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THE AMBIVALENCE OF *LIFE IS STRANGE* IN PORTRAYING ITS FEMALE CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Nowadays, there has been a new trend in the video game industry to unleash the stereotypical female characters as a response to the increasing criticism toward gender equality in the video game industry. *Life is Strange* is one example of video games that challenges typical female characters who are usually described as powerless and objectified. However, such a progression has not amended the problematic female representation completely within its narrative. By using the concept of hegemonic masculinity, this paper discusses the ambivalences in *Life is Strange* in challenging stereotypical female representations. The result of the analysis shows that although *Life is Strange* successfully subverts the female physical representation through its design, the narrative still perpetuates hegemonic masculinity by means of sacrificial heroine and lesbianism eroticization.

Keywords: Female Representation, Hegemonic Masculinity, Lesbianism Eroticization, Sacrificial Heroine, Video Game Industry

Introduction

The video game industry is known for its androcentrism. Its characters and players are male-dominated, which affects how the narrative and the visual graphic are designed. Dyer-Witheford and dePeuter's 2009 study (as cited in Cote, 2016) states that masculinity beliefs have dominated video games as they are "rooted in the masculine milieu of the military industrial complex" (Cote, 2016, p. 9). Women in the video game industry are often portrayed as the damsel in distress, and the object of sexuality to attract male players in the video game industry. In contrast, men are portrayed as the hero, and they can utilize his agency to empower the community. Nevertheless, the video game industry does not only lead to negative impacts on the female players but also on the male players (Fox, Gilbert, & Tang, 2018). Fox, Gilbert, & Tang (2018) state that it reinforces toxic masculinity, which is evident in "sexist and misogynistic comments, preoccupation with sex and genitalia, homophobia and gay bashing, and sexual callousness." (p. 4066). However, nowadays, there has been a new

trend in the video game industry to redefine stereotypical female characters (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016; Rajkowska, 2014).

Life is Strange is a part of this new trend. It depicts the first female lead character differently compared to the other standard video games (Elena, 2016). The game does not sexualize its female characters; the first lead female character is portrayed as a heroine instead. *Life is Strange* revolves around the story of two major female characters, Maxine Caulfield or Max, who is depicted as a shy and introvert girl, and Chloe Price or Chloe, who is depicted as a queer and free-spirited person. They should investigate the root causes of several issues which is related to bullying, sexual assault, and violence against her women counterparts in her town, the Arcadia Bay, by the help of Max's power to rewind time. Since the game employs choice-driven gameplay, the game claims that the choices have its consequences for the past, present, and future story. Even so, the game is predestined to end without the involvement of the player's choices that they have had chosen before. The game eventually serves two communal choices which are caused by Max's power that in consequence generates catastrophe in the town. Max should choose to sacrifice either the Arcadia Bay or Chloe. It is a tough choice for Max since Chloe is considered as her best friend, even assumed to be her girlfriend depending on how the players play the game. At the beginning of the story, Max and Chloe who have been apart for years coincidentally reunite because Max has saved Chloe from the gun discharged by Nathan Prescott, a male character portrayed as a bully and misogynist. Max's heroic action also activates her power to rewind time. After they have reunited and can work together to investigate the problems occurring in the town, there are many things that threaten Chloe's life which Max should overcome by rewinding the time. However, unknown to her, the more she operates her power to rewind time, the worse the storm is becoming. In the game, this catastrophe is intertwined with the chaos theory in which a small change can alter a substantial difference condition to the future universe (Boeing, 2016).

Although the story ends in tragedy, *Life is Strange* received an overwhelmingly positive reception from their players both female and male, as shown on Steam, video game distributor platform ("*Life is Strange*", 2015). The page also shows the popularity of the game as one of the best adventure episodic video games with is several awards, The Best Storyline by British Academy Games Award, The Games for Impact by The Game Award, and many more. If we look at the community discussion on the *Life is Strange* page on Steam, most of the players are interested both in the design and the narrative which bring new progress to the video game industry in depicting the female characters. In term of the design, the game is seen significantly subvert the typical "sexy" female physical representation by presenting diverse body types to portray the female characters (Pewter, 2015). The narrative is perceived to advocate new forms of affection intimacy (Seller, 2016), which depends on how we play the game. In other words, the players can choose whom Max is sexually attracted to, Chloe or Warren, Max's male counterparts.

