

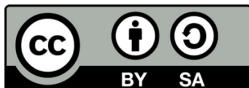
The Catcher in the Rye Meets Life is Strange

**A Dialogical Exploration of Narrative Structures
and Social Justice in Student Realities**

Vanessa Krjutschkow^{1,*}

¹ Universität Bielefeld

* Kontakt: vanessa.krjutschkow@uni-bielefeld.de



Dieses Werk ist freigegeben unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY-SA 4.0 (Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen). Diese Lizenz gilt nur für das Originalmaterial. Alle gekennzeichneten Fremdinhalte (z.B. Abbildungen, Fotos, Tabellen, Zitate etc.) sind von der CC-Lizenz ausgenommen. Für deren Wiederverwendung ist es ggf. erforderlich, weitere Nutzungsgenehmigungen beim jeweiligen Rechteinhaber einzuholen. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>

Abstract: This article explores how J.D. Salinger’s literary classic *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, can be effectively integrated into the English language classroom by pairing it with the narrative adventure game *Life is Strange*, released in 2015 by Dontnod. The two works are combined to discuss narrative and perspective in storytelling to spark meaningful discussions about sensitive topics such as struggles as a young adult, mental health, grief, bullying, gender, and sexual identity. The article is based on the premise that the classic heavily influenced the game and that the game could be considered as a modern adaptation of it. Still, the game also challenges the novel by including female protagonists and addressing issues such as bullying and sexual identity in a more contemporary and inclusive manner. The article further presents a practical teaching approach and argues that combining both media allows students to engage with authentic literature, build empathy, and reflect on social changes over time. Furthermore, the contribution points out the potential of this approach for learners to deconstruct canon literature by exploring and juxtaposing its themes, the effects of different media of narration, and perspectives in the evolving world of digital and traditional literature, as well as in society as a whole.

Keywords: canon literature; born-digital literature; narrative; mental health in education; gender; sexual identities; LGBTQ+; adolescence; Social Justice Education

1 Introduction

J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951 and is still regarded as one of the most popular novels of the 20th century. It has remained in print, sold more than 60 million copies globally, and has been translated into over thirty languages (cf. Graham, 2007, p. xi). It seems like the novel has retained its relevance and continues to appeal to readers across generations. The Guardian further ranks it among the 100 best novels and describes it as “one of the most controversial and best-loved American novels of the 20th century” (McCrum, 2015). Despite its status as a 20th-century classic, it has also been one of the most frequently banned books in America due to its strong language and sexual content. Although some readers have condemned the novel since its release, it remains included in school curricula, solidifying its status as canonical literature (cf. Surkamp & Nünning, 2024, p. 44).

However, some scholars, including Surkamp and Nünning, suggest diversifying school reading lists with novels that offer broader representations and

new perspectives to leave the bias in school reading materials behind, including Salinger's classic (Surkamp & Nünning, 2024, p. 45; see also König, 2018, pp. 168–169; Volkmann, 2023, pp. 97–98). While I agree with this perspective, I propose leveraging *The Catcher in the Rye*'s popularity to engage in critical discussions in class by combining it with contemporary digital literature, because the novel's influence even extends to modern media, as seen in the narrative adventure game series *Life is Strange*, first released in 2015.

The protagonist in the game is an 18-year-old girl named Max Caulfield, which is a playful reference to Salinger's famous protagonist, Holden Caulfield, in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The characters not only share the same last name but also experience similar moral dilemmas as they navigate adulthood. Both stories tackle significant and sensitive topics, as both young adults have experienced the death of someone close to them. Holden lost his younger brother, Allie, to leukemia, while Max lost her best friend, Chloe, whom a fellow classmate shot. These experiences deeply affect the characters and shape the overall stories. They depict the struggles young adults face in understanding their identity, dealing with sexuality, and coping with the impacts of bullying.

Even though both coming-of-age stories cover similar themes and topics, they differ in their medium, mode of storytelling, and their overall plot. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden is not only the protagonist but also the narrator, whereas *Life is Strange* is played and narrated from a third-person perspective. The game has a narrative-driven structure, following an overall plot line of five episodes and designed as a branching narrative, allowing players to engage with the story. As the character Max, players navigate various environments, such as her high school or the fictional town Arcadia Bay, and interact with other characters, such as her peers, teachers or parents, while investigating the mystery of a missing friend. The player's task is to make decisions for Max, as many moments in the game require the player to make important choices for her, from choosing options in dialogue or determining actions she should take. With Max's ability to rewind time, players can further undo previously made decisions and explore different choices and outcomes to alter the narrative. Major choices lead to consequences that affect the game's story and characters.

My proposal aims to develop a teaching sequence using both the novel and the game to actively explore social justice topics in English Language Teaching (ELT) and to engage students in a relevant and exciting way. First, the

game presents a modern take on the coming-of-age story genre, including aspects of students' realities today, such as cyberbullying, more openly discussed sexual identities, and mental health issues. However, since the game reflects a more contemporary view on these issues, it highlights aspects of social justice that remain unsolved, an ongoing challenge that I will explore in more detail later in this article. Therefore, this article aims to encourage learners to develop their own narratives and stories, highlighting this ongoing work needed for social justice. By comparing the game to the novel, for example, students can analyze societal changes, similarities, and their connections to different characters, ultimately identifying necessary steps for a more just future.

Second, the video game is particularly interesting in the English language classroom because it is a text born in the digital realm. It allows students to activate the existing digital literacy skills which they have developed in their everyday lives and helps them navigate and explore literacies crucial for the 21st century to prepare them for the demands of today's world (Becker et al., 2024). As argued by Becker et al.,

“[b]lending traditional face-to-face lessons and online learning scenarios can be another step in empowering teachers and learners to create authentic learning spaces that mirror students' daily life, which oscillates between digital and analogue spaces” (Becker et al., 2024, p. 19).

Consequently, this approach may not only prompt discussions about the novel's continued relevance in today's world, but also offers a way to make learning more engaging and interactive.

To begin with, I will present the advantages of combining the novel and the digital game in the English language classroom. I will demonstrate how born-digital literature can prepare students for the demands of the digital world and how it relates more closely to their everyday experiences. Then, I will compare the narrative structures of the novel and the game to show how these differences can enhance teaching. I will also provide examples of how we can connect the novel and the game in a way that encourages a dialogical approach to learning. In the next chapter, I will dive into the core topics of social justice relevant to students' lives today and start by focusing on mental health, highlighting similar struggles depicted in both works. Then, I will have a closer look at gender and sexuality, demonstrating how juxtaposing these two media can help learners analyze the gender representations in the novel while challenging them with the more inclusive portrayals found in *Life is Strange*. This is followed by a brief exploration of the concept of “critical discomfort”,

illustrating how these sensitive topics can be addressed in ELT. Lastly, I will offer a practical teaching approach for introducing these works in a classroom setting, providing specific ideas for educators to use.

2 Why combine the novel and the digital game?

2.1 Potentials of born-digital literature

Becker et al. (2024) argue that although digital media play a central role in daily life, printed texts still dominate English language education. The scholars, therefore, advocate incorporating born-digital texts into the ELT classroom and giving equal importance to consuming and producing digital texts alongside printed ones to align with students' already existing digital literacy experiences (Becker et al., 2024, p. 1). The authors specifically promote the concept of "born-digital" texts, as anything encountered in the digital realm represents a distinct kind of "text." They define two key features: Firstly, born-digital texts have fluid boundaries regarding their authorship, as they are continuously (re)shaped by the collaboration of many individuals rather than just a few. Secondly, they are characteristically multimodal, combining, for example, texts, music, or video elements. This, however, requires the ability to decipher these interconnected modes in the process of meaning-making (for a more detailed overview, refer to Becker et al., 2024, pp. 10–14).

Ludwig et al. (2024a) further argue that born-digital texts should not replace printed texts. They, for instance, demonstrated in their study, how integrating digital media tools can benefit students' comprehension and motivation to engage with printed texts (Ludwig et al., 2024a). Ludwig further suggests that incorporating digital media into ELT can create more authentic, collaborative, and creative reading experiences, ultimately supporting learners to become more autonomous readers (Ludwig, 2021). Therefore, the overall goal in the English language classroom regarding digital narratives, as argued by Lütge et al., is that "both digital and traditional literature work alongside one another and complement one other" (Lütge et al., 2019, p. 537), which is also the overall direction of this article.

