her bangs." As seen, she is not quite ready to consider the implications of her sexual fantasy prior to her formative meeting with Rachel. While the letter is available to the player immediately at the beginning of the game and not dependent on any player choices, the game does not give the player any incentive to read it; unlike Sean's sketchbook in *Life Is Strange 2*, which the player is required to examine to complete the game, there is little reason for the player to read Chloe's letters beyond their own curiosity. However, the game does require and encourage the player to thoroughly explore their environment. While exploring, the player is bound to notice at least one of the many allusions to queer imagery or figures that the game associates with Chloe, such as the rainbow-coloured sculpture in Chloe's room or her license plate that spells "ANBONNY"[3]. While Chloe's queerness ought to be evident to a discerning player, the topic is hardly explored in a meaningful way outside of her optional, romantic subplot with Rachel. In other words, the player is not required to engage

[3] A reference to Anne Bonny, a notorious female pirate surmised to have been in a relationship with another woman

with any of the major, queer elements of the game in a meaningful way if they prefer not to. However, the in-game statistics suggest that most players willingly chose to explore the queer nature of Chloe and Rachel's relationship, as 72%[4] of the players chose to refer to Chloe's feelings towards Rachel as "something more".

Life Is Strange: Before the Storm first establishes Chloe as a defiant troublemaker, who is known for her sharp tongue and snark; As Chloe, the player's first objective is to get past a bouncer, who is keeping Chloe from attending an illegal punk rock concert. To gain access, the player may attempt to "backtalk" the bouncer, or, in other words, convince him to let Chloe pass by the way of using sarcastic remarks and insults. Chloe's feelings towards Rachel become evident, when she starts stuttering and acting awkwardly in a manner that is out of character for her. Chloe cannot adequately describe her feelings: "Is this… nervousness? Is that what this feeling is? Wish Max were here, so I could ask." While changing behind a folding screen, Rachel asks Chloe to pass her her belt. If the player chooses to bring it to her instead of throwing it, Chloe nervously approaches half-clothed Rachel. Later, if the player tries to make small talk, instead of commenting on the weather, Chloe will comically mess up her words and say: "Nice Rachel we're having." While she is eventually able to speak to Rachel normally, she still acts hesitant around her, especially during more intimate moments.

If Chloe was punched in the face during the concert, Rachel offers to cover the bruise with makeup. The girls may then share an intimate moment. If the player continues to initiate these kinds of moments of intimacy with her, Rachel interprets Chloe's feelings towards her as romantic, which affects her response in the following scene.

As per Lee's (1998) framework, the intensity of the new emotions forces Chloe to confess her new-found feelings to Rachel. When Chloe and Rachel get into an argument, Rachel pushes Chloe to articulate her feelings verbally:

[4] On May 16, 2019

> **Chloe:** […] I don't want to ruin this the way I ruin everything else in my life.
> **Rachel:** And what is "this" exactly?
> **Chloe:** I mean… fuck. Are you actually going to make me say it?
> **Rachel:** Say what, exactly?
> **Chloe:** You know. Like, a friendship. But… more.

If the player chooses to refer to their relationship as "friendship" instead of "something more" after initiating moments of intimacy earlier, Rachel appears disappointed:

> **Chloe:** A real friendship.
> **Rachel:** Oh. Is that all?
> **Chloe:** I mean. I don't know. Yet. But I wanna find out.

In this manner, the game tallies the moments of intimacy initiated by the player. The game, and Rachel, interpret the player's actions and react accordingly. Instead of having Rachel responds in just two different ways, the developers chose an approach that simulates real human interaction. While Chloe struggles with trying to articulate her feelings, Rachel appears to be more in touch with herself and is not surprised by Chloe's confession if the player's previous choices fall in line with Chloe's answer. If the player initially refers to their relationship as just a friendship but has Chloe reveal her feelings later by asking for a kiss, Rachel is surprised:

> **Rachel:** Really? I though you weren't into that. At least, it seemed that way.
> **Chloe:** I know. I guess I didn't know how I felt until now.

In adolescent lesbian fiction, girls are made to hold hands in public for the purpose of showing the negative consequences of being openly in a queer relationship (Lee 1998: 155). While Chloe and Rachel are walking home late at night, Rachel offers to hold Chloe's hand. As they walk down the street, hand-in-hand, they shyly steal quick glances from one another, and an acoustic song plays in the background. Rather than being anxiety-inducing declaration to the public, the act of holding hands affirms their closeness to one another. As per Lee's (1998: 155) model, their first real act of physical intimacy is kissing, which takes place during the same scene. If the player chose to initially label their relationship as "friendship" and asks for a

kiss now, Chloe and Rachel share a sweet kiss. If the player established their relationship as "something more", the kiss is more sexually charged.

According to Lee (1998: 156), the source of tension in coming-out stories is the threat of the queer relationship being revealed to the public. More specifically, the characters are often forced to come out as a punishment once they become sexually active. At this point, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* diverges from Lee's model for coming-out stories. Since the game does not feature any depictions of sex, explicit or otherwise, Chloe and Rachel's first kiss marks the culmination of their relationship. If the game were to follow Lee's model, Chloe and Rachel would now have to confront the negative consequences of being in a queer relationship. For a moment, the game appears to be heading into this direction: After Chloe and Rachel have their first kiss, the girls plan to run away. While trying to sneak into Rachel's house to get her bags, they are seen by Rachel's father, and her mother insists that Chloe stays for dinner. To avoid raising any suspicion, Chloe and Rachel agree. In this segment, the tension is brought on by Chloe's feelings of out-of-placeness in the nice, upper middle-class house, Rachel's barely contained hatred towards her assumably unfaithful father, and James's revulsion for Chloe. However, rather than her queerness, Rachel's father aversion towards Chloe derives from her socio-economic background and reputation as a delinquent:

> **James:** You are not welcome here or around my daughter any longer. I knew exactly what kind of person you are from the moment I saw you, and I let my wife's compassion get the better of me.
> **Chloe:** Oh, what kind of person is that?
> **James:** A delinquent. A broken girl from a broken home.

While her family's poor financial situation is a source of anxiety for Chloe, and she was initially self-conscious about her social standing in comparison to Rachel, Chloe is not bothered by James' insults. After Chloe was assured that Rachel does not see her as a lesser-than, James' words do not sway her, or, if they do, this is not communicated to the player.

After Chloe is affirmed of her importance to Rachel, she is reinvigorated and decides to change her appearance. As the song *Hope* by Daughter picks up in the background, Chloe wipes the fogged-up bathroom mirror, revealing her hair, now partially dyed to its iconic blue colour from the original game. The soundtrack goes, quite unsubtly: "And once again you'll be reborn, reborn, reborn." Afterwards, Chloe is shown stealing her signature boots from her mother's wardrobe and picking up her father's old clothes, emphasising her feminine and masculine sides. While Chloe had dressed up in shirt and jeans, much like Max, who struggles with her self-image, Chloe is now able to express herself through her physical appearance in a way that is true to herself. Her more elaborated look also reflects her improved self-esteem: after the makeover, Chloe is seen admiring her own reflection on several occasions. This is a striking comparison to her in the first episode, where she is barely able to look at herself in the mirror.

4.1.2 *Life Is Strange 2*

Life Is Strange 2 offers Sean five opportunities to declare himself as bisexual to other characters. As in *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, the protagonist's queerness is almost exclusively discussed in the context of romance, as four of these scenes require the player to kiss Finn, the male love interest. While Sean's attraction to girls is established in the very first scene of the game, his attraction towards boys is brought up much later.

