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Disco Elysium

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Introduction – The Precarious World (Problem)

*“Seems like the point of this game is *victory*. The absence of defeat on all fronts. Victory in business ventures and creative undertakings. Victory in love and over other people. Political victory. Ideological victory. Hell, even sexual victory. Definitely a lot of object-based victories, too – having things and not losing them. One problem, though: not a lot of victors in sight. Everyone’s mostly losing. Why is that? And how do you *not* lose?” (Disco Elysium).*

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM, 2019) is an award-winning isometric cRPG in which the player plays an amnesiac detective named Harrier “Harry” Du Bois (or Raphaël Ambrosius Costeau, or Tequila Sunset. He is in between names). As Harry, the player must solve a murder case in Martinaise, a small district in the city of Revachol, a city within the fictional world of Elysium. Along the way, the player-as-Harry discovers and assembles knowledge about the game’s world, such as the history of Revachol and the ideologies that power it, or Harry’s own personal history – the one that was lost. Like most other cRPGs, *Disco Elysium* is known for being a narrative-focused game with over a million words of text (Purslow). In addition, the game has also been praised for an effective and unique joining together of its narrative and gameplay mechanics. An official review on IGN states that the game “takes the age-old mechanics of tabletop RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons and twists them in strange ways around a macabre tale of violence, poverty, and a society on the brink of collapse” (Cardy). In the same vein, a review on GameSpot compares *Disco Elysium* to older isometric cRPGs like *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare, 1998) and *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isles Studios, 1999), as well as the more recent *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios, 2017) both mechanically and narratively, while also adding that the game is still “very unlike other RPGs” (Wildgoose). Both of these articles cite several of the game’s following properties as the mark of its uniqueness: a skill system with skills that interact with Harry (and the player by proxy) through dialogue, a lack of a traditional combat system, and a story that is deeply political and

explicitly left-leaning. Though, how exactly the game's story, and by association its gameplay, could be interpreted as 'leftist,' I am going to explain further.

At first glance, *Disco Elysium* could be read as a game about failure, one that begins at the pre-game narrative level with the protagonist's backstory. After failing to win Her – his ex-something's – heart back, Harry went on several days (in addition to six years prior) of heavy drinking, drug-taking, suicide threats-making, and overall 'partying' until he lost all memories about himself and the world around him. Meanwhile, he left his murder case hanging (and rotting) behind the hostel that he stayed in. Harry's failure, as well as its subsequent damage to his body and mind, reflects and is reflected by the world around him, with the closest mirror being the district of Martinaise. After the failed communist revolution that has been violently suppressed, Martinaise has been left in ruin. Its architecture, ridden with bullet holes and bomb craters, is comparable to Harry's body, which has been damaged by years of alcoholism and drug abuse. The attempts to revitalize the district through commerce have not succeeded either, as evident in the Doomed Commercial Area, an abandoned commercial center housing countless failed businesses. These entities – the Doomed Commercial Area, Martinaise, and Harry – are haunted by their own failed futures: Harry by his lost happily-ever-after with his ex-something, Martinaise by the lost communist utopia, and the Doomed Commercial Area by the lost promise of prosperity under capitalism. Simultaneously, they themselves become specters that haunt Revachol – each a relic of an ideal future that never-was and could-never-be-again. Moreover, this theme of failure is not exclusive to the game's narrative. Failure follows Harry, or rather player-as-Harry, into the actual gameplay, as the game's core mechanics provide ample opportunities for failure to happen. Because the game decides much of player-as-Harry's success through dice rolls, there are often occasions in which the player's fate is left entirely in the hands of chance; chance, whose odds would always be stacked against Revachol and everyone in it, including Harry himself. The game

acknowledges this in one of its quests. During the “Investigate Doomed Commercial Area” quest, Harry might meet the Novelty Dicemaker, a woman who makes commissioned dice for roleplaying games, and whose business, remarkably, is the only one that did not fail. Upon meeting her, Harry can ask her about the murder case and the Doomed Commercial Area, as well as commission a dice from a selection of dice sets, one of which is ‘cursed.’ When Harry revisits the Novelty Dicemaker to retrieve his cursed dice, she asks him to roll it. Every time he rolls, the dice always lands on the side with the inscription “god is indifferent.” The Novelty Dicemaker then reveals:

Novelty Dicemaker: “Except I’ve weighted the die. When you try rolling it, you realize that each time it gets you exactly the same result - *God is indifferent*. This is our curse.”

Conceptualization: [Medium – 10] It’s even worse than she says. God is dead – We live in a forsaken age.

Mark Fisher describes the sense of hopelessness borne by failed futures – the sense that one is living in a “forsaken age” – as an effect of ‘capitalist realism,’ which is “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (*Capitalist Realism*, 2). Capitalism manages to achieve this effect through multiple methods, such as the normalization of surveillance and state violence (1), and self-promotion as a system without ideology, which means everyone could participate regardless of personal convictions (12-13). In *Disco Elysium*, these are also the methods used by the Coalition, an alliance of ‘developed’ nations that support capitalist economics and centrist ideology, to control Revachol. For example, after the Coalition helped the Royalists (monarchists) utterly annihilate the Commune of Revachol (communist revolutionaries), they sent several airships to surveil the city below, becoming an ever-watchful presence in Revachol’s sky. Despite claiming that their intervention in Revacholian politics is for the purpose of establishing

democracy, the airships indicate that their intentions are to preserve the status quo in which they are omnipresent, omniscient, and eternal.

Yet, despite the Coalition's, or capitalism's, attempts at maintaining it, the status quo could never remain stable. On the contrary, it is fragile and fraught with anxiety, being constantly haunted by specters. Fisher defines these specters, referencing Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, as hauntological figures: ones that exist without existing, occupying a space between presence and absence, as well as a time of simultaneous past, present, and future ("Ghosts of My Life," 18). Both Derrida and Fisher identify the specters as the specters of communism, though they do not claim that communism is the specters' sole identity. For instance, in his article "What is Hauntology?" Fisher associates the specters' haunting with "the failure of the future" under capitalist realism (16), in which 'lost' futures – futures that were promised but never arrived – return to haunt the cultural present. The lost future could very well be communism, but it could also be the absence of capitalism or the presence of a better alternative. Fisher gives examples of how these specters of the failed future manifest themselves in music, pointing out songs that borrow sounds from past decades without inventing something new because 'something new' is unimaginable. In *Disco Elysium*, the specters manifest themselves in Harry's inability to let Her go, which causes him to self-destruct. They manifest themselves in Martinaise's 'haunted' ruins, each has been abandoned, with no one to rebuild them. They manifest in Revachol's precognition of its own fate, which it shares with Harry if he knows how to listen. No matter the actions that Harry, or player-as-Harry, takes during the game, Revachol, the city, will one day be utterly devastated by an atomic device before it is swallowed into the eerie nothing-scape of the pale: an anti-life, anti-matter, and anti-meaning force that will eventually consume the entire world. Here, *Disco Elysium* shows that not only it is easier to wallow in nostalgia-infused despair than to imagine a different future, but it is

also “easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2).

In this introduction, I have offered a glimpse of how the hauntological forces operate through the *Disco Elysium*’s narrative elements, specifically the worldbuilding aspect. In Chapter 3, I expand upon this more by exhaustively (and lovingly) analyzing the game’s characters, setting, and plotlines. However, as I have mentioned, *Disco Elysium* is not only known for being narratively rich, but also for intertwining said rich narrative with its reflective gameplay, i.e., the theme of failure with dice rolls. I aim to explore this further with the theme of hauntology as a whole as well. To do so, I categorize the game mechanics into three sections: the character creation and progression system, the gameplay loop in which dialogues are the core gameplay mechanic, and the gameplay ‘challenges’ that include skill checks and save-reload system. By interpreting these mechanics, I demonstrate how the game designers construct and present the game’s play-elements in a manner that accentuates its hauntological themes. For example, the player’s ability to redefine Harry after his amnesia through character creation and progression while also experiencing Harry’s past through dialogue options turns Harry into a spectral figure: one whose identity is unfinished, ever-shifting, and never his own. Furthermore, I propose that the game, because it is a game and not literature or film, allows the act of *play*. It invites players to question the certainty of identity and, consequently, the certainty of the ‘present state’ of the world. In other words, through the act of play, the game asks players to consider and act out an alternative: to conjure, if they wish, “the spectre of a world which could be free” (Fisher, *Acid Communism*, 9). As a culmination of my analysis of the game’s gameplay mechanics and narrative, I move beyond – though do not necessarily leave behind – the discussion about hauntology, instead attempting to answer the emergent question: what new world does *Disco Elysium* imagine would come after the world haunted by failed futures, providing that the thought of a new world is possible at all?

1. The Theories of Hauntological Ludonarrative

1.1. What is Ludonarrative?

1.1.1. From Ludology vs. Narratology to Ludonarrative

In a discussion about video games, it would be remiss of me to not mention the debate between ludologists and narratologists, as it provides insight into what video games are and could be as a cultural artifact. On the one hand, narratologists view video games as a potential new medium for storytelling in the digital age. Murray writes in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2016) about the various types of digital media, which includes video games: “This wide range of narrative art holds the promise of a new medium of expression that is as varied as the printed book or the moving pictures” (35). For Murray, video games enhance narrative by offering readers (or ‘users’) greater immersion (99), reader agency (125), and power of self-transformation (149). Although Murray does not call herself a narratologist, the sentiment she has expressed about video games, as well as other digital media, aligns with many champions of narratology and has often been cited, less favorably, by ludologists as the proof of narratology’s alleged hegemony over game studies (Murray 19). Supporting Murray’s enthusiasm about the future of digital storytelling, Ryan states that the development of digital media, like any other new media type, naturally influences the evolution of narrative (“Digital Narrative,” 334). However, Ryan also comments on the limitation of narrative in video games in particular, which is often “subordinated to the playing action” due to the tension between a game’s story and gameplay/player choice (“Will New Media,” 350). Ryan claims that, for video game narratives to be more complex – to shift from belonging to popular culture into the ‘Temperate Zone’ (the narrative type in between the avant-garde North Pole and the pop-culture Tropics) – the ludic elements must be simplified: “focus would be on the story, and interactivity would be an easy movement through the storyline and through the

storyworld that would lead to enjoyable discoveries” (“Digital Narrative,” 339). Such proposals to de-gameify video games to be more supportive of narratives are criticized among ludologists, whose arguments I am going to discuss further below. While Murray and Ryan’s ideas concern the aesthetic potentials of video game narratives, Crawford and Gosling’s concern the impact of video game narratives on players’ reality outside the games. Crawford and Gosling propose that video games, more specifically sports games, have an effect in forming the players’ “narrative identities and social interactions” (63). Ludologists, according to Crawford and Gosling, in their play-only approach to video games, ignore how players interact with the game in actuality – interactions that affect and reflect the players’ presentation of their own real-life identities (63). Everything considered, to narratologists, even if games themselves are not stories, they are, as Ryan notes, “machines for generating stories” (“Computer Games as Narrative,” 189).

On the other hand, ludologists believe that categorizing video games as a narrative or narrative tool diminishes them as their own cultural form. In *Cybertext: Perspective on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Aarseth writes that “[t]o claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories” (5). Though Aarseth does not deny that narrative elements have always been used in some form in video games (e.g., cutscenes), and can sometimes complement the gameplay, he cautions against the employment of narrative theories to judge a video game’s aesthetic qualities. Narratology, according to Aarseth, more often than not assumes the inferiority of video games to other traditional narrative mediums (e.g., literature and film) (106-107). Consequently, a vast majority of literary and media scholars analyze a game based on how closely it compares to literature, film, artwork, etc., instead of allowing it to stand as its own medium. This, Aarseth says, muddles the “intrinsic quality” of the medium (Aarseth, “Quest Games,” 362). To highlight said intrinsic qualities, Aarseth and other ludologists such as Frasca

and Juul detail throughout the years the recognition of the differences between games and narratives.

As the debate itself is not the main point, I have given only examples of some of the more common arguments. First, ludologists argue for the structural difference between games and narratives: “the first is a set of possibilities, while the second is a set of chained actions” (Frasca, par. 44). While narrative follows a sequence of ‘storylines’ from beginning to finish, a game’s progression does not follow that sequence, but numerous forking paths that are created every time a player acts. A coherent story, if any, can be extracted from a game and interpreted as a story only *after* the ‘play’-session itself is over. A game, then, depends on its formal structure of ‘play,’ while narratives are interpretive (Juul, “Games Telling Stories?”, par. 47). Because of this, if games become narrative, they would cease to be a game.

Second, ludologists argue for the difference in reader/player participation. Aarseth claims that even if one stretches the definition of narrative to its maximal flexibility, an “ontological difference” between games and narrative would remain. That ontological difference is “best described with the word *choice*” (“Quest Games,” 366). While readers – those who engage in narratives – are passive observers of their medium, players – those who engage in play – are active (Frasca, par. 46). This causes games to structure themselves in a way that supports and reacts to players’ actions. One such way is the player’s ability to manipulate in-game objects like items, Non-Player Characters (NPCs), and game environment. In a novel, each object is crucial and irreplaceable, as meaning could be lost upon the objects’ disappearance. In contrast, objects in video games are designed to be interactable, and in most cases, destructible (par. 59-60). Players being active also eliminates the need for anthropomorphic figures to act as ‘protagonists.’ Some

games have no identifiable ‘characters’ at all (e.g., *Tetris*), as the player already functions as that relatable figure (Juul, “Games Telling Stories?”, par. 40).

Finally, ludologists argue for the difference in temporality. Narrative makes a distinction between discourse time and story time, in which discourse time is the time spent reading the text, and story time is the time that the events of the narrative play out (Chatman 62). Such distinction does not apply to video games, as everything in a game is always happening in the continuous present. This is because the act of playing “requires at least points or periods of temporal convergence where the time of the game world and the time of the playing merge – and the player can actually *do* something” (Juul, “Games Telling Stories?”, par. 36). Therefore, even time management devices like analepses (flashbacks) and prolepses (flashforwards) have the “now” quality in video games, as players engage with and experience them as if they happen in the present. Here, games are, once again, positioned as fundamentally different from narrative. For ludologists, it follows that games must be studied as a separate medium; otherwise, they would forever be dismissed for their inability to be like narrative.

The ludologists’ arguments and their variations have been refuted in some ways by narratologists like Ryan. Ryan rebuts the first argument – the structural differences between games and narrative – by pointing out that games also have fixed structures, they are simply marked by different terms (“Computer Games as Narrative,” 186). Whereas the story progression in narrative is marked as ‘plot’ or ‘events,’ the story progression in games is marked as ‘quests’ and ‘levels.’ Depending on the title, some quests/levels have a more rigid structure than plots in experimental narratives (186). Moreover, even if a coherent story does not emerge until the end of a quest/level/play-session, the retellability of said emergent stories is, in and of itself, an indicator of its underlying narrative design. Ryan writes, “[f]or a game to inspire *specific* retellings, to be

narratively designed, it must involve actions whose purpose is not just winning or losing but fulfilling a concrete goal ... Above all, it must take place in a fictional world, and not merely on a playfield” (193). Thus, whether or not a game contains a narrative, players still experience and (re)imagine them narratively.

The second argument – the argument of choice and passive-active user dichotomy – is criticized by Ryan as being spawned from the misconception that games, due to their life-like qualities, are like life in their totality (189). However, despite the simulative qualities that games possess, they still “[operate] on symbols, within a designed environment, whereas real-life action operates on material objects within a world thrown together for no obvious purpose” (190). Choices in video games are, then, half-choices, premeditated by the game designers. Consequently, players are passive observers of their own choices as much as they are actants. Additionally, Crawford and Gosling argue that readers are not merely passive observers either, as they continue to engage with the story outside the medium, giving “a text meaning and life beyond the page or screen” (56).

Ryan counters the final argument – the argument of non-standard chronology in video games – by using cutscenes as an example. Cutscenes, a cinematic instance in games in which the player cannot take action, are becoming a standard method in video games to manipulate the game’s chronological order (“Computer Games as Narrative,” 185) or to give other narrative contexts. Meanwhile, narratives are not relegated to retellings of past events only. Some traditional narrative types can be as ‘present’ as video games, lacking the differentiation between story and discourse time, e.g., political speeches (186). All arguments considered, Ryan and other narratologists suggest that games cannot be isolated from narrative as ‘just’ a system of play. The similarity between games and narratives is not arbitrary: it indicates that games do contain a

narrative dimension – “a dimension that will be overlooked if we concentrate exclusively on rules, problem-solving, and competition” (203).

Ultimately, the approaches of ludologists and narratologists towards video games are, on each of their own, incomplete. Ludologists are, at times, excessively preoccupied with what narrative *cannot* be to exclude games from being considered a narrative medium, and as a result, they create a false dichotomy between ‘play’ and ‘story.’ Narrative, in this case, becomes an inconsequential part of a game, functioning as either a decoration or a hindrance. Moreover, the dismissal of narrative in *all* video games creates a hierarchy amongst game genres, in which narrative games (e.g., CRPGs) are placed below ‘pure’ mechanic games. As Rune Klevjer points out, the concepts of ergodic and ludology, “[o]riginally suggested as tools for the study of computer game aesthetics ... turns into self-contained arguments for advocating the purity of games, targeting a broad category of games (story-based, single player action games) as unworthy of serious attention” (193-194). Simultaneously, narratologists often commit the very thing that ludologists criticize them for: favoring narrative while patronizing the gameplay. For instance, even as she defends video game narrative, Ryan writes: “computer games are an art of compromise between narrative and gameplay. If designers had truly fascinating stories to tell, *they would write novels and film scripts rather than games*” (“Computer Games as Narratives,” 198; emphasis added). Here, Ryan situates gameplay in opposition to narrative, as something that needs to be ‘compromised’ with, as well as implying that a ‘fascinating’ story in a game emerges only *in spite of* the gameplay. However, as I hope to demonstrate in my analysis of *Disco Elysium*, gameplay and narrative in video games are not opposed to each other as ludologists and narratologists in this debate often claim. Examining games for their narrative elements does not necessarily diminish their play-elements. Conversely, games can tell a deep, meaningful, and *fascinating* story, not in

spite of, but *because of* its gameplay. In fact, in narrative-heavy cRPGs like *Disco Elysium*, gameplay and narrative (ideally) work in tandem to create a meaningful experience.

Most ludologists and narratologists have eventually found a middle ground in their debate, becoming open to the idea of the ludo- and the narrative working together as well. For instance, Juul admits in his book *Half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005) that though “the denial of fiction is an alluring position,” he has shifted his stance on fiction in video games to one that considers fiction relevant to gaming experience (13). In the same book, he goes on to argue that video games, when coming into interaction with players, are both sets of rules and fiction, and that game-rules make game-fiction more imaginable (6). Similarly, though she continues to emphasize that video game narrative is less sophisticated than traditional ones, Ryan proposes “a functional *ludo-narrativism* that studies how the fictional world, realm of make-believe, relates to the playfield, space of agency” as a method for analyzing video games (“Computer Games as Narrative,” 203; emphasis added). And it is this ludo-narrativist method that I analyze *Disco Elysium* with.

1.1.2. Defining ‘Ludo’

When Tynan Sylvester writes in his book that “[f]iction and mechanics need not fight (though they easily can), and neither one need be given primacy (though one often is). Used together, they can enhance and extend each other in ways that each cannot do alone” (34), he is advocating for the *ludonarrative* method of game analysis. Though Ryan has used a similar term (i.e., ludo-narrativism) in her 2006 book *Avatars of Story*, the coining of the term ‘ludonarrative’ itself is usually attributed to Clint Hocking, who has written a 2007 blogpost about ludonarrative dissonance in the game *Bioshock*. Since then, the term has been developed and used widely in game

studies. For this thesis, I use Weimin Toh's definition of ludonarrative, which is "the implied 'whole' of every video game and it includes the gameplay ('ludo'), the story ('narrative'), and the player" (2). In this section, I examine the 'ludo-' component of the term, while Section 1.1.3. focuses on the 'narrative' component in more detail.

The term ludo- or *ludus* or 'play' does not have a conclusive, indisputable definition. As Salen and Zimmerman state: "[a]ny definition of play will be a bit fuzzy at best. But this fuzziness points to the fact that there is something fundamentally unknowable and ephemeral ... something *playful* about play" (85). Thus, any definition given in this thesis is a combination of previous scholars' attempts to capture the meaning of play. I begin with Huizinga, one of the earliest scholars writing about games and play, who defines play as such in his seminal work, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949):

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life" (28).

Several key features of play can be identified from this passage, e.g., agreed-upon rules, emotional involvement, and distinction between 'play' and 'the ordinary.' Among them, the one that later scholars refer to the most as the essential part of play-activities (i.e., games) is the rules of play. As Salen and Zimmerman put it: "[r]ules are a fundamental part of any game. If you purchase a board game, you are purchasing, in essence, a set of rules" (9). Expanding upon Huizinga's definition, Roger Caillois distinguishes between two types of play: *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia*, Caillois writes, "manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy" that is "an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety" (13). In contrast, *ludus* establishes some kind of discipline over play, structuring it with "arbitrary, imperative, and purposefully tedious conventions ... completely impractical, even though it

requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity” (13). Despite its arbitrariness and tediousness, however, *ludus* refines and enriches *paidia*, which makes play more purposeful and pleasurable (29). It is this notion of *ludus* that connects back to the rules of play in Huizinga’s definition, and it is this very notion that influences the general understanding of the ludo-, or ludic elements, in games.

In *A Multimodal Approach to Video Games and The Player Experience* (2019), Toh further develops the definition of ludo in video games to include the interaction between rules and player choice. Toh explains that the ludo, or the gameplay, is a set of possible player actions that are either supported or hindered by rules (39). These rules “contribute to the players’ motives in the game which encourage the players to interact with the controls to select *choices*” (41; emphasis added). It is through these choices that players manipulate the game world, progress through it, and experience the consequences (i.e., ‘winning’ or ‘losing’). Toh then categorizes the rules into two types: constitutive and regulative (41). Because regulative rules involve influences on player actions and interactions from communities outside the game world (e.g., fellow gamers in different gaming communities), which are beyond the scope of this thesis, I discuss only constitutive rules.

Constitutive rules are rules that allow players to act and interact with the game, and they encompass mechanics, cheat codes, and walkthroughs (Toh 41). Once again, because cheat codes and walkthroughs are optional rules that are not relevant to this thesis, I do not discuss them here. On to the matter of mechanics: mechanics is comprised of language and signs that indicate to the players the possible actions they can take in a game (41). Game mechanics can be divided into three types: core mechanics, satellite mechanics, and peripheral mechanics. First, the core mechanics are the main gameplay loop: “the set of activities that the player will be involved more frequently during the game experience, and which are obligatory to win the game” (190).

