

Escapism and the Absurd: Problems of Identity and Ideology in *Disco Elysium* (2019)

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By Zoltán Fejes

“There is nothing. Only warm, primordial darkness”. (*Disco Elysium*) In 2019, the gaming medium was gifted with an overly niche game called *Disco Elysium*. *Disco Elysium* shocked the roleplaying-market, with its non-traditional structure of dialogue options. The video game received general critical acclaim for its narrative design and its realistic story filled with the tragic aftermath of a failed revolution. It deals with the traumatic past of both the main character, Harrier Du Bois, and Revachol, a city-state that has suffered both a communist uprising from a tyrannical monarchy and its defeat by foreign forces. Initially, Harry’s job is to solve a murder case, but in the end, he also has to come to terms with his absurd reality while trying to understand Revachol. Through his task he comes across many opportunities to find an answer to his problems. This search coincides with the philosophy of Albert Camus, the philosophy of the Absurd. His philosophy is a description of man’s struggle with the world. This struggle is when man’s view of reality clashes with the irrational reality. This conflict forces man to make one out of three possible responses to the absurd world around him either by trying to escape it through suicide, or belief, or accepting it by revolting against it. But overall this awareness leads to the conclusion that there is no true meaning in the world. Later Albert Camus would continue this idea with *The Rebel* in regards to the best response. Throughout the entirety of *Disco Elysium* Harry undergoes all three responses to the absurd. His character, therefore, demonstrates how people who face issues in their realities tend to turn to ideologies. This essay argues that when the people of Revachol and Harry try to escape their absurd reality through identities based on ideologies leads to self-deception, through the rejection of their own nature.

Disco Elysium and the absurd

The absurd that Albert Camus illustrates in his essay is quite convoluted in terms of its appliance to literature as almost anything could be considered absurd fiction if the circumstances, the dialogues, or the characters behave in an absurd manner. What Camus means by the absurd is the conflict between man's rationality with the irrational world which causes man to reassess himself and the universe. In other words the world itself is absurd. As Plant notes, "Absurdity arises at the juncture of the world and human experience" (Plant 119). Therefore, the important point that Camus makes is the three responses one can have when dealing with absurdism. The first response is suicide when someone admits that they simply cannot bear to exist anymore. The second is the searching for something much greater than ourselves and identifying with it. Lastly, the third, that Camus supports, is rebellion which is not escapism but rather still living life while being aware of the absurd situation.

The search for meaning is ignited by being aware of our absurd circumstances. The absurd subject is "aware" of their triviality in the universe. It is through this awareness then these tragic heroes show defiance and rebel against their universe despite its unfruitful outcomes. That despite all one must show revolt, freedom, and passion to fight the absurd (Camus 42). Even a critique of Camus, Thomas Nagel in his essay "The Absurd", notes that humans by nature are always prone to step back and analyse their situation in order to make the right decision. That, "we (humans) possess a certain kind of insight" (727). Of course, he concludes his paper with the idea of approaching our absurdist life with irony rather than with defiance and heroism (727). Nonetheless, Nagel's criticism is also important regarding how people would use politics as a way to explain their problems when they mix it with awareness.

Harry's reaction to the absurd world is similar to what Nagel criticises Camus' philosophy for. Harry's possible actions and responses that the players could choose as a form of reaction to the world are childlike. Too much emphasis is placed when he announces his favoured political view. Whether capitalistic, communistic, liberal, or even moralistic (so centrist) Harry's response is already radical with no grey area whatsoever. As Nagel states when one wishes to leave the position of the absurd state they do so by, "seeking broader ultimate concerns" that are often, "small and insignificant and individual" things taken seriously such as "fulfilment in service to society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, or religion and the glory of God" (720). Harry put much importance on the political opinion itself when he responds in a conversation.

What is *Disco Elysium*?

Disco Elysium is a 2019 Estonian non-traditional roleplaying game that sets out to reform the genre. The game's inspiration is found greatly in the 1996 game called *Planescape: Torment*, a roleplaying game that was also considered to be niche in its time. The uniqueness of *Disco Elysium* comes from its usage of dialogue. Rather than using a combat system as any other roleplaying games, *Disco Elysium* relies only on dialogue options. As with Roleplaying games in general *Disco Elysium* also fits Rick Swan's claim in his *Complete Guide to Roleplaying Games*: "(...) a roleplaying game is an improvised novel in which all the participants are the authors" (Swan in Dey 10). Players do not have to spend their skill points to better their chance for accuracy with their guns or increase their unarmed skills. Instead, the skills are meant to provide ample opportunity for conversation. Just like its spiritual predecessor *Disco Elysium* is approaching player integrity through questions of morale, values, and perception.

Planescape: Torment's approach towards the questions of morale and values also interrelates with the core idea of Eric Hayot's research. In *Video Games and the Novel*, Hayot discusses the uniqueness of the video game as a medium namely its reliance on interactivity. Hayot argues that this notion has been a part of the history of human art such as folk stories or popular theatre (179) which constitutes the base of understanding video games. Hayot names the idea of "choosing" as the human concern that it responds to (182). Players engaging in video games therefore can make their own choices in the medium, tailoring their experience within video games. However, he also mentions that there is an issue in attributing "powerlessness" to players (183) for the majority of their experience as overcoming obstacles and winning is a core concept of video games. Powerlessness, therefore, is a concept that most games tend to either completely disregard or as Hayot notes use it as a starting position before becoming powerful (183).

