'Detective — what *were* you hoping to accomplish?': Benign Violation as Means of Moral Detection in *Disco Elysium*

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ABSTRACT

'Benign violation theory' is a general theory of humour developed by McGraw and Warren. It has been used in game scholarship to explain the mechanics of interactive jokes in puzzle-platformer games and, more specifically, how these jokes contribute to the thematic, narrative and poetic richness of such games. In this paper, I argue that the theory can in fact be applied more widely, not just to the comedic elements of video games but to the ways in which certain types of game enable players to experimentally violate societal norms and taboos, as both a route to meaning and a tool of moral investigation. Using the 2019 role-playing game *Disco Elysium* as my primary example, I examine how the role of player agency in overstepping boundaries impacts upon a game's cohesion as an expressive artefact, with the resulting volatility widening opportunities for personal growth and reflection on the part of the player.

Keywords

humour theory, RPGs, taboos, agency, puzzle games, realism, morality

INTRODUCTION

'Benign violation theory', developed and popularised by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, posits that the basis of humour is a contradiction between one or more perceived violations (including "threats, breaches of norm, taboo-breaking … displays of aggression, hostility and disparagement" (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p.1142)) and a sense of safety. That sense of safety may be the result of knowledge of intent (for example, where one is playfully mocked by a friend, or where a greater moral purpose is suspected, as in satire) or of being out of range of any damaging effects, or of a belief that the violation in question is ultimately harmless. McGraw and Warren describe, as an example of the latter, the case of a man having sex with, then cooking and eating, a freshly bought supermarket chicken. Although the act provokes disgust due to societal taboos around bestiality, necrophilia and the ingestion of bodily fluids, a reasonable person may also recognise that no violence is inflicted, no one's autonomy infringed upon, and loss of dignity suffered only by the sole willing participant. In addition, because the example is obviously hypothetical, "and thus psychologically distant" (ibid.), it is possible to find it amusing. Whether someone does or does not depends, in all likelihood, on the extent to which they believe the act represents a deeper corruption

– they may, for instance, link it to a general contempt for animal life or to a broader sexual deprivation that threatens other individuals. McGraw and Warren's initial study concludes that an amused response is a "signal to the world that a violation is indeed okay" (p. 1148).

As a universal theory of humour, BVT has been critiqued as both insufficient and giving too much affordance to cruelty (Murphy, 2022, p.62-63). For the purposes of this paper, however, I am interested in whether it can be used as a basis for understanding how video games position players as moral investigators, able to explore and reflect upon aspects of their own moral instincts and judgement through their interactions with digital storyworlds. BVT has already been utilised in video game scholarship, in Wyatt Moss-Wellington and Paul Martin's 'Benign Trials, Vexing Violations: Reading Humour in Puzzle Games', which analyses visual and interactive gags in two puzzle-platformers and argues that such instances are central to the communicative strategies of these games, that they are a key aspect of how each positions itself as an artefact of meaning. I will take this a step further and argue that affording the player the means to commit violations themselves can serve as a means of both deepening their investment in and contributing to the philosophical and emotional impact of a game, as well as strengthening the player's capacity for personal reflection. I will do this mainly by reference to ZA/UM's 2019 role-playing game *Disco Elysium*, a title which is already the subject of intense scholarly investigation due to the complexity of its themes and story, and the high degree of configurative and narrative agency it imparts to the player (Bodi and Thon, 2020, p.167). My argument will focus on both the experiential dimension of benign violation from the point of view of the person doing the violating, and its role in the procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) of a video game, by which I mean the difference it makes to the 'message' that is conveyed through the game's interactive systems and therefore to how meaning is derived from the combination of narrative and gameplay.

'Harry, do you notice how ... none of this is very funny?'
One of the immediate problems with applying benign violation theory to screen media is the technology of the screen itself. Applying McGraw and Warren's logic, the audience is always 'safe'; that is, they are beyond the reach of any apparent threat, unless what is depicted is understood as a transmission of something actually taking place in another physical location. The screen-as-barrier does not just result in audiences laughing at instances of extreme violence and other forms of outrage, but in their experiencing them as catharsis, or even expressions of their own desire to take action (this is a topic of serious and sustained scrutiny in more than one academic discipline, see Lawtoo, 2018). All violations in this context would seem to be in some sense benign.

