

***Disco Elysium*: Existential Reflection within Crisis**

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

At this juncture in the Anthropocene, marked by climate collapse, social inequality, and neoliberal exploitation, digital games emerge as a valuable tool for understanding contemporary anxieties and potential responses. By transforming crises into intersectional spaces for existential reflection and pleasure, they enable nuanced engagement with agency, identity, and systemic critique.

I critically assess this potential in the Estonian role-playing video game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019). I chose this 'deep game' (Rusch 2017) as a suitable example to show how games explore values and identity in the aftermath of ideological and physical ruin. The dialogue-intensive game establishes intermedial connections with cyberpunk literature while reflecting the post-Soviet era in Estonia, positioning the player as a murder investigator in an impoverished district within Revachol. Through its use of surrealistic and expressionist aesthetics, mythic metaphors, and complex decision-making, *Disco Elysium* interrogates themes of failure, resilience, ownership, and choice.

Existing research indicates that *Disco Elysium* lends itself to diverse interpretations. Kłosiński (2021) uses object-oriented ontology and hermeneutics to examine its design; Spies (2021) explores trauma and meaning through Camus' 'absurd'; Bodi and Thon (2020) focus on narrative and agency; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná (2023) discuss vocal performance in socio-critical storytelling. These studies highlight the game's narrative and aesthetic complexity, making it illustrative for research connecting narrative, ontology, and ethics.

However, the existing literature does not simultaneously merge analyses of game text, player reception, and developer intentions. Thus, I holistically analyse *Disco Elysium* for its existential qualities, and examine and compare the developer's intentions and players' interpretations to determine what the game conveyed and how. Ultimately, the game emerges as both a crafted, artistic, and philosophically existential work and a site for emergent, collective meaning through play and community discussion (Taylor 2006) on political, philosophical, ethical, and psychological issues (Sicart 2009).

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First, I conducted a critical playthrough of the game, followed by a textual analysis of its aesthetics, narrative, and mechanics. Then, I applied inductive thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) to data gathered from online sources on developer intentions and player reflections and interpretations.

Six developer interview transcriptions that explicitly addressed intentions were thematically analysed, revealing four core design priorities: social and political context, emotions, freedom, and mistakes and ownership.

Upon close reading, the game appears to draw on an existentialist framework in which identity and purpose are presented as self-discovering and self-defining (Sartre 1943), actively constructed through the choices players make. Like other RPG-games, it uses dice-roll-based skill checks against character statistics to determine narrative outcomes. This highly chance-based narrative journey of (re-)building an amnesiac character further highlights the *thrownness* often central in existential approaches (Heidegger 1962).

Indeed, the developers explicitly prioritise freedom of choice, aiming to create a space where players can pursue any idea or ideology, *“no matter how dark or controversial”*. My co-occurrence analysis further supports this reading, as sub-themes of ‘freedom’ consistently clustered with ‘player agency’, indicating deliberate commitment to autonomous, morally ambiguous gameplay design (Christiansen 2017). Crucially, freedom in this context was also closely associated with codes regarding mistakes and ownership, suggesting the value of experimenting with failure and reflecting on the significance of their choices (Heron and Belford 2014) in relation to the personality and ideology of their character.

But more than just personal struggle, the developers mirrored real-world problems rather than stereotypical tribulations in fantasy role-playing, to provide players with tools to address social, economic, and political issues. This reading thus builds on the well-established interpretation of games as socio-political texts and spaces for political experimentation and agency (Muriel and Crawford 2018; Oberle et al. 2020).

As the third element of the investigation, player data from the r/DiscoElysium subreddit, comprising 100 posts and 904 comments, was analysed. Reddit was chosen for its interactive dialogic discourse, which encompasses both opinions and factual information and challenges to others’ views, closely replicating Socratic dialogue and collaborative learning.

Four themes dominated user discussions: world context ($n=60$), skills progression ($n=41$), finding yourself ($n=37$), and emotions ($n=24$).

Players engaged most with the socio-political texture of Revachol, debating ideologically distinct playthroughs and opinions on systemic issues like racism, fascism, and capitalism, and recommending ways to engage with the skills system as a tool for shaping personality and identity.

The emerging pattern from developer interviews regarding freedom to personalise players’ journeys was also strongly reflected in user discussions. Players especially discussed skills progression ($n=41$), highlighting the different ways to advance one’s character and story: *“It’s at least doing one commie playthrough and one fashy playthrough”*, one player said. Players also discussed replayability and the pursuit of

darker, subsequent playthroughs. For example, one user's second playthrough was as a "total degenerate who takes every drug, accepts every bribe, discovered new areas already". In this regard, the notion of finding yourself ($n=37$) and its accompanying emotions ($n=24$) was notable. For example, one user described the game as an attempt to "fuse every bad trait in life with every kind of subtle feelings of human being". Player discussions of freedom and resilience intertwine with in-game mistakes and ownership of failure, directly aligning with the developers' deliberate framing of failure and selective agency as core design philosophies.

Overall, developers and players coalesced in their understandings of failure and freedom of choice amid moral, economic and socio-political disorder. The intention of designing a morally ambiguous space to create an existentially compelling and meaningful journey seems to have been conveyed successfully to the players. The community reflections show players engaging in deeply humanising and reflective discussions about their gameplay, often exploring ideas and concepts similar to those of the developers.

This line of inquiry highlights the transformations that arise as players navigate ambiguous and intersecting identities or ideologies in alternative gameplay and invites research into how such intersectional experiences are procedurally and aesthetically mediated to foster new ways of being and knowing within games. This analytical approach, as well as its findings, will be relevant for future studies of value-laden existential play, especially topical given civilisational crises arising from the interplay of environmental degradation, social inequality, and technological advancement.

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