Life Is Strange

a netnographic video game reception analysis conceptualised through agency

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In this essay a mediated video game reception of the game *Life Is Strange* is made, with the purpose of examining the players' meaning-making processes from a gender perspective. The materials of this essay consist of videos from six different YouTube channels where each player film themselves whilst playing through *Life Is Strange* as a way to review and share the gaming experience. The results show how the meaning-making processes are littered with gender discourses and affects. The affects offset discourses by amplification or by revealing discord between available cultural narratives and the simulated reality of the game. Even though the game highlights themes like female-centric relationships, suicide, euthanasia, lesbianism, socio-economic circumstances, social accountability and men's violence against women, it successfully delivers highly involving, enjoyable and appreciated gameplay experience. The game is shown to provide players with a platform around which they can connect and continue to discuss, raise awareness and produce knowledge around these important topics. The fan generated culture will in turn, reach a much larger audience than the game sales numbers reflect.

Key words: Video games, computer games, game theory, gender theory, women in games, media reception, media studies, feminist theory, gender studies, *Life Is Strange*, YouTube
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1. Introduction and Background

My interest in video games is personal. As a young individual I had to share the family consoles with my younger brother, and it has ever since then been perfectly clear that most video games cater for a male audience. My brother was allowed to make most choices of which video games would be purchased in our household, and most of the games reflected predominately male characters and more or less hollow narratives which always left me with a vague, lingering feeling of not being addressed as a player, both by the games and the culture around me. It always interested me how fully videogames engage their players, but the potential of nuanced storytelling always seemed unfulfilled because of the cliché narratives and stereotypical characters. Still, my love of games persisted. I did not fully realise in what limited sense the games I've played reflect my own life, gender, social positions and problems until I played *Life Is Strange*. According to the game developers they created this game to consciously break taboos of narratives treated within the computer game industry\(^1\). The game treats topics like female-centric relationships, suicide, euthanasia, lesbianism, socio-economic circumstances, social accountability and men's violence against women. After finishing the game I was in shock, because I couldn't really understand why I loved a game with such heavy topics so incredibly much. Representation of women in the game couldn't alone account for my feelings. I had other questions: Was I the only one to love this game so much? How do other players reflect upon this game? Do they dismiss it because of the heavy or female-centric content? Is there a large political debate about it now? These questions led me to YouTube and Let's Play videos where players film themselves whilst playing a game from beginning to end. I found many more filmed play-throughs of *Life Is Strange* than I would have imagined, and as I started watching I became transfixed

\(^1\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2Hr_Lb1M2E [Accessed 17 Apr. 2017]
with the YouTube players' involvement. This fascination is what finally lead me to write an essay with the Let's Play videos as my primary materials.

1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this essay is to examine a female oriented game and the players' meaning-making processes during playing this game from a gender perspective. My research questions are:

How do the players reflect upon the narrative of the game?
How do the players understand the characters in the game?
How do players reflect upon the gameplay/game artefact?
How do the players negotiate their own position as a player of this game in the situation of filming themselves for YouTube broadcasting?
What affects are evoked in the gaming experience?

1.2 Disposition

This essay will begin with an introduction of the previous research. After that, an introduction of my theoretical framework will take place, before I further present the methodology and materials of this essay which will be concluded by ethical considerations. After, a separate paragraph will introduce game characters and a summary of the narrative in the game and the Let's Play videos to give context to the results. Finally the results and conclusion will finish this essay, along with suggestions for further research. A detailed bibliography will be at the very end of this essay.
2. Previous research

This paragraph offers an overview of the intersecting fields of Video Game Studies with a gender perspective or with results that address gender. First I will present some quantitative research to give an overview of gender related player demography followed by qualitative research on video games and gender studies. I will also touch upon how media studies have discussed the media format "video games". As the materials of this essay mainly touch upon Occidental game culture discourse the paragraph only reflect that, as opposed to games and game culture from other parts of the world. I have also focused on recent research, rather than older, as video game studies is a highly evolving field.

According to the 2016 quantitative data published by Entertainment Software Association (ESA), an international association where most of the largest game development companies are members) 40% of all game purchasers in America are women and 60% are men. The average age of the purchaser is 38 years old. Nick Yee (2006) writes another quantitative study on Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) to study user demographics, motivations and derived experiences. Men were more driven by personal interest and achievement goals, and females were more oriented towards interaction with other players. However 39% of male players and 53% of female players felt that the relationships they formed within the game were as meaningful as their "real life" friends. It was also found 25% of male players and 60% of female players played with their romantic partner or a family member, which points toward a strong overlap of "real life" and in-game social relations. Rheben Florian et al. (2016) investigates the sociodemographic reasons for why male players are reported to spend more time gaming. Results gave that players with older age, higher levels of education and full time employment produced lower gaming time. "[T]he higher gaming time of males is fully mediated by the higher preference of role-playing and shooter games among this gender group" (Florian et al. 2016:abstract). The correlation
between genre and gaming time needs further investigation according to Florian et.al. as it could indicate the orientation of the media text as a potential correlating factor. The genres in themselves, especially Role Playing Games (RPGs), could potentially explore every possible role in any situation imagined. This is corroborated by Benjamin Paaßen et al (2017) who ascribe the association of gamer culture as male-encoded to visibility of male figures within the culture.

Cuihua Shen (2016) investigates the preconception that men play better than women. The study is quantitative and investigates two Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) in United States and China, and concludes that women play at least as good as men, and that the preconception will most likely contribute to unequal participation in digital gaming. Linda K. Kaye and Charloette R. Pennington (2016) study the impact of stereotype threat, i.e. the impact on female gamer performance when actively subjected to the prejudice that women can't play. Results give that female players do underperform under stereotype threat, but that this effect can be countered when females identify with a positive social identity (which can't be the female gender). A male-encoded culture that forces female players to alienate themselves from their own gender could be problematic and the researchers suggest that "it would be worthwhile to explore whether gender identification moderates the gender stereotype threat-performance link, particularly when considering broader gender categories (such as transgender) and their relativity to sex of participant."(Kaye&Pennington 2016:207).

Lotte Vermeulen and Jan Van Looy (2016) have written on stereotype perception and genre choice of digital game players. Findings show that frequent female players disagree strongly with gender stereotypical preconceptions about players. The study also contradicted previous research which found female players as less motivated to play video games. Xeniya Kondrat (2015) and Teresa Lynch et. al (2016) write about stereotypical representations of genders in games. "The results show that there is still negative stereotyping of female gender. However, at the same time, the answers of the respondents show that the target audience of
video games desires improvements in presentation of female gender as well as male." (Kondrat 2015:abstract). Lynch et. al have more of a historical approach and concludes that character representations of women between 1984-2014 have been at large "Strong, sexy and secondary".

In the early years of 2000 there was a large scholarly debate regarding whether video games should be understood through narratives or ludology: a term young scholars tried to introduce to the field of game studies. This debate is covered in summary by Michalis Kokonis (2014). Gonzalo Frasca wrote a dissertation on rhetorical analysis for video games, toys and play activities (2007). The term ludology has with time yielded to "Video Game Studies". Susanne Eichner who's in the field of media studies concludes that "game reception has been ceded in large part to communication studies, media psychology or cognitive film theory." (Eichner 2013:101).