Planescape: Torment (and also *Disco Elysium*), however, has a different approach. Of course, in *Planescape: Torment* you can become a highly skilled mage, a powerful warrior, or the most quick-handed thief but you do not hold power over the past of the Nameless One. The consequences of his past incarnations haunt him in his interaction with the world around him and the player is unable to rectify those sins. For example, one of his companions, Dak'kon is bound to his service as one of his past incarnations saved him. Dak'kon, one from a race that detests any form of servitude because of their history of being enslaved, follows the Nameless One with a heavy heart. When the Nameless One learns of this the player's dialogue option may portray regret over Dak'kon's debt, but ultimately the player cannot make him leave their

services, as it was bound by the past incarnation. The player in the place of the Nameless One is completely powerless to change the mistakes his past made. This becomes all the more visible when the Nameless One is sent to fight an endless war at the end of the game. Many other roleplaying games at the time let the player influence the outcome of their journey, either bringing hope and happiness to the world and its citizens, or potentially ruining the world for selfish reasons. For the conclusion of *Planescape: Torment* the only influence the player has is how the destined outcome will be reached. No matter what decisions were made during the journey, the connections formed with the people, or the reactions one had to the world in the end the Nameless One must repent for his mistakes and join a never-ending war as punishment. Powerlessness is the beginning and the end in the story of *Planescape: Torment*.

The theme of powerlessness is also found in *Disco Elysium*, and as Daniel Vella writes in his essay this powerlessness is found in Harry's amnesia. Not only has he lost his identity but the game's theme of failure puts the detective in a position of lost authority too. As he puts it, "No matter what the player chooses, the effect is much the same: few things are as demeaning to authority as being forced to impotently reassert itself" (96). Both *Disco Elysium* and *Planescape Torment* deal with the idea of powerlessness as it is rooted in their amnesiac plotline: the inability to escape.

As *Planescape: Torment* focused more on dialogue and narrative story than on combat, *Disco Elysium* has cast away the combat-system altogether. By putting more focus on dialogue players are able to explore the nature of man. As Eric Hayot notes games often tend to have difficulty fully representing human life (184) due to reliance on killing any obstacles players come across which makes the idea of failure is overshadowed by the need for victory. However, by putting much more importance on interaction *Disco Elysium* allows players to experience not only success but also failures. This makes it a good candidate for an absurd analysis, as it is mostly about understanding the world fully through its ups and downs.

Moreover, *Disco Elysium* borrows elements from the medium of novels. If we consider video games as art and *Disco Elysium* as a game borrowing from the novel, then we could argue it corresponds to the idea of what Camus had about novels. The "novel satisfies a yearning for unity without compromising the confrontation with the absurd" (Eubanks and Petrakis 303). While playing the game through the avatar of Harry the players will experience the desire for unity and also the conflict with the absurd.

In regards of player experience and Harry's story this is where the conflict between narratology and ludology come into place. The two terms have been a matter of debate in game studies regarding how a game should be analysed. The ludology analysis regards video games

as non-stories, rather focusing on a game's mechanic and its complex usage of systems and does not consider the medium of games as stories, while narrative analysis views games on their storytelling capabilities. Video games has become a subject of narratology when the corpus of the term was extended for image-based media such as movies, digital narratives, graphic novels, and games (Ryan 3). There are many approaches of narratology analysis to games: the analysis of cutscenes cinematics played between gameplay segments, greater attention placed on the emotions games can give to people (Sicart in Ryan 6).

The problem stands that what can be taken as a narratology view on games is still convoluted. Approaches can be varying to video games, but what is true is that player influence is still a core-part of the narrative that a game would want to create (Hitchens and Drachen 2). For example even linear, narrative driven games such as *Walking Dead* (2012) or *Wolf Among Us* (2013) with their simplistic game mechanics still require the input of the player in order to tailor their respective narrative. *Disco Elysium* comes into this debate with its features. This essay wishes to explore game through a Narratology view, but of course it still must be done by the analysis of the dialogue that the game gives. In order to explore the themes of self-destruction, rejection, and hope in the game the dialogue options that player can choose from that build the united narrative and their own narrative will be studied in this essay to demonstrate the presence of the absurd

The First Response

The first response to the absurd is found at the beginning of *Disco Elysium* when in a void-like place the first voices that speak to the player through the avatar are the Ancient Reptilian Brain and the Limbic system. It is not yet known who the main character is. It is obvious that the state the character is in right now is non-existence. A state of being where there are no longer any painful distractions or memories. The moment there is a chance to learn more about an ex-wife, the other voice, the limbic system immediately warns the player of possible pain if further asked. It is implied from this very scene that perhaps this state is not entirely a beginning but is meant to be the end for someone.

The sweet nothingness eventually stops its embrace disrupted by a huge horn sound from a nearby vehicle. The character is Harrier Du Bois of the Revachol Citizens Militia, who wakes up with a very heavy hangover with amnesia. From here on out the nothingness that was meant to be his end now becomes his beginning as a new person, but not at all saved from the responsibilities of his previous life such as investigating a murder via hanging. Moreover, he has yet to cut down the hanged corpse from the tree.

The game is set in Martinaise, a district of Revachol where people are heavily burdened with their past raging from communist theory follower university students through nostalgic old men for a fascist regime to just simple labour workers who desire no political confrontation. Essentially, the player must figure out three mysteries during the investigation: the murder case, Revachol's trauma, and Harry's identity in all this chaos. All three are interconnected in this process.

