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Content Warning:

This paper focuses on achieving catharsis for trauma. As a result, the following topics will be discussed in-depth throughout the different sections, some through a first-person lens. They are listed in the order they appear.

General violence, mass shootings (specifics include Columbine and Parkland High School), cancer, the death of a child, the deaths of family members, anxiety, depression, suicide, bullying, drugging.

Specified content warnings will be provided underneath the headings of each section so that those who may be triggered by certain topics can skip that specific one.

This paper will also contain spoilers for *That Dragon, Cancer*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and *Life is Strange*.

Abstract:

Video games have a variety of uses, including creating a positive catharsis following a traumatic event in a person's life. This catharsis can lead to positive long-term effects, and players often are motivated to find healthy coping mechanisms, seek professional help, and heal following their cathartic experience. I will begin by defining catharsis and explaining the Catharsis Hypothesis, then respond to the common belief that video games lead to a violent catharsis. For this project, I focused on three games: *That Dragon Cancer* (2016), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), and *Life is Strange* (2015). I will be discussing both my own cathartic experiences with these three games as well as the experiences of other players. Their stories came from a variety of sources, including YouTube interviews, gaming journals, and Reddit threads. I will end by discussing the proposals from therapists and psychologists that support the use of video games to help victims of trauma.

Introduction

Although many players still turn to video games as a means of entertainment, their value and usefulness is expanding beyond the realm of downtime. In the last ten years, they have found their place in police training sessions, classroom education, and even therapy. While anyone can have a therapeutic experience through video games, victims of trauma can also experience an intense catharsis. Players do not need to be in a therapist's office to reap the therapeutic benefits of video games. Many people can experience them from the comfort of their own home through narrative-based games. These games emotionally invest players through not just their plot, but also with their striking visuals and well-written characters that players can connect with. Once that emotional connection has been established, players who have experienced trauma can experience a positive and healthy cathartic release. Often, this catharsis will lead players past the point of holding in their emotions, and as a result, they feel more open to developing coping mechanisms that will help them deal with their trauma in the outside world. In this way, video games become a tool for positive catharsis, rather than the negative release they have become nearly synonymous with. Through their stories, abstract visual styles, and relatable characters, those who have experienced trauma can see their own experiences in a less confrontational way, and as a result players are more likely to experience a positive catharsis that ultimately leads down a path to healing.

Catharsis Defined

Before diving into the substance of this project, it is first important to establish the type of catharsis I will be focusing on. There are many different definitions of the term, some of which are completely unrelated to any artistic medium. Possibly the most common definition, catharsis can be “the process of releasing strong emotions through a particular activity or experience, such as writing or theatre, in a way that helps [people] to understand those emotions,” (Cambridge). Although this definition cites writing or theatre specifically, I am arguing that it can also be applied to video games. I will also occasionally refer to what is known as the Catharsis Hypothesis. When broken down, the Catharsis Hypothesis is essentially the idea that “pent-up emotions, anger, and frustrations can be purged by expressing one's feelings,” (Oxford). It is also important to acknowledge that the Catharsis Hypothesis can focus on expressing emotions through anger, aggression, and violence. However, through the examples from myself and other players, I will argue that the Catharsis Hypothesis can be just as effective when creating a positive outcome and emotional relief, rather than anger and violent expressions.

What Has Always Been: The Misconception of Video Games and Violence Content Warning: General Violence, Mass Shootings (Columbine and Parkland)