3. Theory

In this section media reception for video games will be introduced through the work of Susanne Eichner. She conceptualises media reception via agency and media involvement. Then affects and discourse will be discussed mainly through Eichner and Margret Wetherell (2012). Lastly gender theory will be introduced with the help of Raewyn Connell and others who've written on feminist theory and gender studies.

3.1 Gameplay

Susanne Eichner (2013) describes the process of gameplay as such: In a simulated structure, drawing on cognitive structures input result in certain feedback, typically audio-visual but also haptic: such as in the input (player using controller) and output (controller
vibrates) of the game controller. When a game of a certain genre is chosen and played the player has an idea of the obstacles to be met, and translates their knowledge into new game interface input (Eichner 2013:104 citing Lindley et al. 2008:2). The game invites the player to forward their exploration of the simulated environment by presenting new cues. This type of stimuli evokes emotional involvement in the player, but only when the stimuli is contextualised by the player, does it turn into emotion (ibid:104 citing Grodal 2000:201). Torben Kragh Grodal, who writes in the field of Film and Media studies, has identified mechanisms of emotions in gameplay: “a cause, an arousal, a cognitive appreciation and a labelling, followed by some actions that remove the cause of arousal” (ibid:104 citing Grodal 2000: 201). The action that will lead to overcoming the obstacles to reach the goals presented in a video game depends on haptic input (player using the controller), which often involves coordination of motor skills (the player's ability to use the controller). Many games draw on the process of the player's need to fine tune their handling of the controller interface, as a way to represent the progressing levels of difficulty in the game (ibid 104). To master these controlling mechanisms will invoke a sense of pleasurable flow, where the player's immersion as an actor in the game intensifies (ibid:107). The need for player input is what separates video games from other media such as TV or film: the game will not progress without the player interaction. This player interaction involving the controller is called ludic involvement (will be further developed under Involvement in media reception).

3.2 Agency and Video Games

In social cognitive theory Albert Bandura has claimed agency to be "the hallmark of human nature" (Bandura 2006). With the help of Bandura's work Eichner stipulates that agency is one of the core pleasures in gameplay. Eichner (2013:51 original emphasis) then defines agency thus:
the general ability to perform actions implying the capability of could have acted differently, while actions are the actual processes of acting. Agency in social life has furthermore been defined as a creative capacity that depends on individual and socio-cultural resources that can be amplified and improved on and that is anchored and incorporated in the human body. ... agency presupposes a general discursive consciousness, which does not imply that we are always aware of our intentions and goals. ... In this sense, agency is not necessarily intentional, rather it is the could have acted differently which is at the core of agency. Nor is agency a fixed possession someone obtains. It is related and determined by resources such as knowledge resources. While intentionality thus remains a possible aspect of agency, situationality, processuality, influence and meaning making are marked as core aspects of agency...

One of the compounds that create a sense of agency is self-efficacy which is the individual's level of impact over themselves and their lives (Eichner 2013:105). To act efficiently in the world is pleasurable. Thus simulating a high grade of self-efficacy by the player's actions (haptic input) which has a large effects on the game world, will be perceived as pleasurable (ibid:106). The effects on the input must naturally be meaningful for the player, and is thus a layered meaning-making project which involves the players pre-understanding, the narrative and symbolic content in the game (ibid:106). Frans Mäyre's work (2008:3) provides an excellent illustration which is reworked to illustrate the meaning-making process while playing a video game in figure 1:

The simulated experience of control can thus be described as a constituent of a gaming experience (ibid 108). In the Results of this essay we will find many examples where players

![Figure 1: A Venn diagram illustrates the cultural contextual intersections in which the meaning-making process between a player and a game takes place.](image_url)
have to negotiate and understand what level of control they have in the game. The negotiations of agency and control will produce both pleasure and negative responses when limited by the game narrative.

### 3.3 Involvement in media reception

Eichner accounts for the term involvement as "the intensity and amplitude of participation in processes of reception" in its broadest sense (Eichner 2013:128). The information processing can be seen as a mediation of the recipient’s disposition, how the media text is delivered (a video game in this essay) and the media text itself (ibid:130).

Eichner uses the term "point of attachment" to conceptualize the interplay between the recipient and the media text. This term refers to something that evokes the recipient's personal interest, for example a specific topic, genre or representational interest (ibid:131). Finally different reading strategies of the recipient, and certain forms of textuality can influence the type of involvement evoked (ibid:130). Lastly Eichner identifies seven specific modes of involvement during a media reception (ibid:139pp): **Immersion/presence**: narrative involvement or presence. **Character involvement**: relationship with the fictive characters. **Ludic involvement**: specific for video games, as described above in "Gameplay". **Excitement**: emotional involvement and emotional meaning making. **Spectacle**: visual and special effect. **Analysis**: meta-analysis of the media-artifact. **Inspiration**: contextualization of the media text as a source of inspiration. **Habitual involvement**: the act of participating in media. **Agency**: as described in "Agency in video games" or in an extended sense: as various forms of fan culture.

### 3.4 Affect, discourse and reception

To discuss affects and emotions in the process of meaning making is not the most clear cut task. I will draw both on the work of Margret Wetherell who has written *Affect and*
emotion a new social science understanding and Eichner's understanding of emotions in the meaning making process in media reception. Wetherell makes a strong argument for the close relationship between discourse and affect, as opposed to an older view of discourse as conscious and deliberate, and affect as automatic and involuntary (Wetherell 2012:52). Wetherell recounts at length the research of William Reddy who has conceptualised some first person speech acts as emotics which refers to language actions (verbal or non verbal) such as "I feel angry" (ibid:53, 68). Sara Ahmed describes in "Affective economies" (2011) how affects can be described as circulating in societies in a similar way to products in a market economy. She describes how affects can be generated in one discourse, be disjoined from it, circulate, and then via cognitive association be reactivated in a different discourse altogether as a crucial part of human meaning-making processes. Marianne Winther Jørgensen and Louise Phillips stipulate that discourses can be seen as resources when in need to understand the world (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 1999:105). Eichner, in accordance with Wetherell, places emotion alongside cognition as equal in value in meaning making processes (Eichner 2013:78). In the results of this essay we will clearly see examples of circulating discourses and affects, and how they are intimately intertwined in meaning-making processes.