Video games are a particularly strange case because of their interactive nature; on the one hand, they have been defined, particularly by early ludologists, as spaces where nothing serious occurs, in which all manner of events and behaviours can take place without any real-life consequences. On the other, as more recent scholars have postulated – and as I have argued in my own research into poem-game hybrids (Stone, 2022) – the medium is in part delineated by the assignation of responsibility to a player, so that events in the game directly implicate the player in their outcomes. The player's acceptance of a role within the game's word – the fact that their presence completes what Brendan Keogh calls an "intercorporeal circuit" (Keogh, 2018, p.45) – means that they are liable to feel the emotional impact of failure or punishment as part of the feedback loop. Video games are also sites of near-constant contravention of normal societal rules, most notably with regard to violence; players aggressively attack, kill and disembody each other's on-screen avatars, slaughter droves of weaker enemies and

destroy buildings, vehicles and terrain with abandon. In what sense can we consider any of this to be a true violation, and in what sense can we say that the player sits at a sufficient psychological distance for it to be benign?

I have found that one can get reliably wrong answers to such questions from the GTP3 deep learning language model, so by way of beginning with something to argue against, I asked it to give an example of benign violation in a video game. The suggestion it returned was "jumping over obstacles that are not too challenging but amusing and lighthearted – for instance, if a character in a platform game had to jump over a row of small cartoon rabbits". I asked, "How is that a violation? What is it violating?" and was told: "The violation in this is the idea of the character doing something that would be considered dangerous or potentially harmful, such as jumping over something that could cause them to fall or injure themselves. This would be a violation of the rules of reality, as it would not be something a real person could do without harm. But a game-world has its own rules, irrespective of our own, such that it's almost impossible to injure oneself by jumping." This conception of benign violation encapsulates everything even slightly unrealistic that could happen in a video game, or in any other medium that imagines its own world. But benign violation is supposed to function as a theory of humour; is there, therefore, a way of conceiving of it in such a way that it explains how a video game can be funny?

In order to answer this, I will briefly compare two video games that are functionally and mechanically very similar, and from the same era, where one is considered to be comical and the other not. For the sake of using familiar examples, these will be *DOOM II* (id software, 1994) and *Duke Nukem 3D* (3D Realms, 1996). Both are first-person pseudo-3D shooters released on PC and console gaming machines, in which the player collects and manages supplies of weapons and ammunition while firing on (and avoiding taking damage from) various humanoid and non-humanoid monsters. Killing is not a condition for completing any level of either game, except in the case of a small number of end-of-level boss monsters, but in practice it is almost impossible to proceed throughout these levels and locate their exits without engaging in combat on a frequent, if not continuous, basis, due to the concentration of enemies. In terms of the aporia-epiphany cycle (Aarseth, 1990) that drives gameplay (in other words, the primary gameplay or compulsion loop (Buchanan and Crowe, 2012)), both games are modelled around simple strategies of rapid extermination.

It is difficult to imagine anyone finding *DOOM II* funny. Its subtitle is 'Hell on Earth' and its episodes are respectively set in a dour futuristic spaceport, an equally grim cityscape and, finally, hell itself, not long after billions of people have been massacred by an invading army of demons. The player's avatar ('Doomguy') is an armoured marine who does not speak at any point throughout the game, except to grunt, gasp or scream in pain, and whose facial expressions (represented on the HUD at the bottom-centre of the screen) range from steely determination to vengeful glee, as he fills each level with dribbling, eviscerated corpses. The main character of *Duke Nukem 3D*, Duke Nukem, is likewise a musclebound stereotype, and in nearly every other way *Duke Nukem 3D* apes the template established by *DOOM II* and its predecessor (as itemised by Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 157). But Duke is a much more vocal avatar, frequently quipping to himself as he engages in violent acts, reprimanding the invading alien army for stealing and molesting Earth's 'chicks', or threatening the game's bosses with obscene and humiliating retribution ("I'll rip your head off and shit down your neck"). Alongside its shallow and foul-mouthed protagonist, the game features "incidental scatological humour" (Tyler, 2022, p. 91): alien footsoldiers can not only be splattered across the map but interrupted on their toilet break, while chaingun-wielding lizardmen sometimes pause to defecate on the floor. At one point, the player is given access to a shrink ray, allowing them to reduce enemies to the size of mice and stamp on them, and