Experience with the core mechanics can be both diegetic and extra-diegetic. Diegetic experience involves player interaction with the world, items, and non-player characters (NPCs) within the game (190). Common diegetic gameplay actions include moving through the game environment, engaging in combat, engaging with NPCs through dialogues, managing the inventory, avatar customization through leveling up and equipping/unequipping items, etc. Extra-diegetic gameplay actions involve player actions in the real world such as clicking the mouse and tapping the keyboard (190). The complexity level of the extra-diegetic gameplay actions depends on the game. Action games naturally have more complex control than visual novels, the latter of which usually requires only clicking the left mouse button for the majority of the play session.

Second, satellite game mechanics are “those aimed at enhancing already existing activities by enriching the core gameplay without increasing its complexity” (193). These are subdivided into three more types of mechanics: enhancement mechanics, opposition mechanics, and facilitating mechanics. Enhancement mechanics transform core mechanics by adding to or modifying them during game progression, sometimes in accordance with the narrative (193). Opposition mechanics increase the game’s challenge (193-194). Facilitating mechanics aid the players (194). The enhancement mechanics usually work alongside either opposition mechanics (e.g., increasing enemy AI’s attack and defense values) or facilitating mechanics (e.g., player character’s equipment upgrades) (193). In *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017), the player’s main weapon, the Nail, can be upgraded throughout the game, changing from Old Nail to Sharpened Nail to (eventually) Pure Nail. This upgrade irreversibly increases the player’s damage output and alters the aesthetic of the weapon in the player’s inventory.

Finally, peripheral gameplay mechanics are those that “[encompass] all activities which need completely new mechanics (neither relying on core mechanics nor satellite mechanics), and

which temporarily replaces the core gameplay at a certain point of the game experience” (197). Minigames such as the lockpicking minigame in *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011), which replaces the usual combat and exploration with a new precision- and timing-based mechanic, fall under this category.

Mechanics alone do not constitute gameplay. Gameplay *happens* when mechanics interact with the player choice which leads to player actions, the consequences of which progress the gameplay. Player actions come in two forms: instrumental actions and strategic actions, both of which interact with gameplay elements like the game’s environment, the player character (PC), the character’s behavior, and the communicative aspects (e.g., dialogue choices) of the game (Toh 182-189). Instrumental actions are instinctive and reliant on the player’s familiarity with video game conventions (182), such as breaking crates/barrels to search for items (interacting with the environment) (183) or dashing, crouching, and jumping actions (interacting through character behavior) (184). Sometimes, games force players to take instinctual instrumental actions to enhance both gameplay and narrative, such as irreversible PC ability upgrades at the end of a mandatory questline (interacting with PC) or timed dialogue choices (interacting with communicative aspects) (184). Strategic actions, in contrast, require players to plan ahead. Players, motivated by gameplay mechanics, strategically utilize their knowledge about the game to optimize their experience (185). A strategic interaction with the environment, for instance, can involve players placing gunpowder barrels in an area, luring enemies into it, then set everything on fire, causing the barrels to explode and deal massive amounts of damage to the enemies. Similarly, players can pre-plan other aspects of the game like customizing their own PC during character creation and/or level up screen (186), practicing certain PC behaviors like aiming and shooting (187), or considering carefully the consequences of their dialogue choices (188).

Taking everything into consideration, I define gameplay – the ‘ludo-’ component of ludonarrative – as the part of a game that combines rules (mechanics) and choice (player actions) to not only determine how the game world operates but also to generate more possible play-actions. In the case of *Disco Elysium*, the gameplay that I analyze includes the character creation and progression system, and the core gameplay mechanics that include dialogues, skill checks, and the save-reload system. However, in cRPGs like *Disco Elysium*, the ‘ludo-’ cannot be easily divorced from the ‘narrative.’ Thus, it cannot be analyzed in total separation. Although ‘pure,’ narrative-less, abstract game mechanics can work in games like cards, dice, or chess, if stripped down to its bare mechanics, *Disco Elysium* would no longer be the game that it is. It would become just another game of dice. And though a normal game of dice can motivate players by evoking emotions such as tension, defeat, and triumph, the emotional core of *Disco Elysium* comes from the fictional world that it wraps its game mechanics in.

1.1.3. Defining ‘Narrative’

The definition of narrative has been defined, redefined, and expanded upon (or narrowed down) to include (or exclude) new styles and mediums. In order to place interactive mediums under the narrative umbrella, Ryan defines narrative as such:

a narrative text is one that brings a world to the mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plots), which cause global changes in the narrative world. Narrative is thus a mental representation of causally connected states and events that captures a segment in the history of a world and of its members (“Will New Media,” 337).

Additionally, narrative is affected by its medium. Ryan considers how the “new media,” or digital media, a category under which video games belong, interacts with narrative. She outlines five properties of digital media: reactive/interactive qualities, multimedia quality, networking

quality, volatile signs (the ability to be refreshed and rewritten), and modularity (the ability to exist and transform on its own) (338). Out of these properties, Ryan singles interactivity out as the most important. Unlike traditional narrative mediums, the user of digital media (the player) has an active role in the formation of narrative by making decisions and creating branching paths, many of which lead to even more (potentially unexplored) alternate narratives. These decision-making moments are possible because of the game mechanics that support them. In turn, they are mediated by narrative tools. According to Sylvester, there are three types of narrative tools: scripted story, world narrative, and emergent story.

First, scripted stories are “events that are encoded directly into the game so they always play out the same way” (Sylvester 84). When the matter of narrative elements in video games is discussed, the scripted story is first to come to mind. In games, it is the part that “provides the context, and gives the players a motivation when they are asked to do something” (Toh 42). It usually takes meaningful choices away from players, and players’ actions usually do not have any bearing on them. In other words, they break ‘play.’ Graphics, cutscenes, and dialogues that players cannot interact with fall into this category. Sylvester reasons that because scripted stories remove player agency, they should be used sparingly or used by way of ‘soft scripting’ instead (84). Like normal scripted stories, soft scripting is a pre-written event that always happens at the right trigger. However, unlike normal scripted stories, players can still act during their occurrences. For example, players who explore the open world of *Elden Ring* (Fromsoftware, 2022) may come across enemy factions consistently fighting each other in the same area. Players can choose to join the fight or ignore it completely. The fight itself is scripted, but because players can act during them, it is *soft* scripting. Several instances of this happen outside combat as well, with some non-player characters (NPCs) appearing in certain areas on specific days/time. The NPCs act out events between each

other, sometimes addressing the PC. Most of the time, though, players can choose whether they want to initiate dialogues with them.

Second, world narrative is a “story of a place, its past, and its people. It is told through the construction of a place and the object within it” (86). The most obvious method of world narrative construction is the documentation through objects such as written messages, audio logs, video logs, etc. These usually tell the player, some more explicitly than others, about the game world (87). The other, more interpretive, method is the arrangement of the narrative’s mimetic space, which is the space where the story happens (Ryan, “Four Types,” 1). In video games, according to Ryan, spaces can be divided into inert *spaces* and active *places*. Active places are where the main play-action happens, while inert spaces are spaces “in between” (14). Ryan urges one to consider the number of inert spaces in comparison with active places, as well as what those spaces/places are filled with, as it can hint at events that used to happen in the narrative’s recent past (15). To increase immersion, the objects that fill the spaces/places should mostly be cultural symbols that are recognizable to players in the real world (Sylvester 87). For example, classical Greek architecture might invoke a sense of antiquity, even if Greek civilization has never existed in the game’s fictional world at all. Similarly, *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) arranges dark and grimy quasi-gothic architecture in its mimetic space to invoke the themes associated with the gothic (e.g., horror, the sublime, supernatural presence, the dark side of human nature), while also hinting at some more twisted hiding in plain sight.

Finally, the emergent story “is generated during play by the interaction of game mechanics and players” (90). Emergent stories are where the abovementioned notion of choice comes into play. At the end of a play-session, a player who chooses a diplomatic path would naturally have a different story to tell than a player who chooses a violent one. This is because the choices that they

have made inform their experience of overall gameplay and narrative. However, choice is not the only factor in emergent stories; *chance* is equally important, especially in games inspired by the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*. Two players that choose the same option might still experience diverging stories if one succeeds in the dice roll and the other one fails. Chance multiplies the number of branching paths, providing that the players allow it (i.e., not reloading the previous save file). Hence, not only is chance a narrative tool, but it can also be used to generate more content (90).

On an additional note, emergent stories are more unpredictable compared to scripted stories and world narratives because they are most reliant on players' introspection. While scripted stories and world narratives can be viewed and/or interpreted during play, players only truly realize emergent stories *after* the play-session is over. Game designers often encourage and enhance players' emergent stories by utilizing labeling, abstraction, recordkeeping, and sportscaster systems. Labeling is when game mechanics are given fictional names (93). For instance, skills in *D&D*-style roleplaying games, which mechanically function as numeral modifiers for dice rolls, are labeled with names like "Athletics," "Persuasion," "Stealth," etc. Abstraction is when games deliberately show and tell players less information so that players can imagine the scenarios on their own (94). Recordkeeping is when games record game events and player's actions to later present back to the player (95). In most games, in-game journals or quest logs fill in the recordkeeping role. A more sophisticated method of recordkeeping is the sportscaster system, which arranges the player's actions during play-sessions into a narratively coherent form (96).

Narrative tools are not applied at random. When game designers implement them, they follow story-ordering devices like levels, quests, progression blockages, skill requirements, and time-sensitive events. These devices are more often than not intertwined with game mechanics to

create story structures. In *Elden Ring*, a notoriously difficult early-game boss enemy named Margit the Fell Omen functions as a progression blockage and skill requirement check for players. Story-wise, Margit serves as a motivation. He is a reoccurring archnemesis who hinders the PC's journey by attacking and sending other enemies after them. Later on in the game, players eventually have a chance to defeat Margit – a more powerful version of him – for good. To get there, however, the PC must become stronger. Gameplay-wise, Margit's presence incentivizes players to explore other contents first, so that they can familiarize themselves with the core mechanic (i.e., combat) and satellite mechanics (e.g., leveling up, defeating lesser enemies for better equipment, upgrading said equipment, etc.) In other words, players improve their skills and knowledge of the game mechanics, i.e., becoming stronger like the narrative demands. When players defeat Margit for the last time, the emergent narrative of their journey could be one of an unlikely hero's perseverance, which leads to an eventual triumph, against a much more powerful and relentless opposition.

Although my example may paint *Elden Ring*'s story structure as somewhat linear, the actual experience of the game is anything but. The rivalry between the PC and Margit is simply one of the possible emergent stories, as players could be taking a different approach to the game completely. Some players may disregard Margit and never return to defeat him, thus never building a sense of rivalry before meeting the boss' final form. In this case, Margit would not be a personal archnemesis as much as just another obstacle in the game, and an emergent story told about the play-session involving him would be distinct from the one above. Video games, like other interactive narratives, can support all these story paths because they have 'multi-linear narrative,' which is a narrative that "possesses multiple narrative and gameplay pathways ... foreground different story or gameplay elements, or result in different narrative endings" (Toh 151). There are several subtypes of multi-linear narrative structures, which Ryan distinguishes into categories of

structures with “fixed, predetermined story” and structures with “patterns of choices that result in different stories” (“Toward an Interactive Narratology,” 102).

Within the first category in which the overarching story is predetermined, Ryan presents the network, the vector with side-branches, the sea-anemone, and track-switching structures. The network contains nodes that are largely connected, which “allows loops and makes at least some of its nodes accessible through different routes” (102). This type of story structure breaks down chronological order, as players can potentially experience the same story events more than once, some of which might contradict previous events. In most cases, it can be detrimental to story coherence, though some games can use it to their benefit. *Slay the Princess* (Black Tabby Games, 2023) is one such game. The game follows a PC’s quest to slay (or spare) a world-ending princess, during which the PC’s choices determine the variation of princesses that they meet. Once the PC experiences one version of the story revolving around a princess type, the entire process begins again, and the PC must find a new type of princess by repeating the same scenario. Moving on to the vector with side-branches: this type of story structure “takes the reader through the story sequentially, but every episode offers an opportunity to branch toward external materials or optional activities that enrich the story” (104). Essentially, the vector with side-branches is side quests, an important component in a vast majority of video games. The sea-anemone, or as it is sometimes called the hub and spokes, “allows information to unfold recursively from a main menu into a variety of submenus. From each point on the diagram, the user can return to the main menu in one jump” (104). In *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), the Firelink Shrine functions as a main menu (hub): a safe space that players can retreat to at any time. From the Shrine, they can access several other areas (spokes), each of which leads to even more areas. Eventually, the player acquires the ability to teleport, or ‘jump,’ between areas instantaneously as well. Lastly, the track-switching structure is one where “[e]very strand is linked to every other strand at certain decision

points, but the links follow the temporal flow of the story and never take the reader back in time” (104-105). This type of structure is common in multiplayer games where each character can break off from the group to do their own side quests, or in single-player games where the player controls multiple characters.

Within the second category in which the storyline can be broken into different endpoints, Ryan presents the tree, the flowchart, and the maze structures. The tree resembles branches that “grow in a steady direction, are kept neatly separate, and do not allow returns to a previous point ... particularly efficiency at modeling the decisions that await characters at various moments in their lives” (105). While the tree branches out, the flowchart merges plotlines (105). Most video games, especially cRPGs, with multiple endings often employ the tree and the flowchart together to organize the game’s narrative routes, preventing the routes from becoming either overcomplicated or overly linear. The maze is more unorthodox when compared to the other two, as it “can only be viewed as a plot diagram if it represents the topography of the virtual world” (106). It is more common in sandbox games with absent or irrelevant overarching plots and endings like *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011). In these games, the narrative is not arranged into forking paths that players can choose from; instead, the narrative emerges when players travel to and perform actions at different sites in the game’s world.

Various types of narrative structures can be – and often are – combined in practice. My example of the network narrative structure, *Slay the Princess*, does not remain the same structure throughout. Near the end of the game, the narrative structure transforms into the tree. The PC no longer loops back to the first chapter of the game; instead, the game presents players with branching paths, requiring them to make a decision. Depending on their decision, players gain access to one of the endings.

Unlike gameplay, the ‘narrative’ component of ludonarrative can exist independently from the game’s rules, and it seldom relies on player choice. They occupy the non-interactable parts of the gaming experience, such as the pre-written story or the game world’s *mise-en-scène*. Alternatively, they are ‘interactable’ outside the game mechanics’ purview, such as fanfictions about the game written after play-sessions. However, even though these elements *can* exist independently from the rules does not mean that the narrative as a whole *should*. My analysis of *Disco Elysium*’s setting, characters, and plots – all of which are narrative elements – would not be complete if I ignored the game mechanics that enriched them. Just as I suggest in Section 1.1.2. that, without its narrative, *Disco Elysium* is another game of dice; likewise, without the game of dice, the message of *Disco Elysium* would lose much of its meaning as well.

1.1.4. Ludonarrative Resonance

Time and time again in this thesis, I state that gameplay and narrative must work together to elevate the gaming experience of most games. In this section, I attempt to elucidate *how* gameplay and mechanics *can* work together by examining the notion of ludonarrative dissonance and ludonarrative resonance. As I mention in Section 1.1.2., video game scholars attribute the coining of the term ‘ludonarrative’ to the video game designer Clint Hocking, who first uses the term in his blogpost “Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock.” In this blogpost, Hocking argues that despite its overall quality, *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007) “seems to suffer from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (par. 4). Hocking explains that while *Bioshock*’s ludic contract expects the player to act in “Randian rational self-interest,” which is to empower the PC without regard for NPCs’ wellbeing; the narrative contract not only expects selflessness but also criticizes the selfishness of Randian Objectivism (par.8-14).

According to Hocking, this dissonance prevents players from being fully immersed in the game, effectively leaving them dissatisfied.

The term ‘ludonarrative dissonance’ has become part of game critique since. However, the usage of the term is also criticized for being too reductive. Roth et al. state that the term is not sufficient enough as an explanation for player dissatisfaction. In its current state, it remains trapped in the ludic contract vs. narrative contract dichotomy, which parallels the old ludology vs. narratology debate (96). Consequently, these critiques often overlook the blurred lines between the ludic elements and narrative elements of a game, as well as the involvement of players in the process. Roth et al. propose that instead of determining whether there is dissonance, game study scholars should instead consider that the sense of ludonarrative satisfaction comes from player interpretation and speculation (98-99). This shifts the focus from the tension between gameplay and narrative into the tension between players’ agency and game designers’ intention (102), with ludonarrative, be it dissonant or harmonious, as a tool to bridge the gap between said agency and intention.

In this way, dissonance in the ludonarrative is not detrimental to games. On the contrary, its presence can:

highlight the overall ideological message(s) communicated by the video game which reflects the concerns of society ... create complex video game narrative to facilitate players’ critical reflection on the PC’s gameplay actions ... draw the players’ attention away from the conventions of the medium ... force the player to rethink their overall approach and game interaction by drawing them in or out of the game experience (Toh 58).

Returning to Hocking’s *Bioshock* example: the dissonance between pro-Randian Objectivism and anti-Randian Objectivism in *Bioshock*’s ludonarrative is not immersion breaking. Instead, it could serve to highlight the difficulties of acting against the system of a given society, despite understanding the moral implications.

With that said, in my analysis of *Disco Elysium*, I center my attention on ludonarrative dissonance's companion, ludonarrative *resonance*. Sometimes called ludonarrative harmony, ludonarrative resonance is “when game developers create narrative and gameplay to seamlessly integrate with each other that *they cannot be separated, they will have a symbiotic relationship with each other*” (Toh 49; emphasis added). In comparison to ludonarrative dissonance, players would feel the absence of ludonarrative resonance more clearly. While dissonance *can* enhance a game's meaning, resonance is *necessary* to effectively communicate the game designers' intention to players without robbing the latter of their agency.

There are several methods to create resonance. The first is to make interactions with game objects coincide with the overarching narrative (Toh 76). In Lovecraftian horror games like *Still Wakes the Deep* (The Chinese Room, 2024), game designers emphasize the sense of helplessness before incomprehensible cosmic horrors by designing the gameplay around running and hiding from the enemies instead of fighting them. If players could fight and kill these cosmic beings, they would cease to be frightening. It would also cheapen the final narrative moment in the game, when the PC exclaims “Oh Christ! We never had a chance...” upon facing the eldritch entity. The second is to impose limitations on PC's abilities, such as carry weight or ammunition (77). Not only it is more realistic that PCs cannot carry a ton of weight around with them at all times, but it also encourages players to engage with mechanics of crafting and looting more. The third is to craft the actions and movements of PCs and NPCs to match players' expectations based on narrative design (77). If an enemy is designed to have wings, then players would expect them to fly. Thus, they should be programmed to be able to fly (or at least imitate flying) during players' encounter with them. Like the second method, this not only increases the believability of the world, but it also prompts the player to strategize differently (i.e., from fighting a terrestrial enemy).

Toh then divides ludonarrative resonance it into twelve types. Because the specificity of the types is not relevant to this thesis, I select only a few to better elucidate the functions of ludonarrative resonance as a whole. First, ludonarrative resonance motivation occurs when the narrative motivates players to engage with different gameplay options, while gameplay rewards, in turn, motivate players to engage with narrative decisions (78). Games often motivates by withholding and/or revealing information (79). In *Hollow Knight*, if players follow the main quest, they will arrive in a location named City of Tears. There, they are confronted in a cutscene by an NPC named Hornet. Hornet tells the player in a dialogue that she knows the truth about the PC's origin and quest. Although this is a revelation, Hornet's dialogue is cryptic enough that the players would not be able to comprehend the full picture. Hornet concludes the conversation by suggesting that if the PC – and by extension the player – wants more knowledge, they must seek “the Grave in Ash.” This narrative moment motivates players to explore optional areas of the game, which are teeming with new gameplay opportunities. Conversely, gameplay rewards from following the narrative moment (e.g., fun challenges, new equipment, more upgrade materials), together with the promise of a ‘true ending,’ motivate players to continue down this narrative route.

Second, ludonarrative resonance semiotic metaphor happens when there is a shift in narrative elements, which causes the corresponding gameplay to transform with them, and vice versa (85). In the survival horror RPG *Fear & Hunger* (Miro Haverinen, 2018), as PCs descend into the Dungeon of Fear and Hunger, they encounter multiple scenarios in which they can lose their body parts, the consequences of which are communicated through gameplay. If the PC loses their legs, for example, the gameplay supports this narrative detail by permanently decreasing the PC's speed to a crawl. This creates a new gameplay challenge: slower speed means players cannot progress far before they exhaust their resources (e.g., light source, food, alcohol), while enemies can catch up to them easier. In return, the new gameplay challenge reminds players of the

established narrative that the Dungeon is indeed a dangerous place of dread and despair, where a single mistake can cost a person's life and sanity.

Finally, ludonarrative resonance consequence makes itself known when players' gameplay choice has an impact during narrative moments or vice versa (86). In *Pillars of Eternity II* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2018), character creation options like the PC's background, attribute, skills, etc. influence dialogue choices during play. Not having a certain background or enough attribute/skill points lock players out of some dialogue options completely, which can result in a different narrative outcome. That narrative outcome could potentially impact gameplay later; for instance, if players are able to choose diplomatic options with certain NPCs, said NPCs become an ally for players in later battles, consequently enhancing the facilitating mechanics.

Viewing games through the lens of ludonarrative resonance, it becomes clear that, in most cases, the ludo- and narrative are tightly interwoven. Completely disregarding their relationship would be detrimental to the game and player experience. Without the narrative consequences to player's choices in *Pillars of Eternity II*'s character options, the variety in the options themselves would become arbitrary. Likewise, if *Fear & Hunger*'s gameplay does not shift with the PC's lost body parts, the narrative implications of losing body parts would become superficial. Therefore, if implemented with proper consideration, ludonarrative resonance has the ability to immerse and motivate players, potentially opening players up to empathizing with what the game has to say – providing that it has anything to say at all.

Disco Elysium undoubtably has something to say – perhaps more than just *something* to say – considering its length of more than a million words. The game says a lot about identity, mental illness, art and culture, different economic and political systems, and more. It says a lot about the specters that haunt its world – that haunt *this* world – and it does so through the million words and

through allowing the audience-user-reader-players to interact with them. Having already defined the ludonarrative device that *Disco Elysium* use to conjure the specters, I dedicate Section 1.2. below to defining the haunting and hauntological specters themselves.

1.2. What is Hauntology?

1.2.1. From Jacques Derrida to Mark Fisher: Defining Hauntology

“Whither Marxism?” (9) Derrida asks in his book, *Specters of Marx* (1994). Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a particular sentiment spreads among Western thinkers that history has ended; that it is inevitable that the “History of mankind ... will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy” (Fukuyama, xii-xiii). Derrida criticizes this notion of so-called ‘end of history’ as dishonest and self-contradictory. The notion presents itself as being simultaneously a simple ideal (*ideality*) and an eternal truth (*actuality*):

“On the one hand, the gospel of politico-economic liberalism needs the event of the good news that consists in what has putatively *actually* happened ... on the other hand, actual history and so many other realities that have an empirical appearance contradict this advent of the perfect liberal democracy, one must at the same time pose this perfection as simply a regulating and trans-historical ideal” (*Specters of Marx*, 78).

