

Disclosure and the “Secret Underground Movement” - Analysing Queerness in *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* and its Place in the Quotidian

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider whether disclosure is necessary to engage with and experience queer elements of the third-person Role Playing Game (RPG) *Disco Elysium* (ZAUM, 2019). Drawing on Carr’s (2006, 2019) and Kuntz’s (2018) respective works on textual analysis and radical cartographies and using the conditionally-closeted characters Kim Kitsuragi and ‘Smoker on the Balcony’ as cyphers, we apply a feminist-materialist approach to isolate and analyse specific in-game elements and how they relate back to the player’s intersectional identity (Barad, 2003, 2006). Throughout, we lead with the assumption that the game, as with any other, contains queer elements, our work here being in their identification and analysis (see Shaw and Ruberg, 2017; Ruberg, 2019).

Disco Elysium is an isometric detective mystery set in Revachol, a bleak, post-war city populated by a colourful collection of downtrodden denizens. While played in the third-person, the game weaves together narratives and mechanics that blur the boundaries between a contained self and external world, utilised to depict issues around trauma, mental illness, and addiction, among others. This culminates in an experience that presents themes such

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as existential dread and moral ambiguity, experienced through the relative ethical malleability of the game's protagonist, detective Harrier ('Harry') Du Bois.

Instances of queerness in *Disco Elysium* are uncertain events that are encountered in a somewhat happenstance manner. Overt experiences of them rely on probability, signified by an in-game die roll, and are dependent on particular engagements with specific characters and their accompanying dialogue trees. Even when experienced within these constraints, it is still difficult to proclaim such encounters with queer in-game elements as obvious. The vast majority of them are ambiguous, relying heavily on player interpretation rather than overt exposition, and oftentimes differ between playthroughs. This is demonstrated, for instance, with Kim Kitsuragi, Du Bois' colleague who discloses that he identifies as a gay man only at the end of an optional, and easily missed, in-game quest.

Relatedly, the most overt instance of encountering queerness (independent of disclosure) in the game is with 'Smoker on the Balcony', a male escort who may eventually yield the 'Homo-Sexual Underground' Thought if interacted with enough. An in-game mechanic which denotes Harry's attempt at moving from an identified Problem to Solution, this particular Thought sees Harry try to resolve the Smoker's ambiguous sexual identity, initially conceptualised as a "conspiring against the state" (ZA/UM, 2019). Rather than offer any clear answers to this ambiguity, the Thought's Solution instead seems to critique Harry's (and the player's) quest for resolution, offering instead that "[m]aybe you should *stop* obsessing about your own -- and other people's -- sexuality?" (ibid.). Its Solution questions the need for the presentation of conspicuous, stable and easily-identifiable queer identities, problematising whether disclosure is even necessary to become entangled with a character's queerness in the first place.

Such ambiguity in *Disco Elysium* raises questions about how queer elements can be mapped to construct a cartography of queer entanglements with the game. This is complicated further by the constant (re)negotiation of such entanglements, leading to an instability of any mapping produced. Such work is contextually based, relying on our positionality as player-researchers, including the various identity markers we exist by and our embodied relationships with queerness that we bring to playthroughs of the game.

In an attempt at accounting for and potentially resolving these issues, we engage with relational inquiry informed by textual analysis, positioning our own subjective experiences as navigational tools for the identification of queer elements and resultant construction of queer mappings (see Ahmed, 2009; Keogh, 2018; Ruffino, 2020). Through our discussions on *Disco Elysium* structured by this methodology, we began to analyse our experience(s) of the game and the elements within it that we identified as queer (individually and collectively). We discovered that we had both deprioritised disclosure,

interpreting Harry's interactions with the Smoker as humorously and sincerely ignorant rather than as a quest for disclosure and revelation.

Such acts of entangled reflection with *Disco Elysium* also demonstrate how this analysis is a feminist-materialist adaptation of Sedgwick's (2003) ideas on paranoid and reparative readings of texts. Such acts, Sedgwick describes, are attempts by queer people at relating to a text while also minimising the harm of antagonistic representations (Sedgwick, 2003: 127, 150). Furthermore, paranoid and reparative readings frame knowledge as performative, demonstrating how queer readings of texts can (re)contextualise various elements as queer (ibid.: 124).

Exemplifying this, when discussing the 'Homo-Sexual Underground Thought' and how pursuing it eventually leads to Kitsuragi disclosing his queer identity, we felt that while neither of pursued the Smoker enough to access the Thought, we did not feel the need to access the disclosure it offered. For each of us, we realised that we had interpreted Kitsuragi as a queer character from the beginning of each of our playthroughs. We were already familiar with sideways glances and opaque conversations that he seemed to engage in with the Smoker, interpreting such as a potentially necessary measure to ensure queer safety. Thus, in engaging with such elements and characters, we brought our own embodied familiarity of queerness with us as players of the game, using it to isolate, identify and ultimately engage with queer elements within it.

To conclude, in this paper we provide an initial analysis of queer elements in *Disco Elysium* which relies on our own embodied knowledge of queerness. Specifically, we highlight how considerations of queer in-game elements and the necessity of disclosure to experience them are dependent on queer player-game entanglements. This we connect with Sedgwick's theory of paranoid/reparative readings, recontextualising it here through a feminist-materialist lens to better understand the interrelations between queer embodiments and the in-game elements they relate to. Through the characters of Kim Kitsuragi and the 'Smoker on the Balcony,' this allows us to provide an initial demonstration of how disclosure is dependent on, and requires a mapping of, these (re)negotiated entanglements in order to consider its necessity.

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