Becker argues that integrating video games can be particularly beneficial for teaching because they are already a crucial part of students' realities and can motivate learners to communicate and develop cultural competencies (Becker, 2021, pp. 10–11). Lütge et al. (2021) add that video games enable learners to take on the roles of the characters, shifting their roles from passive

readers to active participants in the narrative (Lütke et al., 2021, p. 245). Especially the use of game-enhanced learning, such as commercial entertainment-focused games like *Life is Strange*, can be highly beneficial because these games are designed for a target language audience and naturally contain authentic cultural artifacts, providing learners with “real” foreign language communication (Becker, 2021, p. 22). Video games can, therefore, be highly beneficial for developing foreign language skills and improving digital literacy (Becker, 2021, p. 36).

Based on these aspects, the game will be regarded as a cultural artifact, much like the novel. A direct comparison between the literary classic and the game will be used to motivate and encourage meaningful communication in the target language. The specific ways in which the game and the novel can be brought into dialogue, particularly concerning their storytelling modes, will be explored in the following chapter.

2.2 *Life is Strange* and *The Catcher in the Rye* – narratological considerations and shared points of departure

2.2.1 Narrative structure in *The Catcher in the Rye*

One key aspect of *The Catcher in the Rye* is its first-person perspective, which positions Holden not only as the protagonist but also as the narrator of the story. This narrative choice offers readers a deep insight into Holden’s thoughts, beliefs, and motivations. However, since the novel’s story is also told from a retrospective viewpoint, it limits the reader’s understanding to Holden’s subjective version of the events.

“I’m not going to tell *you* my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I’ll just tell *you* about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come here and take it easy” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 1, p. 3; emphasis V.K.),

is how the protagonist introduces himself to the reader and sets up his story. Holden’s story centers on his expulsion from his school, Pencey Prep, his disconnection from his peers, and his subsequent trip to New York City. But only after reading the last chapter, when he refers to “this one psychoanalyst guy they have here” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 26, p. 234), can the reader piece together that he is recounting the events from a mental facility. Throughout the novel, as highlighted in the quote above, Holden addresses his story to “you”, a narrative technique that fosters a personal connection with the reader, though it remains unclear to whom this “you” refers. Graham

argues, “this sense of connection between Holden and the reader is one of the key aspects of the novel’s power” (Graham, 2007, p. 19).

Reading the novel in school could allow students to develop empathy for Holden by understanding his thoughts and motivations, making his journey more personal and engaging. The direct address to the reader especially fosters a sense of trust and intimacy, which may encourage students to read further and discuss his reasoning. As Surkamp and Nünning (2024) argue, reading literature helps learners shift perspectives and expand their understanding to promote further empathy, tolerance, and the ability to adopt diverse perspectives (Surbamp & Nünning, 2024, pp. 14–15).

But what happens when that empathy is too generously given? In her article, Urtasun (2021) references an anecdote from literary critic Booth, who observed that “instead of joining Salinger in his deeply sympathetic but critical exploration of Caulfield’s character, they [his students] simply sided with him against the whole world” (Booth, 2005, pp. i–ii). Urtasun warns that Holden’s first-person narration can easily sway readers to adopt his perspective and manipulate readers to share the protagonist’s view. She argues that this presents an opportunity, however, to critically examine the role of empathy in reading, encouraging students to reflect on whether it can blind judgment. This is particularly important in *The Catcher in the Rye*, where trustworthiness and integrity are the core dilemmas of the novel, as Holden attributes his struggles with others to the “phoniness” and hypocrisy of the adult world (Urtasun, 2021, pp. 142–146).

Reading the novel, hence, can foster empathy, but it should also invite critical reflection. By incorporating *Life is Strange*, teachers and students can aim to challenge Holden’s perspective and analyze the narrative techniques used in both works.

2.2.2 Narrative structure in *Life is Strange*

Unlike the linear nature of the novel, the narrative structure of *Life is Strange* is more dynamic, allowing players to actively shape the story. While the novel positions the reader as a passive observer, the game places players in the role of Max Caulfield, experiencing the story from a limited third-person perspective. Nevertheless, players are confined to Max’s viewpoint, knowing only what other characters reveal to her, which creates a unique blend of narrative control and limitation.

The plot in the game unfolds over five episodes, beginning with 18-year-old Max returning to her hometown, Arcadia Bay, and discovering her ability to rewind time after witnessing her estranged best friend, Chloe Price, being shot. She prevents the shooting and reconnects with Chloe. Together, they try to stop an impending storm which Max foresees and which is about to destroy their town, and they investigate the mysterious disappearance of Chloe's friend, Rachel Amber. Throughout the game, players face moral and emotional dilemmas that affect not only Max but also those around her. Choices in the game are categorized as minor or major, with the latter significantly altering the narrative. For example, in the first episode, Max can either "Report Nathan" (who shot Chloe) for carrying a gun, which leads to hostility towards herself but aids another character, or "Hide the truth", which prevents the bond with that character from forming. After the decisions in the game are made, Max comments on her decision, and players can either decide to rewind time and make a different choice or continue with the plot until they reach a checkpoint, where the plot will be saved. Some of the consequences and outcomes will only progress in later episodes. These choices lead players through different narrative branches providing various options to explore. However, although players can rewind time and explore even more narrative branches, the game overall maintains an overarching storyline that continues across the episodes (for a detailed overview of major choices and their consequences, see *Life Is Strange Wiki. Choices and Consequences*, n.d.).

The implemented narrative structure in *Life is Strange* offers profound didactic potential for the English language classroom. Unlike linear texts, the game promotes interactivity, enabling the learners to navigate multiple paths, which not only changes the didactic and methodological possibilities but also its demands in teaching (cf. Lütge et al., 2019, pp. 525–526). Therefore, Lütge et al. emphasize that understanding the narrative structure of digital literature, especially in interactive forms, is crucial for learners (2019, pp. 530–531). The element of interactivity transforms learners from passive consumers into active participants as they explore the story world, make choices, and engage with characters. Becker further argues that particularly *Life is Strange* can offer valuable insights into American high school life. It allows students to virtually interact with peers, explore the campus, and experience classroom dynamics (Becker, 2021, p. 84). However, this interactivity makes each player's experiences unique, so it would be nearly impossible to recreate that exact same experience again (cf. Lütge et al., 2019, pp. 529–530). For learners, this means greater control over their learning experience. They must actively engage with and consider the consequences of their choices, which influence the story's overall progression, but also in which conversations they

would like to engage, which rooms to explore, or which objects to inspect or collect. Thus, learners become co-authors and share agency with the game developers as they explore the narrative (cf. Becker et al., 2024, pp. 13–14). While it may be challenging for teachers to monitor each group’s progress, this limitation can foster meaningful communication and literary discussion, as differing experiences in the game encourage the need for authentic interaction (Lütge et al., 2019, p. 532). Furthermore, this approach can encourage teachers to step back and adopt a more collaborative role alongside their students. By participating as co-learners in the learning process rather than solely directing it, teachers can foster a more interactive and equitable dynamic.

Moreover, as already indicated, players are not fully autonomous in the game. The narrative is still centered on Max, and this reliance on the protagonist’s perspective requires critical examination: Especially since players must actively engage with the story, they might align more closely with Max’s view. For that reason, I further suggest some strategies to combine the novel and the game, focusing on discussing the game’s decision-making feature.

2.2.3 Connecting novel and game

To truly gain the advantages of using both the game and the novel in teaching, connecting them and initiating a dialogue between the two is essential. One of the game’s key features is that the players have to make decisions for the protagonist, Max. It would be interesting to explore how this element of decision-making could be incorporated into the novel. Urtasun (2021) proposes deconstructing the potential blind trust in Holden’s narration by performing a close reading of a scene in Chapter 22, where Holden’s sister, Phoebe, asks him why he left school (Salinger, 2021, p. 143).

“‘Oh, why did you *do* it?’ She meant why did I get the ax again. It made me sort of sad, the way she said it. ‘Oh, God, Phoebe, don’t ask me. I’m sick of everybody asking me that,’ I said. ‘A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. I was full of phonies. [...] Even the couple of *nice* teachers on the faculty, they were phonies, too,’ I said. ‘There was this one old guy, Mr. Spencer. His wife was always giving you hot chocolate and all that stuff, and they were really pretty nice. But you should’ve seen him when the headmaster, old Thurmer, came in the history class and sat down in the back of the room. He was always coming in and sitting down in the back of the room for about a half an hour. He was supposed to be incognito or something. After a while, he’d be sitting back there and then he’d start interrupting what old Spencer was saying to crack a lot of corny jokes. Old Spencer’d practically kill

himself chuckling and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam prince or something.’ [...]” (Salinger, 2014/1951, pp. 185–186; original emphasis).

