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Publication Date

2023-06-14

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Disco Elysium Through Modernism: An
Investigation and Analysis

Tim Anders

University of California, Irvine

2023



Jami Bartlett, Ph.D

Department of English

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Introduction	1
<u>Video Game Terminology in <i>Disco Elysium</i></u>	7
<u>The Player vs. the Character They Control</u>	12
<u>Historical Context of Modernism and The World of <i>Disco Elysium</i></u>	13
<u>When Does <i>Disco Elysium</i> Take Place?</u>	14
<u>Where Does <i>Disco Elysium</i> Take Place?</u>	15
<u>The Antecentennial Revolution</u>	16
<u>The Revolution in Revachol</u>	18
<u>Martinaise as a Setting</u>	19
<u>The Furies in the Mirror</u>	21
Intellect	24
<u>The Phone Call on the Coast</u>	24
<u>Death by Water and Prophecy in <i>Disco Elysium</i></u>	29
<u>The Dream on the Island</u>	31
Psyche	37
<u>The Harry-Player Bond</u>	38
<u>Hulme's Theory of Language</u>	40
<u>The Skills as Fragments</u>	42
<u>Familiar-Humorous Meta-Commentary in <i>Disco Elysium</i></u>	43

<u>Skill-Related Meta-Commentary in <i>Disco Elysium</i></u>	47
Physique	52
<u>The Aging Body, Harry’s Coats, and Living in the Past</u>	53
<u>Being “This Type of Animal”</u>	58
<u>Karaoke Salvation and the Size of a Soul</u>	64
<u>The Pale, the Gyre, and Apocalypse</u>	67
Motorics	74
<u>Harry and Death</u>	75
<u>Eliot Writing “The Waste Land”</u>	76
<u>The Role of a Detective and Fragments</u>	77
<u>“A Drunken Man’s Praise of Sobriety”</u>	78
<u>The Dead Man on the Pier</u>	79
<u>“Shivers”</u>	81
<u>Impending Doom and the Nuclear Bomb</u>	83
<u>The Doomed Commercial Area</u>	85
<u>The Deserter and the End</u>	88
Works Cited	94

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As anyone who has undertaken a large-scale research project can attest to, no one gets through it alone, and I am absolutely no exception. I'd like to first thank both Dr. Nancy McLoughlin and Dr. Jeff Wasserstrom. Dr. McLoughlin was the director of the program when I first joined, and Dr. Wasserstrom is the current director, and both did an excellent job in cultivating a space for me to explore my ideas and move fluidly through the research process.

Next, I'd like to thank my phenomenal advisor, Dr. Jami Bartlett. Without her input, suggestions, and seemingly-infinite knowledge of all things Modernist, I am sure my thesis would not have been nearly as compelling or well-structured as it ended up being. Dr Bartlett's advice was instrumental to my success throughout the writing process, and our conversations were always compelling and drove me to pursue new avenues I had not yet considered travelling down.

I would also like to thank the Humanities Honors Program for generously providing me with a grant to fund and support my research. I really appreciate it.

Thank you to my family for always supporting me in everything I do, and for pushing me to strive for greatness. I almost certainly would not have even been invited to join the Humanities Honors Program if my mom had not pushed me to join the one at my community college before UCI, so I owe at least some part of this thesis to her. I'd also like to thank my mom for always listening to my writing and offering her own suggestions, even when I am stubborn in taking them.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the rest of my cohort, especially Tristan M., for supporting me throughout the writing process. My complaints (and mad ramblings) were always listened to and considered wholeheartedly, and I hope I was able to offer the same consolation in return.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the video game *Disco Elysium*, analyzed through some of the most popular and well-known Modernist works with the goal of proving that *Disco Elysium* is, at its core, a Modernist work. The incorporation of other Modernist pieces to arrive at this conclusion is mainly to examine reoccurring themes and ideas, some as broad as “obliteration” and others as specific as “identifying with a taxidermy bird after being dissatisfied with the course of one’s life”. In deciding how to structure the analysis, the works of the most prolific Modernist authors were selected with respect to their relationship to *Disco Elysium*’s core player skills. T. S. Eliot was selected to represent “Intellect”, T. E. Hulme for “Psyche”, and W. B. Yeats for “Physique”. The last skill, “Motorics” was not represented by a specific author but rather acts as a collection of final ideas and themes that help to show *Disco Elysium* as Modernist in its entirety, not just in select scenes or characters.

Broadly speaking, video games are not typically analyzed in an academic way. Hopefully, the exploration of *Disco Elysium* alongside Modernist giants like “The Waste Land” demonstrates that this lack of analysis is unwarranted and that video games are worth as deep analysis as any other piece of media. There are countless games just as complex and stimulating as *Disco Elysium*, waiting patiently to be analyzed. This thesis concludes by stating that *Disco Elysium* is in fact clearly a Modernist game, and that the themes of fragmentation and obliteration especially are near-perfect fits for discussing many of its most fundamental components: plot, characters, setting, and more.

INTRODUCTION

He do the Police in different voices

– Charles Dickens, “Our Mutual Friend”

VOLITION: In honor of your will, lieutenant-yefreitor. That you kept from falling apart, in the face of sheer terror. Day after day. Second by second.

INLAND EMPIRE: DETECTIVE

ESPIRIT-DE-CORPS: ARRIVING

AUTHORITY: ON THE SCENE

– *Disco Elysium*

If there were only one word that could be used to describe Modernism, it would be obliteration. A sense of impending doom was the steam that drove forward the engine of Modernist creation, permeating each work thoroughly and ultimately characterizing the literary period wholly. From Eliot to Yeats, there was a distinct understanding that however the world was before World War I, there was no returning to it. In a very literal sense, Europe truly had been obliterated by the war. The war’s conflicts devastated any land they touched, from the carved labyrinth of trenches littering the Western front to the bombed-out husks of buildings across Europe’s most beautiful and developed cities. The minds of those who witnessed the war were in a similar state, as returning soldiers suffocated in the trauma they sustained from the horrors they had witnessed. Civilians experienced a different horror altogether, having gone years without their husbands, sons, and fathers, only to have returned to them a person often fundamentally changed by their time in combat, if they returned at all. As any society does when something held dear is destroyed, the fragments of days gone were the only real thing that could

be held onto for any sense of comfort, as little comfort as it may have been. Ultimately, these two elements characterize Modernism very well: obliteration and fragmentation. It was simply a fact that the old world had been destroyed, and its fragments were all that was left by the wake of destruction.

Disco Elysium, a role-playing video game written by Robert Kurvitz and published and developed by ZA/UM, draws powerful inspiration from this literary period and embodies the themes of obliteration and fragmentation wholly. It follows the story of a detective, who the player controls, after he wakes up from a drunken-drug-fueled bender he underwent the night before in an attempt to drown out a multitude of sorrows. As the game progresses, the player is granted access to learning about the past endeavors of the detective, named Harry, as well as to the different faculties of his mind and body. This is accomplished through Harry's exceptionally-unique set of skills, which the player both utilizes and improves over the course of the game. While the mechanic of improving skills is quite standard of a role-playing game, *Disco Elysium* differs in its execution of this common idea substantially when compared to other games in the genre. Typically, the skills in a role-playing game allow the character the player controls to pick harder locks, speak more persuasively, carry more gear, get hit harder, or hit harder themselves. However, in *Disco Elysium*, the skills are much more specialized to the skillset of a detective, and furthermore, express themselves as different voices within Harry's head. The extreme personification of Harry's different skills makes *Disco Elysium* unique in its own right, but the game also contains some of the best writing of any role-playing game, and likely among the best of any video game. Furthermore, any player of *Disco Elysium* who is familiar with Modernism will immediately see its presence in the game. The setting, the way the characters interact with one another and the world, and the general tone of the game is steeped thoroughly in the themes

of Modernism, most importantly the themes of obliteration and fragmentation already mentioned.

The structure of this analysis will borrow from *Disco Elysium*'s mechanics, specifically the aforementioned skills. Given the uniqueness of these skills and the lack of room for a dedicated analysis of each one individually, it would be a great shame to not give them at least some coverage. *Disco Elysium* has four primary skills, those being "Intellect", "Psyche", "Physique", and "Motorics". Each of these skills has six derivative skills that more specifically detail a strength (or weakness) of the Harry the player decides to create. The four primary skills offer an excellent method of breaking down the different components of Modernism, as some of the most prolific Modernist writers and their works express themes and styles that align themselves with those skills. The first writer whose works and impact on Modernism will be evaluated is T. S. Eliot, arguably the single most influential Modernist writer. His works, especially "The Waste Land", are stuffed to the brim with metaphor, allegory, and reference to other works of literature and art. One would need an encyclopedic knowledge of often highly-esoteric literature and art to truly decipher some of Eliot's works, and as such the skill he best represents is "Intellect". Even more fittingly, one of "Intellect"'s subsidiary skills is outright named "Encyclopedia", which provides Harry with matter-of-fact knowledge about the world around him: history, art, geography, literature, and more. In a general sense, the distribution of references in the works of Eliot make it clear that he possessed a tremendous intellect, justifying the skill choice further. For this analysis specifically, Eliot's writings about social rifts and failing conversations will be related to Harry's own struggles to communicate, especially with his ex-wife.

The next skill is “Psyche”, which is represented precisely by the philosophy and writings of T. E. Hulme. “Psyche” is a less straight-forward skill than Intellect, in that its name does not immediately make obvious what processes and engagements the skill is actually used for. Generally speaking, “Psyche” involves Harry’s emotional responses, as well as some skills that function like “Intellect” in their capacity to reveal information about the world that would otherwise be unknown. Some of “Psyche”’s most important subsidiary skills are “Volition”, “Empathy”, and “Authority”. The “Volition” skill is an especially important gameplay element, as it determines Harry’s “Morale” statistic. This statistic dictates how resilient Harry is to receiving mental damage, as well as generally displaying how much conviction Harry has. Hulme’s philosophical contributions relate to the skill of “Volition” especially, specifically in his “Romanticism and Classicism”. In this work, Hulme aggressively outlines a philosophical theory of language in which individuals are posed as combatants against linguistic expression itself. This is the primary reason Hulme is the chosen representative of the “Psyche” skill. Moreover, there is a skill within “Psyche” called “Espirit de Corps” which serves to provide the player (but not Harry) with glimpses of police activity across the world of Elysium. This skill, as well as a few select others, introduces an interesting meta-narrative into the game, where information is revealed to the player through Harry’s skills, but the information is hidden from Harry himself. This meta-element also works well as far as the topic of philosophy is concerned, because much like the field of philosophy itself, it involves the underlying ideas and concepts that guide and impact the world and mechanics of the game.

Physique, like Intellect, is relatively-straightforward in its function. It primarily governs the aspects of Harry that involve physicality and strength; some easily-understood examples include Endurance, Physical Instrument, and Pain Threshold. It is represented well in Modernism

by William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet and writer. Yeats wrote masterful poems in more traditional styles than many other Modernist authors, who typically utilized free verse, and thus the body of his poetry was more specifically defined in the same way a well-trained physical body also would be. He also frequently discussed the way things were organized in society and how they worked together to form a larger “organism”. His later works often concerned themselves with the processes of aging, typically accompanied by vivid descriptions of his own body and how he felt it existed in the world. Of the works of Yeats, the most emblematic poems expressing the aforementioned bodily themes are “The Second Coming” and “Sailing to Byzantium”. Yeats also had a consistent interest in writing about the apocalypse, which connects well to *Disco Elysium*’s own apocalyptic themes and once more reinforces and evokes destruction and fragmentation.

Finally, “Motorics” is the skill that relates to Harry’s speed and agility, not just physically but mentally too. It contains skills that are clearly physical, like “Hand/Eye Coordination” and “Composure”, as well as ones that are more internal, like “Reaction Speed” (which often picks up on important conversation pieces as someone talks) and “Savoir Faire”. “Motorics” will not be represented as a specific writer or Modernist thinker; instead, in keeping with the theme of speed, it will be a sort of “lightning round” where many Modernist elements and themes are mentioned to tie together the findings and conclusions of the other three skill sections. There are simply too many instances of Modernism within *Disco Elysium* scattered across countless lines of dialogue, and to maintain some semblance of organized thematic analysis, these could not all make the cut into a main skill section. At the same time, it would be a shame if they were skipped altogether. “Motorics” will therefore be an analysis amalgam of scenes, themes, and topics that while not directly connected with one another, form the threads that work in the

background to firmly cement *Disco Elysium* in the Modernist tradition. Lastly, “Motorics” will function as a capstone to this analysis as a whole, tying up loose threads and offering possible future avenues to explore *Disco Elysium* and similar games.

Altogether, each of the above authors and their works highlights some facet of fragmentation and obliteration. Eliot’s obliteration focused strongly on the dissolution of interpersonal and cultural connections, and much of his writing was interested in examining the fragments left behind by these broken states of things. Hulme provides more of a philosophical framework, characterizing the relationship between individuals and their words as a constant battle to wrangle the words towards their intended expression. Where words might once have happily submitted themselves to human use, Hulme instead identifies the human struggle of piecing together linguistic fragments in the hopes that they stick together in a particular way. This obliteration transforms language from being used with carefree simplicity to being rogue and uncontrollable, echoing the total lack and destruction of simplicity present during and after World War I. Yeats presents his form of obliteration as more of a gradual descent into deterioration, rather than an instant imposition of destruction. His emphasis on the body with relation to an ongoing apocalypse lends itself well to some of *Disco Elysium*’s more esoteric and supernatural content, too, such as its impending apocalypse. Before each author is independently examined, there will be four important sections that aim to create clarity in the rest of the analysis. The first will explain some common terms used in video games that are relevant to *Disco Elysium*, and the second will clarify and explain the relationship between Harry and the player who controls him. The third section will provide a general overview of the history of the fictional world *Disco Elysium* concerns, and finally, the fourth will be a brief introduction into how *Disco Elysium* actually begins, especially with respect to the poem it opens with. As will be

demonstrated, this poem itself borrows from the Modernist tradition, and reflects wonderfully on the opening encounters the player experiences through Harry in their first five or ten minutes of gameplay.



Video Game Terminology in *Disco Elysium*

As video games are a relatively-new subject for academic analysis, and generally are not engaged with by a significant portion of the population, it is important that some terms and functions of video games be introduced and explained. To start, *Disco Elysium* is an “RPG”, or “role-playing game”. The most common feature of an RPG, as the name implies, is that the player is taking on the role of someone or something else. This does not mean that these roles are fictional, or even decided by the game itself: in *Disco Elysium* the player is always role-playing as a detective because the main character is a detective, but the player can choose if their detective is rude, polite, communist, fascist, moral, evil, and so on. Even more specifically, *Disco Elysium* is a CRPG, or “computer role-playing game”, because it is a video game (as opposed to TTRPGs, or “tabletop role-playing games” like *Dungeons and Dragons*). *Disco Elysium* is presented through an isometric perspective, which means that the camera is locked “above” the main character and looks down at the world in such a way that it appears three-dimensional. This might more colloquially be called “bird’s-eye view”, with the addition of a specified and consistent angle.

Disco Elysium is a game in the “point and click” category, which means that players use their mouse to point at a spot and click to move their character there. Theoretically, a player could play the entire game without ever touching their keyboard. Aside from walking around and exploring the environments of *Disco Elysium*, the other primary action the player does is click on

other characters to interact with them, which usually means having a conversation. Every character the player is not controlling is an “NPC”, or “non-player character”. There is never a point in time where there is another human impacting the game in any capacity; it is a “single-player game”. The standard experience of playing *Disco Elysium*, or “gameplay loop”, is getting an objective, walking to the place where the objective is, either talking to someone (or multiple people) by clicking on them or interacting with something in the environment (a tree, a box, a car, etc.). A complete playing of the game, from its beginning to its end, is called a “playthrough”. A playthrough of *Disco Elysium* will be somewhere around 20-25 hours, depending on how thorough the player is in their investigation. Of these 20-25 hours, around three will be spent just walking around, and the rest will be reading. The reason *Disco Elysium* can be analyzed like a literary work is because it contains over a million words of description and dialogue; basically, it is a book with sections of walking interspersed throughout.

Once the player has initiated a conversation with an NPC by clicking on them, they will typically be offered a list of choices for them to pick. These will range from actions, such as having their character run away from the NPC or hitting them, to verbal responses to what the NPC is saying. The latter is by far the most common, as detective investigations logically require a lot of question-asking and discussion to be successful. When the player chooses a certain dialogue option, it sometimes means that other options will become inaccessible. This makes *Disco Elysium* a “choices matter” game. Effectively, this means that something Harry does in the beginning of the game could have an impact on what happens later in the game. Most commonly, this involves what Harry does and does not know; there are many instances in which Harry learns something, and that thing comes up again much later in the game. There are also some objectives that once completed, prevent Harry from pursuing certain other objectives.