3.5 Gender theory

Raewyn Connell (2005) has written Masculinities in the field of masculinity research, a sub-category of gender studies. Here Connell defines gender as a process of configuring the social practices that divide an individual's gender in the predominant (but not exclusive) categories of man and woman (Connell 2005:72). The processes of gender configuration have impact on power relations between men and women, which are commonly referred to as the patriarchy (ibid 74). In patriarchal structures women are subordinated and males dominant. Gendered power structures are in our contemporary feminist theories said to interact with
other power structures too, such as race, class and normative functions of the body: this idea is conceptualised as intersectionality (ibid:75). From a social science perspective institutions are seen as constitutive of gender, and can in fact be seen as gendered themselves (ibid:73). The state is an example of a male gendered institution (Connell 2005:73, Butler 1990). Feminist theory has since Simone de Beauvoir provided a starting point in *The second sex* (1949), left the idea of two biologically determined genders behind. Now the social construction of gender in life long socialisation processes have been written about in detail by Judith Butler (Butler 1990). There is a paradox though: if binary genders are socially constructed, how do we talk about them without cementing their groundless existence (Bryson 2016:230)? In this essay the categories of female and male gender will be used tools that will facilitate discussing observed phenomena. That does not mean that the way gender categories are predominantly structured today is fixed or exclusive. As sociologist David Gauntlett (2008:102) understands Anthony Giddens work on structuration theory:

Human agency (micro level activity) and social structure (macro level forces) continuously feed into each other. The social structure is reproduced through repetition of acts by individual people (and therefore can change).

Sociologist Carin Holmberg has written *Det kallas Kärlek* (1993), on social interaction between self-perceived equal romantic partners in a heterosexual romantic relationships, but many of these patterns are present in all inter-human relationships which contain power asymmetries. Holmberg's dissertation pinpoints how structural oppression takes shape on an interpersonal, communicational level. Later she wrote *Det kallas manshat* (2014)² on negative stereotypes of feminists and surrounding issues. Both Holmberg and Connell stress that male dominance can, but doesn’t necessarily have to, involve physical violence (Connell 2005:38). Domination/subordination can just as much be present in the patterns of

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interactions such as women's unintentional voluntary subordination, or men's emotional manipulation with the help of guilt, shame, fear, and threats of violence (ibid). Often men feel that they are justified, or that they are exercising a right to attack, harass or pass judgement on women (ibid).

In this essay both the video game industry and video game culture are seen as male-encoded institutions, as reflected in the "Previous research" section of this essay. *Life Is Strange* is a norm breaking game in the sense that it is female oriented by its narrative, themes and main character representations. Gender theory will be used to understand how both the narrative and characters will be understood by the players, but also what gender related discourses and affects the players use as resources in their meaning making processes.

**4. Life Is Strange - the video game**

This section will offer background information about the game, to provide necessary context to the Results and Discussion.

**4.1 Production background**

The game is developed by DONTNOD studios which is a French video game developer studio. According to their developer diary[^3] Square Enix was the only publishing company who got the sales pitch and agreed not to change the gender of the main character from female to male. Further the developers claim they wanted to raise real life character defining teenage issues in the game. The game is episodic and consists of five chapters first released between January 30th 2015 and October 20th 2015. The game was deemed a commercial success and a second game was announced the May 18th 2017.

4.2 Key Characters

*Max Caulfield:* The only playable character in the game. 18 years old, has after five years in Seattle returned to her childhood hometown Arcadia Bay to attend to Blackwell Academy's prestigious photography education.

*Chloe Price:* Max's childhood best friend. After her father died in a car-accident, and Max leaving shortly after, Chloe is portrayed as a "troubled" young woman by the other game characters. She is not attending school, not working and owes money to slightly older drug dealer Frank Bowers.

*Mark Jefferson:* A famous photographer who teaches Max's class at Blackwell Academy. In episode 4 he is revealed to work together with Nathan (see below) to sedate young girls and photograph them in a helpless state. The girls' consent is valued less than the higher purpose of art. He is also rumoured to have sexual relations with students; Kate Marsh and Rachel Amber (see below) being two amongst these.

*Rachel Amber:* Attended Blackwell Academy but disappeared six months prior to Max return to Arcadia Bay. She was "a social chameleon" who was liked by everyone. She had a romantic relationship with Chloe Price and they had plans to save money and move out of town. Rachel also had a romance with Frank Bowers.

*Kate March:* A classmate of Max with religious beliefs. In a Vortex Club party (a club at Blackwell Academy) Kate is filmed kissing and touching boys after having her drink spiked. The video clip is then uploaded onto internet and Kate is subjected to horrible bullying and slut shaming. This leads her to a suicide attempt in episode 2.

*Victoria Chase:* Is a wealthy, spoiled (according to Max), goal oriented classmate of Max. She is ruthless in her methods of reaching her goals and leads the "popular" gang in class with an iron fist.
David Madsen: Chloe Price's new step dad. He works as a security guard at Blackwell Academy, is a war veteran who probably suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and has an unhealthy obsession with surveillance.

Nathan Prescott: One of Max's classmates. Comes from a wealthy family which is said to basically "run half of the town". Because of Nathan's influential background people are reluctant to, if not forced, not to hold him accountable for his own actions. He threatened Chloe with a gun in Blackwell Academy's girl's bathrooms in episode 1 when Chloe attempted blackmail for money not to rat him out as a drug dealer to his parents. He assists Mr. Jefferson to abduct girls to the Prescott family's secret photo studio "the dark room" where Nathan accidentally killed Rachel with an overdose.

Warren Graham: Attends Blackwell Academy but is not in Max's class. He has an obvious romantic interest in Max and diligently acts as an ally to her. Frank Bowers: A small time drug dealer who sells drugs on the side of his day time job to make ends meet.

4.3 Narrative content summary

In this paragraph I will account for the key characters and narrative content around the two scenes in the game where I've made my observation. The scene "Kate's suicide/attempt" was chosen because of the intimate and empathic conversation that the player needs to navigate in order to be successful to talk her down. It also exemplifies the material effects of oppression: Kate feels bad because she is a marginalised individual in the context of Blackwell Academy in the sense that she is a young woman with a religious belief, she has been severely bullied/harassed and it has consequences in the shape of of her wanting to commit suicide. The scene "Mr. Jefferson at the junkyard" was chosen to see how player's reacted to the discussion of men's violence against women. Were players surprised when Mr. Jefferson was revealed, or did they see it coming?
4.3.1 Scene one: Kate's suicide/attempt

Before class Mr. Jefferson is overheard having an argument with Kate. She storms off and skips class. During class there is an interruption and everyone leaves to find the source of commotion. Outside the student dorms all the students are standing, looking up at Max's classmate Kate who is standing on the roof. Kate jumps, and Max rewinds time to get Kate back up while making her way through the crowd. Time then freezes. People are filming, sad, standing together, and seem quite caught up in the "sensationalism" of the moment. Max gets to the roof top with visible effort and time returns to normal. Max's nose is bleeding. Max thinks to herself (to inform the player:) "I've overdone it, I can't use my powers any more". A conversation follows where Max needs to use her knowledge collected in the game about Kate's life to successfully talk Kate out of committing suicide. The player can't use rewinding time to get the upper hand in the conversation. If the player navigates this conversation right Kate steps down from the ledge. If the player fails Kate jumps and commits suicide. Afterwards a scene follows at the Principal's office where Max is asked to essentially assign blame for upsetting Kate to the point of suicide to one of the following people: Nathan Prescott, Mr. Jefferson, David Madsen or Max herself. Here Max's time rewinding powers work again. End of episode sequence followed by statistics of the player's choices and consequences. (Approximately 10-20 minutes of video, varies with each player.)

