

In Focus

“Making Sense in a Senseless World”: *Disco Elysium*’s Absurd Hero



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of mental health issues in the computer role-playing game *Disco Elysium* by using Albert Camus' theory of the absurd as a basis. Through his daily work routine as a detective, the protagonist Harry DuBois' trauma unfolds through the course of the game while simultaneously revealing the psychosocial aspects of trauma. Interpreting Harry's existential struggles as those of an absurd hero supports the idea that finding (greater) meaning is not a necessity when coping with trauma.

I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end. (Albert Camus: Life of Sisyphus)

The limbed and headed machine of pain and undignified suffering is firing up again. It wants to walk the desert. Hurting. Longing. Dancing to disco music. (Ancient Reptilian Brain: Disco Elysium)

When looking at the subject matter of mental health issues in video games, particularly psychological trauma, it is apparent that in most instances their depiction is quite problematic, as many games fall short of portraying the complexity and peculiarity of these issues (Smethurst 2015; Kuznetsova 2018). This applies especially to the genre of computer role playing games (cRPGs). Although cRPGs usually offer a wide variation of distinctive attributes and skills to choose from when creating the player's avatar or character, they are mostly not mental health related, and if they are, they usually affect the avatar in negative ways only. For example, the *sanity system* of the cRPG *Stygian: Reign of the Old Ones* (Cultic Games 2019), measures the mental health of party members: when reach-

ing critical lows, characters tend to miss attacks, drop their weapons, act randomly or freeze up.

I argue that, unlike other cRPGs, *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019) utilises the genre's possibilities in various ways to represent trauma as an existential wound with both a psychological and social dimension, meaning that trauma is constructed as a phenomenon which affects not only the individual, but also the community as a whole. For the protagonist Harrier Harry Du Bois, who attributes his trauma to subjective incidents, coming to terms with the *psychosocial* component of this trauma is a process that shapes the whole game experience. Previous research explained how the *gameplay situation* (Kania 2017) as the intentional unity between the playing subject and the gameworld allows virtual world experience to gain existential significance (Möring 2013; Gualeni, Vella 2020; Leino 2020). Understanding the own perceptual situatedness within a virtual world and towards the avatar can establish a ground for reflection (Kania 2017). In the case of *Disco Elysium*, it can broaden the understanding of living with mental health issues: the gameplay of the cRPG gives opportunities to show the complexity of (*psychosocial*) trauma and, thus, the chance to challenge the player's view on the topic.

Analysing the protagonist's struggles with finding a (new) identity in dependence of social structures in "the hell of the present," Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2005; originally published 1942) will be used as a theoretical foundation. Drawing on existentialist theorists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus' essay allows us to recognise the absurd element of a traumatic intrusion. As will be shown in this analysis, going on the existential journey of coming to terms with traumatisation [the journey of an absurd hero as Camus describes him], holds the potential to revolt against trauma for those suffering from it. In *Disco Elysium*, it is through facing the absurdity of his daily struggles and the process of becoming an absurd hero within the terms of Camus' theory that Harry Du Bois becomes capable of dealing with his past trauma while simultaneously dealing with the world in which he lives.

ROLLING THE BOULDER, HAPPILY: CAMUS' INTERPRETATION OF THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

Existential psychoanalysis examines existence and the role the individual plays in terms of his or her feelings, thoughts, and responsibilities (Ricablanca, Gabutan, Nabua 2019). From this humanistic-existentialist perspective, trauma – a term deriving from the Ancient Greek τραῦμα, indicating a serious injury not only to the body but also the psyche – is an invisible wound, "left by an experience that disrupted the person's previous relationship to self, to others, and to the world" (Vachon, Bessette 2016; see also Greening 1990). Therefore, Camus' description of the absurd can be equated to an existential traumatic intrusion, when viewed as an experience which calls into question an individual's existing framework of meaning and sense:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an

alien, a stranger. [...] This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus 2005: 4–5)

According to Camus, an individual experiencing absurdity and therefore trauma as a shattered relationship with existence itself, may choose from three options: suicide, taking flight into hope or accepting the absurdity of existence. Camus, however, rejects suicide categorically, referring to it as "repudiation" (*ibid.*: 53) – one can only pretend to evade the absurdity of existence through committing suicide; rather, resignation to the "certainty of a crushing fate" (*ibid.*: 52) includes its final recognition: "Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history" (*ibid.*: 68). Hope, on the other hand, is characterised as a "fatal evasion," (*ibid.*: 7) and, thus, negatively connoted, in that it renounces the here and now by referring to something which is yet to happen (e.g. a great idea) or may never happen at all (e.g. another life/ life after death).