Like Chloe, Sean is initially confused by his sexual orientation. With the train hoppers, most of whom are queer themselves, Sean is allowed to explore his sexuality in a safe environment. When Sean admits that he is still getting used to everything, Finn affirms him by drawing on his own experiences: "It took us time too, you know. Like I didn't change my views on politics, life or sexuality in a blink. Takes a whole fucking reconstruction."

Around the hallway mark of the game, the player is given a choice between turning in early with Sean's little brother or staying up late with the other youngsters. If the latter is chosen, Sean inquiries about the relationship between Finn and another "trimmigrant" Hannah. Finn explains that he and Hannah are not a couple but that they have casual sex. When Sean asks about Finn's sexual orientation, Finn explains in layman's terms that he identifies as pansexual:

> **Sean:** So… would you consider yourself bi or…
> **Finn:** Horny. I see people, not gender. It's all good… long as I get some.

Interestingly, the dialogue varies depending on the way in which the player responded upon learning about Finn and Hannah's casual arrangement. If the player expressed openness, the conversation plays out as above. However, if the player responds in a more reserved manner, the following conversation takes place:

> **Sean:** Does it mean you're into guys and all?
> **Finn:** Uh, that depends on the position, but yeah, sure.

Most notably, if the player expressed openness, Sean speaks more thoughtfully and uses the word "bi"; while Finn does maintain his playful tone, he offers a more serious response. Cassidy, another possible love interest, then asks about Sean's own preference. The player is given four dialogue options to choose from:

> **Sean (More into girls):** I'm just more into girls. Like Jenn, back in Seattle. She was so hot, man. Heh, so long…
> **Sean (Some boys are cute):** I never really thought about it… I find some boys cute, but… Yeah, I haven't actually thought about it.
> **Sean (Not into dating.):** I can't even go there… way too much shit on my plate. Plus I gotta babysit Daniel…

> **Sean (Had many girlfriends):** I've had so many girlfriends, so… I guess it's a done deal. I like girls.

For instance, if the player emphasises Sean's attraction to boys over girls, the option to kiss Finn is more likely to trigger later in the episode. Notably, if Sean admits to liking boys, Finn will decline Hannah's offer to join her in her tent afterwards. Finn's attraction towards Sean is made apparent even if the player chooses girls over boys:

> **Finn:** Oh shit, you had a Jenn? There goes my chance…
>
> **Cassidy:** Didn't think you were such a womanizer!
> **Finn:** Oh, you kidding! A cute guy like him…

A romantic relationship with Finn is established by kissing him, which requires that the player agrees to Finn's plan to rob their criminal boss. If the player took actions that indicated interest towards Finn, such as asking him about his life, drawing him, talking about liking boys, and not expressing interest in the other love interest, Finn will make a direct move on Sean. The player can choose to turn him down or reciprocate. If the latter is chosen, Sean will kiss Finn (see Figure 1).

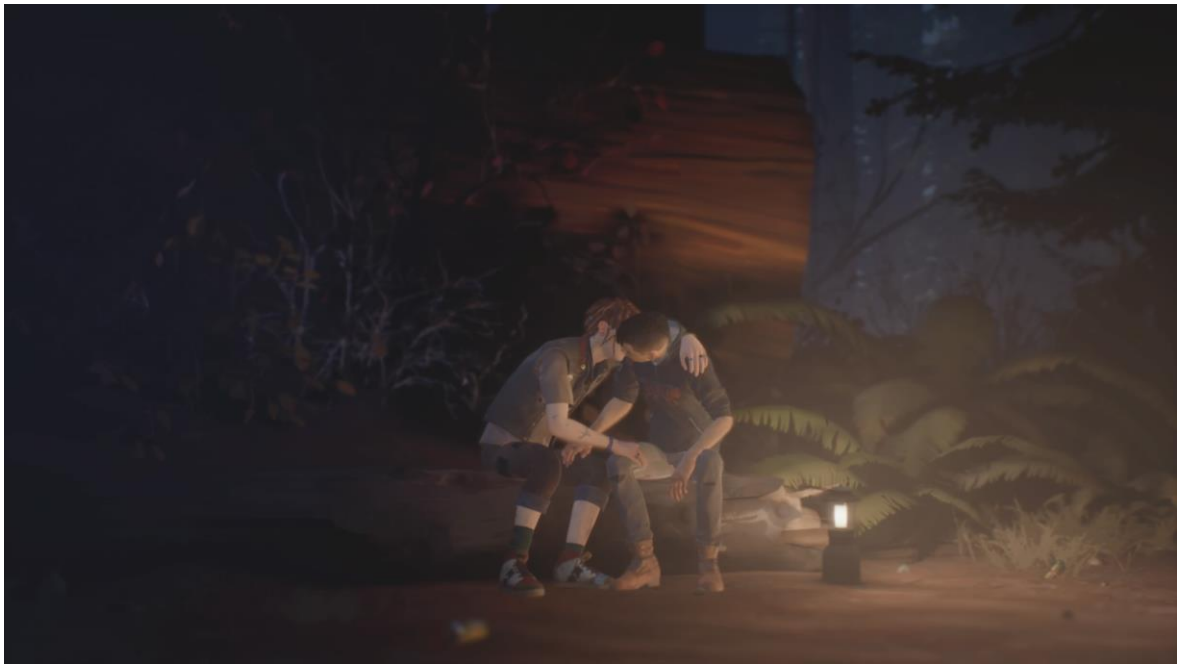

Figure 1. Sean (right) and Finn (left) kissing (*Life Is Strange 2*)

A romantic relationship with the female love interest is initiated in a similar way, except that the player is required to disagree to Finn's plan. While the train hoppers are nonchalant about casual nudity, it is worth noting that the kiss between Sean and Cassidy takes place while they are skinny-dipping. Furthermore, Sean may lose his virginity to Cassidy, while there is no option to have sex with Finn. While it is understandable that the relationship between Sean and Finn progresses more slowly, given that Sean is still figuring himself out, it does enforce the idea that male homosexuality is seen as threatening by risk-averse executives (Karmali 2014). The in-game statistic also show that only 14%[5] of the players kissed Finn, which may reflect the fact that player is forced to agree to a dangerous heist in order to do so. In comparison, 64%[6] of the players kissed Cassidy. The game does eventually balance out the romances to some degree: while Cassidy does not make an appearance after Episode 3, the player may meet Finn later in the game. If the player does not blame Finn for the unsuccessful heist, Finn will make a heartfelt confession:

> **Finn:** I love you so much. You know, that night… it meant a lot to me. I'm really gonna miss you.
> **Sean [holding back tears]:** Me too, Finn… And… who knows, maybe we'll see each other again.
> **Finn:** You're gonna find [Daniel], sweetie. I trust you. So you should trust yourself too.

While Cassidy is not interested in a long-term relationship, Finn is more committed. Even though it is not depicted in-game, this suggests that the gay romance route may eventually lead to a more serious relationship while the straight one does not.