It then cherry-picks historical events that support the idea of Marxism’s defeat while also avoids events that expose the failures of liberal democracy and free market economics (86). Yet, even with the declaration that Marxism is dead and liberal democracy is eternal, the ‘end of history’ is not free from the specters of Marx that haunt it. Just as he once states that “[a] spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism” (Marx and Engels, 14), Marx himself has joined that specter to haunt history and issue an injunction.

Derrida compares this haunting phenomenon to the scene in *Hamlet*, in which the Ghost of Hamlet’s father appears to him, telling him of his murder by his own brother, the now-king of

Denmark. The Ghost, simply by returning, demands justice. “The time is out of joint,” says Hamlet (Shakespeare 1.5.210). “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (Shakespeare 1.5.100) – in the state of the world, and Hamlet laments that he is the one to set it right; to bring justice (*Specters of Marx*, 23). This raises a question: what does justice entail – not for Hamlet but for people of the real world? Is it the emancipation of workers? Is it reconciliation with the oppressed Other? Is it the construction of the promised communist utopia? Derrida does not give a definitive answer, for that, too, would imply some kind of ‘end of history’ (73). Answering “Whither Marxism?” should not involve dogmatically insisting on what Marx ‘truly intended.’ On the contrary, the question itself is the matter of “where to lead it by interpreting it, which cannot happen without transformation, and not where can it lead us such as it is or such as it will have been” (74).

Transformation is the key. After all, the specters do not speak their demands with one voice because they are “something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence ... this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge” (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 5). Specters are things in-between: between life and death; between past and present, and present and future, and past and future; between presence and absence; between existence and non-existence. They are plural (they are *specters* of Marx, not *the specter* of Marx); thus, their meaning – their injunctions – must be understood as a plurality. This characterization of specters by Derrida is a continuation of his previous theories on deconstruction and *différance*. Hauntology, the logic of the specters’ haunting, then:

demands a new understanding of the object of study that escapes the traditional frame of knowledge ... It also throws into doubt claims of objectivity, certainty, predictability, measurability, and completeness, deconstructing the accepted frames of reference and structures of interpretation, and exploring the workings of human memory, both on individual and collective levels (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 9).

The proclamation that history has ended turns the plurality into singularity. It is an attempt to 'conjure away' the specters of Marx, to exorcise them in order to affirm the supposed inevitable victory of liberal capitalism and liberal democracy (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 85). However, to conjure is also "to *evoke*, to bring forth with the voice, to *convoke* a charm or a spirit ... This voice does not describe, what it says certifies nothing; its words cause something to happen" (50). Therefore, Derrida suggests, scholars of Marxism can conjure the specters, not to speak to them, but to allow *them* to speak, "even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself ... even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet" (176). It is a way of reckoning with the ghosts – the "silenced others" (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 11). In reckoning with them, they reveal with their in-between-ness the ability to collapse the linearity of time, "so as to counter impulses of historical amnesia and to map out the possibilities of different futures" (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 11).

To reckon with them, Mark Fisher has conjured the specters of Marx, Derrida, and other previous thinkers in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014). He allows them to speak, but also adds his own voice. While Derrida suggests that the specters haunt the hegemony of liberal capitalism's ideals by promising its return, Fisher's specters haunt not by its reappearance, but by its disappearance. He observes that "there's an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate any more" (*Ghosts of My Life*, 9). This inability to grasp and articulate the present, and thus the future, is the consequence of what Fisher calls 'capitalist realism': "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (*Capitalist Realism*, 2).

However, the conditions of capitalist realism are not naturally occurring (i.e., not ‘just the way things are’). They are manufactured. Fisher writes extensively about how capitalist realism manufactures such conditions. First, it claims itself to be democratic while using military and police forces to subjugate oppositions: “internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist ... there is no withering away of the state ... only a stripping back of the state to its core military and police functions” (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2). What it does not violently subjugate, it subsumes and consumes into itself (4). It markets itself as ideologically neutral while appropriating and repackaging radical thoughts and movements into products that people can consume (e.g., ‘punk’ turning into an aesthetic instead of political movement), in which consumers are invited to participate and become complicit (13-15). Because of capitalist realism’s violence, both corporeally and ideologically, it gives an impression that no other alternative way of thinking and being can survive.

Second, capitalist realism defers the responsibility from the system to the individual. Fisher gives an example of how mental illnesses are treated in capitalist societies. They are explained solely as “chemical imbalances in the individual’s neurology,” ruling out any social/systemic problems that exacerbate one’s mental health issues (21). My own example is climate change, in which individuals are encouraged to reduce their carbon footprint as opposed to interrogating corporations’ energy consumption. Fisher observes that this is a symptom of capitalism’s hyper-bureaucraticism (39-54). Under capitalist realism, people – whether they are workers, academics, or otherwise – are expected to overperform. Then, the performances are constantly surveilled and graded (e.g., employee of the month) using guidelines, peer-to-peer assessments, and self-assessments (41). Consequently, people are focused on *performing* work instead of just doing the work itself (42). On the one hand, the bureaucracy creates a symbol of productivity and prosperity – the sense that the ‘bottom line’ is ‘going up’ – that, on the surface level, substantiate the illusion

that capitalism is ‘different’ and ‘working as intended’ (43-44). On the other hand, when something goes wrong, by nature of it being a bureaucracy, the system can keep deferring its responsibility to other parts of itself. After all, the individual bureaucrats are at the mercy of the overcomplicated, near-incomprehensible, Kafkaesque system as well (49). This fosters apathy and/or antipathy in those under the system, compelling them to believe that nothing can be done about its failings. As Fisher puts it, when a structure demands that *everyone* does something, it absolves itself from the responsibility to do the same, “itself receding into invisibility” (66).

Lastly, the world of capitalist realism is precarious by design. It demands the acceptance of that precarity. Fisher notes that for those who live under capitalism, especially for blue-collar workers, “[w]ork and life become inseparable ... Periods of work alternate with periods of unemployment. Typically, you find yourself unemployed in a series of short-term jobs, unable to plan for the future” (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 34). To be able to survive this precarious world, one must adopt the strategy of forgetfulness (56). It begins with forgetting the weariness of being constantly overwork and underpaid, but it also includes forgetting violence committed to uphold the system, such as manufactured scarcity, union busting, child labor, and environmental damage. The culture of forgetfulness “privileges only the present and the immediate” as to establish a continuous present in which the status quo is eternal (after all, history has already ended) while also tends toward being “excessively nostalgic, given over to retrospection” (58-59). This tendency is reflected in cultural objects that imitate the aesthetic of the past or, occasionally, the past’s imagination of the future without inventing something new (e.g., the endless reboots, remakes, sequels, and prequels in the film industry). Consequently, the culture is afflicted by anterograde amnesia, losing the memories of the future, in which “sufferers are unable to transfer new memories into long term memory; the new therefore looms up as hostile, fleeting, un-navigable, and the sufferer is drawn back to the security of the old” (60). All of this is to say: there is something rotten

in the state of capitalist realism. The specters of Marx, once promising their return, have disappeared. People could no longer imagine an alternative, for the future is unimaginable. Under capitalist realism, history has ended; the future is cancelled; and nothing new can be created.

Despite that, Fisher remains skeptical about the eternal status quo. The specters, after all, are creatures of the in-between. Their disappearance, then, does not mean that they cease to *act*. This is evident in Fisher's definition of hauntology:

the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which act without (physically) existing ... [W]e can provisionally distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which remains effective as a virtuality. The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (Ghosts of My Life, 18-19).

Fisher implicitly expands upon the specters and the effects of their agency in his other work, *The Weird and the Eerie*. He describes the eerie as “constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*,” and that sensation of eeriness “occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or [there is] nothing present when there should be something” (61). Amnesia, for instance, can be eerie, as it leaves empty spaces in a place where memories should belong. In addition, it indicates that the unconscious has an agency of its own. It reminds witnesses that a part of one's mind – a part where there should be nothing – can conceal something from oneself (71-72) Similarly, the specters are things that should be dead yet are not; things that should be *of the past*, yet intrude upon the present; things that should have disappeared, yet continue to make their injunctions. Owing to their very presence and/or absence, the weird and the eerie “[signal] that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete” (13). The weird, through shock, and the eerie, through serene detachment, call into question the things that have been taken for granted as ‘reality.’ Fisher adds here that humans are, in some shape

or form, fascinated by the weird and the eerie (13). Perhaps this fascination – this *yearning* for something more real than reality – is the reason that the specters still haunt. As Fisher states: “[i]t is about refusing to give up the ghost or – and this can sometimes amount to the same thing – the refusal of the ghost to give up on us. The spectre will not allow us to settle into/ for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism” (*Ghosts of My Life*, 22). The question that naturally follows is, then, what world might the specters want the living to imagine? If capitalist realism precedes hauntology, what succeeds it?

Mark Fisher passed away in 2017 at the age of 48 years old. He leaves behind an unfinished work titled *Acid Communism*. In the introduction of the book, Fisher’s student, Matt Colquhoun writes, “Acid Communism resists definition ... It is not only a project for the recuperation of the counterculture’s lost potentials but also the expression of a desire for an experimental (rather than prescriptively utopian) leftist politics” (1-2). The idea of acid communism, which is still being interpreted and expanded upon by readers, interpretations that are no doubt haunted by Fisher himself, does not suggest that communism, as it has been practiced in the real world, replaces capitalism. Instead, it suggests that the world without capitalism must be imagined. Like taking the titular psychedelic drug, acid communism (the idea) invites one into the realm of the weird – the companion of the eerie. To further explain, the weird is:

a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate (*The Weird and the Eerie*, 15).

An obvious example of the weird is Lovecraftian horror, in which incomprehensible entities from beyond the stars or beneath the waves invade the ‘normal’ world, inflicting madness upon humans with their very presence. For Lovecraft, the weird is frightening and unwelcomed. Fisher’s

world of acid communism, however, embraces – is – the weird. Although there is no explicit definition for acid communism, Fisher describes it as a space that exists outside the norm: a new, never-before imagined reality (*Acid Communism*, 41). It is a dream-like psychedelic space that breaks down the notions of capitalism’s eternity and inevitability, opening up novel ways (decidedly plural) of imagining alternative futures: “[a] new humanity, a new seeing, a new thinking, a new loving” (52). It is the future, or futures, that the specters of Fisher allude to, while at the same time being a specter itself: a specter of a world which could be free.

1.2.2. Hauntology in Video Games

Scholars have been using hauntology as a concept for analyzing art and media since the term’s conception. Derrida and Fisher themselves have also done such analyses: Derrida interprets parts of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* through a hauntological lens, while Fisher does the same with multiple films and music albums. It is unsurprising, then, that the concept is eventually applied to the relatively new and still growing medium of video games as well. Unfortunately, despite being a fascinating area of research, as well as being (arguably) the most fitting medium for specters, there have been few studies on the connection between hauntology and ludonarrative. At the time of writing this thesis, there are only three prominent works on the subject. These works examine hauntology in various video game elements, such as narratives, metanarratives, and gaming communities (Robertson); temporality and player knowledge (Asling); and video game objects (Janik).

Robertson’s, Asling’s, and Janik’s works all demonstrate how hauntology works within the time and space of video games, as well as how the haunted game-time and game-space affects players in the real world. Janik characterizes past, present, and future as being “produced almost

simultaneously ... they are all planned and programmed in detail beforehand, waiting to be determined by the process of play” (9-10). Her example is ghosts as game objects. Ghosts in video games have dual meaning. On the one hand, they represent cultural beliefs about the afterlife, which means that they have a life ‘before’ (6). On the other hand, they are pixels just like other in-game objects, coded into the game as always-already dead (7). They function as containers through which players can access the fictional world’s past, causing the game’s past to always be present. From the other direction, the game’s future is always present as well. The different endings in cRPGs, for instance, are already coded into the game. They do not occur spontaneously; rather, they lay still, waiting to be discovered (10). On the surface, this implies that video game narratives are deterministic, which contradicts the plurality of meaning offered by hauntology. However, this only applies if one disregards the ‘ludo-’ part of the experience. When players actually engage with the ludonarrative, when they interact and interpret, they “[leave] traces of [their] actions, thereby forming a bond with the game object and, as a result, becoming part of the bio-object” (18). Because each player experience is unique, each of these bonds are unique as well. Players’ traces provide the game with iterations of itself, regardless of the game designers’ plans and programming.

Asling discusses a similar idea of players’ traces in video games, which could be seen in a game’s time-based gameplay devices. Asling uses the time travel mechanics in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* (Nintendo Entertainment, 2000) as an example, though I argue that most games possess these temporal mechanics in the form of the save-reload system. The mechanics, together with player’s knowledge from outside the game (e.g., knowledge of genre, knowledge of previous titles), provide players with knowledge that in-game characters do not have. Players can apply the knowledge by repeating in-game events (e.g., reloading), consequently conjuring specters that inform their future decisions. Janik further describes the mechanics of the repetitions, stating

that “[i]n the moment of return, the past of the game object and the past of the fictional world are erased, but their specters remain ... new actions are clearly inspired by the past, which has ‘not yet’ materialized and ‘no longer’ exists” (11). While the rest of the game world is bound by the present game-time, the player, and by extension the PC, represent “an exception to this rule ... Time then becomes a simultaneously endless and finite resource. It is always possible to run out of it, but players can replenish it at any point they wish ... they embody the foreign force able to resist and fight against the predetermined fates” (156). In this way, the player becomes the weird: something that should not exist, but because it does, it has the ability to transform reality.

Robertson elaborates on ludonarrative’s power of transformation by examining how failure is handled in a game’s fictional space in contrast to the real world. The real world, Robertson argues, neglects failed futures. He gives an example of how futurism has been reduced to aesthetics after many of its promised technological advancements (e.g., flying cars, teleportation, galaxy hopping) failed to become material (13). This envisioned future is proclaimed dead, becoming ghosts that haunt the present culture: “[t]he future will be Futura ... cannot be anything but this, nor exist beyond it” (14). Video games, on the contrary, do not discard failures that occur in their fictional space. Games often integrate failure into the “play, progress, and action” (11), such as allowing reload, encouraging repetition until success, or providing a path forward despite the perceived ‘failure.’ In other words, in video games, players are ‘failing forward.’ Every failure reveals iterations of the game’s world, offering players a glimpse into alternate futures otherwise inaccessible in the real one. Through the exploration of these iterations – through repetitive confrontation with the specters of failed futures – players can eventually find a ‘way out’ of the game (i.e., ‘winning’ – whatever that might mean for the individual). Reflecting upon how this idea can affect the real world, Robertson proposes that video game hauntology assures that:

a repetition of past traumas [is] not the ultimate game over – they have happened and are always already folded into the present’s spectres. It is not about being guided into the futures by ghosts of the past, but about rewinding until the present is playable and its algorithm clearer than it was before, its ghosts not exorcised but engaged with (28-29).

The emphasis on repetition and iterations in Robertson’s work, and by extension Asling’s and Janik’s, suggests their importance in video games’ ludonarrative. Furthermore, I argue that the manner in which repetition and iterations operate in video games makes the medium inherently hauntological. To explain, I present Aarseth’s observation about cybertext, which video games are a part of. According to Aarseth, readers of cybertext “are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible” (*Cybertext*, 3). The possibilities of alternate routes, alternate endings, alternate meanings are not only woven into video games, but are constantly reproduced by the act of play. Every time a player makes a choice, some realities disappear and become inaccessible while others open up, ready to be explored. All these paths are, more often than not, considered to be equally ‘true’ and ‘valid.’ Authorial intent becomes less important because game designers and players are constantly negotiating the meaning of games with each other. These repetition and iterations break with the common conception that communication prioritizes ‘consciousness’ and ‘presence.’ Moreover, they defy the singularity of meaning, inviting infinite interpretation of the text every time an action is performed, even when the text remains recognizable as the ‘same’ one. In other words, video games have inherent iterability.

Derrida explains iterability in “Signature Event Context” by deconstructing the speech-writing dichotomy, wherein Derrida contests the notion that speech is superior to, by virtue of being ‘purer’ than, writing as a form of communication. He challenges the common definition of the word ‘communication,’ which he says is restricted by the idea of ‘context’ (“Signature Event

Context,” 310). The idea of context, according to Derrida, is vague yet readily accepted as common sense: “[i]s there a rigorous and scientific concept of the *context*? Does not the notion of context harbor, behind a certain confusion, very determined philosophical pre-suppositions?” (310). Context only serves to generalize writing as mere extension of speech – a supplementary means of communication – characterized by its ‘absence’ of addressor and addressee (311). Here, Derrida argues that writing is not defined by its absence. Rather, writing is only writing when it is legible and repeatable, or rather, ‘iterable,’ even in the absolute absence of all addressors and addressees (315). Furthermore, this iterability – this ‘special’ absence – also applies to other forms of communication and signs (318). The change in tone, voice, and possibly accents, for instance, does not render a spoken word unrecognizable even if it influences the perceived context of a spoken word. The word remains comprehensible to listeners because of its inherent iterability (318). In addition to elucidating iterability, this interpretation of spoken words as containing the same property as written words also breaks down the hierarchized dichotomy between the two.

Continuing to explore the concept in “Limited Inc a b c...”, Derrida states that:

[i]terability supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the selfsame be repeatable and identifiable in, through, and even in view of its alteration. For the structure of iteration ... implies both identity and difference. Iteration in its “purest” form – and it is always impure – contains in itself the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration (53).

Iterations, then, are the repetitions of a Thing while also containing within it the Thing’s alteration. Because the Thing itself is also an iteration, however, without accepting its other iterations, the Thing has no meaning at all. It has no center, no fully-realized presence, no absolute ‘existence.’

This concept of iterability returns in Derrida’s writing on hauntology. The specters themselves are creatures of repetition: “[a]fter the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back*

[revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again” (*Specters of Marx*, 10). When the specters return, they are altered; a different iteration of themselves. The specters’ iterations create plurality, which is necessary if their demands are to be intelligible at all: “the injunction itself ... can only be one by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times – and in several voices” (18). If the specters were without iterations – were singular – they would lose their subversiveness to the absolutism of the End of history and the eternity of capitalism. Applying this to video game hauntology, players’ decisions and actions create iterations within a game’s ludonarrative, which support the ability to make those decisions and perform those actions in the first place. The other iterations – the inaccessible strategies, the paths not taken – return to haunt players’ ‘present’ one. Players who reload, replay, and return to the paths unexplored, to the options unchosen, defy the End of the game’s story. They define their own.

Although most games have hauntological elements, *Disco Elysium* is unique because of its self-awareness. It is aware of its own specters and purposefully conjuring them. In this chapter, I have built the theoretical framework, defining the terms that make up the structure of this thesis. In the following chapters, I put these terms to practice by analyzing how *Disco Elysium* channels hauntology through its ludonarrative.

2. “The furies are at home in the mirror”: How *Disco Elysium* Introduces Itself

Disco Elysium begins with YOU – the PC – drifting in oblivion. Suddenly, you become momentarily aware of the ex-something, the meat-thing, and the knowledge that ‘out there somewhere’ evil apes are duking it out on a large ball. Between these moments, your Ancient Reptilian Brain and Limbic System speak to you, urging you to continue your non-existence. But no matter how much you want to listen to them, you are roused by unpleasant sensations. You taste liquor in your mouth and feel a terrible ache in your head. Then, you hear the awful screeching sound of a motor carriage outside the window, ripping you away from nothingness and forcing you back into the world of pain and blinding lights.

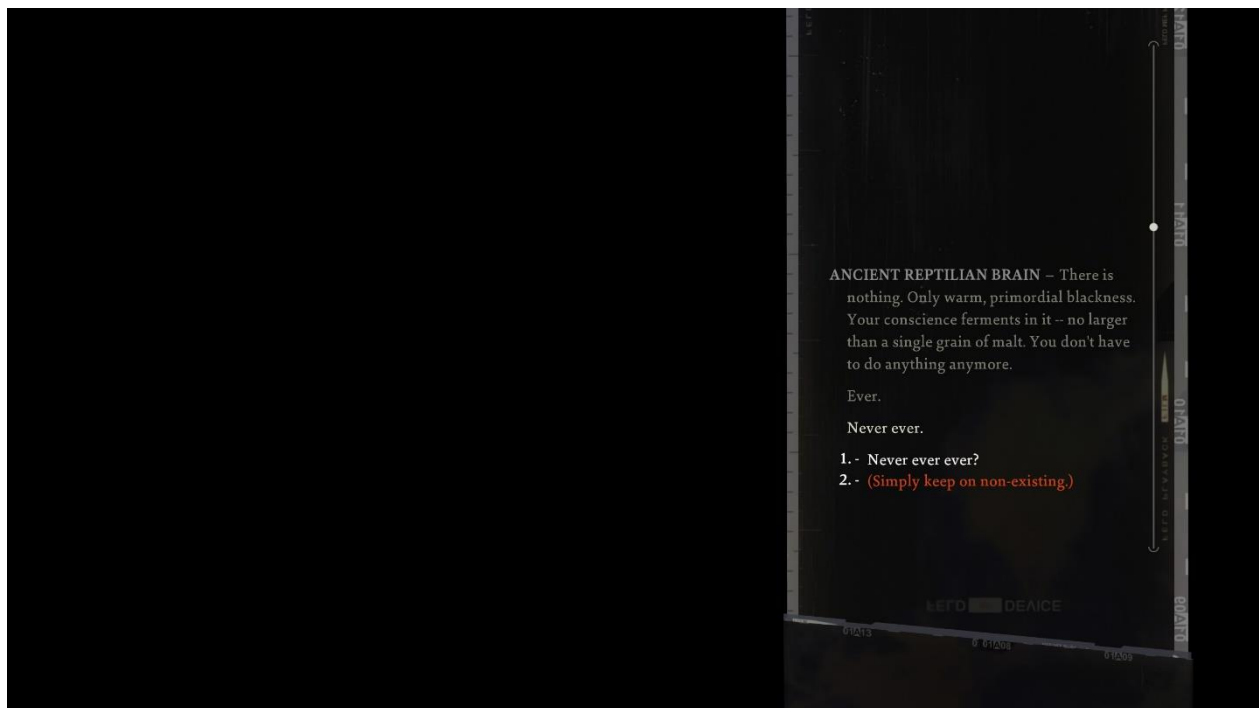


Figure 1. The Warm, Primordial Blackness. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

You wake up naked in a trashed motel room. A window has been shattered, a cassette tape has been torn violently from the tape player, and empty bottles of alcohol lay scattered about the

room. Someone partied *hard* last night. You cannot remember who they are. In fact, you cannot remember anything at all.