while part of the game takes place on a nondescript moonbase, some of its most memorable levels are modelled on sleazy real-world locations such as an adult cinema, a strip club and a porn studio.

Whether or not one actually finds *Duke Nukem 3D* funny, it is undoubtedly joking around, whereas *DOOM II* means to excite and disturb. If benign violation theory works at all as an account of humour, therefore, there must be some sense in which *Duke Nukem 3D* troubles moral (or other) boundaries and *DOOM II* does not. My proposition is that while both games appear to violate social taboos with the same degree of relish, *DOOM II* presents the player with a convincing fictive justification for all the acts it facilitates: the player is charged with saving the last remnants of humanity from an enemy that cannot be reasoned with. To fully engage with the world of the game is to accept the reasonableness (the prudence, even) of brutally slaying everything you encounter. The same is true to some extent of *Duke Nukem 3D*, except that the player, in the role of Duke, goes further than necessary. The goading is excessive, the attacks on 'indisposed' enemies unsporting, and Duke's apparent predilection for seedy environs unbecoming. Violations are of an implicit contract made between player and game as to what kind of moral rules govern the world of the game. In this respect, *Duke Nukem 3D*'s similarity to *DOOM II* is part of how it establishes that contract; its jokes are designed to undercut the seriousness of the alien invasion narrative.

It is useful to note at this point that the player can be, and often is, directly implicated in the violation (in other words, they act as a living component of the joke) even while being positioned as the audience for it. Dooley Murphy (2022, p.55-56) provides a detailed examination of how such "action-based and pre-prepared" 'interactive gags' conventionally operate, but we should also acknowledge that they can emerge spontaneously from the player either deliberately or accidentally violating a set of rules in a manner that the developers have apparently *failed* to anticipate. Usually, this is the result of a conflict between incentive and directive within the ludic or ludonarrative composition of the game (Seraphine, 2016), producing a jarring tonal or thematic discordance. Since the effect is player-driven (ie. since the player is the instigator of the event), the experience for the player in such cases is of simultaneously being the teller and the receiver of the joke. Moss-Wellington and Martin touch on this toward the end of their paper, where they describe a player of *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) ignoring a heroic quest entirely in favour of kicking chickens to death, but for neatness' sake, I will use an example from *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004), a first-person shooter that follows in the tradition of *DOOM II* and *Duke Nukem 3D*. *Half-Life 2* was considered a giant leap forward for the genre at the time of its release, and one of its innovations was to use non-player characters (NPCs) to advance the plot of the story by talking directly to the player character while the player retained full control over their movement (as opposed to interrupting play with expository text or a non-interactive cut scene, thereby dividing the game into 'On-Line' and 'Off-Line' segments (Newman, 2002, para 9 of 37)). While the player moves around, the NPC adjusts the angle of their head and body in order to continue to face them, as a normal human being might if they were trying to pass on urgent information. The NPCs are not, however, programmed to realistically respond to the player pointedly exhibiting interest in something else or behaving hyperactively. The player can jump atop desks and cabinets, and even hurl mugs and other objects at their interlocutor, all while being calmly addressed as if they were gravely considering a serious situation.

This particular variety of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007) remains a rich source of pleasure within the video gaming community, since there are many similar opportunities to clown around while playing games whose narratives are gritty or sombre in tone. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to claim these as examples

of benign violation which are uniquely facilitated by the interactive nature of video games, where the authorship of the joke belongs in part to the player, as opposed to the humour of titles like *Duke Nukem 3D* in which the player has very little say. In both cases, there are implicit rules of decorum within the fictive world that are breached, and the violation is benign in the sense that nobody needs to be held to account, no injustice righted.