Even though Sean's father, Esteban, is killed in the beginning of the game, Sean is given the opportunity to come out to him during a dream sequence. In the dream, Sean and Esteban are on a road trip, Sean driving the car his father never finished fixing for him. The scene highlights some of the regrets that Sean has regarding his father's death, such as not spending enough time together and not telling Esteban that he loved him more often. At one point, Esteban inquires about a girl Sean used

[5] As shown by in-game statistics on June 1, 2021
[6] As shown by in-game statistics on June 1, 2021

to have a crush on back in Seattle. If the player pursued a romance with Finn in the previous episode, Sean may nervously confess that he kissed a boy:

> **Sean:** I… actually kissed a boy. It wasn't planned or anything, just… yeah, this happened.
> **Esteban:** Uhhh… okay! Wow, this is… I mean, I'm fine with that. But as long as you're happy, I'm down with it. It's just… It's a bit… unexpected, you know?

While Sean sounds audibly nervous, Esteban responds positively despite the initial surprise. Even though the conversation is taking place in Sean's dream, Esteban's reaction does not seem out of character for him based on the brief interactions the player has with the character in the beginning of the game and during flashbacks.

Lastly, but most importantly, given that the relationship between the Diaz brothers is the driving force of the game, Sean may come out to his little brother. While staying with a desert community in Arizona, the Diaz brothers meet a middle-aged gay couple: Arthur and Stanley Petersen. Over a walkie-talkie, Daniel tells Sean that he saw them kissing, giving Sean an opportunity to admit to kissing another boy:

> **Daniel:** Ooo, you know what, I saw them kissing the other day! Kinda weird…
> **Sean [playfully]:** Oh, really? Was it weird that I kissed Finn at the farm?
> **Daniel:** DUDE! N-no way!
> **Sean [seriously]:** Dude, I wouldn't lie to you about it.
> **Daniel:** Nah, it's super cool, I just wish you woulda told me you were into him!

While Sean initially responds in a playful tone, almost bragging about kissing Finn, his tone shifts when he thinks that Daniel may respond negatively.

Despite the initial confusion and anxieties about coming out, Sean is never distressed by his attraction towards boys. In fact, when Jacob, a gay man, confesses that his religious community put him through conversion therapy as a teenager, leading him to believe that being gay was a sin and he needed to atone, Sean is quick to call him out: "Atone? For what sins? I don't get how they can preach this kind of crap. I mean, what about Finn and I, then? Are we going straight to hell?"

4.1.3 *Night in the Woods*

Setting itself apart from the other games, *Night in the Woods* offers a slightly different perspective on the process of coming out: instead of focusing on characters as they start exploring their sexuality for the first time, or even their first romantic relationships, the game depicts the not-so-imminent aftermath of coming out to one's friends and family in a small town filled with equally small-minded people. While *Tell Me Why*, as I soon will discuss, opts to depict and discuss direct, more confrontational homophobia and transphobia, *Night in the Woods* goes about it in a subtle manner.

Both Gregg and Angus are confirmed to have strained if not downright bad relationships with their families:

> **Mae:** You up for hanging out later? So much to catch up on!
> **Gregg:** Naw, got dinner with the family.
> **Mae:** Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
> **Gregg [is silent for a moment]:** A friendly thing.
>
> **Gregg:** [Angus'] family is like pure trash.
> **Mae:** How so?
> **Gregg:** Assholes. Really stupid assholes.

It is not clear to what degree Gregg and Angus' homosexuality affects their family relationships. However, the homophobic attitudes of the residents of Possum Springs are made evident through what are best describes as microaggressions. For example, Gregg and Angus' neighbour refers to Gregg as "the little friend [Angus] lives with" instead of his boyfriend or partner. Mae herself does not appear to have faced any major hardships regarding her sexual orientation, which is why she comes off as naïve to the struggles of others.

Unlike the other queer player characters, Mae does not have a major romantic subplot. The player does meet her high school boyfriend early in the game, which

may lead them to think of her as straight at first. Mae is later revealed as pansexual[7] as a part of a casual conversation. For example, if the player chooses to visit a graveyard with Bea, a group of weird teenagers makes Mae and Bea answer a series of questions before they are allowed to pass into "the realms of the of the dead". When asked to describe her dream date, Mae answers: "I don't care if it's guy or girl but they'd have to be like grrr." When asked to share an embarrassing story, Mae may talk about embarrassing herself in front of a girl she had a crush on. Instead allowing the player to shape Mae's identity, these questions are used to reveal predeterminate character.

If the player continues to hang out with Bea, Mae can attend a college party with her. If the player talks to one of the female partygoers, Mae gets flustered, which is indicated by the rapidly changing speech bubble, fragmented speech, and extra spaces: "Need to tell / friend / lo c a tion." While talking to Bea later, Mae laments that she did not get the girl's phone number. Once again, Mae acts on her own accord, and the player is not allowed to choose whether to flirt with "Bombshell".

4.1.4 *Tell Me Why*

While *Tell Me Why* is packed with mysteries, the game refuses to treat Tyler being transgender as one. After the opening montage, the player can explore Tyler's room at the residential centre and inspect a couple of items and symbols that point towards him being a transgender man: for example, a self-help book titled *The Transgender Man's Guide to Healthy Masculinity*, a transgender pride flag, and a calendar that reminds Tyler to take a testosterone injection every Tuesday. As the Ronan family is somewhat infamous in Tyler's hometown, the topic of him being transgender is brought up quite often in casual conversation. Also, considering that

[7] While the game itself does not use the word, one of the developers confirmed Mae as pansexual on CuriousCat (bombsfall 2017).

Tyler being transgender plays a major role in the overall plot, it is nigh impossible to overlook.

As the only player character who is transgender, Tyler differs from the rest in more ways than one. Firstly, Tyler is the only one shown to grapple with a non-normative gender identity as a preadolescent child. In a flashback, 10-year-old Tyler, who is still going by his first chosen name "Ollie", asks Alyson to cut his hair short for him. Even though the haircut is bad, Tyler is overjoyed and hugs Alyson as a thank-you. When Alyson refers to Tyler as her "sister", he gently corrects her:

> **Young Tyler:** Thank you, Alyson.
> **Young Alyson:** You don't have to thank me. You're my sister.
> **Young Tyler:** I feel more like your brother.
> **Young Alyson:** Brother, sister… We look out for each other.

Although Tyler had previously asked to be called "Ollie", in the aforementioned scene, he confesses to identifying as a boy for the first time. In comparison to the quick-time event during which Sean may tell Daniel about kissing another boy, the conversation between Tyler and Alyson is given a lot more weight; the difference in gravitas can be explained by the fact that the former is player determinant, while the latter is not. Moreover, if the whole story were told in chronological order rather than through disjointed flashbacks, Tyler's confession would immediately be followed by the scene in which he goes to show his haircut to Mary-Ann. As one would expect, she had already picked up on the signs that point towards Tyler being transgender. Although Mary-Ann had been looking into better ways to support her son, going as far as cutting ties with her employer, who had suggested conversion therapy, Tyler does not learn about his mother's true feelings until much later. As the role that Tyler being transgender plays in the overall plot of the game is already described in Section 3.5.4, it is not worth restating here. Instead, let us return to the previous topic.

After returning to Delos Crossing, Tyler is required to come out to strangers, who had heard of the infamous Ronan twins but not about Tyler being transgender. Even

people who knew Tyler as a child are not able to recognise him as an adult, which often leads to awkward encounters. For example:

> **Alyson:** You remember my brother, Tyler?
> **Tom:** Your brother? Oh— Right, Tyler! What a pleasant surprise! Didn't Alyson tell you I'd would be by today?
> **Tom:** Yes, I think she did. I just didn't expect to see such a… [d]apper young man!
> **Tyler:** Well, I did shower this morning.