As you hunt down your clothes inside the room, you come face to face with a mirror in the bathroom. You come face to face with yourself. Until now, you cannot remember who you are and what you look like. Your in-game portrait, which should show your face alongside your physical and mental health bars, is blurred into a blob of vaguely humanoid head shape to reflect your amnesia. You can choose to wipe the mirror and see yourself; however, your Inland Empire skill, advises against it in a passive skill check:

INLAND EMPIRE [Easy: Success] – Abort! You clearly have not thought this through. You won't like what you will see there – and you will never *un-become* it.

Here, YOU have a choice: wipe the mirror and see your face, or leave it a fuzzy image of a forgotten past. In my playthroughs, I have chosen to wipe the mirror, which reveals:

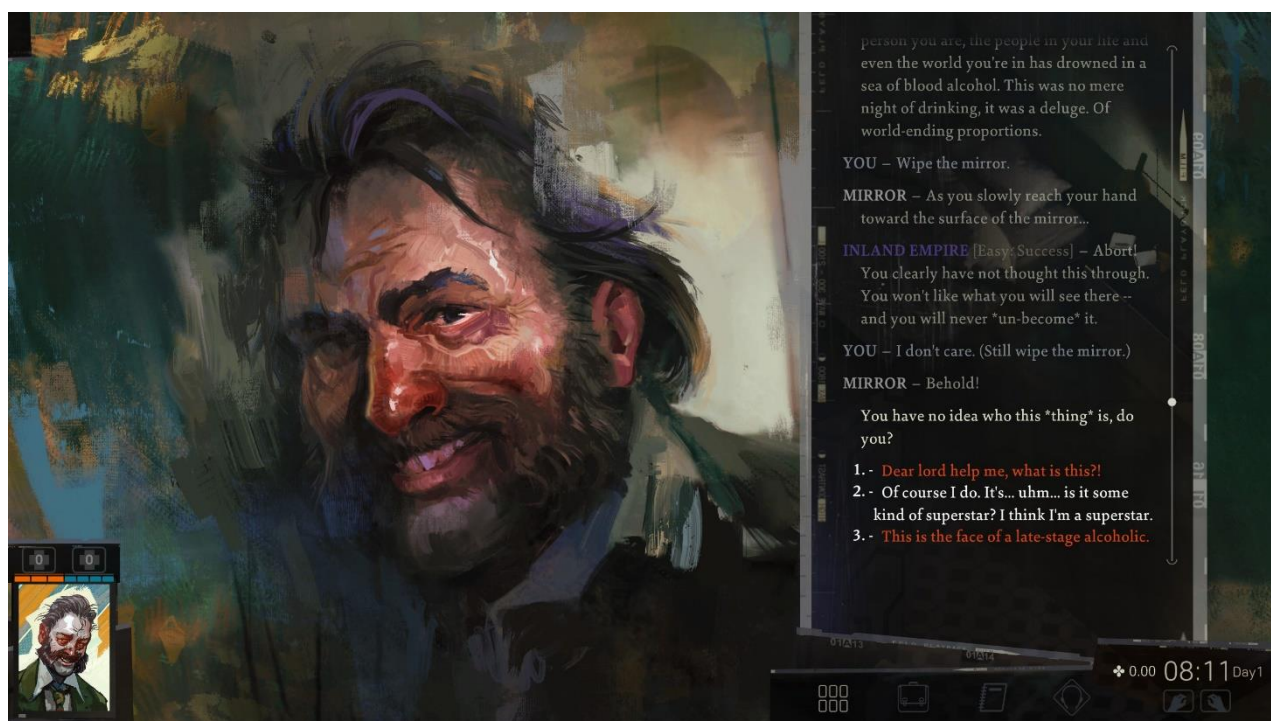


Figure 2. The Expression. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

YOU and everything within you react with horror upon seeing yourself. Your face is a bloated mess, swollen with alcohol and stuck in a half-grin, half-leer *Expression*. Is it the face of a superstar or the face of a broken man who has known nothing but heartbreak? The Mirror comforts you: “Whatever it is, at least it’s *dead* now. There’s clearly *rigor mortis* on your face” (emphasis added). Regardless of what you think of yourself, because you have already returned from oblivion, you must face the world, whether you are ready or not.

At this point in the game, YOU have no name. However, for clarity’s sake, from this moment forth, I call YOU by one of the names that you can eventually accept: Harry.

During this opening sequence of *Disco Elysium*, the game introduces gameplay alongside its narrative, and choices that players have made in the character creation begin to take effect. First, the messiness of the room teaches players how to search, collect, and equip items, whereupon players would notice that certain items like clothing give gameplay bonuses. Then, once players have interacted with their environments, they find that they can enter a dialogue with objects around them, such as ceiling fans and mirrors. In these dialogues, the players are introduced to active and passive skill checks. Active skill checks, which players perform by clicking the dialogue choices marked with white or red highlights, determine how successfully players perform physical, mental, or social tasks. Passive skill checks, which are dependent on players’ choices during character creation, determine what players notice about the world and how they react to it. Through the combination of choice and luck, these skill checks, both active and passive, shape players’ perspectives on the narrative of the game.

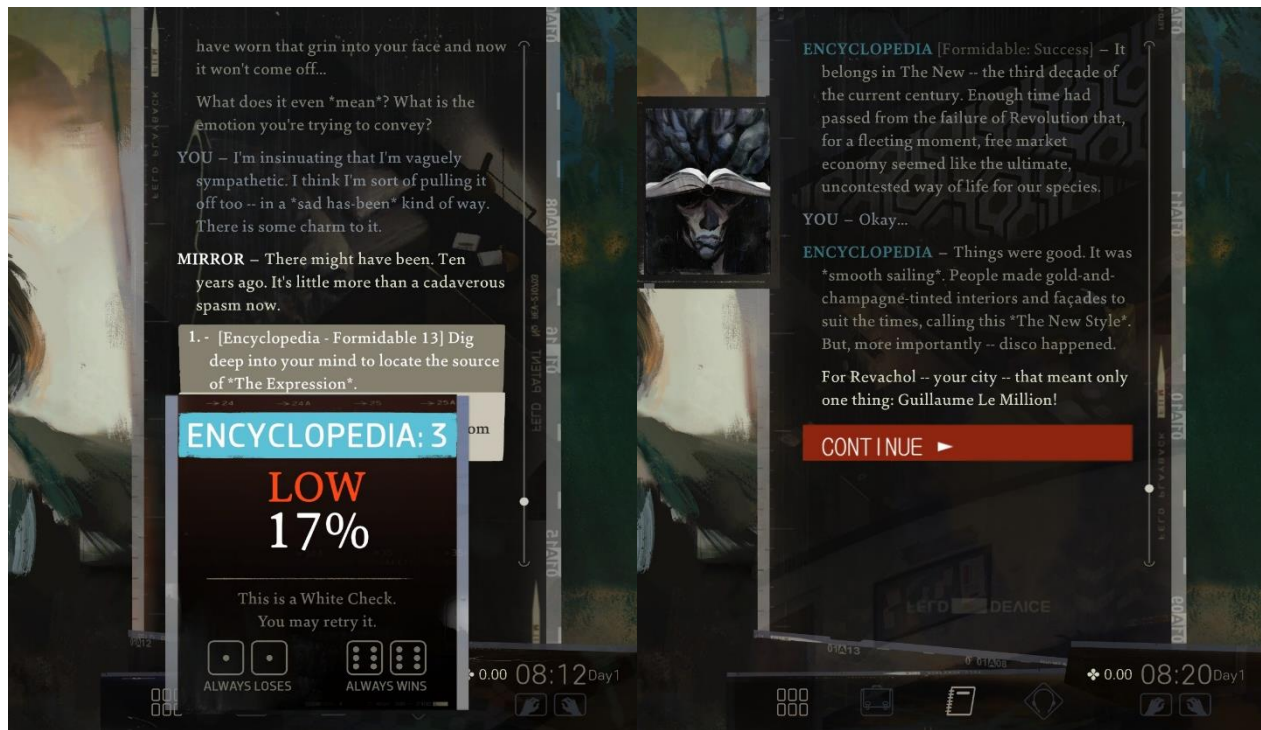


Figure 3. Encyclopedia Check. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

For instance, during the Mirror scene, players can choose to dwell on The Expression on Harry's face. When they do so, they make a skill check using the Encyclopedia skill. The game rolls two six-sided dice. If the roll is a failure, Harry cannot remember The Expression's origin, and the option for the skill check is temporarily disabled. If the roll is a success, Encyclopedia tells Harry about the history behind The Expression, which further characterizes Harry and the setting for the player:

ENCYCLOPEDIA [Formidable: Success] – It belongs in The New – the third decade of the current century. Enough time had passed from the failure of Revolution that, for a fleeting moment, free market economy seemed like the ultimate, uncontested way of life for our species

...

ENCYCLOPEDIA – Things were good. It was *smooth sailing*. People made gold-and-champagne-tinted interiors and façades to suit the times, calling this *The New Style*. But, more importantly – disco happened.

With disco comes Guillaume Le Million, a disco star who has popularized The Expression. Encyclopedia hypothesizes that Harry adopted it due to its popularity, and once upon a time, it was quite charming. However, Encyclopedia adds that it has been twenty or so years since The Expression “looking good on you – or anyone. Humanity has run aground in that time, it’s a different world now. The Expression is a relic.”

From this minor skill check, the player learns new information about the setting – the city of Revachol. There has been a failed Revolution, followed by a period of faith in liberal capitalism. The New is Revachol’s End of History; an end that did not last. The Expression is one of Revachol’s many specters, now etched onto Harry’s face, who himself is a metaphorical living dead. Harry is meant to mirror Revachol, and by extension Guillaume Le Million, in some ways. The connection between Harry and Guillaume Le Million becomes apparent when the player chooses to internalize the Guillaume Le Million Thought in their Thought Cabinet (i.e., a game mechanic that will be further explained in Chapter 4). In addition to giving game mechanic bonuses, the Thought reveals that Guillaume Le Million died thirteen years ago, hanging from a decorative dragon tree after a drunken and drug-fueled night. Players who receive this revelation might recall the first time they see the trashed motel room (also after a drunken and drug-fueled night), in which a Horrific Necktie dangles from the ceiling fan. If the player successfully retrieves the Necktie, the Ceiling Fan tells them that the knot reminds them of a noose. From this gameplay sequence, players are given some context about the objects and events in the world that aid them in their interpretation of Harry and the world of Elysium. At the same time, the game neither confirms nor denies whether Harry has planned to hang himself. Players who have never learned about Guillaume Le Million through the skill check and/or Thought may be unaware of this possible interpretation altogether, and thus have a different understanding of the game events. *Disco Elysium*’s introduction sequence demonstrates how gameplay choices in the game, apart from offering mechanical rewards, deepen

its narrative dimensions. The resonance in the game's ludonarrative carries on from the beginning until the end of the game, which becomes more evident when Harry steps out into the streets of Martinaire, Revachol.

3. The Narrative of *Disco Elysium*

3.1. The Setting: The World and the Pale



Figure 4. The opening screen. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

The setting of *Disco Elysium* is best represented by its opening screen. In the foreground: the district of Martinaire from the perspective of a killer; a ruin that has managed to retain its colors despite everything. In the background: the sprawling city of Revachol and the sky at sunset (deep gold and orange, like a forest fire), where hangs the Coalition airships (nothing sinister about them at all). And lastly, silently lurking behind the world like a promise waiting to be fulfilled: the pale. Throughout play sessions, players learn about and come to know all of these things: Martinaire, Revachol, the world of Elysium, and the pale. The perspective of the killer becomes the perspective of Harry becomes the perspective of the players themselves, each moving through and occupying a space in different iterations of Revachol that exist only in their own world of meaning. There are

as many Revachols as there are people who live within it, and nothing demonstrates this better than the game's ludonarrative.

There are several ways for players to learn about Revachol in *Disco Elysium*: skill checks, interactions with NPCs, interactions with other in-game objects, observing the game's *mise-en-scène*, etc. Pieces of information are strewn about the game, waiting to be discovered and pieced together in an instance of indexical storytelling. This method of storytelling is unique to video games, and it refers to the way that video games “[generate] stories through traces, both on the part of the designer and on the player” (Fernandez-Vara 4). Indexical storytelling builds world narrative, placing signs (game objects) with relations to the game world's past events in the game's space, whereupon players can choose to investigate and form connections between the space, the signs, and the events (5). Through the act of investigative play, as well as interactions and decision-making, players, in turn, transform the game's world, leaving their traces in it (6). These traces, both ones generated by the game and the player(s), become the game's emergent narrative. Because these traces manifest in forms as various as the number of players, there are countless possible emergent narratives within a single setting.

When Harry steps out of the Whirling-in-Rags, the motel in which he has stayed for three days on a drunken bender, the player is greeted with the mournful horns from the game's soundtrack, “Instrument of Surrender.” The player will hear this song throughout the game as they explore Martinaise; the non-diegetic sound soon becoming almost diegetic, unable to be separated from the city that it represents. Standing in front of the Whirling-in-Rags, perceiving the world through Harry's eyes, the player does not see the city at sunset, instead finding themselves in the middle of a ruined district, its walls riddled with bullet holes and its streets with bomb craters. In front of them, a mere few steps away, is a blue motor carriage of Harry's detective partner, Kim

Kitsuragi. Harry can deduce that it is the infernal machine that dragged him back from sweet oblivion. To the north stands a group of buildings with weatherworn walls and peeling paints: the Doomed Commercial Area and the Capeside Apartments. Nestled in between the former and the Whirling-in-Rags, the backyard where The Hanged Man hangs from the tree, his decaying body pelted with stones by a pair of troubled children. To the west, the player can follow the cracks in the pavement to find two old men playing pétanque in the aforementioned bomb craters, one of the men a bitter Royalist ex-soldier, the other a mild-mannered Union man. To the south is a maze of cargo trucks, their drivers stuck in a traffic jam. One of the truck drivers, Harry has heard, might be smuggling illegal substances into the city. To the east looms the Greater Revachol Industrial Harbour and its machinery, its gate blocked off by striking Union members and scab protestors. These traces – the bullet holes, the bomb craters, the crumbling buildings, and even the two children, the two pétanque players, and the conflicting groups at the Industrial Harbour – paint the player a picture of what Martinaise, and by extension Revachol. It is a place that has suffered violence, and its scars have failed to heal. Consequently, its people are crushed under the weight of its suffering.

Through a combination of skill checks and interactions with the traces (e.g., items, NPCs, interactable environment), Harry learns the context behind them. Together with him, the player gathers that Revachol is a city on the isola (i.e., continent) of Insulinde, one of Elysium's seven discovered continents. Once, Revachol was a constitutional monarchy and a prosperous empire, gaining its wealth from its colonies all over the world. Revachol exploits their colonies, forcing them to produce commodities like apricots, marbles, tobacco, sugar, and cocaine for it, which it then exports. During Elysium's turn of the century, Revachol's political and economic strength declined as generations of its kings overspent the country's fortune and overdosed on cocaine. During this time, multiple communist revolutions also occur around the world. Eventually, the

people of Revachol built their own Commune: The Commune of Revachol, and revolted against the king. After a period of violent civil war, the Commune successfully kills the king and ends the monarchy in Revachol. Upon the king's death, however, the Coalition of Nations, an alliance of foreign first-world countries, decides to interfere. In an operation called Operation Death Blow, the Coalition bombs Revachol from their airships, destroying Martinaise and other districts that house the communist revolutionaries. Then, the Coalition lands in Revachol, captures the city, and massacres the remaining communists and anarchists. Afterward, Revachol became a Zone of Control, its political body and economy governed by the Coalition, who imposed upon the city free market capitalism and moralist (i.e., centrist) ideologies. In the following two decades, Revachol struggles to rebuild itself. It is only in the third decade of the Current Century when Revachol East sees a short-lived economic boom (Revachol West, where Martinaise stands, on the contrary, is left to rot). This economic boom ushers in disco music and ultraliberalism (hyper-capitalism), which lasts for a decade before the recession hits in the fourth decade. Revachol still suffers recession in the fifth decade, the spring of '51, when the game's events are set.

For this thesis, I interpret Elysium as a world that suffers under capitalist realism. It begins with Revachol, the main setting – and arguably one of the main characters – of *Disco Elysium*. Revachol is haunted by failed futures. The Revolution has ended with devastation; the traces of which continue to mar the district of Martinaise, from the broken structures to the broken people that inhabit it. The ideologies that promote change died alongside the people who fought for it. The NPC Joyce Messier explains:

YOU – “Who got shot in the head?”

JOYCE MESSIER – “Those would be the communists. Generally speaking, 40 million people got shot in the head during the World Revolution. But the communists – they *all* got shot in the head.

Oh, and the anarchists too! They shot them well. So well one forgets they even existed.”

The ‘they’ that shot the communists and the anarchists before burying them in mass graves are the Coalition of Nations, whose beliefs revolve around free market capitalism, moralism, and the insistence that they are ideology-free. Moralism could be equated to centrism in the real world; its self-proclaimed core values are humanism, democracy, moderate compromise, and slow, incremental progress. As the Sunday Friend, a Moralintern NPC in the game, puts it: “moralists believe in a normal, stable world, governed by democratic values.” The ideology itself is tied to an organization, Moralist International, also known as Moralintern, who supplies the Coalition with airships that constantly surveil Revachol under the pretense of keeping peace. However, as Harry would come to realize during his time in Martinaise, there is nothing peaceful or humanist about Revachol, especially in a district that the Coalition wants to forget ever existed. While the Moralinterns are willing to shoot communists and anarchists in the head, as well as carpet-bomb several of Revachol’s districts, they are not willing to employ any radical methods to provide security or stability for Revacholians. The poverty-stricken children in Martinaise are left at the mercy of domestic abuse, addiction, and exploitation. There are no social programs to help the mentally ill, one of which is running around the district with a gun in her hand, threatening people not out of malice but because of confusion from deteriorating mental health. Corporations can send violent mercenaries to massacre Union members to dissolve their strike, regardless of how peaceful the strikers are. These things reflect the features of capitalist realism as described by Fisher. The ruling bodies (i.e., the Coalition and the Moralinterns) present itself as democratic and the faith in them as ‘common sense.’ It uses its ‘dedication’ to democracy and humanist projects to justify surveillance and threats of violence (i.e., the Coalition airships), while also continuously failing to deliver its promises of peace and prosperity. The Kingdom of Conscience Thought, the Thought that Harry gains once he has enough Moralist points, summarizes this best:

The Kingdom of Conscience will be exactly as it is now. Moralists don't really *have* beliefs ... Centrism isn't change – not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth.

With the communists and anarchists all dead, and the Moralinterns, and by extension the Coalition, seeming almost god-like, an alternative future to them seems unimaginable. Another NPC in the game, Harry's detective partner Kim Kitsuragi, upon being asked what he thinks of the Moralintern, answers: "The Moralintern are a fact. I try not to have opinions on facts – until they change. And ... it doesn't look like that's about to happen." Even the city of Revachol herself, in a split second, suggests to Harry that, no matter how hard he tries to change for the better – to change *the city* for the better – it would not amount to anything in the end. In 22 years, an atomic bomb will be launched, leveling the entire city. Following the destruction, the ruins of Revachol, and soon the entire world, will be swallowed up by the pale. The lead writer and creator of the world of Elysium, Robert Kurvitz, confirms the destruction of Revachol and the end of Elysium in his novel *Sacred and Terrible Air*, which was written six years before the game's release. In other words, even the fictional world of Elysium ends before capitalism does, as Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have stated, "is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (qtd. in *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher 2).

The world of capitalist realism is full of specters, and Revachol must contend with specters of its past and future. There are the specters of the failed Revolution. There are the specters of the Moralintern's failed promises. There are the specters of failed businesses that (allegedly) live in the Doomed Commercial Area's chimney. There are the specters of *Sacred and Terrible Air*, the novel that comes before but reveals the terrible things that come after, a revelation that haunts the narrative of *Disco Elysium*. Not last and not least, there are the specters of Elysium's communism,

which manages to have their petty revenge, as the corpse of The Hanged Man, who is later revealed to be one of the mercenaries sent to massacre union members, tells Harry about its killer within the first few hours of gameplay (assuming that the player inspects the body): “communism killed me. Love *DID ME IN*.” Many elements of the game communicate to the player about how these specters haunt its setting and characters, how both Revachol and Revacholians are simultaneously haunted by the city’s past (i.e., the Revolution, the false promises) and its future (i.e., the End). However, nothing represents these hauntological forces within the world of Elysium better than the pale.

The pale is a geological phenomenon that separates the isolas (continents) of Elysium. It is a dominant feature of the world, though very little is known about it. It is indescribable and unquantifiable. Every property is suspended when it comes into contact with the pale: language, mathematics, history, etc. The deeper one travels into the pale, the more de-realized the world becomes. Those who are in contact with the pale for a long period of time ‘lose their mind’ because there is no more meaning for their minds to grasp. Those who travel into the deepest part of the pale, the pale superdeep, lose themselves altogether. There, the pale erases memories, not only *from* the ones who go there but *of* the ones who go there. They become dust, erased from the world and the world’s memories. The pale is largely a mystery, though there are two certain things about it. First, it is human-made, though not intentionally. As an NPC in the game states: “It is a nervous shadow cast into the world by you ... Its advent coincides with the arrival of the human mind.” Second, it is expanding, and one day, it will cover the entire world. There would no longer be Elysium; only the pale will remain.

The pale is an eerie force: it is something where there should be nothing and nothing where there should be something. It is a serene nothing-scape. Its existence is anti-existence; anti-matter

and anti-meaning. Yet, at the same time, it carries within it the weight of all history; of the past and the future. One of the symptoms of overexposure to the pale is memory loss, but also remembrance. These memories that one remembers are not about oneself, but of things that have already happened a long time ago, to someone else, in some other place, or of things that have not yet happened. Its effects echo Fisher's description of hauntology. The hauntological forces of the pale allow things that are *no longer* to remain effective and things that are *not yet* to already be effective in the now. Pale-addicts in *Disco Elysium* are over-radiated with nostalgia for the past and the failed futures, spending their days continuously mourning things that are gone and things that have never come to be. However, like all eerie things, the pale is also an impetus for change. Its existence prompts questions about reality as one takes it for granted. Despite fearing its advance, the humans of Elysium are also fascinated by the pale. During the 6000 years of recorded history, humans have studied the pale, tried to understand it, made attempts to circumvent and/or contain it, and employed it in multiple spiritual practices. Because traversing through the pale is necessary for interisolar travel (i.e., intercontinental travel), humans also find tactics to navigate it. By bouncing anodic frequencies – a type of radio waves – between locations at different entry points, humans can cut a path through the pale. Emerging from the land of nothingness, travelers find the world again. In *Disco Elysium*, the player meets one such traveler who has reemerged out of nothingness: detective Harrier “Harry” Du Bois himself.