Despite the positive female physical portrayal and the positive receptions, the narrative of *Life is Strange* remains a flaw. A previous research study has stated that although *Life is Strange* advocates several feminist values, the female character sidekick, Chloe, is depicted "as a sacrifice for the greater good and the

continuation of the community.” (Butt & Dunne, 2017, p. 1). Choe’s fate in the narrative unmask the sexist attitude where a woman’s free-spirited personality can be harmful, and eliminating this spirit is necessary for the greater good community. Besides, Max as the female heroine character is possibly trapped into a sacrificial heroine characterization. The trait is evident in a catastrophic output after the heroine utilizes her power (Crosby, 2004). Furthermore, related to the implied lesbian narrative in the game, Max and Chloe’s queer identities are suspected of being eroticized. Louderback and Whitley’s 1997 study (as cited in Puhl, 2010, p. 9) suggest that men perceive lesbianism as acceptable since men see it, two females being together, as erotic. Also, research which sees the prejudiced attitude against gay men and lesbians finds that men tend to eroticize lesbian and have a negative attitude against gay men more than women (Thomas & Yost, 2011). Louderback and Whitley (1997) explain that one of the reasons for such an attitude is related to the traditional gender belief system which expects men to hold stereotypical masculinity: being heterosexual and as a sexual subject. Therefore, lesbianism narrative does not only perpetuate women as a sexual object but also indicates homophobic to maintain heteronormativity as the default ideology in the video game industry.

Due to the presumed inconsistency of the game in portraying female characters, this paper will examine whether the video game tends to maintain traditional gender roles or to advocate equality. Also, although many scholars have discussed the controversy of the video game industry in gender studies framework, studies that examine how video games challenge female character stereotypes through the design and the narrative remain scarce. A previous work by Butt & Dunne (2017) only focuses its analyses about *Life is Strange* on the sidekick character, Chloe, by analyzing the trolley problem in the utilitarianism framework to reveal its game ideology about gender role in the video game industry. This paper discusses the ambivalence of the game in challenging gender issues. To examine the ambivalence, the textual analysis that is combined with the concept of hegemonic masculinity for the narrative and male gaze for visual design will be chosen as the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the game is considered as a text and textual analysis is used to examine the game’s ideology about gender. According to Carr (2009, p. 1), "textual analysis of games involves thinking about how meaning emerges during play." It can be said that the ideology produced by the game *Life is Strange* is materialized when the game is practiced, actualized, or played. The meaning-making using textual analysis in this paper is intended to examine the ideology in the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) argues that hegemonic masculinity is a practice “which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women,” (p. 77). Connell (1995) also argues that women are perceived as sexual objects for men and this perception validates men’s masculinity. Men compete for each other for this (Donaldson, 1993), which dangerously can create a harmful gender paradigm that can stimulate homophobia and perpetuate women as merely an object. Therefore, based on that constructed gender role conceptualization, male domination which overlaps with heteronormativity and homophobia is the fundamental issue of hegemonic

masculinity. This gender issue is manifested in the narrative of *Life is Strange*. Male domination in the game is reflected by the conception of a female sacrificial heroine and lesbianism eroticization which reflects the heteronormativity and homophobia.

Masculinity is also manifested into male gaze (Gonzalez, 2014). Male gaze is an act of seeing women as the object of sexual desire by men and not as the subject. Male gaze was firstly introduced by Laura Mulvey (1989) in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”. She argues that cinema offers many possible aesthetic pleasures such as scopophilia. According to Mulvey (1989), Scopophilia is the act of objecting and controlling people through gaze, which can give the subject a sexual pleasure. Like classic Hollywood cinema, the video games industry has its male gaze as a prominent issue (Hoffswell, 2011). It often sexualizes female characters through the certain camera angle which focuses only on the certain parts of the female characters’ body and “the male character is not looked at or objectified in the same manner” (Gonzales, 2014, p. 9).

Method

This paper would examine the design and the narrative of the game which would be combined with the concept male gaze for the visual design and hegemonic masculinity for the narrative. For the design, the paper would examine the portrayal of female physical character by analyzing several aspects of design graphic that include the design of clothes, body type, gesture and how the camera took a shot towards the female characters. The result of the analysis would be related to the game’s stance on the portrayal of female physical representation in the video game industry. In terms of narrative, the paper would examine the portrayal of female characters by examining Max’s power, Max’s attitude toward the power, Max and Chloe’s relationship, and the problematic ending of the story. The result of the examination would reveal the game’s attitude toward hegemonic masculinity.