Of course, Tyler and Alyson are not yet aware that Tom is their biological father; instead, they assume that Tom is merely surprised by Tyler's masculinity. As seen in the above example, Tyler responds to poorly worded compliments with relative ease, often in a sarcastic way that communicates to the speaker that they have misspoken. However, Tyler is far more uncomfortable when dealing with more close-minded people, which is shown by his first conversation with a local man, who mistakes Tyler for a trespasser and threatens him with a gun. As he is about to shoot, Alyson intervenes:

> **Alyson:** Sam, put the gun down! This is Tyler! *My brother*.
> **Sam:** Your… brother? Oh, shit… Huh, I guess I heard about all that, but I never… Damn… You look like a real man.
> **Tyler:** So do you, Sam.
> **Sam:** You know what I mean. I just… didn't know they could make a woman look so much like a man.
> **Tyler:** You know, I'm just trying to be me. It's just who I am.
> **Sam:** Hum… Well… I've seen a couple of lady transvestites on the tv before, but… Hum… I've never seen a dude.
> **Alyson:** Sam, that's not how you say that.
> **Sam:** Say what? Transvestites?
> **Alyson:** Yes. It's transgender… Transgender men.
> **Sam:** Augh, I'm… sorry. It's hard to keep track out here in Delos Crossing. The world's just… moving on without us.
> **Tyler:** It's fine. Let's just change to subject.
> **Sam:** Works for me… Tyler.

When Sam conflates being transgender and being transvestite, Tyler clenches fists and looks up in exasperation. Alyson knows to take over the conversation at that point. As Alyson is well-known and well-liked by the residents of Delos Crossing, her words lend credence to Tyler. As the only game to outright depict homophobic or transphobic attacks that are directly aimed at the protagonist, instead of merely

alluding to them, *Tell Me Why* stands apart from the rest by having an ally defend a queer person against discrimination.

While Tyler being a transgender man is indisputable, *Tell Me Why* grants its players a lot of control over Tyler's sexual identity. According to the lead writer Morgan Lockhart, leaving Tyler's sexual orientation up to the players' interpretation was a deliberate choice made in the fear of alienating some transmasculine players:

> Do we just decide he is of certain orientation or sexuality, or do we allow players to experience that? […] There's room in there if you believe that Tyler either isn't specifically interested in [the male love interest] or isn't gay or possibly is ace. You could make all those choices kind of in the options that you have – you can have different versions of Tyler. (Henley 2020)

For example, if the player chooses to play Tyler as gay or questioning, another layer is added to his identity.

Michael, a Tlingit man, is the only romance option in the game. Furthermore, being gay, Michael is only available for Tyler. Like with many other player characters, Tyler's sexual orientation is nearly always brough up in a conversation with a possible love interest. Like all the other previously discussed love interests, Michael is more experienced than the player character and considerate of their feelings. Not only is he a safe person for Tyler to start exploring his sexuality with, but Michael also offers him moral support and guidance. When Tyler asks Michael about living in a small town as an openly gay man, Michael speaks about the discrimination that he faces: for example, having to keep his relationships hidden and being forbidden from "practising his lifestyle" in front of customers. Most importantly Michael, introduces Tyler to the importance of a having queer community:

> **Michael:** I've got a community [in Juneau]. Could be yours too.
> **Tyler:** Hmmm, 'fitting in'… there's a concept.
> **Michael:** You have no idea how life saving a chosen family can be. They've pulled me out of the dark more times that I can count.

If the player enters a romantic relationship with Michael, Tyler will move to Juneau with Alyson and Michael and join a queer community there. Furthermore, Tyler

will abandon his initial career plan as a ranger, choosing to become a mentor at the Juneau Coalition for Equality instead.

4.2 Resisting the archetypical coming-of-age narrative

Now that we have located the central, queer narratives, we may move on to discuss the coming-of-age narratives more in depth. Specifically, the present section examines the character flaws that hinder the protagonists' personal growth, some of which were already mentioned in the previous section. More importantly, the present section will determine whether the protagonists are able to make a successful transition to adulthood or if their progress is arrested. At the same time, we will consider the ways in which the character arcs relate to the archetypical coming-of-age narratives, especially to the gender-specific norms that are embedded in them. As previously stated, many coming-of-age narratives reflect gender-specific norms. To reiterate, manhood is typically associated with independence and womanhood with interdependence. (Rishoi 2003: 65.)

4.2.1 *Life Is Strange* and *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*

In *Life Is Strange*, Max's introversion and "social unease" dictate much of the ways in which the player can interact with the game world. In the beginning of the game, there is a short classroom sequence, during which Max does not yet possess the power to control time. Here, the player is only allowed to initiate a conversation with Max's classmate Kate, whom she is already casually acquainted with. Max's teacher Mark Jefferson asks her to see him after class. After the class is dismissed, he even calls out: "And yes Max, I see you pretending not to see me." Whenever a game gives a location-specific objective, the player is typically required to complete it before they can progress further; if the player tries to leave the area earlier, the player character often makes a comment along the lines of "I better go talk to my teacher first". However, as Max prefers to avoid most conversations for the fear of

embarrassing herself, she does not stop the player from trying to leave before talking to Jefferson. However, if the player attempts to exit the area, Jefferson orders Max to turn back: "I see you, Max Caulfield. Don't even think about leaving here until we have talked about your entry." When the player is finally allowed to leave the classroom, Max puts on earphones; the player may then explore the hallway, but they cannot talk to any of the NPCs or listen in on any of the conversations that are taking place around Max. Before gaining the power to turn back time, Max prefers to observe the world from a safe distance, as a photographer would. However, after Max is able to "rewind" and do-over any conversation, the player is allowed to speak to almost any NPC. Whenever the player angers an NPC by choosing a wrong dialogue option, they may start over. For example, after witnessing an argument between two of Max's classmates, the player may ask about it:

> **Juliet:** Uh, why do you care? […] You never talk, just zone out with your camera.
> **Max:** That's why I'm talking to you now.
> **Juliet:** What's my last name?

The game then gives the player four options to choose from. If the player guesses wrong, Juliet gets angry at Max, and they are required to rewind and try again. Her power also allows Max to act in a way that is not socially acceptable, especially for a woman. At times, she must be assertive, brash, or even aggressive to achieve a desired result. However, the repercussions for doing so are often so severe that the player is forced to rewind. For example, Max may purposefully antagonise Chloe's drug dealer, Frank, in order to get him to reveal the location of a certain item. When he attacks Max, the game forces the player to rewind. The player must then use the information they just gained to figure out a less confrontational approach, which allows Max to keep her good standing with Frank.

While the ability to rewind allows Max to safely leave her comfort zone, her powers also play into her major character flaw, which is her lack of self-confidence. Max's self-esteem issues often manifest as indecisiveness and procrastination. As a

teenager, who is figuring out the next step in her life, Max is already an ideal protagonist for a game that centres around choice and consequence. However, by giving her the ability to redo previous events, and a time limit, the game effectively raises the stakes for her. Notably, in the final episode, Max must choose between saving her best friend and possible love interest, Chloe, and sacrificing her to save their hometown and its residents. However, as the player's decision affects not only Max's fate but also Chloe's, let us first discuss Chloe's coming-of-age narrative as it is told in *Life Is Strange* and *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*.

Much of Chloe's selfish behaviour in *Life Is Strange* and *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* is due to her fear of abandonment, which, in turn, originates from the following events: her father's abrupt death and Max moving away from Arcadia Bay. Furthermore, when her mother eventually remarries and Rachel disappears, this fear is escalated. While Chloe cannot fault her father for dying nor Max for being forced to move, she does act out against her mother and David. Notably, Chloe rejects David's efforts to get along (see Figure 2).