After a lengthy explanation, his sister Phoebe replies, “You don’t like *anything* that’s happening” (Salinger, 2014/1951, p. 187; original emphasis), indicating that the problem lies not with the school but with Holden himself. At first glance, his explanation may seem trivial or even silly, but the beginning of the quote hints at deeper reasons beyond just disliking pretentious teachers. He later recalls an event where a classmate was bullied so severely that he committed suicide (which I will explore further in Section 2.3 of this article). Holden blends this seemingly minor complaint with genuine traumatic experiences, providing an opportunity to analyze these dilemmas and choices. Learners could discuss: Was leaving the right choice? If the novel had the same interactive features as the game, would they rewind any scenes, including him leaving school? What other outcomes could have occurred if Holden had made different choices, and what are the consequences of his current choices? Learners could also step into the perspective of his sister and design a small branching narrative starting from Holden’s explanation, viewed through her eyes, with various possible responses and outcomes. The overall goal is to encourage empathy while also promoting critical reflection of his actions.

To further enhance discussions and encourage learners in the physical reading, they could be prompted to find similarities between the two works. A lesson could guide them to actively search for Easter eggs and similarities in the game that mirror the novel’s themes, helping students make exciting connections that highlight the text’s enduring relevance. Several blogs have already identified and discussed these Easter eggs (Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020; *Life Is Strange Wiki. References (Life Is Strange)*, n.d.). In the following I will only highlight a few that could be especially interesting for a teaching unit. For example, in addition to their shared last name, “Caulfield”, players might notice another reference in Max’s dorm room. On the wall between her windows, there is a poster titled *The Winger and the Cow*. As seen in the screenshot below (Fig. 1), the title and the design closely resemble the cover of the first edition of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Fig. 2, both Figures on the next page) (cf. Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020; *Life Is Strange Wiki. References (Life Is Strange)*, n.d.).



Figure 1: Screenshot of Max's dorm room (© Square Enix)¹

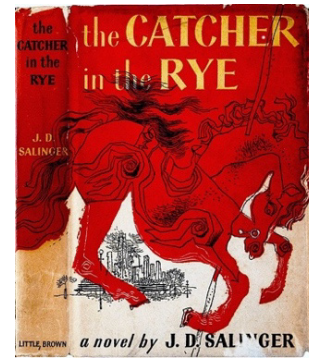


Figure 2: First-edition cover of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)²

In episode 3, the player can further explore the principal's secretary's office, where they will notice a rack in the corner, next to the bathroom door, with a single red hat hanging on it (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Screenshot of the principal's secretary's office (© Square Enix)³

When players click on the hat for a closer look, Max remarks, “Only a total phony would wear a crappy hat like that,” mocking Holden, who frequently

¹ Screenshots from *Life is Strange* are created and shared here in line with Square Enix's Material Usage Policy: https://www.square-enix-games.com/en_US/documents/materialusagepolicy; last accessed: 20.02.2025.

² This image is in the public domain. The image is a scan of the original dust jacket, and both the scan and the cover are public domain because they were published in the U.S. between 1929 and 1977 without a copyright notice. For further information, regard: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Catcher_in_the_Rye_\(1951,_first_edition_cover\).jpg?uselang=en#Licensing](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Catcher_in_the_Rye_(1951,_first_edition_cover).jpg?uselang=en#Licensing); last accessed: 20.02.2025.

³ Screenshots from *Life is Strange* are created and shared here in line with Square Enix's Material Usage Policy.

calls people “phony” in the novel (Dontnod, 2015, ep. 3; cf. Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020; *Life Is Strange Wiki. References (Life Is Strange)*, n.d). The hat is a further reference to Holden’s iconic “red hunting hat, with one of those very long peaks” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 3, p. 21), which he wears throughout the novel. Students could explore why the game developers chose to include this red hunting hat and analyze its significance in the novel. For instance, they could examine why Holden emphasizes, in the novel’s final scene, how his little sister gives him the hat back, leading him to feel a sense of acceptance in his transition from childhood to adulthood (cf. Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 25, p. 233). Here, the connection of the novel and the game could serve as a useful tool for understanding the symbolic weight of the hat and its broader significance in *The Catcher in the Rye*. However, they could also discuss the implications of implementing a different object or reference to connect Holden’s and Max’s worlds.

There are more similarities between the novel and the game. However, since these involve more sensitive topics, I will not consider them as Easter eggs. Instead, I will address them in greater depth in the next section, which focuses on mental health, to ensure the gravity of these issues is properly considered.

2.3 A closer look I: mental health

The novel and the game portray challenging mental health issues or risks, such as loss, depression, suicidal thoughts, and (attempts at) sexual assault, making it essential to approach these themes with care in the classroom. Talking about these topics might be intensely challenging for both teachers and students. However, I would like to encourage viewing them as an opportunity to engage students in meaningful discussions about mental health. Unfortunately, research shows that mental health issues, especially anxiety and depression, are on the rise among adolescents globally (Becker, 2024, p. 47; WHO, 2021). Since schools play a crucial role in supporting teens through this vulnerable phase, the English language classroom could foster emotional resilience and promote a deeper understanding of mental health (Becker, 2024; Ludwig et al., 2024b). Moreover, addressing these issues in class can help reduce the prejudice and stigma around mental health and provide them with tools to recognize and cope with challenges they and others face in their everyday life to support their journey of becoming more empathetic and healthier individuals (Becker, 2024; Ludwig et al., 2024b).

Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize that teachers are not mental health experts, so we cannot expect teachers to treat mental health issues in the classroom. Instead, the opportunity lies in analyzing the fictional characters and language presented in the game and novel to open up discussions about mental health. This approach could encourage students to explore how language and narrative might perpetuate stigmas while also considering ways to deconstruct these patterns within literature and beyond. By discussing the similar themes and issues that the characters in the game and novel go through, learners can examine these topics through the lenses of fictional characters. This might encourage students who may be dealing with mental health issues to explore and discuss these topics without feeling compelled to disclose personal information. Simultaneously, it offers students who may have never encountered such issues the opportunity to gain insight, develop empathy, and learn how to address these topics respectfully. This provides an opportunity to approach the topic scientifically by analyzing and comparing both narratives while still acknowledging the personal implications and challenges inherent to it.

To further demonstrate these themes, both Max and Holden experience profound loss. Learners can observe how losing someone so close can be traumatic and how their grief deeply affects their decisions in both narratives. Max ultimately contemplates sacrificing the entire town to save Chloe, while Holden makes poor choices, such as leaving his school and distancing himself from those around him. As the blog *Strange Dark Stories* (Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020) points out, Holden frequently wishes to turn back time and even imagines conversations with his lost brother, Allie, when he feels particularly depressed (cf. Salinger, 2014/1951, p. 110). Perhaps Max's ability to turn back time to bring Chloe back ultimately reflects her desire to avoid truly confronting her grief, too, and therefore only occurs in her mind (Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020). Identifying similarities in these character-driven narratives might engage students in discussing the emotional challenges and obstacles the characters face while also building a bridge to broader discussions of these issues in young adults, all within the context of character development, narrative, and language.

However, there are more sensitive scenes in the game and novel that need to be discussed carefully and with adequate trigger warnings. In the novel, Holden plans to stay a few nights at Mr. Antolini's place, a professor he finds both strange and intelligent and someone he perceives as trustworthy. When Holden arrives at his apartment, he already feels dizzy, and after he has drunken some coffee there, he gets so tired that he can barely engage in the

conversation anymore. Later, when Holden wakes up, he finds Mr. Antolini sitting right next to him and patting his head. When Holden asks him what he's doing, he responds, "Nothing! I'm simply sitting here, admiring" (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 24, p. 211). Holden then panics and leaves the apartment immediately. After that encounter, Holden is not only scared but questions whether he might have overreacted because Mr. Antolini has always just been nice to him. It is also one of the last scenes before we learn that Holden has been admitted to a mental health facility.

A very similar scene is played out in *Life is Strange*. At the beginning of episode five, Max wakes up and realizes she is tied to a chair. Mr. Jefferson is right in front of her and she remembers that he drugged her before to take pictures of her. Mr. Jefferson is, similar to Mr. Antolini, a young and charismatic teacher whom Max initially admired. However, he uses his position as an art teacher to take illegal photos of young girls to capture the beauty and loss of innocence with his camera. Unlike Holden, Max can rewind time to escape this dangerous situation. Moreover, because Max detects even more pictures of young girls Mr. Jefferson photographed, she eventually manages to get him arrested (cf. Dontnod, 2015; Hisbrokenbutterfly, 2020).