The response to the absurd starts in Harry's dream of pure nothingness. Camus' essay states that the first sign of absurdity is awakened by the nothingness of the heart (Camus 10). That sort of "nothingness" like that occurs in the absurd man when he has suffered too much in their life that they become weary. They have now collapsed under the dreadful question they have asked to their lives: "Why" (10). This is where the consciousness starts and brings in the consequence after such a realisation: would one choose suicide or start to recover from their weariness? It can be safely stated that Harry made the first response: suicide. He did indeed cause the death of his former self, but that then gave birth to his new life which might be interpreted as a "start to recovery" phase. The reason is that Harry's love, Dora left him six years ago mostly because of his self-destructive behaviour involving alcoholism and drug abuse that was used as a coping method against the stress of his police work. Her leaving was the point when he became too weary of life. His eventual reawakening is caused by his desperate attempts to forget her. Even his limbic system and ancient reptilian brain in the starting oblivion will prevent him from trying to learn about her. Nonetheless, Harry will eventually remember her as his consciousness is still holding onto certain memories.

According to Camus, the deepest desires of the consciousness parallel the man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe (13). While he no longer wishes to remember his wife the pain of wanting to be with her and impressing her still lingers in the new Harry's actions. His loneliness caused by her leaving manifests itself in Harry's openness to the people of Martinaise. Moreover, his self-destructive and self-loathing attitude makes his new failures all the more painful to him adding up to his past failure sense. His pain is illustrated by his overly fragile self-confidence. This is also experienced by the player with the use of the typical health system that is found in other games. But in *Disco Elysium* there are two separate health systems: "physical" and "morale", the former refers to damage caused by physical damage, either a heart attack, falling off, or hit by other characters; and the other is for confidence damage which caused by social awkwardness, being made fun off, or when his officer status authority is not respected. He can suffer a morale wound to his ego from his interaction with other people. Any time Harry feels that he did not make the best acquaintance with someone,

or if he gets ridiculed, or he is shown to be vulnerable, or just genuinely feels worthless he could easily die from a panic attack. His deep unconsciousness still retains the fatalistic attitude that causes him to maintain a fragile confidence in himself, which caused his suicide attempt in the first place.

His suicide attempt is an escapism attempt as Camus classified in his essay. However, suicide is not the only form of escapism. Escapism from the absurd world is common not just in Harry, but in Revachol too. This escapism often leads people to self-deception to not be aware of their problem as it is described in the work of John L. Longeway on escapism. As he explains when we people swim into more serious escapism, “we use it as a defense against reality itself” (2). A feeling that one does not wish to recognise, which could be according to him, “guilt, anxiety, or shame, but sometimes it is anger, a sense of helplessness, or whatever else the person, perhaps idiosyncratically, finds aversive” (2). Usually, this is a coping mechanism to protect their self-image - as Longeway calls their self-concept - in the face of conflict. These feelings are found in the world of *Disco Elysium* too through history and people.

Disco Elysium: A battle royal of ideologies

The problem in the game for the protagonist, that also provides the canvas for the player to build their own character, is the lack of identity and knowledge of history. As Camus writes, “*A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world*”, (6) through Harry the player can find ways to provide the protagonist opportunities to explain Revachol by learning political ideologies. The player is free to collect any political thoughts they come across and adopt them to forge theirs and Harry’s new identity. Alastair Hadden described Harry’s role as an avatar for the player accurately, “Harry is nothing more than a political magpie, collecting the worn-out remains of any political-theory he comes across” (Hadden).

To discuss ideology, John Levi Martin’s essay is a good start. His essay discusses the nature of ideologies. The core nature of ideologies, as he describes, only gives an illusion of a set of values that can be easily switched on and off in regard to certain issues. An example he gives is how American Christians would argue against the separation of the church and state, but would support it against other religions (14). Ideologies give people just enough knowledge on issues and life that make it easier for people to create friction between each other, based on their different values. Sometimes it even leads to choosing their beliefs based on what their opponents might hate (17). This is similar to the identity politics of today. Cressida Heyes in her research titled *Political Identities* writes about the problems of identity politics on how it makes the “otherness” important in one’s identity. This thinking and practice can alienate people from marginalised groups, such as racial and sexual minorities, who may not be a part of but might share the same goals because of the sameness of the otherness. The idea again here is how ideologies especially the ones built on a set of identities might offer some community with others, but it ultimately tries to explain problems and questions with simplicity. Often it even lacks consistency.

This of course is found in *Disco Elysium* as well. While the player may take the options of political thoughts as a form of role-play, game-wise the option lends a chance for Harry to find common ground with people. However, it also leads him to create friction with others on the fly. The player can become antagonistic with other characters for differing political opinions. Moreover, as said this is more for Harry to find a chance to escape his non-entity into an already established persona that has its political and cultural identity.

The Thought-Cabinet: What makes the nature of a man?

For the purpose of learning any political ideologies through internalising thoughts the main mechanic of the game comes into picture. This feature is called “Thought-Cabinet”, which is a collection of more than fifty thoughts from which the player can choose up to a maximum of twelve to internalise. This video game mechanic not only allows the players to regain some of Harry’s past memories, but they also help them to think about certain characteristics and philosophies he might find interesting. The players can make Harry think about Advanced Race Theories, the Communist Manifesto, Fascism, or even the tranquillity of Moralism. This is the mirror to other role playing games’ skill sets, as they not only provide identities that players can incorporate into Harry, but also different attribute points for the twenty four skills. These can be either beneficial or downgrading. It is through the Thought-Cabinet that the second response to the absurd is found: holding a belief.