I want to turn now to consider whether a similar kind of player-authored violation can be anticipated by the developer and integrated into a video game in a way that meaningfully contributes to that game's moral agenda.

'Better to know you're being played'

Disco Elysium is a role-playing adventure game developed and published by an independent European cultural association (the lead designer, Robert Kurvitz, and several other key members are Estonian). It received numerous game industry awards for its narrative design, and its cultural impact is such that in 2020 it was announced that the story would be adapted into a TV series. As a game, its pedigree is two distinct genres: on the one hand, there is the role-playing video game, in which the player is given numerical representations of their character's abilities, health and other features, and is charged with increasing these statistics through the completion of various exercises and accumulation of items so that the character 'grows' enough to proceed through gateways in the game's story; on the other hand, there is the point-and-click puzzle adventure game, in which the player must solve problems by interacting (non-violently) with NPCs and objects, conducting conversations, giving and receiving items, combining other items and changing key elements of the game's storyworld. *Disco Elysium's* predecessors in the former category include *The Bard's Tale* (Interplay Productions, 1985), *Baldur's Gate* (Black Isle Studios, 1998) and *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007), in the latter category *King's Quest* (Sierra On-Line, 1984), *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts, 1998) and *Tales of Monkey Island* (Telltale Games, 2009). Its setting – a neglected, war-scarred district on the edge of a port city, brought to a standstill by bitter strike action – is in stark contrast to the pre-industrial, magic-infused fantasy worlds of the majority of these titles. As such, although it is a work of urban science fiction, *Disco Elysium* has been regarded as an example of a recent tendency toward realistic drama and naturalism in European game development (Zagolo, 2022). It is not surprising, therefore, that its developers would seek to simulate the experience of resolving complex and realistic moral and procedural problems through the combination of the game's mechanics and its narrative, in keeping with their approach to aesthetics and imagery.

The protagonist and player-character of *Disco Elysium* is a police detective called Harry DuBois, though his name is not revealed until some way in; at the beginning of the game Harry wakes up suffering from severe amnesia, a narratorial device that allows the player to better connect with the perspective of the character, since everything that needs to be explained to one also needs to be explained to the other. In step with the ensuing extended process of self-discovery, the player is invited, before the game even starts, to choose a specialism for Harry: either he is a logician-type detective (Sherlock Holmes), a brute-type detective (Sam Spade) or a sensitive-type detective (Father Brown). The extent to which this will go on to affect gameplay and narrative options is not made immediately clear to the player, and indeed, throughout most of the game the degree to which events and the fates of particular characters are dependent upon player choice and action is obscured by the atypical meshing of role-playing and puzzle game mechanics. A detailed account of this is given by Bodi and Thon (2020, p.166-174), but briefly: in the tradition of point-and-click puzzle games, the player has the option to replay most of the conversations they have with NPCs in order to feel out what series

of responses will result in them gaining the information they need to move forward in the narrative. However, certain dialogue options, as well as actions, involve testing one or other of the player's numerically-rated abilities against a randomly generated number, or dice roll. If the player fails the roll, they may not be able to explore that avenue of the story – not without restarting the game, or reloading an earlier save file. More surprisingly, failure can sometimes lead to a realm of story or dialogue that was previously unreachable.