4.3.2 Scene two: Mr. Jefferson at the junk yard

Max and Chloe received a text from Nathan where he threatened to remove all the evidence of Rachel's death. Chloe is furious and rushes off to Chloe's teen age hang out junk yard to make sure Rachel's body is still there. Max goes with her of course. They find Rachel's body in place, but while huddled over Rachel's grave someone sticks a needle with sedatives in Max's neck. Max doses off and therefore can't use her rewinding powers. Before Max loses consciousness she sees Chloe get shot in the head. Chloe's body collapses on top
of Rachel's grave. As Max falls over backwards the camera grazes over the person standing behind her with the gun: Mr. Jefferson is thus revealed to be responsible for the disappearances of the girls (including Chole and Kate). He's been drugging girls and photographing them in a helpless state for the higher purpose of art. End of episode sequence follows by statistics of the player's choices and consequences. Later it is revealed that Nathan sees Mr. Jefferson as a father figure and has assisted Mr. Jefferson in abducting the girls. At some point Nathan accidentally killed Rachel by giving her an overdose of sedative drugs. Mr. Jefferson and Nathan are thus both responsible for Rachel's death. (Approximately 10-20 minutes of video, varies with each player.)

5. Research materials and methodology

This chapter will account for the materials which consists of the YouTube videos of players playing the game *Life is Strange*, and the limitations and the scope of this essay. It will also account for how the materials were transcribed and analysed with the help of ethnography conducted on the internet: Netnography. The final section will discuss ethical considerations.

5.1 Limitations and scope

The materials for this essay are limited to videos from six separate YouTube channels. The YouTube videos are part of a larger intertextual chain which consists of human encoded and decoded media texts in many different interlinking layers: game development-game-YouTube Let's Play videos - YouTube watchers - YouTube comment fields. Another limitation that was made was to watch two specific scenes in the game (scenes discussed and motivated previously under headline "Narrative content summary") as one entire play-through would be roughly 10 hours for one player. To access a broader sample of meaning-
making processes I chose to have a representation of several different players in shorter play-time, rather than more play-time from a fewer players.

5.2 Let's-play videos and players

The method for this essay is qualitative research which means that the selection of YouTube videos for this essay is strategic. In the videos each YouTuber plays this single player game while filming their face/upper body. Typically the footage of the player is superimposed in the top right corner of the video game visuals. I have chosen videos both from hugely popular, and less visited YouTube channels. Six separate YouTube channels were chosen with the intent to represent a variety of players regarding gender and race, to include as many perspectives as possible. After two videos with female players were transcribed I felt I'd have a better chance to capture more talk/conversation if I chose a video where two people were in the same room talking and playing together, so I did. In the fourth video two female players are filmed: one plays, the other watches. This is why the gender representational ratio of the players is skewed. The final number of videos remains six but the players consist of four female players, two male and one player who reads as gender queer. Factors such as age, ethnicity, cultural background, class, education, self-identified gender and sexual orientations are because of the partial nature of the information available on YouTube videos/channels, not specified. Thus it is hard to make a judgment call on how diverse the selection really is. What can be said is that all players speak English, and all are adequately media literate and somewhat adhering to the north American cultural discourse in which the game is set.

5.3 Transcription process

To facilitate an analysis the verbal talk in the YouTube videos was transcribed into text. The guidelines for the transcription were found in Barbo Klein's 1990 paper "Transkribering är en
analytisk akt" (translation: "Transcribing is an analytical act"). Klein stresses the importance of making an active choice suited for the source material in how to write out the transcription. Cristopher Joseph Jenks who wrote the book *Transcribing Talk and Interaction* in 2011 corroborates the importance of conscious choices when transcribing. Jenks and Klein both acknowledge transcription can't be a lossless transformation (Jenks2011:9). In my process of transcription I focused mainly on the spoken words rather than things such as tone of voice and detailed transcription of body language. I have however chosen to transcribe affection indicative verbal sounds such as UHHHH or NOOoooo where capital letters reflect a louder volume than lower case letters and the length of the drawn out vowels somewhat represent the length of the sound.

### 5.4 Netnography

Robert V. Kozinets has coined the term "Netnography" and has written a book with the same title (2015) which takes on the task of conducting ethnographic research with materials collected on the internet. In the introduction he declares two questions central to this field of research:

How can we understand human to human and human to machine interactions and experiences? What is the cultural and social phenomenon manifesting as social media, and how does it relate to concepts we already know such as networks, communities and culture? (Kozinets2015:2).

What are the research practices that guide, inform and structure netnography? How do historical precedent, extant theory and adaptive reasoning support them? How do the applications of these practices lead to cultural understanding? (Kozinets2015:2).

Kozinets describes YouTube as a platform which offers "social sharing expressions" where users consocialise around common interests rather than personal social relationships.
The reciprocal action between cultural expression and cultural products can be seen as cultural structures with Giddens' understanding of structuration theory mentioned previously under headline Gender theory. At the same time netnography is always necessarily partial, as one can never wholly describe an informant in full. This partiality is why Kozinets recommends to use netnography in conjunction with other methods (ibid:76).

5.5 Ethical considerations

This essay is written within the paradigm of post structuralism. Feminist science critic Donna Haraway writes "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (Haraway 1988:583). With that I remind myself that I am a player of the video game Life Is Strange before I became a scientific author on the same subject, and thus cannot lay claims to an objective, all-encompassing perspective on the materials of my own work. Instead I have tried to make available enough information on my scientific process, so that a judgement call on the conclusions that I have found can be independently made by the reader. According to Kozinets the internet draws from older ideas of the public sphere as well as ideas about textual materials, and can be described with both perspectives simultaneously (Kozinets 2015:135). The YouTube videos are publicly available to anyone without any needing to ask for permission to use them or to name the channels, but after much consideration I decided to not use the aliases of the YouTubers, as I do not wish to facilitate a discussion of the players' individual opinions or characteristics. I am more interested in which gender related discourses the players' make use of in their meaning-making processes. In the Results the player's gender will be mentioned if it is contextually relevant for their gendered meaning-making processes, for example if their own gender can be understood as a point of reference in understanding the game characters or narrative.
6. Results

This part of the essay will be structured as such: First I will give a quantitative overview of the themes that are related to the research questions to the materials of the essay. Then I will continue to introduce the themes in greater detail. Headlines will reflect the research questions which are: talk about the narrative, talk about the characters, talk about Mr. Jefferson, talk about gameplay, negotiation of the players own position in a Let's Play video and expressions of affects.

6.1 Introduction to findings

In my transcription process I chose to transcribe mainly words uttered and at large omit descriptions of body language, so that the bulk of my material would reflect spoken linguistic actions during the act of playing the game. To produce an overview in which *number of words* players uttered that related to each research question a graph is produced (Figure 2.) This chart should not be read as 100% accurate as the analytical themes linked to the research questions are not discrete, but overlapping in reality.