Finally, constant revolt, as exemplified by the fate of Camus' Sisyphus, constitutes a third option. According to the most common interpretation of Greek mythology, Sisyphus attempted to outsmart death, an arrogant act for which he was punished by the gods. Sisyphus was condemned for all eternity to roll a boulder up to the top of a hill, only for it to keep rolling back down into the valley. Although the Sisyphean task has served as a metaphor for meaningless and futile tasks until today, Camus reinterprets Sisyphus' fate as a happy one (2005: 119), appointing him as the prototypical absurd hero: "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing" (*ibid.*: 116). Unable to resort to suicide or hope, Sisyphus is only left with facing the task itself and completing it. This, in turn, defines him, becoming part of his being. Aware of his situation, Sisyphus,

through constant revolt, can accept the inherent absurdity of his fate:

And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). [...] The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to. (*ibid.*: 29-30)

All three options – committing suicide, taking flight into hope and constant revolt against the absurdism of existence – are also available for Harry Du Bois as a human being who tries to cope with his trauma.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ABSURD: THE POTENTIAL OF THE ANTI-HERO

Harry is not the type of hero usually depicted in video games. He does not possess any extraordinary skills or talents, nor does he have a discernible calling that would distinguish him from the rest of the population. As a lieutenant of the *Citizens Militia*, he arrives in Revachol, the working district of the city Martinaise, to solve a murder. Entrenched with grief over missed chances and opportunities, the neighbourhood, stuck in the past, mirrors Harry's identity crisis as a traumatic "wound that won't heal," (Hadden 2019) making it impossible to look towards the future. Afflicted with total amnesia, Harry (and with him the player) has a *psychosocial* puzzle to solve, in which his personal traumatisation merges with the city's collective trauma: "In the course of putting your character's memories back together, you also put together the pieces of Revachol" (Evans-Thirlwell 2019).

So far, Harry has mainly displayed signs of escapism, repeatedly attempting to withdraw from life. Only single clues, gathered through exploring the environ-

ment and conversing with others, provide a fragmented image of the *pre-game* Harry, who, in an act of toxic denial, had virtually drunken himself into a state of unconsciousness, trying to escape the feeling of absurdity. Following his excessive night out, he does not want to awake from this comatose state, using drugs and alcohol to escape any kind of conscious awareness. There are clues of multiple suicide attempts. While drunk, Harry drove his car into a canal, potentially on purpose. The tie dangling from the ceiling fan in his motel room suggests that Harry may have attempted to hang himself, a notion that is further solidified by Harry's dream of being the murder victim hanging by a tree.

Though Harry seems to be having continued suicidal thoughts, he, in fact, thinks of suicide as a theoretical option only, which gives a prospect of improvement, as contradictory as that may sound at first. The unique *thought cabinet* in *Disco Elysium* can be characterised as an inventory for ideas and ideals. When Harry explores a thought called "Finger on the Eject Button," the idea of committing suicide appears to him every evening (if the player chooses this option, the game ends); however, at the same time he receives bonuses on the authority skill (+2: *Nothing to lose*) and the suggestion skill (+2: *I always liked you the best*). Both Harry's self-esteem and confidence grow knowing that he is in full control of choosing life and the fact that he has repeatedly chosen life before: "In that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth which is defiance" (Camus 2005: 53).

Following the nullifying of his self-induced amnesia, Harry, who is initially robbed of a future and a past, now is discovering the world with naivety and almost childlike curiosity. In his seemingly limited trauma universe, "beyond which all is collapse and nothingness," (Camus 2005: 58) life means "[n]othing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given" (*ibid.*). A traumatised Harry defiantly faces a traumatised world, his revolt "[...] is that constant presence of man in his own eyes.

It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (*ibid.*: 52). With nothing left to lose, Harry relentlessly engages with, and is fascinated by, Revachol’s lost individuals: underground revolutionaries, tradespeople struggling to survive, minors dealing with drugs, abandoned elderly people. Not only can Harry interact with them, but he can also influence their fate both positively and negatively.

Detached from any pursuit of greater purpose, Harry’s existence is determined by daily, often mundane, societal work. His Sisyphean task is “[...] his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgement but his own” (Camus 2005: 64). Hopelessness, rejection, and dissatisfaction – traits that mark the anti-hero in classic detective stories – are reasons for his “inner freedom,” (*ibid.*: 56) allowing Harry to choose unorthodox methods and to persistently pursue goals and tasks that others would consider insignificant. From this, he derives meaningful conclusions regarding the peculiarities both of the world and its society. Ultimately, a renewed world view can, in turn, change Harry’s rigid self-image: the absurd “[...] restores and magnifies [...] my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man’s availability,” (*ibid.*: 55) an availability that may lead to a confrontation with the (inter-) subjective aspects of trauma.

