

Ideology of Martinaire

An analysis of narrative use and developer positions in Disco Elysium

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how the developer's political views influence the narrative in Disco Elysium created by the indie studio ZA/UM. In an industry where games offer differing narratives, mechanics, and art styles, Disco Elysium stands out for its integration of political theory within its storytelling with elements that are not commonly seen in the role-playing game genre. The game presents a narrative-driven experience that prioritizes story, player choices, and visual art over traditional gameplay mechanics such as combat. For that reason, it offers the player an immersive experience of participating in the game world of Elysium by adapting an ideology as a character trait. Players navigate this world with a high degree of agency, selecting skills that shape their perceptions and experiences, wherein they get to reflect on four different ideological perspectives. This study situates itself within the emerging field of game studies, which intersects with media and cultural studies to investigate the cultural significance of video games. The research also considers the developers' position, including their experiences in Estonia and historical events, which inform the game's ideological content. Opting for a mixed-method approach and using qualitative methods, including formal analysis of gameplay and close reading, the study examines how the game's design and narrative transfer the story to the player thus answering *how the characters of Disco Elysium embody various political views through the developer's perspective*. Through gameplay and taking notes, this research set on to find out exactly how all the four main ideologies were presented, and why. Moreover, with the help of defining ideology, the characters were presented with their according reasoning of why they were considered a part of each group. This study contributes to the academic discourse on the intersection of political theory and video games, offering insights for future research and game development.

KEYWORDS: *developer positionality, ideology, game studies, narrative, influence*

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1. Introduction

In the current landscape of the video game industry, there is certainly no shortage of choice for the consumer to pick what they would like to spend hours playing. In addition, the abundance of genres offers the gamer a choice to indulge in a wide range of stories, mechanics, and art styles. These main traits of games are a conscious choice of game developers, as their production comes from a subjective view of the world provided by the developer to the player (Bulut, 2021, p. 4). The study of video games is a newer field, still in its development in the overarching category of culture studies (Nieborg & Hermes, 2008, p. 3-4). Game studies have over the years gained more attention shifting themselves as an addition to media studies thus trying to answer questions of how and where video games are positioned in our culture and what significance do they hold (Davidson, 2011, p. 10). As

An example of a game explicitly doused in political theory is *Disco Elysium*, a role-playing game from 2019, created by the indie studio ZA/UM, or more specifically the ZA/UM art collective comprised of writers and artists from Estonia. *Disco Elysium* has shaken the gaming industry with its release, offering an experience that has not been explored yet, as its focus relies on the story, player choices, and visual art, rather than the gameplay itself. It provides the player with an immersive experience of its environment and characters through constant interactions and conversations with characters whose visual appearance and voices signify more than simple character design, adding on to the experience of the world of *Elysium* (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná, 2022, p. 3-4). With the developing story of an unsolved murder, the player is introduced to many different political viewpoints and agendas through the characters and the environment of the district of Martinaise. In addition, the focus of the story is to find out the history of the district and the world of *Elysium*.

Moreover, *Disco Elysium* allows the player to perceive the district and its inhabitants in different ways by allowing the player a sense of agency to select their skills, thus playing in the world through the selected build (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 12-13). The world is built upon the players' exploration, with the help of text and voiceovers in the game, building the world with stories from non-playable characters and objects. The game's dialogue-based storyline is accompanied by narration, as different skill sets give the player an insider perspective into the psyche of the main character that they are playing. This, again, is led by decisions based on politically laced dialogue options toward other characters. Furthermore, approaching *Disco Elysium* with a lens of political theory and philosophy has been previously addressed by researchers and academics alike, due to its explicit narrative based on such theories. As it explicitly names ideological views, it serves to identify them through presenting a fully

realized world, with inspiration taken from real world historical icons and events, though falsified through the lens of the developers (Apperley, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, it fleshes out ideological views through the usage of historical accounts, and as such identifies ideologies as main objects in society through which makes subjects act on their views (Mouffe, 1979, p. 16). Moreover, the creators of *Disco Elysium* have stated in their book dedicated to the game that they were inspired by their life in Estonia, and the hardships they have witnessed over the years (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 183-185). For that reason, it stands as a passion project of the group that has gained commercial success even though it was made in a small Baltic country with a small amount of capital.

Since the game's release, it has caught the interest of many due to its thematic and political text, getting positive reviews from almost all game review sites, with Metacritic giving it a must-play badge and a 91 score (Metacritic, 2019). Additionally, research on the game can give an introspective look into how it sets the scenery and engulfs the player in its world. This can be useful for future adaptations of political theory in video games, as the subject has been discussed academically but can be expanded upon more (Cassar, 2013, p. 2).

For this reason, the research question for this study is as follows: “How do the characters in *Disco Elysium* embody various political viewpoints through the developer's perspective?” To appropriately investigate the research question at hand, usage of qualitative methods was deemed the most appropriate as the research pertains to a subjective view of player's understanding of politics, ideology, and experience of gameplay. In addition, it will be analyzed with the help of a mixed-methods analysis, namely a formal analysis of gameplay in pair with close reading. As formal analysis of gameplay is a newer addition to qualitative research methods, work from Fernández-Vara (2019) will be used as the guide to properly assess the experience. In the following section, the usage of political theory, inspiration from historical events, game mechanics, and the developer positionality regarding the listed will be addressed. Moreover, a deeper look into the game's story through the mixed methods of close reading and formal analysis of gameplay.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

In the following chapter, there will be an expansion of literature and concepts used as tools for the game's analysis, to adequately address the research question at hand. Starting with a short summary of *Disco Elysium*, to give the reader a clearer approach to the study. After the brief section on the game, comes the explanation of ideology, with a comparison of definitions coined by different philosophers. Furthermore, after explaining ideology, there is a need to go into details of how historical events and material conditions shape an individual's sense of reality. In addition, an important part of this research is based on how developers, writers, and many of the people behind the games shape these game worlds, as their identity serves as a key part in comprehending some choices made. The ending section explains how mechanics have an influence on the player's perspective, as the interaction forms a relationship between them, creating an identity of the player according to their gameplay and choices.

2.2. *Disco Elysium*

Created by a novelist of the name Robert Kurvitz, the world of *Disco Elysium* offers a dense, yet impactful storyline inspired by the environment and past of its creator. Funded and made by ZA/UM, an indie studio that describes itself as a collective of writers and artists who entered the video game sphere, the game version of *Disco Elysium* was made as a moving art piece, or more closely an animating oil painting, giving the illusion of something new and never seen before in other games (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 27; figure 1). The art direction of the game sets it apart due to heavy influences of the art team of impressionist painters, with the likes of Rembrandt. With the release of *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*, the game has amassed over a million words in dialogue and text, making it one of the few games with that amount of attention to text (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 13). It relies heavily on projecting the story through the previously mentioned text and visual components, as well as the mechanics, limiting the player from certain outcomes due to previous choices. The story of *Disco Elysium* is influenced from the history of the USSR and the post-Soviet era, especially with the writers originating from a country of such a background (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 19). Furthermore, one of the creators of *Disco Elysium* wrote in the *Disco Elysium Art Book* that they follow Marxist ideas of individuals being shaped by their material conditions and historical context, that can be described as historical materialism, and is also seen as a pointed approach to the story throughout the game (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 21).



Figure 1. The first scene of the game

The game itself is classified as a role-playing video game (RPG), putting the player into the role of a detective with alcohol-induced amnesia from an isometric point of view. Through this setting, the player is forced to investigate their surroundings to comprehend the world that they have been put into. Furthermore, the game features micro-reactivity, as even small events get brought up later by characters and some items may find themselves useful much later than they are found, offering a detailed setting for the player to be fully immersed so much that they feel like their minds are being read (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 15). This allows for exploration through the usage of storytelling and environmental narrative building, as settings change with the developing story. Starting the game, the player is forced to assign points to certain skills, with the main four being Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics. There are a total of 24 sub-skills, 6 for each of the main ones, that add onto the approach to which the game will unfold (figure 2). The skills are, however, an active component of the game, as they actively speak to the main character (player) giving an introspective view on the events unfolding (figure 3).

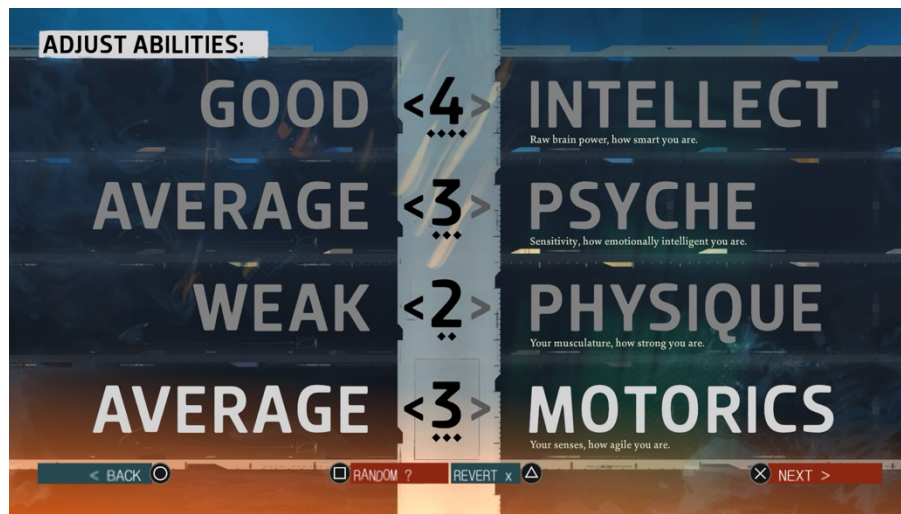


Figure 2. Abilities and skills



Figure 3. Example of a skill check

Another aspect that Disco Elysium presents the player with is the mechanic of chance by rolling the dice as a skill check, a feature that is commonly used in Dungeons and Dragons based games. Moreover, the game's combat is almost non-existent, relying on skill checking and luck using the dice mechanic, an unusual feature for a role-playing game (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 11). With an intricate approach to storytelling, art, and uniqueness of the usage of mechanics, Disco Elysium set itself apart from other games in the same branch of genres.

The storyline of the game spans over 10 days, putting the player on a time limit. As an alcoholic lieutenant of the local police force trying to investigate a murder behind a hostel garden, the player is thrown into a world of desolation, filled with memories of a previous revolution that has failed its

inhabitants and desolated the remainder. The few that remain are non-playable characters (NPC's) with a rather pessimistic view on life, filled with ideological viewpoints shaped by their own material conditions. As aforementioned, since the main character wakes up with no memory of previous events, it is up to the player to explore and find out who they are even playing as. The main character, whose identity is unknown in the beginning, is later in the game revealed to be Harrier (Harry) DuBois, a lieutenant double-yefreitor (meaning twice refused the position of captain) of Revachol Citizen Militia of Precinct 41, with a history of heavy alcoholism and drug use, who suffers from a serious case of amnesia, now assigned to a case to solve the murder of a man who was hanged behind the main hostel in Martinaire – Whirling-in-Rags. Martinaire is described as the seaside district of Revachol, one of the cities on the isola (continent) by the name of Insulinde, in the world of Elysium (Novitz, 2021, p. 2). In trying to solve the murder, he is assigned a partner named Kim Kitsuragi, a lieutenant of Precinct 57, who can be described as a level-headed and rational individual, antithesis of his unusual and unstable partner Harry. Throughout the 10 days of the investigation, there are themes of politics, religion, socio-economic struggle, and revisionist ideas that are discussed with the NPC's, giving an insight to the player to the core of Martinaire, how it operates and breathes as one of the main frontlines of the previous revolution. One of the main points of conversation is the strike of the dock workers union that is tied to the murder. The themes of conversations also reach points of personal introspection of the main character Harry, as he is trying to figure out his own personality, past, and future. With the help of the skills chosen, Harry is given a special insight into the world around him, tying it to his past, thus serving as a point of discovery of the character and the way that the player has shaped him up to be.

With the themes discussed, the game has caught the attention of many researchers, as a new and unique project from an indie studio, filled with academic phrasing and theory. As such, there is much to choose from in terms of analysis of the game. The Baltic Screen Media Review dedicated an issue specifically to the game in 2021, providing different approaches and analyses of the game, starting with Ozimek (2021) as she provides interviews of Estonian game developers and their view on how the game impacted the Baltic game industry. Following that, Gekker and Joseph (2021) discuss how the studio ZA/UM criticizes Western values and employs leftist language through their game and interactions with the fanbase, the state of the video game industry, and the impact of the game reaching worldwide audiences. In their study they view at how the studio asked for fans to translate the game into multiple languages to reach more audiences around the world, not wanting to employ professional translators, as well as having a 'working class update' for the game that optimized it for hardware that could not run it beforehand for the same reason. Moreover, Novitz (2021) looks at the narrative of the game through the

lens of a gothic novel, employing literary dissection of events and text. In addition, it has been the subject of a philosophical breakdown by Kłosiński (2021), McKeown (2021), and Spies (2021), each having a different approach to the theme of the analysis, as Kłosiński (2021) argues how the character is built through the usage of hermeneutics. McKeown (2021) approaches the game from a post humanist point of view, analyzing the way the game illustrates humans. Ending the philosophical approaches, Spies (2021) uses Albert Camus' theory of the absurd as a basis of analysis, researching the existentialist themes of *Disco Elysium*. The issue is thus ended with a critical media analysis, more specifically a game studies-based approach from Vella and Cielecka (2021) wherein they argue about how the game treats the sense of self with the help of theories of ludic and virtual subjectivity. With this issue and many more articles, *Disco Elysium* proves its worth in being a subject of research.

2.3. Ideology

Ideology, on the surface, might just be defined as an individual's political viewpoint of all aspects of life. While this stands as true, there is a need to properly distinguish what ideology is, how it is built up, and how it is administered. The philosopher Antonio Gramsci offers many conceptualizations of ideology, starting with it being a tool of the class in power over others, as it focuses on hegemonic ideas of the dominant groups (Woolcock, 1985, p. 4). Moreover, ideology serves as a driving force of society, existing in a material matter through practice, as it produces subjects, and in turn makes them take action (Mouffe, 1979, p. 14). As ideology serves as a tool of action and identity, it is also an apparatus of oppression, as grouping a class into ideologies serves in the dominant groups' interest (Ramos, 1982). As this stands, it establishes ideological matters as a form of foundation for society, as certain events, teachings, actions, and more, only happen because of such matters. Furthermore, ideology can be found in everything, as the power structures prevail in one's everyday decisions and actions. The underlying messages reminding one of their positions in society are found even in menial moments, as they are surrounded by the structure set in place by those in power of a higher class than oneself (Mouffe, 2014). Thus, this constant reminder of one's position starts to shape itself as the reality one is set in with no chance of change. Knowing one's place in society, in the image of the one projected by the dominant social forces, gives one the ability to conform and follow structural ideas, positioning oneself as a member of society (Ramos, 1982, p. 2-4).

