This Will Come Back to Haunt You: Choice and Time in Life is Strange

By Todd Harper | February 9, 2015

Let me introduce you to someone. Her name is Max Caulfield, and she is the star of Dontnod Entertainment's *Life is Strange*. That's a better name than what I assume was the original draft version's: *Max Caulfield and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Max is having a rough time. She's just discovered she has the power to rewind time while retaining her awareness of events. It just happened to be triggered by witnessing the death of a long lost friend.

But all is not lost! Max's power is used in the game in precisely the ways you imagine it would be: to fix mistakes. Did you give the wrong answer in class? Rewind and give the right one. Say something unintentionally offensive to a classmate? Rewind and say something flattering instead. Sometimes the stakes are a little higher. See a girl get shot right before your eyes? Go back and ring the fire alarm, providing the distraction she needs to escape.

The ability to rewind time in games is not a new mechanic, so predicting how Max's abilities would play out in the game wasn't hard. Just within the past 15 years, we've seen it used in *Zelda* games (particularly the soon-to-be-re-released *Majora's Mask*), the *Prince of Persia* series, and in shooter/platformer *Super Time Force*. It's also at the core of one of the most notorious independent games of all time, Jonathan Blow's *Braid*. This list is hardly exhaustive; the ability to toy with time to fix mistakes is a pretty durable sci-fi/fantasy trope.

But fixing our mistakes is not limited solely to playing with the timeline. In fact, Dontnod's debut into gaming, the idiosyncratic and clever (but somewhat flawed) *Remember Me*, uses the "rewind!" mechanic but with a focus on memories rather than linear time.

The effect is rather the same, whether it's Max's turning back the clock or Nilin's tinkering with an unsuspecting person's Sensen: the player has a goal, and to accomplish it, they must go back and "fix" things to build the proper future in which it is possible. Link's Groundhog Day-esque journey through a recurring three days in Termina is founded on the same idea: the moon probably isn't supposed to crush this tiny town (or have that creepy-ass face on it) so this continual repetition and rewinding of time is the only way to save it.

What's interesting about these situations, to me, is that they often imply there is a "right" course of history and a "wrong" one, and that time travel is your ticket to making the "right" one happen. Sometimes, this is overt; when the Prince dies in *Sands of Time*, the game frames the death as part of a divergent, non-canon timeline. The narrator telling the story goes "Wait, no, that's not what really happened." I particularly enjoy this because 1.) it casts every failure in your playthrough as non-canon fanfic and 2.) I like any homage to the movie *Clue*.

Cleverly, the Dontnod games subvert this. In *Remember Me*, you are doing the exact opposite: creating undetectably fictional memories that rearrange existing pieces to construct your desired outcome. Nilin rarely stitches new memories from whole cloth; she remixes existing events into just the right order and framing so that her victim's brains consider these unreliable memories to be the capital-t "Truth." Rather than suggesting that there is a "true" version of events, this is proof that such a thing is an illusion. When the story bears out that Nilin is just as much a victim as those she's "remixed" are, this conclusion's impact is all the more potent.
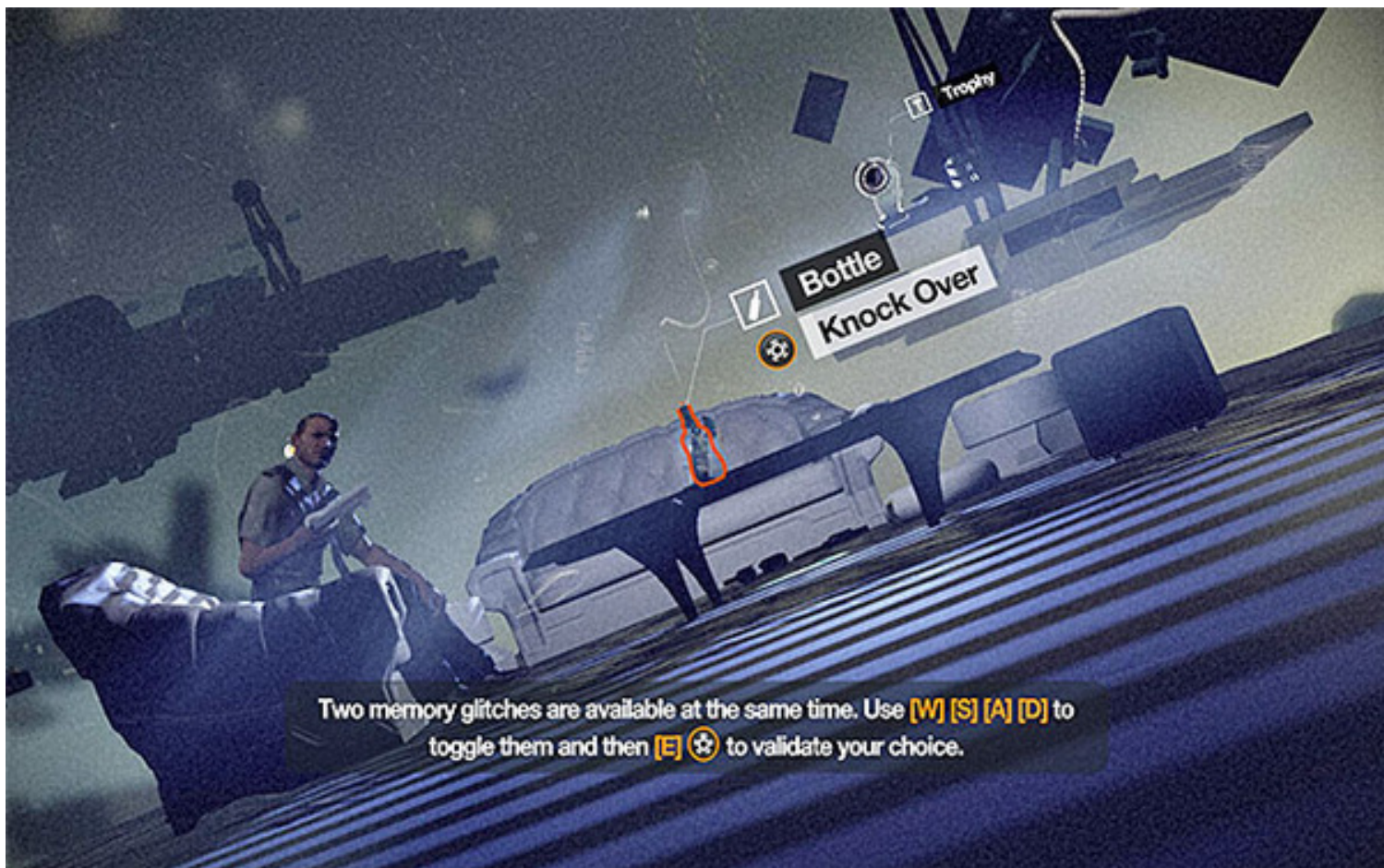
Remember Me