DEALING WITH TRAUMA: IN THE CENTRE OF NOTHINGNESS

In *Disco Elysium*, trauma permeates the world not only metaphorically, but as a physical phenomenon. In the *Dolorian Church of Humanity*, a mysterious formation called the *Pale*, which is said to consist of nothingness and is devoid of any matter, leaks through a tiny hole. It devours any noise in its vicinity. It is no coincidence that in *Disco Elysium* this nothingness manifests itself in a place of lost spirituality: the church has been long abandoned, faith – and with it hope – have no place in

Martinaise. Merely an old mural depicting the revered saviour Dolores Dei, a leader of the failed revolution, is reminiscent of the original purpose of the building. Finding salvation through a religious leader appears to be a relic of the past, leaving behind an existential hole that needs to be filled – a hole that also trauma can tear into an individual’s existence.

When equating the hole, through which the *Pale* enters the church, to a subject’s or social collective’s traumatic intrusion, an alignment towards the present and future is only made possible by creating a juxtaposition to the trauma’s silencing “speechless terror” (Kolk, Hart 1995: 172). In the case of *Disco Elysium* this juxtaposition is created by music: “And not just any music: noisy, urgent rave. Youth music. If the old world is leaking, *Disco Elysium* seems to say, plug it with the new” (Hadden 2019). Rave started as a political counter-movement. In *Disco Elysium*, it represents both an individual and systemic dimension of dealing with trauma, enabling a *working through* “by offering a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control in action which would permit desirable change” (LaCapra 1994: 209). The rebellion of youth against convention and tradition (through music) helps to discover a new rhythm that goes beyond past events and experiences. In the words of Camus: “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (2005: 117).

This also applies to Harry. As a disco fan, he is bound to a nostalgic past filled with glitz and glamour, which gives him a supposed sense of stability and safety. However, Harry can now become acquainted with and dance to rave music. On the edge of nothingness, he dances to the music of the new, the present and, as a subject, joins the society of his time. “Harry can commune with the city by boogieing out of his mind” (Hadden 2019). Only by becoming aware of the intersubjectivity of his traumatising can Harry *step out of his mind*, leave his *thought cabinet*, or rather, *thought carousel*, behind, which is endlessly spinning around itself, around a void centre,

his trauma. Turning to the (socio-cultural) present, Harry can affirm life despite its meaninglessness and constructively integrate past events in it: "If there is too much past to bear, make yourself present. He [Harry] cannot run from his past, but he can dance with it" (*ibid.*).

FACING THE ABSURD: THE DISCOVERY OF THE INSULINDIAN PHASMID

Through Harry's unorthodox methodology, which repeatedly clashes with the more rigid approaches imposed upon police officers, and his attention to seemingly insignificant details he considers to be as crucial as solving the murder case itself, several layers of Martinaise's complex social structure are revealed to him. Harry is led to his most fundamental finding by not only breaking supposedly fixed societal rules and regulations, but by questioning the laws of nature. That is, he persistently follows the traces of the *cryptids*, a mysterious insect-like species, whose existence is only acknowledged by an elderly cryptozoologist couple. Towards the end of the game, one such *cryptid*, the so-called *Insulindian Phasmid*, appears on a small island near Martinaise where Harry can engage in a dialogue with it. The creature does not allow for Harry to resort to transcendental explanations, which, though hopeful, would ultimately strip him of any accountability of his fate. Laconically, the *Phasmid* dismisses all of Harry's meaning-seeking questions:

Harry: Where does this come from? All this? Around us? The world? [...] We need to know. Perhaps it's sent to us by a god?

Insulindian Phasmid: *I* think we should eat it. If it's a leaf you can put it in your mouth. Or a reed. Yum yum. (ZA/UM 2019)

Eventually, Harry faces the absurdity of human existence: "Then all we can do is beat our fists against it? Day after day. With no answer" (*ibid.*). In response, the *Phasmid*

makes clear that, for Harry to overcome his personal traumatising, it is indispensable to acknowledge the trauma's inherent *psychosocial* structure, which makes the turning towards society a key prerequisite: "I also have one more thing to say to you: that woman – turn from the ruin. Turn and go forward. Do it for the working class" (*ibid.*). The woman mentioned by the *Phasmid* is Harry's ex-girlfriend Dora. In imagining her as the religiously glorified Dolores Dei in a prior dream, Harry has already (subconsciously) linked his trauma's individual dimension to its socio-cultural aspect: "In Harry's addled mind, this isn't a trite comparison; the Revolution and Dora were both opportunities for hope – joyous uprisings – but they're gone now, into history" (Hadden 2019). This crucial engagement with the *cryptid* results in Harry grasping that he, too, has idolised Dora as a symbol of hope. Like Revachol, he has cleaved to a delusional idea, a phantasm of the past that was never real, and, thus, could not resolve his crisis.

