# THE DILEMMAS OF A DISCO COP

*Ethically Well Played Experiences in Disco Elysium*

MIA CONSALVO, E. JULES MAIER-ZUCCHINO, & ROBERT MARINOV

A growing body of work has analyzed several of *Disco Elysium'*s complex interlocking elements, from the game's skill and thought cabinet systems to its representations of legal structures (Bernick, 2021; Novitz, 2021). However, researchers have not yet sought to interpret what it means to engage in these mechanics and representations in a 'well-played' manner. *Disco Elysium* does not require or test the skills that are traditionally connected with playing videogames well. Players interact with the game almost entirely through dialogue interchanges, meaning fast reflexes and physical dexterity are utterly inconsequential to progressing through the game's story. Rather, it is the act of deliberate choice that defines this game.

In some regards, this makes *Disco Elysium* difficult to analyze in the frame of a well-played game. The lack of an "optimal" playthrough (Vella & Cielecka, 2021) renders interpretation into a process of sifting through numerous, seemingly contradictory potentialities. Furthermore, the ethical dimension of much of the game's content ensures that what one person interprets as an ethically-defensible action could easily be debated as ethically-objectionable by others.

This uncertainty, however problematic it may appear on the surface, is precisely what makes the game so engaging. Rather than closing off meaning, the instability of *Disco Elysium*'s world and protagonist (Novitz, 2021) and the lack of conventional markers of progress encourage players to become comfortable with this ambiguity. They must find meaning in the choices they make to navigate the game rather than in the conclusions those choices lead to.

This essay reviews the processes that inform players' experiences of ethical gameplay and their enactment through both virtuous and dark playstyles, and discusses how *Disco Elysium*'s flexibility in this regard is afforded by its unconventional protagonist. We present three distinct perspectives that explore what it means to play *Disco Elysium* 'well.' Separately, none of these playthroughs can be claimed as an ideal form of the game. They are isolated stories and reflections generated by viewing the game through the specific lenses adopted by each researcher. Taken as a whole, however, they form a gestalt that parallels the game's themes, demonstrating a multiplicity of potential stories that, when layered together, reveal the persistent ethical currents that underpin the experience of playing *Disco Elysium*.

## AFFORDANCES FOR ETHICAL EXPLORATION

Following Miguel Sicart and Jose Zagal, we view videogame ethics as arising primarily from system-based design choices and mechanics, which can either open or close affordances for ethical reflection, experience, and development for players. Sicart (2009, 2013) treats videogames as designed objects whose game world, rules, and mechanics produce and communicate opportunities for ethical experiences. As rule-based systems, games can be designed to either create certain values and ethical actions or behaviors as prerequisites to successful completion, or to open varied possibilities for ethical interpretation and choice: "Through a rule, the game is communicating a series of values

about how the game should be played," while the consequences of following or breaking those rules can "appeal to our ethical mind" as moral beings (Sicart, 2009, p. 108). Sicart (2013) then defines ethical gameplay as ludic experiences which "require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities" (p. 24), and as "an experience in and of play that disrupts the progression toward goals and achievements and forces players to address their actions from a moral perspective" (p. 29).

An ethically-designed game is thus one which avoids simplistic binaries of good/evil action and instead structures nuanced ambiguities capable of sparking ethical/moral reflection. A key example of such design structures is what Sicart (2013) calls 'wicked problems': situations with "unclear boundaries and no clear solution" that engage players in a moral dilemma (p. 100). Such dilemmas force players to use moral reasoning and engage with their personally-held values and knowledge (p. 106).

Zagal takes a similarly rule- or systems-based approach to videogame ethics. Developing on what he terms "ethically notable videogames" (Zagal, 2009), Zagal (2011a) views ethically-designed games as those which, "using a variety of design elements including narrative, gameplay, and more, create opportunities for their players to think about ethics" (p. 21). Through the interplay of game rules, systems, mechanics, and design, the ethically-designed videogame ensures that players are faced with "ethically interesting choices and situations" (Zagal, 2011b, p. 2) from which they can morally self-reflect. "A game that afforded ethical reflection would also … encourage players to assess their own ethical values, the social context of issues identified, and consider the ramifications of alternative actions" (Zagal, 2011a, p. 21). As such, key to both Sicart and Zagal's perspectives is how game design produces (or fails to produce) *ethical affordances*: those dilemmas or situations within which

players can engage in and be affected by ethical reflection and reasoning.