One of the more prominent philosophers interested in defining ideology and discourse, Louis Althusser, claims that ideology is a lived experience, for which individuals are defined by the social structures in place (Althusser, 2010, p. 5). Thus, the social structures in place are defined as the

ideological state apparatuses such as the institution of family, church, political parties, and the likes of such (Leopold, 2013). These ideological state apparatuses shape one's reality from the beginning of their existence, starting with family as an institution. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977) by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, family is the child's introduction to designating certain roles or objects to their parents, the first formation of a relation according to its desires. Moreover, they claim of an individual being oedipalized as a complete submission of oneself to the structural system in place. As formerly mentioned, other scholars see this as ideology in itself, yet Deleuze and Guattari (1977) claim it to be an existing part of consciousness that replicates these societal functions without resistance. These two can be combined together, wherein the state of oedipalization is the state of one's formation of ideology and externally one self's identity. Through this identification, they perform certain actions based on what state actors provide them to be the norm for their sort of situation. As Althusser claims, ideology demands of one to be responsive to their existence and the conditions put in place, ensuring they meet them (Leopold, 2013, p. 14-19). Thus, they further reproduce the same societal structures, ideologically shaped by the material subjects they are surrounded with.

Building upon this idea that ideology is found in every material subject, video games as such serve as an example of this, carrying the influence of social, cultural, and economic importance (Cassar, 2013, p. 9). Moreover, games as such are carriers of historical and cultural circumstances, thus offering a window into the happenings of the world through the eyes of the developers and writers. One example of this is *Irrational Games'* Bioshock trilogy (2007- 2013), that Lizardi (2014) dissects as games that involve components of ideological and historical material of real events but with elements of fiction. As such, the game studies subsection of academia is still growing in the analysis of games as products of ideology, as earlier works focus on mostly American-centric games. Expanding on Althusser's theory of ideology as a shaping tool of society according to their condition (Leopold, 2013, 14-19), additional interest falls at understanding where the developers and writers of games come from, who they are financed by, and who tests their games. All these factors go into the ideological view of games, as knowing these factors allows for an advanced understanding of their material and form of play. Moreover, understanding that games are made by individuals that are engulfed in ideological ideals by their surroundings, they replicate existing hierarchical and systemic rules in games, creating their own ideological worlds (Bulut, 2021, p. 3). Even though they might exist in a virtual sphere, their impact on players, as well as their makers, is of significance.

2.4. *Games as projections of developers*

The gaming world has no shortage of political agendas portrayed through narratives and mechanics, thus as a visual culture it presents the viewpoints of the developers themselves, most commonly as being of a domineering class group (Murray, 2017). Furthermore, in the chapter by Murray (2017), it is argued that games reflect the imperialist world structures, seeing as the most popular themes of games tend to be colonialist, the main objective being to take over and conquer. This line of thought stems from a historical materialist view of Western imperialism and its consequences on today's society.

In their book, *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009, p. 171-181) take the examples from Grand Theft Auto (GTA) franchise as games that do not take ideology seriously yet use it as a device of satirizing the status quo and its ideological viewpoints. In the instance of GTA, the main point of satire are prevalent issues in the United States of America, and the ideological viewpoints surrounding them. In their critique of the franchise, they find a likeness to the main character of the fourth installment of the GTA franchise and the founders of Rockstar, the company behind GTA and others. The founders of Rockstar come from a rich British family and were provided with a private education, later emigrating to New York to pursue their careers. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009, p.171-172) put this in comparison with the main character of GTA IV, Niko Bellic, who also emigrates to the Rockstar version of New York called Liberty City, under different circumstances than its creators. Bellic is presented in the game as a Bosnian immigrant that has escaped war-torn Bosnia from previous crimes that he committed there and joined his cousin in America. This shows the difference between the two stories and where the people behind them come from. In his essay of critique of *Games of Empire* (2009), Bulut (2021, p. 4-5) argues that it is important to note that the developers of GTA are predominantly white men, with their performance of white masculinity, desiring to offend everyone equally because of cynic idealism, an approach that views everything as equally bad and worth of ridicule, no matter of any cultural backgrounds. In addition, he argues that since developers are predominantly white men, they get to set the standards of what and who is acceptable to offend. As such, they act as gatekeepers in the industry, as their core audience tends to be of the same disposition. While trying to push the boundaries of neutrality and innovation, these breakthroughs come at the expense of people who are not the majority in the circles of development (Bulut, 2021, p.8). In game development this is exceptionally heightened as the industry still finds itself pandering to men, or more specifically white men (Johnson, 2018).

Moreover, in his study, Bulut (2021) conducted interviews with a group of white developers to assess their thoughts on the production. Through this study, the resulting point is that game developers

see their jobs as an escapism from the real world, finding joy setting free their imaginary worlds and unfulfilled or unattainable desires. Bulut, through a post-colonial and psychoanalytical lens, addresses this by comparing the such to 19th-century colonialist explorers, as they search for new imaginative lands to conquer, colonize, and spread their viewpoints to. This establishes a point that game production is full of subjectivity, as the developers create these imaginative worlds with a preconceived notion of what the Real world is or who the Other is, as they take mastery over technology, setting their ideological viewpoints as the ideal or norm. In addition, a sense of orientalism arises as the portrayals of the Other are perverse – stereotypical or villainized in a particular sense (Said, 1995). Othering as a process is what happens when developers give space for everyone to be ridiculed, finding escape in their cynicism, as a saving grace against criticism.

An instance of the direct influence of imperialist structures is through an online first-person shooter game called America's Army (2002) made by the U.S. Army to recruit young people, that was also free to play (Squire, 2006, p. 2). Through this example, there is a direct influence of real-life events being put in a game to give an impression on individuals to join armed forces. As a simulation of the real, it is also a falsified view of warfare as presented by the U.S. Army to be desirable by potential recruits. Games themselves offer a capsulated world, while showing real objects, are not proper representations of reality, yet a limited experience of what is given to one through code, design, and storyline (Squire, 2006, p. 2-3). Moreover, Johnson (2018) argues that games as such are a result of military fundings, promoting a culture of war and combat. These encapsulated worlds in a box are made within restricted boundaries of code, giving the player a limited access to storylines, illusory multiple-choice options that are coded to play out in the way it was envisioned from the beginning text.

2.5. History and its influence on developers

In line with the aforementioned concept of ideology, there is a need to address how historical and contemporary events manifest themselves in games, with either direct or subtle references to them. Replication of history is not a novel concept, as historical events are reproduced not only in fiction but also in real life. As this circular motion of events keeps making rounds, there is bound to be inspiration found somewhere, especially with events close in proximity to individuals, which is something that the Disco Elysium developers also mention in the art book dedicated to the game (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 23). While taking inspiration from historical events, Disco Elysium takes a different approach to other historically inspired games. The game takes references to events and people and fictionalizes them in a

fashion that fits the narrative of the story, such as the historical figure of Karl Marx being named Kras Mazov in the game, adorning similar looks and being presented as the father of communism (figure 4).



Figure 4. Karl Marx reference with Kras Mazov

When directing attention to the intentional usage of historical events and implications, there is the term used by scholars called ‘deployment’. Deployment is used when there is a point trying to be made by using historical, political, or cultural traits that may or may not be conscious decisions made by developers (Metzger & Paxton, 2016). The reason for this is the cultural and material conditions that shape an individual through their environment. Knowing this to be the case for film and literature, there is a difference found in video games. Through the playing of a game, the player is faced with options and finds their own pace through the game’s duration. With this, there is not a fully strict timeline of events, as the players themselves oversee setting how they want to experience the game. This notion of input and response is called dynamic interactivity, as the development of the story is in the hands of the player (Metzger & Paxton, 2016). As players continue to interact with the content, they create their own events and stories, within the limits that the game itself gives. This gives for a layer of immersion into the event, that cannot fully be provided through formerly addressed formats such as literature and film (Metzger & Paxton, 2016). In addition, games such as the subject of this research can be seen as ones that provide counterfactual approaches to historical data, as they are personal retellings of popular history from the perspectives of developers, thus challenging hegemonic historical beliefs (Apperley, 2018, p. 6). Once interacting with the game, players accept the notion that they are part of the false production of events and data, as seen through the developers' ideological lens, not necessarily having to subscribe to such ideologies to play the game (Apperley, 2018, p. 6).

For this reason, games possess the ability to immerse an individual into an ideological world shaped by developers, designers, and writers (Squire, 2006, p. 2-3). These worlds are thus presented to players as extensions of the people who create them, creating an illusory gateway to the environments and minds of their creators. This is furthered by the communities of fans that the games amass, as they contribute to the narrative building of the game through further work like fan art and fanfiction, and more. Thus, comes the creation of affinity spaces, as places of open conversation between fans to discuss not only the game, it the context behind it (Hartman et al., 2021). In the context of *Disco Elysium*, it has brought upon a great discussion in the fan circles, not only about the game's content. In addition, the fan circles are mostly comprised of fans that follow political content, thus having political discussions of their own, reminiscent of those from the game.

2.6. Narrative agency and ideological worlds

As formerly stated, video games are ideologically shaped worlds by their designers, developers, and writers (Bulut, 2021, p. 4). Knowing as much, there is the question of whether these imaginary worlds have a direct impact on the players themselves as they live through these worlds for hours on end. Immersing themselves in embodying the main character of a world imagined by individuals exposes the player to an ideological world and thus influences their decisions and creates their new moral system based on the rules set. In finding their way around the game world, players learn the culture and system of it, adapting the game's culture to function as a part of it adequately.

The concept of agency is one that can be found in the works of scholars when talking about the influence of video games on an individual as they go through the process of integration into the gameplay with the initial introduction of limits and controls. Agency is mentioned in the process of how the players interact with the controller, thus setting their own control over the linearity of the story (Garite, 2003, p. 3). Building on that, agency in gaming can also be seen from a narrative perspective of the player having the chance to manipulate how a game's story is developing (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 2) The inputs given from the player to the game via the controls are translated to the screen, or the character in control of the player, giving a sense of agency to the player as they get to set their own pace to the original storyline, giving the feeling of uniqueness to their playthrough. Moreover, having in mind that games are a sequence of spectacles and actions keeping the player engaged, their immersion in the unreal ideologically laden world is only further emphasized when given such a feeling of agency over their actions (Garite, 2003, p. 4). Following Althusser's idea of interpellation, Garite (2003, p. 5) expands on the idea of agency in games as players get immersed in the game to such an extent, that their own original

thoughts and motoric functions are replaced by the ones from the game (or more closely the developers, writers, etc.), unknowingly. With all of this in mind, while the players themselves may have a degree of agency in the way they approach the game, ultimately, it is up to them immerse themselves in the game with repetitive actions and spectacles. Bodi and Thon (2020, p. 3-4) differentiate four types of player agency, starting with the spatial-explorative agency that is composed of the player's ability to move around and explore the game's world. Secondly, the temporal-ergodic agency is comprised of components that regulate how the player interacts with the game as a system. Thirdly, configurative-constructive agency gives the player the ability to customize their character and change elements in the game world. Finally, narrative-dramatic agency is made of components that control the player's impact on the storyline. These four elements of agency exist simultaneously and serve as a denominator of establishing the degree of agency in a game and the impact it has on narrative (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 10).

2.7. Narrative and game mechanics

Narrative building in video games in recent years has evolved into one that can be compared to the likes of films and books, as the industry catches up, producing even movies and TV shows based on games. The ever-expanding building of narratives also provides the player with an evolving storyline based on their decisions or gameplay approach; they dictate how the environment is shaped (Jenkins, 2004, p. 4). Actively participating in a game and following the storylines presented allows the player to immerse themselves in a specific world of set rules that they subscribe to, recognizing their agency and the extent of it (Domsch, 2013, p. 41-42). Player agency is thus related to the mechanics of the game, as they dictate how the player is using their agency, and how they are allowed to exist in the world of the game they play.

Furthermore, the work of Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) differentiates two types of design strategies, with the first being a narrative texture spread through the interactive details, and the second combining narrative with interface design focusing on interactivity. Focusing on the latter, interactive narrative focuses itself on game mechanics as a means of communication. As such, game mechanics are used as interactions of players with the game within the structured rules of the game (Dubbelman, 2016). Moreover, narrative in the game is followed by traits that build it up into a false reality, starting with the characters themselves, as they need to visually be interesting and have a personality to which the player can easily identify and transcribe traits to (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012, p. 4). This usually means that they have an end-goal (that is also potentially the end goal of the game) and a personality that is driven to succeed. In addition, the game needs to have an adequate story world, or the positioning of how time

moves, and space interacts with the characters. Narrative is also supported by emotion, as bits like the music and believable characters add onto the experience of the game world as the players reality at the given moment, evoking a sense of emotionality in them. What is more, the usage of narrativized interface allows for a major focus on narrative interlaced in interactivity, as the player is given options of decisions to make that directly impact the story, giving for an immersive factor and a need to progress further to develop it (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012, p. 4). As these narrative structures are created, the player is thus subject to take proper action and follow the rules of the game to achieve the end goal as it is intended (Waern, 2012, p. 4).

In his book, Alexander Galloway starts with describing what a game is, ending with a conclusion that it is an action-based medium with deep historical and material influences that create it, straying away from basing it on interactivity (Galloway, 2006, p.1-3). As they are action-based, the two main types of actions in games are machine actions and operator actions that unify once performed by both the player and machine. Moreover, those actions are defined as gamic actions, removing themselves from real life and happening in the space occupied by the game. The two different spaces that gamic actions occupy are diegetic and nondiegetic. As defined by Galloway (2006, p. 6-8), diegetic spaces are those that exist within the game world, including the narrative, characters, events, and more, while nondiegetic spaces are the external parts of narrative that connect to the act of the gameplay, such as pressing start, pause, accessing the menu, and the heads-up display (HUD). Moreover, there is a difference between diegetic machine and operator acts, as the machine acts can be seen as ones that happen without input from the operator (idle animation, cutscenes, etc.), and the diegetic operator acts are interactions within the game world, such as moving the character (Galloway, 2006, p. 12, 22). In addition, nondiegetic operator acts are those that happen outside of the narrative, yet contribute to it, actions executed by operator for the machine to receive, such as configurations of brightness, inputs, and more. These actions cannot be predicted by the machine, thus defined as nondiegetic (Galloway, 2006, p. 12). There is another differentiation in what actionable and nonactionable objects serve for the game, keeping in mind that they are subject to change throughout the duration of the gameplay. Actionable objects are found in games in many forms, be it doors, keys, NPC's, buttons, and more serving as something to examine or use (Galloway, 2006, p. 24). They are sometimes highlighted by the HUD as interactable, thus easily identifiable by the player. Nonactionable objects are usually objects of the game that exist in the space, such as inert scenery, that are created in the process of designing the game's levels (Galloway, 2006, p. 24). These are formal elements that create the game, and as such serve as the basis of understanding how it operates and serves the player.

Another element of narrative building pertains to the environmental aspect of games, as through the components that build up the game world the player gets to experience. The concept of environmental storytelling in the context of video games signifies two things, namely the first is that the narrative shapes the environment and through its navigation there is a building of the narrative sequence. Secondly, it is on the player to gather pieces of the story with an interpretation of objects and events that happen in the game world (Fernández-Vara, 2011, p. 3). With these narrative elements and mechanics, there is a chance to expand on the textual understanding of the game. An element such as environmental storytelling serves to give a detailed view into how the story has progressed, especially with a game such as *Disco Elysium* that does not have concrete levels yet changes with the time passing in-game. Additionally, it is there to back up the narrative as a visual experience for the player to create their own character identity through it (Fernández-Vara, 2011).

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains how the research will be conducted with two qualitative analysis methods. For starters, it gives reason to why qualitative methods will be used, and the research design will look. Moreover, it describes how data will be collected for this study and why it is a mixed method study using both close reading and formal analysis of gameplay to answer the main question of the study, assessing the credibility of such choices. Furthermore, through operationalization it is explained how key concepts from the theoretical framework will be employed in the analysis. That is followed by explaining the sampling method, and finally a look into researcher positionality, and validity and reliability of the research itself.