Findings and Discussion

Part 1: Visual Design of Life is Strange

Since male players dominate the video game industry, many video games create a visual design which is presumed to be appealing for the heterosexual male players. It is intended so that they can be immersed in the game-play, which simultaneously generates profit for the video games (Hoffswell, 2011). Hoffswell (2011) also states that the video games industry designs its female characters in a sexualized way and thus demonstrates the male gaze. For example, female characters are designed with an unattainable body type mostly in the shape of a narrow waist, big breast, and buttock (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Cote, 2016). Different from that standard visual design, the visual design of *Life is Strange* fairly portrays its female characters which significantly minimizes male gaze, by the aspects of its logic plausibility. According to Wu (2012), logic plausibility in the video game “refers to whether the visual design of the object fits with its function described in the story” (p.106). Logic plausibility in *Life is Strange* visual design is evident in several characters designs, manifested in their clothes, body types, and gestures. The way the camera takes a shot, such as the camera angle,

and cut-scene, also significantly contribute to defining the logic plausibility of the game design.

First, clothes design in *Life is Strange* is driven by story and setting. Throughout the episodes of *Life is Strange*, the clothes of the characters are designed for its practical utilities. The female characters in *Life is Strange* are dressed in clothes that indicate their social status and the climate of the location instead of being dressed in inappropriate clothing for its storyline. Most of the characters wear clothes which indicate them as a student, teacher, mother, and security who live in a cold town below 10° Celsius. For instance, the main character Max, an 18-year-old photography student, wears jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt, and sometimes a jacket which show her identity as a student who lives in a cold-weather town. Similarly, the moment when Max and Chloe wear bikini is driven by setting and story requirements. Different from most the video games which reveal female's private body for the purpose of attracting the presumed straight male players—indicated by its unparalleled story and setting (Cote, 2016)—Chloe and Max are designed to wear a bikini since they are about to swim in a swimming pool in the Blackwell Academy Pool. Additionally, aside from the social status and climate of the location, the mechanic of the game also helps to minimize male gaze which comes from the clothes design. The stereotypically sexy clothes (cleavage-revealing clothes) which are worn by Dana, another female character in the game, does not become a channel to serve heterosexual male players' voyeuristic pleasure since there is no zoom in or zoom out mechanics which can explore her breast in favor of the male gaze.

Second, unlike most of the stereotypical female characters in the video game industry, which are portrayed with the emphasis on the buttock and breast, the female characters in *Life is Strange* are featured in a variety of realistic body shape as a result of its genre as a realism video game. One of the examples is presented by Max, who inevitably becomes the object of the players' stare since the game is told from her perspective. Max is shown to have a skinny body, with a small breast, and buttock that is covered with her sling bag. That portrayal also indicates that Max as the first female lead character departs from the "Lara-phenomenon" which is a term that is referenced to a strong heroine, yet sexualized protagonist female lead character named Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (Jansz and Martis, 2007). Just like Max, other characters who also represent diverse body types are Alyssa and Dana. Unlike most of the video games whose fat female characters are depicted as a joke or a psychopath such as in *Fat Princess* and *Dead Sliding*, Alyssa is neither presented as a joke nor evil just because of her full-figured body. On the contrary, she appears as a protagonist student who has a good relationship with Max and even helps Max to gather information for Max's investigation. She is humanized despite all the portrayals of fat female characters in the video game industry. On the other hand, Dana, who is portrayed as a conventionally attractive, gender-conforming and her attire leaves her cleavage shown, is not exaggeratedly designed as the stereotypically sexy girl in the video game industry. Her body type is considered as an attainable body compared to the standard default body type in the video game industry which is "portrayed with an emphasis on their buttocks and large breasts" (Cote, 2016).

Another aspect of *Life is Strange* which significantly redefines harmful stereotypical female character representation in the video game industry is

gestures. Gestures play a significant role to communicate the state of feeling and emotion of the gameplay. It also conveys the game intention: Does it try to engage the players in the atmosphere of the game? Or does it simply to entertain and attract certain players? The gestures in *Life is Strange* that are presented by the female characters demonstrate their emotional state rather than to attract male gaze. For example, in Episode 3: Chaos Theory, instead of presenting sexual gesture which is considered as a form of male gaze (Sarkeesan, 2016), Victoria, an antagonist, and flirtatious female character, seduced toward Mr. Jefferson, a male lecturer, verbally: "*Just imagine if you pick my photo though. We would have spent time together. That could be.. fun, don't you think?*" It indicates the game tries to depict female sexuality in another way which suggests that sexuality can be expressed in many forms; it does not have to sexualize the female character which creates male gaze. Sexualization for female characters in a video game according to Sarkeesan (2016) is an intention to design, frame, and dress the female characters to be sexually appealing for the presumed male characters, whereas sexuality exists within every individual and can be expressed in many kinds of form. Therefore, the game presents Victoria's sexual desire by the way that is humanizing rather than sexualizing.