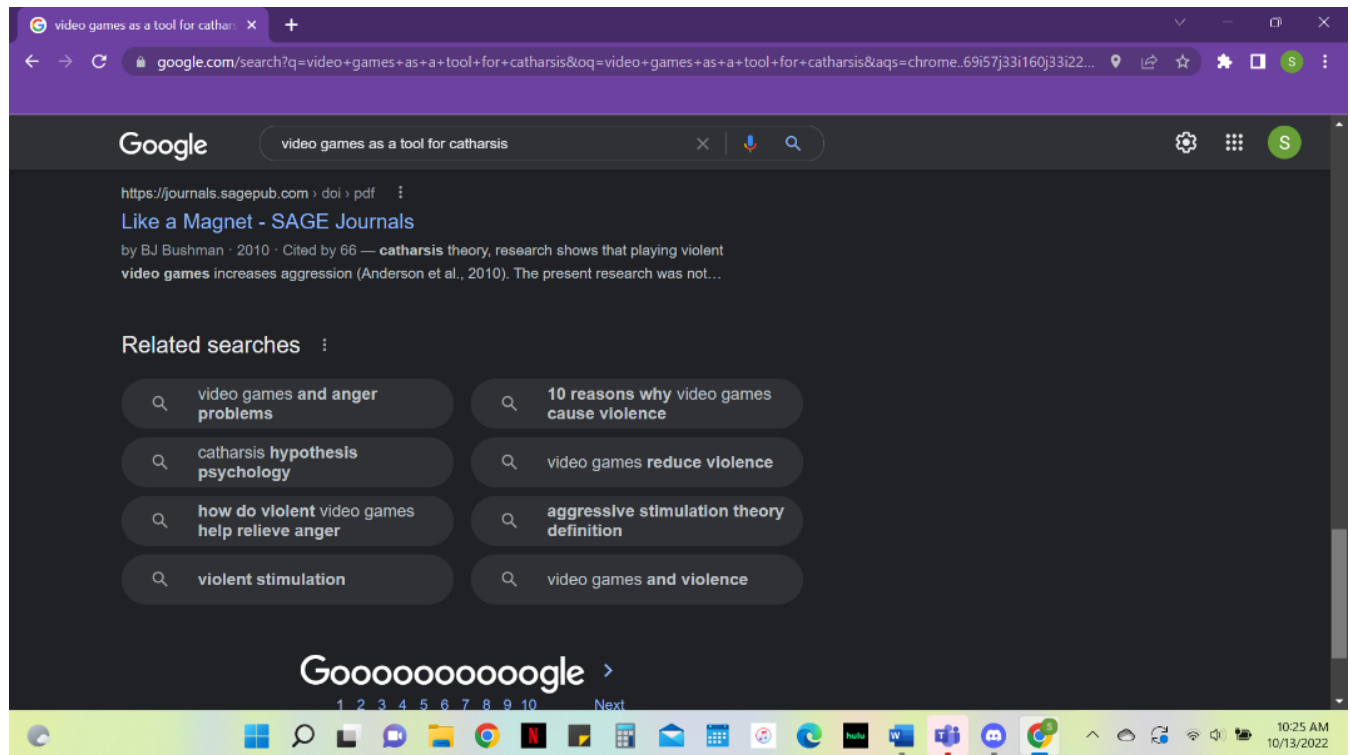


Image 1: Screenshot of results and related searches when searching “video games as a tool for catharsis”

When discussing video games in relation to catharsis, most people believe that violent video games lead to a violent catharsis that causes them to commit violence outside of the game world. This narrative is so prevalent that, when first searching the terms “video games as a tool for catharsis”, all I was met with were articles about how violent video games led to a violent catharsis in a player’s life. Some of these included a study that claimed violent video games drew in people with anger issues, an article that claimed violence in video games provided stimulation for a violent catharsis, and another study that claimed violence in video games could predict the sort of violence a person would commit in real life. However, the studies that led to this conclusion are often biased and conducted by those set out to prove that video games can only be harmful. Once bias was considered as a factor in the outcomes of prominent studies, research done by psychologists and neurologists that there was “no cumulative harm, no long-term effect

and barely even any short-term effect on aggression in the real world,” (Lehmkuhl). While I am not focusing on any violent games for my main points, they are the prevalent subgenre when attempting to investigate catharsis achieved through video games, so it is important to address and disprove this status quo before discussing any other games.

Cathartic releases do not have to be accomplished through aggression or violent means, even if the associated emotions are negative. While one might assume the term “negative emotions” means anger and aggression, other negative emotions include fear, sadness, depression, guilt, and helplessness, all of which can stem from a traumatic event (Johns Hopkins). Especially in the case of trauma, these emotions can be “bottled up and keep existing without being realized”, causing victims to hold onto them for a long time (Drach). As a result, achieving a catharsis can be important, as the “suffering from restraining emotions stops and a person feels much better,” (Drach). These expressions do not have to be inherently violent, and instead can come in the form of “shouting” or “[bursting] into tears,” Drach. According to players themselves, the latter is often experienced at the end of a cathartic experience related to a narrative-based video game. Despite this, many still believe video games can only lead to a violent and harmful catharsis.