But what are the consequences of such ethical affordances to an understanding of a 'well played' game? Sicart's (2009) view of players as moral beings is key here. He argues that "[p]layers are not passive receivers, and they are not just bots clicking on the button to get their ludic fix. Players are reflective, virtuous beings" (p. 111). He therefore views videogame ethics as constituting a "distributed responsibility," a dynamic wherein "ethical issues are distributed over a network of ludic systems and game agents," including the player and their responses to the game's design/rule structures (p. 148). By recognizing this two-way dynamic between player and game, Sicart opens a path to analyzing videogames as material processes that exercise power (i.e., coercion, influence) and subjectivization:

> Power creates subjects, and so games create players. The process of experiencing a game and becoming a player needs to take into account how the nature of the game contributes to the creation of that subjectivity. … [T]he game as ethical object establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game. *A player is then at least partially affected in her moral being by the game she is experiencing.* (p. 68; emphasis added)

If "computer games are power structures" to which players are subject through their gameplay (Sicart, 2009, p. 68), then Sicart's videogame ontology highlights how, in ethical terms, 'well played' games would entail *certain forms of subjectivization.* Namely, through a game-ethics perspective the question of 'well played' hinges on the flexibility of the game as designed object to open ethical affordances that allow player-subjects to be morally and ethically affected (subjectivized) through self-critical and constitutive ethical experiences/dilemmas. Rather than focusing

only on winning or losing, cheating or honoring rules, an ethical and 'well played' game can be understood as one wherein the player is enabled to critically self-reflect on their 'real-world' or embodied ethical positions, behaviors, and even, as Murphy and Zagal (2011) suggest, their emotional connections and relations of care.

The processes and designs allowing for the emergence of ethical gameplay do not always lead to virtuous behaviors, however, and it's important to consider that a player's choice to subvert conventional ethics can also emerge from the activation of their ethical imagination. One enactment of such subversions is dark play. There are many definitions of dark play, although most begin with (or depart from) Richard Schechner's view that it subverts order, contains hidden agendas, and employs "deceit, disruption, and excess" (quoted in Mortensen, 2015). This begs the question: can a person play well at dark play?

Dark play also has its own conventions – it is not simply unfolding chaos. These can be expressed through both gameplay fictions and mechanics. Bjork (2015) writes that some games actively try to make players feel guilt or shame through design elements. One well-known example is *Spec Ops: The Line,* which

> tries to provide a fabrication that people can play it as an ordinary military shooter – they can adopt the normal player frame. … *Spec Ops: The Line* makes use of both narrative and gameplay to provide players with a negative experience when the fabrications become apparent (p. 184).

In such situations there is little room for the player to express agency or make choices: the game is making an argument, first and foremost. Dark play can also be a way for players to explore different values or ways of thinking about ethical quandaries. Kristine Jørgensen examined the stealth game *Dishonored,*

arguing that "dark play is about exploring subversive or immoral behaviour and allowing the player to experiment with the sinister aspects of the human mind in a safe environment built around fictional events" (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 212). Employing both its storyline and gameplay mechanics, it tugs the player in different directions – suggesting through its Chaos Meter that performing fewer kills was the better path for players to take, but via its narrative suggesting that some deaths were clearly deserved. This combination forces players to actively reflect on different ethical perspectives in unique ways, as there is no one right way to play the game.

Similarly, Torill Mortensen had several elite players play alongside her in the MMO *Star Wars: the Old Republic* to see how they confronted the ethical challenges the game provided for those on both the 'light' and 'dark' side of the force. They expressed a range of responses to the game's ethical situations. One player felt no guilt for any actions taken, as it was simply "digital pixels," while another expressed concern about some dilemmas which caused him "inner conflict" (Mortensen, 2015, pp. 157, 161). And as with Jørgensen's reading of *Dishonored,* the fiction and gameplay mechanics both needed to be employed to promote these actions. As Mortensen concludes about dark play, it can put "our own conventions and assumptions into stark relief, displaying the weaknesses in what we accept without question" (p. 168).