The Thought-Cabinet is important for two reasons: as a game mechanic and for its connection with the absurd. In the former the Thought-Cabinet is important as this represents the developers’ intention of revolutionising the role-playing genre in the gaming medium. The thought-cabinet is akin to any average trait system in a traditional role-playing game where the player incorporates traits such as “subterfuge” or “diplomacy” that attributes to their characters’ skills in the collective union. So, for example, the “diplomacy” trait gives bonus points to the persuasion skill. However, in *Disco Elysium*, we do not get “subterfuge” or “diplomacy”, we get thoughts such as “Actual Art Degree”, which gives the player the ability to heal their morale when passing certain skill checks. Many thoughts operate on the same wavelength giving bonuses or penalties to certain skills based on the quality of the thoughts themselves. These thoughts and the thoughts of ideologies can only be interacted if the player responds in certain ways to the world in the game.

Playing as the amnesiac Harry and trying to make sense of the world is an appropriate example of Camus’ philosophy about the absurd. In his essay, Albert Camus describes three different yet similar characters that understand the futility of their struggle with the absurd but continue and live their lives. These men are the Don Juan, the conqueror, and the actor. As Camus himself puts it, “I am choosing solely men who aim only to expend themselves or whom I see to be expending themselves. That has no further implications. For the moment I want to speak only of a world in which thoughts, like lives, are devoid of future. Everything that makes man work and get excited utilizes hope. The sole thought that is not mendacious is therefore a sterile thought. In the absurd world the value of a notion or of a life is measured by its sterility” (45).

The Don Juan character, is described by Camus as someone who is always chasing other women, always seducing and courting. But not out of love, or for the lack of it, but because he “loves them with the same passion” (45). He lives for the passion of love. The second is the actor who enters the minds of the characters they portray. They are well aware that their fame will fade away to the unkind rifles of time. However, their passion is acting out as many roles as they could for the audience. They exist only at the time of acting out a life. The third example is the conqueror. The conqueror embodies the revolt of the absurd man. Who battles the eternal struggle to bring eternal victory to human nature, changing it. A task that he knows is impossible to achieve.

Albert Camus did list these archetypes to point out their similarities, that is their awareness of the futility of their struggle and endeavour, and not to paint them as the perfect absurd models. But what is important is that all three characters maintain the three consequences of the absurd: freedom, passion, and revolt. All three characters use their freedom in their life to follow their passion and revolt against the absurd world by not trying to find the end goal of their lives. Harry character-wise as a detective is in the same category. A character who uses his freedom to live for his passion as a person to experience and seek knowledge on life. However, his revolt is still shadowed by his desire for an identity to find unity with the world and himself.

Thought-Cabinet and the absurd

The progress of trying to build an identity through with the meeting of the world is best explained by the research of Cam Caldwell. In his essay, Caldwell, using the words of other scholars, defines identity as a response from the individual to the world around them and the people (Burke and Tully, 1977 as cited in Caldwell 393). It is their tool to express themselves or value themselves as he cited Josselson (cited in 393). This idea of comparing ourselves to others to form an identity is also suggested by Flynn (cited in Caldwell 394) in Caldwell’s research as someone confirms their identity through the perception of others.

In that regard, Caldwell also discusses that identity and self-awareness are related to each other and self-awareness is essential for a person to successfully integrate behaviours to their self (395). Therefore, even stress can be detrimental into an individual’s process of identity forming as stress levels decrease one’s ability for self-reflection (395) which then would lead to self-deception that rather than enforces the individual’s ability to understand themselves, devolves into a defense mechanism that is based on avoidance principles (396).

Self-awareness and deception are also connected with the concept of the ideal-self defined in Boyatzis and Akrivou’s essay. The ideal-self, which can be privately conceptualised

or socially influenced as noted by Nasby and Schecter (cited in Boyatzis and Akrivou 625) is the concept in which some kind of internal drive makes a person change their behaviour based on imagination. The research, however, points out that it must ensure a deeper satisfaction within the individual to be aware of acting within character (625, 626).

Opposite of the ideal-self are also the avoidance motives and the ought-self. The avoidance motives actively make the individual avoid any forms of threatening aspects of the present and future (626), often withdrawing from events. The ought-self, however, is similar to the ideal-self, but it is not one of internal drive to change, rather the desire to fit among a group. The ought-self can be confused with the ideal-self that it can be successfully integrated into one's image of the ideal-self, but any differences would create frustration among the individual (627).

These ideas are important when talking about *Disco Elysium's* protagonist's internal desire for unity with the world around him which is similar to the people's desire too to escape the absurd. Harry's desire to escape his nonentity is driven by the image of an identity of any kind that can create unity with the world around him.

This is connected to the second point on the Thought Cabinet's importance which is related to absurdism. As the actor, the conqueror, and Don Juan characters live their lives to know the world the thought-cabinet helps Harry to collect these experiences and categorise them to define himself. While struggling with the futility of his quest to know the world, or at least Revachol's history entirely, in the end, he is at least able to define himself

Harry's profession as a Detective is essential as he tries to explore everything about the world from history to simple pop-culture. However, his ultimate goal is to find the truth not just for his investigation but for his circumstance too. Interacting with the world he not only collects clues but also thoughts that he could then "use" as a way to bring order to his life. This is the escape through belief response that Camus mentioned. This is mostly done by seeking out the companionship of others around the district. As Longeway, one way to escape a harsh truth is to find others with whom they might share views (1). The view is the fact that Harry struggles with the world, and the others he seeks out also struggle with their realities. By investigating the murder Harry also investigates the world.