Video games and the catharsis they create have been blamed for real life tragedies. The most common tragedy where video games are blamed is mass shootings. Too often, it seems professionals and members of congress blame a cathartic release from video games, rather than any underlying issues the person or people may have had. The most prominent example stems from the Columbine shooting in 1999, where the shooter game *Doom* was blamed for making the two teenaged perpetrators carry out acts of violence (Kauffman). That example is three decades old, but this has happened as recently as 2018. Following the Parkland High School shooting,

Former President Trump attempted to blame violent video games as a motive for the shooter, claiming that the violence in the games he played made the shooter feel angry, and as a result created a supposed need for a catharsis (Kauffman). However, an important factor many fail to consider when claiming video games lead to a violent catharsis is any pre-existing mental health conditions, leading to another flaw and potential bias that skews results. The reality is “there are no findings [...] that demonstrate a direct connection between people playing violent video games and mass shootings” (Kauffman), and in the case of Parkland specifically, “the gunman had a history of mental health problems,” (Mazzei). A study performed by Regebogen and peers debunked the claim that video games had any part to play in the loss of a sense of reality. When brain activity of gamers versus non-gamers was studied via MRIs, Regebogen’s team found “the ability to differentiate automatically between real and virtual violence [had] not been diminished by a long-term history of violent video game play, nor [had] gamers' neural responses to real violence, in particular, been subject to desensitization processes,” (Hall). Therefore, it appears that for these perpetrators, there was some loss of a sense of reality and their perception of the world around them and themselves was warped in one way or another. Video games themselves do not have any distinguishable links to acts of violence, and instead there are often pre-existing circumstances and conditions that are ignored and lead to a bias.

Other Side of the Controller: Video Games and Violence

While I am attempting to argue that there is no real link between video games and real-world violence, it is important to acknowledge the arguments of those who still believe the opposite of my own perspective.

There are many who still believe that violent video games or video games in general lead to real-world violence. I will be focusing on one of those people, a psychology PhD graduate named Kirnajit Pawar, and his thesis on this topic. Pawar argues the biggest flaw with attempting to prove that video games do not cause violence is that the evidence is based around inherently flawed or biased studies that were, in one way or another, performed improperly, and as a result the conclusions were likely skewed. I used this point to argue that the evidence is flawed and ambiguous, however it can be used for the opposite argument as well. One prominent example Pawar cites was a study completed in 2008 by Graybill, Kirsch and Esselmen on children in grades two, four, and six (5). However, the study was only performed for a total of eight minutes in one play session, and as a result, “only demonstrated short term effects” and could not present “evidence of any long-term benefits,” (6). At the end of the study, many of the children that played the violent game said that they felt better or were experiencing a positive catharsis, but Pawar believes that because only the short-term emotions were studied, there was no way to know if the children were led to violence because of violent games later. While Pawar’s conclusion could certainly be true, it is also entirely possible that the long-term effects were just as positive as the short-term ones. There is no real way to know for certain because the study was performed in such a short amount of time. However, it is important to acknowledge that there could be some substance to Pawar and others’ arguments that video games may cause some to be violent, despite my argument that they do not.

(That Dragon, Cancer)

Content Warning: Cancer, Death of a child, Death of a family member

Overview

Released in 2016, *That Dragon, Cancer* tells the real story of a child named Joel, who was diagnosed with and eventually passed away from cancer. It was developed and released under the name “Numinous Games”, and at the helm of that creative team was Joel’s father, Ryan Green. According to Green, the game started as a look into the ups and downs of living with a child with cancer, but plans drastically changed when, halfway through development, Joel passed away. Suddenly, the game’s development went from a celebration of a child living with cancer to a means of cathartic release for Ryan Green, his wife, and the entire development team.

Cathartic Development

One of the most striking features of *That Dragon, Cancer* is its art style. It’s simple, but that does not detract from how impactful the game is. Style was at the forefront of Green’s mind when creating the game, which did not start as a game at all. In an interview, Green revealed that he and his wife considered different mediums to demonstrate to outsiders what Joel’s experience was like. One of the very first ideas Green had was “an interactive art installation,” (Sessler 2:18-2:31). It is that idea that birthed *That Dragon, Cancer*. It feels more like an exhibit than a game, as the player cannot control what ultimately happens and instead interacts with objects in the environment to help bring Joel’s story to life. However, the format of an artistic game allows audiences to have a better understanding of the exact emotions the Green family went through and can also identify their own in the process. Two standout examples are the chapters “Adrift” and “Drowning”. In both, Amy and Ryan Green’s in-game representations attempt to grapple with the realization that their son will likely never recover from cancer. “Adrift” focuses on Amy. She sits in a boat, floating over the water as she relies on her faith in God to help Joel and the rest of the family through the fight ahead. Meanwhile, “Drowning” shows Ryan suspended

below the depths, surrounded by thoughts of the worst-case scenario. While both scenarios seem like they vastly differ from each other, they share an emotion: fear. Both Amy and Ryan are overwhelmed by fear in that moment, but the way they choose to express it is represented by their chapter. And while the experiences represented in the game focus specifically on Ryan and Amy, they have been shared by players as well. When at PAX [Penny Arcade Expo] showing off a demo of *That Dragon, Cancer*, Green received overwhelmingly positive feedback from those who played the game. Many offered him and his wife support while a few felt safe enough to briefly share their own experiences watching a family member battle cancer (*Thank You* 43:37-48:59). Even a short demo of the game proved to be cathartic for players.