The most important part of any role-playing game, especially *Disco Elysium*, are the skills the main character has and develops over the course of the playthrough. These have already been mentioned in the introduction, but in a broader sense, a character's skills in an RPG are numerical representations of their capabilities. These skills can be improved or worsened when they are invested into using "skill points", which the player can earn through a variety of means but most commonly involves the collection of experience points, or "exp". In *Disco Elysium*, a player earns exp when they complete objectives or achieve certain successes in conversations. The purpose of improving skills, also known as "levelling up" skills, is to get better at the things a particular skill is associated with. Normally, skills in role-playing games are quite passive, and represent a character improving in some generalized and nonspecific way. In *Disco Elysium*, this is not the case: Harry's skills are manifestations of his psyche and body, so they "talk" directly to him when something related to them happens. For example, there is a skill called "Electrochemistry" that handles anything drug, sex, or party-related. When Harry encounters alcohol or drugs, this is the skill that almost always comments on it. Furthermore, the higher-level skills Harry has will interact with him more frequently and narrow the scope of what Harry notices and cares about. As another example, a Harry who has had his physicality-related skills levelled up more than his intellectually-related skills will notice things like posture, frame, muscle, and build of an NPC more than they will notice things like titles of books, names of historical figures, artistic patterns in nature, and the ways that others speak. This makes two different "Harrys" not only have different talents, but actually experience the world around them in unique ways. Through the selection of skills, the player also shapes the role they are playing as. If they want to play a smart and knowledgeable character, they will probably level up the "Intellect" skills; if they want a brawny and strong character, they will probably level up the

“Physique” skills. The purpose of levelling up skills, aside from having them talk to Harry more often, is to succeed on “skill checks”. In *Disco Elysium*, these skill checks determine whether Harry succeeds or fails at a specific task. These tasks range from seeing something far away to ascertaining a character’s motivation to aiming and firing a pistol. Whether or not Harry succeeds is calculated by rolling two six-sided dice and adding the relevant skill’s level to the result. For example, an “Electrochemistry” check to identify a particular brand of whiskey would roll the two dice and add Harry’s “Electrochemistry” skill level to the total. There are red checks and white checks. Red checks, once failed, cannot be retried. They usually represent important or time-sensitive choices. White checks can be retried if failed, but only after Harry levels up the skill that corresponds to the check he failed. These are usually not time-sensitive, but can be just as important as red checks; most of the mandatory checks to progress the plot, for example, are white. As should now be clear, these skills are incredibly important for this analysis as a whole, and will come up many more times throughout it.

Role-playing games almost always have some statistic that represents the character’s “health”, or how much damage they can receive before they are killed (or otherwise unable to function as normal). In *Disco Elysium*, Harry has two of these health bars: a standard one, which measures how strong his body is, and a “Morale” bar, which measures how much mental damage he can sustain before having a heart attack and dying. These are directly tied to his skills, with his health being tied to “Endurance” and his “Morale” being tied to “Volition”. Every point in these skills past one will grant Harry an additional instance of being harmed before he dies. For example, if Harry’s “Endurance” is levelled to two, Harry will be able to withstand two instances of physical harm before he dies. During the game, Harry can purchase healing items for each statistic in order to recover lost health. If either bar drops to zero and Harry does not heal them,

he will die and the player will receive a “game over”. This means they will have to return to the last time they saved the game.

Finally, another significant feature of role-playing games is the presence of items that can enhance or detract from the skills a character has. In *Disco Elysium*, these are almost always articles of clothing, with a few very exceptions. Otherwise, there are some tools Harry can find that allow him to do things he could not do by hand: a prybar, a flashlight, a boombox, and a bag for collecting bottles are some examples of these tools. They will most commonly give Harry additional options when interacting with certain items, or allow him to interface with the world in general in a new way (by collecting scattered bottles and cans with the bag, for example). Harry can also find random other items strewn about the world, including postcards, pens, books, and mugs, to name a few. These typically play very minor roles, and will be used only once or twice in particular dialogue exchanges. Some items exist purely to be sold for in-game currency, so that Harry can purchase other products like the aforementioned healing items or clothing that NPCs are selling.

All of this information about how *Disco Elysium* is experienced as a video game should help clarify any confusion in the upcoming sections. However, there is an additional aspect of video games that requires clarification: the fact that they require a player. It can quickly become confusing when a statement like “Harry chooses to do this” is really saying “the player directs Harry to choose this”. Moreover, even though the player is slipping into a particular role when they play *Disco Elysium*, Harry is not a blank slate that they are able to customize to suit them exactly. To mitigate any confusion surrounding this specific issue, the next section will discuss the roles of both the player and Harry in terms of an organized hierarchy, so that the two objects might be better disentangled and the incoming claims clarified.

The Player vs. the Character They Control

As will become abundantly clear in the main sections of this analysis, Harry is a very complex character that despite being influenced by the player, is not fully shaped by them. Harry is not designed to be a “stand-in” for the player; however, *Disco Elysium* employs a clever trick and storytelling device to allow the player as much freedom with Harry as possible. This is done by making Harry an amnesiac, such that his past is as known to him as it is to the player (in other words, not known at all). This does not mean that there is no past there: in fact, arguably one of the player’s primary objectives as they play is to discover as much of Harry’s past as they can. Harry is a very compelling character, so the player will likely feel a desire to uncover more about him. This will also happen passively, as many of the characters that inhabit the area Harry can explore know about him in some manner or another.

There are a lot of choices for the player to make as they play, especially when it comes to dialogue and what Harry says to other people. This is simultaneously the area where the player has the most control as well as the area where Harry is most defined and constrained. Because the player is choosing from a list of options, they do not have total freedom to have Harry say anything they want him to say. However, they do control which option they pick. It is extremely important to remember that any option the player has is something Harry both would and could do. Just because the player neglects a particular option does not mean that Harry would not do or say that thing; it only means that the specific Harry they have been directing and levelling up did not make that choice. The option appearing at all indicates that Harry would be both willing and capable of doing that thing. Any analysis regarding Harry in general will pull from every option he has in the game, not just the particular options that suit a specific version of Harry best. Overall, it is very important to reject the idea of Harry being a complete projection of the player.

He is a unique character like any other in the game, the only difference being that the player directly influences what he does through their direction of him within certain parameters. This is not to say that their relationship is unimportant, but rather that understanding them as two distinct entities is basically necessary for any meaningful analysis of either party's general role.

Now that the roles of Harry and the player have been more cemented, the next section will cover the context surrounding the situation that Harry is in. Essentially, this will mean describing the in-game world of *Disco Elysium*, which is named Elysium. This will mostly be history, as the political background of Elysium is very similar to Earth's own history and helps to introduce the context of Modernism itself, but mentions of the general culture, technology, and politics will also be included to better paint a picture of what Elysium is really like.



Historical Context of Modernism and The World of Disco Elysium

The examination of video games through thematically-related literary movements can stall and struggle when looking at a game like *Disco Elysium*. While investigations like “Modernism as it relates to Britain's experience during World War I” or “Modernism in contemporary sculptures” only require Earth's history to make their cases, transplanting a real-world literary phenomenon into a world with its own unique history is a trickier puzzle to solve. *Disco Elysium* is a world created from the ground up, both extremely similar to Earth in some respects and then completely opposite in others. The first several pages of this analysis will resemble an Elysian history textbook, providing explanations of events that have happened in the world of the game to flesh out why Modernism is such a good fit for analyzing the themes and game content a player might experience when playing through it. This will begin with an overview of the geography of Elysium and the forces that control it, followed by a look into the

nations and political factions that led to the major political event within the game, the war that sparks the constantly-in-game-referenced revolution.



When Does *Disco Elysium* Take Place

Before even situating the places of Elysium, the time during which the game takes place should be established. The game has its own timescale, and much about it is left vague. When the player takes control of the main character, it is said that the game is taking place in “’51”. It is unclear if this is number has a prefix number (or multiple, e.g., 151 or 1051 or 1951). It is worth mentioning that if *Disco Elysium* took place in 1951, this would be a time where Modernism was prevalent and abundant in the literary canon. Both world wars had happened, and the world was rebuilding itself from the brink of arguably the most horrific time in human history. The Soviet Union at this time was also headed by Stalin and was in full swing, and the Allies were dealing with the splitting up of Berlin. This was a time of international turmoil, and the literature and art reflected it clearly: annihilation was not far behind in humanity’s rearview mirror.

The second-to-last thing that informs when the game might take place is what kind of technology the player has access to in *Disco Elysium*. In the game, there are radios, cars, mass-produced music (on tape spools), lights (sodium lights specifically), boomboxes, blimps, trains, cranes, and trucks. There is also disco music, which the main character is said to have been quite fond of in his youth. So, technologically speaking, Elysium is more or less on par with a combination of technology from the 40s, 60s, and 70s. No televisions are present in the game, and computers, while extant, are bulky (as in, need-to-be-on-carts-with-wheels bulky) are rare. Finally, an interaction within the game notes that the cities around the main setting have relatively-recently switched from coal power to petroleum-based power (*Disco Elysium*). This

lines up well with the time period in the real world where petroleum and natural gas took over coal: the 1950s (US Energy Information Administration). With this information, the physical makeup of the world can now be examined.



Where Does *Disco Elysium* Take Place?

The world of Elysium is fundamentally physically different from Earth. For one, it is not a sphere like Earth is. The game mentions that weather balloons have been sent up into the low atmosphere to get a better idea of what the world looks like physically, and pictures have come back as something referred to only as a “dark gray corona” (*Disco Elysium*). Because of real-world current events, any search with the word “corona” in it is almost impossible to parse if looking for anything other than information about the virus, so it is a bit vague as to what a world shaped like a corona would actually look like. One potential interpretation is something like a contact lens, a sort of warped dome-like shape that might at least somewhat resemble a sphere when looking at it a certain way. The underside of this corona, thanks to a force called the pale that will shortly be discussed, might be something like a trailing comet, with bits and pieces of the once-whole planet literally fracturing and dissolving away.

On this corona-shaped thing are seven isolas: Mundi, Seol, Samara, Iilmaraa, Graad, Katla, and Insulinde. These function more or less as the continent counterparts to Earth, with the word “isola” coming from “isolation”, as the inhabitants of each at one point assumed they were alone in the world. *Disco Elysium* takes place in the Martinaise district of Revachol, a city in Insulinde. These isolas are not just landmasses, as the oceans that surround some of them are considered to be a part of the isolas themselves (much like tectonic plates on Earth). This is because the majority of Elysium is not covered by water, but by a strange substance called the

pale. The pale is an odorless, colorless substance that manifests mainly as a sort of gas, and acts as the glue that holds the isolas together and in place. It is estimated by scientist within the game that 72% of the surface of Elysium is covered by the pale (*Disco Elysium*). The pale makes orbital flight exceptionally difficult to undergo, and is why the aforementioned weather balloon is important: it was one of the few successful attempts to view the world of Elysium from a semi-orbital perspective. The pale has many strange qualities: it modifies the passage of time, degenerates the mental faculties of people who spend too much time in it, and even causes fundamental physical rules of the universe like math and distance to fall apart entirely (*Disco Elysium*). The pale is a wonderful metaphor, and will be examined in much greater depth. Returning to the isolas themselves, each isola acts somewhat as an anecdote for a country or region present on Earth. For example, the isola of Graad is coded somewhat to be like Eastern Europe, and the isola of Insulinde is closer to Western Europe. However, this does not have any relation to their physical locations on the surface of Elysium. Given this broad overview of Elysium, the most important events of the world will be covered, as they arguably provide the most context for and relation to the real-world Modernist movement.



The Antecentennial Revolution

As the name suggests, the Antecentennial Revolution was a revolution in the world of *Disco Elysium* that occurred just after the turn of the century, in '02, and lasted until '08 in most of the world and '10 in Revachol, a city on the isola of Insulinde and the main setting of the game. This revolution was sparked by a group of communists in Graad following the outbreak of a prion disease and involved at least Graad (where it broke out), Samara (who was allied with/controlled by the communists), and Insulinde (where Revachol is). The main parties in this

war were Kraz Mazov, the leader of the communists (ideologically and otherwise) and a clear stand-in for Karl Marx, as well as the Moralists International (or Moralintern for short), and the royalty of Revachol, headed at the time of the revolution by King Guillaume “Le Lion” and ended by his nephew, Frissel I. The latter king was executed by communists when they invaded the city. However, it was not the fault of either of these two kings that the monarchy was so unstable by the time the revolution came. That honor can be attributed only to King Filippe III, who came two rulers before Guillaume and ruled for 25 years. During his rule, King Filippe III spent so much of his nation’s wealth on extreme lavishness and extravagance that the national treasury was quickly depleted, weakening his kingdom severely. He was also severely addicted to cocaine, which likely led to some less-than-ideal decision-making on his end. It is argued that his maladministration of the kingdom was ultimately responsible for its collapse during the Antecentennial Revolution about 150 years after his rule. He was blamed so much so for his failures as a leader that in March of ’02, the newly-formed Commune of Revachol blew up statues of the leader and his symbols as well as dug up his remains and threw them into the Insulindian Bay.

The Revolution continued to develop as Kraz Mazov headed the Eleven Day Government in Graad. Meanwhile, a counter-revolutionary force began to develop around him and across Graad. This force was so powerful that it eventually toppled the revolutionary government, leading to Kraz Mazov committing suicide in his palace (although remaining communists dispute this idea). After the revolutionary government was toppled in Graad, the Moralintern stepped in and began to orchestrate the founding of the Coalition of Nations, which might be likened to something like NATO on Earth. This Coalition was made up of Graad and several other republics across the isolas that eventually invaded still-communist Revachol in ’08 during

“Operation Death Blow”. This operation involved the aerostatic bombardment (via blimp-like airships) of several districts in the city of Revachol. One of these is Martinaise, the district the player actually explores and interacts with during their playthrough of *Disco Elysium*, and was chosen as a location of bombardment because of its coastal placement and revolutionary activity in nearby bunkers on the coast. The communists were defeated during this bombardment (despite never officially surrendering), and ceded control to the Coalition. Revachol as a city was a tremendously valuable resource for the Coalition to have as the former so-called capital of the world (economically speaking), and so it was divided into twenty-one individually-controlled cordons. The Coalition has since imposed a harsh and exploitative capitalist economy upon the city, causing much tension between the workers there and the foreign interests who extract extreme amounts of profit from the city’s industry. Finally, the Coalition founded the Revachol Citizens Militia, a volunteer police force that is responsible for keeping the peace in Revachol. However, the RCM has quite little actual control over Revachol, and serves mainly to keep its citizens in check as much as it is allowed to by the Coalition.



The Revolution in Revachol

Since *Disco Elysium* takes place in the city of Revachol specifically, it is pertinent to explore how this city was affected by the revolution and how the revolution manifested specifically in this environment. In Revachol, the wars during the Revolution were primarily between the Royalists, who supported King Guillaume and his administration, and the communists, who formed the aforementioned Commune of Revachol as well as the Insulindian Citizens Militia, or ICM to fight them. Guillaume realized relatively quickly that he was fighting a losing war, and so he fled to Graad to become a venture capitalist. His nephew, Frissel I, was

then both put into power and removed from it via communist execution unceremoniously. Thus, Revachol was under communist control until '10, when Operation Death Blow “liberated” it from their control. Given all of the different political parties that were operating at some point within the city, it is easy to see why the area is such a hotbed and stays under close scrutiny from the Coalition. This abundance of political ideas is something that will be mentioned again, as it is quite relevant to the discussion of Modernism and the development of communism alongside and after neoliberalism in the game itself. For Martinaise, one of the districts bombed during Operation Death Blow and the main setting of the game, the same is true, as a colorful variety of political perspectives can be found within it. The rest has already been said: the Coalition took control over the city, divided it, and kept it impoverished in order to extract as much as possible and appeal to their foreign interests (but not before taking a sizeable cut themselves).



Martinaise as a Setting

Now that the history surrounding Revachol has been explained, as well as the physical and temporal makeup of the world around it, Martinaise can be examined specifically as a setting for *Disco Elysium*. The first thing to mention is that Martinaise, visually speaking, is still very clearly a war-torn place. Craters line the streets from shelling, half-completed-or-half-destroyed tenements stand precariously over the bay on wooden stilts, and caches of weapons in secret bunkers under the roads can still be discovered even decades after the revolution has ended. For the people of Martinaise, life is dull and unstable. It is not just structurally unstable though; because of the delineations between RCM precincts, Martinaise fell between the cracks in a metaphorical sense and was scarcely (if at all) policed. This was done in part intentionally by the Coalition, which used the ruins of Martinaise as a symbol and pseudo-monument for the

communist defeat. Unfortunately for the residents of Martinaire, this lack of policing led to an influx of crime and unrest. As a product of this, a new group called the Dockworker's Union sprung up to take control, and when the game actually takes place, are the de facto leaders of the district. Crime is still a significant issue when the game takes place, but the Union provides security in the city to those who are able to afford it or those who otherwise are allied with the Union in some way. When the game takes place, there are a few primarily-political conflicts occurring that the player can choose to interfere with. These include the strike the Union is currently orchestrating, a drug-smuggling ring that has developed and can be investigated thanks to the strike stopping the transportation of cargo in Martinaire, and perhaps most importantly and central to the game, the hanging of a man behind the Whirling-in-Rags, a hostel in Martinaire and the main character's temporary base of operations.

Besides the hostel, there are several other key locations that figure into the development of Martinaire as an interesting Modernist setting. To the east of the hostel, the gates to the harbor stand tall and imposing. This is where the strike is being held, although the main character is able to circumvent their blocking of the gates through some tactful exploration. Besides the dock, to the west is a mysterious development referred to by locals as the "doomed commercial area", as it was the home of several businesses that went bankrupt in secession. West of that are some half-bombed out tenements housing several compelling denizens of Martinaire. To the south, there is a small fishing village largely disconnected from the more urban part of Martinaire and home to an abandoned pier, complete with a market and some attractions. Most notable among these is a Ferris wheel, or at least the foundations of where a Ferris wheel once stood. Nearby this is an old church, the oldest building in Martinaire, which is almost abandoned. Finally, at the

southern-most tip of the map are some old factory buildings, now-abandoned but otherwise standing strong and breaking up the slush-gray and bland tundra-marsh landscape.

Armed with all of this history and information about Elysium, we can begin our expedition into the game's playable content. This starts with an exploration of the game's opening poem, titled "Reflections".



The Furies in the Mirror

“The furies are at home
in the mirror; it is their address.
Even the clearest water,
if deep enough can drown.”