3.2 Research design

This research is interested in finding the intricate ways in which developer positionality can be an important aspect of video game development, as the ideological positionality and material conditions determine the way themes are discussed, approached, and presented. For this reason, the choice to adapt a qualitative research method was deemed the most appropriate. Qualitative analysis concerns itself with an individual's perception of a topic, acknowledging that it will be subjective rather than objective (Silverman, 1997, p. 13). Keeping that in mind, this research thus will address the research question with a subjective point of view, as described more in detail in the following.

To adequately address the research question posed, the approach to use for proper analysis is to use the methods of close reading and formal analysis of gameplay. With the help of close reading, there is a possibility to approach the text of the game with an understanding of contextual circumstances, such as its writer's perspective, choices, and knowledge of the subject. Analysis of text uses the different areas of expertise such as humanities and social sciences subjects as tools of uncovering the meaning of the text (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 8-10). Coupled with the formal analysis of gameplay, the extensive and intricate approach to the game gives a better chance of answering the research question, as it calls for the knowledge and understanding of the game itself, and its mechanics. An analysis such as this looks at games as compositions of inspirations from other works, trying to find connections and patterns in them (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 8-10). In the further text, there will be a description of these analyses with an understanding of how data was collected using such methods.

3.3. Data collection & Sampling

With close reading research, there is a need to approach the text with an extensive understanding and care to manage the meaning hidden behind the text (Brummett, 2019, p. 4). In addition, it provides an introspective look into the original author's positionality in terms of their sociocultural viewpoint. As discussed in the chapter by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011, p 12-13), close reading of games in particular demands of the researcher to deeply immerse themselves in their work, and not approach the game in a purely critical manner but rather maintain their identity as a gamer, having both stances simultaneously active through the gameplay. As aforementioned, looking into the game as a product of ideology, the close reading will provide an analysis of the historical and cultural influences upon which the game has been built. Furthermore, taking the approach of a close reading comes with the understanding of the researcher having a relationship with the medium and the approach they take researching it, while trying to maintain the positionality of a naive reader (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 12-13). This structuralist approach to text seeks comparison to existing materials to try to reveal the developer's original meaning and inspiration for game creation (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 11-12).

Researching a game such as *Disco Elysium*, which in total has over a million words in text, proves itself difficult as digital games generally pose a challenge because of their size, constant engagement with differing mechanisms, and indeterminacy, meaning each player will experience the game according to the path they take (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 9-10). Keeping in mind the length of the text and its underlying meaning is of great importance when considering the limits of this research. For this research, the main method of sampling used was non-probability purposive sampling as the main objective is to discover the representation of ideological stances used by developers through the game and its characters. Through purposive sampling, there is an understanding that the researcher has knowledge of the subject matter, focusing on specific elements that serve to answer the research question at hand (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 5-6). As the game functions on a mostly narrative and dialogue basis, the unit of analysis is the game itself, as all of the elements that build it and its context are being used to analyze it properly. Thus, the textual data for the close reading was acquired by recording the gameplay, focusing on text that addresses political and cultural issues within the game.

The game was played on PlayStation 4, providing a bit of difficulty with recording the gameplay, yet a solution was found with the help of PlayStation Remote Play application and the Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) as a recording device. Alongside the recordings, a gaming diary was used to note down moments of importance to the analysis. The expected amount of completion of the game was only once,

as the game's length provides difficulty to complete multiple times to establish comparisons in approaches. The game's main mission run time is around 23 hours until completion, and accounting for also completing most of the side missions, the game turned out to take about 35 hours to finish. While this might pose a bit of difficulty, due to previous knowledge of the game, there is no stage of learning how to play the game. This eliminates possible additional hours of getting used to the game and its system of rules.

The gameplay recordings were categorized into sections according to the dates they were played on and later categorized by parts of the story relevant to the concepts in question. The diary was used to keep track of impactful conversations, game mechanics used for events, and to write down characters, their attributes, and potential ideologies that they represent or brandish. Creating a repository for the data collected will thus allow for an easier approach to transforming the concepts mentioned in the theoretical framework into tangible arguments for answering the research question. Moreover, going from the theoretical framework's concepts, these excerpts of text were divided into four different categories of political ideologies mentioned in the game. Other text that is deemed as unfit or irrelevant was discarded. Furthermore, due to an interest in the developer's perspective, it is important to also note how these ideologies are represented through text. This is another aspect to keep in mind as, if there are differences in approaches to ideologies and the overall gameplay, it must be noted down to answer the research question of developer positionality in creating text.

As the researcher had previous knowledge of and experience playing the game, this research was not a first-time playthrough but rather an experienced play. Familiarity with its contents and gameplay mechanics might be of use, as the game is not that of a traditional standard, being heavy with text and having mechanics that are unique to it (such as skills that converse with the player as though breaking the fourth wall). However, having familiarity might come at the cost of having a preconceived notion of what is to come, abandoning the element of surprise or novice that becomes of use during a formal analysis of gameplay, focusing on one's own subjective view (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 28-29). This also comes with a difference in attention, as a novice player might not be able to shift their focus on some details in the game, giving the expert player an advantage of being able to take a closer look into the text (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 11-12) Moreover,

3.4. Data Analysis

Moreover, the close reading of the text was paired with a formal analysis of gameplay from Fernández-Vara (2019) that entails critically approaching a game and not only reading it as text, yet employing an analysis of its context, formal aspects, and giving an overview of its content. The reason for this is to reflect on the process of playing *Disco Elysium*, having the research question posed. Understanding how the gameplay mechanics are paired with the narrative, gives a better outlook on what the developers deem worth implementing for an immersive experience of the game. Acknowledging the game's environment, character design, and mechanics in the context of the narrative adds to the analytical process of understanding the game (Fernández-Vara, 2019). In conducting a formal analysis of gameplay, there is a need to separate the focus of research into three sections, as suggested by Lankoski and Björk (2015), containing actions, components, and goals. The components are described as spatial items that indicate a game's environment, setting, and boundaries. Actions are defined as the translation of player input to game character movement or interaction, with the differentiation found in system actions that do not come from an input but rather from the system itself. Lastly, goals are what lead the gameplay, as they are the reason given to perform, thus resulting in rewards. While these components were used in the analysis, one of the current staples of game analysis is the approach taken by Fernández-Vara in her book *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2019) that has served as the main guideline for this research. Fernández-Vara (2019, p. 13-17) suggests three main components that build up a game analysis mentioned in the beginning of the section. She further explains each, as the context of the game is meant as the conditions that the game was produced and played in, including other materials that were objects of its inspiration or communities that it has inspired. The game overview provides the reader with who is the audience/players of the game in question, and what it is about through the analysis of its content, features, and unique factors. Formal aspects of a game are the foundations of it, rather, the system of rules and controls and its presentation to the player through the visuals. As such, these three components are the main objects of analysis, only to be further expanded on with the formerly addressed components.

To establish a proper analysis, the gathered data was divided post collection into the above-mentioned categories, with suggestions for where they could be put as they were noted down. The analysis is led by the experience of player-researcher dynamic with personal accounts being analyzed with the help of the theoretical framework. The above-defined version of ideology was thus adapted to both the game's storyline and the developer's approach to creating the story. Moreover, with the formal analysis from Fernández-Vara (2019) the game was properly dissected and described, highlighting the

content from the game that was deemed relevant to the research at hand. This will further be discussed by addressing how the developers present these characters with their names, visuals, dialogue options, and other components. With this, there is an easier understanding of how they view the manifestation of an identity that might not exactly exist fully in reality but serves only as a representation of their thoughts and ideological viewpoint. The addition of Lakonski and Bjork's (2015) approach to formal analysis served as a guidance in dissecting the formal elements, thus allowing for an easier way of categorizing elements and components according to their functions. To properly assess the narrative, the work of Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) was deployed to understand how game mechanics have an impact on the player's understanding of narrative.

3.5. Validity & reliability

Due to nature of the research, a mixed method of close reading and formal analysis of gameplay was deemed the most appropriate for the research question to be adequately answered. Pertaining validity and reliability, the subject of the research has been well documented with not only active play that was recorded but also through notes, establishing complete focus on the content and details seen. In addition, *Disco Elysium* has been the subject of analysis of previous research with the formerly mentioned *Baltic Screen Media Review* (2021) having a full issue dedicated to research connected to the game, giving proper amount of research to build own arguments on. Furthermore, this also gives for further establishment of the game's validity as the subject of an analysis. Moreover, as the only participant of this research is the researcher herself, there is a need to address the problem of positionality and bias. Going into this analysis, there are two types of interpretation of data as there are two types of data – personal diary recordings and recording of gameplay. The approach to diary entries will be taking a critical research paradigm approach, as I, the researcher, am analyzing my own experience of playing the game with a critical lens (Lin, 2015, p. 5). Additionally, for the data collected by recording the gameplay an interpretive research paradigm will be deployed as all that can be gathered is to be analyzed from the point of understanding of why and how it came to be (Lin, 2015, p. 5-6). Moreover, as there is previous knowledge of data, researcher bias might be of concern for this analysis, as objectivity is hard to achieve with a previously known subject (Baldwin et al., 2022, p. 3). This research does not involve other individuals than the researcher, there is no need for ethical concern. Furthermore, all the data involved in this research is publicly available and does not contain sensitive information. For this reason, there is no possibility of breaching ethical codes.

4 Analysis

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings and the results of the analysis conducted, divided into (to be decided) sections. I will start this chapter with a personal account of my experience of playing the game, thus allowing the reader to understand my process and how it affected me as an individual playing the game. This will be followed by the game overview of Disco Elysium following guidelines from Fernández-Vara (2019), with the description of the genre, diegetic controls, storyline, and political content from the game. In addition, the formal elements of the game will be explained and shown with the help of Fernández-Vara (2019) and Lakonski and Bjork (2015) through the nondiegetic and diegetic elements that make the game into what it is, such as actions, goals, and more. The last section goes into the context of the game, or more specifically the production process, the team behind it, and problems the game faced.

4.2. The experience of playing Disco Elysium

As briefly mentioned beforehand, I am a seasoned RPG player so personally it was not difficult to adapt to the system of Disco Elysium. Moreover, as this was my second time playing the game, I knew what to expect from this analytical approach to it. To the average person, there are two ways to explain the game. The short version would be saying that it is like reading or listening to an interactive audiobook. The longer version is what I will be explaining in the next paragraph.

This being my second playthrough still did not affect my relationship with the game much, as I was again entranced by its writing and stunning visuals. As the last time I played it was around 4 years ago, I forgot certain elements of the story, making the experience not feel tedious. Rather, as I played in my room, starting my playthrough at around 3pm every day, the day would pass without me noticing. The game would make me laugh and even cry, with certain parts of the story having deep introspective and existentialist moments that made me question even myself. As through a rollercoaster ride, I again, grew fond of Kim Kitsuragi, as his character provided both comfort and a moment of reason in times when the story would get crazy. In my diary I emphasize a moment that especially struck a chord within me as I felt extremely tense through the tribunal where the fate of the Hardie Boys was sealed, and Kim was almost shot by the opposing mercenary squadron. I did not want to fail a skill check to warn Kim of the shot that was coming his way, even putting the remaining points I had in the skill needed to do it, completely immersed into this false reality where I couldn't lose my partner (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012).

Moreover, playing as a communist was particularly fun, as the game would make fun of my choices. One of the funniest tasks that I even wrote down was smelling out to find out other communists to build 0.0002% of communism (figure 5). As I accepted the task, the last quote the Rhetoric skill says particularly made me laugh due to personally being a part of leftist circles, and failure being a common unifying factor that keeps on being repeated throughout the discourse (figure 6). The game does not ask for much knowledge of games in general, the only thing it asks of you as the player is to become a part of the story in your own way.

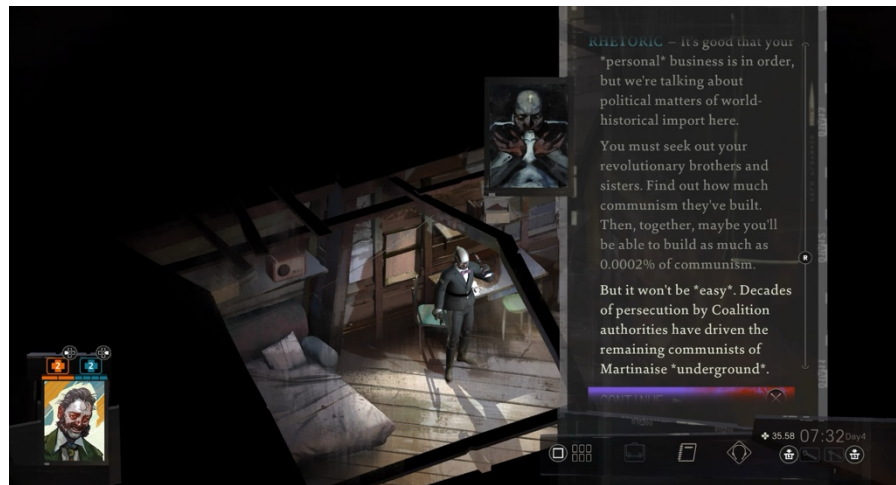


Figure 5. Communist task

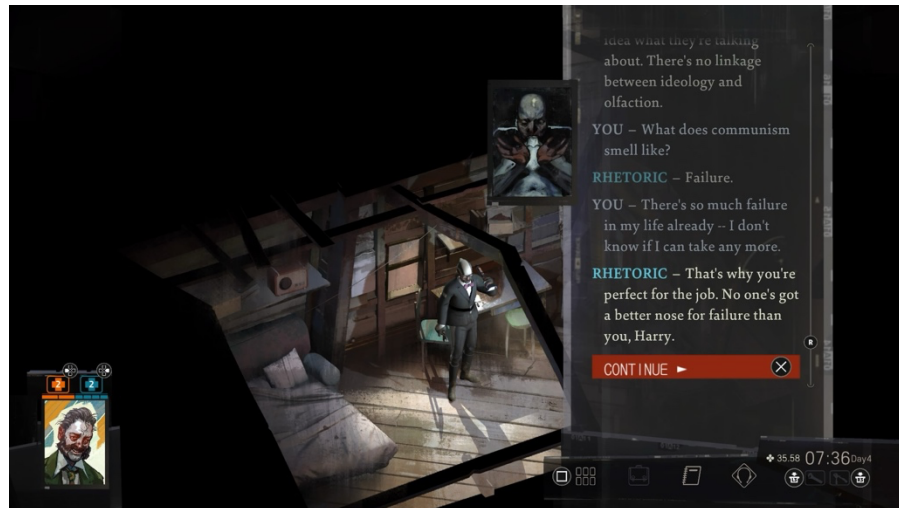


Figure 6. The smell of communism

Through the gameplay I identified with Harry more and more as the story progressed. I knew I had to give special attention and carefully digest the story, which made the experience of playing *Disco Elysium* more interesting, as I started to realize how much I missed 4 years ago. All the references to historical events, current problems, and making fun of fascists with some insider leftist jokes might have flown over my head before, but now as I was writing everything down and paying close attention, they are clear as day. Knowing that the game was made primarily in Estonia with the story based on works from the art collective of ZA/UM that grew up in the country was also an addition that made me identify with the game even more. For those more knowledgeable about the history of Estonia and its current status, the themes of a communist past and the hardships of a failed reinvigoration of its identity are easy to identify as inspiration throughout the game. As I am myself from Croatia, or former Yugoslavia, I share a lot of the sentiments with the developers, coming from a country that used to operate as socialist, taken over by foreign interventions and corrupt governments. As such, the familiarity added to my own immersion into the story and the world built around it, thus recognizing my own ideological position as a product of my environment and system (Althusser, 2010, p.5).