For the Green family, developing the game was cathartic. Ryan Green expressed at several points during and after the game's development that its creation allowed the family to release and cope with the emotions they were going through as their son battled cancer and following his death. Much of this is demonstrated in the documentary made about the game's development process, *Thank You for Playing* (2015). Much of the documentary focuses on how the game's development proved to be cathartic for everyone in the family. Three scenes stand out when attempting to depict how the process was cathartic for the family. In one, Ryan Green is recording voice over with his two oldest sons as he tells the story of the dragon that Joel is battling: cancer. At the beginning of the story, one of the sons has to say that Joel is just a baby and that babies cannot beat dragons. The son says the line, then shrinks back and becomes quiet, visibly upset by that thought. While the children initially have distressed reactions, they are able to talk through how they feel about Joel's cancer with their dad, and it's made clear through their language that this is the first time these kids have been able to really release what they have been feeling (*Thank You* 20:26-22:43). Ryan Green experiences his own catharsis when recording a

monologue directed at cancer. He can barely get through it without crying, but recording those lines allows him to release his pent-up emotions toward the scenario Joel had been dealt and the disease that was slowly overtaking the child (*Thank You* 36:55-39:22). While Joel fought cancer, his family was able to deal with the way it affected them through the development of their game.

Suddenly, halfway through the game's development, the tables turned, and Joel passed away. Before that, the game was intended to have a completely different ending, but since the Green family wanted to represent their real experience, they knew they had to include the end of Joel's life. The entirety of this development process was cut from the documentary, out of respect for the family, but Amy and Ryan's reactions to the ending are included and speak volumes on the cathartic development of *That Dragon, Cancer*. Once they had finished playing, Ryan and Amy held each other, crying and discussing what it felt like to lose Joel (*Thank You* 1:14:10-1:16:25). *That Dragon, Cancer* was not only a way for the Green family to honor the son they loved, but served as "a cathartic experience" that ultimately helped them "create something beautiful out of [their] hope, pain, and love," (Akl).

Personal Catharsis

During the initial planning stage of this paper, I did not think I would have a personal connection with this game. I had lost family members to cancer before, but I was not close to them, so while I felt sad, I could not really relate to everything in *That Dragon Cancer*. However, much like the Green family, my plan changed. Two years ago, my grandfather on my mom's side was diagnosed with Leukemia. The ordeal was scary at first, especially because he was 80 years old when he was diagnosed, but he held on strong and the treatments were working well, so none of us worried too much. That was until the fall of 2022. The treatment had become

less and less effective over time, and in late September, my grandfather made the decision to stop treatment and let things play out the way he felt they were supposed to. He still appeared to be fine, if not a little slower, up until November. Suddenly, he took a rapid decline as cancer overtook him, and on November 24, 2022, he passed away. I'm not the sort that feels comfortable crying or expressing any negative emotions in front of extended family members, so I ended up holding my emotions in for months.

It wasn't until I played *That Dragon, Cancer* that I felt like I could really let go of it all. I felt like I was playing through my own experience. Every story beat and chapter almost perfectly mirrored the emotional range I went through over those two years. I could see my grandfather in Joel's happier moments. As Joel laughed and fed ducks, I remembered all those summers when my grandfather would take my brother and I out on the lake they lived by, helping us learn to paddle the canoe they owned. When Joel snuggled up with a dog, I could see my grandfather sitting on the couch at the beach with our two little dogs curled up with him, safe and fast asleep. The harder moments reminded me of him, too. Joel's negative reactions to treatments brought back memories of my grandfather's exhaustion and pain. Although those may not seem like pleasant memories, it was cathartic to see someone else watching that pain unfold. The experience was so intense I needed a break halfway through, and when I first completed the game, all I felt was heavy. I sobbed, but not entirely out of sadness. There was a little part of me that felt like I was finally seen. Although my family had gone through this as well, that moment was the first time I felt like I wasn't alone. While nothing felt like it was helping at first, the morning after playing, I noticed there was a lightness I hadn't felt before. That weekend, I went home for my grandfather's service. I had an overwhelming sense of dread about the whole thing, but during the actual service, I found myself focusing more on the things I loved about my

grandfather, rather than feeling overwhelming sadness that he was gone. I had the opportunity to let those feelings out while playing *That Dragon, Cancer*, and in that, I found my catharsis.

