

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Language in narrative media functions not merely as a medium for transferring information. It also serves as a strategic resource, constructing meaning, tension, and ideological positioning (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Further, in pragmatic studies, meaning is often generated implicitly rather than explicitly; audiences must infer the speaker's intentions from contextual cues, shared knowledge, and situational constraints. This phenomenon is known as conversational implicature, which highlights how communicative effectiveness depends on implied, rather than explicit, meaning (Grice, 1975). Building on this, Grice explains that communication is guided by the Cooperative Principle, which maintains that speakers generally make contributions appropriate to the conversation's purpose. This principle is realized through four conversational maxims: quantity (providing the right amount of information), quality (being truthful), relation (being relevant), and manner (being clear and orderly). When a speaker appears to flout or not fully observe one of these maxims, the listener assumes cooperation and searches for an additional, implied meaning beyond the literal utterance. This inferred meaning, termed conversational implicature, is context-dependent, cancellable, and relies on shared background knowledge between speaker and listener (Grice, 1975).

During times of crisis, communication often becomes indirect, vague, or strategically incomplete. Speakers may avoid explicit statements of threat, danger, or intention and instead rely on implication to convey urgency, authority, or coercion. According to Coombs (2015), crisis can be defined as the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes. Furthermore, crisis communication is defined by Coombs as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation.

Therefore, in crisis communication, audience are expected to actively infer meanings based on contextual cues, prior knowledge, and situational urgency.

The expansion of digital media has introduced new communicative environments in which language use is shaped by interactive, narrative, and technological constraints. Among these, video games have emerged as a particularly complex site of linguistic production, as their scripted dialogue is not merely decorative but functions as the primary means through which characters negotiate meaning, build relationships, and respond to conflict. Scholars such as Ensslin (2011) ; Fernández-Vara (2019) have argued that video game dialogue constitutes a distinct discourse domain governed by communicative norms that differ substantially from those of everyday conversation, and that meaning in games is frequently conveyed through implication and inference rather than direct statement. This makes video game dialogue an especially productive object of pragmatic analysis, particularly in narrative contexts where characters operate under the kind of urgency, uncertainty, and institutional pressure that characterize crisis communication.

Zenless Zone Zero is an action gacha game developed by HoYoverse whose primary narrative vehicle is a visual novel-style dialogue system, in which story progression is delivered through extended sequences of scripted character exchanges rather than player-directed choices. Characters in this system speak as insiders who share background knowledge, relational history, and situational awareness, producing utterances that are frequently incomplete, deflective, and contextually loaded rather than transparent, the structural condition that Levinson (1983) identifies as generative of particularized conversational implicature. Furthermore, the game's urban crisis setting produces communicative conditions in which characters navigate institutionally complex and ethically ambiguous situations under pressure, making strategic indirectness a recurring and analytically productive feature of its dialogue. Unlike narrative RPGs whose dialogue systems deliver meaning through explicit player choices and declarative character statements, Zenless Zone Zero places the full weight of narrative meaning on fixed, authored character exchanges, making the linguistic construction of individual

utterances, and the implied meanings they carry, the central site of narrative comprehension and the primary rationale for its selection as the research object of the present study. A full account of the game's generic properties, dialogue architecture, and the comparative basis for its selection over other narrative video games is provided in Section 2.6.

Several studies have examined conversational implicature and crisis communication separately, yet none have brought them together within a video game narrative context. Hassan and Jameel (2023) examined the use of conversational implicature in public health discourse, specifically analyzing how indirect language was employed to manage public emotion during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using Grice's Cooperative Principle as their analytical framework, the study demonstrates that communicators strategically deployed implicature to navigate emotionally volatile and high-stakes situations, allowing them to convey urgency and guidance without triggering panic. While their study confirms the centrality of implicature in crisis communication, it is limited to real-world institutional discourse and does not extend to fictional or narrative-driven crisis settings. Similarly, Igwedibia and Adaoma (2016) analyzed conversational implicature in the political speeches of Barack Obama, focusing on how indirect language was used to construct political positioning and ideological meaning. The study demonstrates how public figures exploit implied meaning to address socially sensitive issues while maintaining rhetorical deniability. However, the study is confined to monologic political discourse and does not examine implicature in interactive or dialogue-driven narrative contexts.