When I was playing episode one of *Life is Strange*, however, the change in setting and tone from *Remember Me*'s future-science France dystopia to the new game's indie movie-chic Oregon puts an entirely different spin on these events. After the game opens and Max uses her power to rewind time to save someone's life, you get a chance to wander the campus of the school and talk to Max's classmates. And this is where things started to go to hell for me.

Example: you can talk to Brooke, a tablet-carrying science nerd who appears to be remotely flying a drone. When you try to talk to her at first, this ends in failure regardless of which dialogue choice you pick; whether you show interest in her hobby or not, Brooke disdains you as someone she "thought was smart." Considering the school Max attends is a prestigious private academy for the best of the best, this snobbery is hardly unexpected, but it still rankled. After my first choice I rewound time and spoke to her again, but was rebuffed all the same.

Then I noticed Brooke's bag on the ground behind her. The game's UI told me

I could search her things, and I discovered the box for the drone in her bag. Observing it without being seen, I then rewound for a third time and struck up a conversation. Lo and behold, when she asks me why I care about her drone, suddenly there's a shiny new third dialogue option where I can show off the information that I just gleaned from the box. Max reads off the drone's model number and specs in an easy tone, casually mentioning it as if she's known this all her life. This impresses Brooke, who then lets Max fly the drone (complete with brief aerial cam view for the player).

Honestly, the only reason I didn't hurl my controller across the room is because Max thankfully does not seem smugly superior about the situation, which would be an easy trap to fall into. Instead she just genuinely wants Brooke to like her and wants to impress her, so she uses what she has to do that. I begrudgingly accept that if it were me in her place, I'd have done the same; I know what it's like to just want people to *like* you instead of wish you were dead for five seconds. I find it hard to hate her for doing it.

And yet...

Part of me *is* filled with self-loathing. Part of me knows that I, as Max, have no genuine interest in drones in the way Brooke wants me to. Part of me knows that when I move over and talk to the skater punks, where I rewind a couple times so I can pretend to know what skateboarding tricks are so they think I'm cool instead of a "lame poser," I am being fundamentally dishonest in order to get them to like me. Adult Todd, at age 36, knows that this is a road that leads to disaster. Teenage Max, at 18, just wants people at her new school to like her. That tension is actually really fascinating, looked at from that angle.

And yet...

What is the functional difference between Nilin literally altering someone's memory so that they unknowingly believe a radically different version of events, and Max rewinding time by 2 minutes so she can seem like a cool kid

who's into drones instead of a dork who thinks they're "weapons of war" that probably aren't even legal? To be frank, I don't think there is one. The fact that the "victim" doesn't know the difference—indeed, *cannot* know the difference—and that I *do* know the difference is the lynchpin. Sorry, Brooke; I don't really think drones are cool, but I need the cultural capital that you being impressed with me represents. Sorry, skater kids; I'm sure "tre flips" are awesome but I mostly just want you to like me.

Life is Strange

As a comparison case, look at *Braid.*The rhetorical stinger there is that we were the villain the whole time. It reveals this to us by presenting a set of assumptions—that we are a hero, rescuing a princess—which we internalized based on videogame tropes. When the player gets to the very final part of the game, which effectively runs in reverse, we finally understand that we've been moving *backwards* the whole time, that lovable Tim is actually the monster the princess is on the run from. Our entire experience with the game culminates in this bait and switch, the prototype for games like *Spec Ops: the Line* where the punchline is "it was you! the whole time!" in the end. It functions primarily because of our expectations.