What Remains of Edith Finch

Content Warning: Deaths of family members, anxiety, depression

Overview

At a quick glance, *What Remains of Edith Finch* seems to share many similarities with *That Dragon, Cancer*. The game, released in 2017, is a walking simulator [a game where players walk and occasionally interact with their environment to experience the story] focused on grief and the deaths of family members through both abstract and concrete visuals. However, *What Remains of Edith Finch* stands out in many of its own ways. First and most importantly, the game is entirely fictional, and its stories were created by a team of writers. However, the real distinguishing feature between *That Dragon Cancer* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* is that the game focuses on multiple stories of different members of the Finch family right before they died, and forces players to experience the moments right before their deaths through a first-person perspective. Although this might feel grotesque to some, it is those very stories that proved to be cathartic for one player dealing with the aftermath of trauma.

(What Makes it Cathartic to Others)

What Remains of Edith Finch tells its stories through the perspective of different characters. Players are afforded the opportunity to get a look into the minds and lives of those in the Finch family who died. These stories take place moments before each character's death, and as a result can feel quite visceral. Each story is unique not only in its contents, but the mechanics players must learn. For example, the death of Barbara Finch, Edith's great aunt, plays out

entirely in a comic book, and the death of Sam, her grandfather, advances by taking pictures of significant objects in the environment. Storytelling is not only an important element to the game but is vital to the family depicted within its own story.

Although the stories in *What Remains of Edith Finch* may be difficult for some people to experience, it's those very stories that have proved to be cathartic not only for myself, but other players as well. One writer, Julia Nelius, detailed her experience of how *What Remains of Edith Finch* helped her experience a cathartic release following the death of her grandmother. She made it clear she didn't experience anything she thought was significant at first, but ultimately realized the game had "a lasting, cathartic effect" on her (Nelius). Not long before she played *What Remains of Edith Finch* for the first time, her grandmother passed away. She did not go into the game looking for a healing experience, but she found it through the stories the game relied on to advance its plot. Through the stories in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Nelius realized that she had her own stories from her family that she could rely on to keep them alive. She also saw much of her grandmother in the stories of Grandma Edie, Edith's grandmother. Nelius recalled that "[her] grandmother was [her] main source of information", and where she got all of those stories. Nelius was not only able to find herself in the Finch family, but also found comfort in the stories of the Finch family. Her catharsis immediately following her play session gave her the release of her grief that pushed her to ask for more of the stories she had never heard before. The comfort stories provided to both Edith Finch and Nelius created a catharsis that led down the path of healing from the trauma of death both women faced.

(Personal Catharsis)

My own catharsis comes from one story that many praise for its visuals and mechanics: the death of Lewis Finch, Edith's brother. Once players enter Lewis' room, they pick up a letter from Lewis' therapist that slowly transitions into taking control of Lewis. The therapist blatantly states that Lewis suffered from depression and began to rely on deep states of daydreaming to cope with the misery he felt in his everyday life. Lewis' story starts out relatively harmless, daydreaming while he carries out monotonous work. However, daydreams soon overwhelm him, and he gets lost in them, preferring the dream world over the real one.

My story is not the same as Lewis', but I could relate to what he experienced in his own story. I suffer from at times intense anxiety, and I have subconsciously found myself retreating into daydreams when I became overwhelmed by my anxious thoughts. They started out as small events, but quickly developed consistent plotlines and many characters and became their own stories about both different scenarios in my own life and events completely invented by my wandering thoughts. The problem ultimately became that I reached a point where I couldn't control when and how long I was in daydreams, and they began to happen even in scenarios where I wasn't distressed which created a dependence on them.