Within game studies, Ip (2011) provides a foundational study of video games as narrative systems, arguing that story meaning in games emerges dynamically through dialogue, player action, and contextual inference rather than through linear storytelling. Although Ip does not explicitly apply a pragmatic framework, the study establishes the theoretical basis for understanding video game dialogue as inferential and interaction-driven, which anticipates later linguistic approaches to implied meaning in game discourse. Building on this, Ensslin (2011) systematically examines how meaning in video games is shaped by dialogue,

narrative design, player interaction, and contextual constraints, positioning games as a distinct discourse domain with unique communicative norms. Ensslin argues that video game dialogue frequently departs from everyday conversational patterns due to narrative urgency and gameplay mechanics, making indirectness and implication central to player comprehension. However, the study does not apply a specific pragmatic theory to its analysis and does not address crisis communication as a distinct communicative condition. Most directly relevant to the present study is Halim (2022), who conducted a pragmatic analysis of maxim flouting in *Genshin Impact*, a narrative RPG also developed by HoYoverse, using Grice's Cooperative Principle as the analytical framework. The study identifies all four types of flouted maxims across the Archon Quest Prologue, finding that the maxim of quantity is flouted most frequently through overstatement. This study is particularly significant as it empirically confirms that conversational implicature and maxim flouting are systematically used in HoYoverse-developed games to support narrative development. However, Halim's study focuses on general narrative dialogue without examining crisis communication or high-stakes narrative moments specifically, and does not integrate crisis response theory as a contextual foundation.

Taken together, these studies reveal both important points of connection and significant gaps that the present research addresses. In terms of similarities, the present study shares with Hassan and Jameel (2023) and Igwedibia and Adaoma (2016) a foundational reliance on Grice's Cooperative Principle as the primary analytical framework for examining how implied meaning is strategically constructed in high-stakes communicative situations. Like these studies, the present research treats conversational implicature not as an incidental feature of language use but as a deliberate communicative strategy that serves specific social and situational functions. The present study also shares with Halim (2022) the application of Gricean maxim analysis to a HoYoverse-developed game, and with Ip (2011) and Ensslin (2011) the theoretical positioning of video game dialogue as a legitimate and analytically productive discourse domain in which meaning is frequently conveyed through inference rather than direct statement. These shared

theoretical and methodological foundations confirm the present study's place within an established body of scholarship.

However, three interconnected gaps distinguish the present research from these existing studies. First, while studies such as Hassan and Jameel (2023) and Igwedibia and Adaoma (2016) confirm the strategic communicative value of implicature in real-world crisis and political discourse, no study has yet examined conversational implicature specifically within crisis communication in a fictional narrative context. Second, while Ip (2011), Ensslin (2011), and Halim (2022) establish video game dialogue as a legitimate site of pragmatic and narrative analysis, existing pragmatic studies of video game language have analyzed general narrative dialogue without foregrounding crisis as a distinct communicative condition. Third, no existing study has applied the full scope of Gricean maxim non-observance alongside Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies as an integrated analytical framework for examining crisis-driven dialogue in a video game narrative. The present study addresses all three of these gaps by analyzing how conversational implicatures are realized through maxim non-observance in the crisis dialogues of *Zenless Zone Zero* Season 2, Chapter 2, and what crisis response strategies those implicatures reflect.

Beyond this academic gap, this study is also motivated by a practical communicative problem specific to *Zenless Zone Zero* as a narrative medium, one whose significance is grounded in evidence drawn from three related levels: the design of the dialogue itself, the nature of player reception, and the character of community engagement with the game's narrative.

At the level of design, the dialogue in *Zenless Zone Zero* is not an incidental byproduct of game development but the product of a deliberately coordinated and institutionally organized creative process. In a behind-the-scenes documentary published on its official channels, HoYoverse's narrative team documented the degree of intentionality that governs the game's communicative construction, detailing how each storytelling format serves a specific narrative function and how writers, storyboard artists, animators, lighting designers, and sound teams collaborate iteratively on every scene to ensure that the intended communicative

effect is achieved (HoYoverse, 2025). This is further reflected in statements by producer Zhenyu Li, who confirmed that from Season 2 onwards, the narrative team would deepen its focus on complex, multidimensional character relationships and long-term story development, signaling a deliberate shift toward communicative layering in which meaning is built through accumulation and implication rather than immediate declaration (Li, as cited in ONE Esports, 2025). These developer communications establish a foundational point for the present analysis: the linguistic and communicative choices embedded in ZZZ's crisis dialogue, including its characteristic reliance on incomplete utterances, deflection, and contextually loaded speech, are the deliberate outcomes of institutional narrative design. They are, in other words, intentional rather than accidental, systematic rather than incidental, and purposive rather than arbitrary. This conclusion is a precondition for treating them as legitimate objects of pragmatic analysis, since it forecloses the interpretation that implied meaning in the dialogue arises from scripting oversights or communicative negligence rather than from strategic design.