An equally important aspect in the video game *Life is Strange* which does not only challenge harmful stereotypical female physical representation but also minimizes male gaze exist in the cut-scene and camera angle. In Episode 3: Chaos Theory, when Max and Chloe are at Blackwell Academy swimming pool wearing bikini, the players are positioned as passive spectators who do not have control over Max and Chloe since they both are presented in a cut-scene, a sequence of video game that is not interactive or does not require the players' intervention. Aside from that, the shot of the camera is taken by actively moving the shot from one another, between Chloe to Max. This moving camera represents the perspective which is taken only from both characters, Chloe and Max, not the players' perspective. Therefore, whenever Max or Chloe's upper body appears in the frame, it suggests that it is still based on Max or Chloe's perspective (see Figure 1). The only shot that is taken from the front, which can be interpreted as the player's perspective, does not reveal their body since they are still in the pool. (see Figure 2)



Figure 1. Max's upper body from Chloe's perspective as signified by Chloe's silhouette.



Figure 2. The front perspective showing Max and Chloe from the player's perspective.

In addition to cut-scene which limits the exploration of private female body, cut-scene in the scene *The End of The World* of Episode 4 also limits male gaze. The setting of the scene where is located at the Blackwell Academy Pool is exposed through a cut-scene. Since that cut-scene functions to picture the party situation, the girls who wear bikini inevitably are shown in the cut-scene. However, they do not become an object of male gaze since the camera only takes a glance shoot. Also, the game serves no interactive interaction with the girls who wear bikini, which prevents male gaze. According to Wu (2012), interaction is the core of the gameplay experience. It means that if the players immerse in the interaction which placing women as the object of male gaze, it can give them almost a real experience—since the video game is an interactive media—and create the possibility to reinforce negatively the gender dynamic about the relationship of women and her body, and how their body is perceived (Sarkeesan, 2016). In *Life is Strange*, if there is any interactive interaction, Max is designed to interact with the other characters who are not dressed in a bathing suit; thus, the players' gaze is restricted from exploring the female characters' body.

Furthermore, a strategy to prevent male gaze is through the placement of Max, who is not placed at the center of the frame. During the game-play, she is always put at the right or the left of the frame, which makes the players focus on the environment than on Max (see Figure 3). She is also positioned in an over-the-shoulder camera angle which makes her buttock stays out of the frame (see Fig. 3). Max's placement and the framing challenge the typical video game design which usually reflects female objectification.



Figure 3. Max is placed on the left of the screen with her bottom covered by her sling bag minimizing male gaze

Part 2: The narrative for Hegemonic Masculinity in Life is Strange

Despite the positive aspect of female physical representation, which is portrayed in the visual design, the narrative of the game still employs hegemonic masculinity through the conception of sacrificial heroine and lesbianism eroticization. *Life is Strange* is told from the story of the first female leader, Max, who is the heroine character in the game. Her heroic stance is related to her power to rewind time. However, as the story goes on, Max's heroism becomes problematic since it turns out to portray a sacrificial heroine. Crosby (2004) asserts that in popular culture, female heroines are set up for not capable of achieving male hero's ultimate goal: political authority utilized for the community empowerment; the heroines are trapped as the sacrifices instead. Crosby (2004, p. 153) states it links to patriarchy which criminalizes the heroine's power as 'too strong' or 'too tough' then punishes them by making them to suffer for having moral dilemmas, to become sacrifices, or be fated to have a controversial death ending such as suicides. According to that particular conceptualization, Max's heroine characterization in the game *Life is Strange* epitomizes sacrificial heroine whose traits are evident in the significance and the output of her power.