I saw myself in Lewis, which both terrified and helped me. I felt like I had someone who really understood what I was dealing with, even if they weren't real. In that moment after playing through his story for the first time, I started to panic a little, but it came from a place of release. I'd never talked to anyone about my coping mechanism before, despite having some concerns about it in the past, and as a result my worries were bottled up inside me for years. I wouldn't say I felt better about it following the experience, but it pushed me to realize I needed another coping

mechanism. Mine hadn't progressed to the point Lewis' was at, but I slowly recognized that I could reach that point, and the release I experienced following playing Lewis' story

Life Is Strange

Content Warnings: Suicide, depression, bullying, drugging

Overview

Life is Strange (LiS) is the most complex game out of the three I am focusing on. Unlike the other games, it is five chapters long and was produced by a triple-A studio, Square Enix (*Final Fantasy*, *NieR: Automata*). *Life is Strange* focuses on Max, a young girl at a private school who discovers she can rewind time. However, with these powers comes the knowledge that a deadly storm is barreling toward her town, Arcadia Bay, that she needs to stop. The game is almost entirely choice based, and those choices end up affecting what happens to the other characters around Max. While the game presents itself as a science-fiction adventure, it quickly becomes a heartfelt, emotional mystery focused on connections between people.

(What makes it cathartic for others)

Life is Strange has been regarded as an all-around masterpiece, but there is one aspect that stands out above others: its characters. Each one has been carefully written, and while they can feel like stereotypes at times, they are afforded a complexity and depth that many stories about teens do not deliver. Many of these characters are standouts in their own regard, but one that players frequently discuss is Kate Marsh. Kate starts out as a quiet friend to Max, but as her story unfolds in the early chapters of the game, players find themselves attached to her and wanting to know more about her story. Kate is bullied by almost every student at Blackwell, the private school the game's characters attend, and players eventually find out that Kate attended a

party and was secretly drugged, after which point she was filmed and taunted by fellow partygoers. The bullying becomes too much for Kate, and at the end of Chapter Two (Out of Time), she attempts to commit suicide. Depending on some of the player's choices earlier in the game, they can either succeed or fail to save Kate. Either way, the moment is incredibly haunting, and Kate Marsh quickly became a standout character among the rest.

The reasons for why *Life is Strange* can be cathartic for players differ slightly from person-to-person, but they all ultimately tie back to characters in the game that individuals can connect to. One writer praised the way *LiS* makes players care about the characters, leading to meaningful connections that create a catharsis. For many, the combination of “parasocial relationship and character development” causes players to care about characters they can relate to and leads to “[an] emotional and transformative catharsis,” (Nekumanesh).

Several users in the subreddit “R/LifeisStrange” have shared their own stories, either in their own posts or the comments of others, about how Kate Marsh ended up being a cathartic character for them to latch onto. Many of the posts are from around 2015; as a result, their usernames have been deleted, but their sentiments remain. After telling their own story, one commenter ended their discussion with the revelation that “*LiS* and Kate in particular was the main thing that convinced [them] to actually go to therapy” following a cathartic release while playing the game ([deleted username]). Another commenter echoed this idea, stating that the game did not fix their mental health, “but it gave [them] the tools to start fixing [themselves], which proved to [them] how powerful art can be,” (u/TomB4). On a separate post, another user discussed their connection to Kate Marsh in particular. They wrote that, during the scene where Max finds Kate, ready to jump, they “saw Kate Marsh standing on the roof [...] putting her life in her own hands”, only it wasn't Kate they saw standing on that roof, “it was [them],”

(u/FungacityAndActivity). They experienced a catharsis by recognizing they had once been in Kate's shoes and contemplated suicide, something echoed by a writer named Katie when recounting her experience playing *Life is Strange*. When writing her article, she recalled that "saving Kate was about more than making the right choices" because it was "an opportunity to tell [her] younger self that everything was going to be okay," (Katie). Kate represented a version of her that was deeply embroiled in depression, and through Kate's story, the writer was able to experience a cathartic release from her past struggles and found herself more open to receiving help.

Life is Strange has been out for almost a decade at this point, and as a result, players have had more time to share their stories of how the games could be cathartic for them. In 2021, the game's six-year anniversary occurred, and online gaming journal *Jump, Dash, Roll* interviewed players about what made the game so special to them. While there were a variety of different reasons, some form of catharsis was cited by many of the interviewees. One player, Chamliis, found his catharsis in the outcome of one the game's two final choices. He decided to sacrifice Chloe in order to resolve the branching timeline causing the deadly storm that barrels toward Arcadia Bay, and almost immediately found a release in emotions associated to loss. He joked that he "cried more for these fictional girls than [he] did at [his] own mother and father's funerals", but ultimately realized that the game "freed [him]" and made him a better person (Various). Another player, Gabe, was one of those who connected to Kate Marsh's story. He also acknowledged that "we've all struggled with [self-destructive] thoughts", meaning as a result lots of players could find something to latch onto in Kate's story that ultimately leads to their catharsis.