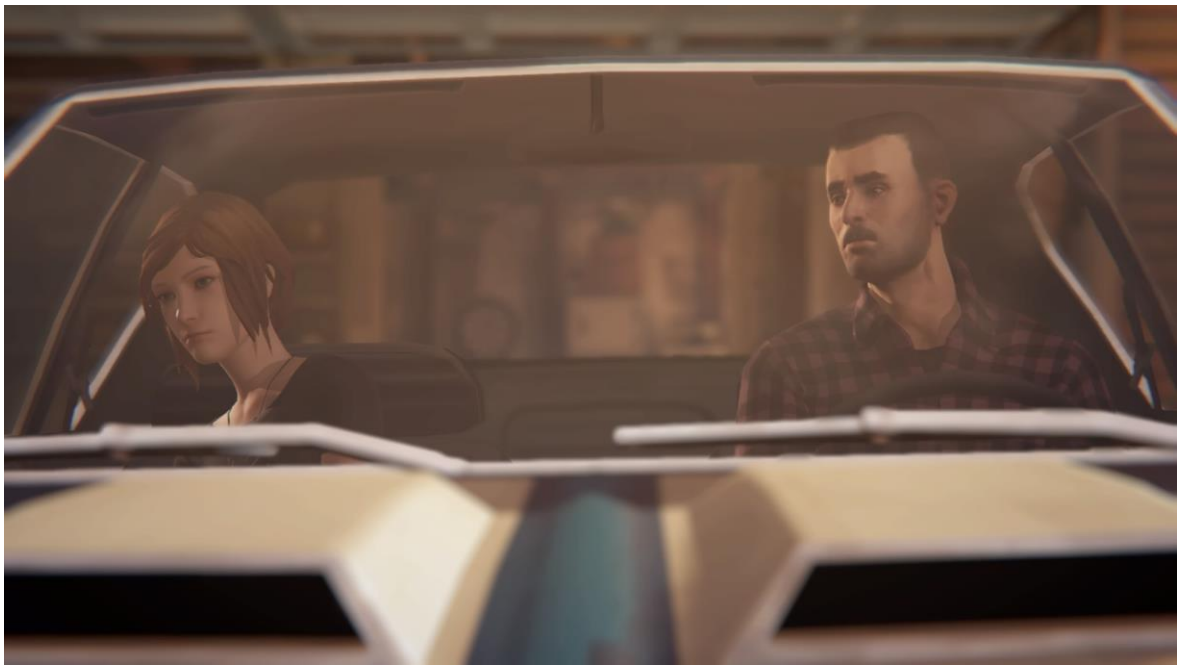

Figure 2. Chloe and David's body language (*Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*)

While stealing, getting suspended, and abusing marijuana are not enough to mark her doom, she is headed down a dangerous road: When Chloe learns that Rachel did not leave of her own volition but was in fact kidnapped and killed, she is finally given a target to blame. Before Chloe is able to ruin her own life, the player must convince her to let the proper authorities handle Rachel's killers. While the player may need to rewind, it is not possible to fail. On that note, Chloe's friendship with Max is the deciding factor in overcoming her fear of abandonment. As seen in *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, Max is unable to maintain her friendship with Chloe after Max's family moves out of Arcadia Bay. Max eventually stops replying to Chloe's text messages, which feeds into her abandonment issues. When Chloe learns that Max had returned to Arcadia Bay only to study under a famous photographer and did not try to contact Chloe, she feels even more undesired. Max tries to explain that she "just wanted to settle in first and not be such a shy cliché geek", but Chloe does not buy Max's excuse. However, her anger is quickly overpowered by the happiness of having her best friend back. Still, Chloe feels threatened whenever Max chooses

someone else over her: For example, if the player chooses to answer a phone call from Max's classmate Kate, Chloe reacts poorly:

> **Chloe:** You don't call me in five years and now you're all over some beeatch you see every day at school? I see how you roll. […] If you'd rather chill with Kate, please go ahead.

In comparison, ignoring Kate brings the player one step closer to "romancing" Chloe successfully. The exchange also shows that Chloe's fear of abandonment and selfishness are closely intertwined.

Much like in *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, Chloe must be reassured that Max will not abandon her. Again, it is not possible to fail, as the friendship between Max and Chloe is rekindled regardless of player choice. As Chloe slowly overcomes her fear of abandonment, she is also able to unlearn her selfish behaviours. Chloe's progress as a character is well-demonstrated if she and Max end up visiting Kate in the hospital:

> **Max:** I'm so glad I get to see [Kate] again. I hope it's not too weird for her.
> **Chloe:** No, she'll be so stoked to see you. Who wouldn't be?
> **Max:** This be it. I'm a little nervous…
> **Chloe:** Just go in there and be her friend. I'll wait out here, so you can chill by yourselves. I was a total dick for blowing a fuse when you answered Kate's call the other day. Good thing you ignored me. I had no idea what shit she was going through. And you saved her… like me. I'm sorry.

An even better indication of Chloe's growth is her behaviour during the climax, which brings us back to the final decision of the game.

As a tornado is about to destroy Arcadia Bay, Max and Chloe, who are watching from a safe distance, conclude that the only way to save the town is for Max to return to the past and let Chloe be shot by Nathan, as she would have been had Max not intervened. Chloe herself begs Max to sacrifice her:

> **Chloe:** [My mother] deserves so much more than to be killed by a storm in a fucking diner. Even my step… father deserves her alive. There's so many more people in Arcadia Bay who should live… way more than me…

The act of putting the good of many above the protagonist's own desires reflects the archetypical female coming-of-age narrative (Rishoi 2003). Furthermore, given the fact that queer relationships between young female characters often end tragically (Jiménez 2015), the alternative option appears far more attractive. The decision to let the storm run its courses also has curious implications for Max's character arc. With determination, Max rips the photograph that would have allowed her to return to past. By prioritising Chloe over Arcadia Bay, Max deviates from the conventional female path (as identified by Rishoi 2003). However, because Max's decision to sacrifice the town is motivated by her desire to protect Chloe, she does not reject it altogether. It would seem that this allows Max and Chloe to eventually lead fulfilling, adult lives.

The original game does not elaborate on Max and Chloe's lives beyond showing that they leave Arcadia Bay together. Also considering Chloe's tragic fate in the alternative ending, Pötzsh and Waszkiewicz (2019) argue that *Life Is Strange* reasserts the deadly, long-running trope that sees queer female characters dead. However, *Life Is Strange 2* offers brief glimpse into their future in case Chloe was not sacrificed, further elaborating the original ending (see Figure 3).