These ethical dynamics converge within the numerous dilemmas of *Disco Elysium*. Players interact with this game primarily through navigating dialogue trees and selecting responses to a diverse range of situations that carry numerous ethical implications, be they obvious (taking bribes from a corrupt union boss) or subtle (choosing to arrest someone before they've committed a crime). A 'well-played' experience therefore requires near-constant engagement with the game's themes and the player's own ethical imagination.

## DISCO ELYSIUM

Players engage in the world of *Disco Elysium* through the role of Harry Du Bois, a detective in the Revachol Citizen's Militia (RCM) tasked with solving a murder. At first, Harry appears as the traditional RPG protagonist. Players determine his strengths and weaknesses across four skill types: Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics, each containing six distinct attributes which can be improved throughout gameplay. This allows players to position Harry as distinct types of cop, such as the Physical type that solves problems with force or the Thinker who relies on observation to circumvent obstacles. This flexibility ensures "there is no obvious strategy for playing *Disco Elysium* with an optimal playthrough in mind" (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, p. 102). Players must make choices that will limit their available options, and these choices force the player to determine for themselves what it means to play well through developing Harry's character and making in-game decisions.

Harry's presentation as a rather unstable protagonist further enhances these complexities. Vella and Cielecka (2021) note that the conventional "ludic subject" is viewed as a "focused subjectivity" that is "coherent in its actions, and focused in rationally wielding its agency towards the gameworld" (p. 93). *Disco Elysium* denies players such coherence by giving a literal voice to each of Harry's attributes, allowing them to advise and comment on the player's actions as non-neutral subjects. Moreover, each one corresponds to disparate political positions, thus effectively "undermining the player's expectations of development toward mastery" (Novitz, 2021, p. 36).

Vella and Cielecka (2021) utilize the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony to address this destabilization, asserting that the "multi-voicedness" of Harry's interior life "invites the player as an essential part of the discourse. … they are forced to hear out the arguments, look for contexts, and make an informed choice"

(p. 102). *Disco Elysium* denies players the stability expected from a videogame protagonist and refuses to offer clear solutions to the many ethical dilemmas they encounter. In the absence of any traditional metrics of success in its mechanics or narrative, *Disco Elysium* configures a 'well-played' experience as one that requires players to actively pursue the outcomes that *they* value.

Harry, however, is not alone in this endeavor. He is accompanied by Lt. Kim Kitsuragi, a non-player-controlled character "who comes to function as something of an externalized sense of the social expectations that come with [Harry's] role as a police officer" (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, 98). In Kim, players are presented with one model of a (mostly) professional policeman who can serve as a moral beacon to emulate. However, as we argue below, Kim's actual role in the game is more ambiguous, thus encouraging players to read between the lines of each scenario.

## METHOD OF ANALYSIS

For our game-ethics analysis of *Disco Elysium*, we each undertook a playthrough from start to finish over the course of roughly six weeks in fall 2021. Progress and experiences were tracked using gameplay journals, frequent screenshots, and weekly meetings to discuss ethically-interesting experiences or dynamics. To structure our approach towards examining more diverse elements of the game system, narrative, and design, we established divergent playstyles prior to starting the game. Namely, Jules and Mia, who had previously completed the game, committed to a dark play approach, exploring the ethical dynamics when playing the role of an immoral cop. They used the game's pre-set character archetypes of Sensitive and Physical, respectively. Robert, having not yet played the game, committed to exploring the ethical dynamics when playing as a virtuous cop, using the Thinker archetype. Beyond these initial commitments to playthrough styles, no other methodological criteria were

enforced, allowing for free exploration of the game world while letting the players define for themselves what constitutes "dark" or "virtuous" actions.

Upon completion, we reviewed each playthrough journal and discussed our overall experiences, attempting to find similarities and disjunctures in the game and player experiences that highlighted ethically-interesting or significant mechanics, choices, and affordances. Several congruences became evident. However, rather than attempting to synthesize our experiences into an overarching thesis about the game ethics and their implications for an understanding of ethically well played games, we opted to each outline our most significant individual experiences. In this way, the next section offers a polyphonic set of analytical perspectives on *Disco Elysium*'s ethical affordances that interweave and diverge on several fronts – reflecting the polyphonic set of subjectivities made possible through the structure of *Disco Elysium* itself (see Vella & Cielecka, 2021).