But the opportunities to even attempt to ponder these thoughts to battle with the absurd are only achieved by actively doing his detective work and interviewing the residents of Martinaise. For example, to reach the leader of the Dockworkers' Union, Edvart Claire, he must first confront the bodyguard, Measurehead. Measurehead is a Semenese worker (a group of people that mirrors African people of our world) and has fully embraced Advanced race

theory. He believes that the Occident race (White Caucasians) has fallen from grace and become a much weaker race compared to others. In his embrace of the advanced race theory, Measurehead is pro-Semenese, considering his race superior to others, with the only invention he thinks is unworthy being the invention of the Disco culture in Revachol. For Harry to continue his investigation, he must consult with Mr. Evrart, but Measure provides the traditional obstacle that an average video game protagonist needs to overcome. Harry has three options: he can simply ignore him and try to take a more secret route, use violence to subdue him, or he can entertain Measurehead's racist view and try to solve the "Racial Enigma" of the world.

The absurd situation here, of course, is the real person behind the ones who embraced the advanced race theory. Measurehead openly states that he believes his race is far superior to Harry's and Evrart's, yet he voluntarily works under Evrart. An act that he tries to describe as an "race heroism". Harry's position to adopt his world view, which is entirely based on the player's decision, could be considered as nothing but a means to an end. He might indulge the racist thoughts of Measurehead simply as a means to an end, and not at all serious about his dedication. Furthermore, this is not the only instance of Harry picking up a certain thought in order to progress with his investigation. Measurehead uses Advanced Race theory to signify his worth and explain his reality but his superiority is used in a career that consists of just pressing a button.

Political philosophies are not the only thoughts for Harry to adapt and escape the absurd. There are also some constructed personalities that Harry could use as a way to define himself. He responds in conversations with certain phrases, such as with authority, with too much confidence or with self-pity, his skills would recommend a certain type of "cop" personality to him. This ranges from "Super-star cop", "Sorry Cop" or "Boring Cop". All the player has to do for these options to opt in for them is to respond four individual times akin to these personalities in conversations around people. Story wise Harry's desire to find a suitable identity, whether a Cop personality or ideologically inspired, is relevant to authors of the Theatre of Absurd such as Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. In their works, characters often meet identical crises in the face of chaotic circumstances (Rahimipoor and Edoyan 14) and put much emphasis on their identities that they need a connection with an entity outside of their world for the confirmation of their existence (15). Harry's dependence on these identities echoes these themes.

The Skills of Harry

These thoughts on ideologies and personality archetypes are all prompted by the games' skill system. The skills are at first glance similar to any roleplaying games' skills system if one takes a look at their names (perception, logic, endurance, and volition). The skills are what give or encourage the protagonist (and in that way the player) to engage and incorporate these thoughts. There are twenty-four skills separated into four different groupings (Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics). However, these skills oppose each other which creates a chaotic experience for players that demonstrates the chaotic mind of Harry. The skills' overlapping is what makes the players' progression unclear and disorienting (Novitz 36). As the skills are the instigators for the player to experience the world, these skills essentially are the "processors" of the information from the world of *Disco Elysium* that the player can experience. These skills are the conduit for the character's response to the absurd by trying to seek meaning and explanation through the skills' own perspective.

For example, empathy, a psyche skill, allows the chance to understand other people's feelings and sorrows, at higher levels even giving the chance to share those feelings. Which is why on the political path Empathy would push for a moralist path in which one could avoid any "radical" thoughts that might hurt someone. Additionally, Endurance, a Physique skill that is about enduring pain, is the skill that advises the 'fascism' path for the player. Of course, not all skills lead down to the path of a political thought since there are only four of those. Some lead to the mentioned Cop personalities. For example, Composure, a Motorics skill, promotes the Superstar Cop personality that strengthens his general self-confidence around people, but to a level that makes his investigation less important. Nonetheless, these thoughts represent their sibling skills in their specific branches.

With the example of Measurehead, almost all the people that Harry meets in Martinise are struggling with the absurd world and they try to adopt an identity that is formed by ideologies or made up personalities. Their traumatic past represents Revachol, the city state's traumatic past too. Revachol was once the "capital of the world". For a long time, it was a monarchy state before being overthrown by a communist revolution. That Communist revolution was then defeated by foreign forces called the Coalition of Nations which has now divided Revachol into individual zones and has maintained control over the City.

The Shadow of the Past

The people of Revachol are unable to revolt against the absurd as history still has its grasp on them. The Communist Revolution's failure, torment, and hope are still prevailing in its citizens and architecture. Harry comes across walls that are still riddled with bullets fired from the uprising and its defeat. As Evans-Thirlwell puts it, "The ravages of that misfiring revolution aren't just a matter for the history books. They echo everywhere in the world, from the coastal shantytowns through the game's never-ending traffic jam to the mind of a man who, in wiping his own memory, has made a hung parliament of his very own skull" – (Evans-Thirlwell). While Harry tries to understand Revachol (and thus himself too) by taking up political ideologies and certain character archetypes, is unable to help it, "This is not a world (Harry) can repair – probably, it is beyond repair" (Evans-Thirlwell). Revachol, just like Harry, is broken by its past and thus remains in a chaotic state where its citizens are divided by their individual clinging to the past. Some hold onto communist ideas and some to the monarchy's fascist regime. Their reliance on political ideology for answers and identity is what Illing writes on Camus' stance on politics, "Camus (...) agree that modern politics is animated primarily by a struggle for identity, meaning, and values" (Illing 224). Revachol being divided by its past mirrors Harry's divided personality that was caused by his inability to come to terms with Dora leaving him which spiralled his self-destructive partying and eventually his amnesia. If one has to give a single theme of *Disco Elysium*, it is the theme of the inability to face our past.