3.2. The Characters: Harry Du Bois and the People of Elysium

Characters in *Disco Elysium* are a part of its indexical storytelling. They represent *something* about the game's world: an ideology, a philosophy, an archetype, and/or a person the player has definitely met before in real life. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná observe how the

game's voice acting adds to its indexical storytelling through its paralinguistic features: "these vocal characterizations and connections convey, by means of *consciously structured parallels to real-world issues and conflictual social informations*, much of the game's sociocritical messaging" (591). They give the Union-busting mercenaries as an example. These mercenaries speak in a standard American accent, which satirizes American imperialism and "militaristic adventurism" (590-591). In a manner, for Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná, voices in *Disco Elysium* stereotype their characters; however, it calls attention to itself as a stereotype. Its representations are "not of people but of *ideas of people*" (592); an exaggerated form of reality, more real than the real, which is fitting for the medium of video games. After all, video games represent reality by giving it a predictable logic through algorithms, even though reality is anything but predictable or logical. They create an "ideal version of reality" (Robertson 10). Moreover, the characters, more specifically the NPCs, fall into stereotypes only at first glance. If the player decides to converse with NPCs and learn about them, they would find that most NPCs, even the morally reprehensible ones, are written with empathy and nuance.

Disco Elysium boasts a large cast of NPCs, each providing interesting perspectives about the world of Elysium in their own right. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to fit the discussion about all of them in this thesis, I select only a few whose story intertwines with the main mysteries of the game: the mystery of the murder, the mystery of the pale, and the mystery of Harry himself.

The NPCs that I have chosen belong to the world of the dead. None of them are ghosts in a traditional sense, but they represent specters or act as a medium for specters that return to haunt Revachol and Harry. Some of them are humans, while others are objects. Indeed, many objects in *Disco Elysium* are considered to be characters. Gameplay-wise, the interactable objects are presented and function like human NPCs. They are framed with a green outline, signaling to the

player that Harry can engage in a dialogue with them. Upon interacting with them, the usual NPC dialogue box pops up. Despite being interactable in the same manner as human NPCs, they are not anthropomorphized. They are still objects; they simply can speak. They speak to Harry, offering him perspectives he would not otherwise have. Through these objects, the game pushes its indexical storytelling further. Not only does it encourage the player to form a story based on the object's presence within the setting's context, but it also allows those objects to act as materialized specters – things that are both living and non-living – and give history. In the world of Elysium, “[o]bjects give history because they open up a space for exploring memory, which is an element of their ‘biography’ ... objects are not just archaeological artifacts, or vehicles of history, but its actors and co-creators” (Kłosiński 63).

The first object I would like to discuss is The Hanged Man, the corpse behind the Whirling-in-Rags. Kłosiński characterizes The Hanged Man as “an object of forensic procedures ... gives rise to thought precisely as an object entangled in history, as its agent and its victim” (63). History is written upon The Hanged Man's body. The armored boots he wears tell his professional history as a mercenary of the Krenel mercenary company, whose team is hired by the Wild Pines to end the Dockworkers' Union strike in the Industrial Harbour. The tattoos across his torso – a map of stars – recount his personal history; of the countries that he has traveled to during his time as a mercenary. Through them, Harry learns about the violence that the The Hanged Man's mercenary band has committed at those locations at the behest of their corporate employers. The cargo belt around his neck informs Harry about the history of The Hanged Man's death, implying that at least one member of the Dockworkers' Union is related to the hanging. These traces reveal the history of conflict within Revachol, as well as Elysium; the conflict between workers and capital, the latter of whom is willing to hire violent mercenaries, despite positioning themselves as more ‘moral’ and civilized, to silent their oppositions.

Apart from the traces on his body, The Hanged Man also *speaks*. Upon a successful Inland Empire skill check, Harry can talk to The Hanged Man and ask him about his murderer. The Hanged Man then answers that *communism* killed him and love did him in. At first, this seems to confirm that the Union members have murdered him. However, when Harry examines The Hanged Man's mouth while doing a field autopsy on him, The Hanged Man mentions that there are "ancient mysteries" within. Examining The Hanged Man's mouth further, Harry finds a bullet from a sniper rifle that has lodged itself in the back of his head. It is a fatal injury. The Hanged Man was not hanged. He was shot, and the hanging is a cover-up. And indeed, the bullet is ancient. It came from an antique rifle from the Revolutionary period, which is no longer common in Revachol. This second set of traces, pointed out by The Hanged Man, informs Harry that the history of The Hanged Man's death, and by extension the conflict in Martinaise, runs deeper than it superficially seems. Something is rotten in the state of Martinaise. The Hanged Man, a specter from the recent past, divulges that the rottenness has dragged another specter back from "the wild pale yonder." This second specter, one more ancient and vengeful, is the one that pulled the trigger.

The second object is the Horrific Necktie. Harry first encounters the Necktie hanging from the ceiling fan of his motel room, reminding him that he has considered hanging himself with it. Retrieving the Necktie from the ceiling fan and putting it around his neck, the Necktie begs Harry to never take it off. After all, they are *best friends*. If the player does as the Necktie asks, Harry will hear the Necktie talk to him throughout the game. The Necktie discourages Harry from confronting the foreboding feelings about his pre-amnesia past. In addition, it urges Harry to 'party' (i.e., drinking, doing drugs, and dancing to disco music) instead of taking on any responsibility, pre-amnesia or otherwise. Viewing the Necktie through the lens of Harry's mental state, Harry uses his Inland Empire to project his problems onto inanimate objects around him, in this case blaming his self-destructive urges on the Necktie. He becomes over-reliant on these inanimate objects to

regulate his mental and emotional health. Moreover, viewing the Necktie through a sociopolitical lens, it becomes clear that Harry's projection is his way of indulging in what Fisher calls *depressive hedonia*. According to Fisher, depressive hedonia is a depressive response to unpleasant and/or unjust conditions that one deems oneself powerless to combat, characterized "not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure" through consumerist means (*Capitalist Realism*, 21-22). For Harry, the consumerist products he has chosen are clothes, alcohol, and drugs, beginning with the Necktie. As colorful a personality as it is, the Necktie is still a product: a Joopson AS catalogue no. J327 that Harry picked out of a tie rack in a clothing store one day, hoping that it will heal his heartbreak. Instead of healing him, the Necktie becomes, as the NPC Bird's Nest Roy observes, a "necrotic object" – a specter – that reminds Harry that something is wrong in the state of Harry Du Bois, and no matter how many funny clothes he changes into, he would never be happy. He would still be a sad man in funny clothes.

Object-characters are not the only things in *Disco Elysium* that give depth to its setting. Revachol is also populated by people: human characters who have their relationship with and perception of the city. The way Revachol morphs into different versions of itself based on the ideologies and experiences of each NPC deserves a discussion of its own. However, because I focus on spectral figures in the game, I would like to discuss an NPC with a closer relationship to the pale than the world. This NPC is the Paedriver. Harry encounters her while investigating the rumored drug trade in the southern area of Martinaire. When Harry first approaches her, she does not notice his presence, smiling to herself as if watching a scene of somewhere far away in space and time. Once he manages to get her attention, Harry finds that the Paedriver is an eccentric old woman. She is unhappy to be brought back to the present in Revachol. She wishes to return to her memory of the glorious past. If Harry already knows about the pale, he can identify that the

Paledriver has been driving through pale-covered routes, consequently being over-radiated by it.

Upon asking her about it, the Paledriver tells Harry that most of her memories are not her own:

PALEDRIVER – “The smell of liquor on Gabriel’s lips after the shoot. In the motor park. The roses on the day of Franconegro’s coronation. On the grand stairs of Raehl. The smoke from the fowling piece, when Dolores Dei was shot...”

“The look on her face – like an orgasm. The wound in her chest. My hand in my father’s hand...” She closes her eyes, her eyelids trembling. “Except I never had a father. And I never shot Her Innocence Dolores Dei.”

The Paledriver is aware of her ‘self’ slipping away, and she does not mind. She mentions that, in the beginning, she drives her lorry through the pale because it is necessary to make a living. She is a working-class woman who has to endure unsafe working conditions to make ends meet. However, she has become addicted to the pale. It has given her beautiful memories, while the world at present, in her eyes, offers her nothing but emptiness and despair. Because of this, she hopes that the pale takes over the world: “What are we **doing** here? ... It doesn’t have to be like this. We can just give up. We can just become vapour.” Unable to deal with the inability to find meaning in the present and the future, she yields herself to nostalgia; to the specters of the past who claim that they come from ‘better times.’ She has driven into the pale and has never really returned from it. The Paledriver has joined the specters, becoming one herself, as she describes: “I’m only terrifying to small children, and to those that used to know me.”

Like the Paledriver, The Deserter is another specter-human character. Unlike her, The Deserter is not pale-radiant; the only memories he has lived are his own. Somehow, though, *that* is worse. He has no golden age to return to, only 43 years of ruin.

The very first perspective that the player sees first in the game belongs to The Deserter. He is The Hanged Man’s ancient mystery; the communism that killed him. Harry meets him near the end of the game on a previously inaccessible inlet west of Martinaire. On the inlet is the crumbling

Sea Fortress that was once used by the Commune of Revachol as a fortification. Living amidst the ruin is The Deserter, who, according to Harry's Empathy skill, is "practically tearing up from spite. Hatred got the best of him a long time ago. This man hates everything." The Deserter is part of the Army of the Revolution; an ideologically trained communist. He and his comrades were in the fortress when the Coalition landed. However, while his comrades stayed and fought, The Deserter was scared. He knew the Coalition would win, so he snuck out of the fortress and deserted. It is the reason that he is alive, as the fortress and all the revolutionaries inside were devastated by the Coalition. The Deserter recounts the event like so:

THE DESERTER – "The combined might of international capital, all at once – all the greed and terror in the world – tore into Revachol. It lifted the streets from the ground and turned houses into ghosts.

...

It was real. I'd seen it. I'd seen it *in reality*.

...

The mask of humanity fall from capital. It has to take it off to kill everyone – everything you love; all the hope and tenderness in the world. It has to take it off, just for one second. To do the deed. And then you see it. As it strangles and beats your friend to death... the sweetest, most courageous people in the world... You see the fear and power in its eyes. Then you *know*.

...

That the bourgeois are not human."

In this statement, The Deserter criticizes the brutality of the Moralinterns and the Coalition, as well as of liberal capitalism in general. However, at the same time, his highly emotional language also colors his criticism with trauma. The capitalists are dehumanized ("the bourgeois are not human") while his fellow communists are idealized in their death ("the sweetest, most courageous people in the world"). The statement shows the extent of the past haunting him. In his mind, everything good in the world is dead, and evil has triumphed. It is the reason why he refuses to reintegrate into society. Every part of the city – the bullet-riddled buildings, the bomb craters, the

hidden bunkers – haunt him with the memories of his dead comrades. To make matters worse, everyone has moved on while his heart remains irreparably broken. He cannot even reconnect with the younger generation of communists in the Dockworkers' Union. He accuses them to be farcical social democrats, and their Union as an enemy of the *true* working class, as Unions, in his opinion, subdue the proletariat's revolutionary spirit. Instead, The Deserter hides on the islet and spies on Martinaise through his rifle scope, waiting for the Girl Child Revolution to return. He believes she would bring about a future where Revachol is free from capital. Like Fisher's specters of lost futures, however, she has disappeared:

THE DESERTER – “The material base for an uprising has eroded, the working class has betrayed mankind and themselves...”

“The historic opportunity for a revolution has passed. It will not come back anymore. However hard I try, whatever I do.”

Unable to accept the disappearance of the Girl Child Revolution, The Deserter continues to guard the ruins of the past even though nothing is there but ghosts. With the combination of declining mental and physical health, as well as rage and loneliness, he becomes a vengeful specter that haunts Martinaise. One day, as he silently watches the city, he sees the embodiment of everything he stands against: The (at the time living and not-hanged) Hanged Man, a fascist mercenary and capital's attack dog, finding pleasure in a woman's arms. In that moment, he decides to make his voice heard; to make a “critique.” He pulls the trigger.

It is that pull of the trigger that brought Harry to Martinaise. Harry; the PC, the detective of the Revachol Citizens Militia (RCM), and the ‘hero’ of the story, is the last character I would like to analyze. He is, like the NPCs that I have discussed above, simultaneously haunting and haunted by something. At the beginning of the game, Harry's identity is fragmented. He is amnesiac, his memories wiped clean by alcohol and heartbreak, and perhaps something more foreboding. When Harry talks with the Paledriver about his condition, she suggests that he has been down Motorway

South, a place consumed by pale superdeep. Internalizing the Motorway South Thought, Harry learns:

The lone vector stretches in your mind's eye into the wild pale yonder. For an unimaginable distance, forgetting, forgetting... Until you can no longer remember anything ... Nothing remains ... And then it comes to you: to reach the end of the Motorway South is to be *unborn*. You've had this thought before while aimlessly wandering the streets of Jamrock. A lost piece of the man you were. A dark hope.

Once upon a time, Harry wanted to go there. It does not mean that Harry *has gone* there, only that whatever happened that caused him to lose his memory, its effects are not unlike Motorway South's. His wish to be un-born has been granted. Yet, somehow, he returns. He returns as a specter, his face marked with The Expression – the rigor mortis. He cannot help but see himself in The Hanged Man's bloated corpse, so much so that, on the first night, he dreams of himself hanging there instead, strung up on a tree by a scintillating disco ball. Unlike The Hanged Man, he was not killed by communism; he was killed by *disco*. Nevertheless, both communism and disco are similar in some ways. They represent Revachol's failed futures: the promise of a golden age that has left and never returned.

Although it was not communism that killed Harry, like The Hanged Man, it was *love* that did him in. Throughout the game, the player learns that Harry has been self-destructing since his 'ex-something' left him. The identity of his ex-something remains muddled the entire game, as the player only sees her through Harry's biased perspective. Harry imagines her with the deific historical figure of Her Innocence Dolores Dei, who deserves both his worship and contempt. She is to him what Girl Child Revolution is to The Deserter and the golden age of Mesque is to the Paledriver. They all believe that their specters' return would make everything alright again. But because they only see those specters through a nostalgia-distorted lens, nothing *real* could ever return to them. Thus, three characters end themselves in some manner: to be un-born, to become vapor, to live forever in ruins.

In his article, Spies observes that Harry's trauma of losing his ex-something "merges with the city's collective trauma" (83). His journey to rediscover himself, then, parallels his journey to rediscover Revachol – and by extension the world – again. However, by the end of the journey, Harry does not discover 'himself' in the 'past self' sense. The old, pre-amnesia Harry does not return. He learns bits and pieces about his previous life through traces he left behind, such as his belongings (e.g., the Horrific Necktie) or the people who used to know him (e.g., his fellow cops at Precinct 41), but he never regains his full memories. Instead, he discovers a different being: a being of possibilities, ever-changing and open to new interpretations, determined not by who he was but by who he *becomes*. He is allowed to be in the present again, and from there, move forward into the future. And because Harry's story is interconnected to Revachol, it follows that the latter also has a chance to move forward as well.

3.3. The Plot: A Story about Failure

The plot of *Disco Elysium*, told through quests, is complicated to explain because although there is a structure to the story, the story details are highly dependent on the player's decisions, interpretations, and even luck. Formally, the game's narrative structure is a combination of Ryan's vector with side-branches, the tree, and the flowchart. The game has a loose narrative sequence, with The Hanged Man's case as the main quest and multiple optional side quests on the side. Decisions during these quests branch out like a tree. For the main quest, there are many ways to approach the investigation. The player can do any of the tasks, such as inspect the body, investigate the crime scene, or talk to potential witnesses, in their preferred order. These branching paths are not infinite; they eventually flow back into the main quest or merge with side quests. Regardless, they serve The Hanged Man's case in some capacity. Despite the structure, however, the added

element of the player makes the possibilities of emergent stories endless. The game begins in oblivion, progresses to the point in which Harry finds the killer, and ends with Harry meeting other detectives from his precinct afterward. Most every other story detail depends on the player's contribution. There is an achievement called "What body?", which the player gains by completing the game without *ever* inspecting The Hanged Man's body. The inspection of the body, an arguably important task, can be completely ignored. In other words, the game is very flexible about how the player influences its story.

The game's flexibility does not harm the narrative. Instead, it enhances the thematic significance of moments that are set in stone. Throughout the game, Harry receives information from various NPCs that he must solve the case before something terrible happens. As I have mentioned above, although the Union members did not kill The Hanged Man, they pretended that they did to protect another suspect. This other suspect is not the killer either, but the union members have taken her under their protection. Nevertheless, other mercenaries in The Hanged Man's squad want someone to punish. To avenge their brother-in-arms, the mercenaries plan a Mercenary Tribunal, in which they will gun down the Union members with their advanced war machines. Harry knows that it would be a bloodbath, as the Union members, who are normal civilians, have no fighting chance against highly trained and heavily armed mercenaries. The only way to prevent the Tribunal is to find the murderer.

However, regardless of Harry's actions, it is *impossible* to find the killer before the Tribunal. The player can complete every quest, pass every skill check, discover every secret – the conflict would still happen as part of the scripted story. People, including Harry himself, are bound to die or get hurt. At this moment, the game's message is clear: failure is inevitable, especially in Revachol, the city of countless failed futures.

The theme of failure appears in side quests as well. Some of these side quests directly connect to the main quest, while the others are thematically related. While walking through Martinaire, Harry comes upon the Doomed Commercial Area, a graveyard of failed businesses. Talking to an NPC in the area, Harry hears that a “malignant entity” has been haunting the commercial center, placing a curse of failure on all the businesses within. If Harry decides to investigate the matter, he finds out that the supposed ‘malignant entity’ is a normal human: a Novelty Dicemaker who has been doing business on the top floor of the building complex for 14 years. Unlike other businesses, hers is the only one that did not fail. Discussing the curse with her, the Novelty Dicemaker shares her opinion that other businesses failed simply because they made terrible business decisions. Fortress Accident, a game development studio on the floor below, she points out as an example, failed because of overly ambitious ideas and financial mismanagement. Depending on the player, they can accept this theory as the reasoning behind the failures, or they can have Harry roll a Shivers skill check. On a success, the city whispers to Harry a secret: there is a curse, after all. The Novelty Dicemaker is spared simply because her workshop is technically not part of the Doomed Commercial Area. She does not argue with Harry when he shares this knowledge with her. Instead, she muses:

NOVELTY DICEMAKER – “Or maybe it’s the entire world that’s cursed? It’s such a precarious place. Nothing ever works out the way you wanted.”

Her statement grants Harry The Precarious World Thought, which I have quoted at the beginning of this thesis. Here, the game makes a meta-commentary about life being like a game of dice, in which failure is statistically inevitable. Like the curse, it suggests that sometimes an action ends in failure because of forces beyond one’s control. For the Doomed Commercial Area, that force is the curse. For the Tribunal, it is the scripted story. For Elysium in general (and perhaps for the real world too), it could be interpreted as fate, chance, or even capitalism. The world of capitalist

realism, after all, makes the world precarious by design, so that people have nothing but despair and nostalgia-fueled consumption for company (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 31-61). This is the curse of Elysium.

There are three more side quests that I would like to discuss; however, I would not analyze them in their entirety in this chapter. These quests tell stories about failures and hauntings like the Doomed Commercial Area, but they draw different conclusions about the world that offer fresh perspectives to the main quest as a whole.

The first quest begins in an abandoned church on the outskirts of Martinaire's western side. Outside the church, Harry meets four ravers – as in people who like to attend raves – pitching a tent on an ice sheet. The ravers want to start a nightclub for anodic dance music inside the church, but there are spooky “dopeheads” and “burnouts” already occupying it. They ask Harry to inspect the church for them. Inside the church, Harry finds two occupants, neither of which are strictly dopeheads or burnouts. The first occupant is Tiago, an enigmatic man who climbs around on the church's rafters, worshipping the Mother of Silence, a 2mm pillar of unnatural silence in the middle of the church. Tiago barely remembers his past, only that he used to be an alcoholic and addict, but since he found the Mother of Silence, he no longer relies on substances. The second occupant is Soona, the Programmer, the former lead programmer for the Fortress Accident, the failed game development studio in the Doomed Commercial Area. Soona believes that the studio failed because of a mysterious loss of company data. Feeling guilty over the lost data, even though she is not responsible for it, Soona returns to Martinaire to find out the real cause. Detecting a strange anomaly in the church, a 2mm hole in the world that disrupts radio waves, she sets up her equipment inside to gather evidence about it, suspecting that it is responsible for the data loss. While doing this quest, Harry discovers two disheartening information. One: the ravers have lied. They planned

to open a drug lab, not an anodic music club. Although they are genuinely passionate about music, they have financial disadvantages, and they do not believe that people will care about their nightclub without drugs involved. Two: when Harry helps Soona with her experiment, they discover that the 2mm hole is a part of the pale. The pale is in Martinaise. It already has an effect: it has erased Fortress Accident's data and, potentially, Harry's memory. It is only a matter of time before it spreads to cover the entire district and beyond. The ravers' doubt about their art represents the fear of failure. They want to create something new and beautiful and *true*, but they are unsure about its survival the precarious world. Soona's presence in this quest is a reminder of a different failed passion project. Moreover, the church, the place in which they want to set up a nightclub, is threatened by the force of nothingness. The world will end, and nothing beautiful will matter.

The second quest starts in the same area: the western side of Martinaise, though not at the church. There, Harry meets two cryptozoologists, one of which is Morell the Cryptozoologist. Morell is in Martinaise with his wife, Lena, the Cryptozoologist's Wife, a kind old lady who Harry has already met at the Whirling-in-Rags. Lena and Morell are passionate about a particular cryptid: the insect-like Insulindian Phasmid. It is important to them on a personal level as well, as it is how they got together as a couple in the first place. Lena claims to have seen the Phasmid when she was young. Later, as an adult, she shares that story at a social event, and Morell, who happens to be there, takes interest in her. They eventually got married. Lena believes that the Phasmid is the foundation of their marriage, and she is afraid that if it turns out to be just a fantasy, their marriage would be a lie. Harry can help Morell and Lena search for the Phasmid. He can walk along Martinaise's western bank, checking the Phasmid traps for signs of disturbances. Each trap is filled with insects, the Phasmid's alleged food. Three out of four traps are undisturbed. The more Harry checks the trap, the more unlikely it is that the Phasmid is real. When Harry inspects the fourth trap, however, the baits are gone. For a moment, there is hope that the Phasmid – a miracle of

nature – exists. But upon further investigation, Harry finds out that the local children have been playing with the traps. Otherwise, there are no other traces of the cryptid. Morell and Lena, haunted by the Phasmid, the specter of a fantastical world, must accept that their creature is not real. Although Harry can reassure Lena that their marriage is real despite the non-existence of the Phasmid, everyone is left with the sense that the world is tragically mundane – the world where miracles fail to happen.

