

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Mayzie Wilkinson

Your school: DigiPen Institute of Technology

Your email: mayziewilkinson@gmail.com

Month/Year you submitted this review: November 2021

Game Title: New Danganronpa V3: Killing Harmony

Platform: PS4/PS Vita/ PC/Nintendo Switch

Genre: Mystery, adventure, visual novel

Release Date: January 12, 2017

Developer: Spike Chunsoft/Team Danganronpa

Publisher: Spike Chunsoft/Nippon Ichi Software

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kazutaka Kodaka

Overview

Sixteen “Ultimate” high school students wake up imprisoned in a school. The stage is set for the third game installment in the Danganronpa series. Like the previous two games, our protagonist wakes up in a classroom - or perhaps more aptly, the inside of a locker. Upon tumbling out, Kaede Akamatsu realizes that she’s isolated from the rest of the world and has no way out of the prison she just awoke in.

“This amazing story will begin for real this time!”

Though in **truth**, it is later revealed that “V3” is an abbreviation for “53.” This is not the third Danganronpa killing game, but the 53rd season of a long-running TV show under the genre of “real **fiction**,” where real people are brainwashed into believing that they’re **fictional** characters - full of fake memories, fake emotions, and fake bonds. Accordingly, this applies to every character that has ever appeared in Danganronpa media over about ten years of games and spin-off media. It was all a grand **fictional** scheme to entertain the masses through fabricated tragedy - both in the game and in real life.

The revelation is understandably crushing to both the characters in the game and the players, who are now forced to face that everything they’ve experienced thus far wasn’t just a **lie**, but a bitter mockery of the emotional attachments they’ve faced thus far. How could a game pull such a shocking twist in its last moments of gameplay? After all... **fiction** is far less important than **reality**... right?

Let the 53rd Killing Game begin...

Characters

- **KAEDE AKAMATSU** 赤松楓 - The Ultimate Pianist. She takes the starring role in the prologue and first chapter of the game. Her unrelenting kindness and courage make her a shining beacon of hope in the early game, despite her borderline-inappropriate bluntness. Before being included in Danganronpa, she was a girl who claimed to have no faith in humanity, a stark contrast to the Ultimate Pianist Kaede. She is framed for killing Rantaro and is executed in the first chapter, transferring the protagonist role to Shuichi.
 - **Player Connection** - Kaede’s confidence mirrors an experienced Danganronpa

player. Likewise, her death signifies to the player that their previous Danganronpa knowledge won't save them in V3.

Kaede Akamatsu

Even after I'm gone...my wish will still be here. So I'm counting on you all! I'm entrusting my wish to every one of you!

- **SHUICHI SAIHARA 最原修一** - The Ultimate Detective. The 'true' protagonist of the game. Timid and unassertive, he lacks self-confidence. Despite his Ultimate talent, he's only solved one case. However, it was such an impressive feat that it earned him the title. As the culprit of the case was arrested, he looked at Shuichi with an agonized expression that taught him the pain that comes with the **truth**. The baseball cap he wears is an attempt to hide his eyes in shame. It also hides the *ahoge* (cowlick) he has, which in the Danganronpa universe is a meta-signifier that only protagonists have. The moment he removes his hat also coincides with when he fully takes on the mantle of the protagonist and therefore begins earnestly chasing after the **truth**. His messy relationship with the **truth** mirrors the game's central themes, and his final decision to believe in his own **truth** acts as a call to action for the player. He survives the killing game.
 - **Player stand-in** - Shuichi follows an emotional arc that is parallel to what a player may experience when playing the game for the first time. After Kaede is gone, the player is left confused and disoriented. They share very similar knowledge; there are only a few scenes that the player may witness but Shuichi cannot. This acts as a gentle balancing act for the player, given that Shuichi is a detective and therefore may have deduced things that the player hasn't. Meanwhile, the additional scenes give the player the benefit of extra knowledge that Shuichi cannot possibly know.

Shuichi **Saihara**

I can't say for certain... but I still believe. But I will fight to prove it. I will fight with everyone. To grasp the hope on the other side of this truth...