As Julialicia Case argues, this approach to game mechanics results in a sense "of layered, overlapping – and sometimes incoherent – stories" (Case, 2018, p. 79) occurring simultaneously – the present iteration of game reality as one strand of a messy, volatile whole which is not pointed in any single narrative direction. This clashes with *Disco Elysium*'s handling of its setting and characters; the fictional district of Martenaise is detailed, realistic, and literally riddled with markers of historical events which are described to the player abundantly both through dialogue and internal monologue (Harry's cultural knowledge, as with other emergent facets of his character, is presented to the player as a separate inner voice with which he can converse). The storyworld as a whole possesses a consistency and depth that puts most of it firmly beyond the impact of the player's failures and successes in rolling dice, and yet the player is led to believe these dice rolls, as well as other irreversible decisions, exert some kind of influence on the overall shape of *Disco Elysium* as a fictive contrivance, resulting in the paradox of a narrative that is "inherently contradictory and incoherent, while also cohesive and linear" (ibid.). The player may not even be entirely certain that some future aspects of the present iteration of the story haven't been already determined by chance. This was the case for an earlier police-themed point-and-click adventure, *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997), in which the backgrounds of several characters are randomised at the very beginning of the game. Without paratextual knowledge (ie. looking up information in guides and wikis) the player is left decidedly insecure about the degree to which their actions are driving the events of the story.

This is a very different context in which to position instances of benign violation to that which is presented by puzzle platform games like *Braid* and *Limbo*, as analysed by Moss-Wellington and Martin. Since neither of those games feature NPCs that can be interacted with in anything other than the most limited way, and since both take place in storyworlds that appear to be chiefly symbolic (and which may even be renderings of their protagonists' nightmares), the effects of the player's decision-making are visited solely upon the player and/or their ludic self. To the extent the worlds of these games can be manipulated by the player it is only to allow them to move linearly through them, usually from left to right, from an entrance to an exit, or else to provide them with a more complete understanding of the game's narrative and thematic concerns. There is almost nothing in the way of opportunity to violate social norms or behave in ways which are excessive or uncalled for, and no sense of multiple, overlapping stories. Instead, the way benign violations manifest in these games, according to Moss-Wellington and Martin, is in "the invasive transferral of negative affect from an unreal character to a real player" (Moss-Wellington and Martin, 2022, p.124), the undermining of the player's learned strategies of advancement, or the proximity of incongruous elements such as cute animals and human faces (p. 122); that is to say, the player is the butt of the joke. Both games violate the implicit contractual terms of the encounter with a cartoon puzzle environment as a way of speaking to the player, or rather inviting them to make cognitive leaps toward a fuller appreciation of each game's thematic complexity. The player is chiefly a witness to the ways the game, acting upon them through the intercorporeal circuit of game-and-player, uses joke-like mechanisms to convey meaning. It is something akin to the archetypical zen master hitting his student with a stick, the student protesting that this is unfair, and the master slyly explaining that he is imparting a lesson.

To an extent, this is also true of *Disco Elysium*. Some of the most memorable early experiences in the game involve the player being set up as the target of an interactive gag. They may, for instance, lose the game after being made to sit in an uncomfortable chair, if their choice of specialism results in them lacking a robust constitution, or they may be unable to stop Harry giving in to despair after a demoralising encounter with a pair of feral youths. Much more consistently and noticeably, however, *Disco Elysium* recruits, enables and implicates the player in acts of benign violation which are chiefly (but not solely) directed toward other characters in the game, and to the fabric of the social reality by which these characters are bound. It is the player themselves who is empowered to cross boundaries, much as they are empowered to behave offensively toward the NPCs in *Half-Life 2*, but here in collusion with the game itself. The way this is set up is partly narratorial; Harry is, first of all, a policeman investigating a murder, and secondly an amnesiac. Both these traits grant him privileges which are not afforded to most people: as a policeman he has the authority to interrogate people and pry into their personal lives. As an amnesiac, he can be forgiven for experimenting with different personae and asking obvious, even irritating questions in his attempts to jog his memory and rediscover who he is.

By the same logic we applied to *DOOM II*, then, offensive behaviour on the part of the player cannot necessarily be considered a violation, since it is justified by the narrative. But the player's privileges as policeman/amnesiac act as a pretext for options that are far more perverse. Throughout *Disco Elysium*, through dialogue with the NPCs, interactions with places and objects and internal conflabs with the different parts of Harry's psyche, the player is permitted to act eccentrically, even outrageously, in pursuit of their goals. To give a non-exhaustive list: they can lie and steal; they can threaten a child with a gun, or threaten to shoot themselves; they can choose between supplying illegal drugs to a minor, confiscating the drugs in accordance with the law, or keeping the drugs for their own use; they can cultivate more than one style of flamboyant arrogance, or internalise a genuine belief in fascism.