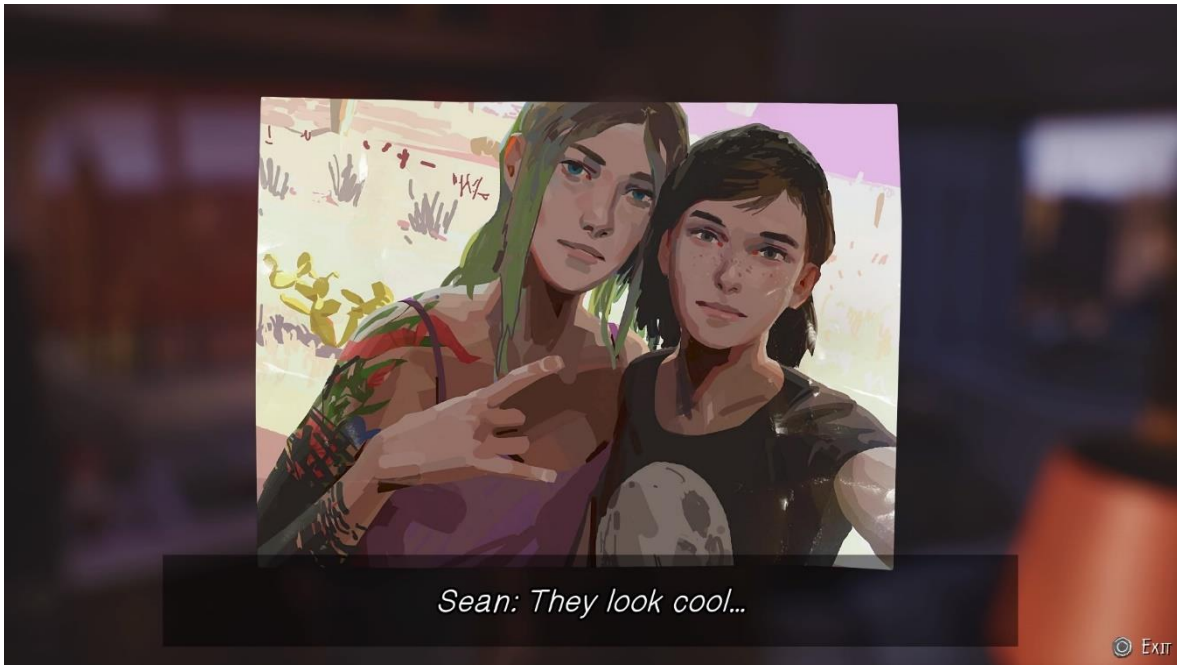

Figure 3. Sean looking at a photo of Chloe (left) and Max (right) (*Life Is Strange 2*)

In *Life Is Strange 2*, Max, who was initially too insecure to launch her career as a photographer, is actively trying to set up an exhibition. Chloe and David also have formed a good father-daughter relationship over the years.

4.2.2 *Life Is Strange 2*

The premise of *Life Is Strange 2* resembles the archetypical, masculine coming-of-age story: 16-year-old Sean finds his father's caretaking and rules oppressive. He also fights a lot with his 9-year-old brother, Daniel, who does not respect his space either. While Sean is still unsure of the direction his life should take, he cannot wait to become an adult. However, after his father is killed, Sean is forced to take responsibility for Daniel and learn to survive without societal comforts while on the run from the police.

In the beginning of the game, Sean is only willing to accept help from others in life-or-death situations; his mantra is, after all: "My brother, my responsibility." Because

Sean is not mature enough to care for a child by himself, especially with such little resources, Daniel ends up getting sick. With no other viable option, Sean reaches out to their distant grandparents, who take the brothers in for a while. While the brothers, especially Daniel, are not too happy about having to live by their grandmother's strict rules after getting used to being by themselves, they overall enjoy their stay. After their grandparents help the brothers escape the police, Sean begins to value the help of others over the masculine need for independence, marking a permanent change in his attitude. When the brothers join the train hoppers, Sean is more willing to follow the group's rules in exchange for a sense of security and community. The ending of the game, including Sean's fate, is in part dictated by whichever Daniel is taught to value more: following the rules of society or their own independence and needs. As a result, Sean's fate may either fully discard the archetypical male coming-of-age narrative, conform to it, or fall somewhere in the middle of the two extremes.

Typically, boys are expected to cut any emotional ties to their family to become men (Rishoi 2003). If the player maintains a close relationship with Daniel, Sean is able to avoid the lonely fate of the archetypical male protagonist. If Sean goes to jail, which requires that the player taught Daniel to conform to the rules of society, Sean himself is not able to incorporate to the society as an adult after being released: after spending some time with Daniel, who is now an adult, Sean is shown driving away by himself. While this resolution may resemble the traditional male coming-of-age narrative, it is important to note that the actions that lead to it stand in opposition to the ethos of masculine individualism.

Sean's fate in the ending *Parting Ways* is curious in that it closely resembles that of Max's in *Life Is Strange* in case player chose to sacrifice Arcadia Bay in favour of saving Chloe. This ending is achieved by teaching Daniel to abide to the rules of society but asking him to use his powers to force the blockade when they finally reach the border. In this case, Daniel refuses to comply. Instead, he destroys the blockade without harming the police officers, which allows Sean to cross the border,

but Daniel himself chooses to stay behind. While the brothers are separated, both are able to lead fulfilling lives as adults. For a more detailed description of all the possible endings, please see Table 2.

Table 2. All possible endings of *Life Is Strange 2*

Ending	**Sean's fate**	**Daniel's fate**
Sean decides to surrender, and Daniel agrees (Redemption)	Sean goes to jail and is released after 15 years.	Daniel is taken in by his grandparents and is allowed to live a normal life. He uses his powers for the betterment of society.
Sean decides to surrender, and Daniel refuses (Lone Wolf)	Sean is killed when Daniel uses his powers to force their car through the police blockade.	Daniel starts a new life in Mexico by himself. He uses his powers to commit criminal actions.
Sean decides to force the blockade, and Daniel refuses (Parting Ways)	Sean starts a new, seemingly happy life in Mexico with his love interest (if applicable).	Daniel helps Sean escape but surrenders himself to the police. Daniel is taken in by his grandparents. He uses his powers for the betterment of society. Daniel is shown wearing an ankle monitor.
Sean decides to force the blockade, and Daniel agrees (Blood Brothers)	Sean and Daniel start a new life in Mexico together. They use Daniel's powers to commit criminal actions.	See Sean's fate.

4.2.3 ***Night in the Woods***

One of the central themes of the game is evident from the very beginning of the game. When the player is given control of Mae, they find that in order to progress,

they are required to move to the left side of the screen. In Western cultures, texts often present old information on the left and new on the right (Halliday 1994, as cited in Jones & Hafner 2012: 54). Most side-scrolling video games, like *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo EAD 1985), follow this same given-new structure, which requires the player to move the avatar from the left side of the screen to the right. At the beginning of *Night in the Woods*, Mae has just gotten off the bus and is standing on the outskirts of her hometown, Possum Springs, which is situated to the left, signifying the past. While *Life Is Strange* basks in nostalgia, *Night in the Woods* sets out to deromanticise it by emphasising its potentially destructive power. This notion plays not only into the external conflict of the game but to Mae's coming-of-age narrative as well.

After dropping out of college, Mae moves back in with her parents. Every day, she gets up after noon and waits for her friends to be done working for the day. After she is done hanging out with them, she returns home and goes to sleep. The cycle repeats. At the age of 20, Mae wants to be recognised as an adult, but she does not want the responsibility that comes with it. She finds herself in a place where she is considered a "child-woman" by other adults, while the younger generation thinks of her as an adult. Notably, Mae's carefree attitude puts a strain on her relationship with her mother and Bea. When Mae's mother chides her for dropping out of college, Mae learns that they are about to lose their house:

> **Mae:** What's happening to the house??? […]
> **Mom:** Don't worry about it. Don't worry about anything. Why start now? Go off and do whatever it is you do.

Mae's parents also pressure her into getting a job. Even local teens judge Mae for not having her own car. Her friends encourage her to search for an apartment, but Mae keeps avoiding all adult responsibilities. Through her interactions with other residents, Mae slowly understands that returning to being a teenager is no longer an option. Still, she is still unable to take the next step.