- R. S. Thomas, “Reflections”

Disco Elysium opens with the epigraph seen above, the first stanza of a poem written by R. S. Thomas, who was born in 1914. As Thomas was born in the middle of World War I, *Disco Elysium* places the player in control of Harry in the middle of his existential crisis. The screen fades in from black, and the player sees Harry slumped over on the floor of a hostel room in his underwear, surrounded by overturned furniture, emptied bottles, and a general sense of chaos. Already, obliteration and fragmentation are present. Harry's room in the hostel acts as somewhat of a tutorial, as the player learns how to click around the room to move Harry and pick up his clothing. Additionally, there are a few elements of the room Harry can interact with: a ceiling fan and its light, a broken tape player, and most importantly regarding the poem, a steamed-up mirror with a broken faucet beneath it. Thomas's poem discusses the nature of mirrors and how they force the person looking into them to confront their life, both good and bad. When the

player directs Harry to look at the mirror, they receive the following text from his “Inland Empire” skill, which dictates and involves imagination and the supernatural: “Abort! You clearly have not thought this through. You won’t like what you will see there – and you will never *un-become* it” (*Disco Elysium*).

If Harry responds with “Dear lord help me, what is this?!” , the mirror says “whatever it is, at least it’s dead now. There’s clearly rigor mortis on your face” (*Disco Elysium*). This exchange describes the role of the mirror for Thomas best: when a person stands in front of a mirror, they must reflect on the person they are confronted by. There is an interesting difference between Harry’s experience of looking in a mirror and the experience someone would normally have, and this difference is one that Thomas is concerned with as well. This difference is that Harry, after he wakes up from his drug-and-alcohol-induced coma, is a complete amnesiac; he has forgotten everything about himself, including his name. This puts him directly next to the player themselves as far as knowledge about Harry himself, and is why the mirror is an interesting figure to present before the character. While the mirror normally would have someone examining themselves and delving into their own psyche, Harry has nothing to delve into. Where Thomas warns against even the clearest water being able to drown someone, Harry barely has water to look into at all; if anything, Harry would be looking at a completely foreign object, not water but some entirely-alien fluid. He cannot reflect on it, as he knows nothing about it.

The examination of *Disco Elysium*’s opening illustrates how Harry serves very effectively as a figure of obliteration. Not only has his life force been seemingly obliterated, with rigor mortis being mentioned by the mirror, his memory and mental state is in the same condition. As the opening scene of the hostel serves as a tutorial for the player, it also serves as an entry point for this analysis, because it is emblematic of the rest of the game being a journey for the player to

recollect Harry's memorial and experiential fragments. Harry is also a detective, whose entire profession rests upon the collection of fragments. Thus, both items of Modernism are fulfilled: Harry wakes up in a scene almost wholly-characteristic of obliteration, and the rest of the game involves piecing together fragments of not just Harry's life and past, but of the world around him as a whole. In fact, it ends up being the case that Harry is not just a figure of obliteration for himself, but for the entire world he exists in. Building up to this conclusion, virtually every author and their works to be examined will return to the idea of Harry being a force of obliteration and in pursuit of his fragments. *Disco Elysium* expertly plays upon the player's own desire to uncover more and more, especially considering the game's advertisement as a detective story first and foremost. However, as the mirror reminds the player, there are some things that once discovered, cannot be un-known or un-become. This is a narrative that will play out further in specific scenes, where the player pursues lines of questioning and dialogue that provide them with information about Harry (especially his past), but harm Harry (through his health bars) in their uncovering. One such example is the first that will be posed with Eliot's "The Waste Land", which will also open the "Intellect" section and direct the first main segment of analysis.



INTELLECT

YOU: Intellectual vanity will be my undoing.

LOGIC: And the crown on your head as you lay in the casket.

– *Disco Elysium*

One of the most substantial changes to the lives of those experiencing World War I was a sudden and intense rift in communication between individuals. When men came home from the war, if they came home, they were often traumatized and deeply changed by combat. These men, if they were able to speak cohesively and coherently at all, found it excruciatingly difficult to communicate their struggles, fears, and experiences with anyone, even the people they were closest to. Modernist authors picked up on this and discussed it frequently; obtuse communication styles and conversations spent talking past the other person are commonplace in their works, and *Disco Elysium* borrows from this tradition too.



The Phone Call on the Coast

The first instance, and one of the most powerful scenes in the game concerning Harry's past, takes place through a payphone call on the coastal section of the playable area. This area is inaccessible until the third in-game day, which is important: by this point, the player has already been familiarized with at least some of the main objectives and general flow of gameplay. Over the course of these three days, the player will have begun excavating Harry's past from the recesses of both his mind as well as from the city around him. Through this, they will have begun piecing together some of the most significant fragments of his life, including the existence of a romantic interest he once had and now has lost. This figure, in fact, is brought up in the first 20 lines of the entire game, which involve Harry, his Ancient Reptilian Brain, and his Limbic

system arguing over whether or not Harry should wake up or stay floating in his subconscious.

The exchange between the three goes like this:

ANCIENT REPTILIAN BRAIN: An inordinate amount of time passes. It is utterly void of struggle. No ex-wives are contained within it.

Harry: What was that about the *ex-* something?

LIMBIC SYSTEM: An awareness creeps up on you. A mass lies hidden in your dead angle, soaking in some lurid, acidic sauce. It's bloated and shameful, a ball of meat surrounding you... This is a terrible line of questioning, and it will only lead to more awareness of the meat-thing.

Harry: No, I wanted to know about the ex-something.

ANCIENT REPTILIAN BRAIN: Ex-love, ex-tenderness. It is foolish of you to resurface to the loss. (*Disco Elysium*)

Between this dialogue and the discovery of the payphone, there are a few instances where Harry can learn more about the love he lost. None are as potent, however, as him actually speaking to his ex-fiancé through the payphone on the coast. This interaction, from start to finish, almost perfectly encapsulates the type of failure in communication that is found in Eliot's "The Waste Land", specifically in the second section titled "A Game of Chess". This section begins examining the lives of those in London during World War I, and in the second stanza, it describes a "conversation" between two partners. The conversation follows:

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad.

Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

I think we are in rats’ alley

Where the dead men lost their bones. (Eliot, lines 111-116)

It is clear that this is a one-sided conversation. For one, Eliot only uses quotation marks up to “think”, with the “rats’ alley” portion being unquoted, so only one person is talking in this scene. Presumably the person speaking is the wife or girlfriend of the other; they are worried about the mental state of their partner, who does not speak, and a loss of the ability to speak would align with symptoms experienced by shell-shocked soldiers. Moreover, the soldier replies (in his head, most likely; again, no quotation marks) with a mention of rats’ alley, a nickname for the trenches on the Western Front during World War I (Eliot 115-116). Most importantly for Modernism, there is no real communication taking place in this exchange. The soldier finds himself unable to answer at all, and his partner is frantic in her pleas for a response. While the soldier’s capacity to speak has been destroyed altogether, his partner’s exclamations are reduced to bits and pieces of what she really wants to say, evoking fragmentation. The exchange continues, reaching its apex with the soldier’s partner asking, “are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (Eliot, line 126). There is struggle and disconnect underpinning her question, as there clearly is something in the soldier’s head, but his trauma still renders him mute. Interestingly, Harry also expresses extreme discomfort with the contents of his head during the opening dialogue with his Ancient Reptilian Brain, where he exclaims “Mother, help me,

there's a head attached to my neck and I'm *in* it" (*Disco Elysium*). The irony of Harry's exclamation is that the self he believes is in his head is largely erased at this point, since he wakes up an amnesiac. With respect to Eliot's soldier's head, there actually is, essentially, nothing in Harry's head when he wakes up. The question of both the soldier's and Harry's life is also relevant, as was mentioned by the mirror and the apparent rigor mortis Harry's face is experiencing. There are continued comparisons to Harry's body and corpses throughout *Disco Elysium*, but they will mostly be saved for the sections covering Physique, Yeats, and the Motorics lightning round.

Harry's initial interactions with the payphone are banal. He puts in ten cents, dials a random number, and goes on to talk to a few different people; an unhappy husband, a burnt-out writer, a woman looking for her nephew, and a criminal awaiting a cash drop-off. Then, the player is offered a skill check to "Dial a random number – with [Harry's] eyes closed" (*Disco Elysium*). Upon succeeding, Harry begins to dial a number known only to his muscle memory: his ex-fiancé's phone number. As it rings, Harry's endurance skill breaks in, warning him that "the handset [is] slipping from [his] sweaty palm... [his] breathing is heavy", and he is given an out in the form of a "Volition" check to hang up (*Disco Elysium*). The check's dialogue box labels its difficulty forebodingly: "impossible". Finally, "the ocean breaks. Out of the depths, a woman's voice emerges. Small. The dearest thing [Harry has] ever heard" (*Disco Elysium*). The opening of the conversation, with optional sections cut out, proceeds as the following:

PAYPHONE: "Hello." She sounds sleepy.

YOU: Your voice is so beautiful.

PAYPHONE: "No-no..." She's waking up now. "It's *you*, isn't it? It's you..."

YOU: I want to die.

PAYPHONE: “What?” It takes a second for her to realize what you just said.

YOU: Your voice makes me want to turn into dust.

PAYPHONE: “Oh no... not this... what time is it?”

YOU: I don't know who I am. I am an amnesiac.

PAYPHONE: “You're not an amnesiac, Harry... You're drunk.”

YOU: I'm not drunk or high. I'm just hurt... why does it hurt to talk to you?”

PAYPHONE: “Oh god ...” There's silence, it's as heavy as tin. The wind howls. (*Disco Elysium*)

As was the case in the exchange between the soldier and his wife, there is no true communication taking place in the payphone conversation. Harry, like the soldier, is clearly too emotionally compromised to convey anything of meaning, with his responses lamenting his own state more than anything else. His ex, meanwhile, is left to interpret the conversational fragments Harry throws at her, which due to his compromised state are nonsensical and obscured. Even when actual information is about to be conveyed, as seen in Harry's answer and then follow-up question asking why it hurts to talk to her, the other half of the conversation drops out, and he is responded to only with the exclamation “oh god...”. The simile proceeding this exclamation, characterizing the silence as heavy, also evokes a common Modernist trope identified here as “informative silence”. This concept involves the inferences individuals draw from pauses and silences within conversations, which in many cases turn out to contain information missing from the claims that are actually spoken out loud. This explains how a silence can be heavy: because

of the massive amount of information contained within it, including recollection and lamentation of a bygone past, surprise, heartbreak, anger, and more.



Death by Water and Prophecy in *Disco Elysium*

Eliot's "The Waste Land" is split into five sections, the second of which was already mentioned: "A Game of Chess". The name of this segment is unique in the poem in that it is the only one that does not reference any of the elements or elemental powers; in order, the sections are "The Burial of the Dead" (earth), "A Game of Chess" (no element), "The Fire Sermon" (fire), "Death by Water" (water), and "What the Thunder Said" (thunder/lightning) (Eliot). Of all these elements, the one "The Waste Land" makes the most use of is water, despite the "Death by Water" section being just ten lines total. Eliot makes up for it by sprinkling water throughout the rest of the poem, though. Water for Eliot is fascinating and unique as its role is to be both a force of rebirth as well as destruction, as the name of the section dedicated to it implies. In "Death by Water", unsurprisingly, it is a force of destruction: it recounts the story of Phlebas the Phoenician and his drowning at sea, or more specifically, the aftermath of his drowning. Elsewhere in "The Waste Land", water takes the form of rain, a river, or of fog, the latter spreading across London and typically being described as a negative, almost oppressive, force. For *Disco Elysium*, it is the story of Phlebas that is the most important.

As discussed in the section titled "The Furies in the Mirror", *Disco Elysium* opens with Harry recovering from his drug-and-alcohol induced coma. As the game is equally a mystery about Harry's past and the murder case he is sent to Martinaise to solve, there are scenes and interactions where the player can uncover what happened the night before they assume control of Harry. Notably, his bender has caused him to lose both his gun and his badge, but it turns out

there is another piece of police property he lost: his car. This discovery is made in pieces: the first is a broken fence with some tire tracks, the second a collapsed (or runover) billboard-turned-ramp, and finally, the motor carriage itself. When Harry finds his car on the coast, it is half-submerged-half-frozen in a sheet of ice, and he does not recognize it. “Inland Empire” does, though, when it says “You get a sudden sinking feeling. Stomach acid comes up as you look at the motor carriage in the deep, dark, cold water” (*Disco Elysium*). Perhaps even more interesting is “Volition”’s reaction to what “Inland Empire” says: “Why the doom and gloom? It’s just a sunken motor carriage. Some motor carriages are bound to end up in the sea” (*Disco Elysium*). The word “bound” here evokes an almost oracular or prophetic happening, as if there was nothing Harry could have done; things were bound to be that way. As it turns out, a prophesized death by water is exactly what Phlebas and the speaker of “The Waste Land” are involved with themselves.

When the speaker of “The Waste Land”’s first section goes to visit a “famous clairvoyante”, one of the cards set before him is “the drowned Phoenician Sailor” (Eliot, lines 43, 27). Eliot remarks in his notes on the poem that while he did not have much knowledge of actual tarot cards, he decided to pick the ones that sounded the most interesting to him for his poem. One of these is the Hanged Man, which represents the fertility god sacrificing himself to save the land of his people (Eliot, line 55). However, when the fortune teller is going through her divinations, she says that “[she does] not find / The Hanged Man. Fear death by water” (Eliot, lines 54-55). Here is another parallel with *Disco Elysium*. One of the very first things Harry can interact with when he wakes up in the hostel is his necktie, fastened to a ceiling fan blade and whirling slowly above him. While Harry does not find the Hanged Man in the sense that he does not become him, he does meet a hanged man in his dreams: a bloated, fetid version of himself

hanging in place of the actual corpse he is sent to investigate behind the hostel. Nevertheless, Harry avoiding the Hanged Man by not becoming him and instead being warned of water lines up very neatly with the experiences of Eliot's speaker. Harry, too, should fear death by water, whether that be the death he narrowly avoided in his motor carriage or the death of his motor carriage itself, rusting and rotting in the frozen bay of Martinaise. If it is the latter, he has every right to fear it: Harry's past, especially his immediate past in the context of when the game takes place, is deeply uncomfortable for him to reflect on. Either way, though, in the same way that "Volition" remarks that some motor carriages are bound to end up in the ocean, the Phoenician Sailor is bound to meet his death by water. But Harry survives his aquatic prophesized end, since he does not go down with his ship. At least, it seems that way, until *Disco Elysium's* final dream sequence, where Harry meets his ex-fiancé and attempts to find closure with her.



The Dream on the Island

The final act of *Disco Elysium* takes place on an island just off the bay of Martinaise, taking only a few minutes by boat to arrive at. Harry and his partner, Kim, walk around the island and explore an old bunker containing a makeshift bed. Harry, at the player's direction, can decide to take a nap there, and if he does, he dreams of the same bunker and island. As Harry walks out to the coast, a thought hits him suddenly: "Walk into the water. Now." (*Disco Elysium*). Just after Harry makes his first steps onto the water of the bay, the next thought appears: "You see her footprints in the water..." (*Disco Elysium*). Harry continues walking and eventually comes upon a slice of his old neighborhood, on the corner of a video rental store and some apartments. The video rental store is actually mentioned earlier in the game, with the same negative connotation as any other thing connected to the ex-fiancé. In a thought involving the

“Shivers” skill, which gives Harry fleeting glimpses into different parts of the world around him (as well as in his memory), he remembers:

“On the corner of Voyager and Main a large neon sign hangs on the side of a building:

‘Video Revachol, 24h.’ It’s raining and there is almost no traffic on the street. A woman’s footprints in mud lead away from the front door.

Tiny heels, tip-toeing down the road. Beautiful steps, light-footed, with a lifetime ahead of them. [Harry looks] up and the air seems to grow darker.

Suddenly [Harry feels] like [he doesn’t] want to hear about video rentals anymore. [He doesn’t] want to hear about *any of it*. It was all shit. It’s over.” (*Disco Elysium*).

Surprisingly, based on how the phone call went, the conversation between Harry and his ex-fiancé (who is represented by Dolores Dei, a half-god-half-political figure of Elysium’s world) appears wildly productive, insofar as it allows Harry to finally find closure with his ex-fiancé. However, when analyzing the exchange, it becomes clear that closure and productivity is only taking place because Harry’s ex is forcibly severing the last remaining fragments of Harry’s attachment to her. This interaction also provides closure for the player, who has at this point read quite a lot about Harry’s ex, potentially heard her if they choose to do the phone call, and now, on the island off the coast in a dream, they finally meet her. In this dream, Harry’s ex is portrayed as getting ready to leave Revachol in an airship, signifying the beginning of her departure from Harry’s conscious (in reality, she is already isolated away, as explained in the phone call conversation). This is emblematic of the attachments each party holds: while Dolores has been gone for years, Harry is still mentally trapped by her ghost on the street where they

used to live. This too connects to Eliot; the narrator of “The Waste Land” witnesses a procession of ghostly soldiers walking around the familiar streets of London and calls out to them, but gets no response (Eliot, lines 62-69). Both parties, Harry and the narrator, clamor to hold onto the past, but find only ghosts when they do. Harry’s ex seems, at least in Harry’s dream-conception of her, to be sent for the explicit purpose of severing the aforementioned fragments, and in line with Modernism, she employs the language of obliteration to do so. Alternatively, her appearance here can be characterized further through the concept of obliteration by some of the things Dolores says about destroying her old self in order to get over Harry. While Harry took the drinking-into-oblivion route to remake himself, his ex went with the healthier approach of working through pain incrementally, day by day, year by year. These two interpretations overlap significantly though, as Dolores uses the destruction of her old self as a justification for severing her old ties.

