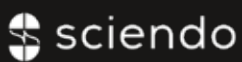# *Disco Elysium*
as Gothic fiction

sciendo

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ABSTRACT

Disco Elysium demonstrates many hallmarks of the Gothic through its storyline and representational elements, particularly its emphasis on the instability of its protagonist, the sense of decline and decay conveyed through its setting, and the interconnected secret histories that are revealed through exploration. Furthermore, many of the game's stylistic and ludic features, such as its dense description and emotive language, and its overwhelming array of options, interactions, and responses, can be understood as engagements with the uncanny and disorienting excess of the Gothic tradition. These Gothic elements manifest most frequently through the game's attempt to represent psychological complexity within its role playing system, its depictions of urban spaces, and its approach to questions of unresolved memory and history. The presence of these Gothic features in *Disco Elysium* work to contest the game's categorisation as a 'detective role playing game.' While the genres are closely connected, detective fiction typically follows a trajectory in which the history of the central mystery becomes progressively clearer through the accumulation of information and detail, whereas the Gothic traditionally seeks to maintain and heighten a sense of disorientation. Exploring the tension between *Disco Elysium*'s Gothic elements and its status as a detective game allows for a richer appreciation of the political and social commentary that emerges from both its narrative and gameplay.

ZA/UM Studio's *Disco Elysium* (2019) has been both marketed and critically received as a 'detective' computer role playing game (RPG), suggesting that its gameplay mechanics, environments, and narrative are designed to emulate the process of investigation and deduction that typifies works within the detective fiction genre, on both page and screen. The initial premise of the game sees the player taking control of an amnesiac detective in an alternative world. The player character awakens in Martinaise, a decaying seaside district in the alien city of Revachol and finds that they have been tasked with solving the murder of a mercenary employed by Wild Pines Shipping, a company that is locked in a labour dispute with the local Dock

Workers Union. While seemingly straightforward on the surface, the case involves them in political and jurisdictional conflicts, which ultimately connect to the complex history of the city itself. As the player investigates, they have the option to customise their character's personality, outlook and political orientation through their dialogue choices and the game's role playing system, while uncovering more information about the player character's past.

Although the game has been widely praised for its writing, world-building and innovative RPG mechanics (for example Kelly 2019; Wildgoose 2019), its status as a satisfying 'detective game' can be contested. In a *Kotaku* review, Jason Schreier argues that although the game abounds with choices, alternative paths and role playing possibilities, the structure of its central murder mystery is essentially linear, in that the player is funnelled towards some version of its solution, regardless of their success or failure in earlier gameplay tasks (Schreier 2019). Other generally positive reviews, such as Bell (2019) and Mysiak (2019), have also noted that the linearity of the game's murder mystery plotline detracts from its effectiveness. Furthermore, the ending involves a controversial twist, in that the murderer turns out to be an entirely new character introduced late in the narrative – a deserter from Revachol's long vanquished Communist revolution, who has been living in hiding on the margins of the city. In addition, the player will discover that the Deserter killed his victim on a jealous whim, rather than as a part of the industrial conflict that the player has spent much of the game unravelling. In a *Medium* article that specifically examines the game's ending, P.J. Judge argues that players and critical commentators have found it disappointing because it appears to violate the principle of 'fair play' in detective fiction (Judge 2019). This is the assumption that the reader will have a reasonable chance to solve the central mystery for themselves before the answer is revealed, based on the clues unearthed by the detective protagonist, and this argu-

ably remains an expectation for the genre, from the classic 'whodunits' of the early twentieth century to the more contemporary police procedural (Priestman 2013). Other detective games, like *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes and Punishments* (2014) and *Paradise Killer* (2020), have been praised for their strict adherence to this principle, in that they provide players with the opportunity to construct and choose between multiple potential solutions to their central mysteries based on their discovery and interpretation of evidence (Jones 2014; Skrebels 2020). By contrast, *Disco Elysium* introduces a culprit from outside the established pool of suspects in its denouement, meaning that the player has no real opportunity to reconstruct the hidden narrative of the crime for themselves before its true structure is revealed. In addition to appearing 'unfair' by the standards of detective fiction, this also has the potential to feel underwhelming or deflationary for players, as Jake Arias observes in a critique of the game's ending (Arias 2019). Rather than unravelling a complex, interconnected conspiracy, it is revealed that the player has been engaging with largely disconnected events, which would be considered 'red herrings' in a classic detective story.