- **RANTARO AMAMI 天海蘭太郎** - His talent is unknown, even to him. Easygoing and cool with a 'big brother' vibe, he seems strangely calm about the killing game. He often asks ominous questions, rousing suspicion despite his friendliness. His Ultimate title was gained after he survived the 52nd season of Danganronpa: the Ultimate Survivor. He was then "recycled" into the next killing game as a recurring character, though he was given amnesia to keep the killing game fair. His actual predicament is only discovered by Shuichi in the final chapter of the game and is key to discovering how Danganronpa operates. Rantaro is murdered by Tsumugi when Kaede's plan to kill the mastermind fails.

- **Destruction of the Meta** - There is a plot-essential character with a “???” talent in both preceding Danganronpa games, making the mystery character a series staple by this point. Rantaro being the first death of the killing game is startling for this reason - the audience has become accustomed to the mystery character being a crucial part of the plot, and everything about Rantaro hints that he’s a plot-centric character. His death sets the stage for Kaede’s, informing the player that they’re about to experience a game unique from the others.

Rantaro Amami

My name is Rantaro Amami. I can't remember my Ultimate talent at the moment... But I promise I'm not a bad guy. Nice to meet you.

- **KAITO MOMOTA 百田解斗** - The Ultimate Astronaut. Although, he’s never actually been to space before. Boisterous and perhaps a bit dim, his belief in himself is often much more powerful than anything else he has going on. Though prideful, his willingness to prop others up makes him a magnet for those who lack confidence on their own, like Shuichi and Maki, who he dubs as his “sidekicks.” He agrees to murder Kokichi in an attempt to craft a truly unsolvable murder, thus ending the killing game.
 - **Support Character** - Kaito fits quite neatly into the “best friend” archetype. He very rarely gives Shuichi important clues for solving a murder but is always there for emotional support. The player, who is meant to identify with Shuichi’s experience as a player avatar, can find a sense of security with Kaito that further affirms his support character role. This makes his death all the more powerful for both the player and Shuichi, as their consistent ally is no longer around to support them.

Kaito Momota

Being able to share your burdens with others... That's how you get stronger! Don't hold on to your past forever! You gotta confront it to move on! And I'm gonna help you with that!

- **MAKI HARUKAWA 春川魔姫** - The Ultimate Assassin, though she uses the title of the Ultimate Child Caregiver. Standoffish and harsh, she has built up a harsh exterior after years of brutal assassin work. She eventually falls in love with Kaito after becoming one of his “sidekicks” alongside Shuichi. Tantamount to Maki is her dramatic character growth throughout the game, growing from cold and unapproachable to genuine and kind towards those she trusts. She survives the killing game.
 - **Power of Friendship** - Maki makes a dramatic change from her first appearance

up until her last. She becomes kinder, more genuine, and happier. All of this is thanks to her friendships with Kaito and Shuichi, highlighting the power that **fictional** bonds can have.

Maki Harukawa

Even if everything is fictional... I'll believe in my feelings. If I can't believe in my feelings, then my existence will have no meaning. If we can change reality, then we won't be just fiction... Our lives will have significance. And hopefully... my feelings will have significance, too.

- **KOKICHI OMA** 王馬小吉 - The Ultimate Supreme Leader. He's an impish young man who constantly tells petty **lies** and quickly becomes an outcast in the group due to his cruel antics. Kokichi himself arguably doesn't understand his own feelings, too wrapped up in a wall of **lies** to resemble anything genuine. Though he claims to be a leader of a secret evil organization, it seems as though he's actually the leader of a harmless group of pranksters with an anti-violence pact. He is the victim of an elaborate murder he set up himself, in order to create a crime where neither the victim nor killer could be identified.

- **Foil to Protagonist** - Where Shuichi is shy and polite, Kokichi is bold and rude. Where Shuichi begins to learn the importance of friendship, Kokichi is seemingly incapable of forming genuine bonds with others. About Kokichi, Shuichi remarks: "...I finally saw Kokichi for what he really is. Malice. His entire body, nothing but raw and unfettered malice." He is broken - his actual feelings are debatable, but he struggles to express anything that is **true**. As Shuichi learns to grasp the power of **lies** in the pursuit of a greater **truth** or moral good, Kokichi's **lies** are lost on others. He demonstrates the negative extreme of Shuichi's actions.

Kokichi Oma

H-How could a game...that you're forced to play...be fun...? I had to think this game was fun to survive... I had to lie to myself!"