Life is Strange accomplishes something interesting in the same way, though whether it was intentional or not is up for debate (and the answer isn't terribly important either way). As people who've played games before, we know that if we're handed the power to rewind time, we're supposed to use it to fix things, to make things "better." That's what we do in games, right? We make the good choices, the right choices, the best choices. In an oft-quoted line, Sid Meier defines a game as "a series of meaningful choices."

And this game sure does want us to feel like our choices are meaningful. I say this because it hammers the point home with repeated use of a particular UI element: when you make a decision that can have possible future impact, the game shows a flapping butterfly in the upper left hand corner of the screen. Besides being a slightly cheeky reference to the "butterfly effect," this is basically an "is that your final answer?" device (thanks, Regis). The game is saying: this is going to come back to haunt you. Are you sure you want to do this? Sometimes Max chimes in to *literally* ask these questions in her internal monologue: "Maybe I should go back and change it?"

You can, too. There are a few break points at which going back and changing things is impossible—it appears Max's power has considerable limits in terms of how far she can go back—but otherwise, you can make a critical decision and then go "Well, but wait" and change your mind. Perhaps the most interesting version of this is when Max spies the academy's security guard hassling a quiet student named Kate who has seemed sad of late. You can either watch from a distance and snap a shot of it with Max's trusty camera (she's a photographer), or you can intervene and help. When this scene first happened, I chose to stop and take a photo. My thinking was: I don't know what intervening will do, but photo evidence might help if this goes bad.

To say the game sells this as not the nicest choice is an understatement. Once the guard is done hassling her, Kate turns and notices you, saying "I hope you enjoyed the show" with utter disdain before wandering off, angry. Max's inner monologue kicks in, asking if that was the right thing to do. Should you have

intervened? Ping! The game is cueing you: you could change this, if you wanted. Did you really want to be a creepy voyeur? Is that your… final answer? Meanwhile the butterfly twirls about in the upper left, informing you that This Will Have Consequences Later.

Okay… fair point. I rewound time. I intervened. And part of me did really feel a lot better about it, a lot less like a creeper. Back comes the butterfly, informing me that This Will Come Up Again, We Promise. But then Max's internal monologue *also* comes back: she wonders, was intervening the right thing to do? Did you just make things harder for the girl *and* for yourself?Maybe it's better to sit back and watch. And that's *Life is Strange* in a nutshell. Just when it seems like it's herding you to the "right" answer, you realize it's asking you to examine your choices via the "this will come back to haunt you" moment. The game reinforces this at the end; once the credits roll, you're given a list of the "important" choices and what other people did. In fact, you get two sets of stats for players on the relevant online service
(Steam, for me): one for everyone, and one for only your friends.

The list of choices is actually quite small. Did you tell the principal about the rich kid who brought a gun to school (most people did)? Were you nice to a total jerk after you douse her with paint to solve an in-game progression puzzle (most people were)? There are a couple more, including the example I just discussed with the security guard (most people stepped in to help). Four in total.

But there are a lot more than four choices in this game, and a lot of them still prompt the Causality Butterfly to pop up and inform you it's going to matter later. In no case do they actually tell you what the consequence is going to be, or when it's coming, though there are a few that you can infer or see for yourself. For example, letting sketch artist Daniel draw your portrait results in him posting it to his Facebook wall, which you can actually see for yourself by using the laptop in your room later. For the most part, though, we don't actually know what's going to happen. What's the long term impact of

deceiving Brooke into thinking you're into drones? What will happen if you save a bird from flying into a window and knocking itself out in your childhood best friend's house? I'm still trying to figure out where they're going with that one.

I can't tell if this resulting instability is genius, madness or a little bit of both, but *Life is Strange*'s most interesting bit is that it's playing around with our expectations about using the ability to change the in-game world to make the "right" choices. With four more episodes to go until the story is finished, I wonder where Dontnod is going with this.

Honestly? I hope that they will punish me for the white lies I have told to become more popular. I hope that at the end of the game, all of Max's decisions, all of her tampering, become public. Brooke and the pretentious photographer and the skater kids find out I cheated to make them like me. Kate finds out I actually sat there and watched a man verbally assault her before I rewound time and decided to step in out of guilt. How would they look at me afterwards? Would they understand? [As Maddy Myers said in her](#) [review for Paste](#), the game has already lampshaded its nature with a throwaway comment (which itself hints at certain likely outcomes), but following this through could actually lead to fascinating places.

My expectation for the ending of episode 5, though, is that Max will find no matter what you do, sometimes you can't make the "right" choice even if you have the chance to do everything over again, knowing what you know now. And that in its own way is also an interesting commentary on the idea that games are a space where we can go to have control over the outcome. Whatever happens, however, I'm interested in where Dontnod is going to take this. Maybe it's time something like this asked us to take a good look at our expectations of agency and perfect control in games. Like the butterfly reminds us, though: it's impossible to know where these choices will take us. The most we can do is to take a breath and choose.