(What made it cathartic for me)

When I first played *Life is Strange* back in 2018, I couldn't find anything cathartic in it. Sure, I could relate to Max's anxious worries and the self-doubt she possessed, particularly concerning the things she created, but none of that was cathartic; it was simply relatable. It wasn't until I'd gotten to college that I really began to feel the weight of what Max thought throughout the game. My high school was incredibly intense and, strictly numbers-wise, I was considered a below average student. However, once I got to college, I suddenly had the strappings and accolades of a student considered well above average. I'd been conditioned to think I wasn't all that smart, so when I was suddenly hit with all these opportunities, I felt like I didn't deserve them. It was overwhelming, and the idea of keeping up whatever it was I was doing that "tricked" people into thinking I deserved the opportunities I'd been given caused me a great amount of distress. While Max never resolves her own imposter syndrome, seeing her experience gave me something to latch onto, and as Max gained more confidence throughout the game, I found something cathartic in seeing that it was possible. When thinking of how Max's imposter syndrome gave me something to latch onto, my mind goes to an example from the very beginning of the game. In her photography class, every student is required to submit a photo to an international contest. Although Max goes so far as to take the photograph and bring it to class, she begins to experience doubts about her work and whether she is really any good at photography. Within her doubts comes the belief that she does not deserve to be among her peers at an elite boarding school, and ultimately, she rips up the photograph, deciding it is better to not turn in the assignment than learn if her doubts are true. I always felt too anxious about my grades to not turn something in, but I have those moments of feeling like an assignment, at any moment, was going to be so terrible that my professors were finally going to realize that I was not worthy of the grades and accomplishments. Even with this paper, there is still that lingering doubt in the

back of my mind that something along those lines will happen. However, forming that connection to Max and the imposter syndrome she experiences throughout *Life is Strange* helped me experience a catharsis for all that worry, and the further I got into college, the easier it became to acknowledge that I had earned my academic accomplishments.

(Connecting Threads)

While all three games have their different reasons audiences connected with them and were able to experience catharsis as a result, there are some common threads that can be found when looking below the surface. The first and most obvious one is that audiences found a character that represented either their own experiences or the experiences of someone close to them. The common characters were Ryan, Amy, Edith, Edie, Kate Marsh, and Max, but any one person could find a way to relate to any of the characters in any of these games. For example, if someone had cancer as a child, they may find a better connection in Joel, rather than his family who experiences the cancer from the outside. Finding a character to connect to is important, because that empathy will evoke a stronger emotional response from players, and as a result, an audience member is more likely to experience a cathartic release.

Another, perhaps less obvious, connection is that all three games are more artistic and at times abstract, rather than completely grounded. By not directly reflecting reality, artistic games can make playing through one's own experience comforting rather than harrowing. It might be easy to see this in *That Dragon, Cancer* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. The polygonal art

style of the former softens the blow of the severity wrapped up in the game's subject matter, while the latter's varied expressions of death create stronger reactions to what the audience experiences. *Life is Strange*, aside from its premise, might seem more grounded, but the game has many moments focused around the more artistic and interpretive parts of life. The style itself makes each character look like a drawing. The game also features photographs throughout, many of which are simple faceless drawings, much like in *That Dragon, Cancer*. The ones that do have faces maintain the same style. While these elements may seem disconnected to the idea of experiencing a safe catharsis at first, it ties in more to *That Dragon, Cancer*. *Life is Strange* tackles incredibly serious topics, and the art style sitting outside of realism can help players feel safe when experiencing something that may cause them to recall trauma, as it does not feel like they are being directly confronted by their own issues.

The final connecting thread has to do with the experiences players have had. In each of the testimonies and stories I have cited, players mentioned how their catharsis pushed them toward the process of seeking help or otherwise learning to cope with the traumatic situation that caused the negative emotions to build up in the first place. While every scenario is going to be slightly different, seeking out healthy coping mechanisms is ultimately going to be helpful in the long run, and these players happened to find that push through a cathartic release in video games. In some cases, therapy scared the players at first, but the release they achieve through the game they played helped them realize it would ultimately be better to learn to cope and live with the trauma they had faced, rather than continue to bottle it up and hide from it.