## ROBERT'S PLAYTHROUGH EXPERIENCE: THE ETHICAL-PROFESSIONAL COP

What does virtuous behavior look like for an amnesiac alcoholic who wakes up with no memory of who or where they are, unsure even if they are truly a cop? I approached my playthrough with the goal of avoiding unethical, unprofessional behaviors: I was going to do things by the book, be a serious investigator, and a professional, fair, and neutral cop. My view of what an ethical cop's job might look like in Martinaise was quickly problematized, however, by the striking amount of politically-contentious content: by mid-day of my first day on the case I was drawn into conversations surrounding child labour, worker's strikes, capitalism versus communism, racism, sexism, and 'delinquent' drug-addicted kids. If that wasn't enough, I was faced with ethical dilemmas over my own possibilities for action, including theft, drug use, breaking and entering, and more.

Where was I? Who was I? Getting to know and develop my character turned from a simple path of virtue-signaling to an uncomfortable attempt at navigating this complex socio-political world from a purportedly 'ethical' position.

My efforts didn't end well, and for good reason. *Disco Elysium* combines a rich, historicized socio-political game world with a design structure that defies moral centring and so serves, by default, to pause instrumentalist play and 'straightforward police work' while encouraging ethically well played experiences of *political subjectivization* (i.e., how interaction with the game design and mechanics engrains certain behaviors and subjectivities – in this case, politically reflective ones; see Sicart, 2009, Ch. 3).

### Searching for a Moral Beacon: Kim and the question of corruption

Besides a few rebellious slips, I succeeded by and large to remain virtuous… at first. As mentioned above, Harry's partner, Lt. Kim Kitsuragi, acts as a sort of 'moral center' in the game: a reserved and professional cop keen to solve the case and uphold his duty to the RCM. Kim's 'prudent' voice seems designed to keep us on track in our investigation, frequently complaining when we diverge into side quests and offering a moralistic voice to our actions. From the start, Kim served as a genuine moral base from which I sought to shape my own understanding of being a professional cop in this unfamiliar world. I valued his presence and his calm and collected interventions in dialogue with other NPCs. I came quickly to see him as a friend and a role model.

Far from offering a clear beacon of ethical action, however, Kim's role in *Disco Elysium* is fraught with mixed signals. Corruption, as it turns out, is not so far removed from his image of duty. Whether we consider his suspiciously "confiscated" hub caps, him "conveniently" looking the other way as I stole a dock worker's ID card, or his indifference to breaking into apartments with chain-cutters to look for evidence, Kim's de facto role as a moral center is complicated by the gameplay's affordances for

*unethical* action and his complacency or encouragement thereof. In this sense, similarly to how *Dishonored* uses NPCs as "moral compasses" to stimulate ethical reflection by "explicitly commenting on the player's activities" (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 213), so too does *Disco Elysium* use Kim as a morally *ambiguous* compass for stimulating ethical dilemmas.

Several choice structures in *Disco Elysium* straddle the line between blatant corruption and excusably-utilitarian investigative work, depending on one's interpretation. One example in particular demonstrates how Kim's presence complicates these scenarios. During our first interaction, Evrart, the district's corrupt Union boss, asks Harry to open the door to the apartment of an anti-socialist "weasel" in order to intimidate him. Determined to avoid corruption, I discussed the situation with Kim, who expressed an uncomfortable yet surprising openness to the task (see Figure 1).
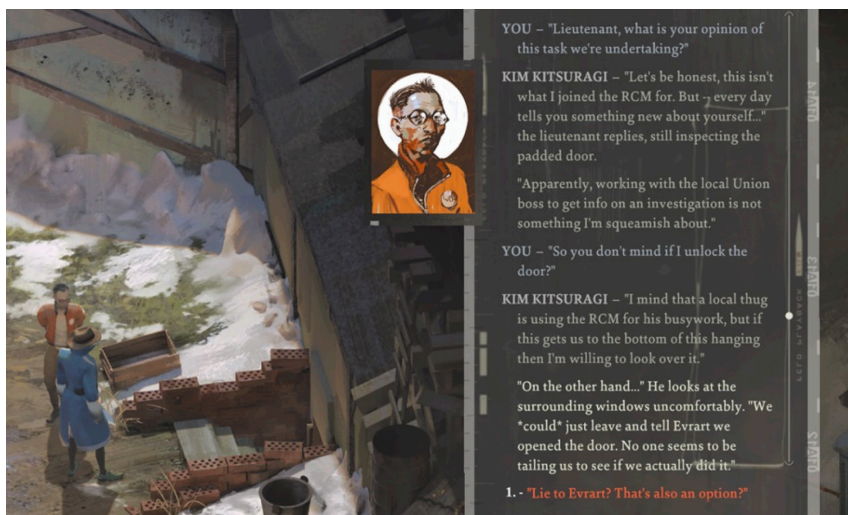