The third quest is one of the four political vision quests, each representing the four political alignments in the game that Harry can internalize: communist, fascist, moralist, and ultraliberal. The quest that I analyze is the communism vision quest, which starts on the fourth in-game day. If Harry's communist points are high enough, his Rhetoric skill tells him to seek out other communists in Martinaire. Simply talking to Union members is not satisfactory for Harry because he needs *real* underground communists. After some sleuthing, Harry finds exactly who he has been looking for. Harry's real communists are Steban, the Student Communist, and the Echo Maker, two haughty university students who run a communist book club with exactly two members: themselves. Once, there were more than two members, but Steban and the Echo Maker found them ideologically inadequate (i.e., one of the ex-members dares to read *novels* during a serious communist book club), so they expelled everyone except themselves. They also receive new members with skepticism, insisting that new members submit an essay and be interviewed by them first. It is unsurprising, then, that the book club never gains another member until Harry comes along.

When Harry first meets Steban and the Echo Maker, they are stacking a bunch of matchboxes together, constructing an oddly shaped structure that is structurally impossible. And indeed, their structure falls. Later, Harry finds out through reading *A Brief Look at Infra-*

Materialism, an in-game introductory text about the branch of communism, that the students' action is based on one of the infra-materialist beliefs. The belief postulates that if the proletariat's communist thoughts are strong enough, their mind can influence the world's material reality:

A BRIEF LOOK AT INFRA-MATERIALISM – When a society's revolutionary fervour reaches the third and highest level, infra-materialist theoreticians have postulated that the laws of physics cease to be laws.

...

Others have argued that people living under third-level condition will be immune to such infirmities as hunger, disease, and mental illness...

In some of his later writings, Nilsen himself speculated about the potential for an *extra-physical architecture* that disregards the laws of 'bourgeois physics' and instead relies on the revolutionary faith of the people for structural integrity.

The students are trying to build the extra-physical architecture with their revolutionary fervor. As evident in Harry's first meeting with them, they fail every time. It would require a miracle for a structure like that to remain erected. At this point in the quest, the game seems to suggest the impossibility of a communist utopia – a world without scarcity or pain. There is no faith in communism strong enough to make a miracle happen. Moreover, the only champions of 'real' communism that Harry has met until now are a pair of students who run an echo chamber/book club, both having no plans for concrete and practical real-world actions.

The three quests demonstrate how specters of failed futures haunt the story in myriad forms: the specter of anodic music haunts the ravers, the Phasmid haunts the cryptozoologist couple, and the infra-materialist utopia haunts the communist students. At certain points, these characters give up on their specters. However, *Disco Elysium* is not satisfied with this conclusion. The game eventually reveals that, despite their disappearances, the specters have not given up on these characters. To appreciate the revelation, though, one must understand how the ludic element builds the stories up to this narrative conclusion. Therefore, Chapter 4 deals with how the game rebels against the precarious world through its gameplay.

4. The Gameplay of *Disco Elysium*

4.1. The Gameplay Loop: Dialogues Shaping the World

One of the most important elements in *Disco Elysium* is the dialogues. It is the dialogues that shape the world, the people, and the story of the game. Through dialogues – through *discourse* – the specters that inhabit the world of Elysium, and perhaps the specters that inhabit the game itself, speak. The importance of dialogues is not represented only by their function as the game's narrative method, but also by their role as the core gameplay loop.

In games, a play session revolves around the gameplay loop that connects all gameplay mechanics. The gameplay loop is a cycle of actions that the player performs during their interaction with the gameplay mechanics (Guardiola 2-3). In most narrative games, upon the completion of each game cycle, the player progresses closer to the game's conclusion. In *Disco Elysium*, the typical gameplay loop is the following: Harry traverses the map; Harry interacts with an interactable NPC, during which he starts, progresses through, or completes a questline; Harry gains experience points, which he can spend on leveling up; Harry exits the dialogue; and repeat everything all over again. From this, the main actions that propel the game forward are exploration and engagement in dialogues. During a play session, Harry spends most of his time walking around Martinaise and talking to NPCs (humans or otherwise). The talking part is especially important, as most other core gameplay mechanics exist in service of it. Mechanics such as attributes and skills, skill checks, and equipment bonuses, are there to enhance the player's experience of the dialogues. Dialogues are also where most of the ludonarrative motivation happens. Ludically, meaningful choices in the game come in the form of dialogue choices, which are a part of the dialogues themselves. By making choices, the player affects both the gameplay as well as narrative. Beyond just leading to different story paths, choosing one or more of the dialogue choices can give the

player gameplay benefits like additional Thoughts. Selecting at least four communist dialogue options, for example, grants the Mazovian Socio-Economics Thought, which the player can have Harry internalize for some gameplay bonuses and penalties. As I discuss further in Section 4.2., the Thoughts from the Thought Cabinet mechanic also influence the narrative experience. Narratively, dialogues provide context to the abovementioned meaning choices. Because choices in games are not just any action that the player randomly takes, but “a *situation in which the user has to decide between a certain number of explicit options*” (Estupiñán 150), there needs to be something that frames those options and hints at their consequences (150). Dialogues fulfill that function.

Because *Disco Elysium*’s prioritization of dialogues as the core gameplay loop, dialogues become the thing that shapes the game’s ludonarrative. First and foremost, it shapes the game’s sense of space and time. According to Goins, “[i]n game environments, as in those of the real world, individuals negotiate objects and spaces full of meaning through interacting with the world around them over time” (268). Being the main method of interaction, dialogues in *Disco Elysium* give meaning to the space that is its setting. Martinaire, the Whirling-in-Rags, the streets, the Doomed Commercial Area – all of these and more are *inert spaces*. They are the in-between that Harry moves through. These spaces only become *active places* when Harry interacts with the NPCs that occupy them. This is also represented by how time is managed in the game. As a part of the user interface, the game displays a digital clock at the bottom right of the screen. The time on the clock only moves forward when Harry engages in a dialogue. Without the interactions, the spaces are static watercolor images on the screen, forever frozen in time. With the interactions, the spaces become dynamic places – places of discourse. And through discourse, they are given meaning. The discussion between the NPCs and Harry, or Harry and himself, about the world add perspectives to it. For instance, Harry’s understanding of Revachol changes depending on the points that the

player puts in his skills. The Harries with high points in the Encyclopedia skill get to see Revachol through its recorded history as if he reads about it in history books or newspaper:

ENCYCLOPEDIA [Easy: Success] – Revachol is the disgraced former capital of the world, divided into zones of control under foreign occupation – half a century after a failed world revolution. She is central to our moment in time.

Revachol's meaning to Encyclopedia is its meaning to the world at large. Encyclopedia knows people in the same way: famous people whose names *mean something* to the public like Guillaume Le Million or the revolutionary Kras Mazov. However, Encyclopedia is ignorant of the hidden things; things about the city that are overlooked and unrecorded. These things are the forte of a different skill: Shivers.

Shivers' functions are more abstract than Encyclopedia. The character creation screen describes it as a skill that “[r]aise the hair on your neck. Tune in to the city.” The Harries with high points in Shivers get to see Revachol through her own eyes. Revachol communicates through Shivers, letting the wind carry her voice to Harry, whispering to him about her moving parts, her memories, her longing and hopes and dreams and fears. She shares with him knowledge about the hidden things that evade people's perception, such as the old weapon cache since the time of the Revolution that has been buried underground, or Harry's home in Jamrock, a place so far away in space and time that he does not know how – or whether – he could return. While Encyclopedia's description of Revachol is general knowledge, Shivers' description of Revachol comes from Revachol herself:

SHIVERS – I AM A FRAGMENT OF THE WORLD SPIRIT, THE GENIUS LOCI OF REVACHOL.

MY HEART IS THE WIND CORRIDOR. THE BOTTOM OF MY AIR IS RED.
I HAVE A HUNDRED THOUSAND LUMINOUS ARMS.

...

I'VE SEEN YOU, I'VE SEEN YOU! I'VE SEEN YOU WITH HER – AND I'VE SEEN YOU WITHOUT HER. I'VE SEEN YOU ON THE CRESCENT OF THE HILL.

Revachol's meaning to Shivers is as a living, breathing thing; one that knows the fear of death. Furthermore, Shivers does not know people because of their fame; it knows people because *people* live in the city. It tells Harry about a nameless architect who once stood inside the Capeside Apartments a long, long time ago. She was sad, Shiver recalls, and she was shivering in the cold. She was not an important historical figure. Shivers knows her because Revachol witnesses and remembers her, just as Revachol witnesses and remembers Harry.

However, just as speech is not superior to writing, Shivers is not superior to Encyclopedia just because Revachol speaks directly through it. Instead, the dialogues – the back-and-forth sharing of perspectives – invite the player to acknowledge Revachol's iterability. Revachol has many faces and many voices, each of which is noted down by different methods. It is this inherent iterability that allows Harry to find meaning in the city, and arguably for the city to have meaning. Otherwise, the Revachol without dialogue would be eternal yet motionless and dimensionless, stuck in a singular space and time.

Not only do the dialogues shape the game's space and time, but they also shape the gameplay actions. In most video games, even in narrative-focused cRPGs, the crux of gameplay actions is the combat mechanics, as most conflicts can and are expected to be resolved through a battle. In these games, the PC's abilities to attack and do damage are represented by weapons (e.g., swords, guns, magic wands) or other combat abilities (e.g., magic spells), while their defenses and resources are represented by health points, mana points, stamina, and other possible game-specific categories. In *Disco Elysium*, Harry has something that resembles these elements. Harry has two health pools: health points (representing physical health) and morale points (representing emotional/mental fortitude). Like other games, if either of these health points is reduced to zero,

the player gets the game over screen, indicating that Harry either died from physical or emotional/mental strain during the investigation. However, Harry does not have the abilities to ‘attack’ and ‘do damage’ in a traditional sense, as the game has no traditional combat system. Even though the game presents Harry with choices of weapons: a gun or a Molotov cocktail, Harry does not use these to do a calculable number of damages to reduce an enemy’s health points. Instead, Harry uses them only as a part of a dialogue.

Despite this, I would still argue that the game *does* have combat, with the dialogue themselves, depending on the context, functioning as combat encounters. In this way, dialogues transform physical conflicts into conflicts of ideas and/or ideologies, which could be resolved by participating in the discourse. To illustrate this, I would like to use the Mercenary Tribunal event as an example. After Harry fails to find the killer in time, the Mercenary Tribunal begins. The drunken Krenel mercenaries, ignoring the order of the Wild Pines representative, decide to confront the members of the Dockworkers’ Union and prepare to gun them down. To progress the game from this point, Harry must interfere. This encounter, like the rest of the game, from the pre-fight conversation to the gunfight, is played out in dialogue form. Harry can make arguments by choosing dialogue options, which could potentially influence the difficulties of the available skill checks. His arguments, as well as the subsequent skill checks, determine who lives or dies by the end of the Tribunal, though it must be noted that Harry *cannot* save everyone. To set the scene: there are eight Union members and three Krenel mercenaries. Six of the Union members can potentially die during this encounter, three of which are scripted to die. All three of the Krenel mercenaries can potentially die; however, all three can be alive by the end as well. The highest number of deaths is eight people, which includes five Union members and all three mercenaries. The lowest number of deaths is four people, all of which are Union members. Here, the gameplay does not incentivize the player to strategize about dealing the most damage to their enemies.

Instead, the gameplay asks the player to reflect, using dialogue choices, on the ideas about saving lives; how to do it in dire situations, whose lives they consider worth saving, and at whose expense.

Using arguments to fight, then, represents Harry's 'attack' actions. During this encounter, there are nine starting dialogue options (i.e., actions) to choose from. Some of them are ineffective against the mercenaries, while the others 'weaken' them, making certain decisive skill checks easier.



Figure 5. Bonuses and Penalties. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

As can be seen in Figure 5, the Hand/Eye Coordination skill check has only an 8% success rate *before* Harry talks to the mercenaries. The percentage increases to 58% after Harry has exhausted other dialogue options, providing that Harry chooses the dialogues that make sense with the situation. The green +1 bonuses are the game's ludonarrative consequence feedback, indicating that Harry's past actions (i.e., dialogue options) have returned to aid him. The initial check already has a bonus as well: the "+1 Distracted by memories" bonus. This bonus has been gained many

hours before the Tribunal in other play sessions. In other cases, Harry's actions can lead to skill check penalties as well, represented by red minus symbols instead of green plus ones. These gameplay feedbacks like the one shown in the Figure demonstrate how past actions that are *already done* still have effects on the present ones. Moreover, this extends to future actions that *have not happened yet* as well. Because the game uses clear feedback to frame its choices, after the first time that the player is aware of this bonus/penalty system, they would likely become more mindful of their present decisions during dialogue. In other words, not only do dialogues shape non-dialogue actions within the world (i.e., fighting), but their past and future versions return to shape themselves. Every dialogue option, and thus every action that Harry and the player take, contain specters of decisions that are consequential to and consequences of their current ones haunting them, demanding justice to be done by them. Regardless of the specters' demands, though, none of the dialogue options are *wrong*. When the player makes a choice – even if they choose the options that inflict penalties or options to do nothing, or fail their chosen skill checks – the game progresses. The results of their choices become one of the story's many paths all the same. I interpret the dialogues-as-gameplay as *Disco Elysium* suggesting that as long as the player engages in a dialogue, subsequently allowing the specters to speak, the eternity of the present can be broken, and the times can move forward once more.

4.2. The Character Creation and Progression: Harry Du Bois as a Player Character

Though dialogues shape the ludonarrative of *Disco Elysium*, they themselves are also shaped by the narrative and other game mechanics in return. The game, after all, follows the story of Harrier “Harry” Du Bois, the amnesiac detective; thus, the dialogues are filtered through Harry's perspective on the world around him. As I have mentioned in Chapter 3, however, Harry's

perspective is not singular. There are specters of Harry – different versions of him that are in the constant state of *becoming*, thus always in-between *being*. And although this spectral quality can be applied to many characters in the game, Harry, by being a player character, is the only one whose malleable identities the player can experience and influence. These ever-shifting faces of Harry Du Bois are represented ludically by the character creation and progression mechanics.

First, however, I would like to define Harry's role as a player character. According to Lee and Mitchell, there are three types of PCs: the avatar, the 'rich' character, and the shell character (240-249). The avatar is "commonly defined as the player represented physically within the game-world" (241). They are blank characters with no predetermined appearances, backstories, personalities, and anything else that constitutes an identity. Their purpose is as "digital prostheses" through which the player can represent themselves (Papale and Lorenzo 271). The Tarnished from *Elden Ring*, for example, is an avatar. Rich characters, in contrast, are designed by game designers to have their own identities, goals, and connections to the world (Lee and Mitchell 241). Players can still impose their interpretations on rich characters; however, there will always be limits to said interpretations. Characters like Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007) is a rich character: the choices that are available to him in the game are limited to his background, personality, and potential future. Lastly, the shell characters straddle the line between the two (242). On the one hand, the player cannot truly 'build' them like they could an avatar. On the other hand, the identity of the characters themselves is uncertain, full of blank spaces that the player must fill. The character, then, "is a collaboration between writer and reader, in which the text guides how it should be read but does not determine the end-product of the read's interpretation" (242). I argue that Harry is the shell character. He used to have an identity of his own, but his metaphorical death through amnesia has remade him. Though the new Harry retains traces of his past self, much of his identity is now up to the player. The player can turn him into any kind of cop (e.g., Boring Cop,

Sorry Cop, Superstar Cop, Apocalypse Cop), align him with any political ideology (i.e., communist, fascist, moralist, ultraliberal), and endow him with any set of skills. As a result, Harry becomes iterable: recognizable as the same character while still speaking in multiple voices.

The major game mechanics that reflect the many iterations of Harry are attributes, skills, Thought Cabinet, and clothing items. Attributes and skills are selected during character creation. There are four attributes: Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics. Each represents the different aspects of Harry's mental and physical abilities:



Figure 6. Attribute Points. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

Figure 6 displays the attributes and what they represent. The player begins with eight attribute points to distribute among the four of them, all of which automatically have one attribute point before the distribution and can go up to six points. Attributes cannot be permanently increased during the game; however, Harry can only temporarily do so by abusing drugs and alcohol.

The main function of the attributes is to determine the starting skill points. *Disco Elysium* has 24 skills, divided into four groups of six that correspond with an attribute. Like the attributes, the skills are narratively labeled to indicate their role. Some skills' labels are quite straightforward, such as Logic (for logically analyzing information), Suggestion (for charming and persuading people), or Perception (for perceiving things). Other skills, however, have more abstract labels like Inland Empire, Esprit de Corps, Shivers, and Half Light. This coincides with their purposes, which are more abstract as well. Inland Empire governs imagination, allowing Harry to talk to non-human things. Esprit de Corps informs Harry about his brothers-and-sisters-in-arms, updating him on his fellow cops that are all over the city. Shivers, as I have already explained, tunes Harry to the city. Half Light is Harry's fear; his flight-or-fight response that often warns Harry about the coming apocalypse.

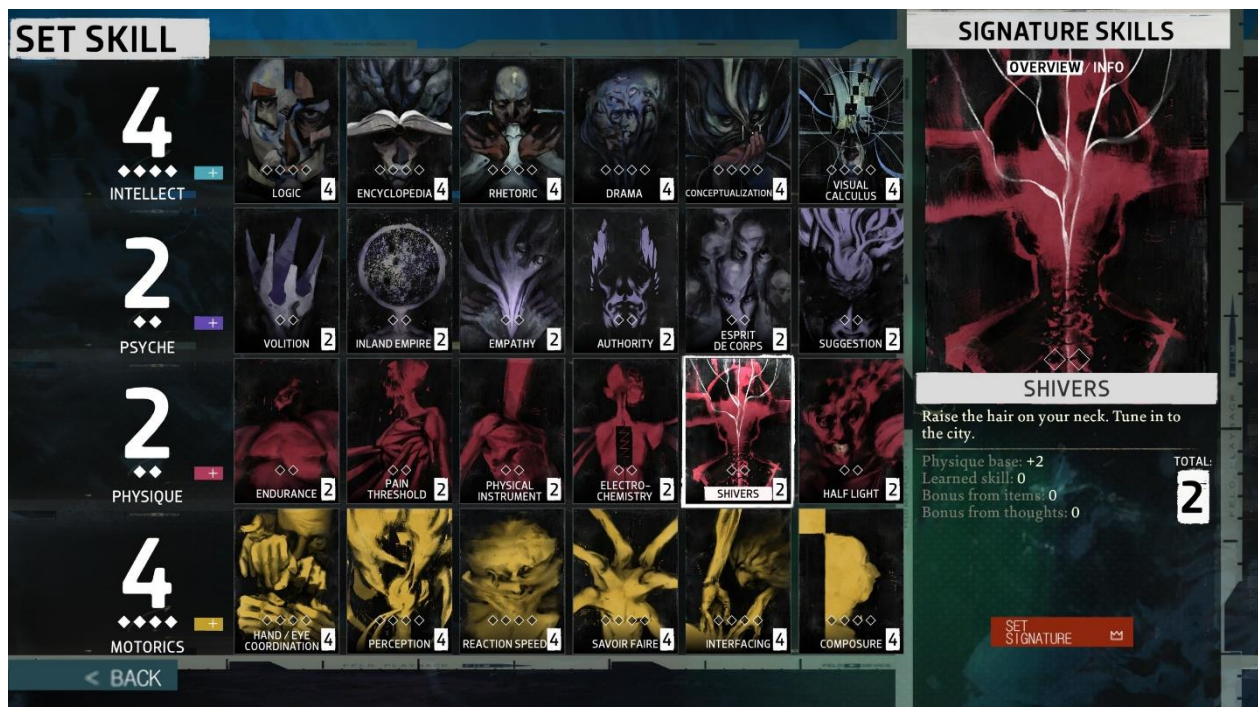


Figure 7. Skills. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

In the skills part of the character creation screen, the player can choose a skill to be Harry's signature skill, increasing the skill points by one. To explain: Harry with two points in the Physique attributes would also have two points in Shivers, a Physique-related skill. However, if the player sets Shivers as the signature skill, their Harry will have three points in Shivers, even though their other Physique-related skills still have two. The higher points Harry has in a skill, the more likely that they will offer input during the dialogue through passive skill checks. Active skill checks using that skill become easier as well.

Unlike attributes, skill points can be increased during play sessions by leveling up. This mirrors Harry's growth as a character throughout the game. It is not uncommon for video games to structure the PC's character development through the gameplay mechanics of leveling up, as it provides a sense of "progress and achievement" to players (Breyer 217). However, I note here that 'growth' does not equate to 'becoming a better person' in Harry's case. Increasing his skills can lead to positive results (i.e., success in skill checks), but it can also lead to negative ones. The Electrochemistry skill, for instance, can help Harry identify substances like drugs and alcohol. If the player increases it too high, though, it will keep interrupting conversations to tempt Harry with those substances instead. Here, the game implicitly advises against the hyper-fixation on anchoring Harry to only one aspect of his self. On an additional note, the skills in *Disco Elysium* are unique because they are also characters. They have personalities, opinions, and biases. Sometimes, they support each other and Harry despite their differences, while other times, they argue because of them. Some even have their own political agenda: Rhetoric favors communism, Endurance supports fascism, Empathy advocates for moralism, and Savior Faire enjoys ultraliberalism. This indicates that, despite his amnesia, Harry cannot escape the politics of the world that made him. His fractured psyche is, then, "used to explore the inescapable influence of political forces and

history upon the actions of the player, puncturing their expectations of independent, empowered agency” (Novitz 38).

A companion mechanic to the skills is the Thought Cabinet. Gameplay-wise, it enhances the skill system. At the same time, it also has a narrative function. It represents a storage for the thoughts that loom large in Harry’s mind at any given moment. The Thought Cabinet contains three free slots at the beginning of the game, indicating the number of Thoughts that can be internalized at a time. When Harry levels up, instead of spending his level on a skill point, he can spend it to unlock a new slot in his Thought Cabinet or forget previously internalized Thoughts.