The presence of Nothingness: The Pale

For the theme of facing our past comes into the game's supernatural element, the *Pale*. The Pale is a phenomenon that rarely gets mentioned in the course of the investigation. This is an ominous threat in the world of Elysium, aside from a handful of characters, nobody wants to discuss the effects of it or even its existence. This is even more apparent when Kim, Harry's partner, wants to avoid the subject altogether. This phenomenon covers two-thirds of the known world of Elysium, outweighing reality two to one and it is said to be ever growing, marking itself as a sort of boundary between the isolas, the islands in *Disco Elysium*, in the world.

About the nature of the Pale, Harry can only acquire information from few a people. One of them is Joyce Messier, a woman who represents the Wild Pines Company in the ongoing Union strike. Joyce describes the Pale as: "Achromatic, odourless, featureless. The Pale is the enemy of matter and life. It is not 'like' any other – or 'any' thing in the world. It is the transition state of being into nothingness." (*Disco Elysium*) The Pale does not only influence the geometry of the world by altering distances and radio waves in such a way that makes it

impossible for scientists to even measure any properties of the Pale, but it also damages the human mind. Joyce mentions that the Pale has the chance to radiate simple human history into the mind of everyone who enters it, “Pale somehow ‘consists’ of past information, that’s degrading. That it’s rarefied past, not rarefied matter. They call it ‘the blend over the self’. (...) The human mind becomes over-radiated by past.” (*Disco Elysium*) Joyce concludes her explanation with the only known fact about the Pale: that it grows and one day will cover everything.

The Pale, as Joyce described, is a matter of nothingness that can overflow the mind of an individual with information about human history, even with the past of other people. The Empathy skill remarks that Joyce not only knows about the Pale but has travelled in it. Empathy notes that she speaks about the Revolutionary days as if she were there herself. However, she is not as affected as another woman. Among the lorry drivers stationed outside the harbour, there is a woman sitting on her truck looking into the distance with aged hair. Upon approaching this woman the name the player will be given is the “Paledriver”. She earned this name for driving through Pale inflicted areas around the isolas. The effects of the Pale is more present in the Paledriver. When approached she sits quietly and holds an old photo in her hands with a warm smile. It takes more than one attempt from the player to wake her up. When she finally snaps away from her daydreaming she becomes agitated. As the phenomenon rewired her memories with a past more comfortable the Paledriver has become obsessed with relieving those histories and moments that she never truly experienced. Woken from her daydreaming, she scolds Harry for interrupting her as she was about to see the new movie of Gabriel Buenguerro, until he appeared. When asked if she was at those screenings she answers, “Someone was” (*Disco Elysium*). The Paledriver regards the Pale as her home as she is the only one who is willing to take routes that undergo the dangerous phenomenon. Moreover, she reinforces Joyce’s fear about the Pale: that it will consume all there is.

However, her attraction to those memories is more than just simply adored daydreams while waiting for the end of the strikes. She purposefully chose those memories. She compares the time she spends in that memory, a screening in Mesque, to the times of the Revolution in Revachol regarding it as a golden age. The cigarette she smokes is even a brand from Mesque. In this regard the Pale is an opportunity for her to escape reality, the present, and even her own past into a world of false nostalgia. It is even mentioned the amount of past she relieves would be too much for one to bear but she finds comfort in it.

The Pale’s existence also comes into connection with the belief response. In one of the side investigations that players can follow Harry comes across a church dedicated to Dolores

Dei, a secular saint called Innocence. In this investigation, Harry's task is to help a woman called Soona in her research of an anomaly found in the Church where sound is silenced. Upon completing her research it results in an almost catastrophic event nearly destroying the Church. Upon passing a Logic skill check Harry can come to peculiar conclusions. Firstly the Pale's presence might have allured the builders of the church, "It didn't form in a church, the church formed around it. (...) Acting on an instinctual level." (*Disco Elysium*) Secondly, the next conclusion is that it might also be the answer to why so many ideologies have failed in the past: "Even the revolution was defeated here. I mean a kind of entropoetic history. (...) All the failed business and ideologies here—there's something is 'wrong' here." (*Disco Elysium*). The Pale is the nothingness that Camus describes in *Myth of Sisyphus*. The place where all belief and meaning are broken down. People might try to find comfort in it through the embrace of the memories and history it gives, but it overall reduces the world to oblivion.

Shackles of the past

The one who perfectly captures Revachol's inability to move on from the past and thus revolt against the absurd is the murderer. Investigating the case Harry finds out that the hanged man was actually shot and the hanging was a cover up. He traces the bullet to a nearby island where he finds the murderer. Iosef Lilianovich Dros, an old man who served in the Communist uprising. Iosef's speech is clouded by his communist ideology, insulting Harry and despising Revachol as if they are the representation of everything that was deemed evil in the eyes of Communism. However, Iosef is called the deserter for a reason. He is described by Judge as, "the last gasp of the utopian project that haunts Revachol" (Judge).

For Iosef the absurd is that he cannot come to terms with the fact that he has deserted from his post and tries to bury it by still clinging to his communist ideology. He was a communist commissar at the age of sixteen and his role was to enforce the ideology onto the citizens. However, when the Coalition forces attacked Iosef deserted and survived the air strike by hiding in a bunker. Ever since then, he has been guilt driven for not dying alongside his comrades. For the last few years, however, he was not living alone. One day a Phasmid, an undiscovered creature began to co-habit with Iosef. The Phasmid's pheromones which was used to conceal itself from Iosef also affected him. It kept intact his health and has also influenced his mentality in a deteriorating way. He is unable to confront the absurd and has for decades escaped back to his communist identity, which is similar to the belief response. His moment of fear is downplayed as nothing more than "Reaction", a "petty-bourgeois terror" that is in all men (*Disco Elysium*).

