

QUEER LIFE IS TRAGIC

Lauren Berlant’s “Cruel Optimism” and Lee Edelman’s Negative Queerness in *Life is Strange*

By Tara Fredenburg

ABSTRACT. *Life is Strange* (2015), by Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, has sparked outrage for “queerbaiting” lesbian and bisexual women in the gaming community, but criticisms pointed toward the game have failed to address its most pernicious argument. By placing the controversy within the historical context of the 1930s Hays Production Code, examining one of the game’s central lessons in conversation with philosopher Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” and critical theorist Lee Edelman’s anti-reproductive definition of queerness, I contend that *Life is Strange* (2015) reveals the inability of adherents to heteropatriarchal ideals to conceive a world beyond the current, oppressive system by which we live.

The 2015 video game *Life is Strange* by Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch has sparked outrage for “queerbaiting” lesbian and bisexual members of the gaming community, but criticisms pointed toward the game have not yet gone far enough to dissect why its conclusion agitates queer players and what its agenda fails to do. By placing the phenomenon of contemporary queerbaiting within the historical context of the 1930s Hays Production Code, examining one of the game’s central moral takeaways in conversation with philosopher Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism,” and then complicating that reading with critical theorist Lee Edelman’s anti-reproductive definition of queerness, I contend that *Life is Strange* (2015) reveals the inability and reluctance of uncritical adherents to heteropatriarchal ideals to conceive of a world not steeped in such ideology.

The game's failure to see beyond the current system by which we live epitomizes the heterosexist mindset—a mindset we must surpass.

In the midst of a 2015–2016 internet uproar responding to the deaths of an absurd amount of lesbian and bisexual characters in popular media, particularly on television (Framke, 2016), *Life is Strange* (2015) became notorious among the online lesbian gaming community for “queerbaiting”—relying on the promise of LGBT+ representation to draw in a large audience and then either leaving that promise unfulfilled or killing off the queer characters. The main accusation was that *Life is Strange* (2015) incorporated into its plot the “Bury Your Gays” trope, which is primarily used to communicate the explicitly homophobic attitude that gay, bisexual, and transgender people should suffer for their sins, or the less obviously harmful attitude that uses the tragic deaths of queer characters as lessons to teach heterosexual and cisgender people tolerance and compassion for others (“Bury Your Gays,” n.d.). This trope has been around for decades as a vestige of the 1930s Hays Production Code, which banned homosexual expression in film. The Code states, “No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin” (Leff, 1990, p. 284). When queer people appear in media, they must either be serial killers, like Leopold and Loeb in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*, or they must die as punishment for their identities. Even after the code was abolished, this attitude toward queer characters continued because detrimental tropes like the pedophilic gay man and the predatory lesbian were already irrevocably cemented in the public consciousness.

Life is Strange (2015) follows the story of Max, a high school student, when she inexplicably gains time-traveling abilities and uses them to solve the mystery of a young woman’s disappearance with her former best friend,

Chloe. The plot's dominant focus is the relationship between Max and Chloe, especially as Max's powers and Chloe's impulsive nature throw them into increasingly dangerous scenarios. Because the game's format is a narrative with differing routes determined by choices that the player makes, Max and Chloe's relationship can appear either purely platonic or unambiguously homoerotic based on the sequence of actions the player chooses. This ability to decide may or may not constitute queerbaiting, as it allows straight players to completely ignore the protagonist's potential bisexuality. The line here is blurred. Chloe, however, is all but stated to be a lesbian several times throughout the game, and her queer-codedness makes it impossible to ignore that her ultimate fate in the game is connected to mainstream media's habit of killing off queer women.

Max's first experience with time travel comes about when Chloe is shot in the bathroom at the local high school. Max, an aspiring photographer, is in the middle of taking a photo of a butterfly (whose wings are the same shade of blue as Chloe's hair) when the dispute between Chloe and the shooter begins. It seems Max's photograph is connected to her new sci-fi ability, because she winds back time in order to rescue Chloe and then is able to return to that same moment later in the game by using the photograph she took. Max uses time-travel to reverse both her small mistakes and life-or-death situations, including a classmate's suicide attempt and multiple other fatal run-ins that nearly kill Chloe. The game's tagline is "This action will have consequences," alerting players to use this ability wisely. As Max continues to travel through time, the threads of universal law begin to fray, eventually culminating in a raging hurricane that threatens to eradicate Max's town, Arcadia Bay. In the end, none of the actions leading up to the conclusion matter because the player is left with a binary choice: save Chloe and let the hurricane destroy the town, or save Arcadia Bay and leave Chloe to die, with Max

becoming only a useless bystander at the scene of her murder.