At the level of player reception, however, evidence suggests that this intentional communicative design does not always successfully bridge the gap between the implied meanings embedded in the dialogue and the comprehension of players encountering it. Published player reviews of Zenless Zone Zero illustrate a documented tendency to misread the game's communicative register, particularly among players who engage with the narrative without the contextual grounding required to interpret its implied meanings. One reviewer noted that approaching the game without prior contextual knowledge produced a fundamentally distorted understanding of its narrative world, specifically that the game's reliance on implied rather than explicit framing caused the story to be read as a genre it was not (Neumann, 2024). A separate review characterized the game's overall narrative design as resisting clear interpretation, noting that its handling of story ideas does not yield readily to straightforward comprehension (Sharma, 2025). These reception difficulties are further contextualized by the developer's own acknowledgment that the story layer does not retain all players: the deliberate inclusion of a dialogue-skip feature, highlighted by the development team as a

considered design decision rather than a secondary quality-of-life measure, signals awareness that the game's narrative indirectness poses a comprehension and engagement challenge for a portion of its audience (Li, as cited in ONE Esports, 2025). While these player-facing sources do not constitute systematic empirical evidence of comprehension failure and are treated here as illustrative rather than foundational, they collectively indicate that the implied communicative structure of ZZZ's crisis dialogue creates genuine difficulties at the level of reception difficulties whose linguistic origins have not yet been systematically explained.

At the level of community engagement, the comprehension gaps produced by the game's reliance on implied meaning are further evidenced by the character of the discourse that surrounds its narrative within the player community. The ZZZ fanbase is widely noted for its engagement in active speculative interpretation, with community members constructing detailed and often divergent readings of character histories, relationship dynamics, and narrative motivations that the game's dialogue leaves unresolved or deliberately ambiguous (UltimateGacha, 2025). While this interpretive activity reflects genuine audience investment in the narrative, it also illustrates the communicative problem at stake: in the absence of a systematic linguistic account of how implied meaning is generated in ZZZ's crisis dialogues, audiences are left to reconstruct that meaning through assumption and speculation rather than through any principled understanding of the mechanisms that produce it. The gap between the intentionally designed implied meanings in the dialogue and the community's capacity to access those meanings without analytical tools is precisely the practical problem that the present study seeks to address.

Against this background, this study examines how conversational implicatures are realized through maxim non-observance in the crisis dialogues of Zenless Zone Zero Season 2, Chapter 2, and what crisis response strategies those implicatures reflect. The study approaches this investigation by drawing on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Thomas' (1995) theory of maxim non-observance as its primary linguistic framework, identifying instances of flouting, violation, and opting out across the selected dialogue and interpreting the implied meanings these non-observances generate. These implied meanings are subsequently situated

within Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies, allowing the study to examine not only how implicatures are linguistically constructed but also what communicative functions they serve within the crisis narrative. In doing so, this study brings together two analytical frameworks that have not previously been integrated in the analysis of video game dialogue, and applies them to a communicative context, namely crisis-driven narrative discourse in a video game, that remains underexamined in both pragmatic and crisis communication scholarship. It is hoped that the findings will not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how implied meaning operates in digital narrative media, but will also offer practical insight into why players may encounter comprehension difficulties when engaging with crisis-driven dialogue in *Zenless Zone Zero*, and how the linguistic construction of such dialogue shapes the overall narrative experience.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What conversational implicatures are generated through maxim non-observance in the crisis dialogues of *Zenless Zone Zero* Season 2, Chapter 2?
2. What crisis response strategies are reflected through those conversational implicatures?

1.3 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions above, this study aims to:

1. To analyze the conversational implicatures generated through maxim non-observance in the crisis dialogues of *Zenless Zone Zero* Season 2, Chapter 2.
2. To explain what crisis response strategies are reflected through those conversational implicatures.

1.4 Research Significance

This study aims to contribute to linguistic scholarship, particularly in pragmatics, by broadening the application of Grice's theory of conversational implicature to the analysis of crisis-driven narrative discourse in video games. While conversational implicature has been widely examined in everyday conversation, political discourse, and media communication, its application to crisis communication within video game narratives remains limited. By analyzing how conversational implicatures are realized through the full scope of maxim non-observance, encompassing flouting, violation, and opting out in *Zenless Zone Zero* Season 2, Chapter 2, this study extends the analytical reach of Gricean pragmatics beyond its traditional domains and demonstrates how implied meaning operates within interactive and narrative-driven digital media. Furthermore, by integrating Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies as a contextual interpretive framework, this study establishes a cross-disciplinary connection between pragmatics and crisis communication theory, contributing to both fields by demonstrating how linguistic analysis can enrich the understanding of crisis communicative behavior in narrative contexts. The research also contributes to game studies by reinforcing the view that video games constitute a legitimate and complex site of pragmatic and linguistic analysis.

The findings of this study are expected to improve readers' critical understanding of how implied meanings are constructed and interpreted in video game narratives, particularly in situations characterized by crisis and urgency. This research may serve as a reference for students and researchers in the fields of linguistics, pragmatics, crisis communication, and game studies who are interested in the analysis of language use in digital and interactive media. Furthermore, the study may provide insight for game writers and narrative designers into how the strategic non-observance of conversational maxims and the construction of implied meaning support effective storytelling, emotional involvement, and player immersion in crisis-driven narratives.