It is later revealed that Mae suffers from a dissociative disorder, which is why she ended up dropping out of college. Mae explains it as follows:

> **Mae:** …the tree out front, I looked at it every day, it was like a friend outside the window. Now it was just a thing… just a thing that was there […] Like all the stuff I felt about the tree was just in my head. And there was some guy walking by and he was just shapes.

Due to her disorder, Mae also experiences existential dread, which causes her to question the meaning of her life. While stargazing, Mae asks Angus, who is an atheist, if he believes in anything. Angus answers: "I believe in a universe that doesn't care and people who do." Angus further explains that God never cared when he was having a hard time, but Gregg did. As with many other player characters, the interpersonal relationships provide Mae with the means to overcome her inner struggles. While this does not of course cure her dissociative disorder, she is better equipped to live with it.

Finally, let us discuss the significance of solidarity and community not only in *Night in the Woods* but some of the other games as well.

4.3. Solidarity among the solitary

As mentioned in the previous section, each game calls attention to the importance of togetherness and one's sense of belonging, especially in the face of uncertainty. In this section, I examine some of the ways in which this is accomplished.

Life Is Strange, and, to a lesser extent, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, present men as a source of anxiety to teenaged female protagonists. In the very beginning of *Life Is Strange*, Max is forced into back-to-back confrontations with most of the recurring male characters: She is first lectured by her male teacher, and none of the available dialogue options appease him. When Max goes to the girls' bathroom to collect herself after being humiliated in front of and by her peers, she witnesses a male

student Nathan shoot an unknown girl, who is later revealed to be Chloe. Max travels back in time to set off the fire alarm before the gun goes off. After Max exits the bathroom, she is approached by the security guard and Chloe's stepfather, who starts aggressively questioning her. David is shooed off by the male principal, who in turns starts interrogating Max and aiming thinly veiled threats at her. If the player is not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with Max's male classmate Warren, his continuous advances come off as unwelcome at best, stalking at worst. Finally, she physically assaulted by Nathan. The game does not allow Max to relax until she is alone with Chloe in her truck. Over the course of two games, Max, Chloe and Rachel are violently tormented at the hands of the male antagonists: Rachel is killed by her kidnappers, Chloe is fatally shot by both Nathan and Jefferson, and Max herself is held captive by the latter. The main antagonist of the original game, Jefferson, is obsessed with capturing the moment a young woman loses her innocence, or more specifically, the moment of desperation when the victim understands that the hopelessness of her situation.

While *Life Is Strange* does humanise most of its male characters along the way, alleviating Max's anxiety, she still sees men as a threat on a subconscious level: In a nightmare-like sequence, which makes up for a large portion of the final episode, Max must stealthily navigate a dark maze, which is patrolled by distorted versions of the male characters. If Max is detected, the player must rewind. In other words, there is no way for the player to fight back, only to avoid. Throughout the encounter, the male characters taunt Max, echoing her own fears and anxieties. For instance, Jefferson, whom Max used to look up to, tells Max that she will never be a photographer. Frank shouts: "I am gonna cut you open, freak!" After the player exists the maze, they are directed to a winding path that shows many of the happy moments that Max and Chloe shared in the previous episodes. The road leads Max to Chloe.

Given the motivations of the antagonists, most of the Max's goals in *Life Is Strange* centre around protecting and uplifting other women. Whereas nearly every male

character poses as a threat to Max, she is given plenty of opportunities to bond with other women. What is more, the player is often rewarded for doing so. For example, if the player supports Kate, who is a victim of cyberbullying and slut-shaming, Max is able to talk her out of committing suicide. As a result, Kate will aid the player later. However, the way that *Life Is Strange* emphasises the importance of showing empathy towards others, even to those undeserving, is best demonstrated by the player's interactions with the mean, rich girl Victoria. In the first episode, the player is given a choice between comforting Victoria and making fun of her. If the player chooses to reach out to Victoria in a sympathetic way, Max compliments her talent as a photographer. As Victoria's mean girl behaviour is rooted in her own insecurity, the compliment means a lot to her. While Victoria reverts to her mean girl act around her clique, she is significantly less antagonistic towards Max. After Max learns that Nathan is involved in the recent kidnappings and that Victoria may be the next victim, the player may warn her of the potential danger. Whether or not Victoria heeds Max's warning is decided by the player's previous interactions with her. In the final episode, the player is no longer able to dictate the tone in which Max approaches her final conversation with Victoria, as Max's response reflects the player's previous attitude towards her: In Episode 5, Max rewinds to the first conversation that the player has with Victoria. In Episode 1, Max silently tolerated Victoria's rudeness, but in Episode 5, she speaks with confidence. If the player successfully warned Victoria about Nathan, signifying that the player established a mutual respect between the girls, Max's respond exhibits maturity. Max implores Victoria to consider the consequences of bullying and reassures her of her talent: "Wouldn't it be better to lift people up than to bring them down?" While giving Victoria a taste of her own medicine in the first episode can be satisfying for a moment, reaching out in empathy ultimately leads to a better outcome, as it prompts Victoria to reconsider her behaviour and allows her to overcome her insecurity.

While *Life Is Strange* focuses largely on female friendships, *Night in the Woods* considers the importance of having people to rely on in bleak times, regardless of

gender. Although, it is best demonstrated by the relationship between Mae and Bea. For example, when Mae and Bea attend a college party, not realising that Bea had lied about being a college student herself, Mae ends up embarrassing Bea in front of other partygoers, which causes Bea to storm off. After Mae is able track her down, Bea reveals that she attends college parties every month to "feel normal". Mae tries to console her, but the act only demonstrates her ignorance:

> **Mae:** College is stupid anyway.
> **Bea:** Oh my god you complete asshole. You will never understand this. Ever. You know what I do when I go to sleep? Ha ha ha. This is so friggin sad. I think like obsessively about going to college. […] I have to dream about this, this thing you're so over already. [...] And my life is slipping away, and I'm trapped in that stupid hardware store in that stupid town. I'm just doomed.

Afterwards, Mae points out that Bea is not the only person stuck in Possum Springs: "Look. We're both trapped. But we're trapped together." The camera then moves in a way that emphasises the proximity between Mae and Bea, using the negative space around them (see Figure 4). Bea finds the sense of togetherness comforting.