Dolores Dei characterizes all and any conversations between her and Harry expertly in the first few sentences of their encounter, when she says “[Harry and her] have nothing to talk about anymore. Every combination of words has been played out. The atoms don’t form [them] anymore: [them], [their] love, [their] unborn daughters...” (*Disco Elysium*). This level of atomic destruction emphasizes the oblitative nature of the conversation, and firmly asserts that what Harry really wants is unattainable and exists only in the past he has long left behind. This conversation is a weird clash between statements of overwhelming value (coming from Harry) and statements containing nothing at all (from Dolores). Harry pours his heart out and clings desperately to the thought of getting her back by presenting fragments of their past: he offers her a figure he purchased earlier in the game, reads a letter he finds from her out loud, and tries to extend the conversation as much as he possibly can. The latter is most clear just after he finishes

reading the letter, when he prompts both Dolores and the player with “What now? What happens now? What is the next thing [they] talk about?” (*Disco Elysium*). Dolores talks about having to catch her flight, and just after, “Interfacing” butts in: “Don’t let her. Don’t let her go there. [Harry] should re-do the topics. Go over *everything*, the things [he] didn’t say before too. Make it go on and on...” (*Disco Elysium*). As Harry offers the things he associates to Dolores (the figures and the letter, mainly), Dolores tears them down in her fragment-severing way. Harry laments this, saying “I thought you liked figurines. I thought the figurines were for getting you back.” (*Disco Elysium*). Dolores responds simply with “that’s not what the figurines do, Harry” (*Disco Elysium*). The letter exchange is even more profound, as Harry reads the entire text for her and Dolores sits in silence as he does. When he finishes, Dolores says that “‘it was *a hundred million years ago* [when she wrote the letter]. I was someone else then – filled to the brim with love... I am no longer that person. This...’ She points to herself... ‘has taken her place. It will devour you. Harry – I will eat your mind” (*Disco Elysium*). Not only does this scene evoke the opening of the game, in which Harry’s poisoned memories of her motivated him to destroy his mind with alcohol and drugs, it also tells Harry what waits at the end of his obsession with her: total annihilation.

Unfortunately for Harry, Dolores offers another prophecy involving the dream Harry is having about her. Towards the end of their conversation, Harry asks if “[they will] ever see each other again”, to which Dolores responds that “[she] won’t see [him] but [he] will see [her]” (*Disco Elysium*). When Harry asks her how, she says that Harry will see her again:

“Right here. Tomorrow night. Once this dream starts happening it keeps happening – three times a week. At least. And Harry, it really, really looks like it’s started

happening again. There's the video rental... I'm suffocatingly beautiful. And young. And I smell of tutti frutti chewing gum – like I did that time when I asked you for forgiveness. After leaving you the first time, so long ago..." (*Disco Elysium*).

Harry responds either with "I like this" or "But this is intolerably bad." Either way, Dolores's response is the same: "Oh, yes. This is real darkness. It's not death, or war, or child molestation. Real darkness has love for a face. The first death is in the heart, Harry" (*Disco Elysium*). The prediction that Dolores offers of Harry having the same dream over and over again identifies Harry's final struggle for closure as a sort of death spiral, and that for him to truly be free of her, he needs to do what she has done and sever all attachments.

Altogether, the interactions between Harry and his ex-fiancé are fiercely representative of the social dissolution described by Eliot in "The Waste Land", and Harry's pursuit of his ex comes dangerously close to fulfilling the "death by water" prophecy also contained in Eliot's poem. Every major interaction Harry has that involves his ex takes place near water, and sees Harry crossing water in order to contact her: first the coastal payphone, which cannot be accessed until the water lock is repaired and walked across, and then the dream, which takes place on an island and has Harry crossing the bay in order to get there. This movement across water shows that while Harry is at risk of being swept under the waves and consumed, he is able to persevere and find closure in the end, defeating the prophecy the same way he does before the game starts when he fails to hang himself. Dolores is characterized as being a force of water too, when the way she is introduced in the phone call is described as "the ocean [breaking]. Out of the depths, [her] voice emerges" (*Disco Elysium*). The same can be said for the opening poem of the game, which warns the player immediately that "Even the clearest water, / if deep enough

can drown” (*Disco Elysium*). This could very easily be a direct reference to Dolores as well, as her being “clear” could be her beauty or honesty, both of which she mentions during the dream sequence and are traits Harry obviously perceives her to have. The interactions also display the same desperate clinging-to-the-past that many people tried to do after World War I, who like Harry, found that moving on and accepting the destruction of the past are the only way to truly make progress. Finally, the conversation between Harry and Dolores in the dream subverts Eliot’s perspective on broken conversations: two clearly traumatized individuals are able to come to a consensus on something by the end of their discussion. The irony of this subversion is that the proposed solution involves a total dissolution of something very fundamental to Harry, which Eliot would likely have considered to be the very problem destroying conversations in the first place. Nevertheless, the closure this dream sequence offers allows Harry to productively engage in a broken exchange, putting himself on the path to mending the fragments he can still healthily use and removing those that pain him, like glass shards in his subconscious. Through the examined conversations and events, the presence of fragmentation and obliteration are reified within portions of *Disco Elysium*’s plot. The next examination, though, will focus on the meta-elements going on behind the scenes of the story, especially with respect to how the player interfaces with the world of the game and Harry’s skills.



PSYCHE

YOU: What will happen to me?

INLAND EMPIRE: The same thing that happens to all humans. You will become vapour.

Dissolve into frequencies. Then those frequencies will be forgotten.

– *Disco Elysium*

As a video game, *Disco Elysium* has an inherent element of meta-ness that comes from its need for a player. While books have readers, films have viewers, and so on, video game players are unique because they play an active role in directing the course of the game they are playing. This is especially true in *Disco Elysium* as a role-playing game, because the player is creating and developing the main character of the story and tailoring their experience through the content they choose to interact with. However, *Disco Elysium* goes a step further in that it sometimes acknowledges itself being a game, and furthermore, things within the game (characters, the skills, the environment) can refer to meta-features of the game, like its mechanics. Sometimes these mechanics, such as the ability to modify Harry's skills as he plays, tie into Modernism; the same can be said for the game's need of a player at all.

Modernism deals heavily with ideas that are meta to the human experience of the time; the nature of truth, for example, or speculation into how humanity would persevere after World War I (or whether it would persevere at all). Formally, meta-discourse is referred to as philosophy, which has been a fascination of human inquiry for millennia. As the period of Modernism involved so much upheaval of what were considered fundamental aspects of humanity, there was a great deal of philosophizing going on. One of these great philosophers, who informed Modernist thought intensely, was T. E. Hulme. While Hulme did not contribute as much during Modernism's height as Eliot or Yeats, it was not for a lack of trying: tragically, he

was killed in battle in 1917 after enlisting in 1914 (“T. E. Hulme”). Hulme offered in one of his writings a theory about how language is filtered by and through artists (writers), specifically when they bend words to their will. Similarly, the content of *Disco Elysium* is filtered and bent by the player themselves, who increases and decreases Harry’s statistics. As they do, they fundamentally change the story they experience: two players with different skill allocations could easily experience the game in two very different ways. This analysis will serve as the first part of this section, while the second part will be devoted to self-reference in *Disco Elysium* and how this self-reference furthers the themes of fragmentation and obliteration.



The Harry-Player Bond

While there are many different ways in which *Disco Elysium* uses meta-narratives, the strongest and most inescapable is the relationship between Harry and the player. *Disco Elysium* blurs the line between the player and the character of Harry by making them highly similar in some regards and then very different in others. This is evident before the game even really begins, where the player is directed to allocate points into Harry’s potential skills. This gives the player the impression that they are building a figure up from scratch, and this assumption would not be unfounded: *Disco Elysium* advertises itself as a role-playing game, and that usually means starting with a completely blank slate. *Disco Elysium* is careful not to overplay its hand in this regard, which helps create the intense intrigue into Harry’s backstory players will likely feel as they progress through the game. This is the first major divide between the player and Harry: although both parties start with a blank slate of Harry’s memories, one party is remembering (Harry) while the other is discovering (the player). Often, this creates an interesting conflict of interests when information Harry receives (which the player directed him towards) harms him,

but incenses the player to dig deeper. The player is also simultaneously impacting their own gameplay experience in this process, because if either of Harry's health bars deteriorate to zero, the player receives a game-over. Without healing items, players can be barred from gaining certain pieces of information due to their Harry being too flimsy to bear the pain of a sudden realization, resurfaced memory, or emotional outburst.

The second major divide between the player and Harry is the way in which the player learns about the world. Because the player is not in Martinaise themselves, they rely on Harry to interpret and examine the things around him at the player's direction. The main complexity present regarding this is that the game not only contains, but encourages unreliable narrators to spring up wherever it is possible for them to do so. Harry himself is a horrible narrator in terms of accuracy and truth: he laments himself, bursts out emotionally, bursts out physically, and is generally a very unpredictable person. This is, in part, due to the fact that the player is managing him as a collection of fragmented skills and emotions. Harry is supposed to be a polarized figure; the game even makes the player choose a "signature skill" during initial skill allocation, which benefits that entire category ("Intellect", "Psyche", etc.). This does make him an incredibly good Modernist figure, as his "truth" is highly subjective, but it nevertheless complicates things for the player. Moreover, the player not only hears from Harry as they play, but also from the personified character traits Harry has that are his skills. This is the encouragement of unreliable narrators: these skills are about as unreliable as possible, with each one having its own agenda and desired direction to push Harry in. The player is not innocent in this project, as the skills they level up are the skills that will speak to them and Harry more often. These selections will likely reflect what the player themselves finds interesting about the world, the characters in it, or about Harry himself. *Disco Elysium's* design throws one wrench in the machinery here, in that there

are incentives to level up specific skills, and they are liberally scattered throughout the entire game. Some specific skill point allocation will even be required for the player to progress the main plot of the game, which is further complicated by their lack of being identified as necessary upgrades. Altogether, the allocation of skill points in response to a player's personal whims as well as the needs of the game's mechanics is a highly complex and intersectional process.



Hulme's Theory of Language

In his "Romanticism and Classicism", Hulme discusses the stylistic and thematic emphases present in the classic and the romantic time periods. His conclusion is that while classicism focused mainly on things on a human scale, while romanticism occupies itself with the "infinite". As Hulme discovers in his discussion of beauty within the same text, neither the classic nor the romantic perspective on definitions (especially definitions of concepts like "beauty") suits him, either because the definitions are too limited or too vast. This leads him to plunge into an extended metaphor with the goal of developing "accurate, precise, and definite [descriptions]" (Hulme). In this metaphor is where the connection to *Disco Elysium's* skill selection appears, when Hulme expresses that "language has its own special nature, its own conventions and communal ideas. It is only by a concentrated effort of the mind that [one] can hold it fixed to [their] own purpose" (Hulme). The metaphor he uses involves a plank of wood, which over time can be bent such that it would end up curved in a particular and intentional way. However, Hulme thinks that the way wood bends is not exact enough for his project of accuracy, precision, and definition, so he extends the metaphor by introducing a piece of steel that artists bend to their will in order to achieve the meaning they desire. Above all, Hulme warned of the pitfall that is relying too much on ingrained knowledge or technique. For Hulme, to do so would

be to simply see the plank of wood or piece of steel and accept it as it is, without any manipulation or struggle. Hulme was highly critical of artists who acted this way; he would even have considered it shameful. This is part of why he introduces the steel in the first place: though it is harder to bend, it is ultimately a more fruitful and fulfilling process, and shows more mastery over impulse than the wood might.

But where is this wood and steel in *Disco Elysium*? As it turns out, Harry himself is the piece of steel the player simultaneously struggles against and builds up. As words are for Hulme, Harry is unpredictable and imprecise. The player might understand him as a simple drunkard, or as a mouthpiece for vast and infinite philosophy. This is where the player has the most direction, as the skills they choose to level up and the dialogue options they select incrementally move Harry in their intended direction. There is still a piece missing, though, and that is the assumed state of Harry; in other words, the state the player would have an impulse to direct him towards. While this impulse will naturally vary from player to player, Harry's highly-mysterious and dramatic backstory provides a very enticing direction to investigate. Problematically for the person following this impulse, Harry's state of knowing everything about his life is the state that caused him to spiral heavily and, among other things, nearly end up dead. As "Inland Empire" puts it, "[Harry] is a man with a lot of past, but little present. And almost no future" (*Disco Elysium*). Moreover, there is the broader question of whether or not losing all of one's memories is even a bad thing, especially for someone with such a tumultuous (to put it lightly) past. Harry expresses this thought himself, musing that "[he] lost his memory too, but [he likes] it. It's like [he gets] to create a whole new [him], start again from scratch" (*Disco Elysium*). Someone like Eliot might even have preferred such an outcome: is it better to be reduced to nothing, or to hang

on dearly to whatever is left of an original? Either one reaffirms Modernism, and can even be furthered through the investigation of the skills as fragments.



The Skills as Fragments

It has been established that recollecting parts of Harry's memory is a primary objective that the player of *Disco Elysium* pursues as they play. His memory often revolves around the events, people, and places Harry has seen or experienced. However, there is another type of memory recollection the player engages in as they play: the levelling up of Harry's skills. This levelling up has been mentioned several times already, but the mechanics behind it have not. Recall that when Harry completes a task in the game, whether it be talking to someone, turning in some item, discovering some location, or otherwise, he receives experience, or "exp". Once Harry collects 100 exp points (with the average task yielding between ten and thirty points), he is awarded with a "skill point", which can then be placed by the player into one of Harry's twenty-four unique skills. All of this is very standard in other role-playing games, but where *Disco Elysium* differs is that the XP Harry earns is generalized, in the sense that doing particular actions does not give him XP related to that action. In other games this is typically not the case: if a character fights monsters, for example, they will get XP and skills that help them be better at fighting monsters. This begs the question: why is the player able to allocate Harry's skill points wherever they want, instead of into specific skills related to the tasks he completes? The term "skill" implies Harry learning something new, but given how advanced some of these skills are and how they sometimes seem completely disconnected from actual skills that can be learned, it is much more interesting and productive to identify skill improvements as recovered memories. This also works well to explain why the twenty-four skills are specific and consistent in every

playthrough, if they are understood to be skills Harry once had, but then forgot how to properly exercise.

I will argue that Harry’s skills are fragments; not only of his memory, but of his capability too. This framing adds another shattering caused by the great obliteration that Harry subjected himself to the night before the player begins directing him. To borrow from Eliot once more, the process of developing these skills is akin to his near-closing words in “The Waste Land”, where he mentions a king’s “fragments [he has] shored against [his] ruins” (line 431, Eliot). For Harry, the “ruins” are his crumbled and crippled sense of factual memory, while the fragments he uses to support it are his initially-neutered-but-salvageable skills. Mechanically this fits too, as the skill checks Harry does to progress the plot (and therefore progress his memory retrieval) cannot be completed without levelling up Harry’s skills at some point in the game. Without his skills, Harry cannot remember effectively, and his ruins collapse upon themselves. It is our job, then, to bolster Harry with ruined fragments until he is able to complete his task of solving the murder and remembering his past.



Familiar-Humorous Meta-Commentary in *Disco Elysium*

Broadly speaking, there are two types of self-reference that *Disco Elysium* engages with. The first is when figures within the game, usually the skills talking to Harry, refer to game mechanics that are specific to *Disco Elysium*. These tend to be humorous or tongue-in-cheek remarks, and should be familiar to most people: this is the same type of meta as a character looking at the camera filming them and “breaking the fourth wall”. They will be referred to as “familiar-humorous” meta-commentary. Some of these instances are not just for humorous purposes, though, and do genuinely add intrigue and depth to *Disco Elysium* as a whole. The

other utilization of meta-narratives deals with the aforementioned relationship between Harry and the player. Occasionally, things within the game, like characters or events, interfere with Harry's skills and prevent them from communicating with him effectively. Such interferences are meta because they involve the information Harry receives, which the player is simultaneously accessing and utilizing. These situations are dangerous especially for Hulme, because they disrupt the flow of players using Harry's skills to "write their story", the way that artists bend words to their will in their own creations. When they occur, these meta moments sever the bond between Harry and player, and force the player to reconsider whether the skills they have been modifying are really theirs to utilize, or if they are working against them. Such situations will be called "skill-related" meta instances. These instances connect to Modernism through their idea of a guiding figure (the player) becoming disconnected from Harry despite controlling him, much in the same way that the people living through the Modernist time period felt like they had lost their guidance, typically from a source of divinity (Miller). First, though, the familiar-humorous meta-commentary will be examined.

To organize the familiar-humorous meta-commentary, the most innocent and obvious example will be given as a baseline: a clear reference to the game's specific mechanics, delivered through the medium of the mechanics themselves. This first example occurs when Harry is talking to a man named Idiot Doom Spiral, whose story is that he lost his keys one day and never found them, causing him to become homeless and impoverished. His story is humorous, but his method of coping with his present situation is not: he sits with his friends and drinks, copiously. Harry witnesses him spill a drink onto himself, causing "Hand/Eye Coordination" to say "He could definitely work more on his Hand/Eye Coordination" (*Disco Elysium*). This is clearly a reference to the skill itself, as the game both capitalizes it the same way as the skill as well as

includes the “/” (in the same place, too). This also calls back to the idea of developing these skills as forgotten memories; surely, Idiot Doom Spiral was more dexterous in his past, when he was sober. The next reference is discovered by Harry in the Doomed Commercial Area. The Doomed Commercial Area, or DCA for short, is a building the player can explore in Martinaise, found to be mostly-abandoned and containing several old businesses that no longer operate for one reason or another. One of the two surviving businesses in the DCA, a novelty dicemaking shop for role-playing games, can be discovered and its owner talked to. As the dicemaker laments the state of her building, she speaks of escapism and path choosing:

“That’s why people like role-playing games. [People] can be whoever [they] want to be. [They] can try again. Still, there’s something inherently violent even about dice rolls. It’s like every time [one casts] a die, something disappears. Some alternative ending, or an entirely different world...” (*Disco Elysium*).