It would not necessarily be mistaken to criticise the video game because of its ending, as the atmosphere and tropes of detective fiction are clearly important to *Disco Elysium*. What such criticism would overlook, however, are the ways in which *Disco Elysium* can also be understood as a distinctively Gothic video game. Where the classic detective story typically uses the development of its central mystery to underscore the intelligence of its protagonist and their logical process, the Gothic often focuses on a protagonist whose rational agency is impeded or constrained (Krzywinska 2015). In contrast to the formulaic order of the detective story, the Gothic mystery provides an experience of the irrational, usually keeping both protagonist and reader in a state of suspenseful uncertainty, until it is cathartically resolved, typically in the form of a dramatic

confession or the discovery of previously unknown information (McCracken 1998). There is a clear tension at work in *Disco Elysium* between its Gothic elements and its status as a detective game and exploring this allows for a richer appreciation of the layers of political and social commentary that emerge from both its narrative and gameplay. This article will examine how the Gothic tradition permeates the game's approach to RPG mechanics, its depiction of urban space, and its engagements with memory and history.

THE GOTHIC IN VIDEO GAMES

Gothic narratives emerged in the 18th century as popular, escapist works that were defined by sensationalist plots, implied or explicit supernatural elements, and their emphasis on dramatic landscapes and architecture. In contrast to realist literature's fascination with the contemporary, Gothic literature typically looked backwards, being either set in the past or focusing on its remnants: ruins, crypts, and castles, secret histories and aristocratic lineages (Smith 2013). As the form developed, more diverse Gothic works tended to emphasise some of its characteristic elements - mystery, romantic or forbidden love, medievalism, the supernatural, and the grotesque and the uncanny - to greater or lesser degrees. This made the Gothic foundational to the development of later traditions of popular fiction, such as horror, fantasy, romance, and the detective story itself (McCracken 1998). As Tanya Krzywinska (2015) notes, the later diffusion of Gothic forms and figures makes absolute categorisation difficult. Rather than operating as a distinct genre of fiction, the Gothic persists in contemporary media as a mood or atmosphere of dread, menace, and disorientation, usually created through the sense of the past as a barbaric or terrifying force, which invades or overwrites the mundane present (Hutchings 1996). This typically involves the transformation of the familiar into something strange or menacing, which marks the Gothic as an uncanny mode of literature, as discussed by Sigmund Freud

(Smith 2013). Furthermore, whether the past manifests as a curse, haunting, legacy, or repressed history, it will typically have a destabilising effect on the protagonist, leading them to realise that their agency is constrained, controlled or limited in some way by its intrusion (Kirkland 2013).

Aspects of a Gothic sensibility are easily translatable into video games. The dark, dramatic landscapes and brooding atmosphere that characterise the Gothic are often drawn upon in visual and environmental game design (Krzywinska 2015). Additionally, the vast architectural spaces often found in video games often recall the labyrinthine castles, dungeons, and prisons of Gothic literature (Kirkland 2013). Simon Niedenthal (2009) also notes that many video games also replicate the uncanny treatment of urban environments and pastoral landscapes in later Gothic literature and cinema, where seemingly non-exotic spaces are made to seem strange and threatening. The psychological elements of the Gothic, however, are more challenging to translate into gameplay. Krzywinska argues that the protagonists of Gothic narratives are typically flawed or false heroes, often morally compromised, disturbed, and doomed to succumb to some form of entropy or tragedy. Kirkland similarly notes that the erosion, instability, and constrained agency typically experienced by Gothic protagonists is at odds with the usual trajectory of success and accomplishment found in video games. Krzywinska argues that while many video games feature surface-level or decorative engagements with the Gothic, it is much harder to find games that offer their players a genuinely Gothic experience by providing the disorienting and alienating qualities associated with Gothic fiction through their narrative and gameplay. Both Kirkland and Krzywinska affirm that the few that do so are situated largely within the survival horror subcategory of video games, which aims to evoke a sense of mystery, dread and disempowerment. Bernard Perron (2018) notes that survival horror titles remediate many aspects of Gothic literature into

gameplay, through mechanics and environmental design that destabilise the player by preventing mastery and obfuscating vision. Their often minimalistic and mysterious narratives also frequently explore the Gothic transgression of the boundaries between past and present, with the player being challenged to reconstruct the history of ruined locations through their discovery of letters, diaries, and other documents.