Although these are extremely sensitive scenes, they allow exploring crucial issues such as violence, trust, power, and boundaries. Teachers, however, should consider consulting with school administrators and be prepared to enable students to seek further support, such as counseling, if necessary.

This information, along with trigger warnings, is also crucial for the next aspect I would like to point out, as both stories deal with the topic of suicide. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden recalls a tragic event involving one of his former classmates, James Castle. A group of boys bullied James after he called one of them "conceited" (Salinger, 2014/1951, p. 188). The boys demanded he take his words back, but when he refused, the boys physically assaulted him and locked him in a room. James, unable to escape, jumps out of the window and dies. A similar scene occurs in *Life is Strange*. The character Kate Marsh is severely bullied after a video of her kissing strangers goes viral. In episode two, Max finds Kate on a rooftop, attempting suicide. The scene is particularly difficult for players, as they control Max's actions. If players supported Kate throughout the first two episodes and encourage her on the rooftop, they can convince her to come down and save her life. If not, Kate will jump. This is an emotionally intense moment, which is why I recommend playing the last scenes of episode 2 together in class and allowing adequate time to discuss the scene. However, I would like to emphasize that

teachers need thorough preparation for this sequence. It is crucial to address these issues before learners engage with the reading material and the scenes in the game, ensuring they are not caught off guard. I suggest introducing these topics beforehand using different materials to ensure learners are prepared for what they are about to encounter (I will explore this aspect of tension and challenging discomfort more in depth in Section 2.5 of this article).

Both James and Kate suffer from severe bullying, with tragic consequences. By examining these scenes, students can explore the profound emotional and psychological effects of bullying. Kate's public humiliation through cyberbullying further demonstrates its modern-day impact. As Opitz (2024) notes, cyberbullying "transcends and amplifies the effects of traditional bullying" (p. 196), since harmful content can be widely distributed, leaving victims feeling as though there is no escape. Even though digital technologies are a part of students' lives, risks come with them, such as cyberbullying, and this should not be ignored in ELT (Opitz, 2024, p. 202). Learners could discuss the importance of responsible digital behavior and reflect on the way they engage with others. Additionally, learners can explore ways to support peers facing similar challenges, emphasizing kindness, responsibility, and awareness in both real-life and digital settings. This discussion might be especially relevant considering both characters' tragic outcomes, likely stemming from untreated mental health issues that were compounded or reinforced by bullying.

I would like to argue that studying these scenes could help learners recognize the severity of depression as a life-threatening mental health condition. A lesson plan could also encourage students to reflect on the medium and how these scenes are portrayed. Students can discuss the impact of decision-making in the game, fostering moral reflection. Most importantly, discussing these scenes should, as already indicated, open opportunities to introduce learners to mental health resources, such as counseling services or crisis hotlines, while also providing support for those who may need assistance accessing these resources.

One might argue whether these topics are appropriate for ELT. However, as Louloudi emphasizes, mental health is crucial when addressing social justice issues. By neglecting the topic because it is too difficult or too controversial for both teachers and students, we "further perpetuate[] the consideration of mental health as a taboo, instead of opening up a conversation to support both students and teachers" (Louloudi, 2024, p. 239). It is also important to note that, according to the 2024 WHO report, "suicide is among the leading causes

of death in people aged 15–19 years.” Moreover, half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14, yet many go unnoticed and, hence, untreated. Among other factors, the main risks, as the WHO highlights, that lead to mental health issues are the pressure to align with peers, the quality of relationships with them, but also “violence (especially sexual violence and bullying)” (WHO, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, *The Catcher in the Rye* continues to be published and is sold to this day. Similarly, the game has achieved significant commercial success: According to the official X (formerly Twitter) account, the game reached 20 million players in 2023 since its release (cf. Life is Strange [@LifeIsStrange], 2023). This may lead to the assumption that the “controversial” aspects of both the novel and the game contribute to their success, as they resonate with a broad audience, demonstrating that these topics are far from niche. Nevertheless, the topics are already present in popular literature, whether in printed or born-digital literature, making it necessary to engage with them. As young adults, in particular, need spaces where mental health can be openly discussed, these works provide an important platform for such conversations. As Becker argues, “[l]iterature has the power of lifting existing stigmata and granting access to the complex phenomenon underneath, so the EFL classroom as a literature classroom can become an emancipatory setting for learners” (Becker, 2024, p. 54). Discussing mental health in ELT, particularly through the examples of *Life is Strange* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, could, therefore, encourage young adults to feel less isolated in navigating these challenges while also equipping them with the tools to critically engage with and deconstruct existing narratives that require further examination. After highlighting the similarities and connections between the novel and the game, I will explore how they can be contrasted and juxtaposed in the following section.

2.4 A closer look II: gender and sexuality

By juxtaposing *The Catcher in the Rye* with *Life is Strange*, we can explore how literature and digital narratives portray gender roles and challenge traditional perspectives, making them powerful tools for critical discussion in the English language classroom.

König et al. (2016), echoing Volkmann’s (2007) observation, note that despite the appearance of equality, the literary canon remains dominated by white, heterosexual men. Texts by female authors or featuring predominantly female or LGBTIQ* perspectives are still rare in A-level curricula, reflecting

persistent heteronormative and sexist tendencies (König et al., 2016, p. 27). As an alternative to *The Catcher in the Rye*, König suggests including works with queer representation (König, 2018, p. 168), which is why I propose supplementing it with *Life is Strange*.

But why should we address gender in our English language classrooms? König et al. (2016) argue that children and teenagers are already exposed to gender norms through family, peer groups, and media, which introduce them to different concepts of gender. However, they also face traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity that shape their lives, creating conflicting gender expectations (König et al., 2016, pp. 19–20). The authors further argue that schools play a “double role of being both an agent of socialization and an agent of education” (p. 20). As an agent of socialization, schools are also agents of societal power and contribute to constructing gender norms and practices. However, as an educational institution, schools should allow and encourage personal and subject-related development. As König et al. argue, “it is part of the educational mandate of schools in Germany to support students in developing fundamental ethical principles, which include respect, justice, tolerance towards others, and gender equality” (2016, p. 21). I fully agree that addressing gender and sexuality in the classroom is essential for promoting social justice in education.

Especially because *The Catcher in the Rye* is a prime example of canon literature authored by a white male, it is important to examine the concepts of gender presented within it. The narrative unfolds from Holden’s male perspective, and while numerous female characters appear, they remain largely marginalized. In fact, throughout the story, Holden objectifies and insults women and girls. However, his relationship with women is further conflicted as he expresses a protective instinct towards their innocence, as seen in his bond with his sister Phoebe and his anger towards Stradlater when he believes he will have sex with his childhood friend Jane (cf. Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 4). Additionally, he criticizes his advisor Luce for insulting a former girlfriend, rejecting the objectification of women by other men (cf. ch. 19, p. 160). Despite these moments of conflict, the novel contains deeply misogynistic elements.

However, König et al. (2016) argue that even though a novel might be blatantly sexist, learners may not recognize these patterns due to their prevalence in cultural products. Students could, therefore, approach the text by analyzing the narrative situation and the representation of characters (König et al., 2016,

p. 28). They further suggest asking students to investigate female representation, for example, which adjectives, phrases, or activities are used to comment on women. Additionally, the authors suggest including a follow-up task in which students move beyond the male perspective to confront this inequality by incorporating the missing female viewpoint (König et al., 2016, p. 28).

To illustrate how König et al.'s (2016) approach can be incorporated into teaching, I would like to highlight a scene that Baldwin (2007, p. 112) suggests could be analyzed to reveal Holden as a problematic narrator. After arriving in New York, Holden goes to a bar and observes three women at a table. Although he describes them as being “around thirty or so,” he still refers to them as “girls.” Throughout the encounter, he judges their appearances and insults them, calling them “ugly” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 10, p. 77), “witches” (p. 78), and stating that they are “giggling like morons” (p. 78) or “stupid” (p. 79). Later, he joins their table, complaining that they were too ignorant to invite him to sit with them. However, Baldwin argues that “Holden here draws on the codes of conventional male behavior in imposing himself uninvited on the space occupied by the women,” making it clear that it is Holden’s behavior, not theirs, that is truly “ignorant” (Baldwin, 2007, p. 113). Learners could rewrite the scene from the perspective of one of the three women, sharing their thoughts with a friend about the encounter. Alternatively, teachers could implement a decision-based narrative branch (cf. Section 2.2.3 of this article) that allows students to explore how one of the girls might have responded to Holden’s behavior, considering various choices and consequences in the process.

