

"Cuz She is My Daughter": How Players Navigate Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

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INTRODUCTION

The contradiction between one's beliefs and actions is referred to as cognitive dissonance. In video games, where beliefs are imposed by game systems, this dissonance manifests as ludo-narrative dissonance: storytelling contradicts game mechanics. Existing research focuses on game designers' perspectives on avoiding or utilizing ludo-narrative dissonance in game design, with little attention to the player's role. This study examines players' actions in coping with ludo-narrative dissonance through the analysis of the game *Identity V* (NetEase 2018). It uses ludo-narrative dissonance as a standard to define game practices and character attachment (CA) to analyze players' motivations behind their actions. Additionally, procedural rhetoric is employed to understand the development of character attachment and its impact on game practices.

Ludo-narrative dissonance

The term "ludo-narrative dissonance" was introduced by game developer Clint Hocking (2007) in his critique of the conflict between simulation and narrative in *Bioshock* (2007). Hocking identifies contrasting signals within the game's ludic and narrative structures, suggesting that such inconsistencies should be avoided. Seraphine (2016) provides a comprehensive review of academic and critical sources discussing ludo-narrative dissonance, identifying three distinct approaches: avoiding dissonance to maintain immersion, introducing emergent narratives to eliminate dissonance, and embracing dissonance for intentional design purposes. However, a close examination of current studies (Hocking 2007; Makedonski 2012; Ballantyne 2015; Seraphine 2016; Howe 2017; Grabarczyk and Walther 2022) reveals a designer-centric focus, with limited exploration of how players cope with dissonance, aside from brief attempts (e.g., Grabarczyk and Walther 2022). Previous studies on player attachment (Lewis et al. 2008; Bopp et al. 2019) shed light on how player behaviour may be influenced or altered.

Character attachment (CA)

Avatars function as a means for players to establish connections with characters, environments, and missions within the game world (Taylor 2002). Understanding the motivation behind behaviours in virtual spaces requires recognizing the significance of the connection between players and avatars. Character attachment (CA) in

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interactive video games is an extension of classic parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956) in non-interactive media. This study utilizes Bopp et al.'s (2019) conceptual framework of character attachment, which categorizes forms of attachment through differing emotional qualities. Bopp et al. describe character attachment as “the sense of liking, connection, and closeness a player feels to any in-game character.” This study uses six out of seven identified forms: (a) Cool and Capable: praising the character’s in-game capabilities; (b) Admired Paragon: admiring the character as a role model; (c) Crush: forming a fascination with the character; (d) Concern for one’s Protégé: feeling concern, worry, or responsibility for the character; (e) Sympathetic Alter Ego: feeling empathy towards the character based on personal experiences; and (f) Trusted Close Friend: treating the character as a friend. The form “Respected Nemesis” is excluded since it does not match the system of Identity V. Types (a), (b), and (c) emphasize the character’s functionality, while (d), (e), and (f) value the character’s emotional qualities.

Procedural rhetoric

Procedural rhetoric helps to understand the dialectical relationship between player behaviour and their relationship with game characters. It deconstructs player behaviour and rationalizes player actions. Originally proposed by Bogost (2006, 2010), procedural rhetoric is an approach to understand how player behaviour is manipulated by the game’s rule set and how games convey and persuade players. Šisler (2017) offers a different perspective, exploring how rules can limit and restrain gameplay, influencing the overall game process and determining possible representations. Thus, procedural rhetoric serves as a lens to determine how rules constrain gameplay experiences and more importantly, how players negotiate with rules, expressing themselves through play.

Methodology

This study examines Identity V, a game where ludo-narrative dissonance occurs: complex background relationships between controllable game characters often contradict the “competitive” game mechanics. The focus is on data about two characters: “Emma Woods” (gardener, daughter, survivor) and “Rio Baker” (Hell Ember, father, killer), who have a family tie but are on different teams. While the “competitive” mechanics incite Rio Baker to kill Emma Woods, the background narration depicts a “father loves daughter” story. However, players often align their actions with the background stories rather than the competitive mechanics. This study employs a mixed-method approach to collect three types of data from NetEase God (“网易大神”), a game community platform: specific game practices aligning with background stories from videos on the platform, comments from these videos, and interview responses from players of these characters. Interview questions focus on players’ play-style motivations and their attitudes towards the characters.

This research utilizes discourse analysis to explore the intertextuality between gameplay and player interactions in Identity V. By examining player actions, video comments, and interview responses, the study investigates how these elements interconnect to shape the player’s gaming experience. The analysis focuses on how these intertextual relationships construct a cohesive narrative experience, highlighting instances where players struggle with story and competitive mechanics. This approach aims to uncover the complex dynamics between game mechanics and narrative engagement, particularly character engagement, in Identity V.

Result

This ongoing research provides preliminary findings based on initial data analyses, revealing the significant role of character attachment in influencing player behaviour. The study indicates that a stronger sense of character attachment significantly affects how players perceive and respond to ludo-narrative dissonance. When players feel a strong identification with their avatars, they are more attuned to the contradictions between the game's narrative and its mechanics. This heightened perception of dissonance compels players to align their in-game actions with the narrative logic rather than the competitive game mechanics. For instance, players who feel a deep attachment to characters like Gardener, based on concern for one's Protégé (Bopp et al. 2019) and Hell Ember, based on crash or concern for the Gardener's Protégé, are more likely to act in ways that reflect the characters' background stories, such as a father-daughter relationship, even if it contradicts the game's competitive objectives. This finding underscores the importance of character attachment in shaping player experiences and highlights the complex interplay between narrative and gameplay. As the research progresses, further analysis will further explore how different forms of character attachment influence player behaviour.

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BIO

Mao Xuanyi is an undergraduate student majoring in Media and Communication at the Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College. She is interested in the study of new media, the media that she currently studies is the video game. Her areas of interest include but are not limited to gender representation, para-social relationship and fan cultures in video games. In her spare time, she is an avid player of various video games, with a particular interest in Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, such as Honor of Kings, Identity V and Splatoon.

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