Disco Elysium takes an alternative and unusual approach to the Gothic experience in its narrative, environmental design, and gameplay, one that builds out of - but also works to subvert – its status as a both a detective game and an RPG. Rather than creating a sense of Gothic disorientation through the minimalism and restricted gameplay found in survival horror titles, Disco Elysium offers players an abundance of information and gameplay options. Reviewers have noted the occasionally overwhelming verbosity of the game's writing – where simple activities and interactions can unfold into extended paragraphs of description and internal reflection (Bell 2019). These elements are in keeping with the literary origins of the Gothic. As Marshall Brown (2005) argues, early Gothic novels were often notable for their density, with extended descriptive passages often pausing the momentum of the narrative to accentuate suspense. In following this tradition, Disco Elysium replicates the stylistic uncanniness of Gothic literature. The dense, descriptive passages found in Gothic works do not create a more assured sense of familiarity and knowledge, but rather heighten the reader's suspenseful disorientation and uncertainty (McCracken 1998). In a similar way, Disco Elysium's constant stream of information often works to accentuate the game's mysteries rather than resolve them. This contrasts with the familiar trajectories of both detective stories and RPGs, where the acquisition and application of knowledge typically results in greater security and confidence. The game's innovative role playing system is an important component of this approach in that its complexity and wealth of options and

skill combinations ultimately works to capture the fragmented and unstable mindset of the Gothic protagonist, undermining the player's expectations of development toward mastery.

GOTHIC ROLE PLAYING IN *DISCO ELYSIUM*

Disco Elysium's role playing system provides an uncanny variation on the customary gameplay of RPGs. RPG video games usually offer players a very clear trajectory of empowerment and advancement, with gameplay rewards being directly and explicitly reinvested in the improvement of player's in-game avatar(s). *Disco Elysium*'s role playing system works to complicate this by splintering the usually simplified and holistic RPG attributes of the player character into a complex multitude. In most RPGs, the various attributes and statistics have clearly defined functions and boundaries, usually working to improve performance in specific gameplay tasks. In *Disco Elysium,* the utility of many of the player's skills is deliberately unclear. Attributes in the game are grouped under four broad areas: Intellect (the player character's rational qualities), Psyche (their emotional qualities), Physique (their physical strength and endurance) and Motorics (their co-ordination and presence in the game world), which each have a set of skills attached to them. However, the skills do not have discrete and individualised gameplay functions but overlap with one another. Non-player characters (NPCs) may be persuaded using the Suggestion, Empathy and Authority skills under the Psyche attribute, but also, depending on the context, through the Rhetoric and Drama skills under Intellect, or the Savoir Faire skill under Motorics. The player character's alertness to their environment is governed by the traditional Perception skill under Motorics, but also by the Half Light skill under Physique, which measures their alertness to physical threats, and the Visual Calculus skill from Intellect, which gauges their ability to measure size and distance. The abundance of overlapping skills makes the player's

progression through the game unclear and disorienting – it is harder than normal to anticipate which skills will be useful in any given situation.

Adding to this complexity is the fact that each skill has its own 'voice' and will talk to the player, advising them on how to approach challenges and debating or contesting the claims of the other skills. Assigning experience points to improve a particular skill will make its voice stronger and it will interject more regularly to encourage its use, shaping the player's understanding of the game world and its environment. The competition and conversation between the various skills creates a sense of a fractured and unbalanced mindset, very much in keeping with the Gothic tradition. In her exploration of the Gothic elements of survival horror games, Krzywinska (2015) notes that the systems, mechanics, and algorithms of video games, which are usually comforting, fair and reliable, can be made to function as 'occulted forces' that constrain and direct the player. This supports Laurie Taylor's (2009) argument that as the Gothic is principally concerned with the transgression of the boundaries that define traditional power structures, the 'ludic-gothic' is best expressed through gameplay mechanics that disrupt the player's expectation of control and mastery. *Disco Elysium's* role playing system demonstrates how this can operate in an RPG. Rather than acting as simple gameplay tools to aid the player's advancement, the skills and attributes in *Disco Elysium* threaten to impinge upon the player's agency, creating the appropriately Gothic sense of not being entirely in control.