Against this backdrop, the *Phasmid* becomes a symbol of both Harry's rebellion and a newfound solidity of the self: the protagonist's acceptance of the absurdity of life, his willingness to tackle challenges, his persistence and pride are the reasons for him to discover the *Phasmid* in the first place. The realisation that his universe contains more than just his trauma opens up new realms of consciousness for Harry. "A single certainty is enough for the seeker," (Camus 2005: 29) for which reason the *Phasmid* can be regarded as a concrete and more significant representation of Harry's personal development than the ambiguous murder case whose resolution remains unsatisfactory after all. It is the *Phasmid* that enables him to shift his perspective towards the future and to embrace (traumatic) existence in the here and now – a myth that has come true, "making sense in a senseless world" (May 1991: 15).

AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN: CONFRONTING PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAUMA

Harry's initial intention for visiting the small island off Martinique was not, in fact, to find the *Insulindian Phasmid*, but to further investigate the murder case. On the island, the protagonist encounters a white-bearded elderly man introduced as *The Deserter*. Harry can now persuade the man, whose real name is Iosef Lilianovich Dros, to confess the murder of Ellis Lely Kortenaar. The motive is complex. On the one hand, Iosef, who is a communist, shot the capitalist Lely because of their differing political leanings. On the other hand, the murder victim had an affair with a woman called Klaasje (the very first woman Harry talked to after waking up hungover in his motel room) whom Iosef was in love with. The fatal shot was fired when Lely visited Klaasje in her motel room. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Iosef did not necessarily act out of political conviction but, to a greater degree, based on emotional reasons. In denial of the fact that he might be nothing more than a jealous man with a wounded pride, Iosef still defines himself through an already failed revolution which, to him, remains identity-forming: "For him, it is not a memory. It is the foundation for his life. And the impossibility of realising it has driven him insane. His last and only respite is pointless violence" (Judge 2019). Obsessing over a missed opportunity, a missed chance, he clings to a past that never came true, while meeting the present with nothing but contempt.

If Iosef is seen as a representative of a societal *might-have-been*, he can also be interpreted as a representative of a subjective *might-have-been* with regard to Harry. Just the same as Iosef, the game's protagonist is stuck in the past which he transfigures and re-interprets in a way that makes it possible for him to renounce any personal accountability for what had happened. Iosef, driven by his outdated ideology, withdraws from contemporary society and falls victim to his own vengeful needs – unable to see that those needs are not strictly

individual and private and that the murder of a woman out of jealousy, a femicide in a patriarchal society, is always linked to a sociocultural context. However, unlike Iosef, Harry shifts his attention to the people he is surrounded by. His space of action remains within contemporary society. Gradually, he comes to understand that, by excluding any sociocultural context from his self-constructed image of the past, especially concerning his former relationship, prevents his existential progress. Coming to terms with the *psychosocial* nature of his existence and his trauma is the actual case that Harry needs to investigate – and Iosef is Harry's final gaze into a dark mirror:

In this sense, I see the shooter as not simply a jealous madman, but a manifestation of Revachol's guilt, trauma and unresolved anger left over from the failed revolution. His attack is the violent last gasp of the Commune, lashing out at those who hurt it. It is the result of decades of putting this community trauma aside and refusing to come to terms with it, or perhaps not allowing it to heal. There are a good number of parallels between the shooting and Harry's binge drinking night, both are tragedies that are the result of unresolved trauma. (ArtOfConfusion 2020)

INTEGRATING THE PAST: A SNAPSHOT OF TRAUMA PROCESSING

In the finale of the game, when Harry's superiors from *Precinct 41* reach the city and evaluate his fitness for duty, Harry has already found an alignment with himself. By examining not only other people's lifestyles, ideals, actions, and choices, but first and foremost, by looking back at his own life, a comparison with Harry's pre-blackout self becomes possible:

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his

life [...], in that slight pivoting, he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. (Camus 2005: 119)

It is only after Harry has confronted his past, acknowledged the contradictions and gaps of his own biography and existence, that a more differentiated picture of him emerges. In this process, the fragility of human identity proves to be an entry point for traumatic events, but it also suggests that changing oneself is possible.