Much of the outrage against *Life is Strange* (2015) began because the game's insidious argument is that lesbianism is incapable of producing happiness or completeness for young women. The queer desire between Max and Chloe in the context of the Hays Production Code and in the context of the tag "This action will have consequences" operates in line with Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism." Berlant (2011) describes, "Where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place" (p. 21). Chloe is an irrational, angry, and lonely teenager who is defined by her experiences of abandonment—first by the death of her father, then by Max when she leaves town, and finally by the disappearance of her friend Rachel Amber. She is terrified of being abandoned, so when Max reappears, Chloe latches onto her without realizing that their rapidly developing relationship is exactly what must lead to her imminent doom in the scenario that a player decides to sacrifice Chloe in favor of Arcadia Bay. Similarly, regardless of which option the player chooses during the final decision, all of Max's efforts become futile. She has saved both Chloe and others in the town several times already, and it is integral to Max's character that she remains an "everyday hero"—the title of a photo contest to which she submits a piece during the game. If in the final decision the player makes the choice to sacrifice Chloe for the city, a situation that is caused by Max's time-traveling powers, then her original desire to rescue Chloe is ruined. Still, if the player chooses to sacrifice Arcadia Bay for Chloe, then Max is endangering others she saved in the recent past, *also* defeating the purpose of her superpower. In short, the women's connection to each other is what

obstructs their flourishing. Queer desire is portrayed as destructive to the participating subjects.

But such a reading of *Life is Strange* (2015) would be incomplete. This application of cruel optimism works as a personal critique that emphasizes Max and Chloe's character flaws: they both need to learn to accept what they cannot control—particularly to accept what is fated. The impulse to deny the inevitable is crazymaking. This lesson of compliance may not seem dangerous on the surface, but it brings to mind one question: How should queer people address oppression? Surely not through acceptance. Maybe Max's experience with cruel optimism is not exclusive to her desire for Chloe but also applies to her potential to adhere to heterosexist reproductive futurity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, critical theorist Lee Edelman (2004) asserts that queerness is the antithesis of reproductive futurity, which is the habitual reiteration of oppressive practices that hold up hegemonic structures throughout time. Reproductive futurity imposes "an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (Edelman, 2004, p. 2). Because so many of our society's institutions—especially the financial—rely on and benefit from the heterosexual, nuclear family configuration, the idea of queerness is systematically driven into invisibility. Even attempts at justice that aim to assimilate LGBT-identified people into cisgender and heterosexual society succeed only in recreating the nuclear family with slight changes. Edelman says this assimilatory practice does nothing to rectify the unjust expectations of heteropatriarchal society. Max is surrounded by pressure to comply with gendered expectations, which is exaggerated by Max's nightmare in episode five, "Polarized." In the dream, her teacher mentions Max was once "pure and innocent," implying this

is no longer true, likely as a result of her same-sex attraction. Her principal calls her a bad influence. Warren, a male friend who is the other romantic option aside from Chloe, is also present in the nightmare, guilt-tripping her for not loving him. This reveals the subconscious psychological impact of misogyny and heteronormativity on Max's perception of herself and on the world with which she must interact. She is aware that she must uphold certain female expectations, like purity and emotional availability, in order to achieve the goals she had before gaining the ability to time travel. This is where cruel optimism strikes.

In "Cruel Optimism," Berlant analyzes three literary pieces in terms of her theory. The first is an untitled John Ashbery poem about a secret, ephemeral queer moment in a suburban, religious neighborhood. She says the following:

Cruel optimism about imminence[...]grows from a perception about the reasons people[...]do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to. Or perhaps they move to normative form to get numb with the consensual promise and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement. (Berlant, 2011, p. 23)

The cruel optimism in this case is about suffering discontent or even damage in order to conform to the hegemonic system in which one is born. There are psychologically and physically enforced incentives to comply with what is "normal." It is an achievement to comply so effectively that nobody notices that one is actively self-assimilating. Berlant is fascinated by Ashbery's poem because it is the documentation of an "impasse" within the systematic regime of cruel optimism—of reproductive futurity. She writes, "Queerness substitutes itself for religious affect's space of reverence: in the end, life is at the best imaginable of impasses[...]where the people are now lost but alive and unvanquished in their displacement" (Berlant, 2011, p. 25). The same can and