This is a straightforward commentary on exactly the type of game *Disco Elysium* is, one where players choose some outcomes and paths to pursue, while the ones not chosen fall away and are destroyed. Dice are also explicitly used to determine whether or not Harry succeeds a skill check, concretizing the comparison even more. What this says about *Disco Elysium* should not be unfamiliar by now: this is a direct representation of *Disco Elysium* being fundamentally entwined with obliteration. No matter what choices a player makes during their playthrough, they can never access everything the game has to offer. As the dicemaker suggests, this is because some choices are mutually-exclusive from each other, and some even lock Harry out of pursuing a certain piece of content permanently. While this does not initially look like obliteration, choosing

an option forces the player and Harry to commit. Through this choice, the player is obliterating the other options, and those paths become unavailable for Harry to pursue.

The last instance of familiar-humorous meta-reference provides a nice transition into the Harry-player-skills meta occurrences. It appears in the conversation between Harry and his ex-wife, the same one that was examined during the “Intellect” section. In this specific exchange, Harry’s ex criticizes him for being unable to communicate without incessant questioning and listing of things. This in and of itself could be seen as meta-commentary, as Harry’s dialogue options across the game tend to be questions, but it could also be explained by his career. The conversation continues, where Harry introduces the concept of dialogue trees. Dialogue trees are a common way to organize dialogue in video games, especially games with many options to choose from (like *Disco Elysium*). Harry continues discussing his habit, stating that “they’re not lists. They’re *trees*” (*Disco Elysium*). Exasperated, his ex replies, “this is another one, isn’t it? We’re in a *tree* right now!” (*Disco Elysium*). These dialogue trees are vital to how *Disco Elysium* functions: in fact, the resource being used to retrieve the quotes for this analysis come from a software made to present *Disco Elysium*’s dialogue in a tree-form, such that certain paths can be traced and followed to their preceding and succeeding lines. The trees also call back to the previous meta-event, where only some paths can be followed while others wither away and are lost. Altogether, these three examples of meta-commentary demonstrate a sense of self-awareness on the part of *Disco Elysium*’s writers, and allow the game to comment on itself. In contrast, the skill-related meta occurrences focus more explicitly on the relationship between Harry and the player, especially relating to how his fragmented skills fail to function under extreme duress.



Skill-Related Meta-Commentary in *Disco Elysium*

We may feel a bit far from Hulme by now, having waded through several examples of humorous meta instances with our fragmented skills disappearing in the rearview mirror. Rest assured; Hulme returns now, as the relationship between Harry, his skills, and the player and how they are disrupted by content within the game is explored. This warps the player's ability to shape Harry, as the skills they once trusted to be consistent and measured become hijacked by the actions of others. The first of these skill-related meta occurrences returns us to the encounter with Harry's ex. When this interaction begins, Harry is bombarded by his skills giving advice on how to "win her back". This begins with his offering of a wargame figure of a soldier, which fails. "Suggestion" then fittingly suggests that Harry kiss her and say "I know you still love me" (*Disco Elysium*). It is worth noting that this skill check is only a "Medium" difficulty check, subtly encouraging the player to attempt it. Furthermore, this is a red skill check, so it can only be attempted once: the outcome not achieved, failure or success, is erased from possibility. If Harry succeeds, he kisses her, but she does not kiss him back. It is a cold interaction, one-sided and more isolating than comforting. As Harry's ex withdraws her face from his, "Suggestion", one of Harry's "Psyche" skills, laments the interaction: "Brother, you should put me in front of a firing squad. I have no words for how I have failed you" (*Disco Elysium*). This exchange demonstrates how the relationship between Harry, his skills, and the player can be severed by certain events in the game, and fundamentally disrupts the metal-bending word-shaping Harry-molding project the player is otherwise engaged with. Throughout the majority of the game, Harry's skills are fairly unwavering in their individual commitments and desires. I argue that this is necessary for the player to shape Harry at all, as without some constant element to his character, the player would essentially just be writing Harry from scratch. To use a metaphor,

Harry is like a big machine, and his skills are the various tools the player uses to manage the machine in different ways. If the player wants a more verbose Harry, they might level up some of his “Intellect” skills, the same way a player might tighten certain screws to achieve some outcome on the machine. However, if the tools changed constantly, the player would likely give up with them altogether and begin tightening screws by hand. This is why in-game occurrences that disrupt the Harry-player bond are so catastrophic, because they erode the ability of the player to trust Harry’s skills, and put them at the behest of those skills rather than the other way around. Hulme would have been furious at such a role-reversal, as for him, this would be even worse than an artist falling into convention: it would be convention surpassing the artist. The most extreme example, which is also the second and last example of skill-related meta instances, takes place during Harry’s interrogation of a witness, a sexual partner of the subject Harry’s investigation is focused on.

In the interaction between Harry’s witness, a woman named Klaasje, Harry goes through the normal detective routine with his partner. He asks questions about the night of the murder, her relationship to the victim, and so on. After finishing his questioning, a new option will appear for Harry to pursue: “[Volition – Legendary 14] Look her in the eye” (*Disco Elysium*). Generally-speaking, “Volition”’s job is to keep Harry in check, which is exactly what this specific skill check concerns. If Harry fails (which is not unlikely, given the difficulty of the skill check), “Volition” says “She looks back, time moves slowly. The triangles of her face rearranging into a weary smile...” (*Disco Elysium*). At this point, several of Harry’s other skills all interject in succession, starting with “Suggestion”, who says “Don’t worry. We [Harry’s skills] will protect you from her beauty. We will *consult* you through the reefs and sounds of her persona” (*Disco Elysium*). “Drama”, the skill responsible for detecting and generating lies,

echoes this sentiment, stating that “We will see through deceptions. You are shielded. You are wise” (*Disco Elysium*). Several others, including “Electrochemistry”, “Conceptualization”, “Perception”, and “Endurance” all speak, expressing more or less the same sentiment as “Volition” and “Drama”. However, if Harry succeeds the “Volition” check, the interaction proceeds like this:

VOLITION: Soft, light brown eyes look back at you, directly into the space behind your eye sockets. You see the smoke rise from between her painted red lips. She’s beautiful...
I have bad news for you.

YOU: What?

VOLITION: You know these guys?

LOGIC: Who, me?

DRAMA: Yes, you. He’s talking about you, you boring stiff.

VOLITION: You too.

DRAMA: Me? What did I do?

VOLITION: These guys are compromised. She’s got them singing along to her tune. The little bleeps and bloops you trust for info – you can’t trust them anymore.

VOLITION: I’m sorry I didn’t catch it sooner. It takes conscious effort on your part.

YOU: Which ones exactly are affected?

VOLITION: There’s no way of knowing. At the moment I’m afraid it’s best to assume...

... *all* of them. (*Disco Elysium*)

There are several fascinating elements of this conversation as it relates to fragments and the Harry-player bond. The first is that it displays infighting between Harry's skills. While this certainly is not unique to this situation, it reinforces the idea that Harry's skills are so fragmented and blown apart from one another that they no longer function together productively. Again, this is part of the player's job: to acknowledge this fact and mitigate it by focusing on particular skills, rather than trying to rebuild Harry's entire psychological ecosystem. As they do, they bend the steel that is Harry as a whole. The second impactful part of "Volition"'s finding is that it expresses disdain for not having figured out Klaasje's manipulation sooner, remarking that it takes a conscious effort on Harry's part for it to do so. This "conscious effort" would be the player choosing to attempt the skill check, as every decision Harry consciously makes (what to say, where to go, what to do) is directed by the player. Really, "Volition" is saying that in order to be successful, the player must guide Harry by deliberately choosing certain skills and deciding for him what he should do based on what they want to see and create. Ultimately, this is Hulme's entire argument about what a writer ought to do in their craft: deliberately choose words, then shape them into exactly what the writer wants to fulfill their desire. The third and final compelling piece of information contained in this interaction is how afraid it should make the player. This scene happens fairly late into the game's main plot, so to hear that every skill Harry has been employing (with apparent success) is untrustworthy and maybe even dangerous should be shocking. Thankfully, "Volition" offers a solution when it remarks towards the end of the dialogue that "you [Harry or the player] can trust them. Just not with Klaasje Amandou" (*Disco Elysium*). Even with this comfort, the message is instilled within the player effectively: if they do not wrangle Harry's skills towards their aims and goals, they will be wrangled instead.

Altogether, the meta content in *Disco Elysium* plays with the already-blurred line between Harry and the player. As the player undergoes the project of moving Harry in their desired direction, they align themselves with Hulme's philosophy of language. Because of the sheer amount of content in *Disco Elysium*, and the fact that not all of it (likely not even half of it) can be experienced in one playthrough, the player is essentially helping to "write" the story of their playthrough by directing Harry. The skills the player levels up represent fragments of Harry's past capability, and because higher-level skills will communicate with Harry more frequently than low-level ones, the player is filtering the information they receive through their choices. However, *Disco Elysium* incorporates scenes that interfere with the communication between Harry, his skills, and the player, forcing the player to question their authority over the skills and reinforcing their drive to control them. These scenes, coupled with Harry's ever-present failure to accurately portray information (especially about himself), allow the player to grapple against him and his skills in a way that closely mimics Hulme's ideas of bending metal words to the writer's desired shape and angle. The next section will focus on something much more grounded: the physical nature of Harry's body, how it ages, and how he views it himself, analyzed through the works of W. B. Yeats.



PHYSIQUE

MEASUREHEAD: YOUR BODY BETRAYS YOUR DEGENERACY.

*PHYSICAL INSTRUMENT: Your body does *not* betray your degeneracy. That's a lie. You're in great shape.*

– *Disco Elysium*

While Eliot and Hulme commented on the social, metalinguistic, and philosophical aspects of life during and post-WWI, William Butler Yeats focused his writing on the depiction of how things, especially his own body, aged as time passed. His poems, like “Sailing to Byzantium”, lamented the state of an aged human body while recalling times of wisdom and peace, like those of Ancient Greece. Beyond harkening back to the past, as many Modernist writers have been shown to do, Yeats also discussed the future. As should be unsurprising at this point, his view of the future was not a very positive one; in fact, Yeats believed that the world after World War I was descending into madness, and that an apocalypse was just around the corner (if it was not already taking place). *Disco Elysium* incorporates both of these themes, the nature of an aging body as well as an impending apocalypse, into its game thoroughly. Harry and his skills mention his body frequently, especially with regards to how poor of a shape it is in. In particular, Harry compares his body to an animal on multiple occasions, which is exactly how Yeats described his own.

As for the apocalypse, *Disco Elysium* contains an apocalyptic force only mentioned once up to this point, that being the pale. Not only is the pale the exact type of force that Yeats feared, one that dissolves and tears apart everything it touches, it also is explicitly said to have come from Harry (or from humanity broadly) after his arrival in Martinaise (or after humans began spreading and civilizing). The pale is very complex, and fits into the themes of Modernism

extremely well. Not only does it hold the world together, it also dissolves it slowly but surely. Heavy exposure to the pale in people causes their minds to deteriorate, not randomly but in a way that prioritizes the destruction of recent memory. In other words, the pale is a force that traps people in the past, forced to relive their oldest memories until their brain withers away altogether. It could be interpreted as the force that strips meaning and purpose from humanity after WWI, or it could be a representation of the war itself (or even the war yet to come, WWII). Regardless of how it is interpreted, it is thoroughly Modernist. At the very least, it is a strong symbol of fragmentation, as it keeps the fragmented-islands of Elysium together while eating away at them, and of obliteration, as it promises to destroy all of humanity. First, though, the descriptions of the body.



The Aging Body, Harry's Coats, and Living in the Past

In “Sailing to Byzantium”, Yeats remarks that “an aged man is a paltry thing, / a tattered coat upon a stick” (Yeats, lines 9-10). While Harry is not quite an old man at 44, his age has certainly been accelerated by his alcoholism and several other medical conditions, sustained either in his early life or during his service in the Revachol Citizens Militia (RCM). From his jaw to his fingertips, Harry is scarred, burned, muscle-spastic, seizure-prone, swollen, and bloated. Really the best thing that can be said about Harry’s body is that it is still alive, even after all he has been through. Harry seems distressed by that fact, as suicidality features prominently in his wander across Martinise and creeps into his dreams, where he sees himself hung in place of the hanged man whose case Harry is solving (*Disco Elysium*). Although he does not carry a walking stick like Yeats’s description puts forth, he does have a collection of tattered coats: his RCM patrol cloak, his RCM commander’s jacket, and his “Disco-Ass” blazer. These items represent

important time periods in Harry's life: the two RCM jackets remind him of his position as detective, while the blazer is a relic of his disco days. The way these objects are presented in the game, though, does relate to the notion of something being tattered and worn.

Beginning with the Disco-Ass blazer, the player finds this right at the beginning of the game, tossed around Harry's hostel room. Harry's coats, like many of his features and possessions, are representations and reminders of the past he no longer lives in (but wishes to return to). The Disco-Ass jacket is presented as proximate to partying and youth: that is why it is found in the hostel after Harry's bender, surrounded by bottles and other discarded clothing. The name itself also implies this, not only through the word "disco" but through the humorous yet juvenile title that (presumably) Harry has given it. The blazer is also an interesting intersection between Harry's personal life and his life as an RCM officer, as it bears halogen watermarks stitched onto its back and sleeves. These watermarks are a part of the RCM's identification system, and reveal a map of Revachol when an RCM vehicle shines its headlights at them (*Disco Elysium*). Given that Kim, Harry's partner, wears the same watermarks on his personal jacket, it seems that RCM officers are allowed to adorn their personal items of clothing with RCM identifiers. If this is the case, then Harry's blazer having these watermarks indicates that at some point in his life, he understood that he would eventually need to give up his partying habits for his career; in other words, he aged, and began to leave his party-filled past behind him. At the very least, he knew he would have to supplement his partying with detective work. Still, as the section about animals will elaborate on, the Disco-Ass blazer is a powerful symbol of Harry managing (or attempting to manage) the various aspects of his life. The mechanical bonus granted by the jacket reflects a similar idea, as it gives a +1 to all "Espirit de Corps" checks, by virtue of its halogen watermarks. There is no bonus relating to partying, or drinking, or drugs,

despite other articles of clothing in the game possessing specifically those bonuses. Visually, the jacket echoes this: no matter where Harry is found, no matter how many bottles and pills surround him, he is identifiable as an RCM officer before anything else.

Both of the other coats Harry can find in the game that directly relate to his past involve his roles as a detective, and one of their most interesting features is where they are found in the game. The RCM patrol cloak is first, which as the name implies, is the type of clothing an officer would be wearing while they are patrolling. The description of the item notes that it is “nigh wind- and waterproof”, and that “the signature white rectangle of the RCM covers the garment’s back” (*Disco Elysium*). Also noted by the description is that the cloak has three bullet holes in it, although elsewhere in the game, it is revealed that only two of these struck Harry, while the other passed through only the cloak (*Disco Elysium*). The other coat is the RCM commander’s jacket, which is described as being “of exceptional quality, other than some minor wear-and-tear” (*Disco Elysium*). Interestingly, Harry is not a commander; his official rank is “Lieutenant Double-Yefreitor”, which means that Harry declined promotion (presumably to commander) twice. This is likely an example of Harry being afraid to confront his aging body, as the role he specifically plays in his precinct is “head of the Major Crimes Unit” (*Disco Elysium*). Harry’s strong desire to be in the field could indicate a fear of his body no longer being physically capable to do so. His profession before being an RCM officer supports this, as he was a gym instructor at a high school before joining the force; clearly, Harry values not just physical capability, but also the ability to maintain it.

Harry’s physical capability is actually what allows Harry to retrieve his RCM patrol cloak, which he initially finds hanging off of a railing below a roof the player can access. The way the cloak hangs is very evocative of Yeats’s quote, as it sits limp and helpless on the railing.

To retrieve his cloak, Harry must succeed on a “Savoir Faire” check to jump down from the roof and onto the lower section, where the cloak is. When he succeeds, “Savoir Faire” narrates the jump and landing: “as the concrete floor welcomes [Harry], [he realizes] it’s been a while since [he] felt so alive, alert, capable” (*Disco Elysium*). Again, the word “capable” here is emphasized by one of Harry’s skills, meaning it is something he likely values. This jump, besides returning Harry his coat, also offers a new section of the map (the harbor) to discover and explore, marking definitive progress in the player’s playthrough. Even more interesting is that this cloak is flat-out better, mechanically-speaking, than the Disco-Ass blazer. There are exceptionally few items that are straight upgrades to other items, but this is one of them: as already described, the Disco-Ass blazer gives Harry a +1 bonus to “Espirit de Corps”, while the RCM patrol cloak gives that bonus on top of a +1 to “Shivers”. This not only symbolizes Harry’s continued progress away from his youthful, disco-filled past by virtue being committed to his career, but also incentivizes the player to adorn Harry with the new jacket and leave the old one to rot. Two options therefore present themselves: it could be an acceptance of old age and a rejection of youth, or it could be a rejection of the worn and tattered coat Harry had on (the disco blazer) in favor of his RCM cloak. Given that Harry is not actually that old, the latter could be an example of a particular item of clothing, hairstyle, or manner of speaking “aging” someone. For Harry, this once again evokes the idea of his desire to stay in the past. Even if he is perceived by others to be old and “behind”, Harry would rather have that than accept his present reality and move forward. However, if he puts on the “new” coat, he is another step closer to doing so.