![Figure 2: Number of words pertaining to each research question](image)

The chart is meant as an overview of how much quantitative speech action is spent in each analytical category compared to the other categories. *Expressions of affect* is not limited to
transcribed words like NOOOOOO or URGH in the videos, but present throughout all talk. This becomes exceedingly clear when watching the videos as body language is ever present as well as the tone of voice indicating affects. Therefore the graph is under representative in the quantity and importance of affective expressions, but present a way to measure them within the limitations and scope of this essay. Note that Talk about characters excludes Talk about Mr. Jefferson, as he is the focus of the second examined scene, and therefore is talked about in excess.

6.1.1 Talk about narrative

At Kate's suicide scene five out of six players understood that Kate felt severely bad, but not to the extent that she might attempt suicide. One player was completely unaware. Shock at the narrative event of an attempted/completed suicide was evident for all players. Several players reflected that they hadn't interpreted or taken note of the signals that preceded Kate's suicide enough to feel confident of the dialogue choices on the rooftop. The completely unaware player is male, and has either not looked around or remembered what he saw which becomes evident in the dialogue when Max has to talk Kate down:

Should we just lie to her, or did I actually find this out but I just wasn't paying enough attention or a little bit of both? Uummm. I'm gonna put 'you were drugged'. ... [Player talks over dialogue when Kate is talking indecisively about jumping]: You stay up there. You've got more to live for! This is crazy. I'm trying to save your life honey! [Adressing YouTube audience:] I'm tryin to conquer her guys... Show her some support. ... JUST GRABB HER ASS, JUST GRAB HER! JUST SNATCH HER ASS DOWN.

This player's verbalisation about lying, "conquering" and grabbing Kate can be read as masculine-encoded; as if trying to reclaim dominance in a situation where he has lost control. It could also be seen as a display of masculine strength about his intended results to his viewers on YouTube or a way to display/assert difference between himself as a man and
Max, who is only given the feminine-encoded option of *talking* Kate down. It may also reflect a lack of practice in feminine-encoded practices: to invest time and effort (emotional labour) in social relationships and paying attention to details, as Holmberg describes (Holmberg 1993:143). Either way, the player is seen to struggle for a satisfying reading strategy. In the scene following the suicide Max has to blame someone for Kate's (attempted or successful) suicide. Max has the following choices: take the blame herself, Mr. Jefferson, Nathan Prescott or David Madsen. Most players chose to blame Nathan, as he was known to be present at the parties where girls "black out" and seems generally unstable. One player pointed out that the choices of assigning blame are terrible: "I just think Nathan and David options are going to get me in trouble while Jefferson didn't really do anything unless he's secretly behind everything bad." All the non-male players display hesitation to assign blame, and more than the player quoted were worried to "get into trouble" for assigning blame as all options other than blaming Max herself means assigning blame to someone in a power position over Max: Nathan the unstable class mate who's family owns the "half the town", Mr. Jefferson is Max teacher and a well-regarded photographer and David Madsen is the security guard in the school. One female player gleefully tries all options by rewinding time, to see which designation of blame seems to have the smallest negative impact on Max. The player seems to thoroughly enjoy the feeling of increased agency, a stark contrast from the scene with Kate on the roof. This player also uses a harsh and confident tone in passing judgement on the characters involved in the scene. It seems like she feels entitled to judge the characters in a similar way that Connell describes in men exercising a right when passing judgment on women (Connell 2005:83). This can again be understood as the player's feelings of control (agency) and dominance in the safe situation of playing a game.

In the scene where Jefferson is revealed as responsible for the abductions and the killer of Chloe, three of the players express concern about being two women alone in the junkyard at night. They do expect Nathan to be there, but they seem to be drawing on the
discourse of *dangerous strange men attacking women in public spaces at night*. The revealing of Mr. Jefferson as responsible for the abductions is generally referred to as a plot twist by the players. All players display extreme discomfort at the point where he is revealed. The discomfort is displayed very loudly in both non-verbal and verbal expressions which will be elaborated under the headline Talk about Mr. Jefferson.

In this paragraph we've seen examples of a high amplitude of narrative involvement from all players. We've also seen examples of how players need to adjust their reading strategy when the narrative moves players to situations they were unprepared for.

### 6.1.2 Talk about characters

Victoria, a wealthy, manipulative classmate to Max, has gained her popularity by bullying other students. Players predominantly judge her character very harshly, as if she is all through bad/evil. This takes form by calling her names like "Why are you upset are you upset that Kate's not dead *you sick fuck?*", "You better be sorry *you fucking cunt*" or "Yeah feel guilty *you bitch!*". This quick and non-reflexive judgment passed on Victoria can be understood as habitual emotional meaning-making: the understanding of Victoria's character employs circulating *negative stereotypical images on women* which is closely linked with negative affects (Wetherell 2012:69). One player befriends Victoria by making empathic dialogue choices and Victoria is revealed to be quite a normal, troubled teenage girl with problems of her own. Victoria does try to get ahead of others at the expense of (some) others, but she is not the initiator of any of the larger crimes in the narrative of the game, even if she takes the opportunity to benefit from some of them (such as filming and spreading Kate kissing boys at a party). Nathan is at large believed to be responsible for the abductions and the killing of Rachel: "I wanna see that little jerk get what he deserve. I don't like his smug ass. Yeah you gonna get it. [When assigning blame after Kate's attempted suicide]". Even though the players dislike Nathan the name calling has a different characteristic, namely less
severe and less sexualised: bitch-ass, jerk, asshole, bastard. That said, Nathans character is not written as a one-dimensional stereotype. His behaviour can be understood through a lack of consequences, and him turning to Mr. Jefferson for guidance. A toxic and exploiting relationship forms where Mr. Jefferson holds considerable power over Nathan, as older, as his teacher, and as a well-regarded photographer.

In this paragraph we've seen that passing judgement on the character's from a safe position as a player of a video game seems to evoke a sense of agency, as players can be seen to take on a meta perspective where they can and feel entitled to pass judgement on the game characters without risk of personal consequences or confrontations. Sometimes this behaviour seems explicitly pleasure-invoking, and sometimes it seems to be of a more habitual nature.

6.1.3 Talk about Mr. Jefferson

The meaning-making processes around Mr. Jefferson are some of the most interesting ones from a gender perspective. In a magazine interview the game developers claim to have put so many clues to point at Mr. Jefferson they thought it would be too obvious, and after the release they were surprised that more people didn't figure him out before it was revealed in the narrative (Diver 2016). Three female players claim to have figured out that Mr. Jefferson was responsible, but only say so after he was revealed in the narrative. The wife of another player is claimed to have figured it out early in the game:

...there was enough to kind of plant you to thinking it might have been him.. maaaaanaaaauh my wife really really got it she was like (in a disgusted, wheezing voice) "it's him" ages ago hmpf! like ages ago. Way before this episode came out. So. She's psychic basically. Tsk. Tsk.