Importantly, unlike in *Duke Nukem 3D*, the player is not forced into the role of a bloviating bastard; they also have the option to play the game relatively straight, to quit drink and drugs from the very start, and to behave respectfully in the majority of their encounters with NPCs. Because, however, of the relative safety afforded by the screen-as-barrier, and because the aforementioned meshing of two different game systems produces the sense of a volatile relationship between player and story, the temptation to experiment with the riskier and more novel options presented is very powerful. On some occasions a positive or negative result can be immediately ascertained, but for the most part the player has little way of knowing the full ramifications of their choice of words or action until much later in the game. Perhaps it really is necessary to behave unpredictably, obnoxiously or even brutishly in order to prevent a second murder? Perhaps, as parts of Harry's psyche urge him to believe, there is a perfectly good reason why the possibility of indulging in these actions is occurring to him, one that will be revealed in the fullness of time?

The game also provides plenty of hints that the apparently straight-and-narrow path is more crooked than it seems. The victim of the murder Harry is investigating may well have got their just-desserts, for instance, and if the player chooses to arrest a prime suspect, there is a high chance she will be executed by the authoritarian elements of the regime. *Disco Elysium* does its utmost to deny the player certainty that they are playing the game in the correct way, or that it is even possible to play the game in a correct way. While we can point to many occasions where the game is funny, therefore – both through what it inflicts upon the player and what it permits the player to inflict upon others – the opportunity for benign violation is chiefly proffered as a way of navigating

the moral conundra that the story throws up. It insistently presents the player with the possibility that certain boundaries ought to be tested, even reconfigured, and gives them the means to do so. The jokes, such as they are, are deeply interwoven with the suffering of the game's characters, rather than offering a distraction from the grimness of the setting and story. Even at his most joyfully reprehensible, Harry DuBois must be played as a wreck of a man scrabbling around for some scrap of dignity.

'The first death is in the heart, Harry'

Mercifully, *Disco Elysium* does supply the player with something of a moral anchor in the form of Kim Kitsuragi, the player's partner in the murder investigation. While Kim will rarely intervene directly, even up to allowing the player to go through with suicide, his general demeanour, along with the sense and seriousness of his interjections, acts as something of a counterweight to the urge to act wildly. His presence at the player's side helps to keep them focussed on – and provides continual reassurance of the legitimacy of – the overall investigation. He is a source of useful information, and can provide assistance in other ways (he will sell his possessions to save Harry from having to sleep on the street, for instance). He is also one of *Disco Elysium*'s most private and intriguing characters, and unlike the NPCs of *Half-Life 2* is not indifferent to the player's antics (in fact, the extent of his trust in the player is recorded as a statistic that can affect key events in the story). For these reasons, it is difficult for the player to avoid wanting to remain on good terms with him, and looking to him for hints as to how the game should be played. For a violation to be benign, there must be a sense that punishment is neither necessary nor possible, and Kim's disfavour constitutes a kind of punishment.

Even in this respect, though, there is a degree of restraint which is crucial to *Disco Elysium*'s capacity to provide the player with meaningful moral agency. At one point, you can choose to have Harry convince himself he has manifested the power of teleportation and used it to materialise himself to the top of a tall building. "I did it, Kim! I teleported!" Harry says, to which Kim responds: "I just saw you climb the ladder! You just climbed it. Like a regular person." But the player is not in a position to confirm or deny either account; the act of either climbing or 'teleportation' is concealed by a cut to black. Kim may or may not be right. In such instances, the game simulates the experience of having to weigh one's trust in the judgement and authority of other human beings against one's own instincts and desire to move beyond established constraints.