The RCM commander’s jacket, like the previous two, offers Harry a +1 bonus to his “Espirit de Corps” skill, along with a +1 bonus to “Visual Calculus”. It offers another flat upgrade from the Disco-Ass blazer, further cementing the idea that Harry is intended to be

moving away from his past and towards his present (and future) career as a detective. Once again, the location this jacket is found in plays into its role regarding Harry, his past, and his age. The RCM commander's jacket is found in the trunk of Harry's motor carriage, and can only be looted after Harry discovers his car in the ice on the coast. This continues to follow the natural progression of the game: the coast cannot be accessed before Day 3, as the water lock bridge to get there is not repaired. Like the RCM patrol cloak, this jacket "welcomes" Harry to a new part of the game's explorable area. The fact that it is found in the trunk of Harry's patrol vehicle, and the description of the item stating that it has only minor wear and tear, means it probably was not getting much use. It is possible that Harry kept it clean for sentimental purposes, but it has already been established that he did not seem very attached to the title of commander. The jacket would ultimately have identified him as such to anyone he encountered, so it would not be surprising if he did not use it as a result. Relating to Harry's fear of age, though, this jacket is a symbol of his continued maturation: no longer in the field, Harry as a commander would likely be sitting behind a desk most of his life, taking on easier jobs and eventually retiring. It is no surprise, given this, that it would remain locked away in the trunk of his car. The skill bonuses the jacket yield reflect this too, as the "Shivers" skill bonus from the RCM patrol cloak is dropped in favor of a "Visual Calculus" bonus. "Visual Calculus", in the game as a whole, is used when Harry is reconstructing scenes pertinent to the investigation in a mathematical way; bullet trajectories, vectors of flight for thrown shoes, tire tracks and their velocity, numbers of footprints and their distinct patterns, and so on. It is very directly and specifically "detective work". "Shivers", on the other hand, is nothing like this. Most commonly, it provides the player (and sometimes Harry) with little glimpses into the world outside of Martinaise. By doing this, it encourages the player to yearn for more information about everything except the investigation

happening immediately around them. “Visual Calculus” is the exact opposite, providing information exclusively when it pertains to either the case or to Harry’s missing police items (like his car), and nothing else. The commander’s jacket, then, represents the final stage in Harry’s maturation process, where he would be wholly committed to his higher-up detective work and distant from the filthy streets of Revachol. Which coat Harry wears is left up to the player, but as *Disco Elysium* has been shown to do, there are incentives for keeping on the RCM patrol cloak over the commander’s jacket. Mainly, this is because “Shivers” is easily one of the most enticing skills in the game. Its ability to grant the player insight into the rest of Elysium makes it highly intriguing, and it is personified not just as a thought in Harry’s head but as the spirit of Elysium as a whole. “Shivers” will be discussed more thoroughly in the “Motorics” section, as its contributions are scattered across the entire game and do not neatly fit into any concentrated analysis. Before “Motorics”, though, Harry must be once more put underneath the microscope: this time, to determine what type of animal he is, according to both himself and the other creatures he encounters as he explores Martinaise.



Being “This Type of Animal”

As is the case with many of Harry’s most dramatic incidents, the first mention of Harry being animalistic happens before the player takes control of him, on the night of his bender. At the end of his rampage, he is screaming and crying to himself in his hostel room, loud enough that Klaasje (who is staying two rooms down from Harry) overhears some of his outbursts. When Harry is interviewing her, as discussed in the “Psyche” section, he can inquire more about what she overheard since he has forgotten all of it. Her response introduces the idea of Harry seeing himself as an animal, although the exact nature of this animal is unknown: Klaasje tells him that

“[she thinks he] screamed that [he]... didn’t want to be this type of animal anymore” (*Disco Elysium*). These are Harry’s last words before he passes out, which Klaasje confirms a sentence later. While it is unknown what Harry means by his exclamation, it is quite obvious that he is extremely unsatisfied with the animal that he believes he is. A similar sentiment is echoed by Yeats, also in “Sailing to Byzantium”, when he describes himself as being “fastened to a dying animal” (Yeats, line 22). It is important here to draw a distinction between relating either Harry or Yeats to a specific animal and their particular usage of the word. Harry and Yeats are not saying they are literally animals, nor are they trying to evoke a particular animal in the reader’s mind. Both are expressing extreme discomfort, Harry through his outburst and Yeats through his usages of the words “fastened” and “dying”, with their physical forms being unable to fulfil the desires they have for it. Harry is frustrated and furious with what he has done over the course of his life, and rejects the body he has come to inhabit. Yeats, on the other hand, is lamenting that while his mind might have continued plans (as expressed by his desire to sail to Byzantium, a place of sacred intellect), his body is unable to sustain his plans as an intellectual. Moreover, neither Harry nor Yeats seem to be able to identify what type of animal they are, with Harry simply calling it a “type” and Yeats following his line with “[his heart] knows not what [the animal] is” (Yeats, line 23). Despite neither figure identifying themselves as a specific animal, there is one animal that plays a significant role in both “Sailing to Byzantium” and *Disco Elysium*: a bird.

Although Yeats does not know what animal he currently is, he does have an impression of one he would like to become: “a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enameling... set upon a golden bough to sing” (Yeats 27-29). This description of a golden bird, crafted to sing, is freeing and beautiful, but notably not really imbued with life. It sounds

more like a clockwork or robotic animal, not a flesh and blood one. Such a bird also can be found in *Disco Elysium*, in the form of a taxidermy skua that Harry finds and subsequently destroys during his bender in the hostel. In this case, the specific type of bird actually is important, as Garte (the cafeteria manager of the hostel) tells Harry that the skua is a symbol of hope in Elysium (*Disco Elysium*). This provides us with an interesting divide between how Yeats and Harry address challenges or alternate outcomes to the animals that they are. Yeats is wishful and maybe even optimistic, hoping that he might shed the dying animal he is attached to in favor of becoming a songbird. Harry, on the other hand, sees the skua as a symbol of hope, the type of animal he could possibly become if he worked towards it, and destroys it outright. Naturally this is another reminder of Harry's destructive nature, but his active rejection of a better future (through his transformation into and association with the skua) shows that Harry has not figured out the animal he wants to be, or is at least highly dissatisfied with the skua being an option. This conclusion is backed strongly by the game itself, because one of the things Harry can actively pursue during the game is figuring out the type of animal he is. The first time this happens is in the bookstore in the Doomed Commercial Area (DCA). There, Harry can find a book titled "From A to Zriek! A Guide to Cockatoos" (*Disco Elysium*). Purchasing (or stealing) this book and reading it initiates a side quest titled "Find your heraldic bird", and relates mainly to the different "cop archetypes" *Disco Elysium* sets before the player. There is a boring cop, an apocalypse cop, a superstar cop, and a sorry cop, and each one has a cockatoo associated with it: the Bang-Bang, the Funeral Cockatoo, the Major Majestic, or the Fuckupatoo, in that order (*Disco Elysium*). Regardless of which cockatoo is chosen, it is interesting that the options for Harry's animal-association are once again birds.

Harry has two non-bird options for his animal choice, the first of which requires a very specific set of circumstances to reach. On the coast, if Harry has a nine or higher in his “Electrochemistry” skill, he will find a leopard-print leotard washed up on the sand. Levelling up a skill this high is something that will likely only take place towards the end of the game, and beyond that, “Electrochemistry” is largely an unimportant skill for the game’s plot purposes. For this reason, the majority of players will never even see this interaction. For those who do, they will see Harry discussing whether or not he should put on the suit with his skills. He is warned by “Composure” that “once the leotard goes on, it never comes off. *You* [Harry] will change irrevocably” (*Disco Elysium*). If he chooses to don the garment, he replaces his underwear with it as “the silky warmth engulfs [him]. Someone else is in charge now” (*Disco Elysium*). The line about someone else being “in charge” seems to indicate that this is the type of fundamental shift becoming a new “type of animal” brings. The final line of the interaction hammers this home, where the leotard states “it is wearing you [Harry] now” (*Disco Elysium*). If the player has not yet completed this task, they will also receive an achievement for their commitment to the clothing, which is titled “Leopard Mindset” and includes the description “*this* is the kind of animal you want to be” (*Disco Elysium*). Concretely, this is the only event in the game that allows Harry to firmly arrive at the type of animal he is. Unfortunately for us, it is not overwhelmingly clear what conclusions, if any, we are supposed to draw from this identification. “Electrochemistry” usually involves itself with partying, drugs, and women, and while the leotard is certainly flamboyant, it does not seem to directly relate to any of those ideas. Moreover, despite the constant warnings and apparent-changes Harry experiences when he puts it on, the leotard does not actually do anything mechanically. This is especially strange, considering that every article of clothing in the game that Harry can acquire gives him some kind

of statistical benefit (as was mentioned in the section about the coats), but the leotard does not. Whether this means that the process of discovering the type of animal one is has no real merit, or if the developers simply thought this happened too late into the game with too specific requirements to give it much analytical weight, is unclear. Given that “Electrochemistry” is one of the less-trustworthy skills in Harry’s repertoire, it could simply be a delusion to satisfy Harry’s intense emotional attachment to discover what animal he is. If this is the case, it would explain Harry’s immediate and illogical attachment to the leotard; after all, why else would someone put on a sandy, salt-encrusted leotard, especially to replace their underwear?

The second and final non-bird instance of Harry relating his journey to being a “type of animal” happens at the very end of the game, once Harry’s investigation takes him to an island just off the coast of Martinaise. Up to this point, there has been an optional side-plot about a wife and her husband, who are cryptozoologists, that Harry can pursue. Through this, he learns that the couple are after a very particular cryptid, called the Insulindian Phasmid. Whether or not it is real is highly disputed; the wife of the pair claims to have seen it in her childhood, but no actual evidence for its existence has ever been brought forward. That is, until Harry actually finds it on the island his case takes him to. It turns out that the Insulindian Phasmid is quite a bit bigger than the cryptozoologists expected, as it rises to about the size of a large horse. Harry is able to have an entire conversation with it seemingly-telepathically, where it reveals what life is like for it: “A series of half-lit images. A kind of darkness, being intruded upon. Transient. Dim. Moist” (*Disco Elysium*). When Harry asks what intruded upon it, it responds with:

“Shapes of plants and animals. And *internal* sensations. A swarm of sounds, tiny vibrations on the inside of my forearms – all speak of complexities totally beyond my

understanding. I am at the end of a narrow funnel. Weightless. So light it only feels like *something* to be me. In truth – perhaps I’m nothing? I certainly do not have a soul. And if I did, it would never ache.” (*Disco Elysium*).

Harry can respond with “You’re the type of animal I would like to be” (*Disco Elysium*). Funnily enough, the type of animal the Phasmid is, is exactly the type of animal Harry is during the introductory sequence of the game. He is horribly hungover and on multiple come-downs, which might cause his life to look like a series of half-lit images, and he is intruded upon by the arrival of Kim’s motor carriage, which rips him out of the transient and dim sleep he is experiencing. As for moistness... with the condition of Harry’s room and the lack of a functioning shower, it might be better to leave moistness out. Given this, it is very strange that Harry would want to even consider being the type of animal the Phasmid is, as he only got to that point because of his intense hatred for who he was. Nevertheless, the existence of this option indicates that regardless of how much Harry has changed over the course of the game, he always can, and is at risk to, return to his comatose state. This returns us to Yeats, who would likely have agreed with such a statement; that no one can truly overcome the animal they might be, and are shackled to suffer with it for as long as they bear their mortal coil. Whether or not Harry is doomed to repeat his mistakes (and stay the animal he is/was) is an unanswered question, and ultimately depends on what choices he makes throughout the game.

Holistically, the exploration and pursuit of a fitting animal for both Harry and Yeats demonstrate a certain discomfort with simply being human, and in fairness, being human is very unpleasant sometimes. Yeats expresses his discomfort primarily through his aging, and the reason he wishes to jettison his “dying animal” is because it no longer serves him any purpose

other than causing him suffering. Yeats also has a vague idea of the animal he would enjoy being, that being the golden songbird. Ignoring the specific animal itself, Yeats thinks of the bird through its traits: free, joyous, and most of all, immortal through its clockwork nature. Harry struggles differently, in that he seems to have only a vague idea of the type of animal he is, let alone one he would like to become. He is presented with a few options, but none of them truly stick or allow him to firmly conclude “Yes, this is the type of animal that I am now”. The only exception to this is the leopard-print leotard, but as discussed, there are no satisfying conclusions that can really be drawn from that interaction. In the end, it seems that Harry does not figure out what type of animal he is or wants to be, but perhaps he will simply have to get older to find out.



Karaoke Salvation and the Size of a Soul

Before delving into the apocalyptic maelstrom, we will have a brief intermission on singing and karaoke to explore the role it plays for both Harry and Yeats, and how it relates to the process of recovering fragments. Once again, “Sailing to Byzantium” provides the entry point to this topic. Just after the line about an old man being a coat on a stick, Yeats discusses a way to potentially push away the paltry nature a man will otherwise exhibit as he gets older: singing. Unfortunately, not everyone can simply learn this song, and it must be cultivated through introspection and thought:

“[A man will become a paltry thing] unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying

Monuments of its own magnificence” (lines 10-14, Yeats).

Singing features prominently in *Disco Elysium*, as would be expected in a game with “disco” in its title. The hostel Harry stays in features an open mic, and if Harry is able to recover the tape he destroys during his rampage, he can sing the same song he sung in his room before passing out. This song is titled “Smallest Church in Saint-Saëns”, and is meant to be tremendously sad. For Harry, the main reason he wants to sing is to display the “size” of his soul. When he first approaches the karaoke mic and stage, “Inland Empire” tells him that he must sing in order for people to “know of [Harry’s] vast, oceanic soul” (*Disco Elysium*). Harry can respond by saying his soul is either immense, puny, modest, or that he cannot figure out how large it is because of his hangover. However, it does not actually matter what Harry says, because “Inland Empire” will tell him that everyone needs to hear the size of his soul irrespective of its size. This is a minor but strong example of Harry’s skills having their own motivations and interests, and not being overwhelmingly trustworthy figures; regardless of what Harry answers or wants, certain skills will push him in their desired direction anyway. Nevertheless, it seems like singing to display his soul is actually highly similar to what Yeats envisioned a person should do to stave off aging. Harry is forced to introspect every time he engages with any of his skills, as he is interfacing with and processing his own thoughts, and the idea of his soul being measured in size is actually a holdover from his relationship with his ex, making it a fragment he is retrieving and reusing. This is shown to the player directly if they recover the letter Harry’s ex wrote him (the same one they can read to her during the dream sequence), which concludes with her telling Harry that “[he] has a vast, vast soul and [she] will always ALWAYS, ALWAYS come back to it” (*Disco Elysium*). With this, the karaoke performance might be characterized as a part of the

fragment-shoring of the ruins, where Harry uses some aspect of his past to enhance or at least stabilize his present.

The song is also performed differently, depending on whether or not Harry succeeds the check to sing. While the successful version of the song sounds more even, the voice breaking and off-pitch failed version feels much more expressive of Harry's true feelings, rather than an organized recitation of a song. The audience does not seem to feel this way, as they give Harry only a piteous applause, but Kim expresses sympathy:

KIM KITSURAGI: "Let's go, officer." The lieutenant closes his notes. "These people wouldn't know a good performance if it bit them in the ass."

YOU: "You... liked it?"

KIM KITSURAGI: "Detective Du Bois..." He bows lightly. "It was downright *tragic*. Now let's go."

ESPIRIT DE CORPS: I mean it, he thinks.

CONCEPTUALIZATION: To him, being a cop in the RCM was truly expressed in that performance. (*Disco Elysium*)

The tragic nature of Harry's performance feels much closer to what Yeats envisioned for his own song. While Harry is forced to confront the decay and sadness his soul is wrought with, it does seem genuinely alleviating for him to have done so, and the support he receives from his partner reinforces this. It also provides a counterexample to the last time Harry sung the song, which Yeats might have identified as the version that a person might try to learn with the intention of preserving their soul (and necessarily failing in the process). When Harry sings violently in his

room, he fails to introspect and simply becomes a manifestation of his rage. When he sings it as karaoke, he does so with intention, feeling, and thought, conforming much more closely to Yeats's proposal and moving himself away from the fate of becoming paltry and old. For Harry's personal past, this also lines up: he surely sung karaoke in his disco days, and the merge of that past with his new realization of tragedy produces circumstances where Harry is able to maturely process his emotions and even perform them for others.



The Pale, the Gyre, and Apocalypse

Although the war was perceived by many to be an apocalyptic force, Yeats believed that it was only the catalyst for the true complete dissolution of both society and humanity. It was the fact that humanity could even stoop to such levels of monstrosity that signaled the end, regardless of the actual outcome of the conflict. In arguably his most well-known poem, "The Second Coming", Yeats describes vividly the apocalypse he imagines the world was descending into. His famous image is that of a gyre, two cones superimposed into one another at opposite positions, with one turning clockwise and the other turning in the opposite direction. Imagine two hollow cones meeting each other head-on and combining, with the point of one cone on the same level as the base of the other. This was Yeats's general interpretation of history, with one cone representing his ideal society and the other representing chaos. As time passed, the gyre turned, and society tended more towards one side or the other. As humanity tended more and more to the outsides of it, or the extremes, more and more anarchy crept in. As Yeats described it, humanity was:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Yeats, lines 1-4)

Very fittingly, *Disco Elysium* has its own apocalyptic side plot, which also is (allegedly) brought on by the arrival of Harry in Martinaise or more broadly, the arrival and continued progress humanity has made on Elysium. Like Yeats’s apocalypse, it is not a rapid onset of destruction that ends humanity, but rather a gradual creeping towards the extremes until enough damage has been done that the changes are inescapable. This also allows us to finally explore the mysterious pale, which was last mentioned in the section about *Disco Elysium*’s historical context. To refresh, the pale is a substance that both covers and holds together the world of Elysium, and makes up about 72% of its surface. It is odorless and colorless, but nonetheless highly dangerous. Prolonged exposure to the pale is known to cause a person’s mental faculties to deteriorate, sometimes in such extreme ways as to erase memories entirely. Most forebodingly and importantly for this section, the pale is expanding slowly but surely, and eventually will swallow all of Elysium. The pale is also very strange in its physical capabilities, as it causes universal rules to erode if perceived deep enough in the pale. For example, travelling through the pale was impossible for a significant portion of Elysium’s history, because distance simply did not function the way it normally did. A person could go into the pale and wander infinitely, never reaching the “other side” of where they entered. Only once the technology was developed to bounce radio waves off of the intended destination, forcing the pale to be “defined”, was pale travel made possible. Much like war, the pale is an ever-present force that impacts every isola on

Elysium; in some instances, it even arches over and across them like the arches of solar ejections (*Disco Elysium*).