I went into the close reading of the game with the framework adapted by the works of Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) from their work on the process of close reading in video game analysis. In the context of *Disco Elysium*, the text is one of its main functions, as most of the game is spent reading or listening to the dialogue and explanations given by the many characters the player encounters. There are also descriptions of items and further details that stray from the usual format of the game, such as the item and task descriptions. Through playing the game, I was left with a sense of having read a novel, or rather a script as the names of characters are put next to the words they are saying, reminiscent of that of a play, as seen in figure 7. The said characters are adorned with character portraits that signify their status with the use of color and symbolism, as characters discuss that certain colors represent differing political alignments. Knowing who the artistic and literary influences of the game are, I paid close attention to dissecting the influences and how they are integrated in the game. As previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, acknowledging that the creation of games is an ideologically laced process in which creators replicate existing hierarchies and systems, served as an important aspect when examining the text (Bulut, 2021, p. 6-7). As such, the political identities of characters were significant to see how the creators of the world view them, as they take direct inspiration and names of them from real life, while taking their own spin on them and satirizing such serious themes (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, p. 171-181).

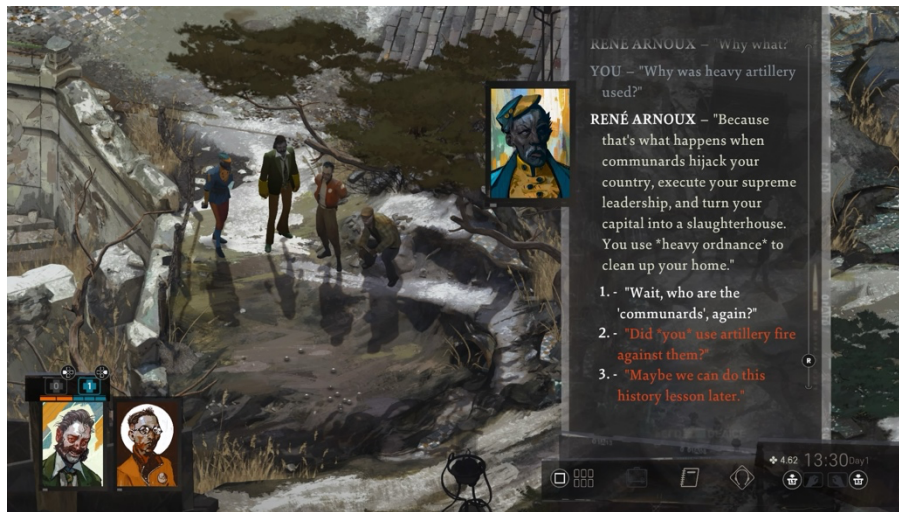


Figure 7. Rene's hatred of communists

With a previous knowledge of the main story of the game, I knew that it offers the player the ability to identify with certain political affiliations, but that the essence of the story remains the same. Moreover, I set into this analysis with the intention to explore as much as possible to learn more about the story, while also playing as a true believer in one of the political alignments. The reasoning for this is to properly analyze how the game presents each political alignment, tracing it back to their cultural backgrounds, uncovering developer positionality regarding the game. Taking back to the work of Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009), uncovering the how games can be products of the creator's own view of the world they inhabit, with preconceived notions of righteousness and hostility towards certain topics is one of the main aspects of this research. Ideology was deemed the most appropriate concept to use for this research, as its definition covers the basis of those main aspects, as it not only serves to describe an individual's political alignment, but also the role that the system has put on them as a citizen of its world (Ramos, 1982). As such, my reading of Disco Elysium was on the basis of ideology as the main concept, that was thus differentiated into four smaller concepts of the political alignments of the game world. In addition, emphasis was put on uncovering how the characters identify themselves, what their position is regarding the world, how others identified them, and how they are defined by the system of Elysium to grasp their ideological standing (Althusser, 2010, Leopold, 2013). Positioning itself as a game with counterfactual historical data, it serves as a personal retelling of history from the eyes of the creators (Apperley, 2018), and I went through the game viewing it as such.

Starting with my version of the main character, I chose to focus most skill points on intellect, with the expectation that it will produce the most amount of content for the analysis. Moreover, special

emphasis was put on the skills Rhetoric and Encyclopedia, as they are known to explain everything in detail with the additional provision of history (figure 8). Throughout my gameplay I adapted the role of communist cop, choosing to interact with characters with dialogue options that speak highly of the ‘communards’ that fought during the revolution, and lowly of the bourgeoisie that occupied Revachol after the commune fell (figure 9). Additionally, throughout the gameplay I shifted between being a Sorry, Superstar, and Art cop copotype, as I did not consciously make decisions pertaining to that part of characterization due it not being a part of political discourse of the game. The game offers additional categorization into different copotypes, as they pertain to a differentiation in dialogue options for the most part, like the options of ideology and give additional points to skills that will be further discussed below.

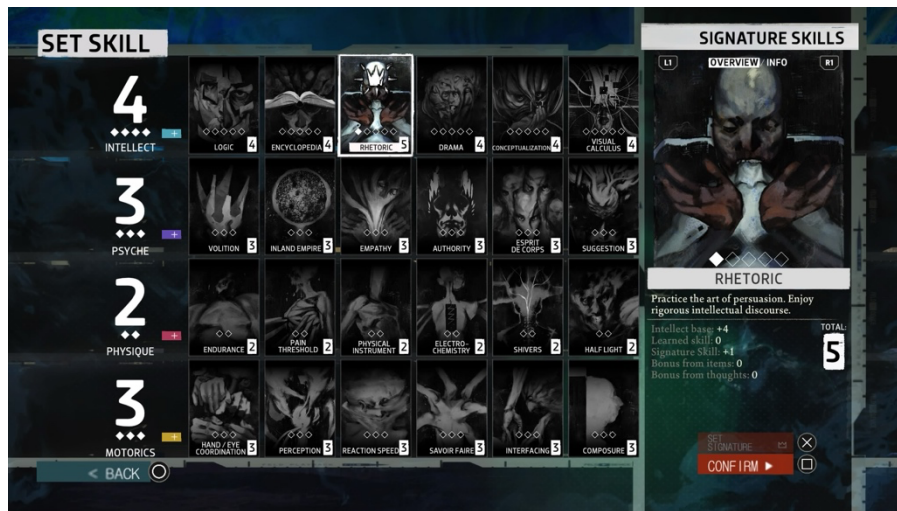


Figure 8. Rhetoric and other skills

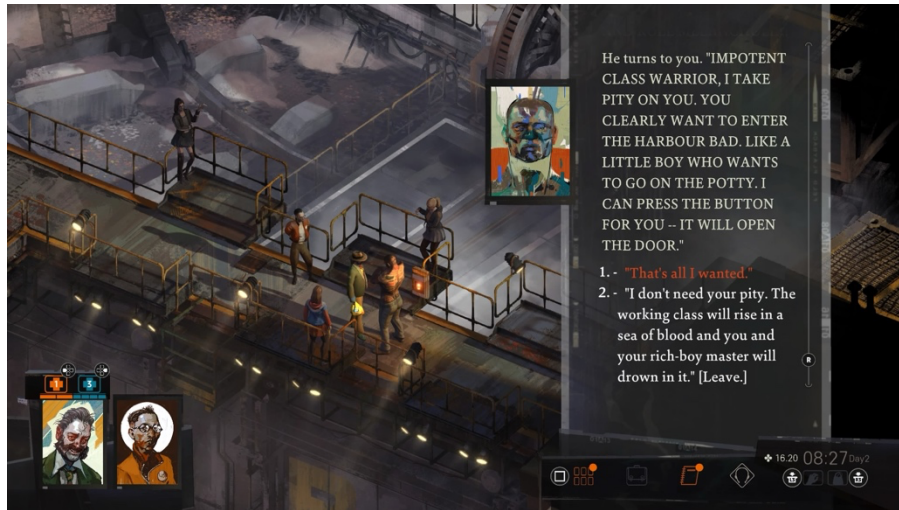


Figure 9. Interaction with Measurehead

4.3. The game overview

The genre of the game falls under the role-playing game (RPG) umbrella, as there are elements of playing as a character, adapting a role and operating on the level of the reality given, having the ability to choose which path to take (Deterding & Zagal, 2018, p. 8). As such, players perform a role given to them, fulfilling the tasks and living in the world of the game. In *Disco Elysium* the player fulfills the role of Harry DuBois, a lieutenant of the RCM, solving a murder in Martinaire, interacting with the world through the eyes of the main character. While having options to customize skills, and picking certain dialogue options, the freedom is limited by the game only allowing prewritten options as. Every possible outcome is already coded in the game, and every interaction is accounted for by the developers, though options lead to different outcomes depending on the situation with dynamic interactivity present throughout the gameplay (Metzger & Paxton, 2016). Players who are accustomed to the RPG genre, like me, can have an easier time getting adapted to the specific controls of the game, yet for novice players it might be hard to keep track of all the facets given. While the game is not that long for an RPG, it still has many qualities to constantly keep track of – such as the many types of skills, customizations, and items that can be used at certain times. Additionally, even for a seasoned RPG player, *Disco Elysium* is a new approach to the genre, having to take some time to get used to. For instance, the skills being personified essentially guiding the dialogue and serving as a monologue of the inner thoughts of the main character is not a common approach, as they are usually seen as additions that unlock certain dialogue options or locations. As such, this integration of skills as essentially additional characters of the game is quite

unconventional, yet a welcome addition. Or even the fact that there is basically no combat in the game, having the player rely on the dialogue to resolve conflict and unlock new locations is an unconventional aspect of it. Furthermore, adding onto the RPG genre, *Disco Elysium* is a particularly existentialist and politically oriented game. While it is not the first RPG to delve into such themes, it is the first to approach it directly, paying no mind to hide its political leaning and inspirations. To put it concisely, it is an existential political RPG, with elements of science fiction, that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Moreover, with the customization through the skills section, the player can involve themselves in additional tasks, thus also serving as limitations that push the player to find ways to solve the tasks by gaining more experience. The player can finish the game without completing additional tasks, but without a lot of the information gained the player does not get the full scope of the characters and the story. Referencing back to the point of the game having over a million words, the game encourages the player to continue trying to understand the world, or *Elysium*, that they have been thrown into. Additionally, as it is an open world game it allows the player to explore the small district of *Martinaise* without wasting time. The only interactions that waste time are interactions with characters and objects. The game encourages the player to read books to pass the time, knowing that some tasks are time based and that the player might not have anything else to do on that certain day of the investigation. Another limitation found in the game is the fact that the player is only given 10 days to uncover who the main culprit is of the murder that took place in *Martinaise*. As such, this motivates the player to try to do as much as is possible under the timeframe and complete the main task of the game, recognizing the amount of agency they are given in the space of the game within the rules set (Domsch, 2013, p. 41-42).

The core mechanic of the game consists of running around the imagined district of *Martinaise* and interacting with NPC's and objects, in the case of PlayStation mechanics – using the right stick to move around and left stick to show what is interactable, thus pressing X to interact with it, and using the same controls to pick dialogue options once interaction has been established. Those are the main actions that make up the core mechanic of the game. Less frequently used actions are opening the skills, tasks, map, and thought cabinet, which is done by pressing the square button, navigating through them with R2 L2, and R1 L1. The mechanics are described to the player by clicking the Option button on the controller with an illustration, and descriptions of the different components such as thoughts, tasks, and more as seen in figure 10. The PlayStation 4 port of the game does not differentiate itself from the others much, other than the usage of PlayStation controls. As the game is mostly based on dialogue, there are no specific

functions missing. Moreover, I am used to playing with a PlayStation controller, so there was no difficulty in memorizing the controls.

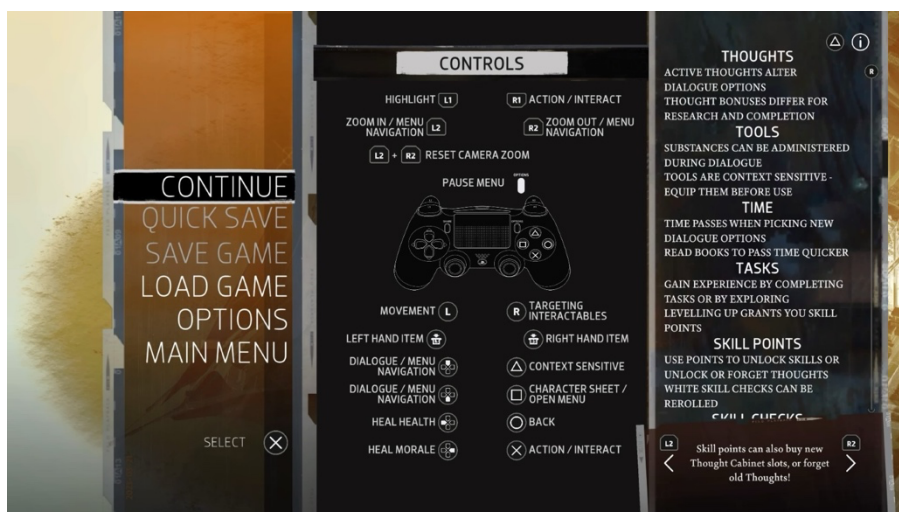


Figure 10. Playstation 4 controls

Furthermore, the exploration of the player is limited by only running around Martinaire, despite knowing about the existence of other districts in Revachol, and other isolas. The space of the game is thus contained in Martinaire, allowing the player to discover parts of it as they progress through the story. One example of this is how the other part of the district – the fisherman shacks and the church are available to unlock on the first in-game Wednesday (third day of the investigation), only then allowing the player to explore them, but leaving it up to the player to decide if they want to do it on that day or later (Jenkins, 2004, p. 4). Disco Elysium does not use levels as an indicator of how far along in the game the player is; it uses the story to track how close or far the player is, with components such as time and skills. Operating through the game, the characters are 3D models on a 2D background from an isometric perspective. To zoom in or out, the player uses L2 and R2 controls, allowing for a detailed or broad view of the space they are in. The closed spaces are surrounded by a black background (figure 11), allowing the player to only see what is given to them, while the outside open space is limited by hills, reeds, or water, yet indicating that there is a further space that is non-explorable. Obstacles as mentioned are there to limit the player's movement, but they also exist to challenge the player to gain certain skills to unlock areas. An example of this is the doors found on the balcony of Klaasje's room that require a certain level of the skill Pain Threshold to pass the skill check, thus opening the doors and unlocking the abandoned pinball machine production area, serving as communication between the player and the game that in order to continue the narrative they need to build up skill to unlock areas (Dubbelman, 2016).



Figure 11. Example of a closed off space in the game (the bookstore)

4.4. The history of Elysium

The story of Disco Elysium is embedded in the game, as the events that unfold are foreseen by the developers, and choices lead to story events that are already accounted for in regard to the progression of narrative. Moreover, all this information was mostly found through investing a lot of skill points into the Encyclopedia skill and thorough reading of the text given by items, characters, and skills. Moreover, starting with the game world's history gives an easier understanding of the game's main plot and will be the first part of this section.