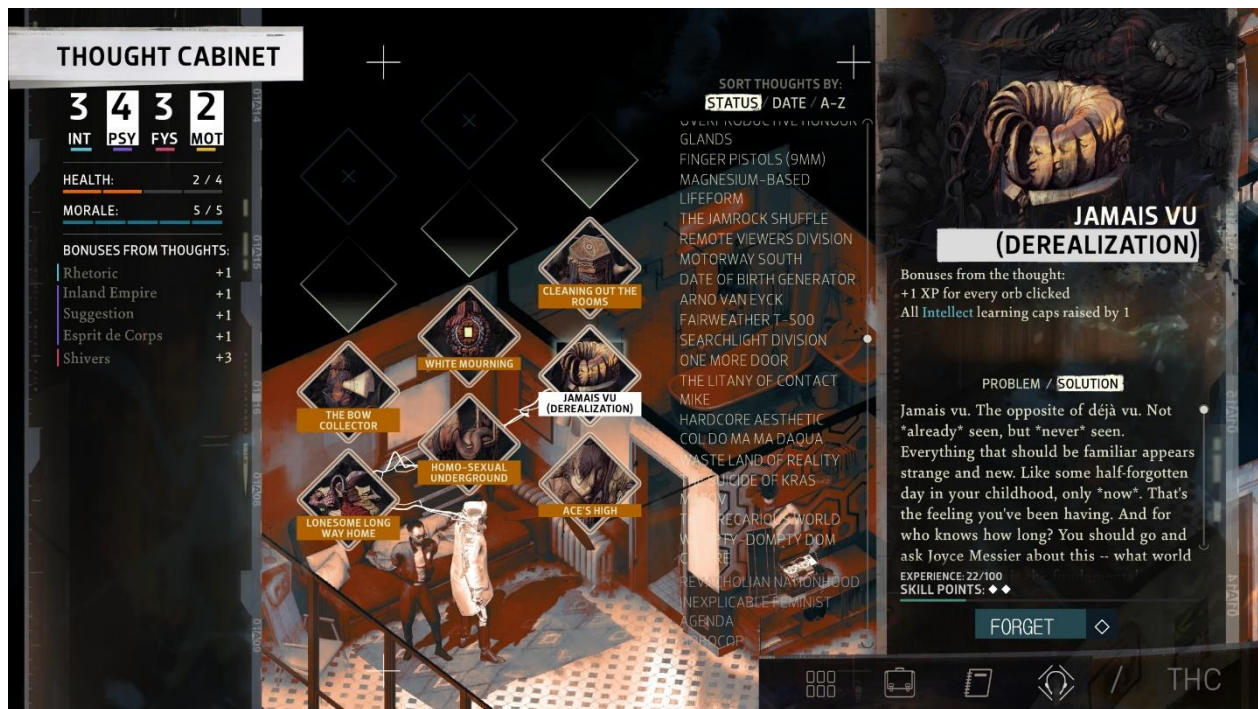


Figure 8. The Thought Cabinet. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

There are a total of 53 Thoughts in the game. Harry starts with none, but he unlocks them throughout the game by making specific decisions during dialogues, many of which I have explained in this thesis (e.g., Guillaume Le Million, Motorway South, The Precarious World, etc.) Once Harry unlocks a Thought, the player can make him internalize it, assuming that there is a free

slot in the Thought Cabinet. The internalization has two phases: the Problem and the Solution. The Problem is Harry's process of internalization – of research, in which he actively thinks about the Thought. Harry spends several in-game hours equal to the Thought's research time, during which he gains penalties and/or bonuses to his skill checks. After the research time is over, the Thought is fully internalized, entering the Solution phase. The Solution is permanent, at least until Harry spends a point during level up to forget the Thought, which reflects the difficulty of changing one's mind once an idea has been ingrained in it. The bonuses/penalties from the Problem are then replaced by ones from the Solution.

The Thoughts are accompanied by descriptive texts, which transform between the Problem and the Solution phase as well. The texts provide narrative contexts to the bonuses/penalties gained, making their ludonarrative semiotic metaphor resonant. Harry's outlook on the world, after all, has shifted once a Thought is internalized. Thus, the gameplay shifts with him, to his benefit or detriment. To illustrate, the Figure below shows the Mazovian Socio-Economics Thought:

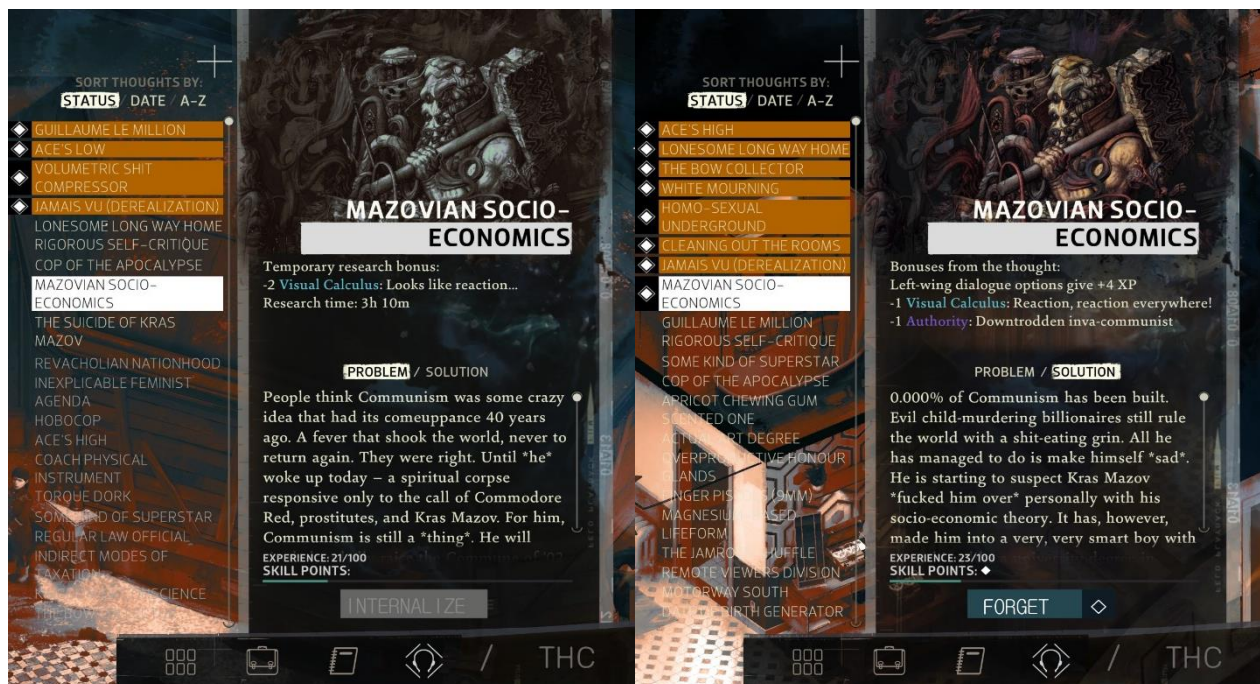


Figure 9. Mazovian Socio-Economics Thought. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium*.

In the Problem phase, Harry imagines himself as the communist hero who will “single-handedly raise the Commune of ’02 from the oceanic trench where it has been resting, covered in ghosts and seaweed!” It is a lofty goal with no practical methods to implement it. As a result, Harry suffers -2 penalty to the Visual Calculus skill: the ability to collect information about the physical world and deduce them as a detective would. Harry’s delusions about being the savior of communism prevent him from perceiving reality. He views everyone and everything other than himself as reactionaries that exist to reinforce the status quo. In the Solution phase, reality hits Harry. He realizes that communism has not been rebuilt at all, and “[a]ll he has managed to do is make himself *sad*.” He is embittered, yet he remains in denial: “[i]nstead of building Communism, he now builds a precise model of this grotesque, duplicitous world.” He suffers -1 to Authority because very few people in Revachol respect a self-proclaimed communist. The penalty to Visual Calculus reduces to -1 because, although he recognizes that he is no communist hero, he remains paranoid about reactionaries being everywhere, shaping this duplicitous world. On a positive note, however, he does gain additional experience points when he chooses left-wing dialogue options. This is because he now knows a lot of critical theories, which makes his dialogues more robust.

Attributes, skills, and the Thought Cabinet are character-building mechanics that portray how a person’s identity is constructed from the complex and multi-faceted systems of body and mind. Besides them, equipable items, more specifically clothing items in the game, also have a part to play in the construction of Harry. Like Thoughts, clothing items enhance skills with bonuses and/or penalties. The Horrific Necktie, for example, grants Harry +1 to Inland Empire. Unlike Thoughts, they can be equipped and unequipped on a whim. They symbolize how one’s identity is

not reliant upon one's thoughts alone, but on material things that surround oneself. With its bonus to *Inland Empire*, the Horrific Necktie essentially makes Harry, who is dependent on it for happiness, more imaginative and conversational with inanimate objects. It becomes the thing that defines Harry's identity, both ludically and narratively.

Although it is not a clothing item, another object of importance, which is also an object-NPC like the Necktie, deserves to be mentioned. It is the Damaged Ledger, a material thing that comes to define Harry. Once, the Damaged Ledger was a normal Ledger where Harry stored his paperwork. However, after his drunken night, he smashed and tried to shove it down the toilet. He eventually finds it again in the Whirling-in-Rags' trash container. When he retrieves it, he notices a watermark on it that could be read with the RCM's motor carriage headlights. Helping him as always, his partner Kim Kitsuragi turns on his own motor carriage's headlights for Harry, so that Harry can read the watermarks. Upon doing so, the Ledger, carrying the traces of Harry, reveals many aspects of Harry's pre-amnesia self, such as the number of people killed during service, cases solved, or years in service. From that moment onwards, a section appears in the game's journal entry, showing the information that Harry has read on his Ledger. This section would be updated throughout the game, continuing to record Harry's post-amnesia identities. It does not capture everything, but it serves as a sign that Harry continues to leave traces in the world despite being metaphorically dead.

Altogether, these ludic elements present Harry as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (McKeown 70). He is continuously transformed by his body and mind, as well as the discourse of the external world around him. Harry's self is never unified or whole; it cannot be completed, only ever-grows. Combining this characteristic of Harry with his

status as a cop, an arbiter of Moralintern ‘law and order,’ the game challenges that authority by fracturing and destabilizing it. In effect, it also fractures and destabilizes the “authoritative self-possessed subjectivity of humanism” (Vella and Cielecka 92) that the Moralists impose upon Revachol. Harry is iterable, and his iterability, each containing a valid perspective on the world worthy of dialogue, deconstructs the Moralinterns’ structures of control. Moralism is not the absolute truth and capitalism is not reality because not even the seemingly knowable and definable thing like *the self* can claim to be eternal.

4.3. The Challenge: Red Checks, White Checks, and the Save-Reload System

The world of *Disco Elysium* is given life and form by its dialogues, which themselves are enriched by the multi-perspectives of the different versions of Harries. This alone creates many branching emergent stories. However, the stories do not emerge from the player making active choices or interpreting the pre-scripted stories alone, but also from chance. Chance comes in the form of dice rolls, with each success or failure determining the appearances and disappearances of countless story paths. These dice rolls are used for the main challenges of the game: the skill checks.

Disco Elysium has two types of skill checks: passive skill checks and active skill checks. Passive skill checks do not require dice rolls. Instead, whether Harry passes the check or not depends on the total passive check skill points, which are automatically calculated during the dialogue using the formula $6 + \text{skill modifier}$ (determined by skill points and their enhancements). If the total points are equal to or higher than the difficulty class (DC), the skill check is a success. The difficulty class ranges from Trivial (DC 6 or 7) to Impossible (DC 18 or 20). The results of passive skill checks can be seen in dialogue, where they can add flavor, information, and/or dialogue options. There are varieties of conditions in which the results show up; sometimes upon

a successful check, a failed check, or both. The passive skill checks represent the skills ‘chiming in,’ offering Harry their opinions and advice that may influence him, for better or for worse.

In contrast, active skill checks require dice rolls. As their name also suggests, they require an action on the player’s part. Active skill checks are a part of the dialogue options, noticeable by options that have white or red highlights over the text (see Figure 3 and Figure 5). There are also texts inside angle brackets that indicate the skill used for the check and the DC. Hovering over the highlighted texts displays more information about the skill check, such as the player’s current skill points, the success rate, and other bonuses/penalties to the modifier.

When the player selects the skill check options, the game rolls two six-sided dice. The result of the roll is then added to Harry’s skill points and additional modifiers (formula: dice result + skill points + modifiers). If the total is equal to or higher than the DC, the skill check is a success. However, if the player rolls double ones, which is considered a critical failure, the check fails regardless of whether the total would have met the DC or not. Conversely, if the player rolls double sixes – a critical success – the check succeeds even if they would have failed otherwise. These dice rolls not only introduce the element of randomness to *Disco Elysium* but also precarity. It exposes the world of Elysium as precarious (literally) by design. The player might carefully plan Harry’s character progression and choose all the correct dialogue options to give him every single skill check bonus, but still fails the skill check in the end. A hidden game system outside the player’s control can and *will eventually* fail them, destroying their preferred outcome – their imagined future – in a single roll of the dice.

But as I have mentioned, neither *Disco Elysium* nor its specters are satisfied with the stories being *just* about failure. Its narrative would not allow it, and neither would its gameplay. The story insists that there is something that comes – that *returns* – after failure, and the gameplay represents

this by implementing two types of active skill checks. They are the white checks and the red checks. White checks are repeatable upon failure, although not immediately. When Harry fails a white check, the option will be locked until he meets a certain criterion through exploration, increases the skill point of the skill related to the check, or internalizes a Thought that unlocks it. To give an example: during the main quest, Harry's investigation leads him to the FELD building at Martinaire's west: a decrepit, abandoned building from the time of the Revolution that once belonged to a computer engineering company. Harry has a hunch that the primary suspect of The Hanged Man's murder is hiding inside the building, but to find a way into the building, he must succeed on a DC 20 (impossible) Shivers white check. Though this Shivers check is necessary to progress the main quest, the first time Harry encounters it, he is more likely than not to fail. From here, there are several ways for Harry to proceed. He can increase his Shivers skill point when he levels up. He can internalize The Insulindian Miracle Thought (unlock all white checks) or The Litany of Contact Mike Thought (unlock all Physique-related white checks). He can explore Martinaire's west coast further and complete other quests there, which not only unlocks the Shivers check, but also grants bonuses to the check's dice roll. Failing the check several times could also unlock a new task: Work with the Children of the Big Sea, which leads to a new story path. In a manner, the white checks are the game's built-in save-reload button. However, instead of erasing the failure completely like saving and reloading would, the game uses the white checks as an opportunity to play with its own iterability. The player, haunted by the specter of the past (i.e., the failed check) and the future (i.e., the outcomes that are locked away as the result of the failure), is incentivized to make modifications to their playthrough in some ways, creating more branching paths within the emergent story. With the white checks, *Disco Elysium* subverts the dichotomy of 'success' and 'failure,' as well as the notion that perceived success could only ever be the desirable

outcome, for failure means the end of everything. Here, the specters of the failed futures refuse to let the player give up on the present and long for a rewind into the past.

While white checks encourage the player to keep trying until one of their iterative attempts eventually succeeds, red checks pose different questions: what if there are no more chances? What if one must live with their failure? What if failure is inevitable, no matter what one does? Unlike white checks, red checks cannot be repeated. If Harry fails them, he must accept the consequences. Failing red checks, however, are in most instances, never catastrophic in the long term, even though it might seem so at the moment. Harry might lose a health or morale point, or he might embarrass himself in front of the NPCs, or both, but the game usually offers the player insight into the failure in return. For example, during the Help Ravers Start a Nightclub quest, Harry finds one of the ravers, a young woman named Acele, squatting outside her tent on the sea ice, recording the sound beneath the ice sheet. Harry notices that she does not have a hat on, even though it is cold. When Harry tells her that she should wear a hat to keep herself warm, she responds with a dismissive “Look man, fuck the hat.” Her response angers Harry, who feels like his authority has been challenged. This prompts a DC 15 (Heroic) red Authority check to appear among the dialogue choices. Harry can ignore it, proceeding with other choices, or he can roll the Authority check to regain his authority in her eyes. If Harry succeeds, he chastises her for swearing in front of a police officer, and she apologizes. If Harry fails, though, the following happens:

AUTHORITY [Heroic: Failure] – Lots of feeling. Feel it up, *way* up.

YOU – “Oh my god! FUCK THE HAT?! Is that what just said to me? I can’t *BELIEVE* you told me to fuck the hat! ... So I should just... just... take this hat I’m wearing and FUCK it, right?! ... Engage in sexual intercourse with a hat right here in front of you, because you told me so? On the SEA ICE?!”

AUTHORITY – More.

YOU – “RIGHT HERE ON THE SEA ICE?!”

AUTHORITY – MORE.

YOU – “GIVE YOU A LITTLE... ICE COP HAT FUCK SHOW?! ... IS THAT HOW YOU SEE ME?”

...

ACELE – The young woman has kept her eyes trained on her wires, waiting for the sorry spectacle to end, but it’s gone awful quiet up there. Then, the sound of sobbing ... Looking up she sees a grown man – on the wrong side of forty, his face bloated from alcohol and god knows what else – not so quietly crying.

“This... isn’t really about the hat, is it?”

YOU – “No...”

ACELE – “You know, you’re not the only one with issues ... I self-medicate, shit... life’s a horror, you know. Crying helps, though. Get it out of your system and then maybe we can talk, okay? I’ll be here.”

Failing the Authority check, Harry has a mental breakdown in front of a civilian, resulting in the loss of one morale point. Although this may seem like a punishment, failure still provides some interesting insights that a successful roll does not. It reveals that, despite his volition, Harry is still emotionally and mentally fragile. He perceives the slightest disagreement as an affront to his authority, breaking down into tears because of it. The event also showcases Acele’s empathy, as well as implies that Harry’s display, caused by mental instability, is not something foreign to the people of Revachol. Because of how *Disco Elysium* designs them, red checks, similar to white checks, reject the notion that success, or the appearance of success, is the only worthwhile result of an action. Even with failure, life goes on. The future does not disappear. Instead, another future takes its place, containing a different kind of wisdom, informed by the specters of its iterations.

Although the design of the white checks and red checks negates the need to constantly save and reload the game to get a favorable outcome, the option is available. The save-reload system, after all, is a classic time device in every game, whether intentionally or not, that creates specters. As Belmonte states: “choices made and then unmade upon reloading, secondary missions completed only for the player to load a state when these missions did not yet exist ... they form

layers of experience that coalesce as a rhizome to further multiply the already based-on-multiplicity experience” (52). Even when the player refuses to accept failure and reload, they are still haunted by the specters of their previous saved game. Their actions “are clearly inspired by the past, which has ‘not yet’ materialized and ‘no longer’ exists” (Janik 11). The save-reload system, when considered alongside how skill checks are handled in *Disco Elysium*, is not just a reset button like it is in other games. It becomes a part of the game’s hauntological ludonarrative. While white checks and red checks motivate the player to fail forward, the save-reload process emulates the attempts at wiping memories – at forgetfulness – that root the player to a moment in time. Like Harry’s loss of memory, reloading may give the player a fresh start; yet, they would still be haunted all the same by their lost futures.

As this chapter has hopefully demonstrated, *Disco Elysium*’s approach to its gameplay elements; its core gameplay loop, its character creation, and its challenges, all contribute to the story’s plurality. On the one hand, this allows for the interpretation of the game as a Fisherian game-story about hauntology. On the other hand, it makes said interpretation, on its own, unfinished. The world of Elysium is indeed a precarious world crushed beneath the all-too-familiar weight of capitalist realism. It is a world haunted by the ever-encroaching pale: its tendency towards amnesia; its nothingness; its obsession with the past that is *no longer* and its future that is *not yet*, and perhaps *not ever again*. However, from this, a question arises: and then what? In the game, time and time again, the player hears about journeys through the pale, where the travelers reemerge again on the other side: “[a]fter the world, the pale; after the pale – the world again.” Harry himself might have, metaphorically or otherwise, traveled through it as well, being unmade and returning as a new being. Considering this through a Fisherian reading, the game seems to be saying that something must be beyond the haunted world of capitalist realism. The pale, like Fisher’s specters, is an eerie force. Though such forces can be perceived as dangerous, harming

humans by trapping them in an endless nothing-scape of nostalgia and yearning, they can also be a sign of the coming of something *beautiful*. The eerie, intruding upon the ‘normal,’ calls into question the ‘real.’ In this case, the eerie is the specters who interrogate the ‘realism’ in capitalist realism. Refusing to give up on the living, they make an injunction: imagine a world that comes after; imagine a world that could be free.

5. “One day I will return to your side”: Beyond Elysium

Disco Elysium does not end with a definitive picture of a utopia. At the end of the game, Harry solves the case, after which he either triumphantly rejoins his precinct or gets left behind, and the game ends there. In the ‘better’ endings in which Harry has been accepted back among his comrades, his Esprit de Corps skill, upon a successful passive check, chimes in and informs him about a conversation between two non-interactable NPCs. These NPCs cryptically imply that a second Revolution is on the horizon and that the RCM, which includes Harry, is going to side with the people. What happens during the second Revolution and what comes after it, however, are left as a mystery. In some ways, this ambiguity is appropriate. Following the Fisherian reading of *Disco Elysium*, there are clear parallels between the game’s conclusion and Fisher’s theory of acid communism. The game cannot offer a singular image of a utopian Elysium because acid communism is *not* a promise of utopia. Rather, it is the ability to imagine an alternative to the current dystopia. To be able to imagine such an alternative, one must turn away from one’s attachment to the End of history narrative (even if that End is a supposed ‘happily ever after’) and embrace the weird. The weird, like the eerie, is the thing that can disrupt the status quo – the eternal present. This acceptance, and even the active search for the weird, becomes another central theme in *Disco Elysium*.

In Chapter 3, I have introduced three quests: the Communist Political Vision quest, the Insulindian Phasmid quest, and the Anodic Music Nightclub quest. The questlines themselves reflect the game’s theme of failure and hauntology. Harry becomes involved with a cast of NPCs who aim to build, discover, or create something unique, unusual, and/or unlikely. The communist students try to build an infra-materialist structure out of matchboxes and their intense belief in communism, the cryptozoologists toil to find the Insulindian Phasmid, and the ravers want to create

a nightclub that plays *truly hardcore* anodic music. During these quests, Harry and the NPCs come face-to-face with the supposed impossibility and meaninglessness of their tasks, and they are presented with the option to give up. At this point, however, the game's ludonarrative has likely conditioned the player to pursue the quest regardless of the outcome. The game's skill checks, for instance, suggest that failure can be as valuable and interesting as success. And indeed, if the player decides to continue these questlines, the quests' conclusions prove just that. Even inevitable failures do not engender an eternal state of failure. The ghosts of the lost futures do not give up on the living, and so as long as one does not give up either, something is waiting beyond the ruins: something weird and miraculous.

Once Harry finishes A Brief Look at Infra-Materialism for the Communist Political Vision quest, he can at night to the book club's meeting place. There, he and the student communists: Steban and the Echo Maker, discuss the reading material. By the end of the discussion, the students seem satisfied, while Harry is not. He refuses to believe that reading and discussion theories are *all there is* to communism, so he asks the student communists a question. The game gives the player options to phrase the question in many different ways, though all variations end with: "...what's the point?" If communism is such a failure, what is the point of fighting for its ideals?