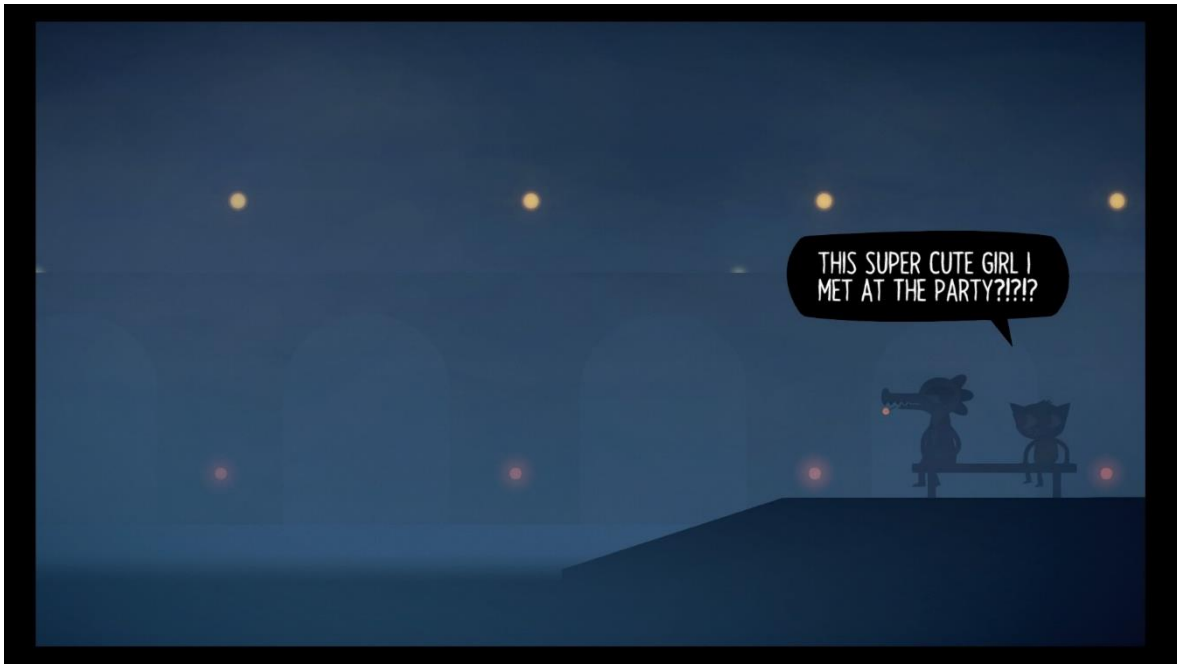

Figure 4. Mae (right) and Bea (left) sitting by a river

The resolution of *Night in the Woods* is somewhat open-ended. While external conflict surrounding the cult is resolved, Mae, Bea, and many other residents of Possum Springs still find themselves stuck in the same dying town. While their material reality does not improve, Mae is better equipped to survive whatever comes next thanks to her rekindled friendships.

5 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to illuminate the ways in which queer coming-of-age narratives are represented in video games that were considered to be socially impactful. Among the winners of Games for Impact (TGA) and Most Significant Impact (G4C), a total of five independent, or "AA", video games contained an explicitly queer player character and a discernible coming-of-age narrative.

The present study finds the gender of the protagonist to be more impactful to the trajectory of the coming-of-age narrative than their sexual orientation. The reason for this may be that the characters' nonnormative sexuality is often indivoreable from any and all optional, romantic subplots; as each game must be able to offer a cohesive storyline in case the player avoids or overlooks the queer romance options that are available. For example, in *Life Is Strange*, the player is not required to engage with any of the queer elements of the game in a meaningful way if they simply choose not to, which, as discussed earlier, is a prevalent occurrence in mainstream video games (Feminist Frequency 2019; Karmali 2014). At best, the protagonists' nonnormative sexual orientation enhances the coming-of-age narrative by adding another layer for the player to explore. The most notable exception to the rule is Tyler (*Tell Me Why*), whose possible romantic relationship with another man impacts his character arc by allowing Tyler to discover his place as a part of a larger queer community. Furthermore, Tyler being transgender majorly plays into the external conflict; by making Tyler being transgender a predetermined aspect of the

character, the game is able to approach the topic in a more meaningful way, especially in comparison to games that only explore the player character's queerness through optional content. It is also worth noting that some love interests, like Finn (*Life Is Strange 2*) and Michael (*Tell Me Why*), flirt with the male player character without being first flirted to, which is a rare occurence in mainstream video games (Karmali 2014). Futhermore, the female player character Mae (*Night in the Woods*) talks about her female crush and flirts with another girl without the player telling her to do so.

As previously discussed in Section 2.2, the archetypical coming-of-age narrative imposes many gendered ideals on to its protagonist; whether or not the protagonists subscribes to these ideals often dictates the overall tone of the ending. However, as Rishoi (2003) demonstrates, these norms are by no means immutable. While Rishoi (2003: 65–66) suggests that female protagonists, who are written by men, are more likely to follow a coming-of-age narrative that is typically reserved for their male counterparts, and vice versa, the present study does not observe such a pattern. In fact, none of the female player characters who deviate from the conventional path are punished in a way that would deny them the means to construct a stable adult identity either during or after the events of the game. However, it is important to note that all these games highlight player choice. To that end, many of them offer several possible endings, which are dictated by the actions taken by the player over the course of the game. While some of them can be considered more tragic than others, especially in terms of the player characters' fate and, by extension, their romantic relationships, these tragic endings, almost exclusively, reflect the values of the archetypical coming-of-age story, which feminist and marginalised authors have resisted in the past.

As previously discussed, Rishoi (2003: 18) observes a relatively recent trend of young female protagonists, who are able to attain their agency while upholding interpersonal relationships. The present study argues that the same trend extents not only the female player characters but to the male ones as well. While the element

of player choice is present, the aforementioned games encourage the player to establish and cultivate close relationships with NPCs by often rewarding them for doing so. *Life Is Strange 2* accomplishes this quite sucessfully, as 81%[8] of the players grew closer to Sean's estranged mother over the course of the game. Furthermore, the most tragic one of the four possible endings is reached by making choices that establish Sean (and Daniel) as detached individuals. For this reason, one could even argue that the game serves as critism of the archetypical male coming-of-age narrative that, according to Rishoi, overvalues self-independence. As the aforementioned ending was achieved by only 8%[9] of the players, the players, too, appear to have rejected the gender-specific norms that this particular narrative enforces; whether or not the numbers reflect the game's own ideologies or the players', or both, is up to debate.

It also worth noting that the present study, while not nearly as exhaustive, stands in direct contrast to Jiménez's study (2015) on queer coming-of-age stories in literary works in some respects: whereas the previous study found bisexual protagonists non-existent, most of the player characters are either bisexual, or at the very least, attracted to more than one gender. While it is tempting to attribute the difference to the aspect of player choice, it is not possible to make such a claim based on the present study alone.

Given the narrow scope of the study, it is impossible to draw any all-encompassing conclusions about the way in which video games construct coming-of-age narratives as a medium. As previously mentioned, the seeming trend towards unity and togetherness may in fact be a mere reflection of the ideologies of few. It is evident that the topic would benefit from further research. However, we can say with confidence that the game industry recognises the social impact of queer coming-of-age narratives that defy gender-specific norms. Furthermore, each year,

[8] As shown by in-game statistics on June 1, 2021
[9] As shown by in-game statistics on June 1, 2021

the award-winning game explores more complex queer identities in a more explicit way, leaving little room for what Ruberg (2018) refers to as "straighwashing".

While not the goal of the present study, it highlights some of the challenges of trying to determine the number of queer characters in a given video game through a quantitative approach. This is especially true if one seeks to categorise the queer characters into identity categories based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. In fact, most games actively resist labeling the characters. Very rarely is the characters' sexual orientation stated in a decisive manner in-game. As most games leave the topic open for the player's interpretation, I was careful not to assign any definitive labels to the characters unless explicitly stated otherwise in a manner that leaves little room for other interpretations. Instead, I merely gathered evidence that supports queer readings and let the reader draw their own conclusions.

As closing note, the prevalent discourse surrounding queerness in games would benefit from ethnographic research on the lived experiences of underrepresented people working in the video game industry. While awards shows make a point to promote certain queer narratives, the effort may very well be only perfunctory. While there is no formal research on the subject, some video game industry researchers, like Keogh (2020), have noted that award categories like Games for Impact do give out the impression of tokenism. For as long as queer people are being pushed to the margins of gaming culture, our best bet is to increase the attention that is paid to independent video games, even, or perhaps especially, those that go unrecognised.

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