Some clues that players refer to as dubious character markers are the rumours of him sleeping with students and the overhearing of an intimate phone call where he brushes off a girl
[presumably Kate]. Here are some of the immediate verbalised reactions after the screen where Mr. Jefferson is revealed:

Wait. ... Oh my god. Everything... Jefferson.. Mr. freaking... ... ... are you kidding me? I - I - I are you kidding me? Mr. freaking Jefferson? What... he used to... he's behind this. he killed... He's working in cahoots with Na... ... guys. (Bends over in laughter) Mr Jefferson?! (while laughing) (pause) (claps hands) I did not see that coming (while clapping hands).

WHAT A Twist! No fucking way! WHAT?! What did, that guy (turns head do the side away from camera and screen) twist is BLEW MY MIND HE WAS SO NICE! HE WAS SO NICE!! WHAT?! ARE YOU KIDDING ME?! .... WHAT!

... So fucking WOW I DID NOT.. THAT WAS THE LAST PERSON I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT... was a psycho. was was was mr... a and he killed... Chloe.

[This is a transcription of two people talking, so every dash represents change of speaker]

-JEFFERSSOOOOON JEFERSSOOOOON IT'S JEFERSOOOOON -It is Jefferson. ... -Jefferson knows. -He does. -He knows we have powers. -Oh my god -it has to be him because he was wearing a blue shirt. We knew it. We already knew -We knew it! -He's been suspicious all the time but I LOVE HIM SO MUCH OOOOH IT HURTS SO BAD. ... NOOOOOOOO! ... I don't get the connection between Nathan and Jefferson though. -But I think it has to do with like the [Prescott] family. -Mhmmm (looks unsure). -True but like the bunker wasn't Nathan's so like what did Jefferson do there? -Maybe it's like -Maybe Jefferson isn't his real name.. maybe.. he's... like... a Prescott? -Uhhm... I'm very I'm just ... I mean I love Jefferson mainly because I appreciate how they made his character. Like he's suspicious but kind of legit sometime. -Hmm. (Nods in agreement) -But I was like (makes small hyperventilation sounds) I like him even more. Weird. I feel like people are gonna be mad at me because I like him and not Chloe. -Uuuuh -But it's like he -He has been a nice character actually. -Yeah but I'm just the kind of person who like appreciates ... ... like... bad characters.. I guess...

Shock and disbelief is evident in all players, but the last comment touches on something different. Holmberg's study reveals premiered attributes for a male love interest as: "very much a man", "thinks of himself firstly", "strong", and "assertive" (Holmberg 1993:132). A woman enjoys the thought of being taken care of, and a stronger man could supposedly take better care of his romantic partner (ibid:134). As Connell points out, masculinity, sexuality
and power have a long history of being linked together (Connell 1995:46-47). Holmberg (2015:175-176, my translation) describes a common strategy of women relating to male power in patriarchal structures as such;  

Women compete or collaborate from the bases of being a woman, but at the same time they keep men as a base of that relationship. Men will thus be the focus of the relationship even in their absence. The women try to get ahead by supporting some men or by making men to role models for good attributes, good behaviour and what it means to make it in this world. What is perceived as feminine is down played.

This together with Connell's discussions of culturally accepted male assertion strategies that tend towards violence, could account for how Mr. Jefferson can qualify as a valid love interest. In the comment we also see how the player tries to negotiate her feelings toward him: perhaps she likes him as a fictional character? Or could she perhaps deepen the appropriation towards Mr. Jefferson to retain her feelings of love even though he conducted heinous crimes? The revealing of Mr. Jefferson is by all means perceived as a major narrative turning point where all players need to change their reading strategy to make sense of the narrative (Eichner 2014:132-133). The urgency and success of finding a way to understand Mr. Jefferson as a criminal varies among the players.

In this paragraph we see that Mr. Jefferson being responsible for abductions and at least one killing presents an emotional shock for all players, even if some of them had suspicions beforehand. The suspicions seemed so unlikely that they were not voiced out loud by any single player within the made observations, except as a joke (see quote on page 25). The discourse of *an unknown, scary, ugly and dangerous male stranger attacking girls at* ...

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night in public spaces is far more present than an assailant being a "nice", "good looking", well-adjusted and known to the victim, which does not reflect statistics. According to Eva and Christian Diesen, academics in the law department, the number of charges brought to perpetrators who are known to the victim are underrepresented in Europe (2013:106). One of the contributing factors is gendered and socioeconomic power asymmetries which impacts the believability of the victim (ibid:34). Further the age-group of the girls is a very high predictor of rape and sexual assault, as they often haven't had time to gain influential socioeconomic positions yet. In Europe 2004 68% of all rapes were conducted within a romantic relationship or by an acquaintance (ibid:368). It might be argued that Mr. Jefferson or Nathan never explicitly is said to have raped or sexually abused the abducted girls, but as they were kept unconscious a part of their trauma is not knowing explicitly what has been done to their bodies. Therefore I argue that the comparison is highly relevant, especially with the rumours of Mr. Jefferson having sexual conducts with students, and the close relations between sexual acts and assertion of power/dominance.

6.1.4 Talk about gameplay

When taking a closer look at what the players say about the game it becomes very clear that playing a single player game is a social act as according to Frasca and Eichner (Frasca 2007:71pp, Eichner 2013:102). It is true that the players may ask to discuss the game with YouTube watchers for financial or social status gratification, but the topics in the game do seem to prompt a longing for social interaction on many levels:

It's fun to have a game like that to share with you bros.

I'm only here because playing a game like this not only brings people closer together but it teaches us that games like this, things like this happen in real life. Games are based on real things that happen in real life, movies books are based on things that happen in real life so if any of you are going through
anything like this please reach out to me. I am always here for you guys because (deep breath in) (inaudible words) I'm just always here. [After Kate’s suicide attempt]

What really happened, I'm like confused. Aarrgh. I can't wait to see you guys in the comment section, what you think happened. Or what you guys feel about this episode should I say. [After Kate’s suicide attempt]

NOW Well guys that was the end of episode 4 the dark room I am SOOOOO MESSED UP RIGHT NOW probably put up another video talking about stuff or uhm tsk uuhmm uuum oh my god I can't even think right now. [After scene with Mr. Jefferson at the junkyard]

Here we see three different prompts for further social interaction: The first reflects on the joy of sharing a really good game with others. The second is of a much more personal nature. The player refers to the game representing reality, and invites watchers to contact the player if they need to talk about real-life issues that are represented by the game. The third comment is about wanting to socially process the narrative and the evoked emotions. One of the players made a separate YouTube video discussing theories about who was responsible for the abductions after episode three, and the commentary fields on Life Is Strange Let's Play videos were flooded with different speculations (before the release of episode four). We can see how the game provides a platform for an extended social (and economic, for those players who are professional YouTubers) agency.