Whether Harry ends up progressively overcoming his trauma or relapsing back into old patterns, depends on the player's choices:

If role playing is about capturing the concept and motivations of a character, then *Disco Elysium* gives you the freedom to continue to be a fuckup or to actually learn from your mistakes, letting go of the past even as you continue to carry the baggage of it. (Signor 2019)

Since it can only provide a snapshot of Harry's personal development, the game remains mostly open-ended – the credits start rolling abruptly, after Harry's discussion with the militia. Whoever criticises the nature of the ending, has not yet accepted the absurdity of existence, has not yet “forgotten how to cope” (Camus 2005: 50). For the absurd man should understand that he cannot reconcile his “[...] appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle” (*ibid.*: 49).

Perhaps Harry can work through his individual trauma and return to his old job, fully recovered. This, however, is unlikely, considering that Harry's accomplishments barely had an impact on the social structures that perpetuate Revachol's collective trauma. Even though Harry became politi-

cised: “It's sad to admit, but Harry's political opinions are flimsy. They don't stand up to scrutiny, let alone the prevailing world order. They also don't factor much into how *Disco Elysium* proceeds or how it ends” (Hadden 2019). Still, Harry's preoccupation with political and thereby socio-cultural conditions can also be viewed as an expression of internal debate and as an indication of a (traumatic) processing, through which Harry faces his intersubjective responsibility – “conceptualising trauma as having both psychological and sociological dimensions, the combination of which has profound existential resonances” (Thompson, Walsh 2010: 377).

CONCLUSION: THE DANCING SISYPHUS

Analysing *Disco Elysium* based on Albert Camus' theory of the absurd helps to highlight the cRPG's destigmatising depiction of mental health issues and trauma. Seen as an existential endeavour, Harry's detective work ends up serving two purposes – “reapplying for your job as a human being and as a cop” (Kurvitz as cited in Hadden 2019). Not only does it enable Harry to identify the murderer, but it also leads to a confrontation with the “vast unknown” (Cannon 1999) that trauma is in form of the *Pale*, with the absurdity of trauma (as manifested through the *Insulindian Phasmid*) as well as with his unresolved *psychosocial trauma* (represented by Iosef). Even though both Harry and Revachol appear to be lost causes, probably beyond repair (see Evans-Thirlwell 2019), Harry certainly has opposed the world with his “[...] whole consciousness and [his] whole insistence upon familiarity” (Camus 2005: 50). Surrendering to his circumstances makes him a Sisyphus of his time:

H.D.B. [Harrier Du Bois] cannot be remade as he was, yet he gets to his feet and goes back to work. He picks through the wreckage, his flotsam and jetsam. He tidies up, solves tasks, and seeks to understand. Somewhere along

the way, he becomes someone or other new. Bearing witness to this process are the people of Martinaise, and a shadow in the reeds—and you, the kind player. (Hadden 2019)

Harry “[...] can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus 2005: 58). As an absurd hero, Harry defines himself through his rebellion, freedom, and passion as an affirmation of the absurdity of existence, against the fact of irreparable injustice. Having lost both his sense of dignity and self-determination following a traumatic intrusion which he was unable to either control or predict, Harry has now regained both. This is made possible, not necessarily by overcoming his trauma, but solely by Harry’s struggle with the absurd, holding on to existence despite his traumatic experiences, or rather because of them. Not having to rely on any kind of pursuit of hope for the future (which can be beyond an individual’s control, anyways), Harry can find himself revolting heroically – not in a mythical sense, but in engagement

with the absurd – against his fate and, as a result, drawing closer to the world. Harry’s exposure to the traumatised Revachol does not necessarily result in a triumph over trauma. Rather, he comes to understand that the preoccupation with the world surrounding him, and through that preoccupation with himself, are admissions of the absurd that, in fact, make him a happy person; an existential point of view, allowing a kind of happiness not depending on the idea that fulfilment is dependent on meaning (see Cox 2019). Here and there, this happiness shimmers through. When Harry, in awe and wonder, interacts with the *Phasmid*, but especially when he dances in the Dolorian Church of Humanity, celebrating for a fleeting moment being alive and humanity as a whole, while experiencing a feeling of high self-esteem. As *Disco Elysium*’s own Sisyphus, the boulder Harry keeps rolling on a daily basis, “his thing,” (Camus 2005: 118) is a disco ball which serves as a personal and social metaphor that brings colour into the pale void of *psychosocial trauma*: “Just don’t pretend it isn’t there, or that it doesn’t have the capacity to crush you” (Cox 2019).

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