- **K1-B0 (Keebo)** キーボ - The Ultimate Robot. His talent perfectly summarizes what he is. When others point out his robotic qualities, he denounces them as "robophobic" and threatens to sue. He often struggles with social nuance. Created by a kindly doctor as a "baby," he progressively learned and grew up akin to a human child. However, his superhuman abilities betray that he's nothing like a human teenager. He is actually a unique surrogate character unique to season 53 of Danganronpa, who takes actions based on a viewer poll from the outside world. This manifests in the "inner voice" that acts as

Keebo's moral compass. He sacrifices himself to end the killing game and Danganronpa as a whole.

- **Audience Surrogate** - Where Kaede and Shuichi can both act as player representatives, Keebo represents the broader audience of Danganronpa. This is demonstrated in how Keebo is not quite human, but rather a broader concept of what "human" is. It is also key that Keebo has an *ahoge* (cowlick) like Shuichi and Kaede do, a meta-signifier for a protagonist. In **truth**, this is an antenna that connects him to Team Danganronpa that gives him his "inner voice." Abusing the signifier of an *ahoge* does make him a protagonist - for the entire audience of Danganronpa in this case, rather than how Shuichi and Kaede are the protagonists from the player's individual perspective.

K1-B0

Yes...I wanted to be treated like a real human. A creature of flesh and blood like you all. But I no longer have the luxury of clinging to that wish anymore! My course is clear! I must destroy this academy and end this killing game!

- **TSUMUGI SHIROGANE 白銀つむぎ** - The Ultimate Cosplayer, she is aptly obsessed with anime and manga but describes herself as being a 'plain' person who often blends into the background. She is actually the mastermind of the killing game and a writer for Team Danganronpa. She values an entertaining story above all else, believing that despair is the most gripping thing to include in a narrative. After Shuichi, Maki, Keebo, and Himiko decide to end Danganronpa, she loses her will to live and is killed in the rubble created by Keebo's sacrifice.
 - **Audience Representative** - Where Keebo is meant to be a literal audience surrogate, Tsumugi is perhaps a softer representative of the darker side of the Danganronpa audience. Following the logic that **fictional** "bonds" can be as impactful to someone as a real bond, it's quite grotesque to enjoy watching said characters suffer for the sake of entertainment. Tsumugi poses a disturbing question about why we enjoy Danganronpa, representing one far end of the spectrum.

Tsumugi Shirogane

Well, that's fine... If this is a world without killing games now... I don't want to be a part of it. I have no interest in a world without Danganronpa.

Breakdown

Breaking The Meta

V3 follows a relatively formulaic structure, akin to the previous two games. This lulls the player into a sense of security that is represented by Kaede's positive outlook. The game is introduced with a brief montage of previous Danganronpa media, further enforcing this false confidence in the player - they think that they have control over the situation after playing through the Danganronpa formula twice before. The way that V3 breaks this formula early on is through Kaede's and Rantaro's deaths, both of which destroy previous series conventions and teaches the player that previous rules don't apply in V3.

Active vs Passive Gameplay (Meaningful Choice in a Linear Game)

Danganronpa is heavy on "passive gameplay," where player choice cannot impact the game experience. Given, the player can mash through dialogue at different speeds as a form of enacting agency during long segments of "passive gameplay," but the player can similarly smash their console on the ground as a way to pause the game. Both are valid ways of interacting with the system but are not necessarily meaningful or particularly useful ways of doing so.

Danganronpa's "active gameplay" is where class trials, investigative sequences, and free time come into play. The player can make meaningful choices about how to spend their resources and tackle certain problems. Active Gameplay also gives the chance for the player to lose something of value, most often an in-game resource like health or in-game time.

The majority of V3's narrative is conveyed through passive gameplay, as the game usually follows a visual novel style. Therefore, meaningful choice during active gameplay holds a greater weight compared to other games where active gameplay is more plentiful. Active gameplay is spent in pursuit of the **truth**, be that solving a classmate's murder or becoming closer to fully understanding a classmate's true nature in free time segments.