His inability to deal with the absurd does not end here but continues with his motive for killing the hanged man, Lely. Iosef continued to regress into his chosen ideology, refusing to reintegrate back into society. He continued to scout Revachol through the scope of his rifle. During this time he developed a stalker-like crush on Klaasje, a waitress at the Whirling-in-rags cafeteria. Klaasje, however, was having an affair with Lely. Iosef, growing jealous due to years of isolation and under the effects of the Phasmid, proceeds to shoot Lely when they are lying together in bed. When confronted about it he tries to explain it as an act of communist defiance, killing a fascist soldier. However, this is just him regressing back to his ideology that controlled his world view for years. The truth is he murdered the person out of jealousy but he is unable to confront his past to revolt against the absurd and keeps using his communist identity as a shield.

Iosef represents the response of escapism through belief quite well. As Longeway writes how often people self-deceive themselves to protect their self-concept they would actively avoid self-awareness (3). Iosef is unable to accept that he abandoned his comrades and therefore still clings to his commissar self-conception in the face of conflict. Again turning to Longeway, he lists the possible ways someone seeks out means to escape from unpleasant truth, they often avoid meeting anyone that might reaffirm the belief they wish to escape. This is true for Iosef, who ultimately chose to remain in hiding, even after so many years, acting as if he is still fighting for the revolution. He regards his survival and continuing to fight as, "Still armed and ideologically trained I wrote a criticism of myself. And resumed partisan duties" (*Disco Elysium*). However, aside from a few hired hits for Evrart, Iosef does nothing to reignite the revolution. He does not attempt to search and reach out to fellow communards but rests in isolation. Even the communist students that Harry could find in an apartment do more for the cause as they put the effort to try and reach out to others with the same ideals. This is Iosef's philosophical suicide, giving up on life after deserting his post.

The path of Revolt

Iosef's belief that he is still a revolutionary makes him the complete opposite of Camus' rebel, the revolutionary. The revolutionary is nihilistic, because it chooses history (215) which is true for Iosef as he chose to live in the past, still in the day of fighting against royalists and the bourgeoisie to not confront his own past. He is a revolutionary, as he views the world around him only in totality, seeing nothing but the true communists and everything that is against it. More importantly, the revolutionary sees that the land of humans has become the land of inhumanity (217) as Iosef says, "The mask of humanity falls from capital. It has to take it off to kill everyone. (...) To do the deed. And then you see it. As it strangles and beats your friends to death... the sweetest, most courageous people in the world. (...) Then you know. That the bourgeois are not human" (*Disco Elysium*). The Revolutionary does not take human nature into consideration which also aligns with Iosef rejecting his own nature that led him to desert. He cannot be a rebel, because he is rejecting everyone's nature and his liberation from his guilt.

However, there is a Rebel character in the game, which is Kim Kitsuragi. Kim's life is plagued by prejudice because of his Seol (Asian) ancestry, even though he was born in Revachol. Despite the continuous attack on his "racial-identity" Kim does not build himself on this notion. Unlike Iosef, Kim does not dwell on his past or try to denounce his or other's nature. Kim accepts that he cannot change the world around him and thus does not try to explain himself, the people, or the city with ideology. In the game's universe his rebellion comes from not engaging with the political atmosphere. His neutrality is not to uphold the status-quo as other centrists in the game are portrayed, rather his main purpose is to seek justice in the world the attitude that Camus attributes to the Rebel (220). Through accepting his reality he finds freedom in it. His rebellion is to not engage in political or ideological ideas to escape the absurd.

Unsurprising than that for Harry and through him the player he is the one who serves as a guide and mentor in the world as Harry can turn to Kim for help for the case, for the people, and for history for he sees the world not through a political ideology but through human nature. Moreover, he is a partner to Harry not only in work but also in his quest for self-discovery. Kim compared to Harry is a more serious, organised, realistic person. But sometimes Harry can persuade him to join in such activities like a "dance-off competition" or wearing jackets that have vulgar words titled on them. Kim, while nonetheless trying to solely focus on his task, deep inside has a more light-hearted personality that comes to the surface whenever Harry interacts with the world more frantically. Kim serves as his support as gameplay-wise

sometimes he even restores some of the morale points lost after failures in the investigation by talking to him. It is through the help and support of Kim that Harry can step on the path of the rebel.

Harry's Revolt

Harry can achieve the path of the rebel by accepting his own nature. His broken mind is separated between numerous personality traits and thoughts. His brokenness causes him to have disunity not just in the world but also in himself. This disunity is what causes him to attempt to escape the absurd world by adopting various ideological views to possess unity in himself and with the world. To accept his nature he also has to accept his past that is unfixable. In terms of his past both Iosef and Revachol can be viewed as possible futures as Iosef and the people still cling back to their history and therefore are unable to heal. Harry's quest is not just to solve the murder but to come to terms with his traumatic past.

Harry's investigation of the murder is very Sisyphean. Every day starts with him waking up and proceeding to question people. The questions he puts to people are mostly concerned about their lives that might or might not be related to the murder case and sometimes they might only be a genuine curiosity about what they think of his character. After that, he reflects on his findings, engages in some side-activities around the district, and when the day is over he goes back to his room and sleeps for the next day. During the night he is approached again by the voices from the beginning, trying to steer him back on the path of self-destruction and breaking his confidence.