With the help of Eichner we can pinpoint some of the factors which affect to the reception of the game:

I love, I love (stuttering) Life Is Strange, it's such a cool game. It takes the telltale\(^5\) for a way of gameplay and I, think it brings things further with atmosphere, more choices... uuuhm, not more choices, the puzzles I really like that and.. even though I fucking suck at them (chews finger). I really feel like they take that and they bring more out of it. There's more... you feel more part of it. In a way. In telltale.. I sometimes get a little bored because I just feels like I'm just watching a film.. This feels

\(^5\) Telltale is a company that makes narrative-oriented, episodic games that build on a point-and-click mechanic.
like I'm playing a game which makes all the difference. And I love the style of it, I love the music, I love..eh-.. heh everything so it's really cool.. and I know you love it too guys.

Every player in my material expressed great appreciation for this game. Between the players all of Eichner's referred forms of involvement are present: immersion/presence, character involvement, ludic involvement, excitement, spectacle, analysis, inspiration, habitual involvement (implied, as all the players have YouTube channels relating to video games), and agency. This aligns with with Eichner's theories of a very high amplitude of involvement in the game, which is empirically observed in the materials of this essay. Some of the most commonly referred to successes of the game is the well written and delivered narrative, excellent voice acting, the multi-dimensionally written characters, graphic design and soundtrack choices, some of which consists of licensed music tracks by "real life" artists. The element of time travelling is observed as crucial in simulating a high degree of agency for the players. The impact of the dialogue choices are constantly analysed and speculated throughout the game by the players, which means that they feel accountable for their actions, which again amplifies their involvement:

I wonder, was there anything we could have done to stop her [Kate from jumping from the school building]

We have to blame someone? Should we change what we said? [The scene with the Principle following Kate's suicide/attempt]

Finally, a game mechanism which also evokes feelings of involvement through narrative accountability is the statistics shown at the end of every episode, for example "-You couldn't save Kate 41% -You saved Kate's life 59%". In the statistics the player's action is highlighted and compared to all the other players' turnout which is shared via the internet. The statistics reveal some of the consequences of the player's choices, and invites further analytical
involvement in the players as to what they could have done differently to change the outcome of their choices.

In this section we see clearly that the well executed narrative content is not enough to account for the involvement of the players and their appreciation of this game. The involvement is evoked through multiple well-balanced game design choices that work in synergy to create the high level of involvement and agency that makes this game enjoyable, despite the difficult and sensitive topics the game brings up.

6.1.5 Negotiation of the position as a player in a Let's Play video

In this analytical theme all the surrounding sentences which contained the personal pronouns such as: I, you, she (Max), and we, which were used in a very jumbled manner:

Did she [Max] just freeze time? Oh my god ok I can't do this right now I just can't Ok Max, you could do it. Comon Max. Ok we're going back [in time]. Ok. I can't go back! YES I CAN! Ok! If Max doesn't go to the everyday heroes contest and somebody else does that might be a complete and total screw up so I think I'm gonna I'm gonna tell about Nathan.

If I'm gonna be able to use my rewind power upon I mean HE DRUGGED ME so I'm kinda going in and out. of consciousness right now which SHE SAW MAX SAW MR Jefferson. We saw [addresses YouTube audience]. Right? ... Crazy bro.

To gain a better understanding on the use of pronouns I use Adrienne Shaw's article "Rethinking Game Studies: A case study approach to video game play and identification", which is written in the field of media communication. One of Shaw's findings is that the way players identify with the characters is strongly connected to the actions the player makes for the character in the game (Shaw 2013:356-357). This together with Eichner's oscillating reading strategies illuminate how quick and plastic the cognition processes of media reception in video games are (Eichner 2013:132pp). What we see in the player quotes above is a fraction of the meaning-making processes the players relate themselves against: their own
cultural contextual framework, their own experiences, the game narrative material, the
playable character (Max), and the YouTube viewers. We can use Eichner's involvements
again: immersion/presence, character involvement, ludic involvement, excitement, spectacle
and analysis. These are all parallel processes and at times players get quite overwhelmed: a
feeling which may add to the realism of the game. There were also other types of expressions
of negotiating the position of the players themselves:

I'm always trying to think what Max would do, I'm always trying to stay in character.

They really need to fix the lip syncing, it really removes a little bit of the.. the spell. I mean, if you look
at the... when she was about to jump her lips wasn't even moving so it's like uuhm ok..? I didn't feel
sad about her dying (laughingly) because she's, she's a robot. [After Kate's suicide attempt]

These two quotes can also be read as signs on negotiating reading strategies. The first quote
could be seen increasing the player's distance to accountability for consequences of the
player's choice, and the second quote could be interpreted as either a genuine break of
immersion in the game, or as an excuse to break the immersion of the game because of the
heavy topic of the media text the game conveyed in the referred scene. This was the only
player in my materials who displayed signs of low immersion during Kate's suicide scene. In
that player's play-through Kate jumped.

In this paragraph the modality of pronouns used by players are understood as
expressions of their meaning-making processes where they situate themselves in relation the
experiences provided by the game (as illustrated by figure 2 on page 10). We can also see
some of the statements as signifiers pointing to different reading strategies.
6.1.6 Expressions of affects

The materials of this essay provide an excellent example to study affect as part of meaning-making processes. There are a few different types of utterances that will be discussed closer:

This is so emotional! I feel like crying right now. UUUAH. Oh god [when Kate responds positively]. YES! That was a close one! Oh.. I feel like crying I have like tears coming in my eyes. Thank goodness.

We lost her. (sigh) Oh my god. I, I, I (stutters) feel like I asked her the best I could. And the motherfucker still jumped off the building. [After Kate jumped off the building]

tsk UUUUUUUUUUUUURGH (rolls head backwards) Aaaare yoooooou seeeeeriiiiiiioooouous? ... MAAAAAAAAn well he! UUUUUURGH ..... .... .... UUUUUUUURRRGH ... ... UUUUUUURUGH UURUUUUGUH I'M SO MESSED UP RIGHT NOW I'M SO MESSED UP RIGHT NOW [After Mr. Jefferson is revealed as the killer]

The first utterance is a textbook example of an emotic, as understood by Wetherell. This type of utterance seems to be employed as a materialization of the inner emotional world of a player. The second quote looks more like rhetorical talk that reflects the player's inner dialogue and emotional state. Rhetorical talk seems to be employed by some players in some scenes to aid in the cognitive processes of understanding what is going on. It seems similar to players "talking to themselves". The third quote points to a large gap between hegemonic cultural narrative (Mr. Jefferson is nice) and the narrative presented in the game (Mr. Jefferson is a killer). Wetherell describes "emotional blisters" which occur when "activated thought material, emotives and goals" won't fit together (Wetherell 2012:70). Here the player's activated thought material could arguably be that Nathan is responsible, a feeling of apprehension while walking in the junk yard at night could be the assumed emotic, and striving towards a happy ending in the game is a reasonable goal. At the scene where Mr. Jefferson is revealed there is considerable discord among several players (as discussed under
headline "Talk about Mr. Jefferson"). Depending on the player's own experiences and contextual frames these types of discords may be more or less familiar which will affect the player's meaning making of the narrative. Some players will perceive them as a sign of realism, some might not. Different narrative situations will also produce these discords for different players, and at different amplitudes (Eichner 2013:153). We can here make parallels to the genre of horror films which frequently mean to invoke excitement and horror in their viewers (ibid). To partake in such strong emotions from the safe distance of one's own sofa can indeed be perceived as pleasurable (ibid).