First, the significance of Max's power toward herself and the other characters is almost futile. Crosby argues that patriarchal community eventually installs "rubber band effect" (Crosby, 2004, p. 155). Rubber band effect is an attempt to maintain male domination in the community, which stimulates the "snapping points" for the tough female heroines (Crosby, 2004, p. 155). The snapping point pinpoints the significance of female heroine's heroism for the community. To put into perspective, it is like the narrative asking the heroines about the significance of their good deeds: For which community do you fight? If we analyze Episode 1 of *Life is Strange*, in the bathroom scene, we can see that Max saves Chloe from the shooting done by Nathan with the help of her power to rewind time. Taken from this narrative, we can assume that Max successfully becomes Chloe's savior, preventing Chloe from the gunshot discharge. However, Max's status as a heroine is merely a pseudo as it is evident in Episode 5. In this episode, when the so-called

communal choice is revealed and that Max chooses to sacrifice Chloe instead of the Arcadia Bay, the game gives a hint of the unaltered timeline. It is shown that if Max had not saved Chloe from the discharge, Nathan would have been arrested and interrogated by the police due to the shooting which causes Chloe dies. This interrogation generates ripple effects in which all the conflicts that are solved by Max throughout the game-play will not emerge since Nathan is the culprit of many troubles in the town. Therefore, this reverse reality as the effect of sacrificing Chloe does not only demonstrate Max's futile power but also tears down Max's heroic journey throughout the game-play. Ultimately, it may affect players' view about heroines in the video game industry which can reinforce to normalize the heroine's sacrifice.

Before heroines attain the ultimate "snapping point" as previously mentioned, they are narrated to pass through the three constitutional beliefs about herself and her relation to the community: guilt, denial, and final communal choice (Crosby, 2004). In *Life is Strange*, Max feels guilty by the fact that her power stimulates destruction to the town. Max asserts in Episode 5 *"This is my storm. I caused this.. I caused all of this. I changed fate and destiny so much that.. I actually did alter the course of everything, and all I really created was just death and destruction!"*. From Max's statement, she thinks her heroism is a sin, which is contradictory with most of the narrative of hero characters in popular culture, in which they feel guilty only when they are not heroic enough to save other people. Heroines' guilt about their power inevitably affects them to feel denial about their power; they wish they can extinguish their power and can be like a "normal girl" (Crosby, 2004). In *Life is Strange*, Max's wish to eliminate her power, which is stated by Chloe's statement *"you were given a power.. You didn't ask for it.."*, has a meaning that if Max were given choices either to have a power or not, she would choose not to have a power because it causes destruction and forces her to sacrifice Chloe as its antidote. Besides, it reinforces a harmful gender paradigm that female is not capable and never be ready to be a heroine so just "let the men do the heroics" (Crosby, 2004. p. 155).

The final stage before facing the "snapping point" is the final choice to prioritize either the patriarchal or the feminist society (Crosby, 2004). In Episode 5, after she has felt guilty and been denial about her power, she faces the communal choice either to sacrifice Chloe or the Arcadia Bay, which appears to be so problematic and difficult to choose. Chloe said, *"there's so many more people in Arcadia Bay who should live.. way more than me.."*. Max answers, *"Chloe, I can't make this choice"*. (p. 3). Chloe's statement demonstrates that the game maintains the patriarchal status quo. According to Butt & Dunne (2017), "when women are placed against the greater good, the bias toward utilitarianism in these games palpably underscores sexist attitude" (p. 7). Instead of critically evaluating Chloe's representation within the society, the game perpetuates patriarchal status quo by encouraging the players to choose a greater amount of life rather saving a woman by the doctrine of utilitarianism: to save Arcadia Bay means saving more people. Not only by presenting such moral imperative, the justification that provokes the players to sacrifice Chloe rather than the Arcadia Bay is also manifested in the storyline which forces Max to saves Chloe for several times, seven times to be precise, during the play-game. Chloe even states *"Maybe you've just been delaying my real destiny. Look at how many times I've*

died or actually died around you. Look at what's happened in Arcadia Bay ever since you first saved me," at the end of the episode before Max has to choose the communal choice. This storyline and Chloe's statement provoke the players to contemplate that Chloe might be meant to die which in turn makes the players submit to maintain the status quo.

The final choice also demonstrates that Max as a heroine has no agency and the importance of the patriarchal community blurs her heroic. Her choice toward the communal choice represents to which female should position herself within a community (Crosby, 2004). What makes it is even crueler, Max who at first is portrayed as a heroine by doing a good deed, saving Chloe from the discharged by Nathan, at the end of the story is portrayed as a "monster". She is forced to either let the community to be killed or to kill Chloe. Regardless of what Max chooses, she also must sacrifice her morality and humanity killed due to that communal choice. Ultimately, she is burdened by the sin of the Nathan, the misogynist man, since she must fix the catastrophe which begins from the moment when Nathan shoots Chloe.