As mentioned briefly before, the game takes place in Martinaise, a district of the city Revachol, on the island Calliou on the isola (continent) Insulinde. Throughout the game, Harry tries to understand where exactly he is and how this world operates in dialogue with other characters, as seen in figures 12 and 13. In trying to uncover his position in the world, he learns of the past and present issues, such as the revolution that took place in Revachol. Through conversations with characters such as The Measurehead, the player finds out about other civilizations of Elysium, namely the isolas of Seol, Mundi, Graad, Samara, Katla, and Iilmara. These are all created with real life locations in mind, as Graad is inspired by Eastern European culture, with one of its cities being named Yugo-Graad, and the character Racist Lorry Driver saying that he likes Yugo-Graad vodka, referencing Yugoslavia and vodka being a staple drink of many Eastern European countries.

The game provides history into how Insulinde came to be, as nations of Mundi were set on an expedition through the pale – a matter that is nothing yet absorbs everything into nothingness (anti-matter), on accords of Dolores Dei to colonize the lands. Dolores Dei is said to have been the ruler of the Mundi nation three hundred years before the setting of the game and is named as an innocence or an important political figure of Elysium, treated among the nations as a religious figure. She is also an important figure of moralism, a political alignment that believes in the preservation of humanity through democracy and progress. Moralism is quoted as the main political alignment in Insulinde and is enforced by the government system named the Moralintern. Additionally, the other political systems discovered throughout the gameplay are communism, fascism, and ultraliberalism (or just liberalism).

The Moralintern works in collaboration with the Coalition Government – an alliance body made up of foreign nations from the other isolas that intervened during the communist revolution in Revachol. The revolution is said to have started in Graad with the leader being Kras Mazov, the father of communism (or mazovianism) in Elysium. The revolution ended with millions of communists dead, and with the ideology of communism with the same fate. Fascists in the game are seen as followers of Franconegro, a predecessor of Dolores Dei who is named the innocence of militarism, who united peoples into nations and introduced the concept of réal (the currency used in game). Ultraliberalism is a historically newer political alignment in the story of Elysium, mostly advocates for a free market, and of belief that taxation is theft. Hated by both communists and fascists, ultraliberals have a tendency to not reveal their political alignment, which the player can see through the character of Joyce Messier (figure 14).

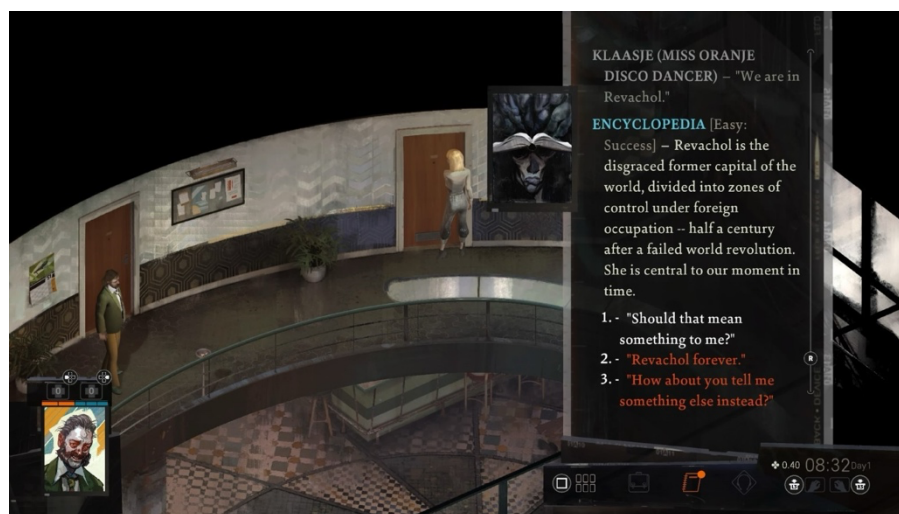


Figure 12. Introduction to Revachol

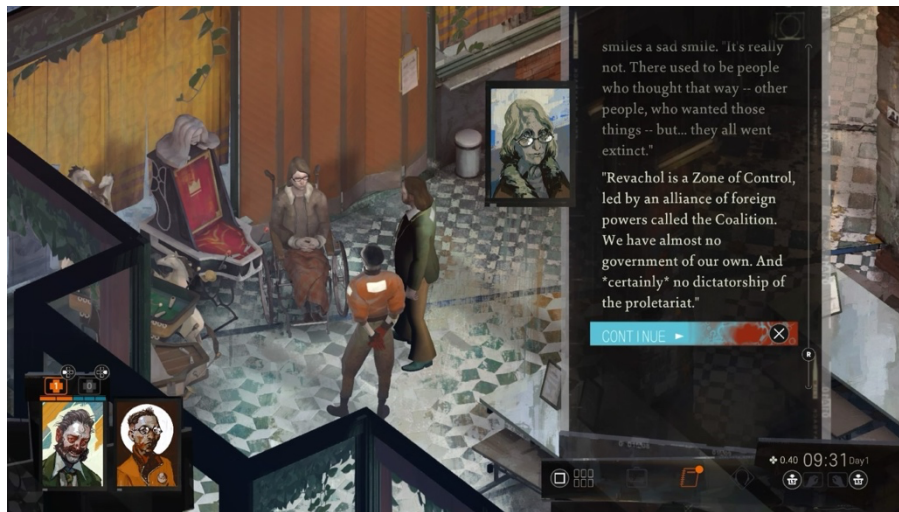


Figure 13. Lena the Cryptozoologist giving a reality check

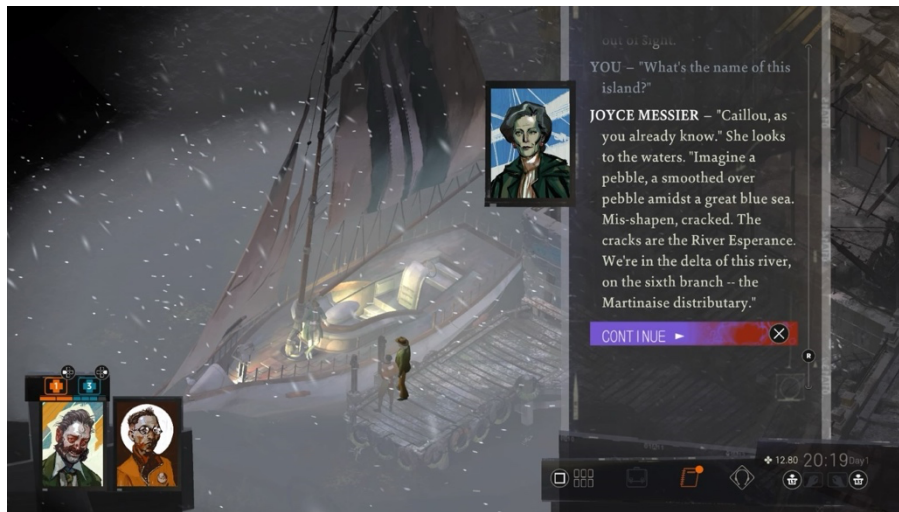


Figure 14. Joyce Messier providing more information

With this long description of the history of the in-game world, and its politics, the player is put in the middle of a strike by the dock union workers, and a counter protest by scab workers that have been paid by the Wild Pines Corporation that operates trade through the dock in Martinaise. In midst of this conflict lorry drivers are put on halt, as is the whole district as one of the only places that are still surviving are the Whirling-in-Rags hostel and cafeteria, the bookshop, Frittte kiosk, and the pawn shop. The district is full of history with bullet holes from the revolution still adorning its walls, and ghosts of former businesses haunting the Doomed Commercial Area, along with hidden communist bunkers. It is presented as an area forgotten by the rest of the world, yet for the player it is the introduction to Elysium. Through this, there comes an understanding of why the characters behave the way they do, as all of them are set in the same system but have served different ideological means that shaped them into their sense of

self through means of historical conditions, as the systems that they prescribed themselves to through their lived experiences (Althusser, 2010).

Moreover, throughout the gameplay if the player chooses to complete tasks that are not integral to the story, they get to meet NPC's and follow tasks to uncover more about them, and the history of Martinaire. As the story comes to a close, and Harry finds his identity again, the killer is revealed to be The Deserter, a character that was not a part of the open world of Martinaire, yet a Sea Fortress that was used by the communist during the revolutionary period. The Deserter is revealed to be Iosef Lilianovich Dros, who served on the side of communists during the revolution as a commissar, preserving the communist ideology among soldiers and citizens alike. As the Coalition started the massacre on communists at the end of the revolution, Dros deserted his position and hid, leaving him to be one of the only comrades alive in Martinaire. He hid in the Sea Fortress for the rest of his whole life, only sneaking out to the district for food and other necessities. Once discovered by the Claires, he was employed to assassinate the previous Union boss, and regularly killed individuals that went against his ideological point of view. He is visibly unstable and unwell once discovered, and digging to understand why he killed Lely reveals that he had a fixation on Klaasje, and that he couldn't bear to see him with her out of jealousy and Lely's political identity. Dros was still carrying his ideological identity that he was given from the times of the revolution, clinging onto his assigned role as a commissar and carrying out his duties well into his old age, rejecting the new system put in place by the Coalition Government making him a firm communist till the end (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977; Ramos, 1982).

While seemingly not as indulgent in the unreal, as the story unravels, the player is met with the realization that there are many paranormal aspects of Elysium, one being the Pale – described by the Insulidian Phasmid as a man-made anti-matter that will consume and destroy all forms of life (figure 15). One of the theories as to why Harry lost his memory is due to him interacting with the Pale that was found in the church behind the fisherman shacks. Moreover, the creature discovered by Harry and Kim at the end of the game – the Insulidian Phasmid give another element of the science fiction genre. The Phasmid is also revealed to be the reason for Iosef Dros' madness, as its influence has given him the persistence to be alive and preserve his ideological identity. As soon as the Phasmid leaves the scene, Dros is left in a catatonic state, as he is no longer under its influence, having his health catch up to his condition.

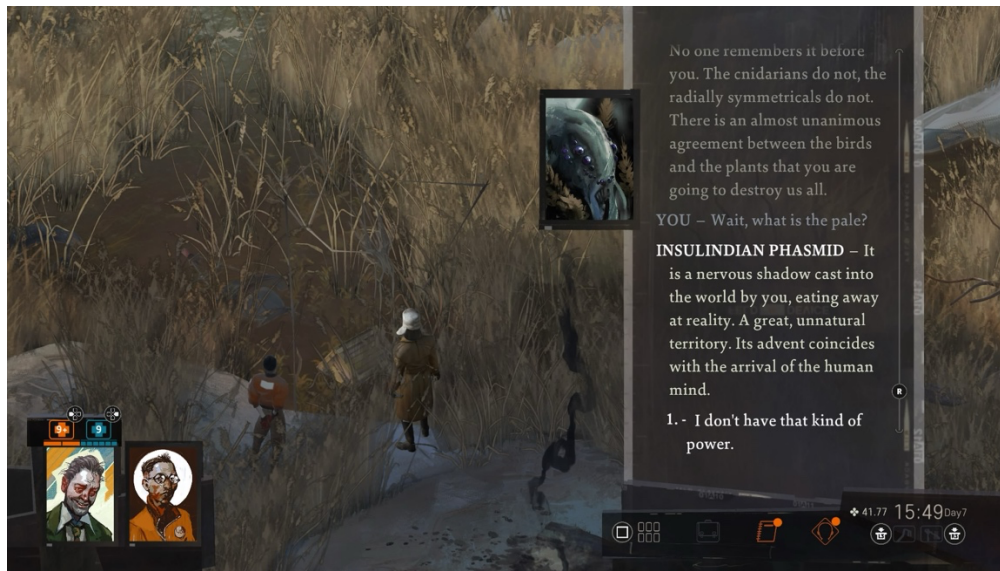


Figure 15. *Insulindian Phasmid describes the Pale*

4.5. *The ideology of Elysium*

As Harry is a member of the RCM, an extension of the Moralintern, it was interesting to see how him identifying with politics of communists was perplexing to other characters. This caused a juxtaposition of his character, serving the interests of the bourgeoisie while critiquing their actions in conversation to others. In the gameplay, I also made Harry adapt a feminist identity, choosing the dialogue options once presented the option (figure 16). These identifications were thus solidified in the thought cabinet, giving certain buffs or debuffs (depending on the thought). For example, the Mazovian Socio-Economics thought gives the character -1 Authority and -1 Visual Calculus but every time the player picks left-wing dialogue options they gain an additional 4 experience points. In talks with the character of Joyce Messier, the representative of the Wild Pines corporation, Harry finds out more about himself, yet contesting that Joyce herself needs to reveal more about herself that she isn't revealing. While Joyce can be seen as the most level-headed character of the game, and the one with the most answers, there is a reason as to why this is. She is self-aware of her position as a wealthy liberal on a yacht in one of the most poverty-stricken areas of Revachol, but doesn't offer much grievance towards its inhabitants, as she is only there to break up the strike of the Dockworkers' union. My version of Harry posed as antagonistic towards Joyce, making her reveal what she is, thus learning that she identifies as a liberal (figure 12). Throughout the game, there are not many liberals, since most of them are seen as rich opportunists by the people of Martinaise. For that reason, Joyce is the face of liberalism in the game, a

rich put together woman on a yacht breaking off a conflict due to her own interests and betraying the people of Martinaise, her actions are a reflection on her political views (figure 17).



Figure 16. Feminist choice

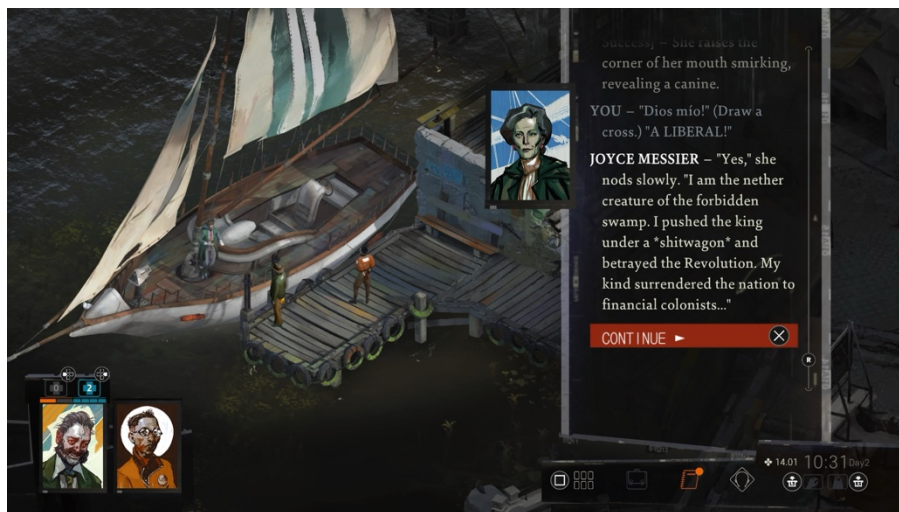


Figure 17. Liberalism

There are continuous explicit jokes on behalf of the ideologies, as mentioned, that served only as self-identifying traits to the NPC's reminiscing on what was before. In almost every conversation there would be mentions of the revolution, the failure of the past and current system, and the imminent complete desolation of not only Martinaise but the whole of Revachol. With the communist run, there was certainly a feeling of self-criticism coming from the writers that was especially present in the quest of trying to find other communists, yet only encountering two communist students that have secret reading group meetings in the abandoned attic of a housing complex (figure 18). Disappointed by the group not

being active fighters for the resistance, Harry leaves the two unimpressed, yet with a better understanding of other thinking styles of communism. Another communist character is the main culprit of the murder, Josef Dros, who seems genuinely shocked by Harry's radical worldview as a cop and a quasi-revolutionary thinker (figure 19). Dros is an interesting representation of communism as he still thinks of himself as a revolutionary fighter, even though he kills people from the sea fortress, hidden from the rest of the world. His position on the world has not changed since the revolutionary era, as the language he uses is of that period. Moreover, there is Cindy the Skull who is an anarcho-communist, living in a coal room and painting graffiti throughout the city with radical messages. Evrart Claire can be a part of this group, his position as a social democrat comes into question as, while he does help the union members, he risks their reputation by making them smuggle drugs as a part of union business. He exploits his workers for profit, albeit for the profit of the union and the district, there is a part that makes him a classic capitalist businessman. The only outlier is union member Call Me Mañana who agrees with Harry's communist sentiments yet rebukes the identification as one (figure 20). The communists are presented as defeated men, who love to argue about theory while not acting on their volition, or social democrats who still exploit the working class for their own gain.

