THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT: PLAYER AGENCY AND TROPE SUBVERSION IN *LIFE IS STRANGE* AND *UNTIL DAWN*

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ABSTRACT

Interactive narratives—such as story-driven, choice-based video games—provide a space for playing with tropes and genre. Players are invited to collaborate in the creation of these stories, and can thus exercise their agency to interact with and subvert, harmful tropes and genre conventions. Here I specifically explore the use—and potential subversion—of problematic conventions regarding character death, such as the conflation of queerness and tragedy commonly known as 'Bury Your Gays' as explored in *Life is Strange* (DontNod 2015), and Carol J. Clover's concept of 'The Final Girl' in the horror genre as explored in *Until Dawn* (Supermassive 2015).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alex Henderson is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. Her creative thesis explores the ways that writers can play with familiar tropes and archetypes for the purpose of social commentary and diverse narratives, with particular focus on depictions of gender roles and the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters.

KEYWORDS

Interactive narrative—Agency—Tropes—Genre—Video games

Scholars and fans alike have long acknowledged the appeal of the interactive narrative—both in terms of choice-based narrative games and their ancestor, the choose-your-own-adventure book—and how its branching structure provides 'interactivity and a feeling of control for the reader, while inherently providing a reason for replay as every reader is aware of the roads not taken' (Starks 2018: 3). In this paper, I aim to explore narrative-driven, choice-based games through a genre studies lens and examine the ways in which they allow their audiences to play with familiar tropes and genre conventions, with a focus on how these games allow players to divert their narratives away from harmful, historical tropes and clichés. I explore this with a focus on problematic conventions regarding character death, such as the conflation of LGBTQIA+ identity and tragedy commonly known as 'Bury Your Gays' and Carol J. Clover's concept of 'The Final Girl' of the horror genre. *Life is Strange* (DontNod 2015) and *Until Dawn* (Supermassive 2015) respectively offer their players the opportunity to subvert these tropes as they present themselves. While both examples have their flaws in execution, they remain valuable case studies in both the progressive potential of interactive narrative as a medium and the study of tropes and genre.

Defining 'playing with tropes'

The concept of 'narrative play' is a key component of my doctoral research and of this paper. To define it, I will be borrowing from Eric Zimmerman's examination of the nature of media 'play', which he broadly defined as 'the free space of movement within a more rigid structure' (2004: 159). Zimmerman constructed this definition of 'play' within the frame of discussing and defining video games, so it is particularly apt here; however, these terms also neatly apply to the manipulation and tweaking of genre conventions and tropes within creative writing. Subverting, upsetting, or otherwise toying with familiar narrative aspects in a way that audiences will recognise is a writing method that 'exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits' yet 'is at the same time an expression of the system, and intrinsically part of it' (Zimmerman 2004: 159). To 'play' with genre and tropes is, therefore, to recognise the expectations of a genre and to deliberately twist them, to create something simultaneously new and still familiar (Neale 2009). The play could not exist—nor be meaningful—without a pre-established literary tradition that both writers and readers (and, in this case, players) know. It is the familiarity of genre codes and tropes that makes this tweaking and upturning of them so effective, as they can be used to challenge norms in fiction. In the case of *Life is Strange* and *Until Dawn,* this narrative play takes the form of players interacting with familiar tropes in a very literal sense and, in that interactivity, taking control of the narrative and the tropes and conventions that it plays into.

Player as storyteller

Eric Tyndale and Franklin Ramsoomair define that 'the biggest difference between a traditional story and an interactive narrative is the added element of participant agency' (2016: 29). While this may be simplifying the matter and perhaps even 'reductive' as a discussion of the attributes of the medium (Cole 2018: 3), it remains true that with an interactive story, like that of the games this paper will be examining, the person engaging with the text is not just an audience member observing a piece of media, but is part of a collaborative effort to create the story. This collaboration involves 'a work of physical construction the various concepts of "reading" cannot account for' (Aarseth 1997: 1).

Though there are limitations on the extent to which the plot can branch—and players are aware of this (Tyndale and Ramsoomair 2016: 31)—these story-based games often place emphasis on the importance of the player's choices in shaping the narrative. To illustrate this concept to their players, both *Life is Strange* and *Until Dawn* make use of the motif, both in menus and on-screen text *and* within the world of the story itself, of the Butterfly Effect; a hypothetical scientific concept that has been 'embraced by popular culture, where the term is often used to emphasize the outsize significance of minute occurrence' (Vernon 2017: 130). These two Butterfly Effect narratives are firmly in the realm of what Marie-Laure Ryan would call 'playable story': games 'in which the production of an aesthetically rewarding story is a goal in itself', rather than simply being games where 'the player pursues a specific goal associated with winning' (2008: 8). *Life is Strange* and *Until Dawn* are two games that draw heavily on familiar tropes and, simultaneously, give the player a heavy degree of participation in the construction of their narratives, and emphasise the power their choices hold in said narrative construction. Thus, a player-storyteller who is aware of both the tropes they are interacting with and their position of 'participant agency' is given a unique opportunity to recognise the narrative and character tropes before them and, should they wish, divert the narrative away from those tropes and conventions with the choices they make. Their 'reward' is the 'aesthetically pleasing story' (Ryan 2008; 2009) of their own design that results from that self-aware diversion.