Fear of The Truth

Despite spending much of the game chasing after the **truth**, V3 continually toys with the idea that **truth** might not be equal to "hope." In fact, **truth** is often what can evoke the greatest despair. The phrase "**Reality** is often stranger than **fiction**" comes from this. Chapter three dives deep into this with the creation of the "Student Council," a cult led by a student known as Angie Yonaga that attempts to seize control of the academy and stop the killing games. However, the

Student Council collapses due to another student - Korekiyo Shinguji's - twisted bloodlust - the **truth** of his true personality being enough to break through the denial that the Student Council perpetuated.

The Fallacy of Hope and Despair

Ambiguity is embedded into every part of V3's narrative. Often, this is the result of union between two strong and seemingly opposing concepts. The duality of hope and despair is used as a motif throughout all Danganronpa media, and V3 is no exception.

Danganronpa characters live in a world that is consumed by despair - death, terror, and betrayal always lurks under the game's cartoonish exterior. The killing game is indeed a 'game.' However, it should be noted that the participants aren't players, but game objects that are used to evoke despair in the "audience." The only real player is the mastermind, who is putting the characters through these miserable situations of their own whims in order to evoke as much despair as possible in the audience.

It is only as the game winds to a close that the survivors begin to realize that they can enact their own agency and become players, not objects - this is defined in the Danganronpa universe as 'hope.' The power to seize one's own destiny, and break free from a system where they can never truly win. This can become analogous to a restrictive society. Those involved see no way out than to play by the rules of those at the top are truly benefitting from the sweat and tears of the common person, thus perpetuating the cycle.

V3 takes the philosophy of the previous games and adds to it, proposing that even choosing 'hope' perpetuates the cycle of pain. Note that this is not to undermine the previous games and their conclusions, but must be taken in context of the 53rd Danganronpa killing game. Every time a Danganronpa protagonist chooses hope and regains their agency, they are providing catharsis to the audience that is key to the killing game's objective - spreading despair. Naturally, the wider the audience, the greater the despair.

Giving the audience hope primes them for despair, which is an addicting cycle that the mastermind, Tsumugi, prays on for entertainment purposes. **V3 does not place blame on the previous installments' characters. It places blame on the system of Danganronpa.**

Further Instances of Ambiguity

Where Kaito is optimistic and shortsighted, Maki is pessimistic and more cunning. They resemble "hope" and "despair." Contrary to its predecessors, the line between hope and despair begin to blur in V3, reflected in how Maki and Kaito begin to rub off on each other and become

more well-rounded characters as a result of embracing both perspectives.

Keebo and Tsumugi also represent this duality. Just as Keebo (hope) sacrifices himself, V3 asks the audience to sacrifice both hope and despair to forge a new path for themselves. His symbolism is quite literal but takes some time to become immediately apparent to the player. Tsumugi also dies in the rubble caused by Keebo's sacrifice, after abandoning her will to live in a world without Danganronpa media.

The duality of these two concepts ends up merging into a nebulous gray zone, similar to the game's primary theme of **truth** versus **lies**, and therefore **reality** versus **fiction**. Similar to the game's constant attempts to prey on the player's meta expectations, the player is primed to associate "**truth**" with "good," which is not always the case. The moment the player watches Kaede get hanged as a result of their pursuit of the **truth**, it becomes quite evident that the truth isn't always good. As Maki embraces the **reality** of her past and moves on with grace, the player is told that the **truth** can also be quite important, no matter how harsh.

Strongest Element

The ending of V3 is also the ending to the entire Danganronpa series as it currently stands, which is a crucial contributor to the ending's potency. Though controversial, revealing that the entire series thus far was in-universe **fiction** is V3's greatest strength.

This revelation casts doubt into the player, as it takes advantage of one of the most precious resources a game can possibly manipulate - player investment. More than HP or currency, player time is often quite a sensitive topic for audiences, especially in a game as long and text-heavy as Danganronpa games are. For many, nothing is more frustrating than becoming invested in a game only to feel cheated by the conclusion.

However, V3's reveal flexes the true power of narrative and the weight that **fiction** can have. From a logical standpoint, we can understand that we're playing a video game and that the characters within the game don't exist. But from an emotional standpoint, the bond that we feel with **fictional** characters can be quite strong. The reveal puts the player in the exact same spot as Shuichi, who's now having to battle that everything that he's experienced thus far has been a twisted **lie**.