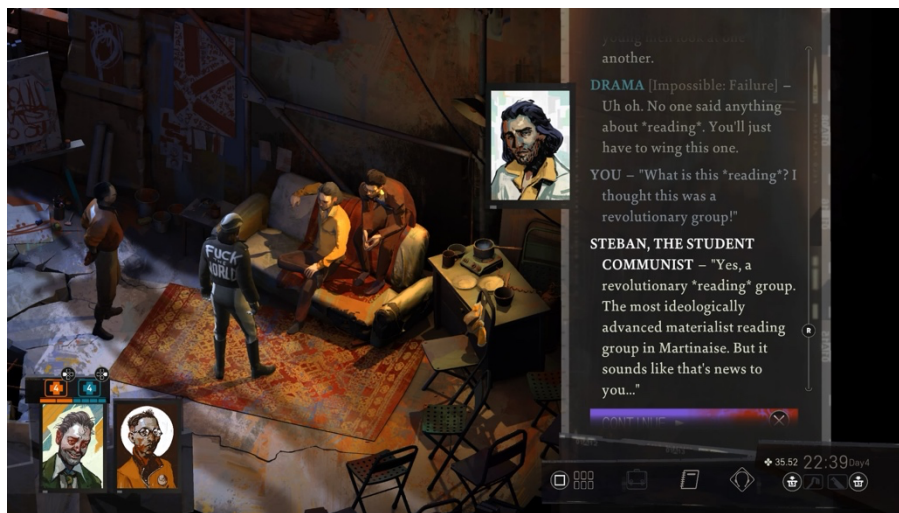


Figure 18. The student communists

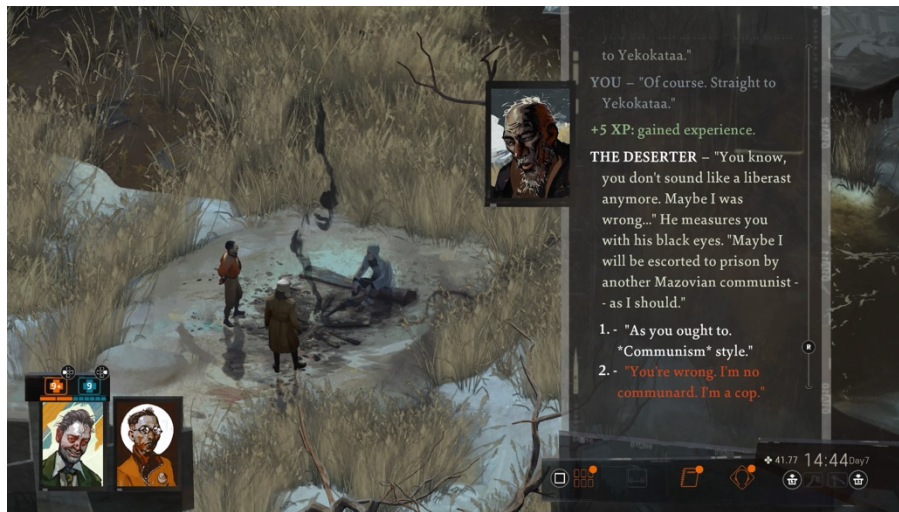


Figure 19. The Deserter's acceptance

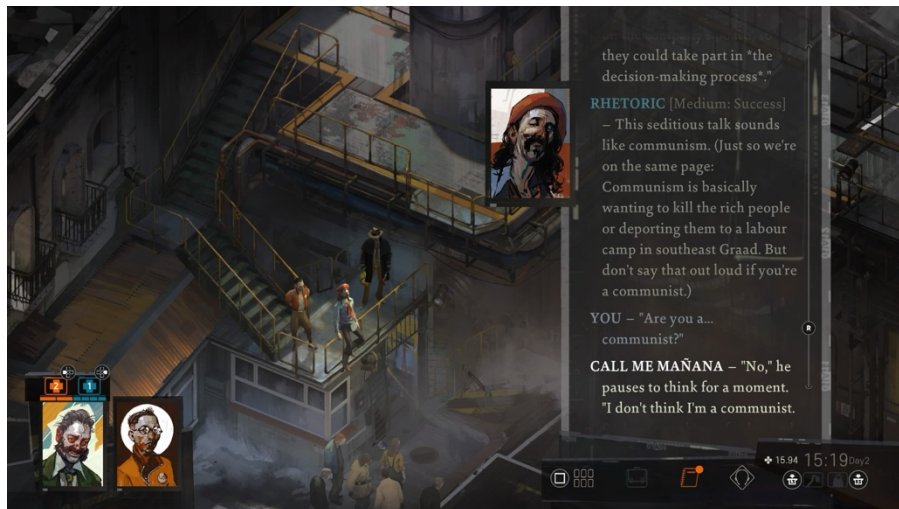


Figure 20. Mañana's rejection of communism

Fascist political views are made fun of throughout the story, seen as ridiculous and sad at times. First encounter with a fascist is with the Racist Lorry Driver, as he says “Welcome to Revachol” to Kim who is half Seolite, saying that he has read books on racist theory proving that there is a superior race which happens to be his own (figure 21). He furthers his racist ramblings on the dangers of miscegenation, and once inspecting his lorry the detectives find fascist memorabilia adorned throughout it. Another fascist is Measurehead who presents a long-winded explanation of Advanced Race Theory, with the races being cast into types on the premise of their quality (figure 22). His explanation of race theory is completely ridiculous, saying that a certain race is inferior because of their excessive production

of sebum and lactose intolerance that came from years of inbreeding. Once Harry defeats him to gain control of a button that opens the gates of the dock, he offers only that he might have underestimated Harry and his race. Rene Arnoux is another fascist, but his loyalty is seen to be towards the king Frissel, who he fought for during the revolution (figure 23). He still wears his uniform and medals daily, reminiscing on his days of the fight. A particularly funny fascist character is Gary the Cryptofascist who Harry and Kim meet while looking for the husband of Lena the Cryptozoologist. First finding his racist mug in the trash behind Whirling-in-Rags, Harry and Kim make the connection that he wronged the union boss by breaking into his apartment where he keeps a collection of said mugs and other fascist memorabilia. Gary ultimately turns out to be a weak-minded opportunist, stealing the armor from the killed mercenary among other things, using slurs and other fascist dog whistles casually in conversation (figure 24). All these characters are seemingly devoted to their cause and thoughts at first, yet through conversation it is obvious that what haunts them is a sense of loneliness and disconnect with others. Their ridiculous rambling on racist theory is seen as a veil for their own unhappiness with oneself, as Rene does not leave his uniform even 50 years after the war, clinging on a sense of superiority over others.

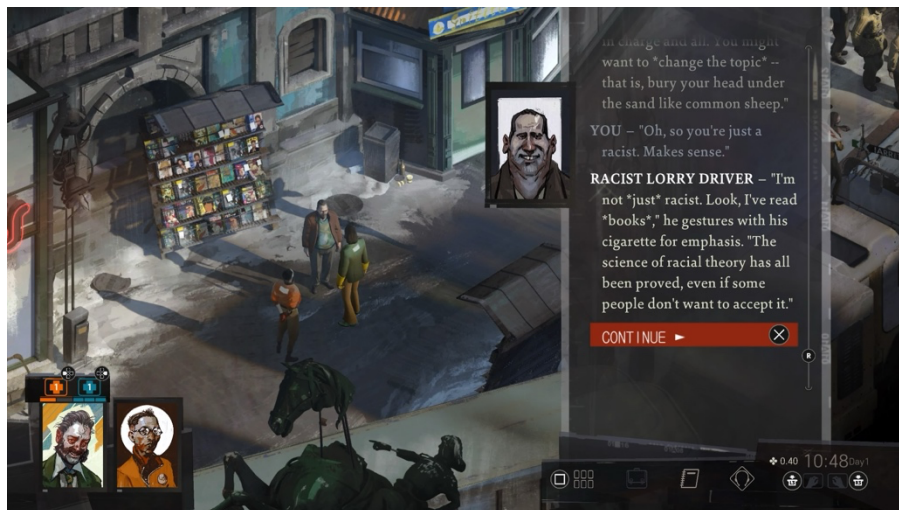


Figure 21. The racist's science

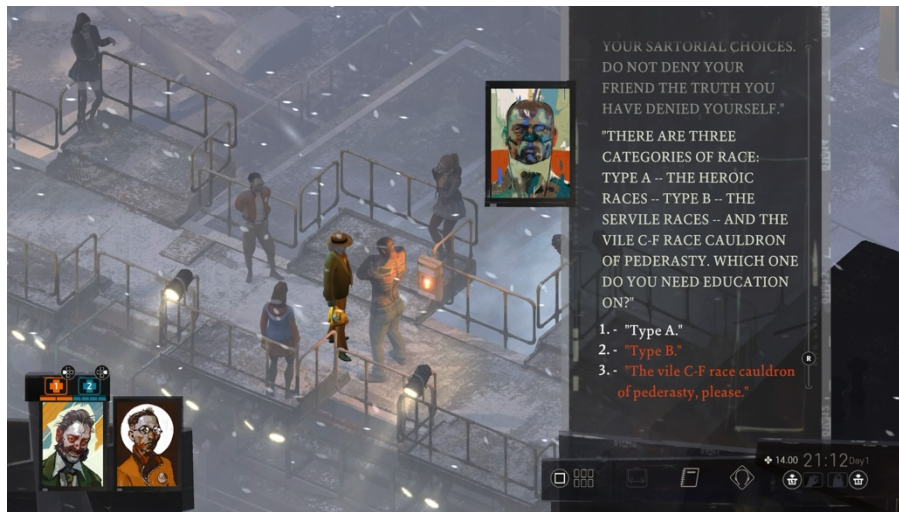


Figure 22. Types of races according to Measurehead

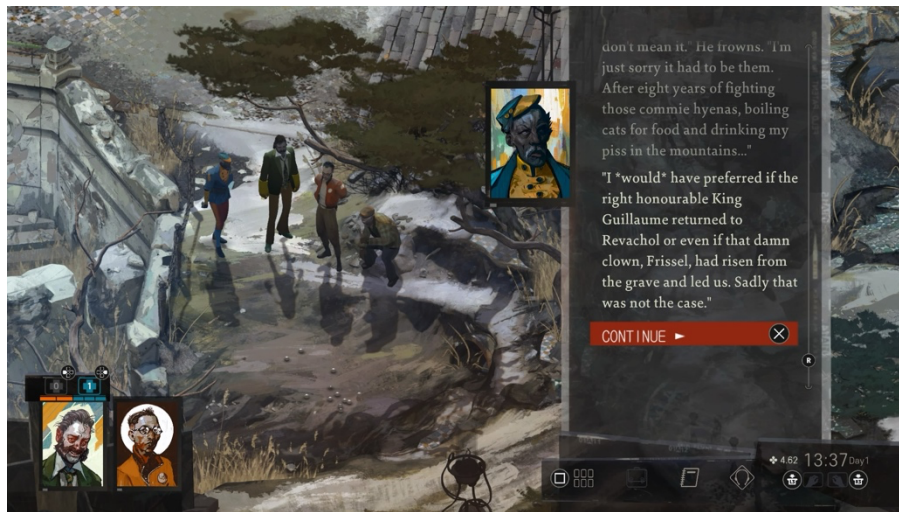


Figure 23. Rene's fascist nostalgia

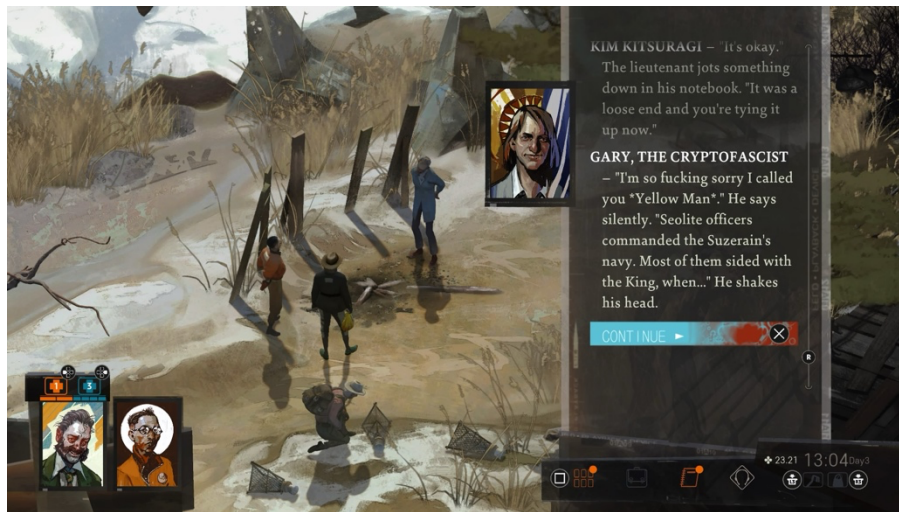


Figure 24. Gary's apology

Moralism is seen as the dominant and most respectable ideology in Elysium, with it representing the government and its branches. As such it is expected of Harry to be a moralist, which in the context of this playthrough was not the case. The first introduction to moralism is through Harry's partner for the case Kim Kitsuragi. Kim claims to have been fond of moralism in his twenties, yet now has a critical attitude but does not define his current ideological viewpoint (figure 25). Simply, he states that he believes in the RCM, only being offended by explicitly racist language for the most part. Another moralist that the two detectives meet is the Sunday Friend, who is introduced as a member of the Coalition Government that is in a hidden affair with a student tenant from the building complex in Martinaise. He goes on to talk about maintaining the "price stabilite", and how inflation has to stay below 2% (does not mention of what), and how the Coalition saved Revachol (figure 26). While not an essential character, he serves as an introduction to the status quo of Revachol, as a member of the government. The last moralist that Kim and Harry meet is Trant Heidelstam who works for the RCM as a consultant and is in Martinaise to check on Harry's mental well-being and ability to serve, visiting the district with his son. The first encounter with Trant is at the Feld Building where he is found telling his son about the history of the building and company, where the duo learns that he is a sympathizer of moralism and the RCM, and a former drug addict.