Life is Strange and 'Bury Your Gays'

Let us first examine this method of player agency and the subversion of familiar, problematic tropes through a reading of *Life is Strange*. *Life is Strange* is the supernatural-mystery-meets-coming-of-age story of Max Caulfield, a teenage girl who discovers that she has the ability to rewind time, first using her power to save her estranged childhood friend Chloe from being shot during a fight with another student. The game follows Max and Chloe as they attempt to reconcile

their issues, as well as try to work out how best to use Max's suddenly acquired superpowers. The player is also given the opportunity to bring Max and Chloe together as a romantic pair rather than just close friends. Even if the player-storyteller keeps this relationship platonic, it is still evident in the text that Chloe is a woman attracted to other women, with an implied past romantic relationship with the female student whose disappearance drives much of the mystery element of the plot. *Life is Strange* gained a loyal and vocal fan following for its portrayal of a queer romance and its portrayal of Max and Chloe as queer protagonists; a fan following that was shocked and disappointed when the ending of the game fell into a historical and problematic trope regarding queer characters and death.

The trope in question is the association between LGBTQIA+ identity and tragedy, a recurring plot element that has become colloquially known as 'Bury Your Gays'. Kira Deshler writes in her thesis *Not Another Dead Lesbian* that 'For many years, queerness, as portrayed in fantasy and as the lived experience of individuals, has been linked to death' (2017: 33). This link comes from, as well as historical homophobia, specific aspects of media history. Throughout the pulp fiction boom of the twentieth century, it was routine practice for publishing houses to refuse to print novels with queer themes or characters unless they had an unhappy ending (Ahmed 2010), leading to swathes of fictional LGBTQIA+ people renouncing their queerness, going insane, or, most often, dying by the end of their story. Due to production limitations such as The Hays Code, this was also persistent in mainstream film, with queer film historian Vito Russo describing mid-twentieth century Hollywood as 'a kill 'em or cure 'em climate' (1981: 162).

While contemporary media is making slow strides in defiance of this narrative (as evidenced in studies such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation's annual 'Where We Are on TV' reports), 'the association of homosexuality with loss, melancholia, and failure runs deep' (Love 2007: 6). These historically established tropes are still entrenched in media, and tragedy hangs over many queer fictional characters to this day (for some (in)famous contemporary examples, see Deshler 2017). It is this deep-running association with queerness and tragedy that makes the final player choice of *Life is Strange*'s interactive story so troublesome, and yet at the same time—depending on the player's choice—reveals the potential subversive power of that 'participant agency' ingrained in the medium.

The story unfolds like so: over the course of the game, increasingly bizarre natural phenomena begin to occur, culminating in a disastrous storm that threatens to wipe out Max and Chloe's hometown. The characters come to the conclusion that the strange events are the direct result of Max meddling with the flow of time. Max—and through her the player-storyteller—is faced with two final options: she can go back in time and let Chloe get shot, thus never altering

the future; or she can refuse to sacrifice Chloe and instead let the storm destroy their home. It is an appropriately climactic and shocking ethical choice of the Trolley Problem variety (Foot 1978; Butt and Dunne 2017). It is a choice that creates two different non-playable ending sequences. To borrow from Shaun Grose's plot summary and analysis, in the ending where Chloe dies, 'the butterfly lands on Chloe's casket; Max knows she has done the right thing'. Whereas, in the ending where Chloe lives, 'Max looks sadly at her town that is no more, and seems to look as though she worries if she made the wrong choice' (Grose 2017: 28).

As Grose's wording indicates, many players felt that the ending where Chloe dies—the option with the most utilitarian perspective, and also the conclusion that invokes 'Bury Your Gays'—was meant to be the 'correct' ending (Chan 2017; Alexandra 2018; Castello 2018). The scene that plays after selecting the 'sacrifice Chloe' option is, at eleven minutes long versus the seven minutes of the scene where Chloe and Max are both still alive (Butt and Dunne 2017: 5), greater in length and richer in detail than the 'perfunctory cutscene' (Alexandra 2018) that follows the choice to save Chloe. This is a storytelling choice that Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt and Daniel Dunne suggest 'reveals a bias in directorial focus' (2017: 5). Many players also noted that choosing to let Chloe perish is the only option that triggers a kiss scene between the two lead characters, and thus 'the only ending that takes the depiction of their relationship from coy to literal is the one that dooms [Chloe], which plays into the disturbingly common trope of homosexual characters being killed off in fiction' (Macgregor 2015).