One of the most shocking discoveries that Harry can make as he explores Martinaise is the discovery of a pale origin point. This point is found in the church tower of the church on the coast (the oldest building in Martinaise), and its discovery is shocking because the prevailing scientific belief of pale researchers is that the pale cannot form in an isola. This church and the existence of the pale point also connect extremely closely to “The Second Coming”. The church is called the Dolorian Church of Humanity, and its name requires some brief explanation. As was very briefly mentioned in the “Intellect” section, there exist on Elysium figures called “Innocences”. Innocences are historical figures so influential and powerful that they become world leaders. They are elected, and once elected, their will is considered to be not a decision as much as an inevitable occurrence. They are not always in office, either; only when history presents an Innocence, is one elected. One of these Innocences is named Dolores Dei, and she is considered to be the most influential and popular Innocence Elysium has had. Because of how powerful and influential they are, it is not uncommon for Innocences to be deified, and indeed this is what happens with Dolores. This provides the name of the church the pale point is found in. While it initially might seem strange that an apocalyptic force like the pale would manifest in a place of humanitarian worship, Yeats actually predicts this almost to the word in “The Second Coming”, when he describes “the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned” (Yeats, lines 5-6). Note, too, that innocence is being drowned, just like the constant invocation of drowning and water to relate to Harry’s downfall. As Yeats states, the world-ending-pale would drown out any worship or ceremony going on in the church once it spreads: one of the pale points’ key characteristics is that it absorbs any surrounding sound,

rendering the area around it completely silent. Furthermore, while the pale is not colored like blood or dim, it does essentially play the role of the ocean on Elysium geographically-speaking, so Yeats invoking the tide also fits. Unlike the tides or the ocean though, the pale is not described as being a natural force in *Disco Elysium*.

The pale not being natural is unintuitive, because it appears as a feature of the world that exists regardless of human input. However, some of Elysium's most tuned-in organisms state that the pale did not exist until humanity began civilizing itself and dominating the planet. Similarly, Yeats's gyre is a feature of human history in which certain beliefs fall in and out of favor, specifically Christianity for Yeats. Without humans to change and shape the world, it is very unlikely that the effects of Yeats's gyre could be seen. For both the pale and the gyre, it is humans that are generating the movement towards total destruction. The strongest example of this is found in the conversation between Harry and the Insulindian Phasmid, which acts as a glimpse into a bizarre and alien interpretation of the world. The Phasmid discusses its perspective when it meets Harry:

I am a relatively median lifeform – while it is you who are total, extreme madness. A volatile simian nervous system, ominously new to the planet. The pale, too, came with you. No one remembers it before you. The cnidarians do not, the radially symmetricals do not. There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all. (*Disco Elysium*)

If the Phasmid is to be believed, then humans are the cause of the pale existing and progressing. The same can be said of the gyre. However, the most crucial similarity between

Yeats's gyre and Elysium's pale is that both involve the ebbs and flows of history. Yeats believed that the gyre was the reason for societies tending more towards Christianity or anarchy, and the general direction of society was due to how the gyre was moving. The pale is very similar, in that it has the ability to slowly move humanity towards the past and ultimately, towards total dissolution. It accomplishes this by through its ability to warp time, both in the minds of individuals who are overexposed to it as well as its apparent capability to temporally-relocate radio waves. The end effect of this movement is to return humanity to the past, threatening to plunge it directly back into the war Elysium had experienced roughly 40 years before the game's beginning. Like World War I for Yeats, this would be the precursor event to humanity's total destruction, which he would view as total anarchy. Harry experiences both effects of the pale as he explores through other individuals; one of these is a paledriver, a person who makes deliveries through the pale. The paledriver's mind has been highly deteriorated through her exposure to the substance, causing her to believe she is living her life at least several decades old, if not older. (*Disco Elysium*). This effectively traps her, cognitively, in the past. The other instance of the pale manipulating time occurs when Harry interacts with a doorbell system that replays the voice of an anguished lover lamenting the loss of her partner. When he asks his partner Kim about it, Kim simply tells him it was "a recording trapped in the circuitry. From an ancient tenant. This sometimes happens" (*Disco Elysium*). While it initially sounds like the type of recording common in modern times, recall that Elysium is not modern; recordings of this nature, especially such consistent and extended ones, should not exist. No other call in the game, radio or otherwise, makes use of a recording. The pale is also shown elsewhere to have the ability to manipulate radio waves in a temporal way. In a different radio call, Harry hears a conversation between him and Kim that has not happened yet, which then happens a few hours

later (*Disco Elysium*). This is not something that just “sometimes happens”; it is a powerful capability of the strange and mysterious pale. Connecting back to the war and the past, once the pale begins to take greater hold on the isolas (a confirmed matter of when, not if), it will plunge Elysium directly back into war. Aging soldiers, in the final decades of their life, will be cognitively returned to the battlefield. Radios across the planet will blare with military commands, air raid warnings, and public service announcements last heard decades ago. With this, Elysium would fight against itself once more before the pale would eat away at all of the physical world, eventually destroying the planet altogether and wiping out any trace of human activity. While this process would take a while, so does Yeats’s gyre: he claims that it took “twenty centuries of stony sleep” to wake the “rough beast... slouching towards Bethlehem” (Yeats, lines 19-22). This eventual creep into destruction as a part of history’s ebb and flow is the most insidious shared feature between Yeats’s gyre and *Disco Elysium*’s pale; perhaps most frightening of all is the fact that each world’s denizens are ultimately at the mercy of each process.

The physical aspects of *Disco Elysium* reveal many important forms of transformation and manipulation, either of the physical form like Harry’s coats shaping who he is as well as his potential animal transformations, or of the worldly form, like the pale slowly tearing apart Elysium. All of these have significant effects on the thing being changed; Harry putting on different coats literally makes him better or worse at particular things, with the coats being representations of his youth and slow maturation process. His exploration of what animal he would like to be tells the player about Harry’s conception of himself, at least semi-independent from how the player sees him. Even if he does not come to a firm conclusion at the end of this process, he benefits: his struggle was with being the type of animal he was before his blackout,

and by the end of his investigation, he no longer seems to feel that way about himself. Among many other things, this is a result of him exploring and expressing his thoughts and feelings, as he does when he sings karaoke and conveys the deep sadness he feels to others. Finally, with regards to Elysium being a body of its own, we find out that obliteration is once again not far away. Through the analysis of Yeats's world-ending gyre, the force known as the pale can be characterized as a human-initiated, deeply-historical mechanism of apocalypse. Before the world is ended, though, there are many loose threads to be tied up. Modernism spans across *Disco Elysium* wholly, but not every speck of Modernism fits into a specific category of analysis. The upcoming "Motorics" section will seek to flit across Elysium, grabbing specks, stones, and boulders alike that have yet to be mentioned, or were mentioned only tangentially and not given the attention they require and deserve.



MOTORICS

YOU: What if I don't want to ask questions?

*REACTION SPEED: You're a cop, Harry. It is *unnatural* of you not to want to ask questions.*

– *Disco Elysium*

By this point, we have explored some of the most fundamental pillars of Modernism as they relate to obliteration and fragmentation within *Disco Elysium*: the dissolution of the social fabric as it concerns interpersonal communication, the inability to rely on and verify previously-trusted features of the world, and the characterization of the body as decaying and losing its capabilities. We have examined situations in which these things are the most clearly demonstrated, like Harry's encounters with his ex or the scenes where his skills fail him. However, the paint of Modernism that coats *Disco Elysium* was not applied so selectively. Modernism and its themes span across the entire game, skulking in the tiniest cracks in the Martinese pavement just as much as they float in the air beside the aerostatics that hover over the coast. This section will aim to put the spotlight on these smaller pieces of Modernist sentiment to firmly ground not just certain scenes of *Disco Elysium* in Modernism, but the entire work. Due to the nature of this section being more rapid, sections will be shorter and not dive quite as deeply into each individual topic. A set of events, items, conversations, or themes will be described and connected to Modernism, and although these could be examined like those of the previous three sections, that is not the purpose of this one. The last of these zoomed-in analyses will examine the solving of the murder mystery central to *Disco Elysium*, and thematically provides an excellent place for this exploration to end altogether.



Harry and Death

Harry is posed next to death, and nearly experiences it, ubiquitously across *Disco Elysium*. During his bender, he is highly suicidal and threatens to end his life both publicly, and after he returns to his hostel room, it is highly implied that he attempts to hang himself from the ceiling fan with his tie. This, in turn, creates the connection to the hanged man he is investigating, who he goes on to see in his dreams and who speaks using Harry's voice. He can continue to engage in suicidally-adjacent lines of dialogue, demonstrated clearly by a conversation where he threatens to shot himself in the head as an interrogation technique (*Disco Elysium*). Harry can also remember that he was "born in a hospital where people usually go to die", and that his full first name, Harrier, is a revolutionary wartime name meant to imbue its wearer with much-needed protection (*Disco Elysium*). Given these two facts, Harry has been proximate to death for what seems like his whole life, and moreover, was tied to the war at the time (in '07) from birth. This once more shows him to be a figure tied to obliteration, represented by death (the obliteration of a person), and his birth happening during the war submerges him in conflict instantly. In general, the sheer amount of death being brought on by World War I causes death to be a very common theme in Modernist literature. Eliot discusses ghostly soldiers patrolling London, Yeats talks about being shackled to his dying animal of a body, and *Disco Elysium* makes ample use of its hanging corpse to develop the theme of death and dying, especially within Harry. This theme will continue to be discussed throughout this section, as it appears many times throughout the game but did not often fit into the categories of the previous sections and their subject matter.



Eliot Writing “The Waste Land”

Arguably the most iconic feature of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” is how many allusions Eliot compiles and synthesizes in order to tell a grand tale about the collapsing Western world post-war. His combination of everything from Sanskrit mantra to contemporary British music creates a poem that appears to span an unimaginable amount of history, and Eliot achieves this by assembling fragments of these different world cultures and histories into a complete work of art. To get very meta once more, I have been engaged in somewhat of a similar process in the writing of this analysis. As was briefly mentioned in the “Psyche” section, the method of retrieving quotes from *Disco Elysium* to put into this analysis is being done through a 3rd-party website and software designed to search through the game’s script. However, in order for this script to work, both a word from the desired quote as well as the figure saying that quote must be input; the script cannot simply be surfed from beginning to end, because the game is not linear. This means that any quote I have used in this analysis is one that I remembered in some way, either through a keyword used or who said it, and then parsed by the website in order to find the quote I actually want. Sometimes, this takes searching through dozens of conversation networks and trees to find the single sentence I remembered from one of my personal playthroughs of the game. Eliot was engaged in a similar project; he was an educated person who had read some Sanskrit here, read some Dante there, and listened to modern music in his spare time. Through his deeper research and memory of what particularly struck him about these different works, he assembled the fragments into “The Waste Land”, and I am assembling the fragments of *Disco Elysium* in this thesis.



The Role of a Detective and Fragments

While we are discussing the assembly of fragments, the fact that Harry's (and the player's, as they control him) job is a detective is in its own way tied to Modernism. In its simplest form, being a detective is about piecing together fragments of information and evidence in order to solve (or get closer to solving) a case. The real world after World War I, the world of Elysium post-revolution, and the case of the hanged man are all so blown apart by conflict and complication that these fragments are scattered everywhere, the latter synergizing perfectly with the player's innate desire to explore and click on everything that can be clicked on. The world and the case are not disconnected, as the player interacts with other characters in the hopes of finding out more about the case, and more often than not receives information about the world as a whole. One of Harry's earliest objectives both demonstrates and demands as much, it being called "Get a reality lowdown" (*Disco Elysium*). By putting the player in the shoes of a detective they are compelled to learn more about the world they are exploring, and by doing so they reveal and combine the fragments of the world to build a story and the fragments of the case to solve a murder. Harry's own skills encourage him to do as much, explicitly using the language of fragments and pieces:

VOLITION: You can do it. It's nothing. Do it for the city. Go.

SHIVERS: Do it for the wind.

LOGIC: Do it for the picture puzzle. Put it all together. Solve the world. One conversation at a time. (*Disco Elysium*)

There are also examples of extremely-literal fragments present in the game. One of these, which was already analyzed in the section about the pale, is the trapped recording of the woman in the doorbell. This is a fragment of a conversation, as only the woman's side is heard, and echoes the conversation between the wife and the soldier back in "The Waste Land". It is also a fragment left behind by conflict (interpersonal, in this case), as is the case with many others in and around Revachol and Martinaise. Simultaneously, *Disco Elysium* lets the player know that they will not be able to piece together every fragment they find. There is an old bunker Harry can find on the coast with its door locked, and although Harry is presented with a skill check to open the door, the check is actually coded to be impossible to open. Kim even remarks on this, telling Harry that "frankly, you're just going to have to accept the fact that you can't get in through every single door" (*Disco Elysium*). This is a lesson for the player as much as Harry; while there are many fragments across Martinaise, not all of them will contribute to the case he is trying to solve.



"A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety"

One of Harry's most defining features is his complete lack of sobriety. Other characters comment on him smelling like alcohol, his own skills try to persuade him into drinking more, and his bloated, red face displayed in the bottom left corner constantly reminds the player of his alcoholism. The player can choose to not have Harry drink at all during his playthrough, but considering the entire game can be completed in four or five in-game days, he is not necessarily sober just because he does not drink during the game's events. Yeats wrote a poem describing sobriety in which he harshly labels drunkards as dead men: the final lines read "a drunkard is a dead man, / And all dead men are drunk" (Yeats, lines 15-16). In Great Britain during World

War I, alcohol was consumed liberally by soldiers both during the war as well as when they came home to cope with their traumas (Kamieński). Harry borrows from this tradition himself, clearly using alcohol to cope, and also nearly drinks himself to death at least once before the game begins. The poem also mentions that the speaker is dancing to avoid being drunk, and that “under every dancer / A dead man in his grave” (Yeats, lines 11-12). With Harry’s own affinity for dancing (another disco-holdover, presumably), his overconsumption during his downward spiral seems to point at him having been more mediated during his party days. As Harry got older, his alcohol consumption began consuming him, and he started to become the dead man in his grave beneath the dancer he used to be. This is also another example of Harry never being far from death; even as the dancer of his past, the threat of dead drunken men was just under his feet.



The Dead Man on the Pier

Continuing with the theme of death, most of the death seen in *Disco Elysium* is stagnant. The hanged man has been in his tree for over a week by the time Harry actually begins his investigation, and Harry himself has been dying for years before the player begins controlling him. However, there is an example of death being portrayed as sudden and unexpected, and this example also deals with the fears of women and children during the war of not having their husbands and fathers returned to them. After Day 3, when Harry can explore the coast via the repaired water lock, he can come across a dead man frozen to the end of a pier. Upon inspection, he is found to have died within the last two or three days, and appears to have slipped and hit himself on a bench in a drunken stupor. Firstly, this dead man confronts Harry with an extremely-possible reality for himself. Any night he went out and drank in excess could have

been a night where he trips, falls, and cracks his skull open on the pavement or an unfortunate inanimate object nearby. This also confirms the Yeats poem just discussed, where a drunkard is shown to be a dead man explicitly because of his habit.

However, the true intensity of this encounter comes when Harry and Kim confront the man's wife and tell her that he has died, and this encounter is soul-crushing. Harry can ask for details about her husband, like the book he was going to go get from the library and the jacket he was wearing, but all of it only delays the inevitable. On top of that, the more questions Harry asks, the more the husband begins to feel like a real person to the player, and the necessity of having to break the news becomes heavier and heavier with every detail. The game recognizes this: if Harry asks too many questions, the "Empathy" skill check to break the news becomes more difficult. Once she is told, she makes a statement that shows the suddenness of death in a very raw way:

WORKING CLASS WOMAN: "Oh." She touches her neck, eyes pale like pearls in seawater.

"Oh," she says again, "But he was just..." She looks at the kitchen table, where two cigarette butts are still in the tray.

EMPATHY: But he was just here. Alive. (*Disco Elysium*)

The feeling of someone being alive one day and suddenly gone the next is one that the families of soldiers experienced all throughout World War I. While families might not have seen their husbands or fathers one day and heard about their death the next, there was a constant fear of other military members knocking on the door and breaking the same news Harry does. Harry

experiences this sudden loss again on Day 4, when a character named Rene Arnoux dies off-screen. This causes Harry and the player to experience the same sensation as the Working Class Woman; one day, they can talk to this character, run through his conversations, and complete tasks for him, and the next he is simply gone. This rather blunt presentation of death is extremely uncommon in most media, but especially video games. Usually, if a character the player can regularly and consistently interact with is going to die, they will get a dramatic cutscene or some final message to be delivered to the player. For Rene, this is not the case – he just disappears from the game. Both of these representations of death coming suddenly not only evoke the same fear felt by civilians during WWI, but also reaffirm that Harry is close to death at any given moment.