Furthermore, I suggest analyzing the concepts of masculinity and manliness portrayed in the novel to foster a comprehensive reflection on gender role construction. Holden’s attitudes toward women and other men provide opportunities to discuss masculinity both in the novel and within the societal context of the 1950s, as Baldwin (2007) argues. This analysis can deepen the students’ understanding of how gender norms influence behavior and relationships in the narrative and beyond. When considering concepts of masculinity in the novel, it is particularly intriguing to examine who is marginalized within this framework and, as a result, excluded from heteronormative perspectives.

In chapter 19, for instance, Holden meets his former mentor Luce and remembers how he used to tell them in school, that

“it didn’t matter if a guy was married or not. He said half the married guys in the world were flits and didn’t even know it. He said you could turn into one

practically overnight, if you had all the traits and all. He used to scare the hell out of us. I kept waiting to turn into a flit or something” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 19, p. 159).

Robinson argues that the scene highlights how, in the 1950s, men who deviated from norms of masculinity were often suspected of being homosexual (Robinson, 2007, p. 73). I would argue further that it not only reveals Holden’s uncertainty regarding his sexual orientation but also demonstrates homophobic tendencies. The term “flit” functions as a derogatory label used to insult individuals based on their sexual orientation or traits that are not “manly” enough to discriminate a targeted group. Holden also describes Mr. Antolini’s attempt on assaulting him as a “flitty pass,” remarking, “even if he was a flit he certainly’d been very nice to me” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 25, p. 214). This reinforces stereotypes of homosexuality as deviant and dangerous, placing blame for inappropriate behavior on the stereotype of gay men as inherently predatory, rather than on Mr. Antolini himself. While I do not wish to downplay the violence and trauma that Holden experiences, the novel’s homophobic undertones might reflect or reinforce social attitudes towards masculinity and manliness, as well as queerness.

Conversely, scholars offering queer readings of the novel argue that Holden’s narrative reflects the struggles of a “repressed gay adolescent who realizes that he lives in a time and place in which same-sex desire is taboo” (Hekanaho, 2007, p. 89; Werner, 2006). Hekanaho argues that Holden, as a teenager in the 1950s, would have struggled to understand his sexual identity amidst the rigid norms of heterosexuality and the prevalent prejudice surrounding same-sex desire. She also points out that Holden’s use of the term “flit” underscores that his fear is not merely of male-male desire but of effeminacy (Hekanaho, 2007, p. 92). He frequently uses terms like “flits” and “perverts” to describe identities that contrast with traditional masculinity, while simultaneously feeling both attracted to and repulsed by diverse gender expressions and sexualities. For example, in chapter 9, Holden observes a person cross-dressing and initially condemns the hotel as being “full of perverts and morons” (Salinger, 2014/1951, ch. 9, p. 68), yet later admits it is “fascinating to watch” (p. 70). Moreover, Holden’s experiences with physical intimacy are confined to violent confrontations with male peers, which demand closeness and engagement, while he avoids deeper physical connections with women. According to Hekanaho (2007) this is why the narrative’s focus predominantly lies on his social and emotional relationships with boys and men, highlighting Holden’s masculine ideals (Hekanaho, 2007, p. 97). Analyzing and discussing these concepts of masculinity and manliness in

teaching could help learners to uncover societal expectations, challenge notions of what is considered being “normal” or socially acceptable, and distinguish marginalized identities. However, a comparative analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Life is Strange* further highlights significant differences in gender representation, prompting critical discussions on how literature can contribute creating more equitable and nuanced portrayals of gender.

In *Life is Strange*, the main protagonists, Max and Chloe, are female characters, allowing us to contrast Holden’s male-centric narrative with the perspectives of two female leads, while also engaging with potential queer representation. By adopting Max’s perspective, in particular, learners can reflect on whether the characters and the narrative itself differ by experiencing the story through a female lens. Following König et al.’s (2016) approach, learners can analyze the narrative situations, character representations, and the adjectives, phrases, or activities used to portray female, male, and queer characters (p. 28), and discuss how these aspects in *Life is Strange* differ from *The Catcher in the Rye*. This comparison may not only highlight the differences in representations but also create opportunities to challenge and confront the prejudices depicted in the novel, particularly regarding queer identities.

In the game, players can choose between a romantic interest in Max’s best friend, Chloe, or a fellow classmate, Warren. However, even if players opt for Warren, some scenes leave Max uncertain whether her relationship with Chloe is purely platonic. This ambiguity allows Max to be seen as a bisexual character, presenting LGBTQ+ representation as a central theme. For example, in episode 3, Chloe dares Max to kiss her, giving players the choice to either “Kiss Chloe” or “Don’t kiss Chloe.” If players choose not to kiss her, Chloe expresses disappointment, and later in episode 4, when Max wishes she had kissed her, Chloe responds, “Oh yeah, now you suddenly want to kiss me? You had your chance.” However, this decision also significantly impacts the game’s ending. Towards the end of the game, all narrative branches lead to a major decision. Due to the butterfly effect caused by Max’s choices, the town and all her friends are put in danger by a storm that is threatening to destroy Arcadia Bay. Players are left with two options: either sacrifice Arcadia Bay, allowing Chloe and Max to move on after the town’s destruction, or sacrifice Chloe, returning to the beginning of the week, where she dies again in the shooting that initially set the events in motion. If the players chose for Max and Chloe to kiss in episode 3, in the end, when the players decide to sacrifice Chloe, she kisses Max passionately. If they have not kissed before, they will either share a hug at the end of the scene or hold hands. This example also

shows how choices in the game impact the overall branching narrative (Sowa & Robinson, 2024).

König et al. (2016) particularly advocate for encouraging discussions on same-sex relationships in the classroom. By comparing both the queer representation in the novel and the game, learners can critically reflect on the personal effects of representation and the harm caused when same-sex relationships are ignored, dismissed, or discriminated; for example, through the question: “How does it affect those in particular for whom such texts could be models of identification because they identify themselves as gay or bisexual?” (König et al., 2016, p. 33). This approach could foster a deeper understanding of queer representation and allows for the deconstruction of prejudices encountered in the novel.

Additionally, this provides an opportunity to discuss female and queer representation in literature and media over time. Given that the book was published in 1951, a lesson could explore the cultural and historical contexts in which it was written. So, in addition to close readings, learners could also explore the novel’s context through a wide reading (König, 2018, p. 153). The novel offers a chance to develop a deeper understanding of the values and norms that might have changed or can be found in literature and media until today (Surkamp & Nünning, 2024, p. 21). In this way, we can highlight that the novel is a cultural product of the 1950s and portrays representations of gender and sexuality that learners may wish to discuss and challenge. Such discussions provide an opportunity to incorporate queer theory into the English language classroom. As Merse (2020) argues, queer theory in ELT deals with sexual and gender identities and thus also addresses issues of norms and power structures (Merse, 2020, pp. 109–110). The goal of integrating queer theory into critical language education is to make LGBTQ+-related identities visible and to encourage a deeper examination of the normative models through which biological sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed (Merse, 2020, p. 111). This approach could also encourage learners to remain critical of the game so that *Life is Strange* is not viewed as a utopian example of how gender structures should function. It is essential to remind students that they are engaging with a cultural product that reflects its own issues and limitations, which can be critically examined, challenged, and transformed.

The character of Kate Marsh, for example, serves as a powerful case study to explore the implications of female sexuality and societal expectations. As mentioned before, Kate was severely bullied. At a party, Kate was drugged by Nathan. Later, a video surfaces showing Kate kissing strangers, an act that

starkly contrasts with her established identity as a shy girl. As the video goes viral on campus, Kate faces humiliation, and her classmates shame and bully her, labeling the video as “porn” and writing derogatory comments on her dorm door (cf. ep. 2). In the game, the players have to decide whether to support Kate and encourage her to report the incident to the police or dismiss Kate’s story. This scene illustrates how female sexuality is often weaponized for humiliation and exemplifies victim-blaming instead of emphasizing the need to confront issues of consent and sexual violence. However, this could also lead to uncomfortable discussions in class, as not all learners may align with Kate’s character or actions. I will address this aspect in more depth in section 2.5 of this article. Nevertheless, focusing on this episode could foster significant discussions about sexuality, gender expectations, consent, and bullying. By further comparing these concepts to those presented in *The Catcher in the Rye*, students may realize that some aspects of these issues have not changed as drastically as they might have initially believed but can still be seen today.