The game is perhaps speaking directly to the player in giving them a direct question - as the

series comes to an end, what did these characters truly mean to them? It's a challenge, not an invalidation. The game puts the player in the role of a Danganronpa protagonist, giving them a potent call to action to consider what **fiction** truly means to them.

Unsuccessful Element

Nestled within the greatness of V3's narrative is a continual problem with its treatment of certain characters. Though one of its strengths is its colorful cast of characters, what's reflected on the other side is an unfortunate trend of sexism. V3's gendered extremes are best exemplified in Tenko Chabashira, a character that is both very interesting yet indubitably hindered at nearly every step by the game's most unsuccessful element: its treatment of its female characters.

This isn't to say that the eight female characters featured are bad, but rather that their greatness is continually held back by the narrative's continual desire to keep them in a state that affords sexualization. "Sexualization" as used here is defined as an extension of the male gaze. A character that is being sexualized does not necessarily have to be perceived as sexually appealing by the characters in the narrative, but is rather meant to be sexually appealing to the creator or the audience. Additionally, sexualization has little to do with what is found personally attractive by the audience, but rather what the creators of the piece want the audience to find arousing - regardless of whether the sexualization adds anything to the character. Due to its nature as something shallowly stimulating, it often does not add to the character and can often distract from the character's other purpose as a result.

With that defined, Tenko fails to live up to her potential due to the sexualization that is continually imposed on her. One of Tenko's defining (and most controversial) traits is her strong distrust of men. A character with a dislike of a certain gender is an interesting space to explore and is not inherently problematic by concept alone. Many people in real life have similar prejudices, so game narratives are as good a space as any to delve into such a topic - the problem with Tenko, which is but a reflection of the game's greater issues of sexism, is that even her hatred of men is sexualized for a presumed male audience.

The reason Tenko hates men is because of her sensei, who is a fatherly presence to her. He warned her not to get close to men out of a desire to keep her out of a relationship. The root of her hatred is essentially because a man told her to hate men, which is ironically catered towards a male perspective. Though Tenko probably had a distrust of men before this due to her habit of beating up sex offenders in her fabricated past, she is still robbed of crucial agency.

Tenko's love of girls is also sometimes sexualized, resulting in something akin to queerbaiting. Tenko is never confirmed to be queer, but she still expresses feelings that sometimes show a desire to be intimate with girls. This in itself is not queerbaiting, but given the broader context of Tenko's male-gaze-centric character, it comes off as disingenuous and sleazy.

Highlight

The highlight of V3 is the scene that ensues shortly after Kaede's execution. The scene solidifies the game's core themes while giving a proper sendoff to Kaede and establishing a unique musical motif that will be used later in the game as a way to convince the player of the **fiction**.

As Shuichi enters Kaede's empty pianist lab, he is forced to face the unfortunate consequences that come with pursuing the **truth**, no matter how grisly. It enforces that there is no such thing as pure **truth** in V3, and uniquely establishes a musical motif that is used in the final trial as an effective way to guide the player's emotional state.

During a tense moment in chapter one, Kaede suggests that she and Shuichi listen to Clair de Lune by Debussy as a way to ease their anxiety. After the trial, Shuichi listens to this song and imagines Kaede playing it. He removes the baseball cap that is symbolic of his sheepish avoidance of the **truth**. While conveying a newfound courage within Shuichi, it simultaneously also calls reference to the Western act of removing one's hat as a sign of respect. For the remainder of the game, we can see that Kaede's death still lingers. He never again dons the hat.

The audience has become most attached to Kaede by nature of playing as her up to this point. When playing as a **fictional** character, we subconsciously think of them as ourselves. Regardless of whether the player likes Kaede as a character or not, they still have a unique bond with her that will make it undeniably shocking when she's brutally executed right in front of them. It's a smart moment of respect to value the audience's investment in Kaede, as to make the transition to Shuichi less jarring. Additionally, it makes Shuichi a more sympathetic protagonist due to the shared trauma he now has with the player. This moment highlights that V3 - while undeniably shocking - is also quite capable of delicacy. That delicacy in key moments such as this one is important to creating emotional investment in a cast of quirky characters in an otherworldly environment.