This system affects the game's status as a work of detective fiction as well, using elements of a 'gamified' Gothic to challenge the formulaic assuredness of the genre. Mary Evans argues that detective characters often act or behave as 'secular gods' in the classic detective story (Evans 2009 p.74). Their judgements and deductions are always presented as absolute and infallible, usually by virtue of the audience having access to the same information that

they do and being able to follow or even anticipate their reconstruction of the crime. Furthermore, the protagonists of classic detective stories are often presented as apolitical in their pursuit of the criminal, being more interested in the remote intellectual challenge of revealing the truth than in passing moral judgement on the crime (Evans 2009). The Gothic gameplay of *Disco Elysium* subverts this expectation of control and objectivity, presenting a detective protagonist who is flawed and fractured, and frequently subject to the biased and subjective influences represented by the game's various skills and attributes. Furthermore, the apolitical pretence of objectively rational deduction is challenged by the revelation that the skills that the player may depend on for their investigation have their own political leanings. The Intellect skills, particularly Rhetoric, often encourage the player to take left-wing political positions, whereas the Psyche skills, which largely focus on interpersonal relations and self-control, favour moderate and centrist philosophies. Physique skills, which push towards aggression and instinct, may nudge the player to adopt nationalist, racist or even fascistic viewpoints, where the Motorics skills, which focus on the player character's comfort, confidence, and coordination within the game world, are sympathetic to economic liberalism and capitalism. As the game progresses and particular skills or attributes are increased, their voices may use these political positions as frameworks for understanding events and characters. Leveling up skills in the fashion common to RPGs may cause the player to be swayed or infected by the covert or explicit politics that inform them. This emphasises how the Gothic elements of *Disco Elysium* – where the player's agency and autonomy is threatened by the prospect of irrational 'occulted forces' – subvert and critique the supposedly apolitical nature of RPG gameplay systems (which attempt to reduce internal human complexities down to a set of numeric abstractions that the player can then apply to fulfill their own agenda) and detective fiction more generally (which

suggests that a rational, objective order and system of justice can be imposed upon the world). The Gothic in *Disco Elysium* - as it manifests in both gameplay, environmental design, dialogue and narrative – is used to explore the inescapable influence of political forces and history upon the actions of the player, puncturing their expectations of independent, empowered agency. This is captured not only through the game's uncanny role playing system, but also through the player's engagement with its urban setting.

URBAN ENVIRONMENTS AND GOTHIC MARXISM

While early Gothic narratives often focused on dramatically isolated, rural locations, the Gothic made a turn towards the urban in the Victorian period, exploring cities as labyrinthine locations divided by disorienting dualities. According to Evans (2009), the city plays a fractured role in the detective fiction that begins to evolve out of the Gothic tradition in the Victorian era. At one level, the detective protagonist must be knowledgeable and comfortable within the city, to see beneath the masks of its various social worlds and apprehend its histories. At another, the city and its secrets are often transformed into something menacing and strange, reflecting the bourgeois fear of having to confront and explore the origins of wealth. As Ljubica Matek (2020) argues, the rise of the city is inevitably linked with capital and its accumulation, and the history that is hidden beneath its seemingly familiar, ordered, and progressive surface is often one of irrational destruction and exploitation. As the player explores the urban setting of *Disco Elysium,* they experience the city as an environment where the past constantly intrudes upon and threatens the present.

In *Disco Elysium*, the ruined and fractured environment of the district of Martinaise consists of multiple layers and networks. On the surface, there are the remnants of failed business enterprises, factories, and the abandoned domiciles of their workers. As Turl (2015) notes, capital-

ism constantly produces ruins from its own former edifices as wealth and capital are consolidated in fewer and fewer hands. But whether by indifference or superstitious dread, the citizens of Martinaise generally avoid acknowledging these abandoned spaces. This kind of unseeing is, as Henri Lefebvre (1976) argues, essential to the survival of capitalism, which must obscure how its systems are designed to ensure that wealth is consolidated, and the rich get richer. Plunging deeper, the player is also forced to confront the history of the war that defined Revachol and still scars the district of Martinaise, where a short-lived Communist revolution was violently stamped out. Where the first layer of ruins results from the deterministic 'rationality' of capitalism – competition and consolidation – the second layer reveals its brutal and coercive irrational qualities, its ruthless and total suppression of alternatives. As Perron (2018) and others note, the Gothic is often expressed in videogames through the player's exploration of apocalyptically ruined and abandoned environments and their reconstruction of tragic histories. By contrast, in *Disco Elysium*, the player is exploring a living city where the ruins of the past are an accepted, if overlooked, element of its ordinary environment. The player's role in the game as a detective and RPG protagonist requires them to break down the divisions between past and present in an urban space, revealing the history of exploitation and violence that underpins it. This supports Taylor's (2009) contention that the Gothic in games and other media typically operates as a process through which the boundaries and categories that support normal power relations are challenged.