Despite the insignificance of Max's power, the catastrophe as the output of Max's power comes as the other evidence of her sacrificial heroine characterization. It is narrated that Max's power to rewind time, causes to alter the timeline. The impact of the altered-timeline ultimately creates a catastrophe. The natural disaster in the game, the tremendous deadly storm, symbolizes what Crosby (2004) called as the dystopian. Crosby (2004) states that the narrative which presents a heroine must be burdened by the catastrophe that she generates to maintain the patriarchal community. In other words, if a narrative presents a heroine, there is always a destructive consequence followed for this heroine. In *Life is Strange*, the news about the catastrophe in the town is published by The Independent, a newspaper in the Arcadia Bay which indicates not only about Max's insignificant power but also her ironic heroine characterization. All the news reports that are published by The Independent associate with Max's decision (see Figure 4). One of the edition reports about two headlines in which the big headline reports about the catastrophe signal, and the small headline reports about Kate's suicidal attempt. The former states "*Flash Snow and Freak Eclipse: 'Apocalypse Soon'?*". This headline is not changeable although the players choose the two choices in a different time. On the contrary, the small headline is changeable depends on Max's choice toward Kate's suicidal attempt: "*Super Heroine Saves Suicidal Blackwell Academy School*" or "*Student Leaps to Public Death at Blackwell Academy*". If we look at the context of the narrative, both of the headlines lead to a meaning that whatever Max chooses, as long as she possesses power, it still eventually leads to one ending in which "threatens the world with apocalyptic destruction" (Crosby, 2004, p. 165). She is indeed independent, is given a right to choose, yet, ironically, she brings a catastrophe.

Even with sacrificial female heroine characterization for its first lead female character, Max, hegemonic masculinity in *Life is Strange* is reflected by the eroticized portrayal of the lesbian couple between Max and Chloe, which eventually conforms to heteronormativity. The erotic value is referenced to the notion that two women engage each other, and the perception that views women as a sexual object (Connell, 1995; Yost & Thomas, 2012). "In this case, it is not lesbianism as homosexuality that is eroticized, but rather, lesbianism as sexual

interaction between two feminine, gender-conforming women” (Puhl, 2010, p. 9). In *Life is Strange*, Max and Chloe are considered as the sexual objects, and their lesbian identity is eroticized. Its traits are evident by the inherent heteronormativity narrative that is supported by the players’ responses.



Figure 4. There is no change in the top headline, while the minor headline is changeable which depends on Max’s choices during the game-play

The eroticization of lesbianism in *Life is Strange* is supported by the players' responses toward three choices which the game gives. It should be noted that all the choices represent sexual orientation and the responses are revealed through the diary mechanics of the video games. In Episode 3: Chaos Theory, Max should choose the choice between kissing or not kissing Chloe, when both of them are playing a double dare game. It is found out that the responses of the players who choose to kiss Chloe reaches up to more than 75%. From this data, we might think that the game gives space for bisexual and lesbians community in a video game, a form of progression in video game industry since in fact, video games are dominated by heterosexual normativity. However, in Episode 5: Polarized, when Max faces to choose either to hug, kiss, or to give other affection to Warren, it is revealed that more than 71% of the players choose to kiss Warren. It leads to confusion as there is an inconsistency in which the players previously choose to kiss Chloe which signifies there is a romantic relationship between Max and Chloe. It also leads to another confusion about the progress of the game which is first assumed to give a space for the LGBT community. These confusions, however, are associated with lesbianism eroticization, and it is strengthened by the other evidence that is more than 55% of the players choose to sacrifice Chloe at the end of the story.