cannot be said about Max and Chloe. The two are not damaging themselves or corrupting each other through the act of queer desire but are actually grasping for control under an oppressive heterosexist regime with little success. Berlant (2011) says that Geoff Ryman’s historical novel, *Was*, contains several stories that are all about “the cruelty of optimism for people without control over the material conditions of their lives and whose relation to fantasy is all that protects them from being destroyed by other people and the nation” (p. 33). Max has no control over what must happen, but she attempts to subvert the impending devastation by trying to gain the upper hand on fate. Her fantasy is that her time-traveling ability came about for the purpose of saving Chloe as proof that Chloe deserves to be saved. The “other people and the nation” are the systemic force—futures. In *Life is Strange* (2015), cruel optimism on a macro rather than interpersonal level is the supernatural realm of endlessly forward-marching temporality which comes to represent Edelman’s systemic reproductive futures. Max’s resistance against this forward-marching temporality is her ability to travel time. She reaches back to the past in an attempt to alter the present, opening up a kind of queer impasse in the now, and she procrastinates the reproductive future she expects to soon inhabit in favor of the love and commitment that she has for Chloe. But the universe gave and the universe has taken away. Her time-travel ability turns out to be catastrophic. The impasse must fail.

The two choices at the game’s conclusion and the consequences that follow each exemplify the systemic and interpersonal readings of cruel optimism; however, the options are not portrayed as equally valid responses for the player to make: killing Chloe makes Max a Pyrrhic victor, but the ending implies that she will ultimately move on into the heterosexist future with little trouble. On the other hand, the destruction of Arcadia Bay serves as a physicalized dramatization of tearing down that future as

Max and Chloe drive through the hurricane-ravaged landscape into seemingly no place.

One common criticism of Edelman's work is that his embrace of queerness as the space of radical negativity against current oppressive structures leaves only that negative space to inhabit; this space is defined by nothing *but* that opposition because queerness "dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests" (Edelman, 2004, p. 6). This is the space the end of the game, should Max save Chloe, seems to suggest. Arcadia Bay—"Arcadia" connoted as an ideal utopia—has been torn apart by supernatural forces. Ironically, the "natural" in supernatural matters here because these forces take the form of a giant hurricane, and this symbol may be associated with common hegemonic propaganda that homosexuality is unnatural or inherently immoral. Utopia has been destroyed, and Chloe herself does not think that sacrificing the town is the right decision. She wants Max to save Arcadia Bay, to save her mother, and she says that she does not deserve to live while the others perish. This route is also hardly a victory, but it has an even more pessimistic tone than the aforementioned because we know Chloe will live with this residual guilt for the rest of her life.

This, not necessarily just the death of Chloe, is where *Life is Strange* (2015) missteps. The negative space of queerness represents an opportunity to build against heterosexist reproductive futurity. We could even humor ourselves with an ecofeminist reading of the final scene among the rubble, where three deer and a small flock of birds are still alive and well despite the storm—where the destruction of an industrialized town means liberation for animals from artificial, polluted human society. The point is that we need to learn to envision the world past what the game gives us. While the common accusation against *Life is Strange* (2015) is that it queerbaits sapphic audiences or that it perpetuates the homophobic portrayal of queer desire as inherently dangerous, that criticism may be more

constructively shifted to the game's reluctance to imagine what the world after the storm would really look like. In terms of the apocalyptic narrative itself, Max and Chloe's world is ruined by their sacrifice, but once we recognize that the true cruel optimism is one's desire to adhere to the reproduction of oppression, we can use the queer negative space left behind to construct an optimism that is not so cruel—a space built on philosophies that do not rely on capitalistic, heterosexist, productivist goals to give value to human life.

Tara Fredenburg is a sophomore creative writing major at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN. They are a recipient of the Bonner service award, a member of the Iota Iota Iota honor society, and a Bridge Builders CHANGE college advisor for high schoolers organizing for LGBT+ social justice issues. They have been published in the Rhodes College *Sou'wester*, *HerCampus*, and *The Bridge*, a homeless advocacy street paper. An earlier version of Tara's paper, "Queer Life is Tragic: Lauren Berlant's theory of 'cruel optimism' within *Life Is Strange*," was written under the guidance of Professor Joy Fairfield for the annual Rhodes College Gender and Sexuality Studies Symposium.

References

- Barbet, R., & Koch, M. (2015). *Life Is Strange* [Episodic graphic adventure video game].
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bury Your Gays / Quotes. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Quotes/BuryYourGays>.
- Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Framke, C., Zarracina, J., & Frostenson, S. (2016). All the TV character deaths of 2015-'16, in one chart. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/a/tv-deaths-lgbt-diversity>.
- Leff, L. J., & Simmons, J. (1990). *The dame in the kimono: Hollywood, censorship, and the production code from the 1920s to the 1960s*. New York, NY: Grove Wiedenfeld.