Juxtaposing both media allows us to examine how characters are portrayed and developed in both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Life is Strange*, enabling students to gain insights into the evolution of gender roles and norms surrounding sexuality over time. Additionally, this comparison highlights that both works are cultural products of their respective times. Thus, this approach may encourage students to recognize these formations as socially and historically constructed, fostering a deeper understanding of how cultural narratives shape contemporary culture and perceptions of identity, showing that interventions are needed.

2.5 Embracing discomfort in ELT

Fostering discussions around sensitive topics in the classroom can be both challenging and essential for advancing social justice in education. Especially by addressing issues tied to power structures, such as gender, racism, sexuality, or mental health, emotional responses might be provoked (Louloudi, 2024, p. 241). The themes explored in this article may already be perceived as controversial. By engaging with these topics in the classroom, learners might be confronted with their own biases, and reflecting on them may unpack our own normative ways of thinking. However, as Louloudi (2024) emphasizes, drawing on the work of Boler and Zembylas (2003), and Ayers (2014), embracing this underlying discomfort can be an opportunity to work toward social justice goals. A key element of creating critical discomfort in

the classroom, according to Louloudi (2024), is centering students' perspectives and possibly joining them as an equal participant by sharing personal reflections, if appropriate. This approach aims to create an environment where students feel "safer" to engage with challenging topics that provoke discomfort while fostering critical reflection without overwhelming them (Louloudi, 2024, pp. 241–244).

However, as Ayers (2014) argues, creating a "safe space" for learners, where all opinions are honored, can sometimes undermine social justice goals. The issue lies in the fact that "equal is not necessarily fair in situations of unequal power" (Ayers, 2014, p. 1). Implementing critical discomfort, therefore, involves letting debates unfold and sharpening them when significant differences emerge (Ayers, 2014, p. 3). For instance, it is the teacher's responsibility to challenge racist or queerphobic remarks, but Ayers strongly advises against simply silencing these utterances. Silencing such remarks might lead students to internalize them or find alternative ways to express similar views. For instance, Ayers argues that "the general approach of privileged people in the presence of the oppressed is to avoid saying something that will be offensive" (Ayers, 2014, p. 3). Instead, Ayers stresses the importance of engaging with the underlying issues, exploring where these remarks come from, and addressing them constructively. Silencing or punishing a student merely reinforces a system of judgment and regulation, returning the teacher to an authoritarian role and does not foster a change in thinking or perspective. Ayers, therefore, advocates for struggling, and examining together to encourage engagement, reflection and learning (Ayers, 2014, pp. 2–3).

Similarly, in the concept of "pedagogies of discomfort" by Boler and Zembylas (2003), discomfort is seen as essential for dismantling privileges, biases, and societal norms. The authors argue that, as students critically evaluate their worldviews, they may experience feelings of anger, grief, disappointment, or resistance. The pedagogy of discomfort seeks to examine these emotional responses to analyze how they are embedded in students' everyday lives. This approach allows them to uncover unconscious privileges or biases tied to power structures to ultimately foster sociopolitical awareness (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, pp. 107–108). As Louloudi (2024) further argues, embracing discomfort and emotional labor is, therefore, vital for critical literacy and advancing social justice goals in education. By reflecting on and challenging biases, teachers and learners can collaboratively deconstruct power structures and transform societal norms, particularly in language education settings (Louloudi, 2024, p. 242). Critical discomfort, thus, operates as both a method

and a topic of analysis, inviting students to explore their emotions and reactions while critically engaging with societal issues.

Nevertheless, Louloudi highlights that discussing topics such as mental health in the classroom comes with significant risks. For example, if students share personal experiences of mental health struggles, teachers may feel obliged to help or treat these issues. While this instinct is understandable and reflects a natural desire to support students, the author emphasizes that “teachers are not and cannot be seen as mental health professionals; the aim of such a lesson plan is to reinforce the deconstruction of biases and not give medical advice” (cf. Louloudi, 2024, p. 250). Allowing critical discomfort in the classroom does not diminish the extensive preparation required from teachers; rather, it demands significant effort from both teachers and learners. However, it creates opportunities to shape discussions where everyone can learn from one another, engage with “controversial” societal issues, and collaboratively uncover their roots. In doing so, the classroom ideally becomes a space to challenge and reimagine societal norms, fostering broader equity and understanding.

3 Teaching *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Life is Strange* – methods and approaches for a teaching unit

Throughout this article, I have already suggested a few scenes and examples of how both the novel and the game could be used together for teaching. In the following section, however, I would like to offer practical examples for a potential teaching unit to introduce both media, specifically highlighting the social justice topics of gender, sexuality, and mental health discussed earlier. My approach is based on the framework for critical literacy by Louloudi et al. (2021) to foster democratic learning in English language education. The primary goal of the teaching unit is to critically engage learners with themes mentioned above, in both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Life is Strange*, using an oscillating approach to encourage to alternate between the novel and the game to help students draw parallels between the two works and their themes. This approach aims to keep both narratives in conversation, foster critical thinking, enhance media literacy, and empower learners to use their insights to create narratives that challenge injustice and promote more inclusive representations.

First, I would like to address some legal and organizational aspects of the game *Life is Strange*. In Germany, the USK (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle) rates the game as suitable for ages 12 and up, while PEGI (Pan

European Game Information) classifies it for ages 16 and above. Given the sensitive topics the game addresses, Becker (2021) suggests playing it with older students, such as those in *Sekundarstufe II*. Alternatively, teachers may opt to focus only on the first episode, where the more challenging themes are less prominent, as episodes two and onward delve deeper into heavier topics (Becker, 2021, p. 87). The first episode is also available for free online, yet this approach would limit the lesson plan's focus on mental health. From a financial perspective, the teacher needs to decide whether to buy the game for classroom use only or have students share the cost and play in small groups. Each episode takes about 1–2 hours to complete, so it is important to consider the time constraints. Becker notes that the game is not too demanding and could be played easily, even by inexperienced gamers, at home (Becker, 2021, p. 87). However, I would advise against allowing students to play episodes 2 and 3 alone at home. Otherwise, it would be essential to provide clear guidance on how far students can progress in the narrative without encountering potentially triggering content.

The proposed teaching unit begins with a shared *pre-reading/-playing activity* in which both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Life is Strange* are introduced. The teacher presents the covers of both works, along with a screenshot of the *Life is Strange* Easter egg referencing the novel (cf. Section 2.2.3 of this article). Additionally, students receive fact sheets for both protagonists (Becker already suggested a fact sheet for *Life is Strange*; cf. 2021, p. 90). They then brainstorm responses to the following questions: “How might these two works be connected despite their different media and time periods?” and “What overlapping issues could they explore?” The teacher also introduces core themes, such as the genre (coming-of-age), gender, sexuality, and mental health, if these have not already been addressed during the brainstorming phase. This activity aims to spark curiosity about both works and highlights that students will engage equally with both media. The goal is also to inspire interest in the social concepts that will be explored throughout the unit.

For the *pre-playing activity*, learners work in small groups and receive one of the first ten diary entries written by the protagonists during the initial days of the story. A *Fandom* webpage lists all the diary entries, including varying content for different narrative paths; this webpage could be shared and explored with the learners (*Life Is Strange Wiki, Max's Diary*, n.d.). Since the entries are longer than the brief narrative chunks during the game, it allows students to reread them later if the game moves too quickly to fully engage with the content. In their small groups, students will read and discuss questions such as, “Why might life be strange for Max, and what struggles could

she face as a young woman?”. Following this discussion, learners will create a short diary entry from Max’s perspective, encouraged to make predictions about the overall plot and to express these in their entries. This activity should help students to connect with the character and gain insight into someone else’s world and thoughts.