“Shivers”

One of the most compelling, if not the most compelling, skills in *Disco Elysium* is “Shivers”. It flies under the radar craftily, as it is a derivative skill of “Physique”, but does not act anything like the other “Physique” skills. These skills typically involve some aspect of Harry’s physicality; how strong he is, how aggressive he is, how much he can withstand, and so on. However, “Shivers” involves none of these things, and rarely speaks. Harry might have brief interactions with it, but only to receive cryptic glimpses of the world outside of his direct perception. This makes it all the more impactful when it finally decides to explain itself, and describe what it is:

SHIVERS¹: I AM LA REVACHOLIERE. I AM THE CITY

YOU: What do you mean, you are the city?

SHIVERS: I AM A FRAGMENT OF THE WORLD SPIRIT, THE GENIUS LOCI OF REVACHOL. MY HEART IS THE WIND CORRIDOR... I HAVE A HUNDRED LUMINOUS ARMS. COME MORNING, I CARRY INDUSTRIAL DUST AND LET IT SETTLE ON TREE LEAVES. I SHAKE THE DUST FROM THOSE LEAVES ONTO YOUR COAT...

You: How are you talking to me?

SHIVERS: THE MODULATIONS OF MY VOICE ARE NOTED DOWN WITH THERMOMETERS AND BAROMETERS. YOU FEEL ME IN YOUR NOSTRILS, ON THE LITTLE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF YOUR NECK... EVERYWHERE THERE IS SPACE. (*Disco Elysium*)

The first thing we should notice is the use of the word “fragment” used by “Shivers” to describe itself. If it is a fragment of the world spirit, that implies that something has caused it to break off and be fragmented. Given the state of the world of Elysium is by far the most impacted by the semi-recent revolution and war, it is very likely that this is the event that fragmented “Shivers”. As for that world spirit, this seems to be another way to describe the human spirit. After all, “Shivers” makes clear that it is measured and processed by humans, and the war would not have happened without them. This leaves us with an entire pseudo-character devoted to a fragmented human spirit that was brought on by war. This exact concept describes the vast majority of Modernist work, if not all of it. To have essentially the core of Modernism

¹ “Shivers” mainly speaks in all-capitalized letters, with a few exceptions. The text here is displayed the way it is in-game.

personified as one of the fundamental aspects of the main character adds another level of confirmation to the claim that *Disco Elysium* is a Modernist game. “Shivers” is not done delivering Modernism to *Disco Elysium*, though, as will be illustrated by the next section that picks up where the last quote left off.



Impending Doom and the Nuclear Bomb

The pale-apocalypse subplot of *Disco Elysium* is scary, but at least it feels distant for the people who actually live on Elysium. On top of that, if all of humanity is wiped out, nobody has to (or can) deal with the consequences that come afterwards. However, there is a more immediate threat for Revacholians especially: a nuclear warhead being dropped on the city, completely levelling it. In the same conversation with “Shivers” quoted in the prior section, “Shivers” tells Harry that it needs him to save Revachol from being obliterated in a nuclear blast, 22 years from when the game takes place:

YOU: What are you afraid of?

SHIVERS: DEATH – IT IS TERRIFYING. I NEED YOU TO PROTECT ME FROM DEATH. I CANNOT PERISH. LOOK AT ME. I CANNOT END. IN 22 YEARS, THE FIRST SHOT WILL BE FIRED. NOT A SHOT FROM A GUN – AN ATOMIC DEVICE THAT WILL LEVEL ALL OF ME. ALL OF ME.

YOU: But... what can I do about it?

SHIVERS: YOU ARE AN OFFICER OF THE CITIZENS MILITIA. YOU MOVE THROUGH MY STREETS FREELY IN MOTOR CARRIAGES AND ON FOOT. YOU HAVE ACCESS TO THE HIDDEN PLACES. YOU ALSO CIRCULATE AMONG

THOSE WHO ARE HIDDEN. I NEED YOU. YOU CAN KEEP ME ON THIS EARTH.
BE VIGILANT. I LOVE YOU. (*Disco Elysium*)

A nuclear bomb being dropped on Revachol, after Elysium has experienced its revolution and war, feels like a clear stand-in for Earth's own utilization of nuclear arms during World War II. It seems highly unlikely that Revachol would simply be bombed randomly, which means it is highly likely (especially given the geopolitical tensions of Revachol, let alone Elysium as a whole) that Elysium returns to war in the near future after the game ends. In other words, this is Elysium's own World War II. This means that the revolution and more recent war that the player and Harry learn the most about would in fact be the World War I of Elysium, firmly situating it historically-speaking with reference to Earth's history. "Shivers" is a representation of Revachol's remaining human spirit after being devastated by Elysium's first war, so it makes sense for it to fear this nuclear blast: it would very likely destroy any faith Revacholians have in returning Elysium to a stable geopolitical state (assuming there are Revacholians alive post-blast at all). The invention and usage of the nuclear bomb fundamentally changed the way war was conducted in the real world, and "Shivers" anticipates this change, fears it, and relays it to Harry. Whether or not Harry is able to save Revachol from this fate is left unanswered, but both outcomes feel Modernist. Either he is able to use the guidance of the fragmented human spirit to salvage it and save humanity, or he fails in his endeavors and the collapsed state of the world leads to annihilation through nuclear fire.



The Doomed Commercial Area

While characters and the interactions between them have been discussed extensively by now, the physical locations within the playable area of the game have been analyzed much less. Martinaire is generally characteristic of a barely post-war city: craters litter the streets from stray shells, apartment buildings are half-constructed (or half-rubble), and caches of guns can still be found in the basements under buildings. Beyond all of these being artifacts of the past and Martinaire's residents reside within them, there is one building that stands out as distinctly characteristic of the destructive and depressing Modernist spirit: the Doomed Commercial Area, or "DCA". The DCA can be explored in its entirety (save for a few hallways barricaded by assorted pieces of detritus), and in it Harry finds two (technically three) operating business and a handful of failed ones. The three operating businesses are a bookstore, the dicemaker mentioned in the "Psyche" section, and the Whirling-in-Rags, the hostel Harry wakes up in and continues to use as his base of operations. Although the Whirling-in-Rags is not physically connected to the building people call the DCA, it is on the intercom system attached to the main DCA building. Of the failed businesses, a hairdresser, a gym, an ice-cream company, and a radio-based roleplaying game company are the most compelling. First, though, the physical appearance of the DCA has some noteworthy elements. Its roof is halfway blown open, and a strange smokestack can be seen poking out of the crumbled concrete and brick. This smokestack is present because the building was built on the ruins of an old coal power plant, and was repurposed to be the main furnace for heating the building. In keeping with the idea of fragments, this is another example of a fragment of the past being used to prop up and maintain an element of the future. Like the fragments of the world, of thought, and of relationships, the smokestack is necessary to keep the

DCA habitable at all, and without it the building would likely be completely uninhabited and fall into ruin.

Thoughts on why the DCA has so many failed businesses within it vary depending on who Harry asks, but the general consensus is that the building is cursed. Plaisance, the owner of the bookstore, places mystical wards on the door leading to the rest of the building within her shop, and the name “doomed” seems to imply some evil force hovering over the structure and ensuring that the businesses in it fail. However, despite the many other pseudo-supernatural elements of *Disco Elysium*, the reason for DCA businesses going bankrupt is perfectly ordinary: bad business planning. The hairdresser, called “Andro-Orlando Hair SCA”, failed because Martinaise is a largely-homophobic place, and the business’s marketing seemed to focus on a queer clientele. Of the Martinaise residents Harry meets, the only confirmed-gay man gives Harry a fake name and allows Harry to pursue a thought titled “Homo-Sexual Underground” (*Disco Elysium*). If the nature of homosexuals in Martinaise (or in Revachol) is to be “underground”, it is unlikely to be a particularly welcoming place for queer people in general. This is reinforced by the presence of not one, not two, but three characters whose defining character trait is their active and overt racism. Unless these characters draw the line at homophobia, it is safe to assume that Martinaise is not an overwhelmingly socially-progressive place. Paradoxically, an assumed-bastion of masculinity, a boxing gym, also fails to succeed in the DCA. While there is no clear direct reason for why this business failed, if it was operating during the revolution and its war, Martinaise may simply not have had enough men as clients to keep the gym running.

The ice cream company’s failure is slightly more humorous: Harry can discover a fridge in the basement of the DCA shaped like a giant polar bear on its hind legs, with the fridge acting

as its chest. The reason this business failed is because the polar bear scared children off, causing very little ice cream to be sold. The bear-fridge is found plugged in, which explains another aspect of the “curse”: the bookstore owner claims that the electricity is erratic and more costly than it should be, and the bear-fridge is the cause of this. Harry also witnesses that the bear’s eyes glow red, making it very easy to understand why children were afraid of it. Finally, there is the radio role-playing game company. This business was developing a role-playing game, similar to something like *Dungeons and Dragons*, that would be played by several people together over the radio. Kim remarks that the scale of this project was immense, and that no undertaking of that scale utilizing radio technology had been undergone before (*Disco Elysium*). Somewhat-predictably, its massive scale leads to the company’s downfall. Together, the failures of these business echo the destructive aspect of Modernism. Each business was once the investment and passion of their respective owners, but despite their best efforts, each one fails. A great deal of human spirit went into each business as well: the hairdresser might have wanted to foster a more accepting micro-community in Martinaire, the makers of the ice cream wanted to make children happy with their product, and the radio game would have connected people from all over the world to create something together. These dreams are shattered for the same reasons lives were shattered after World War I; reality struck, and it struck hard. Passion and hope withered in the face of war and destruction, and once-dreams were turned into millions of glittering fragments of despair. Harry’s ability to explore the building and uncover the mysteries of each business is Modernist in its own way, as Harry wades through the hopeful past in the harsh reality of the present, knowing little except for the failure of each business. Finally, a lack of successful civilian business during wartime is a common occurrence in the real world, too, as industry switches to supporting the war efforts through ammunitions and weapon production. If no other

explanation suits any of the failed DCA businesses, the latter provides a contextually-relevant and reasonable one that both evokes Modernism in the real world as well as fits into the world of *Disco Elysium*.



The Deserter and the End

By now, we have explored many stops along Harry's investigative route: the beginning, when he wakes up, his exploration of Martinaise and himself, all the way up to his journey and dream on the island off the coast. This island is both where the game ends and where it reveals the killer of the hanged man. Considering that discovering this figure is the primary objective of the murder mystery Harry was sent to solve, one might expect the reveal to be grand and fulfilling. While the identity of the killer is exceptionally interesting as far as the game's lore goes, it is not the satisfying end many expect when concluding a detective story. Before the reasons for that lack of satisfaction are given, the killer's place in the world of Elysium will be explained, especially as it relates to the Modernist principles found everywhere else in *Disco Elysium*.

The killer Harry finds on the island is called "The Deserter" when Harry speaks to him. As it turns out, he is a communist soldier who has survived on the island fortress since the war: in fact, he is very likely the last remaining communist combatant who actually fought in the Antecentennial Revolution. He is very, very, old when Harry finds him, and is barely holding onto lucidity. The thing responsible for his degraded mental state is the Insulidian Phasmid, which Harry meets just after meeting the Deserter, as its pheromones have been psychologically impacting the Deserter (*Disco Elysium*). These same pheromones also extended his lifespan slightly, which is why he is still alive to begin with. These pheromones caused the Deserter to

develop a psycho-sexual attraction to Klaasje Amandou, who he would spy on at the Whirling-in-Rags through the scope of his sniper rifle. When Klaasje began a sexual relationship with the mercenary who ends up as the hanged man, the Deserter became enraged and decided to kill both of them. This is how the mercenary is killed: him and Klaasje are having sex in her room at the Whirling (which has a large window facing the island), and the Deserter shoots from the island and hits the mercenary directly in the back of the head. The hanging was staged by Klaasje and the Union out of fear because she believed the bullet was meant for her, and she wanted the RCM to investigate without giving away her career of corporate espionage (*Disco Elysium*). The rest has been covered by now: Harry takes the case, arrives in Martinaise, goes on his bender, and the events of the game ensue.

The Deserter is a textbook example of someone clinging to fragments. His ideology and position in the military are literally all the Deserter has by the time he shoots the mercenary. He was present in Martinaise when Operation Death Blow, the extensive shelling of Revachol, took place. During Operation Death Blow, he deserted his platoon and crawled along the massive chain connecting the island to the mainland and hid on the mainland in a small bunker. The next morning, he discovered his fortress in ruin, his comrades slaughtered, and his ideology crumbling under the might of capital and gunfire. Nevertheless, the Deserter clings onto his ideology as he explains his motivations:

THE DESERTER: “It was real. I’d seen it. I’d seen it **in reality**.”

YOU: “Seen **what**?”

THE DESERTER: “The mask of humanity fall from capital. It has to take it off to kill everyone – everything you love; all the hope and tenderness in the world. It has to take it

off, just for one second. To do the deed.”

THE DESERTER: “And then you see it. As it strangles and beats your friends to death... the sweetest, most courageous people in the world.” He’s silent for a second. “You see the fear and power in its eyes. Then you *know*.”

YOU: “What?”

THE DESERTER: “That the bourgeois are not human.”

THE DESERTER: “I had to, I *had* to fight it. I had to never stop...” The old man falls silent. His black eyes keep piercing your skin as he looks to some great distance behind you, shaking his head slowly – retreating from it. (*Disco Elysium*)

The Deserter is a man viciously haunted by his past, but he nevertheless continues to reside in it because the present has no place for him. His existence is almost a reflection of Harry’s: Harry could easily meet the same fate, ending up in an alleyway somewhere with his disgraced RCM cloak flung over him as he murmurs about ex-somethings and disco days. The Deserter’s insistence that he “had to fight” and “never stop” shows his unwavering commitment to communism, but his attempt to keep it alive singlehandedly ultimately reduced him to a husk as the ideology itself withered away. We have covered characters and places haunted by their past extensively by now, but the Deserter demonstrates that this theme extends all the way to the very end of *Disco Elysium*.

Some who play *Disco Elysium* feel that this ending is anticlimactic, and that the game does not give the player a real opportunity to solve the case with the clues they find up to the point where they go to the island. The latter sentiment is largely true, but calling the ending anticlimactic seems to miss how fitting such an ending is for a game like *Disco Elysium*. As for

clues, there are only a few that point towards the killer being the Deserter. One takes the form of some flower petals left on Klaasje's patio, identified as "May Bells". These flowers are significant because they were used as a revolutionary symbol, and bloomed on the fortress island before anywhere else in Martinaise (*Disco Elysium*). There are also some footprints left in a backroom behind Klaasje's room that do not match with anyone else's in Martinaise. Of course, these are minute details that Harry might not even come across as he explores, and neither one points concretely towards a specific person he interacts with. Even more obscurely, when Harry "interviews" the hanged man and asks what killed him, the corpse "responds" just with "communism" (*Disco Elysium*). "Reaction Speed" chimes in afterwards, stating that "it takes a millisecond for the association to flash within [Harry's] cortex. You have no idea *where* it's coming from – only that it's *right*" (*Disco Elysium*). "Reaction Speed" is correct, but given that the player knows they cannot always trust Harry's skills, and they have no evidence to connect this piece to, most will ignore and forget about it by the time they actually meet the Deserter. This contributes to the ending feeling unexpected and most of all, unpredictable. For a detective game, being largely unable to move towards finding the identity of the killer at all until the last five percent of the game is at the very least unusual. However, this choice is actually also connected to Modernism in a profound way, and expresses that disenchantment is as valid an emotion conveyed by art as any other.

As it turns out, a lack of conclusiveness is also a common Modernist trope. Part of piecing together an exploded world is the fact that some pieces have been completely destroyed, and cannot be used to rebuild anything completely. Eliot experiences this in his "The Waste Land", where so many fragments of history and culture are put together as a mosaic, but none of those cultural elements and stories are told to their endings. Hulme complains that the Romantic

ideals of writing stretch into the infinite, so he fights in an attempt to frame at least some of the language he cares so deeply about. Even Yeats, with his grand apocalyptic depictions, does not provide conclusions to his hypotheses, instead describing the gradual spiral as a constantly-moving historical process. *Disco Elysium* takes from this too, in the crafting of its own ending. Harry explores countless nooks and crannies in Martinaise, interviewing people, learning about their lives, learning about the history of the world around him, acting as a conduit for the supernatural, and exploring local politics. These build up a very large-scale image of Elysium, so the player anticipates an equally-grand ending.

In the end, though, the mastermind behind the seemingly-untraceable murder mystery turns out to just be a senile, nigh-catatonic, ancient soldier on an island. There is no long-standing plot to kill, no vengeful ex-partner or ruthlessly-cunning assassin; all Harry finds is the scorned and bitter shell of a man holding onto his last atoms of consciousness.

Of the thousands of fragments Harry assembles throughout his investigation, barely a handful relate to the Deserter in a meaningful way. When they see this disconnected trail, the player might feel like something went wrong: that they missed a piece of the puzzle, forgot to speak to a certain character, or failed a skill check five hours earlier that only just enacted its consequences. However, this sense of disenchantment is not some sensation that happened to make its way into *Disco Elysium*: it is an intentional emotion being evoked to contrast the rest of the game. It should be abundantly clear by now, if not from the analysis then from the quotes, that *Disco Elysium* is a very stylized game. It utilizes a literal stream-of-consciousness and presents itself as a semi-open-world, then subverts the stylistic expectations of the player and forces them to

confront those expectations. After all, the case Harry solves is just one of 216 others he has already completed, and after he leaves Martinaise, hardly anything has really changed. The entire game takes place in one small neighborhood, made significant only by the worker's strike going on. By ending the game in this way, *Disco Elysium* asks the player, "well, what did you really want from me?". The answer to that question will almost certainly be more profound than any message *Disco Elysium* could offer on its own. Though it starts with the bang of a sniper's rifle, it ends with the whimper of the Deserter falling into a fully-disassociated state and being escorted away by the RCM. Harry returns to the mainland, debriefs with his department, and *Disco Elysium* fades to black, ending both itself and our time with it.



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