Through the depiction of Martinaise's ruins and their associated ghosts and terrors, *Disco Elysium* arguably expresses a kind of Gothic Marxism, as defined by Margaret Cohen. In *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (1994), Cohen argues that the Gothic imagination provides a framework for expanding Marxist critique beyond vulgar materialism and connecting it to psycho-

analytic perspectives through the exploration of seemingly irrational beliefs and associations. Cohen maintains that the haunting, uncanny images and experiences that are examined and expressed in Gothic depictions of urban space can potentially operate as a powerful mode of social critique. The Gothic Marxism that Cohen advocates for, with its focus on ruins, oppression, and madness, underscores how supressed, ignored, or erased histories will inevitably return through irrational fears and anxieties. Classic detective fiction, by contrast, with its assumption of a discoverable order and rationality, comforts its readers by suggesting that the mystery of a city can be solved, that a capable individual can read and master it (Frisby 2001). The Gothic Marxist perspective that is expressed through the player's exploration of the ruins of Revachol in *Disco Elysium* does not offer any such assurance. As they encounter the detritus of capitalist progress in the city – the dusty office supplies and abandoned industrial tools, the bullet and crater holes in the streets of Martinaise, the collapsed bunkers and fortifications on the coast beyond the district – the player's vocal skills imbue these remnants with a sense of threat and uncanniness by offering political and emotional commentary upon the traumas they evoke, and even allowing or forcing the player character to relive them. Rather than working to rationally 'solve' the mystery of the city, the players' various skills leave them open to experiencing the terror and menace of its buried, fragmented past, and the forms of critique conveyed through such encounters. In this sense, *Disco Elysium*'s gameplay and RPG mechanics operate as a 'gothic-ludic' transgression of the boundaries between past and present in the manner described by Taylor (2009).

GOTHIC MEMORY IN *DISCO ELYSIUM*

The sudden and destabilising intrusions of the past as the player explores *Disco Elysium*'s ruined urban environment further underscores how the game operates more as a Gothic hybrid than as a work of pure detective fiction. The Gothic and the detective story are both narrative forms that emphasise the importance of the past and its influence on the present, albeit in quite different ways. Classic detective stories generally adhere to Tzvetan Todorov's two-story structure. The first story is that of the crime (the *fabula*), which takes place in the past, and which is typically hidden from the reader. The second story is that of the detection (the *syuzhet*), or the plot that the reader follows, which reconstructs the first story (Todorov 1977). This structure gradually leads both the detective protagonist and the audience to clear and objective knowledge of the history of the crime by the end of the narrative, allowing for the reassertion of rational order and justice. By contrast, the Gothic is typically more interested in the experience of the uncertainty and disorientation caused by the past's uncanny influence on the present than the process of rationally reconstructing a hidden narrative. In *Disco Elysium*, the player character can spend as much or more time emotionally reliving the traumas of both their personal past and the political history of the city, than deductively reconstructing a timeline of events. The investigation of crime scenes using Perception and Visual Calculus populates them with transparent, ghostly figures; realising that the tattoos on the murder victim's body are a map of his military service may lead the player character to have a momentary, visceral experience of a wartime atrocity; and the discovery of an apricot scented chewing gum wrapper – a trace of the player character's lost love – results in a lingering, olfactory haunting that pursues the player throughout the game. In the classic detective story, the protagonist reconstructs the hidden past narrative through ordered, rational deduction. The protagonist's objectivity means that the boundaries between past and present are maintained – they are discrete and separable. However, the literal and metaphorical hauntings of the Gothic bring the past into the present, and both the protagonist and the audience are made to feel its presence. The player's passage through the game is

essentially 'hauntological', to borrow a term from Jacques Derrida (1994), who considers the Gothic haunting – the literalised encounter with the memory of the past – to be a potentially transformative mode of representation. Derrida coined the term 'hauntology' to describe the way in which memory hovers between the past and the present and operates as an act of translation. Memory of the past, for Derrida, is different from knowledge of it. Memory – whether first or second hand – is not passive and abstract, but active and emotional. It involves a reliving of the past, it brings it back into the present, and breaks down the binary opposition between the two.