Later, the musical motif of Clair de Lune is skillfully used in the final trial when the **truth** of Danganronpa is revealed to Shuichi. The moments after Kaede's death are subconsciously

revisited in the player's mind through the use of that musical motif. In that context, Clair de Lune represents the weight of **fictional** tragedy. With nothing more than a classical piece of music to cut through the usual high-energy techno beats, it becomes more trying to denounce previous experiences in V3 as meaningless when reminded of how impactful Kaede's death was for Shuichi.

Critical Reception

Polygon 8/10

Praises the game for its interesting and unique story and lovable characters. In particular, this review points out how there's bound to be at least one character among the varied cast that clicks with the player. However, the review criticizes the game's dialogue as having many lackluster moments, such as cringe-worthy jokes. It also criticizes the sheer amount of dialogue, which was interesting as the game's form is text-driven by nature.

Game Rant (no score)

In a discussion of what V3 does better and worse compared to its predecessors, the author criticizes the ending as being invalidating towards fans of the series. While praising the more creative mysteries in each murder, its characters, and new ways to approach class trials, most of the frustrations in this discussion come from the ending's plot twist and ambiguity.

Destructoid 10/10

Praises the incorporation of the game's perjury mechanic in tandem with the overall focus on lying and the ultimate **truth**, no matter how gruesome said **truth** may be. Criticizes the cringe-worthy or lewd jokes and the downtime between trials that can drag. However, it gives high praise to its morals and the colorful strangeness of the world and its characters.

Lessons

The Power of Fiction

As demonstrated by the game's greatest plot twist, V3 is an ode to video game storytelling. In the

final confrontation, the player begins to feel personally involved as references get increasingly more meta and targeted at the intended audience - that being someone who's played the previous games. It links us and the remaining characters. When Tsumugi forces the survivors to come to terms with the fact that their lives are all **fiction**, she's also telling us - the player - to accept that everything that came before this chapter of the game was meaningless **fiction**.

What makes this poignant is that we obviously *know* that everything that came before was fiction. But to get to this point in the final chapter of the third installment, we clearly had some kind of investment in this story. The most powerful way to invoke despair in the audience is to say that everything that we've been invested in was completely meaningless.

The game would not be as powerful as it is without the strength of its characters, and the bond that the player - and in turn Shuichi and Kaede - begin to feel with said characters. The game taunts the player and Shuichi by claiming that these bonds aren't real, which is ironic. We as the player understand on some level that these characters are simply a grouping of abstract traits, drawn together under a name and a visual signifier. But the beautiful thing about games is that even though we know that these characters can't "touch" us in the same sense that we can hold hands with another human, we can still feel "touched" by them, just as the cast of V3 do with each other despite being **fictional**.

The Nature of Truth

V3 asks us to question where **fiction** begins and **reality** ends - and similarly, if manipulating the **truth** in the name of the greater good is morally just or not. V3 doesn't give many answers to these questions, which is what makes the game stick in one's mind after completion. Kokichi is the character that best exemplifies this. He often manipulates group members and does undeniably terrible things with the potential end goal of saving everyone in the cast, and is presented just as sympathetic as he is villainous.

It can be quite the headache wondering whether Kokichi is misunderstood or a genuine psychopath, as his actions can be read either way - what is true? What is a "**fiction**" that he's created himself? In our real lives and as writers, what is the **truth** that we want to convey with our work?

Strangeness as a Boon

V3 is a strange game. It does things that other games could do and simply not pull off with the same efficacy. But while it's often shocking in ways that might not jive with some, its strange antics are also responsible for its greatest, most haunting moments such as the executions for each murderer. V3 shows us that just being strange is one thing, but it's rather the continual

betrayal of expectations that can help keep an audience engaged and emotionally attached. However, the game's off-kilter jokes can sometimes leave a bad impression on the player, showing the potential negatives that come with fully embracing oddities in dialogue.

Summation

Danganronpa is many things, but one indisputable fact is that this game is odd. It's refreshingly shocking, unpredictable, and unapologetically eccentric - for the better and the worst. When I finished this game, I realized that what I had just experienced was one-of-a-kind. I've been invested in this series for nearly a decade, so the experience that I'd had was borderline unreplicable - and that's the magic of storytelling in games. It's a new and perhaps terrifying land, where we can make truly profound things into **reality**. That's worthy of celebration.