*Figure 1: The Apartment Door, Disco Elysium, 2019.*

After taking Kim's advice and lying to Evrart about opening the door – my attempt to advance the case while avoiding an overt breach of authority – I was soon out of leads and reconsidered my position. Would entering the apartment reveal any important

clues? Unsure how to proceed as an 'ethical-professional' cop, I faltered and broke into the apartment. At this point, Kim – to my disappointment – had nothing to say on the matter: how was I to interpret my actions without his 'prudent' guidance? Things got more complicated once we entered and discovered a collection of mugs with racist depictions, sparking Kim to exclaim that "I'm beginning to feel better about breaking into this man's apartment." With this narrative cue, I was again torn in reflection over how far I might be straying from ethical gameplay: I knew I was being corrupt, strictly speaking, yet Kim, my supposed role model, was there to ease my guilt. What was the ethical thing to do, then? Was I a bad cop for being unethically instrumental in my investigation? Did I play the game well by exploring for clues, or did I betray my own values? The conflicting values communicated by Kim and other NPCs (including Harry's own attributes) render such dilemmas commonplace. Kim, the game's apparent moral center, turned out to be a moral trap all along, a design element that only made affordances for ethical reflection more complex and nuanced. These built-in ambiguities are further complicated by highly-uncertain structures of authority.

### Am I a legitimate cop? Ethical reflections in a vacuum of authority

*Disco Elysium* confronts players with a political and legal reality that defies simplistic notions of rightful authority. By design, players are pushed increasingly to question their own authority as a cop in Martinaise. As the main narrative advances, we quickly discover that a "militant" group within the Union, led by Titus Hardie, acts as a de facto police force in the city. Their immediate, if questionable, confession to murdering the Hanged Man leaves the player unsure of the extent of Harry's authority: unable to apprehend the "Hardie boys" Harry and Kim are left helpless, seemingly powerless cops in a hostile setting. While speaking with locals, the clear lack of recognition for RCM authority becomes apparent, due largely to its control by a foreign Coalition government that enjoys no support from

residents. Harry must also, at times, choose between enforcing or delegating his already questionable authority (see Figure 2). What are the ramifications of such ambiguities? Is Harry's role in Martinaise legitimate?



*Figure 2: Interaction with The Pigs, Disco Elysium, 2019.*

These unclear legal boundaries and political allegiances create a vacuum of authority within which players must negotiate their possibilities for action, all while facing the "demeaning" implications of their own lack of authority (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, p. 95). Players are forced to reflect on these dynamics and their own "cop" status to determine their actions: should Harry demand respect and aggressively uphold RCM authority despite the political oppression his own masters are effectuating? Does the Coalition's control of the RCM really justify its authority in a city opposed to their foreign rule? How can Harry's own activities, ethical or unethical, be interpreted in light of this vacuum? Navigating these moral ambiguities is further blurred by the political drama that engages players with an array of normative positions to consider.

**The (A-)Political Cop: Ethico-political affordances and subjectivization**

**THE HANGED MAN –** With your hand numb from the recoil, you look at the body slump down. For a moment the man appears to *kneel* in front of you.

