

# Conceptualising Teleological Dissonance

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of *teleological dissonance*, describing a semiotic conflict between game-afforded goals and end-game conditions. Drawing on Seraphine's groundwork (2016), this proposed revision of the notion "ludonarrative dissonance" – originally coined in an (in)famous blog post by Hocking (2007) – is motivated by a) the latter's lack of coherence; and b) the latter's apparent negative connotations. Indeed, the powerful potentials of dissonance should be of great interest to researchers and designers alike – to whom a teleological approach may prove productive.

In his critique of *BioShock* (2K Games 2007), Hocking (2007) argues that the ideas conveyed by "what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story," respectively, "[seem] to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all." Since then, this "ludonarrative dissonance" has been discussed extensively on various blogs (e.g., Ballantyne 2015; Brislin 2013; Bycer 2017) – less so in academic circles. According to Seraphine (2016), "ludonarrative dissonance" describes a "semiotic mismatch between play and narration" – leading, in turn, to player emersion, or "the sensation of being pulled out of the play experience." As one blogger remarks, however, the notion relies on a "false dichotomy" between narrative and mechanics (Burns 2012).

In his literature review pertaining to this subject, Seraphine (2016) identifies an opposition between "incentives" and "directives" in "narrative and ludic structures" alike. The present study builds on this observation by employing a teleological approach to the question of dissonance in games – assuming that "players have stable and ordered preferences" and "that these preferences are directly determined by the game goals" (Smith 2006, p. 240), i.e., that "players want to achieve the goals of a game" (Smith 2006, p. 6).

For the sake of juxtaposing various phenomena, and to avoid confusion with various typologies of game goals (e.g., Debus 2019), the present study classifies winning and end-game conditions alike as *teloi* (plural of telos), which is to say that both are considered game-afforded *goals*. End-game conditions, however, will only be considered desirable to players that find themselves in a winning position.

By applying a teleological approach, dissonance may pertain to various aspects of game phenomena – not merely the aforementioned dichotomy. Interestingly, the contrasting philosophies Hocking (2007) identifies in his critique of *BioShock* may well be described by way of the teleological approach proposed in this study.

Thus, teleological dissonance should not infer any negative connotations. Indeed, the mere suggestion of a "dissonance" in games should be indicating of the profound

meaning-making capabilities of these phenomena. Nonetheless, the apparent negativity surrounding the topic of ludonarrative dissonance suggests an unhealthy longing for "harmony" between narrative and ludic structures (Seraphine 2016; see also Makedonski 2012; ris11 2013). Indeed, it is often implied that dissonance is inherently defective.

To give an example of the opposite – in addition to how researchers may employ the concept of teleological dissonance for the purpose of analysis – one may consider *Terraforming Mars* (FryxGames 2016). In this board game, players take on the role of gigantic corporations committed to altering the environment of the Red Planet through profitable projects, so as to make it habitable for human life in the years after 2315 AD. By the time the planet's global parameters – as indicated by ocean coverage, oxygen levels and temperature – have reached their separate goals, the game concludes. However, players do not merely accumulate points from their humanitarian effort. Indeed, they are incentivised to increase their power and profits most of all.

As such, the supposed semiotic conflict between the teloi of *Terraforming Mars* is about ideology. One is humanitarian progress (comparable to the modernist belief in scientific progress), and the other is the profit motive – indicating of a (late-)capitalist ideology. The latter is identified in the struggle for income and victory points, while the former, accordingly, is identified in the end-game conditions – the global parameters necessary for human life to flourish. Thus, *Terraforming Mars* may be considered a simulation of late-capitalist society (Jameson 1991).

From this concise analysis, it is evident how the concept of teleological dissonance a) may be employed for the analysis of games; and b) may enrich the player experience of games. Indeed – following Backe's arguments on *cognitive* dissonance – the notion of dissonance may involve a peculiar hermeneutic effect on players, forcing them "to (re-)interpret the structure and nature of the game" (Backe 2018).

Do note that the cognitive effects of dissonance fall outside the scope of the present study. At the presentation, however, I will elaborate on the advantages of the teleological approach.

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