Contradicting Viewpoint

While there is a lot of player evidence to suggest that narrative-based artistic games help players achieve a catharsis, not everyone is going to have that reaction. Even if they have been through a traumatic incident playing out in the game, the visuals may be too abstract for them, or they simply may not respond well to the medium of a game. One player wrote about how he felt a game like *That Dragon, Cancer* could not be cathartic. He does acknowledge that “each is confined to their own method of processing their imminent loss” and as a result, some may have cathartic reactions to the game where he did not (Haase). In his work, he discussed how the game “is not a diversion” that could temporarily take someone away from their personal tragedy and have them experience something that feels less confrontational, but instead a “tragic piece of art” without much other purpose. His argument brings up the valid point that sometimes, an artistic work is nothing more than that, and while some may have an emotional reaction to it, it is difficult to experience a cathartic reaction because there is no room to insert one’s personal experience. Haase also calls out the nature of the game itself and its subject. He believes that, because the game’s tragedy is based on a real child’s death, the game itself is problematic, as it is profiting off the pain of a real child. Haase was not alone in this sentiment when the game was first released. Many journalists, players, and casual observers questioned Green’s decision to make a game that ultimately revolves around the suffering and death of a child, especially because, as revealed in *Thank You for Playing*, Green did not want to include any real sounds of Joel crying or otherwise in pain (9:17-9:49). Haase went one step further than those around him and argued that if something is based on an event as horrifying and tragic as the death of a child, it cannot be cathartic because the player is instead too focused on the horror of what they are watching. He closes out his argument by saying that “*That Dragon, Cancer*” is not therapeutic, but because it is a piece of art, it could be considered transformative. While Haase makes some

excellent points in his argument, it is important to remember that what people respond to is ultimately on a personal basis. Many, including the developers themselves, do consider *That Dragon, Cancer* to be cathartic, but that does not invalidate his point.

Scientific Evidence

While studies on the benefits of video games are still emerging, there is already information about how games can be beneficial on an emotional and therapeutic level. Studies on children who play video games have found that games can increase the emotional intelligence and understanding of those who play versus those who do not. One study also found that, by playing and failing at games, “children build emotional resilience” that can help them figure out how to process and express negative emotions, leading to healthier coping mechanisms in the long run (Granci). Not everyone will have experienced trauma as a child, and some may not recognize they were traumatized until adulthood, but it can be beneficial to introduce video games at a young age, particularly ones that have an element of failure, as it may help with coping mechanisms and processing and expressing trauma further down the road.

While my own argument relates to playing video games outside of a clinical setting, some psychologists and psychiatrists have found that video games inside of a therapist’s office can help patients feel safer expressing their trauma and can help players navigate coping mechanisms and fully processing their trauma. One group of psychologists found that “when targeted neural activity [methods that target the brain’s responses and ability to process] is related to symptoms [of trauma or a mental illness], [the] techniques [introduced in the games] may have therapeutic effects,” (Amad 1). Clinical techniques often include a problem that must be solved by the player, which in turn will help players figure out how to solve their own

problems and develop individualized coping mechanisms. Amad and his peers also proposed therapists could benefit from using video games in therapy sessions because they can “take into account the type and severity of the disorder, the patient preferences”, and a variety of other factors that can personalize the experience for players and help them with their specific trauma or mental illness (1). As discussed by casual players, video games can often feel less confrontational and do not force them to see and directly relive their personal trauma, which ultimately may lead to more therapeutic benefits in the long run.

Both arguments end their statements by advocating for the use of video games in therapy. Granci and Lobel, who were detailing a study performed by a team of psychologists, reported that the team performing the study “recommended that teams of psychologists, clinicians and game designers work together to develop approaches to mental health care that integrate video game playing with traditional therapy.” While the study they focused on was conducted on children, evidence also suggests that adults can benefit from having video games integrated into therapy, as Amad and his peers found. They ended their own proposal by stating they found “patients could develop alternate coping strategies” through the problem solving and emotional releases provided by video games and advocated for extending the therapeutic video games beyond their current uses (2). Currently, video games are used for aiding with “depression, autism, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder”, however Amad and his peers argued video games can be beneficial for “the entire field of mental and behavioural disorders,” (2).

Most of the studies on using video games in therapy focus more on problem solving, but those skills revolve around emotions that could be related to trauma either from external or internal factors. The current model is still that players may experience a catharsis in their own homes which pushes them to get therapy, but if therapists are able to induce that catharsis

through video games in sessions, it may be beneficial for the player, as they are in the environment that can then help them develop coping mechanisms on the spot.

Conclusion

Video games are still a divisive subject. Many in both the medical field and in everyday life believe that they cause more problems than they are worth. However, video games, particularly those that rely on a narrative and artistic visuals to tell their stories, can have positive benefits as well. Through connections made to story elements, characters, and the art style of the game, players may be able to experience a safe and healthy catharsis for negative emotions that ultimately pushes them to want to seek out professional help. This professional help can aid them in developing the proper coping mechanisms to help live with their trauma in everyday life.