In the *while-playing activity*, learners play *Life is Strange* in small groups, exploring the decisions and paths available in episode one. They are asked to test various choices and record their outcomes in a tree diagram; paths they did not take can be left blank for now. The groups should be further encouraged to discuss controversial decisions and their potential consequences. As Becker suggests, comparing decisions in class can be insightful, as some students may wish to make more reckless choices while others might aim to avoid conflicts (Becker, 2021, p. 91). Alternatively, the game could be played collectively in class, utilizing a *Menti* tool as a voting system to engage all students in making collective decisions for the protagonist. The teacher or a dedicated student then needs to enter the decisions but pauses at critical moments to discuss how these choices may affect Max’s relationships with other characters, or her own journey. The overall goal is to empower students to take control of Max’s narrative while the themes unfold in her life. This approach encourages students to negotiate different possibilities and outcomes, fostering a deeper understanding of the character’s experiences and the consequences of their choices.

For the *post-playing activity*, students come together in a group puzzle to discuss and compare their tree diagrams. This collaborative discussion allows them to fill in the elements they did not experience in the game and discover how different choices affected the overall outcomes. Even if some branches remain blank, this still represents a valuable learning opportunity. This activity enables students to analyze and understand the narrative structure of the game, while the tree diagram visually represents the overall branching narrative (Becker, 2021, p. 91). Alternatively, if the game is played collectively in the classroom, the episode concludes with an overview of the choices made by the player, along with statistics comparing those choices to other players worldwide. Students could then actively research alternative outcomes by watching “let’s plays” on *YouTube* to fill in their tree diagrams, sharing their findings in a group puzzle to gather additional insights.

The further *pre-reading activity* leverages the popularity of *The Catcher in the Rye* by highlighting its presence in various pop culture moments beyond the game, which can spark the students’ interest in reading the novel. For

example, the novel is referenced in episode 2 of season 14 of *South Park* (Parker, 2010). In this episode, the characters are excited to read the novel because their teacher announces it has just been unbanned by the school board, urging them to approach the controversial text maturely. However, later in the episode, Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny feel tricked into reading the book, as they do not perceive it as controversial at all. Inspired by this, the boys write their own novel, aiming to be particularly offensive and vulgar. Two brief snippets on *YouTube*, each about a minute long, are available to effectively introduce the topic and the episode (cf. aight, 2021; GoodFor-Lough, 2021). Watching the short snippets could be followed by a brief research phase, exploring the novel's historical background and possible reasons behind its censorship so the students get a first glimpse into why the book addresses "controversial" themes. Alternatively, or additionally, the teacher could inform the class about the novel's banning from schools across the U.S. and share a few quotes or short scenes that highlight its controversial themes, such as one of the scenes referenced in this article. With both options, learners could brainstorm what they think makes the novel "controversial" and what their expectations are, especially after playing the game. The teacher could also refer back to the responses from the initial *pre-reading/-playing activity*, allowing learners to build on their earlier assumptions.

Learners then read the novel's first chapters for the *while-reading activity*, while focusing on the narrative situations in both the game and the novel. They explore their roles as readers and players, considering the effects of these narrative perspectives on their perceptions of the characters. Students analyze which adjectives, phrases, or actions are used to describe characters, which encourages them to further investigate anything they might perceive as "controversial." Throughout their reading and gameplay, learners should be encouraged to note and track their findings in a character map. An online mind-mapping tool can facilitate this process, allowing students to add more information as they progress through the novel. This character map serves as a reading log but is more character-centered, emphasizing the analysis of representations of characters. Since the novel is narrated from Holden's perspective and the game uses a limited third-person narrative, both protagonists would occupy the center of the character mind map. From there, students would note which characters are introduced and how they are described, recording the adjectives or actions associated with them, as well as observations about relationships, themes, and conflicts. The character map serves two main functions throughout the teaching unit: first, during a later reflection phase, students will actively compare how gender representations and mental health issues are portrayed in both the novel and the game; second, it will serve as a

foundation for their *long-term post-playing/-reading activity*, which will be discussed later.

In the *post-reading activity*, learners are further encouraged to critically reflect on the representation of a character by creating a more just portrayal. In one of the novel's early chapters, the protagonist, Holden, fights with his roommate, Stradlater, about Jane Gallagher. Jane does not appear in the narrated scenes, so she never gets to speak or actively engage with anyone; readers rely solely on Holden's perspective to understand her character. Therefore, students are asked to revisit their character map to review how Jane is described and presented and to now give her a voice in her own storyline. For instance, learners could be encouraged to write her into the game *Life is Strange*. Learners would need to consider then how they would describe her in her own story and what possible choices and outcomes they would like to assign to her, particularly in her interactions with Stradlater and Holden. This activity aims to reflect on and challenge the material, fostering a deeper understanding of character representation and providing learners with narrative agency. It further prepares students for the *long-term post-reading/-playing activity*, encouraging them to engage thoughtfully with themes of representation and choice in both works.

For the *long-term post-reading/-playing activity*, learners are encouraged to think about their narrative agency on a larger scale as they work in groups to create their own branching narrative about a young adult navigating life in the 2020s. Drawing on their insights from both the novel and the game, students can write a story that aims to portray more just representations, unlike the satirical approach taken in the *South Park* episode. They can develop characters that challenge conventional gender roles, represent diverse sexual orientations, or explore mental health struggles, all while addressing societal expectations and dilemmas. The character maps created earlier will assist in this process. As students gather more details for their character maps, they will identify story elements, attributes to include, and stereotypes or traits they wish to challenge within their narratives. Both the book and the game will serve as inspiration for adapting their stories, creating new paths, and developing meaningful dilemmas. Toward the end of the project, students will present or perform their branching narratives in groups and evaluate their work. This activity aims to empower learners since they not only reflect on how we as society can challenge unjust representations, but they also grow their narrative competence, while fostering their ability to craft engaging and meaningful stories to further encourage social justice for young adults.

4 Conclusion and outlook

By focusing on the literary classic *The Catcher in the Rye* alongside the game *Life is Strange*, this article explored how integrating these two media in the English language classroom can introduce students to diverse narrative forms beyond the traditional linear novel. The game, as a form of born-digital literature, offers a more interactive and immersive storytelling experience, helping students engage with new formats and prepare them for the digital landscape. Additionally, combining these works creates opportunities for meaningful discussions on gender, sexuality, and mental health – topics that are integral to Social Justice Education.

This article further aimed to provide practical examples for facilitating these important conversations in the classroom. The teaching approach suggested here is meant to empower learners by engaging them with thought-provoking content that is relevant for their everyday lives, to prepare them for newer formats of narratives and to encourage them to create their own. After all, education is about helping learners shape their identities inside and outside of the classroom and about encouraging them to envision and create a more just society. This approach first and foremost aims to highlight the importance of student-centeredness in Social Justice Education. By embracing students' stories, voices, insights and ideas, teachers and students, as co-learners, can create an environment that fosters not only deconstruction, but also of empowerment, enabling them to take collective action for social justice. This may be just a small step toward Social Justice Education, but it reminds learners that they do not have to be passive observers. Their voices, actions, and decisions shape outcomes – and they matter.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Eleni Louloudi and Peter Schildhauer. Without your dedication, insightful input, and encouragement, this article would not have taken its present shape. Your commitment to fostering meaningful dialogue through the organization of the Student-Teacher Conference *Teachers for Social Justice 2024* and beyond not only inspired us but also empowered us to take an active role in advocating for more just English language education.

Table of Figures

Fig. 1: *Life is Strange*. Dontnod Entertainment and Deck Nine, 2015, Episode 2, © Square Enix.

Fig. 2: Mitchell, M. (2019, July 29). *First-edition cover of The Catcher in the Rye (1951) by the American author J. D. Salinger*. Wikipedia. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Catcher_in_the_Rye_\(1951,_first_edition_cover\).jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Catcher_in_the_Rye_(1951,_first_edition_cover).jpg)

Fig. 3: *Life is Strange*. Dontnod Entertainment and Deck Nine, 2015, Episode 3, © Square Enix.

References

- aight (Username). (2021, June 7). *Catcher in the Rye – South Park* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSvb51ukrfA>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Ayers, R. (2014). Critical Discomfort and Deep Engagement Needed for Transformation. *Democracy & Education*, 22 (2), 1–4.
- Baldwin, C. (2007). “Digressing from the point”. Holden Caulfield’s women. In S. Graham, *J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye. A Routledge Study Guide* (pp. 109–118). Routledge.
- Becker, D. (2021). *Videospiele im Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Narr Francke Attempto.
- Becker, D. (2024). We Got a Match! Examining Potential Connections between English Language Teaching and Mental Health Education. In C. Ludwig, T. Summer, M. Eisenmann, D. Becker & N. Krüger (Eds.), *Mental Health in English Language Education* (pp. 47–60). Gunter Narr. <https://doi.org/10.24053/9783381114627>
- Becker, D., Kersten, S., Ludwig, C., Schildhauer, P. & Stadler-Heer, S. (2024). Born-Digital Text in English Language Teaching. The State of Play. In S. Kersten & C. Ludwig (Eds.), *Born-Digital Texts in the English Language Classroom* (pp. 1–29). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800414815-002>
- Boler, M. & Zembylas, M. (2003). Discomforting Truths. The Emotional Terrain of Understanding. In P.P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change* (pp. 107–130). Routledge.
- Booth, W.C. (2005). Foreword. In K.E. Bohlin (Ed.), *Teaching Character Education through Literature. Awakening the Moral Imagination in Secondary Classrooms* (pp. i–ii.). Routledge.