**INLAND EMPIRE [Easy: Success] –** Looking straight at you. Helpless, trapped within itself.

**YOU –** Who killed you?

**THE HANGED MAN –** Communism.[1]

One of my assumptions was that an ethical cop would abstain from political commentary and avoid taking sides: my allegiance was only to the law. Like Kim, whose (supposed) neutrality was made clear early in the game, I sought to abstain from commenting on a dockworker's strike, and despite frequent conversations about the game world's prior revolution, the authority of the Coalition, and the pros and cons of capitalism, I tried wholeheartedly to abstain from comment (earning me the achievement of "Unbelievably Boring F**k"). The game's narrative and dialogue choices, however, made such abstention exceedingly difficult – and ethically questionable. What are the ethics of such neutrality? Can you really play *Disco Elysium* well – or at all – through political abstention?

Wherever you go and to whomever you speak in Martinaise, politically-charged dialogue is not far away. Drawn into a fierce labor conflict in a post-revolutionary city teeming with resentment and discontent, Harry must make sense of his world all while being pegged between a representative of capital (Joyce the corporate negotiator) and a voice of social democracy, if not outright communism (Evrart). Players must navigate a myriad of

---

1. Game dialogue that appears after a corpse has been shot down. Disco Elysium often features dialogue from non-sentient and inanimate objects as well as dead bodies.

such politicized conversations to gain a grounding in the world following their amnesic episode. Indeed, the more one explores the city and talks with its inhabitants, the more difficult it becomes to avoid political persuasions and remain neutral. The player's political views have consequences, too, as they can shape dialogue choices, thoughts, skill checks, and NPCs' interactions. So, given these highly-politicized narrative and design structures, is it even ethical to remain a politically neutral, 'professional' cop?

Arguably, we may view ethically well played experiences of *Disco Elysium* as those which engage and explore political positions – anywhere on the spectrum from fascist to communist to free market fundamentalist – and avoid the narrow-sighted objective of professional police neutrality. Such engagement demands thoughtful ethico-political reflection and easily stimulates comparison with real-world issues, ideologies, and 'relations of care' (Murphy & Zagal, 2011). Indeed, we might argue that to remain neutral and fixated only on solving the case in the face of the highly-charged political environment of Martinaise would be to *unethically* remain blind to the suffering and injustices, or the corruption and dysfunctionality, of the city. In this sense, and contrary to my initial assumptions, it's clear that an ethical and well-played experience of *Disco Elysium* requires political engagement and expression. To avoid it would be to shut one's eyes to the actual meaning and substance of the story and blindly follow an instrumental approach towards a goal which is *itself* defined by competing political and moral positions.

Accordingly, without a clear moral beacon available to guide one's actions, in a vacuum of clear authority and duty, and in a suffering world of political strife, the only way to gain an ethically well played experience out of Harry's investigation is to turn him into a political subject. And in this sense, I believe that the joy of finishing the game and the measure of its being ethically well played is not in the completion of the goal – i.e.,

dutifully solving the case. Rather, it's in the realization that communism *did* in fact kill the Hanged Man, and in the joyful political subjectivization one finds in reflecting (whether positively or negatively) on this fact.

## JULES'S PLAYTHROUGH: THE COMPLEX SIMPLICITY OF DARK PLAY

Whenever a videogame gives me the opportunity to engage in moral systems, I make decisions according to my real-world values. Every time I have played the *Mass Effect* games, my version of Commander Shepard has been a Paragon. Even when I'm revisiting the games for the third or fourth time with an explicit intent to play opposite my conventional ethics, I have difficulty engaging in dark play. This put me in a difficult position as I began playing *Disco Elysium* for the second time with only one requirement: I had to play darkly.

*Stumbling around Martinaise in the dark*

My first hurdle in this endeavor was to identify what it meant for me to perform a dark playthrough. Unlike *Mass Effect* and other games that involve binary moral positions, *Disco Elysium* contains a multiplicity of worldviews along which players can align themselves. I could have played as a racist, xenophobic fascist but this didn't seem like it would adequately engage my ethical imagination, essentially flattening ethical decision-making into "identify racist response, select racist response." Given the diversity of ethical affordances *Disco Elysium* offers players, this seemed a wasted opportunity to explore the game's ethical nuances.