How does this affect the player's understanding of *Disco Elysium* as an expressive work, in terms of the combination of narratorial and procedural rhetoric? To answer this, let us compare it to a game with similar themes and a structurally novel way of facilitating player choice, but which ultimately offers a much more conventional approach to imposing a moral framework upon the player. *The Forgotten City* (Modern Storyteller, 2021) is a first-person puzzle adventure game which volubly raises questions about what constitutes transgression against society. Like in *Disco Elysium*, the player begins by picking one of a number of specialisms for the game's protagonist (four, in this case), and is thereafter compelled to play the role of detective, figuring out what wrongdoings have happened (or are about to happen) by interviewing the residents of a locality and decisively intervening in their lives. The titular forgotten city is Roman, seemingly preserved in time, and is subject to a strange curse whereby the entire populace is punished if any one of them commits a crime – an edict known as The Golden Rule. The punishment takes the form of a sort of mass petrification; immediately after a crime is deemed to have been committed, gold statues of archers come to life and start loosing arrows that turn people into static, gilded (but still conscious) effigies of their former selves.

This fantastical contrivance helps to foreground the game's themes: does such a system ensure good behaviour and therefore produce an idyllic society? Is it fair? On what basis can something be objectively considered a crime? At some point in the game, the player discovers that kidnapping and incarcerating an innocent woman is not considered crossing the line. Impulsively taking an item from a street vendor's display without express permission, however, is, as is lingering too long in a private dwelling after being asked to leave. The arbitrariness of The Golden Rule is intentionally provocative, and leads to an ending in which the player is encouraged to resist and refute the logic behind it. On a narrative level, *The Forgotten City* has a clear message: rules sometimes need to be broken.

On a procedural level, The Golden Rule encourages the player to violate boundaries as means of advancement, since breaking it (by killing, stealing, trespassing and so on) results in them being able to return to the start of the game with new information and all their present possessions, putting them in a more powerful position. The player can easily make themselves rich, for example, by stealing items from a merchant, jumping back in time and then selling these items back to the same merchant. They can also map out the precise parameters of The Golden Rule, experiment with different dialogue options and allow different versions of the story to play out in order to understand exactly how the interactions of the various characters lead to different outcomes. Arguably, then, *The Forgotten City* provides us with a very clear example of benign violation as moral investigation, since it is only by overstepping explicit boundaries in this way that the player is able to solve the game's puzzles and uncover the argument it makes against moral absolutism.

Really, though, the time loop mechanic is a clever way to obfuscate the fact that the player must learn *not* to violate any rules. By replaying the same few hours of in-game narrative over and over, the player discovers that the only way to successfully proceed through its simulation of a day in the city is to take actions that are altruistic, law-abiding and non-disruptive in nature. While it initially grants the player an advantage, the time loop ultimately becomes a trap from which they must escape – by behaving in the most scrupulous manner possible. *The Forgotten City* has four possible endings, two of which are intentionally unsatisfying (the player and some others escape the city, but many are killed and The Golden Rule itself goes unchallenged). Another is utterly bleak (the player breaks the time loop, dooming everyone, including themselves and another character who had not even previously appeared in the game), while the remaining one, commonly regarded as the 'canon' ending, necessitates that the player discover and pass on the means to solve individual characters' various ailments and problems, acting as guardian angel, before confronting the god of the city and convincing him to release his captives. In the final interactive montage, the NPCs gather to thank the player individually for making a miraculous intervention. Most are shown to be living fulfilling lives in the present day, while the few ethically compromised characters are revealed to have received appropriate comeuppance.

The case *The Forgotten City* makes, therefore, via its procedural rhetoric (how it rewards and punishes the player through processes) is that one must act in a conventionally heroic fashion, with maximum decorum, and ideally have the benefit of supernatural insight, in order to produce a positive outcome. It is a slightly more convoluted approach to traditional video game morality, which holds that good people with pure intentions can save the world if only they are prepared to put in enough effort. Like most games that purport to be interested in a greater degree of moral complexity, and to allow the player the freedom to break social taboos, *The Forgotten City* actually reinforces those taboos by explicitly steering the player toward what it believes to be the best course of action.