The negative reception of this tragic ending is understandable from a fanbase wise and weary to the literary tradition of Buried Gays (Deshler, 2017). However, unlike with static pieces of media, upset players still had the *choice* to prevent Chloe's trope-adhering death, embracing the 'participant agency' (Tyndale and Ramsoomair 2016: 29) they had been given as collaborative storytellers—agency that is emphasised by the game's recurring use of the Butterfly Effect motif. Butt and Dunne observe that for many players, saving Chloe became something of an act of rebellion, and 'rather than following what was presumed as the right choice' they could instead 'claim what was meant to be an alternate ending as their own [...] thus performing the very autonomy that *Life is Strange* was attempting to question' (2017: 7).

Saving Chloe is a defiance not just of Chloe's supposed tragic fate within the story, but a defiance of a long history of Buried Gays in storytelling overall. The player is presented with the choice to adhere to this old and problematic trope, and they can thus choose to subvert it. It must be noted, of course, that the town still gets destroyed, and the much-discussed briefness of that ending scene leaves the implication that literally everyone apart from Chloe and Max is dead,

so the association between queerness and tragedy still clings to the story. However, the player is still granted the power to avoid at least some of the historical and negative narrative associations that overshadow the ending of the story, and create a happy (if bittersweet) ending for Max and Chloe if they wish—the kind they may have been denied, had they existed in a static piece of media such as the novels and films that entrenched this trope in the first place.

Until Dawn and 'The Final Girl'

There is a similar imperfect, though interesting, process of narrative play to be found in *Until Dawn*. *Until Dawn* tells the story of eight characters in their late teens who travel to a secluded mountain cabin for a holiday weekend. If the player has any familiarity with the tropes of horror—and indeed the horror genre relies on audience familiarity in an almost archetypal, folkloric nature (Twitchell 1985; Clover 1992; Creed 2005)—they already know that nothing good can come of this. Sure enough, the teenagers soon find themselves fighting for their lives as murderous threats come at them from all sides. Across its narrative, as various threats are hinted at and debunked, the game shifts from mirroring the narratives of a haunting movie, to a slasher movie, to a monster movie (with a touch of the revenge movie, if taking the perspective of the once-human monster). The changing scenario allows the game to run the gamut of horror tropes from a variety of subgenres. It is with these familiar tropes that the story invites participants to play (Tassi 2015).

Despite the game's opening imagery of diverging paths and use of the Butterfly Effect motif, *Until Dawn* is a linear story that follows essentially the same plot beats every playthrough, leading to the same climax and conclusion. The main aspect of the story that the player's choices can influence—through dialogue selection, quick time events, and controlled character interactions—is which characters live and which characters die. Anywhere between eight and zero members of the main cast can survive the night, depending on the player's choices and actions throughout the game. There are achievements on offer for both saving every characters' life *and* seeing every character perish (IGN 2015), emphasising that the goal of the game is 'the production of an aesthetically rewarding story' (Ryan 2008: 8) rather than 'winning' by reaching a particular outcome. Like *Life is Strange*, *Until Dawn* presents the player with tropes familiar from a long history of media exposure couched in a narrative with emphasised 'participant agency', and so the player-as-storyteller has the opportunity to play with these tropes within the story. There is significantly less scholarship and documentation of fan reactions to this element of *Until Dawn* than there are to *Life is Strange*, so the following observations stem from my own interactions with this narrative and those of my peers.

Among the tropes *Until Dawn* engages with is 'The Final Girl', a term coined by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. As the name suggests, 'The Final Girl' is the sole character, always female, who survives until the end of the movie, often thwarting the monster or chainsaw-wielding antagonist as well. 'The Final Girl' is the most sympathetic character who represents the universal fears of the audience: in Clover's words, she is 'introduced in the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail [...] She is intelligent, watchful, [and] level-headed' (1992: 44). But not just anyone can be a Final Girl. As Clover states, 'The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film. She is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends [...] she is not sexually active' (39). A genre-savvy player will recognise the character Sam as the potential Final Girl of *Until Dawn*, from her being the first point of view character outside of the prologue, her lack of romantic and/or sexual interest in any other characters, her sympathetic nature, and her use of a boyish nickname. These are all traits of the story's destined sole survivor according to Clover (35 – 41). However, there is the added complication that *Until Dawn* does not exist in a static medium like film, but an interactive one—thus, Sam's survival is not necessarily guaranteed, despite the cinematic tropes the game's narrative draws on, and this is where the subversive element comes into play.