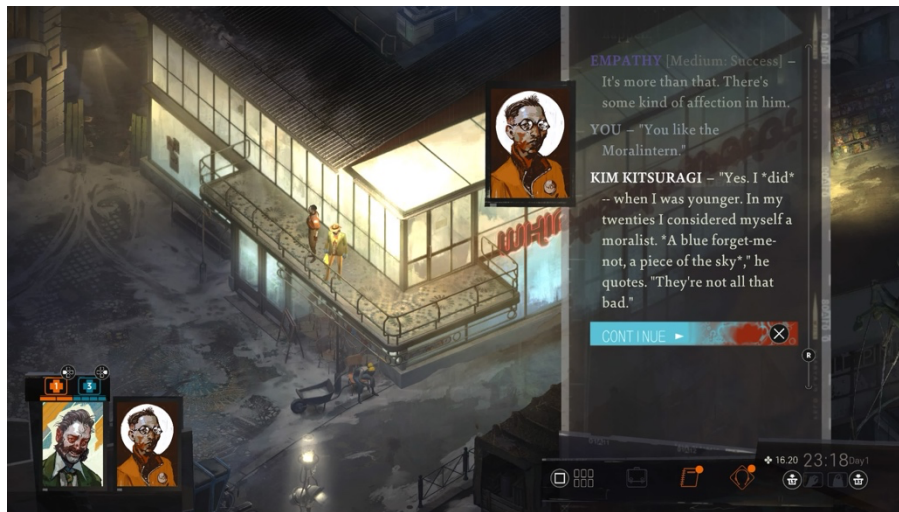


Figure 25. Kim's moralist youth

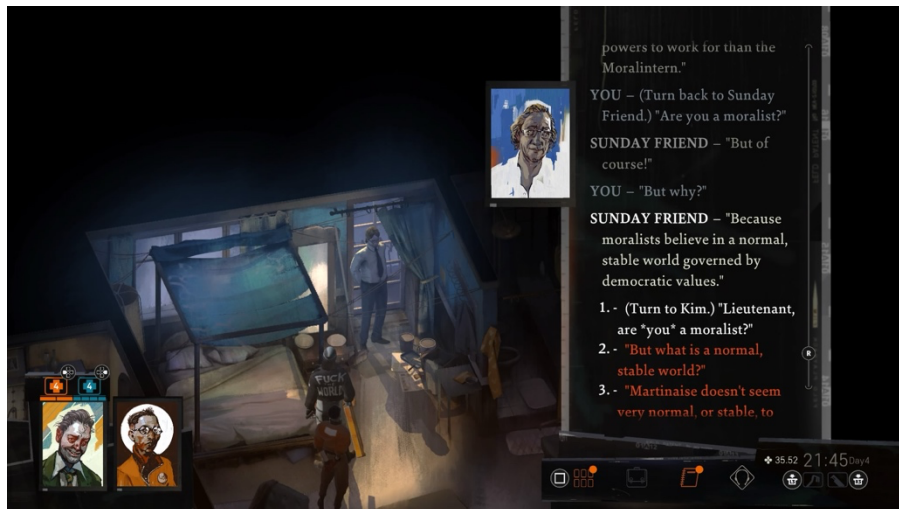


Figure 26. The government moralist

Now, knowing all the political leanings that the game offers, and the characters that essentially personify them, I came up with a political compass that puts all the characters into their respective quadrants as seen in figure 27. In this political compass, I have also put my own version of Harry DuBois to compare with the rest of the cast of Disco Elysium. Through this there is a visual understanding of my experience of how the characters are portrayed in the game, knowing their story, background, and assessing how they portray themselves to the main character.

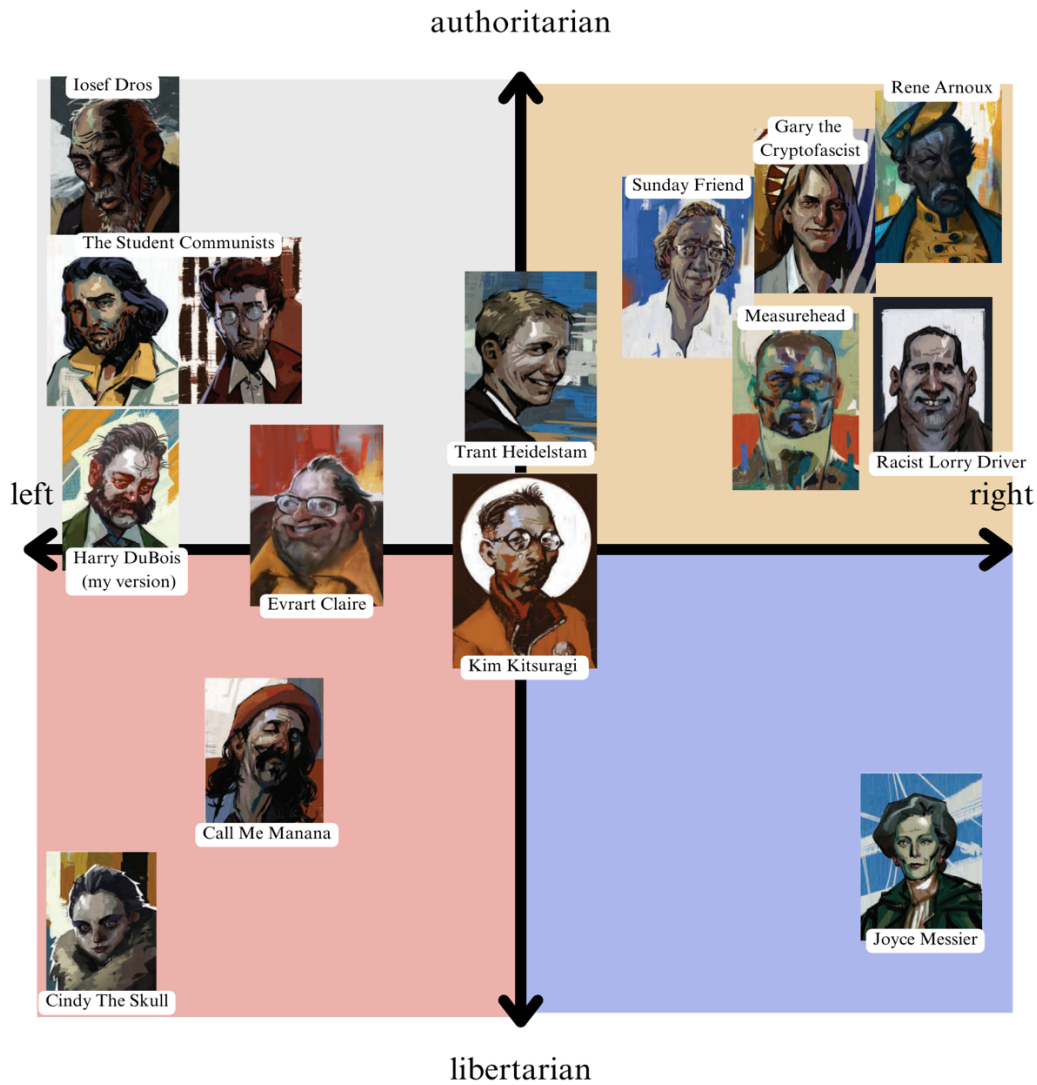


Figure 27. Political compass of characters

4.3. Formal elements of *Disco Elysium*

In *Disco Elysium*, the player is confined within an in-game 10-day time frame, in the open world map of Martinaise. The world is filled with NPC's that do not interact with the world freely yet are in idle animation – a diegetic machine action (Galloway, 2006, p. 12). They might change positions throughout the duration of the gameplay, but this is not always seen by the player or announced. As such, the game environment might be reminiscent of a moving painting (figure 28), with not much action on the screen other than changes in time of the day and weather. The game encourages the player to uncover as much as possible by interacting with the environmental objects available. Moreover, there are environmental elements that serve as borders, indicating what paths are available to explore. Items that block the

pathways are usually rocks, weeds, hills, water, doors, and walls. These blockades can be described as components that signify the spatial availability of the game (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 3).



Figure 28. Cutscene

Establishing interaction with other components is not difficult, as the game has clear indicators that show the player what is interactable and are usually objects shown with white circles and a colorful border that depends on the type of thought and interaction that follows upon interaction. This diegetic interaction serves to uncover certain details that cannot be seen by the player but are seen by the characters in game (figure 29). As such these are components that contain more variables, as some items can give the character more experience points or increase or deduce health and morale (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 3).

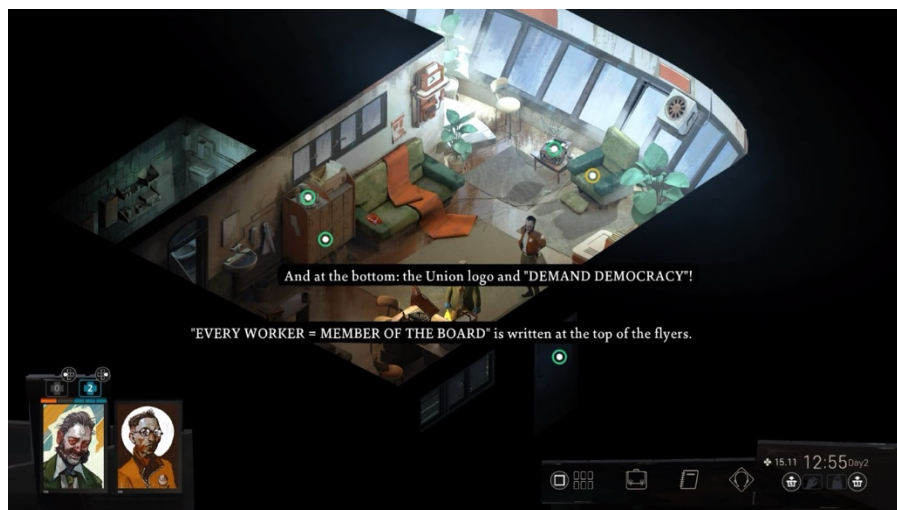


Figure 29. Example of small interactions

Similarly to the mentioned, the game introduces items (like clothes or tools) that can be equipped to gain or lose skill points, that can be described as components that contain variables that affect the character (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 3). Moreover, there are also components that the player can interact with, prompting special dialogue or passing time through reading books thus gaining more insight into the story and potentially getting more experience points. Knowing this, the player is motivated to use said components to gain a better advantage in situations that demand more skills. The main components that pertain to the survival of the character are health and morale, that deplete with player actions such as bad dialogue choices, failed skill checks, and consuming items like drugs and alcohol. The components that aid these stats are magnesium and nosaphed (a nod to Narcan), with magnesium increasing morale and nosaphed health respectively. Another component that is a part of the user interface is the section with the skills that the player can put points into as they gain more experience points, levelling the character up (figure 30). This skills section describes each skill and shows the player how they have arranged their skills according to the four major categories.

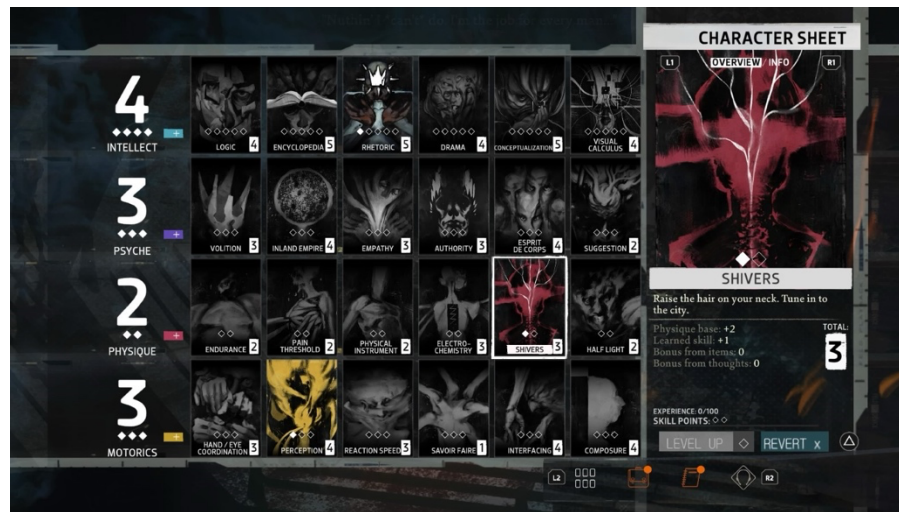


Figure 30. Leveling up

In addition, there is the journal section where the tasks that the player has decided to do are shown, with the weekdays of when they were accepted are shown (figure 31). This component serves as a guide to the player of what can be done or as a choice design due to the tasks not being mandatory but offers the player with the option to complete them (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 162). It shows not only the descriptions of tasks but also the goals that affect the gameplay in terms of getting more experience points as a reward (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 4). The rewards for completing a goal are not shown in the task menu thus they do not incentive the player to finish them only to gain more value. The goals are also not

sorted by their relevance to the main storyline, making it hard to differentiate between obligatory and non-obligatory goals, as the player gets to build their own approach to the story accepting some additional tasks that in the end might prove to be relevant (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 4).

Another part of that section is the map of Martinaire with optional ‘skill checks’ that the player can do to fully get to know a non-playable character, gain more experience points, find out useful information, or even gain an item (figure 32). These are additional tasks that do not affect the progression of the story yet can be described as a side-quest that is optional for the player to choose in order to achieve a better immersive state (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 152).

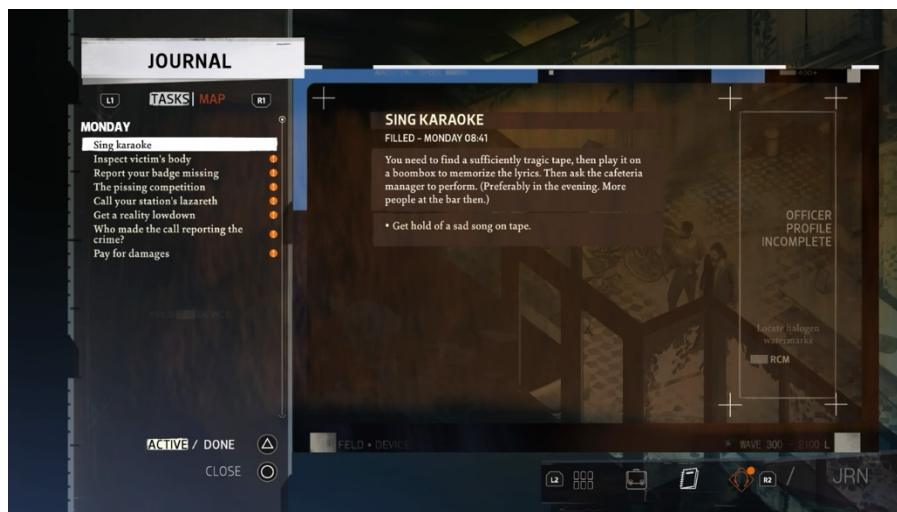


Figure 31. The task menu

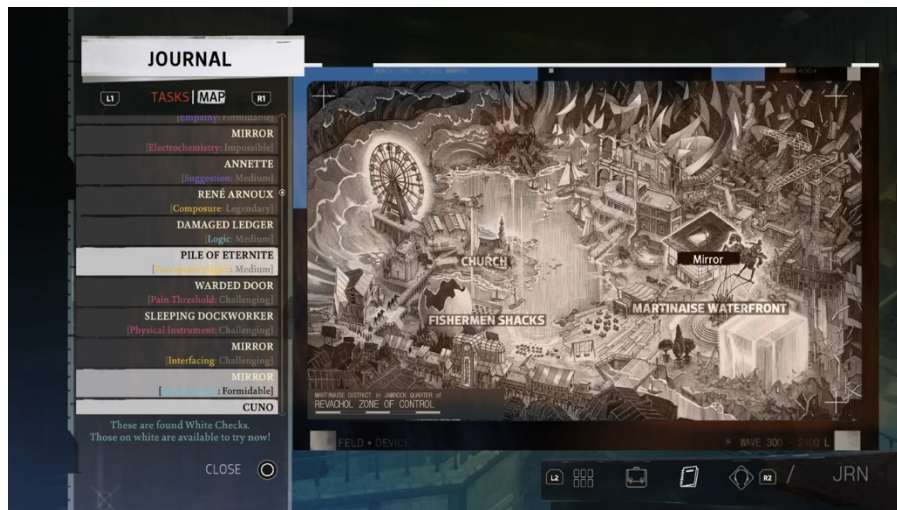


Figure 32. Map of Martinaire

Finally, the last section is the thought cabinet concerned with thought-based skills that take time to develop or internalize, thus giving the character either a boost or reduction of skill points with certain skills (figure 33). They also give the player more experience points and serve as a point of identification for the character, as opting in for some of them gives new options for dialogue. For example, with the thought shown in figure 19 called Lonesome Long Way Home, the player gets +1 Encyclopedia point while it is internalizing, which takes 6 hours and 5 minutes in the game. Through the thought cabinet the character's ideological viewpoint and copotype can be solidified thus giving points thus serving as an element of procedural rhetoric (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 131-132). Additionally, as previously mentioned, the developers have prescribed differing values to the four ideological thoughts, as mentioned the communist one resulting in -1 Authority and -1 Visual Calculus skill points but gaining additional experience points upon choosing left-wing dialogue. The ultraliberal thought is named Indirect Modes of Taxation that takes away one Empathy skill point but every time the player chooses the ultraliberal dialogue option, they gain one real. The moralist thought is seemingly the best option for the player by the name of The Kingdom of Conscience raises the capacity of skill points to 5 for Volition and Logic with the dialogue option healing the players morale. The fascist thought called Revacholian Nationhood can be seen as the most useless as it promotes that the character consumes Alcohol in order to gain physical points, and every time the player chooses fascist dialogue the character loses morale. All these thoughts for the most part affect the character negatively, as a way of the developers punishing the players for choosing any of the identities, while at the same time incentivizing the player to internalize them.