In contrast, *Disco Elysium* pointedly refuses to use its systems of risk and reward to advise on the correct answer to most of the issues raised by its story and characters. In terms of growing the player's statistics, scurrilous antics and vaingloriousness are just as likely to produce positive feedback as cautious or sensible actions. It is this refusal to offer clear guidance that convincingly grants the player co-authorship of their acts of violation, so that unlike in *Braid* or *Limbo*, interactivity is not merely the means by which the game's message is played out upon the player but a fluid component of what that message is. To a much greater degree, the overall import of *Disco Elysium* as an expressive work is contingent on the player's emotional response to their own choices; the game does not end with the world set to right, and whether the majority of Harry's actions and preoccupations were justified remains a matter for contention, whichever choices the player makes. Merely by acting, by making those choices, the player can move toward the story's conclusion.

Against this background, it is possible for the player to arrive at the sense of having done the right thing, but in a manner that is much more personal than the feeling of righteousness offered by *The Forbidden City*. One example of this: at a mid-to-late stage in the game, the player has the option to deliver the news of a man's death to his widow. The incident may or may not have a bearing on the main case. If they want to, the player can insensitively rummage around in the widow's home for clues or useful items. Informing the widow of her husband's death in an appropriate way requires that the player pass a roll against their Empathy rating; even then they can choose to bluntly state that the husband has been dead for "Two days, maybe" while fully aware, through Harry's inner monologue, that if they choose that option "it will be etched in her mind forever". If the player manages this encounter in a sufficiently mature manner, they are told by Kim: "You did well" and earn 10 experience points – a meagre reward, but one which means more to the player the more they have come to value the affinity between Harry and Kim, and to regard any positive effect upon the game's NPCs as an end in itself. For the player to have reached this point they must have previously experimented with breaching decorum and found little procedural resistance. They will be aware that tactlessness goes almost entirely unpunished and any triumph they feel is therefore the result of the development of their own moral attitude toward the game's world and characters.

CONCLUSION

Benign violation theory describes a mechanism which enforces boundaries even as it appears to challenge them. As an explanation of a form of humour, it envisages an audience who accept (or are coaxed into accepting) the legitimacy of a rule or contract to the point where they require the assurance of a safe distance or lack of believability in order to enjoy the spectacle of that rule or contract being broken. To the extent any joke successfully challenges a boundary, therefore, it falters as a joke (for example, where its target is considered to be unjustly injured by it). In this respect, BVT does not immediately seem like a useful instrument for enabling or describing moral investigation.

If, on the other hand, we consider amusement to be only one possible outcome of benign violation, then we refigure it as a tool which can be used to test and unsettle boundaries in a way that affords a more sophisticated understanding of rule-based systems, including moral systems. In the example I use of players clowning around in *Half-Life 2*, the violation is directed against a system of meaning designed and deployed by the game developers; the players may enjoy and learn from the resulting disruption, but the conflict between the strategies of player and developer severely limits the potential for useful self-reflection. In the case of *Braid* or *Limbo*, the violations run in the opposite

direction; they are a fundamental part of these games' expressive agenda but they require the player to play the straight man and to 'get' the joke. In those examples, only the game is speaking. Only the game has moral authority. In *Disco Elysium*, however, the player acts on the invitation to violate, testing the boundaries of moral (and other) systems that are suggested, sketched out and pontificated upon by the game – and which closely resemble systems at large in the real world – but which are not enforced by the non-negotiable rules of the game. That is not to say that *Disco Elysium* has no consistent politics or underlying moral position on anything (I leave it to other theorists to detail these), but that the player's own experimentation with and resulting apprehension of the permeability of certain boundaries is permitted to intersect with any such underlying configuration to produce meaning. What *Disco Elysium* is 'about' depends in part on the results of the player engaging in acts of benign violation and, through such acts, formulating or developing their own ideas about what is justifiable or good. Video games are a medium uniquely placed to deliver such experiences, so long as developers can resist the habit of building procedural systems that explicitly reward only exemplary behaviour.

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