However, that is not the only Sisyphean task he must undertake, but also the dealing of his trauma, Dora leaving him. In the last dream that he has he meets Dora now embodied in the image of Dolores Dei, the secular historical figure from the Church. The absurd stand here is that Dolores is an Innocence, one who is regarded as the best example of both Human beauty and inhumanity. Dora is idolised as the joys of the past and the legacy of the pain she inflicted on Harry are immortalised in his mind through the combination with Dolores, a figure that time has also made to be a controversial figure.

For Harry, the dream is the boulder. As the dream "Dora" explains: "Once this dream starts happening, it keeps happening" (*Disco Elysium*). As she explains to Harry that he will never see her again, she then says "I see you tomorrow" (*Disco Elysium*). Every day he wakes up in the game with the integration of player choice he can do better and struggle against his addictions and insecurities. But he will eventually always meet his trauma in his dream reminding him of his failure and pain. However, as Camus states it is that moment of

continuous struggle that makes the Absurd man stand out. That moment of self-awareness. When Harry wakes up, he will start his day again, still maintaining his struggle. As Camus describes Sisyphus, “At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (Camus 76-77).

The dream is the moment in time when Dora left Harry. No matter what he says, or what he does, the result is inevitable. The dream “Dora” will leave him, shame him, telling him that his suffering will be a perpetual torment while she relatively forgets him in quite a short time. Any chance for a future together is gone as explained by “Dora”: “The atoms don't form us anymore: us, our love, our unborn daughters (...) I terminated yours. Don't you remember...?” (*Disco Elysium*)

With the connection of the Dolores Dei image, Harry's and Revachol's pasts are united in his mind both abandoned by their respective women. Dolores Dei was the founder of the Moralists International, an organisation that eventually defeated the communist revolution in Revachol and put it under foreign control. In the end, the fall of communism did not revitalise Revachol, it started its slow death. The dream “Dora” is the combination of the Revolution and Harry's love, and as Hadden writes, “this isn't a trite comparison; the Revolution and Dora were both opportunities for hope” (Hadden), and both were being robbed of it.

Harry's new hope is gained by discovering the Insulindian Phasmid that has been eroding Josef's mind with its pheromones. If Harry has the necessary skill level with Inland Empire he can communicate with the Phasmid. Harry can attempt to discuss existentialism with the Phasmid about why they exist and where it all stems from. “Where does it come from? All this? Around us? The world?” (*Disco Elysium*) The Phasmid, however, cannot answer his question, “Not even the birds know that. Not even the water lilies.” (*Disco Elysium*) As Spies describes, “The Phasmid does not engage in existential discourse with Harry - (It) does not allow for Harry to resort to transcendental explanations which though hopeful would ultimately strip him of any accountability for his fate” (Spies 85). The Phasmid explain both of their existence on objective terms. It even objectifies Harry's chaotic mind: “I am a relatively median lifeform – while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile system, ominously new to the planet” (*Disco Elysium*). As Genovese defines Camus' absurd man's connection with the world: “There is solidarity between the human and non-human because they are dependent upon one another for definition” (Maria Genovese 3). With the Phasmid, Harry has the chance to self-reflect and accept his chaotic self, rather than fighting it.

The Phasmid is the one that advises Harry to move on from his memory of Dora: “: that woman – turn from the ruin. Turn and go forward” (*Disco Elysium*). Opposed to Iosef and Revachol, it is possible for Harry to realise the absurdity of existence. Revacholians and Iosef are both unable to come to terms with the harshness of life, of their stripped futures. Harry however, with the Phasmid’s help is able to find the strength to move on as Spies notes, “It is the Phasmid that enables him to shift his perspective toward the future and to embrace (traumatic) existence in the here and now” (Spies 85).

Lastly, it is with the Phasmid that the Pale can be discussed fully. The Phasmid regards it as human made for it is the human past, the human mind that gets exposure to the world that will destroy the world: “It is a nervous shadow cast into the world by you, eating away at reality.” (*Disco Elysium*) The Pale becomes the final awareness of the world for Harry. The Pale is the reality that life is meaningless as it will cease to be, overlapping the whole world of *Elysium* and trapping civilization into its own history.

Upon embracing his nature and the future of the world Harry finally steps onto the path of the rebel. After accepting his chaotic mind Harry is finally approached by his fellow policemen from the district. Through them he is finally able to confront his past fully. His former partner informs him how Dora left him six years before and how he handled it. Harry has the chance to feel disbelief over the fact that he has been broken for six years due to heartbreak. This act allows him to fully understand his nature. He is no longer shackled by the past, now he has been freed from it. He has now gained unity not through some forms of ideology, but through clarity. It is also no longer important what happens next. Whether Harry is allowed to stay with the RCM or is fired, or whether or not Kim Kitsuragi joins his station as Caraway puts it, “the revolt against the absurd will not eradicate, circumvent or even mitigate it” (Caraway 130). The important fact is Harry is now fully aware of the absurd and of his own nature and now revolts against the absurd.

In short, attempting to escape the absurd through belief ends in self-deception as it requires the rejection of personal experience and the absurd. However, with the example of Harry, it can be revolted against. One should not try to reject their nature but rather accept it for their liberation. Harry realises that his problems are caused by his inability to move on from Dora and is then able to understand the absurdity of his reality. He kept going even after all the pain he had suffered, understanding that the “Meaning” of why we are here is not important. Genovese put it the best: “Meaning can be assigned to things, but should that transitory meaning replace the awareness of absurdity (as in the case of religion) it destroys itself by

trading truths for absolutes.” (Genovese 4) The important thing is to understand ourselves to confront the absurd.

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