The players' responses toward the three choices above strongly prove the eroticization of lesbianism in *Life is Strange*. According to Donaldson (1993), lesbian and bisexual eroticization conform one of the major elements in hegemonic masculinity which are female as a sexual object and male as the sexual subject (1993). Male perceives lesbianism and bisexual as the so-called double-sexy or the notion of two females perform sexual performance together (Puhl, 2010; Yost & Thomas, 2001). In other words, the relationship of lesbianism or

bisexuality is perceived rather as a sexual performance done by female—as an object of sexual desire—rather than as a romantic relationship. Lesbianism eroticization, which is motivated by merely sexual performance in *Life is Strange* is demonstrated in several narratives. First, the lesbianism eroticization is revealed in a cut-scene which appears in Episode 5. The cut-scene narrates Max and Chloe are kissing right after Max chooses to sacrifice Chloe instead of the Arcadia Bay. It produces two different meaning. First, in a denotative meaning, it is interpreted as a farewell kiss for Chloe since she is sacrificed for the sake of the community. Nonetheless, in a connotative meaning, it is interpreted as a "reward" for the players for having sacrificed Chloe.

According to Sarkeesan (2015), women come as a reward when the game uses a women's affection, her body, or her sexuality as a return of the formalized reward mechanism. In other words, a reward in the choice-driven video game is coded into an algorithm or a system which is assumed as the right thing to choose. Therefore, whenever the presumed heterosexual players choose the presumed right choice that is served by the game; they submit into the ideology of the game which is a sexist attitude. In *Life is Strange*, Max and Chloe's kissing scene demonstrates that the game has actively encouraged the presumed straight male players to think of women as objects and prizes. It is also strengthened by the result of two studies that describes lesbianism as appealing and arousing (Puhl, 2010; Yost & Thomas, 2010). This statement also links to Philips et al.'s study (2015) which describes that players are more satisfied to be given aesthetic and sensual pleasure as a reward in video games. The sensual pleasure of this reward is evident by the shot of the camera. Max and Chloe's kissing scene is taken closely as a close-up tongue-twinning kiss and is positioned in the center of the screen which represents the presumed straight male players' voyeuristic about lesbian sexuality (see Figure 5). It relates to male gaze which Mulvey (1989) states that one of the aesthetic pleasure of male gaze is scopophilia, which is defined as a sexual pleasure that is derived from the eroticism or fetishism. Therefore, the statistic of the players' responses shows their homophobia and sexism attitude by choosing to diminish Chloe, while previously they choose to create a romantic relationship between Max and Chloe which eventually reveal lesbianism eroticization.

Second, the lesbianism eroticization which overlaps with the notion of women as a reward is also evident by the camera angle when Max and Chloe are kissing (see Figure 5). During this kissing scene, the shot is presented ironically. The players can see the massive and devastating storm behind Max and Chloe (see Figure 6). It strongly symbolizes an irony in which while the characters might think they love each other, in fact, their relationship ends with destruction which is driven by choice. It also represents the patriarchal stance that anything other than heterosexual orientation, is considered as the "other" and should be diminished. Through this narrative, albeit are not physically sexualized, Max and Chloe are perceived as sexual objects rather than as a couple who love each other. In other words, they both are sexualized rather than humanized.

Another narrative which demonstrates lesbian eroticization appears in the prequel *Life is Strange* named *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*. In the ending of the episode, there is a foreshadowing in which Rachel, as a bisexual girl and has who romantic-relationship with Chloe, is killed because she was drugged by the

heterosexual lecturer, Mr. Jefferson, for the sake of his filthy photography object. This scene indicates that all the bisexual and lesbian characters and love-relationship narratives in *Life is Strange*, are torn down by a death ending except Max, who albeit still alive, is still burdened by the guilt of "killing" Chloe. According to Wallen (2005, p. 101), "death is the ultimate result of homoerotic attraction." The death; thus, suggests that it is a form of the proper punishment for homosexuality which is considered as is immoral, off from the stable conforming sexual orientation in the patriarchal community—heterosexuality.



Figure 5. Max and Chloe's kissing scene after Max chooses to sacrifice Chloe in a close-up camera shot represents the voyeuristic of the presumed heterosexual male players



Figure 6. Max and Chloe's kissing scene with a devastating view symbolizes an irony of their kissing scene

Conclusion

The video game *Life is Strange* is still found to submit into patriarchal ideology and is against feminist values. Max as a heroine and bisexual girl merely acts as a trope and an inducement for the market expansion in the video game industry, which is the LGBT community, while beneath it all, the game still tries to satiate the presumed heterosexual male players. The game also forces their

players into submitting to hegemonic masculinity in a very paradoxical way, in which choices are given but not to the point of achieving liberty. All choices are a path to one destiny—sacrificial heroine—, which only devalues the roles of women within the community. Hopefully, the results of this study can contribute to examine the trend of video game industry, mainly how it portrays gender representation.

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