- Dontnod. (2015). *Life Is Strange*. Dontnod Entertainment and Deck Nine.
- GoodForLaugh (Username). (2021, February 1). *South Park – Cartman “I JUST READ A BOOK FOR NOTHING!!”* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaK8jPA3ncM>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Graham, S. (2007). *J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye. A Routledge Study Guide*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496015>
- Hekanaho, P.L. (2007). Queering Catcher. Flits, Straights, and Other Morons. In S. Graham, *J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye. A Routledge Study Guide* (pp. 89–97). Routledge.
- Hisbrokenbutterfly (Username). (2020, January 12). The Catcher in the Rye and Life Is Strange. *Strange Dark Stories*. <http://www.strangedarkstories.com/2019/12/the-catcher-in-rye-and-life-is-strange.html>; last accessed: 13.09.2024.
- König, L. (2018). *Gender-Reflexion mit Literatur im Englischunterricht. Fremdsprachendidaktische Theorie und Unterrichtsbeispiele*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20556-0>
- König, L., Lewin, S. & Surkamp, C. (2016). What Does It Mean to Teach about Gender? In D. Elsner & V. Lohe (Eds.), *Gender and Language Learning. Research and Practice* (pp. 19–38). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Life Is Strange Wiki. Choices and Consequences*. (n.d.). Fandom.com. https://life-is-strange.fandom.com/wiki/Choices_and_Consequences; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Life Is Strange Wiki. Max’s Diary*. (n.d.). Fandom.Com. https://life-is-strange.fandom.com/wiki/Max%27s_Diary#Kissed_Chloe; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Life Is Strange Wiki. References (Life Is Strange)*. (n.d.). Fandom.Com. [https://life-is-strange.fandom.com/wiki/References_\(Life_is_Strange\)](https://life-is-strange.fandom.com/wiki/References_(Life_is_Strange)); last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Life Is Strange [@LifeIsStrange]. (2023, November 23). *Happy Thanksgiving Everyone! Something We Are Very Grateful for – The Original Life Is Strange Has Hit over 20 Million Players!* [Video attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/LifeIsStrange/status/1727703814449598789>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Louloudi, E. (2024). “But, Are You Really Fine?” Reconstructing Mental Health through a Critical Literacy Lesson Developed by Pre-Service Teachers of English. In C. Ludwig, T. Summer, M. Eisenmann, D. Becker, & N. Krüger (Eds.), *Mental Health in English Language Education* (pp. 239–257). Gunter Narr. <https://doi.org/10.24053/9783381114627>

- Louloudi, E., König, L. & Schildhauer, P. (2021). Developing Critical Cultural and Digital Literacy. *PraxisForschungLehrer*innenBildung*, 3 (3), 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.11576/PFLB-4357>
- Ludwig, C. (2021). Teaching Literature with Digital Media. In C. Lütge & T. Merse (Eds.), *Digital Teaching and Learning. Perspectives for English Language Education* (pp. 207–230). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Ludwig, C., Sambanis, M. & Hartisch, G. (2024a). #Literature Goes Digital. Digital Transformations in the ELT Literature Classroom. In S. Kersten & C. Ludwig (Eds.), *Born-Digital Texts in the English Language Classroom* (pp. 247–269). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800414815-017>
- Ludwig, C., Summer, T., Eisenmann, M., Becker, D. & Krüger, N. (2024b). Mental Health in English Language Education – An Introduction. In C. Ludwig, T. Summer, M. Eisenmann, D. Becker, & N. Krüger (Eds.), *Mental Health in English Language Education* (pp. 9–30). Gunter Narr. <https://doi.org/10.24053/9783381114627>
- Lütge, C., Merse, T., Owczarek, C. & Stannard, M. (2019). Crossovers: Digitalization and Literature in Foreign Language Education. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9 (3), 519–540. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssl.2019.9.3.5>
- Lütge, C., Merse, T. & Stannard, M. (2021). Digital Textualities. Innovative Practices with Social Media, Digital Literatures and Virtual Realities. In C. Lütge & T. Merse (Eds.), *Digital Teaching and Learning. Perspectives for English Language Education*. Narr Francke Attempto.
- McCrum, R. (2015, February 2). The 100 Best Novels. No 72 – The Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger (1951). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/02/100-best-novels-catcher-in-the-rye-jd-salinger-holden-caulfield>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Merse, T. (2020). Queere Interventionen in die Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik. Theoretische Überlegungen und praxisorientierte Implementationen. In D. Gerlach (Ed.), *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik. Grundlagen, Ziele, Beispiele* (pp. 107–124). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Opitz, B. (2024). Promoting Digital Media Competences by Addressing Cyberbullying in the EFL Classroom. In C. Ludwig, T. Summer, M. Eisenmann, D. Becker & N. Krüger (Eds.), *Mental Health in English Language Education* (pp. 195–208). Gunter Narr. <https://doi.org/10.24053/9783381114627>
- Parker, T. (Writer & Director). (2010, March 24). The Tale of Scrotie McBoogerballs (Season 14, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In V. Chatman, E. Sough,

- B. Howell, A. Beard & J. Shih (Producers), *South Park*. South Park Studios, Comedy Central.
- Robinson, S. (2007). Masculine Protest in The Catcher in the Rye. In S. Graham, *J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. A Routledge Study Guide* (pp. 69–76). Routledge.
- Salinger, J.D. (2014/1951). *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Sowa, A. & Robinson, R. (2024, June 15). Life is Strange: Every Ending Explained. *CBR*. <https://www.cbr.com/life-strange-ending-explained/>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- Surkamp, C. & Nünning, A. (2024). *Englische Literatur unterrichten 1. Grundlagen und Methoden*. Klett Kallmeyer.
- Urtasun, R.F. (2021). Literature and Practical Wisdom. An experience with The Catcher in the Rye. In E. Brooks, E. Cohen De Lara, Á. Sánchez-Ostiz & J.M. Torralba, *Literature and Character Education in Universities* (pp. 137–152). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003162209-8>
- Volkman, L. (2007). Gender Studies and Literature Didactics: Research and Teaching – Worlds Apart? In H. Decke-Cornill & L. Volkman (Eds.), *Gender Studies and Foreign Language Teaching* (pp. 161–184). Gunter Narr.
- Volkman, L. (2023). “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet” – stehen literarische Kanonkonzepte und mit ihnen etablierte Lesarten und didaktische Verfahrensweisen im Englischunterricht vor einer grundsätzlichen Revision? *PFLB – PraxisForschungLehrer*innenBildung*, 5 (3), 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.11576/PFLB-6283>
- Werner, R. (2006). Queer Adolescence. (Homo)sexuality in The Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar. *eSharp*, 6 (II), 1–15.
- WHO (World Health Organisation). (2021). *Adolescent Mental Health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.
- WHO (World Health Organisation). (2024). *Adolescent and Young Adult Health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescents-health-risks-and-solutions>; last accessed: 17.02.2025.

Information on the article

Quotation:

Krjutschkow, V. (2025). “The Catcher in the Rye” Meets “Life is Strange”. A Dialogical Exploration of Narrative Structures and Social Justice in Student Realities. *PFLB – PraxisForschungLehrer*innenBildung*, 7 (2), 175–208. <https://doi.org/10.11576/pflb-7881>

Online accessible: 28.03.2025

ISSN: 2629–5628



Dieses Werk ist freigegeben unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY-SA 4.0 (Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen). Diese Lizenz gilt nur für das Originalmaterial. Alle gekennzeichneten Fremdinhalte (z.B. Abbildungen, Fotos, Tabellen, Zitate etc.) sind von der CC-Lizenz ausgenommen. Für deren Wiederverwendung ist es ggf. erforderlich, weitere Nutzungsgenehmigungen beim jeweiligen Rechteinhaber einzuholen. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>