'The Final Girl' is not necessarily a harmful trope on its own; in fact in many ways the presence of a capable female protagonist who defeats evil is quite empowering (as Clover herself explores). Issues arise in the tropes that lie adjacent to it: after all, to be the sole survivor, other characters need to die, and this is where infamous and troublesome archetypes rear their heads. The clearest example is that assertion of Clover's that 'Unlike her girlfriends ['The Final Girl'] is not sexually active' (39). James B. Twitchell also wrote about this subtextual aspect of the slasher genre, noting that 'in most stab-at-female movies, the victim has been sexually "liberated" (read: promiscuous) and therefore should be "punished"' (1985: 69). This comes into play in *Until Dawn* when a couple, Jess and Mike, travel to a secluded part of the lodge boasting about their intentions to sleep together for the first time. Before they can get fully undressed, however, the monster attacks and captures Jess, dragging her through the forest. However, Jess does not have to die in this scene. Playing as Mike as he chases after the monster, the player must navigate a series of challenges that, if completed quickly enough, can lead to Mike reaching Jess before she gets killed. Jess will then drop down into a mineshaft, and the narrative will return to her later in the game, giving the player the opportunity to pilot her safely out of the tunnels. With the right player actions, Jess can defy her usually-predetermined place on the horror movie hit list—the element of choice provides the ability to save *Until Dawn*'s characters from the death tropes they usually inhabit.

That said, the construction of the game's story imposes limits to the player-as-storyteller's manipulation of tropes. For instance, while there are many opportunities to save other characters throughout the game, it still leans towards installing Sam as 'The Final Girl'. Sam cannot die until the final scene, whereas all the other characters—with the exception of the heroic Mike—have multiple opportunities for choice-induced death throughout the story. Sam is thus indestructible up to a certain point, which renders the other characters all the more disposable. The player can still revoke Sam's Final Girl status by not having her be the *only* survivor of the story, or by having Sam herself die while characters like Jess defy their tropes and live to tell the tale. Of course, for some player-storytellers, it simply may not feel subversive (nor feminist) to deliberately let an innocent female character get murdered by a monster on-screen. It also must be noted that though the player has some impact on which characters live and die, there are still many troublesome historic tropes they cannot interact with, such as the game's treatment of mental health (as seen in the portrayal of sadistic prankster Josh, who falls into horror's historic habit of sensationalising and villainising trauma and mental illness), or its unavoidable adherence to some sexist conventions (for example, preventing Jess's death first requires having her boyfriend rescue her, placing the two in a gendered hero-damsel dichotomy). *Until Dawn* is an imperfect example of an interactive narrative that allows its player-storyteller to play with familiar tropes, but it remains an example nonetheless; the player can claim control over at least some notable aspects of the story and of the genre, making it malleable and making it theirs, and potentially telling a story that subverts some expectations and harmful stereotypes in the process.

Conclusion

Interactive narratives such as these two video games invite their audiences to participate in the construction of the story as it unfolds, with the end goal being to create a story and outcome uniquely forged by the player-storyteller's decisions. This emphasised 'participant agency' (Tyndale and Ramsoomair 2016: 29) offers player-storytellers the opportunity to play with tropes and create narratives that avoid cliché or historically harmful genre conventions, if they wish. This choice-based story construction renders both *Until Dawn* and *Life is Strange* as narrative paradoxes; until the player makes a decision, they are simultaneously stories that play into historically-entrenched, sexist, homophobic tropes *and* stories that subvert historically-entrenched, sexist, homophobic tropes. Neither of these results can be considered more 'canon' than the other, as there is no sense of 'true endings' or 'winning' in these story-focussed games, as in Ryan's definitions (2008; 2009). It is a conundrum unique to interactive storytelling and branching narrative.

Ideally, modern works would simply avoid the use of these old tropes altogether (something that game narratives *are* doing, albeit more in the realm of independent productions), but their providing the audience with the opportunity to disrupt them in motion presents a fascinating avenue for analysis both in feminism and queer studies as well as narrative construction generally. Players can find a sense of personal rebellion against a long homophobic media history by defying fate to save Chloe, and players can equally reject the misogynistic and sex-negative tropes of horror by manipulating them through their choices and creating a horror narrative of their own in *Until Dawn*. From whatever direction the player-storyteller approaches these games, these two examples demonstrate how playable narratives can let us play *with* narrative in new and interesting ways.

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