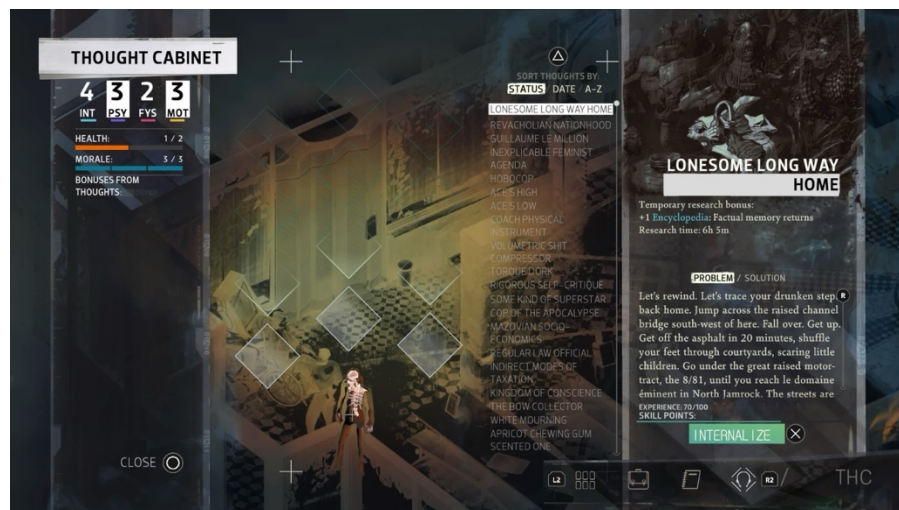


Figure 33. Thought cabinet

The player is thrown into Disco Elysium with the showing of a hostel room in complete disarray, the result of a drunken anger fueled fit. This serves as a piece of environmental storytelling, as the room is in the same state as Harry is - broken, messy, and seemingly unfixable, it is a direct translation of the character (Fernández-Vara, 2011, p. 5). As the player finishes all there is to do in the room, a door that is covered with a transparent green color indicates a point of interaction, thus leading the player to a new room and introducing them to the main player actions that they take in the game, namely movement, choosing dialogues, and pressing the X button to establish interaction (Lakonski & Bjork, 2015, p. 3-4). Interaction with characters functions the same as with other objects, as they are also highlighted with a transparent green color, with the option to press X on (figure 34). As such, the game is made mostly of player actions, as there are rare moments where component actions happen, as their action needs the player to interact with them first. The system actions of the game are the nondiegetic acts such as cutscenes that are initiated by proximity to of an area, as well as the time that limits the number of interactions that the player can have throughout the day (Lakonski & Bjork, p. 4). The game world and the main characters are hard-coded into the game, though the weather changes, music, and side-quests are a part of the procedural content that is generated through the gameplay (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 135).



Figure 34. Interactions with characters

The game encourages saving, as with elements of chance with the skill checks, there is a tendency for players to save to redo the check and pass it eventually. There is an option to quickly save the data, as well as a regular save game button that lets the player save it with a detailed name thus making it an important part of playing Disco Elysium (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 126-127). Additionally, there are moments after major events where the game autosaves, keeping the flow for the player to revisit major

plot points. Knowing that saving is an important part of the game, the dynamic of *Disco Elysium* is linear though inviting players to retry certain skill checks to progress further in the story (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 137). Saving can also be seen as a strategic move in order to cut down on the time it takes to finish the game that in my own playthrough I have utilized on two occasions as my chance of passing was at 97% yet I still failed it. With great frustration I decided to load the previous save and progress further to cut down on my time playing. In the diegetic sense, there are no moral systems of good and bad, as the game makes the player use their own sense of a moral compass to make decisions to reach the end goal of uncovering the murderer. While this stands as true, the game still uses dialogue as one of its main functions, imitating real-life conflicts related to politics and socioeconomic problems, but limiting the player to respond to them with only several answers that are hard-coded in the game (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 129, 135).

4.4. Context of Disco Elysium

As discussed in previous sections and chapters, *Disco Elysium* is a game with heavy themes and a detailed approach to storytelling. Thus, it serves its purpose of entangling the player into its world, be it through entertaining dialogue or unique mechanics. In this section, the analysis is based on understanding the behind-the-scenes of the game's production and how it operates while following the guidelines from Fernández-Vara (2019).

The game was developed by studio ZA/UM and released in 2019. The studio started as an art collective which persisted after the establishment of ZA/UM as a development studio, later expanding to other countries to gather more hands on the game and attention to it. Starting as a small studio from Estonia and later gaining worldwide acclaim, ZA/UM pushed the Estonian market as an important part of the gaming industry (Ozimek, 2021, p. 11). While this stands true, there is still a bit of criticism found in understanding that they needed to branch out to countries of a larger market due to funding, talent, and advertising. Moreover, as the team is from Estonia, the game serves as a reflection of their experience not only living in the Baltics, but also their experiences of the online spaces, other countries, and more (Wiltshire, 2020). Alexander Rostov, the art director of the game, himself says that he grew up in a post-apocalyptic world of the neoliberal zeitgeist that had a lot of influence on his art, and the project of *Disco Elysium* (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 19-21)

As mentioned in the methodology, I played the game on PlayStation, which is not the original version of the game, yet a later adaptation. The game was first released on Windows on October 15th in

2019, and months later MacOS (Ozimek, 2021, p. 2). As it grew an audience, the developers worked with the community to improve the game thus releasing a free update under the name ‘The Working Class Update’ in May 2020, as to make the game more accessible to a wider audience, optimizing it for lesser powerful hardware and with even more language options (Gekker & Joseph, 2021, p. 3). Later in 2021, ZA/UM released Disco Elysium: The Final Cut on multiple platforms including the PlayStation 4 and 5, Nintendo Switch, and Xbox One and X/S. The game was made with the development platform Unity, as shown on its initial launch. For this analysis, I have played the final cut version as I did not have access to other options at the time. The final cut version also was deemed as the most appropriate as it is the final version of the game with fully realized and optimized functions such as the voice acting for all characters, animations, and additional tasks

The studio did face critique from its fans during the fan vote on what can be improved in the game. As the game is explicitly leftist in position in its text (discussed in detail below), critiquing the capitalist market exploiting its workers, fans deemed it ironic that the studio ZA/UM did not rely solely on the Estonian market to source the workers for the game, and relying on fans to translate the game for others for free (Gekker & Joseph, 2021, p. 9). The studio faced even more controversy later, as they fired the main creators of the game – Helen Hindpere, Aleksander Rostov, and Robert Kurvitz in late 2021, consequently resulting in outrage from fans. In an interview with one of the former members of the studio and co-founders of the art collective behind the studio, Martin Lugia claims that the members were fired under false pretenses, as the studio was overtaken by investors that did not share the same vision as the main collective, as they were loud in their leftist beliefs and demands for further projects (Laska, 2022). Furthermore, the collective had ideas for a sequel to Disco Elysium that the studio took over after they were fired, because of the IP still being owned by ZA/UM. This messy ordeal only reflects not only the game’s story, but also the state of the video game industry, as smaller indie studios get used by investors and limit their abilities to express themselves freely as artists (Keogh, 2015, p. 4-5). Throughout this whole controversy one of the quotes from the game keeps getting referenced by fans across the media platforms and as such I want to include it here as it enforces the irony of the studio going against its own employees for capital gain:

*“Capital has the ability to subsume all critiques into itself. Even those who would *critique* capital end up *reinforcing* it instead...” - Joyce Messier, Disco Elysium: The Final Cut (2021)*

When addressing the inspiration behind the game, the main creators of Disco Elysium reference the games *Planescape: Torment*, *Baldur’s Gate*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* as the main ones, with style

influences found from 70s cop shows (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 9). The game's main inspirations can be found in the Art Book released by the studio with the Final Cut, with excerpts from the main team on how the development process looked. The art director, Aleksander Rostov explains that culturally what has influenced the art of the game is his upbringing, where even sketchbooks were not available to be bought, and art was not central to the reinvigoration of the country after the end of the Soviet regime. Moreover, Rostov claims that the art of Craig Mullins, (an acclaimed artist behind many video games such as Age of Empires, Bioshock, World of Warcraft and more) served as a steppingstone into finding his own art style with impressionist and expressive artistic tendencies (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 21). The influences go into further impressionist painters such as Rembrandt and more, and sculptures of Paolo Troubetzkoy. The character portraits of the game are of particular interest, as the inspiration for them comes from the works of Francis Bacon, giving a slight uncomfortable feeling to the viewer (figure 35).



Figure 35. Character portraits from the Disco Elysium Art Book (2021)

Furthermore, upon accepting their award for the Fresh Indie Game category at the Game Awards in 2019, the team shouted out their influences, namely Vladimir Makovsky, Viktor Tsoi, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. They claimed that without these influences and the political education of Marx and Engels, the game would not exist. It is safe to say that Disco Elysium is heavily influenced by communist politics, as it is one of the main themes of the game. The discussion of communism and criticism of it is scattered throughout the game, not only through the dialogue but through the environmental objects and scenery. Having that in mind, the game is full of discourse of ideology referencing multiple works of philosophers and theorists directly, using pseudonyms for their names to fit the narrative of the game.

5 Conclusion

Learning about the political alignments of Elysium the player is faced with direct explanations of how the creators of the game view the real-life extensions of them. The ideologies are thus caricatured through the many characters in Disco Elysium with their portraits and dialogue, serving an audiovisual experience of them. As the creators of the game are self-proclaimed communists, the main writer of the game, Robert Kurvitz, says that one of the main philosophical foundations for the game's world was Hegelianism, thus creating a world that lives its history (Kurvitz et al., 2021, p. 183). Moreover, further philosophical inspiration is seen from Marxist theory with deployment of concepts such as dialectical and historical materialism as the story's shaping grounds. Knowing this, there is a layer of understanding where their views on ideology come from, with clear views into their personal beliefs and origins. The game is focused on retelling their version of history, shaping it into its own entity – a counterfactual retelling from a leftist perspective challenging the hegemonic culture (Apperley, 2018).

The player gets thrust into the world of Elysium, given a sense of agency over their actions as Harry to control the way the story is shaped up. While some of the key plots of Disco Elysium are predetermined and hardcoded into the game, there are moments where the player is free to choose how to approach certain events, even with the ability to choose their own political alignment (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 12-13). Due to the non-linear nature of the game, the player is able to internalize multiple personalities at once, and try to unlock as much of the story as possible but as the game has over a million words, it's hard to get every single detail of it (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 18). As seen from my personal experience of playing the game, I started to relate to Harry and deploy my own opinions through the dialogue options, while also relating to the story of Martinaise as a failed communist force. I was given an agency and fully immersed myself in the game, where I did not have to think twice about pressing certain mechanisms because they started to feel like second nature (Garite, 2003, p. 5). With the interactive narrative aspect of the game, the controls such as skills checks add onto this building of immersion into the story, as they add a layer of emotionality towards the game (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012, p. 7). Every skill check moment would be filled with tension, followed by a resolve of either happiness or disappointment.

As mentioned, games are extensions of their creators, which is particularly the case for Disco Elysium, as self-admitted by the creators themselves. The creators ultimately criticize every ideology, and ridicule it through the usage of characters. Though this stands as true, there is a certain approach to them that feels personal, almost anecdotal. As this seems to resonate throughout the game, it is certain that the

creators of Disco Elysium were aware of their positioning in making the game, using it as a vessel to spread their message. They used their post-soviet era upbringing as inspiration for what it means to live in a world with history that is still alive through both the material (bullet holes and abandoned buildings) and nonmaterial (conversations about the revolution and history of politics). As mentioned, this creation was a byproduct of the art collective's escape from reality, building a new one reminiscent of their own, with a direction of satirizing the real (Bulut, 2021, p. 5). As such, the characters representative of the ideologies are shown in this satirical light even through their portraits, and the choice of voice acting.

Disco Elysium is a political RPG that serves the player a world like no other, with inspiration taken from politics, philosophy, art, and the real life of its creators. As such, it serves as an extension of them, filled with their ideological viewpoints. Moreover, going over its complicated history gives perspective into how much detail the creators put into the story, making their world filled with information for the player to find out and immerse themselves in. The core elements of the game such as the writing, audio, and visual elements are important establishers of immersing the player into the game and its story. Through such immersion, there is a possibility for the player to participate in the part of the ideological world set for them by the developers. Moreover, in the case of Disco Elysium, there is an intention by the creators for the player to think critically while playing the game and picking certain dialogue options. This is further enforced by having specific tasks oriented towards political alignments that make fun of each of them. As the creators of Disco Elysium come from Estonia, their approach to the story is filled with references to Soviet and Eastern European culture, as well as revolutionary era France. With these inspirations tied to a Hegelian and Marxist understanding of the world, the creators thus shaped the characters, building a deep history that is ultimately tied to each character.

5.1 Limitations and further research

This research was conducted in the style of researcher-player, limiting the ability to take a neutral stance and fully observe an individual playing the game from another perspective. Another limitation is that it was done with previous knowledge of the game and its contents, not having a novice experience of it. With this experienced play there is no information on how a novice player would adapt to the controls and their perception of the story, thus losing an element of the analysis (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 28-29). Additionally, as the game offers multiple pathways and identities that the main character can embody, there is a limit to getting the whole story of the game. Further research could be done on the basis of having novice players experience the game and getting their perception of the ideological stance of characters and developers to grasp the full scope of the research at hand. With multiple participants

there could also be a comparison into the different pathways that the participants take, having a better diversity in storyline opportunities.

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