In summary this section has looked closer at some of the different verbalised expressions of affects. However, affect is something that is ever present in the materials of this essay, and has been touched upon throughout all of the Results section. In media reception there is a long tradition of genres devoted to invoking excitement and horror which recipients perceive as pleasurable. This seems to be true for the players of Life Is Strange too, as the strong negative emotions do not seem to deter players from enjoying and appreciating this game, even if deeply affected in the moments of playing.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to examine a female oriented game and the players' meaning-making processes from a gender-studies perspective. We have seen that games are excellent bearers of cultural content and are highly capable to deliver complex narratives in a highly involving manner. It is not surprising that we find a high level of Eichner's narrative involvement as telling stories have engaged people for thousands of years before video games became common practice. However, as Frasca discusses, video games seem to be associated with "play" and "make belief", and therefore the video game industry seems to shy away from certain narratives, topics and representations (Frasca 2007:41-42). Life Is Strange
strongly contests these preconceptions by delivering a highly appreciated gaming experience to all players in the materials of this essay, despite the the game's female orientation and the heavy narrative topics. This can be corroborated by general reviews of the game\textsuperscript{6} and from the video game industry itself, with the recent announcement of a second game\textsuperscript{7}.

The meaning-making processes around this game are littered with gender discourse. Several players express frustration with the conditioned choices and play mechanics in the game which reflect a female positioning: the players didn't have the choice of physically taking Kate down from the rooftop, or the position to comfortably assign blame for Kate's poor mental health. Male-encoded strategies of success were highlighted as problematic in several ways in the materials of this essay. They were frustrating for some players as being absent from Max's range of possible actions, and caused a great deal of frustration in granting characters such as Mr. Jefferson and Nathan success in harming other characters in the game. Some non-male players seemed used to reflect upon the consequences of their actions, and some male players were not at all. This reflects Connell's and Holmberg's (and many other feminist theoreticians) discussions of unequal power dynamics with the end result of expanding men's range of agency at the expense of women's.

We have seen all players pass habitual judgment on the game characters that draw upon circulating stereotypical negative gendered discourses. The players seem to do it more depending on the game's narrative context rather than individual behavioural preferences; when the players feel safe to pass judgment they do (talking at the game from a player's meta-perspective). When they need to consider consequences of their judgement they tend to

\textsuperscript{6} Metacritic is a website which collects the review scores of other game review sites. Life Is Strange typically ranks between 83-85 (a very good score) depending on which platform it's been reviewed for. Referred is the score for the Play Station 4 release: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/life-is-strange [Accessed May 31 2017]

\textsuperscript{7} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoVni44YBtE [Accessed May 22 2017]
think twice about it (exemplified in the scene where Max needs to assign blame for Kate's suicide/attempt). The habitual judgements that players make are frequently disproved within the narrative of this game, which forces players to change their understanding of the narrative and characters. Sometimes the discord between hegemonic cultural discourse and the game's fictive reality is so large the narrative or characters become unintelligible. The narrative points of these unintelligible moments tell us something about the discursive resources the players have available for their meaning-making processes. In the scene on the rooftop one player displayed a lack of understanding for emotional labour. In the scene of assigning blame for Kate's poor mental health most players discussed the unwillingness of reporting Kate's abduction and possible sexual assault to the police, because they believed that Kate's story was not believable, even though all players fully understood that what happened to Kate was real. The discursive resources to make sense of Mr. Jefferson as a character were also severely lacking. One or two players believed that it was more likely that Jefferson "had found out" about Max's time travelling abilities, rather than Mr. Jefferson being an individual who prioritises his idea of artistic expression over the lives, well-being and integrity of others.

When it comes to affects we have observed them as the connecting material between the reality and the fictive world in the game. Affects effectively bridge the gaps between fiction and reality and makes the simulated experiences seem real, as well as enjoyable, important and meaningful. Affect can be seen as highlighting dominant hegemonic discourses by amplification, as in the case of passing habitual judgement on game characters Victoria and Nathan. They can also offset discursive discord between dominant cultural narratives and the game's reality as in the case with Mr. Jefferson in the junk yard. Affects are ever present in the meaning-making processes of the players, and there is nothing illogical or irrational about them.
Lastly we've seen how agency is important in various aspects of a gaming experience. Agency can be very successfully simulated in a game, and that agency spills over into real life in several different ways. The experiences in the game are perceived as so strong and important that players also seek to connect to one and other to discuss these common experiences. One player in the materials of this essay reaches out by encouraging YouTube watchers to get in touch if they "need to talk", another made a separate video discussing possibilities for the abductions in the game, which prompted a rather large discussion. Players are thus given a platform from where they can meaningfully discuss and share in the topics brought up by the game. We've also seen how male players are given a platform off of which they can explore and share in female-encoded emotions such as sadness and empathy. One of the contributing reasons might be that invoked female-encoded feelings are still interpreted as masculine within the masculine-encoded video game culture. This could be a way for male players to learn more about the tools needed to perform emotional labour; interpersonal strategies that promotes communication, cooperation and consent, as exemplified in talking Kate down from the rooftop. In the YouTube video where the second game is announced the developers say that they still receive personal stories, fan-art, fan fiction, cosplay pictures, letters of thanks and appreciation from players every day. These fan-generated artefacts are naturally shared between fans too. The number of sold copies is mentioned as over three million in the video announcement for the second game, but the number of views on the six YouTube videos which were used as materials for this essay were over five million if summarised. The player-generated cultural artefacts that spring from the game will undoubtedly have a larger cultural impact than the game itself can have.

Returning to Giddens' structuration theory, repeated individual acts of agency from the players of Life Is Strange will feed into social structures, not least into the adjoining masculine video game culture. Providing a platform for safely experiencing and discussing
the sensitive and emotionally loaded topics that the game respectfully bring to light is key to cultivating a healthier culture for everyone. The game allows us to build a deeper understanding on a diverse range of important topics that touch countless lives. It offers a fair and truthful representation of the world around us, framed within the fictive context of a time-travelling teenage girl.

8. Further research

One of the undoubtedly most interesting things I found while looking at the Let's Play Life Is Strange YouTube videos was the commentary fields. What are some of the factors that affect the commentators' judgement of the videos? What different aspects of the Let's Play videos do people comment on? Further it became apparent that there was a significant amount of YouTube watchers who watched numerous play-throughs of this particular game and ranked the player's play-throughs depending on the player's emotional reactions to the game. This evokes questions such as: What needs/purpose does it fill to watch this extensive and highly emotional content on YouTube and who has those needs? Lastly the interaction between the players and their audience is of interest. What different patterns can be discerned in that interaction? Further, there are many male players who've posted Let's Play videos of this game. Those videos could be of interest for masculinity studies from several different angles.
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