

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

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## Keywords

Ludo-narrative dissonance, Performance, Procedural rhetoric, Intertextuality

## INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how players navigate ludo-narrative dissonance, the conflict between a game's narrative and mechanics, through performative strategies in *Identity V* (NetEase 2018). While existing research prioritises designer-centric approaches to dissonance (Hocking 2007; Seraphine 2016), this work centres player agency, analysing how players reinterpret narrative-mechanical tensions using performance theory (Gaut 2010) and procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2010; Šisler 2017).

## Ludo-Narrative Dissonance and Player Agency

Ludo-narrative dissonance, coined by Hocking (2007), describes contradictions between a game's story and rules. Hocking identifies contrasting signals within the game's ludic and narrative structures, suggesting that such inconsistencies should be avoided. Prior scholarship emphasises designer strategies to avoid, resolve, or leverage dissonance (Seraphine 2016). 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. Grabarczyk and Walther (2022) briefly acknowledge player-driven narratives, but systematic analyses remain scarce. This gap underscores the need to reframe dissonance as a site of player negotiation, where mechanics and narrative are reinterpreted through performance.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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## Performance Theory in Games

Building on Butler's (1997) notion of identity as performative iteration, Huuhka (2024) conceptualises in-game performance as "counterplay": creative practices that reinterpret rules without altering them. Such performances align with procedural rhetoric, which examines how rules constrain and shape meaning (Bogost 2010; Šisler 2017). Gaut's (2010) framework categorises performance into compliant and interpretative. Compliant performance refers to actions that must be performed for performance to be recognized as part of the work. Interpretative performance involves generating display that goes beyond the necessary elements in work to "suggest or ground a critical interpretation" (Gaut, 2010: 145). This duality offers a lens to analyse how players negotiate dissonance, either reinforcing mechanical objectives or subverting them to align with narrative.

## Methodology

The study focuses on *Identity V*, an asymmetrical multiplayer game where ludo-narrative dissonance arises between characters' backstories and competitive mechanics. The analysis centres on two linked characters: "Gardener" (survivor) and "Hell Ember" (hunter), who share a father-daughter narrative but are adversaries in gameplay. Data was collected from three Chinese platforms: NetEase God, Little Red Book, Bilibili, including videos, images, and text posts with comments, referencing both characters. Discourse analysis examined how players' actions and interactions reshape narrative-mechanical tensions.

## Result

Preliminary findings demonstrate that players employ both compliant and interpretative performances to navigate dissonance, illustrating dynamic negotiations between procedural rhetoric and agency.

### *Compliant Performance*

Players engaging in compliant performance align their actions strictly with the competitive game mechanics, prioritising gameplay objectives. For instance, Hell Ember players strategically eliminate survivors, including the Gardener. Similarly, Gardener players focused on survival tactics. This resonates with Šisler's (2017) argument that procedural rhetoric directs player behaviour toward specific outcomes. However, the presence of ludo-narrative dissonance prompts a subset of players to transcend compliance, engaging in more interpretative forms of play.

### *Interpretative Performance*

Players exhibiting interpretative performance deviate from strict compliance to align their in-game actions honour the father-daughter narrative. For example, some Hell Ember players deliberately avoid eliminating the Gardener, even in competitive matches, prioritising the preservation of the narrative bond overachieving game objectives. These players often use symbolic gestures, such as the "spin", "raise a hand" or using the "Family's

Hug” interaction, to communicate affection, while Gardener players reciprocate with similar gestures, creating a shared performative dialogue within the game. These acts, while mechanically non-essential, created narrative coherence, exemplifying Huuhka’s (2024) “counterplay” and Gaut’s (2010) interpretative layer. By integrating narrative-driven actions into their gameplay, players expand the procedural rhetoric of the game, subverting its mechanical objectives to prioritise narrative cohesion. These performances also challenge the prevailing critique of ludo-narrative dissonance as a design flaw (Hocking 2007; Seraphine 2016), demonstrating its potential to inspire emergent play practices and deepen narrative engagement.

### *Interaction outside the game: conflict and negotiation*

The compliant and interpretative performances are not isolated acts but active interactions within the game community. Discussions on “how to play games directly ” reflect conflict and negotiation, creating a dynamic community discourse.

When examining conflicts, for example in one post where the Hell Ember player deliberately avoids eliminating the Gardener while the Gardener tries to “win the game ” by saving her teammate, players who prioritise the narrative bond criticised the Gardener, commenting that “It’s too greedy to win the game instead of ending in a draw”. Meanwhile, players who prioritise competitive mechanics argued that narrative-driven players were not obeying the rules, saying that “Winning is a normal goal for competitive games, and not rescuing teammates is passive gameplay”. These debates reveal players’ cognitive differences regarding the game’s nature — whether prioritising mechanics or narratives.

Despite these differences, players still generate tacit agreements through ongoing negotiation. For example, interpretative performances such as “avoid elimination ” gain legitimacy in casual matches but are blamed in ranked ones. These interactions enrich the game’s meaning-making, expanding Šisler’s (2017) notion of procedural rhetoric—where rules promote possible representation—into a collective framework. They further emphasise players as active participants in coping with ludo-narrative dissonance, generating creative meanings through negotiation with the gameplay and the community.

### *Negotiating Dissonance: Player as Co-Creator*

The findings highlights players as active meaning-makers. While compliant play maintains immersion through rule adherence, interpretative play enriches engagement by embedding narrative logic into mechanics. This duality mirrors procedural rhetoric’s tension between constraint and agency (Šisler 2017), demonstrating how dissonance can inspire emergent storytelling. For instance, symbolic gestures (e.g., Hell Ember guiding Gardener to victory) reinterpreted competitive matches as collaborative dramas, expanding the game’s expressive possibilities.

By reframing ludo-narrative dissonance through performance theory, this study challenges designer-centric perspectives, positioning players as co-creators who transform contradictions into generative sites of play.

Compliant and interpretative performances coexist, reflecting diverse engagement modes: some players prioritise mechanical mastery, others narrative resonance. This spectrum underscores the need to re-conceptualise dissonance beyond design critiques, recognising its role in fostering player creativity. By embracing dissonance as a dynamic interplay between rules and reinterpretation, scholars, and designers can better understand games as collaborative storytelling spaces.

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