Harry's question manages to break through Steban's arrogant façade. For the first time, he replies sincerely, without the snobbishness that he has displayed earlier:

STEBAN, THE STUDENT COMMUNIST – "The theorists Puncher and Wattmann ... say that communism is a secular version of Perikarnassian theory, that it replaces faith in the divine with faith in humanity's future..."

...

"Communism doesn't dangle any promises of eternal bliss or reward. The only promise it offers is that the future can be better than the past, if we're willing to work and fight and die for it."

...

“I guess you could say we believe it *because it’s impossible*.” ... “It’s our way of saying we refuse to accept that the world has to remain... like this...”

After Steban answers, Harry can mention the matchbox tower again, proposing that all three of them build it together. The students accept. Harry, Steban, and the Echo Maker then spend at least half an hour (in-game time) to stack up the matchboxes. Harry’s partner Kim, if he is in the party, stands on the side and simply watches with skepticism. Shapes begin to form, then grow higher and higher, until Harry places the final matchbox on the zenith of the tower. If Harry’s communist points are lower than 30, the tower tumbles immediately. If Harry has accumulated enough communist points through dialogues throughout the game, however, the tower holds.

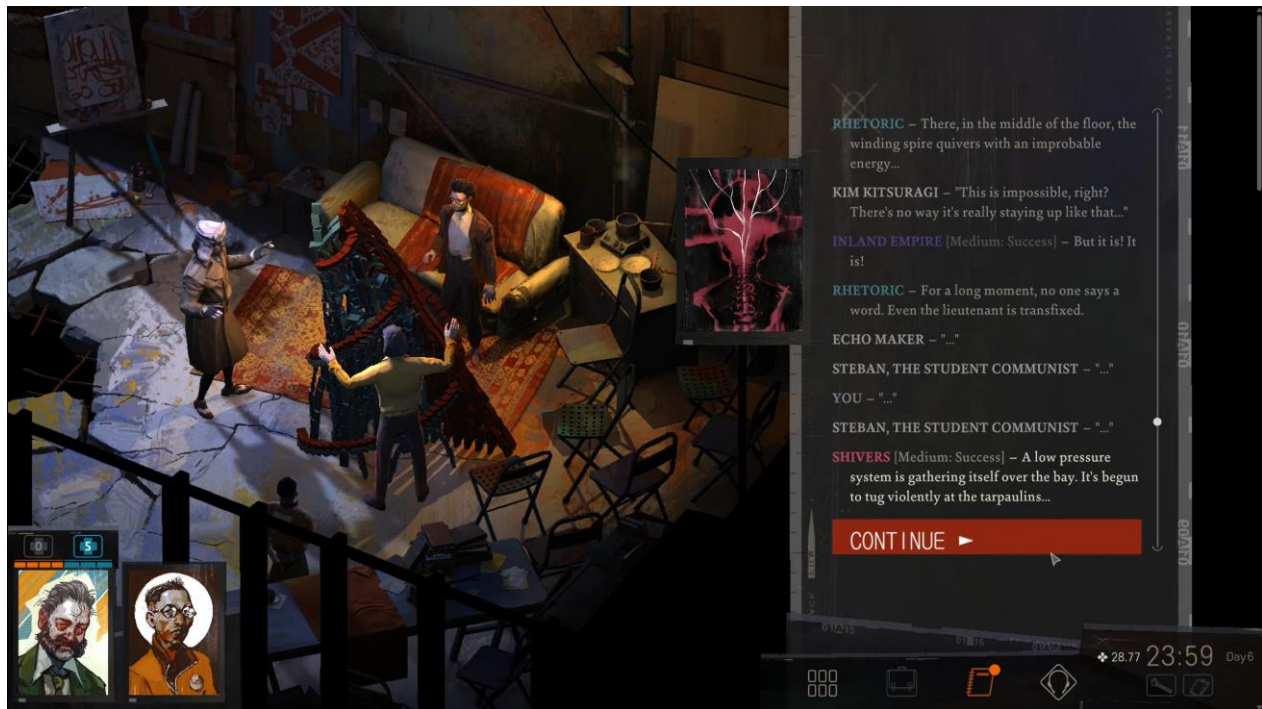


Figure 10. The Matchbox Tower. Screenshot from Squid Child Productions, *Communism* track (9:07).

It holds for an impossible second. A sacred silence falls over the room. Then, when the wind blows through the window, the tower topples. Though it was only for one second that the tower stood, that one second was enough. Harry can make one of two comments about it: “[t]hat was weird” or “[t]hat was miraculous.” Whatever he says, the truth remains that it was both, for

the weird is the miracle and vice versa. For a moment, Fisher's world of acid communism can be glimpsed in the book club, where the weird and the miraculous arrive at the world through sheer belief in a better future.

As Harry prepares to leave the book club, Steban stops him for another short dialogue. After informing Harry that he intends to finally open the book club to more people, even if they are not perfect communists, he tells Harry about a poem, revealing that he also reads texts other than theories. Although he could not remember the whole poem, he shares the line that he could not forget, a line that sums up the Communist Political Vision quest and, by extension, the entirety of *Disco Elysium*:

STEBAN, THE STUDENT COMMUNIST – “In dark times, should the stars also go out?”

And with that, the quest is complete.

While the Communist Political Vision quest does not have a direct bearing on the main quest, the Insulindian Phasmid quest becomes a part of it. At first, this quest seems to end unfavorably. There is no Phasmid to be found by the end of the “Find the Insulindian Phasmid” task, in which Harry checks the traps for the cryptozoologists. Feeling defeated, the cryptozoologists return home, and there are no mentions of the Phasmid again until the end of the game.

Following the main quest, Harry reaches the islet on which The Deserter hides. He finds The Deserter amongst the reeds, sitting by a campfire. As he interrogates The Deserter, Harry notices that he, in addition to suffering physical and mental illness, is also affected by an unknown presence. Near the end of the conversation, Harry hears something moving in the reeds. Searching the source of the sound, he sees a slender yet towering insect emerging from its hiding place, its

stick-and-reeds-like limbs unfolding before him. It is what he has been searching for: the Insulindian Phasmid.

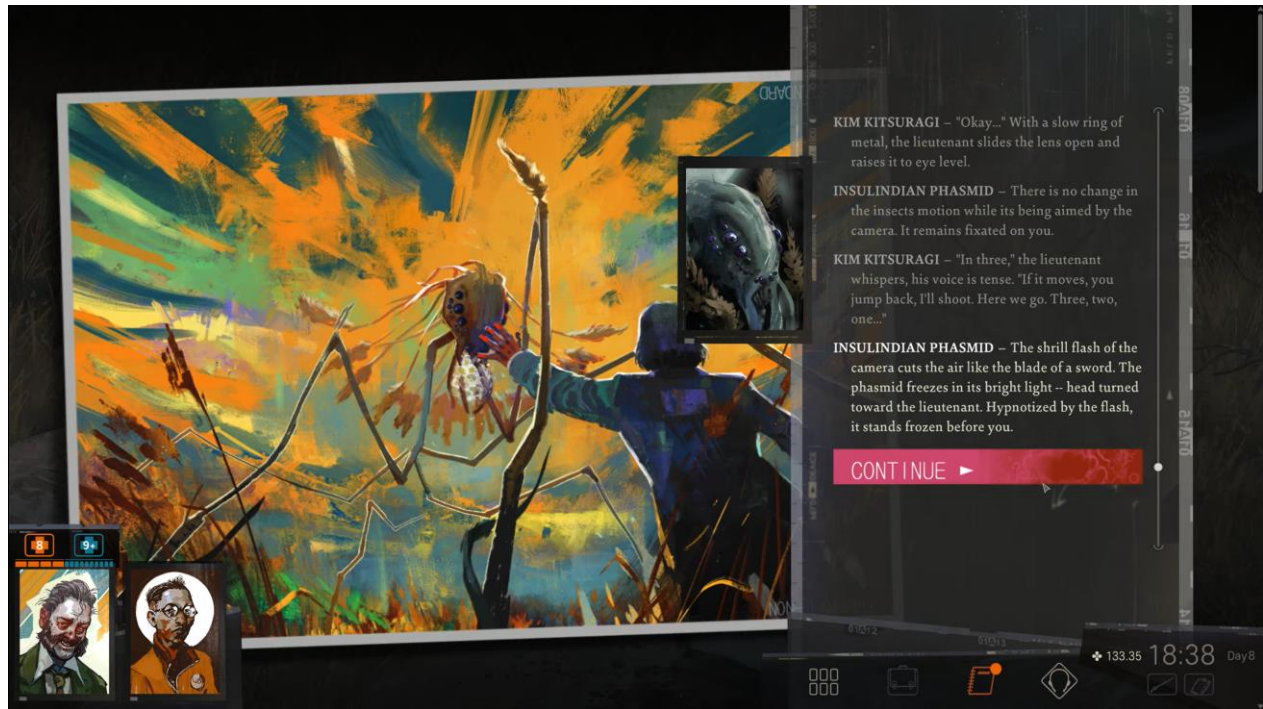


Figure 11. The Insulindian Phasmid. Screenshot from Rohlix, *Insulindian Phasmid* (15:22).

The Deserter cannot see the cryptid, which calls Harry's sanity into question at first. However, if Kim is with Harry, he confirms that he sees it as well. From here, Harry can approach the Phasmid, though he must succeed on a red Electrochemistry check. The difficulty of this check varies. In the previous "Find the Insulindian Phasmid" task, if Harry takes the search for the Phasmid seriously and asks Morell to spray him with Phasmid pheromones, the check would have a Medium difficulty. The check is made easier with bonuses as well, providing that Harry truly engages with Morell and Lena's story (i.e., ask Lena about her story, ask Morell to spray *a lot* of pheromones). If Harry dismisses Morell's beliefs and does not let himself be sprayed with the pheromones, then the check is impossible to succeed. Assuming that Harry succeeds on the check, he can inspect the Phasmid further and even talk to it. Talking to the Phasmid, though, requires an

Inland Empire check. Harry, once again, receives bonuses to the check if he has never given up on the Phasmid during Phasmid-related tasks. In other words, like in the Communist Political Vision quest, Harry's willingness to embrace the weird and to believe in the miracle, expressed through dialogue choices and recorded by the game, affects how closely he can connect with them. And the Phasmid – the cryptid that *should not* exist yet exists regardless – demonstrates that something beautiful and weird and miraculous like it can indeed *be* in the world of Elysium. Yet, when Harry speaks to it and inquires whether it is the miracle, it replies:

INSULINDIAN PHASMID – No. You are the miracle.

...

The moral of our encounter is: I am a relatively median life form, while you are extreme, all-engulfing madness. A volatile simian nervous system, ominously new to the planet.

The pale, too, came with you ... There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all.

Humans, according to the Phasmid, can shape, and even destroy, the world with their thoughts. The pale, after all, is human-made. On the gameplay level, *Disco Elysium* confirms this through how dialogues, the conveyor of thoughts, shape the world. However, if human thoughts can influence the world negatively, the opposite is also true. That is why, at the end of their conversation, the Phasmid leaves Harry with one injunction:

INSULINDIAN PHASMID – Thank you. I also have one more thing to say to you: that woman – turn from the ruin. Turn and go forward. Do it for the working class.

While this is the Phasmid's message for Harry, who has been haunted by his ex-something, it is also a message to the world haunted by lost futures. The Phasmid posits that humans can find a way out of the ruins – out of the coming apocalypse – but only if they can imagine that going forward is possible. It is heartbreaking, yet quite fitting, that the Deserter cannot see the Phasmid

because, after so many years of living in hatred and despair, he could imagine nothing else but the ruin.

Compared to the abovementioned quests, the miraculous aspect of the weird in the Anodic Music Nightclub quest is more implicit. Instead of manifesting as a tangible character or event, it manifests as an implied possibility. The implication of the miracle occurs when the two parts of the quest, the creation of new anodic music and the investigation into the 2mm hole, converge. As Harry helps the ravers establish the nightclub, one of them, named Egg Head, comments that the music is not “hardcore” enough. Harry can offer to search for sound materials to make it “harder core.” If he pursues this task, he eventually finds one of the hardcore sounds inside the 2mm hole: the ‘sound’ of the pale itself. Deciding to use the pale-sound, Harry and Egg Head mix it into the music, creating a novel type of anodic music altogether. From nothingness, something new returns.

While Harry researches the 2mm hole, which leads to the discovery of the sound, though, Harry also learns another information. The 2mm pale did not appear inside the church after its construction. On the contrary, the pale was there first, and the church has been built around it in an attempt to tame it through faith. Though it seems to have worked for centuries, the pale spreads once more in the present, evident in Fortress Accident’s corrupted data. If there is to be any hope of stopping the spread at all, something new must be invented to contain the pale. Conveniently, that something has already been/in process of being invented. It is Harry and Egg Head’s anodic music. It is not a coincidence either that anodic music shares a name with the anodic frequencies; the radio waves that can subdue the pale. If anodic frequencies allow a relatively safe passage through the pale, then anodic music can also stop it from swallowing the world. Anodic music, after all, is the music of the future. It is something weird, something new, something beautiful, created from the collaboration between the unlikely duo: an amnesiac detective and a drug-addled

raver who almost gave up on his dreams. It is the miracle that might – just might – be able to prevent the world from ending, or at least give it more time to exist.

After inventing the music, there is nothing left to do but dance. As Harry dances to anodic music, an option to make a DC 12 (Challenging) Shivers red check appears. Upon succeeding on the check, the city of Revachol formally introduces herself to Harry. Here, if Harry passes a passive Reaction Speed skill check, it informs Harry that Revachol is afraid. She is afraid because she will one day be destroyed, as per the events in *Sacred and Terrible Air*. One day, she will end. Despite the grim realization, however, as the later encounter with the Phasmid suggests in retrospect, it would perhaps be Harry's, or rather, humanity's miraculous nature that prevents the End from coming. It is the reason why Revachol trusts the humanity that lives in her to save her from death:

SHIVERS – I NEED YOU. YOU CAN KEEP ME ON THIS EARTH. BE VIGILANT. I LOVE YOU.

Because *Sacred and Terrible Air* is a traditional novel, its narrative is limited by its medium. *Disco Elysium*'s ludonarrative does not have the same limit. If the gameplay can conjure the many iterations of Elysium, of Harry, and of the story itself, then it can also conjure many iterations of Revachol's future. Through its hauntological ludonarrative, and consequently an *acid* ludonarrative, a future of a free Revachol is no longer unimaginable.

There is a concept in *Disco Elysium* called the Return. Like acid communism, it is not clearly defined. It is simply a promise that something will return from Revachol's past – or perhaps from its lost future. Some believe that it is the return of the monarchy, wealth, or communism. No one can pinpoint what it exactly *is*. One thing that everybody who waits for the return agrees on, however, is that it will change everything. Revachol would no longer be under the oppressive gaze of the Moralinterns. Though it is unclear about the exact nature of the Return, *Disco Elysium* heavily implies that it is the return of the Girl Child Revolution: a second Revolution that has

already been started by the Dockworkers' Union. And the Tribunal, although it was in part caused by Harry's failure to find the killer in time, it is that failure that accelerate the Return. The historic opportunity for a revolution, which The Deserter believes already passed, reappears at the moment that Harry spills his blood fighting for the people of Martinaire during the Tribunal. Harry's blood, mixed with red paint and motor oil, is turned into a large graffito in front of the Whirling-in-Rags. Harry has the option to set the graffito on fire, letting the promise burn bright enough that the Coalition airship above can see its message. The message, a culmination of everything about *Disco Elysium's* ludonarrative, reads:



Figure 12. Un Jour Je Serai De Retour Pres Dé Toi. Screenshot from doktor Almore, *One day* (0:16).

“One day I will return to your side.”

Conclusion – The Precarious World (Solution)

*“How *not* to lose? It is impossible not to. The world is balanced on the edge of a knife. It’s a game of frayed nerves. You’re pushed on by numbers and punitive measures: pain, rejection, and unpaid bills. You can either play or you can crawl under a boat and waste away – turn into salt or a flock of seagulls. Your enemies would *love* that. Or you can fight. The only way to load the dice is to keep on fighting” (Disco Elysium).*

In the Introduction, I have posed a question: what new world does *Disco Elysium* imagine would come after the world haunted by failed futures, providing that the thought of a new world is possible at all? Throughout the thesis, I have searched for the answer to this question by exploring the game’s hauntological ludonarrative. The narrative elements – the setting, the characters, and the plotlines – portray a world that, not unlike the real world, is trapped in the confines of capitalist realism. The history of the world is full of lost futures that failed to manifest, and the people are constantly glancing back towards the ruins in hopes that some meaning will emerge from it. It is a precarious world by design, where hard work and careful planning can be undone by the incomprehensible and inescapable systems outside one’s control. It is a world threatened to be swallowed by the pale, the hauntological force that contains within it all of history – past and future – and the End of history. However, despite the seeming hopelessness, the ludic elements present the player with an alternative.

At first, the dice roll-based gameplay seems to support the pessimistic reading of the game. Regardless of how many skill points or bonuses to the skill checks Harry has, the dice roll could fail. As a response, the player can either live with the failure or reload the game until the dice fall in their favor. Whatever they choose, they nonetheless become haunted by failure like the rest of Elysium. Yet, *Disco Elysium* does not view failure as inferior to success. As is evident with the skill check system, some failed dice rolls can be remedied by retrying them (i.e., white checks).

Those that cannot be retried (i.e., red checks) still provide interesting perspectives on the setting, the characters, and the stories that are as valuable as, and often even more so than, successful rolls. In this way, the skill checks produce and encourage the player to not obsess over, but rather embrace, the specters of the failed futures, as they enable the stories to be plural. This plurality is also resonant with other gameplay elements like character creation/progression and dialogues. The player can employ the character creation/progression system to mold Harry into the many iterations of himself. Harry's disposition consequently influences the dialogues. The dialogues – the main method of understanding the world – in turn shape Harry's perception. The plurality allows for greater imagination and nigh-limitless possibilities of the future story paths. Engineering the game's story in this way, *Disco Elysium's* gameplay implies that there are other possible narratives beyond failure, beyond haunting, and beyond the End of history.

To answer the question: *Disco Elysium's* new world is the world of the weird and the miraculous. It is the world that *has yet to arrive* and *is returning* at the same time. It comes with a promise that something beautiful is going to happen; that the world *as is* would no longer be broken and unfinished. As abstract and indefinite as the description of this new world may be, it coincides with the interactive qualities of the game. Though the player receives glimpses of *Disco Elysium's* new world, which hints at a shift towards some form of leftism in Revachol, the game still allows the player to imagine their own version of the future.

With that, the thesis approaches its conclusion. It is my hope that this thesis has contributed to the study of ludonarrative in some way, such as being another proof that a video game's narrative cannot exist without its 'ludo,' and vice versa. Moreover, it is a proof that video games can tell a story that is as deep and meaningful as any other medium, not despite its ludic elements, but because of them. More importantly, however, I hope that this thesis is an adequate observation of

the insights that the game's hauntological ludonarrative can offer regarding real-life equivalences. The fictional world of *Disco Elysium*, like the vast majority of art and media, holds up a mirror to *our* world. And though it reflects much of our problems, it also has the potential to reveal to us what a solution might look like. It is a reminder to keep rolling the dice – to keep fighting – even when anything else but failure is inconceivable. We must keep rolling because, eventually, the insurmountable odds will be exceeded by a miracle: an unexpected critical success that changes the course of history. We must keep rolling until the specters of the world that could be free finally return to our side.

(32,924 words)

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Abstracts

English Abstract

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM Studios, 2019) is an award-winning isometric computer role-playing game (cRPG) about an amnesiac detective solving a murder case in a small fictional post-revolution town. Like other games of its genre, it is known for being narrative-focused, prioritizing story, themes, and player interaction as much as gameplay mechanics. There have been discussions about *Disco Elysium* through theoretical lenses like ontology, posthumanism, genre studies, game studies, etc. Some of these discussions reference hauntology: a theory postulating that a specter of 'something' (Marxism) has returned from the past (or future) to haunt the present. In this thesis, I develop the analysis of the game's hauntological themes further. Putting *Disco Elysium* in conversation with Mark Fisher's texts like *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), I situate hauntology as the central theme that frames its narrative. Hauntology provides context and perspectives to the setting, the plot, and the characters. Moreover, it influences not only the game's narrative but also its gameplay mechanics. Every layer of *Disco Elysium*, from its ludic to narrative elements, is haunted by the game world's -- and perhaps the real world's -- failed communist revolution. By considering these elements as a whole through the close reading of the game's 'ludonarrative,' the thesis demonstrates not only how the many messages of *Disco Elysium*, which is often teased as a 'literature' due to its absence of combat mechanics, cannot be divorced from its medium, but also how a game can utilize its entire medium to express its political and social commentary.

German Abstract

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM Studios, 2019) ist ein preisgekröntes isometrisches Computer-Rollenspiel (cRPG) über einen an Amnesie leidenden Detektiv, der einen Mordfall in einer kleinen fiktiven Stadt nach der Revolution löst. Wie andere Spiele dieses Genres ist es für seinen narrativen Fokus bekannt, bei dem Story, Themen und Spielerinteraktion ebenso im Vordergrund stehen wie Spielmechaniken. Es gab Diskussionen über *Disco Elysium* aus theoretischer Sicht wie Ontologie, Posthumanismus, Genrestudien, Spielstudien usw. Einige dieser Diskussionen beziehen sich auf die Hauntologie: eine Theorie, die postuliert, dass ein Gespenst von „etwas“ (Marxismus) aus der Vergangenheit (oder Zukunft) zurückgekehrt ist, um die Gegenwart heimzusuchen. In dieser Arbeit entwickle ich die Analyse der hauntologischen Themen des Spiels weiter. Indem ich *Disco Elysium* in einen Dialog mit Mark Fishers Texten wie *Capitalist Realism* (2009) und *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) bringe, ordne ich die Hauntologie als zentrales Thema ein, das die Erzählung umrahmt. Die Hauntologie liefert Kontext und Perspektiven für das Setting, die Handlung und die Charaktere. Darüber hinaus beeinflusst sie nicht nur die Erzählung des Spiels, sondern auch seine Spielmechanik. Jede Ebene von *Disco Elysium*, von den spielerischen bis zu den narrativen Elementen, ist von der gescheiterten kommunistischen Revolution der Spielwelt – und vielleicht auch der realen Welt – heimgesucht. Indem diese Elemente durch die genaue Lektüre der „Ludonarrative“ des Spiels als Ganzes betrachtet werden, zeigt die These nicht nur, wie die vielen Botschaften von *Disco Elysium*, das aufgrund seiner fehlenden Kampfmechanik oft als „Literatur“ bezeichnet wird, nicht von seinem Medium getrennt werden können, sondern auch, wie ein Spiel sein gesamtes Medium nutzen kann, um seinen politischen und sozialen Kommentar auszudrücken.