The discovery of the murderer's identity then – as the Communist Deserter who is not seen or mentioned until the climax of the game – fails from a detective fiction perspective, in that the *fabula* cannot be logically reconstructed by either protagonist or audience and can only be anticlimactically revealed. Viewed through a Gothic lens, however, this trajectory makes perfect sense, operating as the recognition or unveiling of a ghost. The Deserter represents the unresolved past that can be ignored but refuses to vanish entirely – the history of capitalist brutality and consolidation that has made Revachol the city that it is. The player discovers that the Deserter has been figuratively haunting the city, moving through its ignored and neglected ruins, and resenting its citizens for their wilful forgetfulness. At the end of the narrative, the Deserter also serves as ghostly double for the player character, who, it is revealed, has been repeatedly losing and regaining their memory as they attempt to free themselves from the past, but are constantly drawn back to the knowledge of their lost love. The presence of the double – a version of the familiar self that is externalised and rendered strange – is a common element of Gothic narratives and identified by Freud as a distinct manifestation of the uncanny (Smith 2013). This uncanny doubling can arguably present itself in videogames through the player's control over their avatar. Michael Hancock (2016) argues that the player's control is

always haunted by the memory of past failure and the anticipation of future success, and that this ludic transgression of the boundaries of past and present can be read as Gothic when it is diegetically acknowledged within the videogame itself. *Disco Elysium* does so through the player's confrontation with the previously unseen Deserter. They have been unknowingly shadowing each other throughout the narrative, and like the player character, who has been repetitively losing his memory and repeating the same mistakes, the Deserter has spent his life 'replaying' the same game, refighting a long-lost war over increasingly small and petty territory. Both the player character and the Deserter are revealed as men who are trapped in the past by resentments and old traumas, as ghosts who are condemned to haunt the present.

The dangerous and uncanny potential of unresolved memory is also expressed through the metaphysical conceit of *Disco Elysium*'s setting. Through their investigations, the player may discover that the 'reality' of their world is surrounded by swathes of 'unreality' – a territory known as 'the Pale'. Passage through it is possible, but repeated exposure causes travellers to relive their memories in a distorted fashion, which can fundamentally shift their identity and personality. Prolonged exposure to the Pale 'irradiates' the mind with memories, bringing them vividly to life but also causing them to be eventually erased and forgotten, wiping away the person that was. Depending on their actions, the player may learn that the Pale is expanding, threatening to wipe away the shrinking islands of reality in an apocalypse of irradiated memory. According to a mysterious creature encountered late in the game – the phasmid – the growth of the Pale results from the neurosis of humankind, their collective inability to reconcile themselves with their own history, their desire to supress or ignore memory.

At the end of *Disco Elysium*'s narrative, after confronting the Gothic spectre of unresolved memory in the form of the Deserter and knowledge of the Pale, the player character may opt for change. Their

uncanny reliving of the past – in the player character's investigations of the murder and the wider context of the city around it, and in their own dreams, associations, and instinctive actions – can be taken as prompting a transformation of some kind. In keeping with Derrida's approach to memory, the hauntological movements and reflections of the player character may allow them to reshape themselves into something new. The game potentially ends with the spectre of a mysteriously defined 'Return' that will disrupt the capitalist status quo (possibly through the revival of either Communism or Revacholian nationalism) and hints at the player character's possible role in it. In contrast to the ahistoricality of bourgeois capitalism, with its repeated suppressions of past failures and vampiric revivals through the shedding or repression of memory, the player's hauntological investigation creates at least the possibility of reconciliation and transformation before the past apocalyptically subsumes the present.

CONCLUSION

Some of the critical responses and conversations around *Disco Elysium*'s conclusion and its failure to satisfy as a work of detective fiction are a based on an incomplete reading of the game. To focus exclusively on its adherence to the rules and logic of detective fiction – or to even attempt to impose such rules on a perpetually disorienting and uncanny setting – is to overlook the game's distinctively Gothic elements. The influence of the Gothic runs through the game's approach to the role playing subcategory of video game, in its creation of a system that repeatedly suspends or contests the player's agency and through its gameplay style, which layers text with disorienting detail to overwhelm the player. Most powerfully, however, in terms of its commentary and the experience of play that it offers, it engages with the Gothic's fixation on the past and its menacing capacity to intrude upon the present. This is explored through the architecture of the game's setting with its layers of commercial, industrial and wartime ruins, and the ultimate resolution of the murder mystery narrative. This fixation on not just reconstructing the past in the form of discrete and definable knowledge, as per detective story conventions, but rather on uncannily experiencing its permeation of the present, operates as an important element of the game's commentary. Through its spectral, essentially Gothic engagements with unresolved memory, *Disco Elysium* disrupts the boundaries between past and present and the personal and the political within its narrative. Doing so disputes and subverts the comforting expectations of order, rationality, and fairness in detective narratives, in ways that embrace Derrida's perception of the Gothic as a potentially transformative mode of fiction.

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