I spent the first hours of the game exploring different choices open to my cop archetype, the Sensitive, reasoning that if I could discover actions that felt consistent with Harry's personality, I could extrapolate his ethical stances and worldview. The moment that clued me into my character's interior life was not

an ethically-loaded main storyline, but an optional interaction I missed during my initial playthrough.

Early in the game, players are tasked with paying off a debt Harry had incurred during his stay at the Whirling-in-Rags hostel. Players can recycle bottles and cans off the streets to scrounge for cents, take bribes from the Union boss, Evrart, or pursue other avenues of financial accumulation. One such avenue involves convincing an elderly woman named Lena to give Harry a souvenir pin that clearly carries sentimental value. Given my Sensitive archetype's "magnetic personality" (ZA/UM, 2019), I easily convinced her to part with the souvenir. I then took it to a nearby pawnshop and initiated a sale. The game offered a dialogue choice with which I could convince the pawnbroker to hold the pin for a few days, giving me the option to buy it back later and return it to Lena. Harry and I ignored this option. We sold the pin without a second thought, pocketed the money, and used it to buy alcohol.
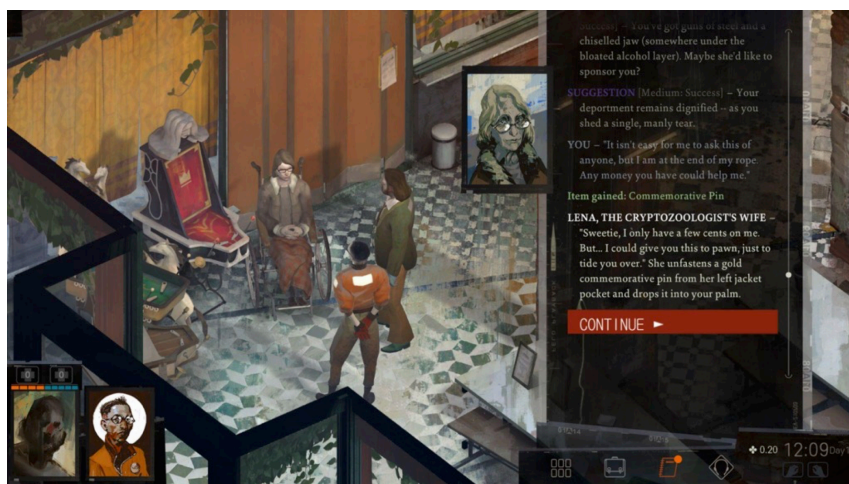


*Figure 3: Obtaining Lena's Pin.*

*Figure 4: Pawning Lena's commemorative Pin.*

Selling Lena's pin felt wholly wrong to me, yet it also opened intriguing ethical considerations for the rest of the game. Martinaise is a desperate district in the city of Revachol, wracked by poverty and corruption, and haunted by the memory of a failed communist revolution (Kłosiński, 2021). Completing the game does not solve the district's problems and players have precious few opportunities to effect any real change. As Bernick (2021) states, *Disco Elysium* "is about the hopelessness of *any* politics as a means of human empowerment and flourishing. The best one can do is more or less what Harry does; get your shit together and reduce a little harm here and there" (p. 30). Such sentiments indicate that *Disco Elysium*'s side quests are critical to the game's ethical world. The most concrete impacts Harry can have on Martinaise are by helping people with their mundane concerns, taking time out of his own busy schedule to improve his community. What happens, then, if the player doesn't try to "reduce a little harm here and there," and instead centers their own individual desires? Through this question, I discovered the nature of my 'dark' version of Harry: the unprincipled, selfish, emotional manipulator willing to say almost anything to benefit himself.

Following this encounter, I actively avoided pursuing side quests and consciously pushed myself toward failing others. This approach meant that I moved through the game quickly. Time in *Disco Elysium* does not proceed continuously but is "correlated with the length and intensity of the text presented in the form of dialogue between our protagonist and things, senses, mental abilities, feelings" (Kłosiński, 2021, p. 58). In other words, by not pursuing dialogue trees to their full extent, time passed slower in the game than it otherwise might, allowing me to accomplish more of the main quest each in-game day without engaging in the world's details. I completed side quests only as an extractive process to gain something tangible, like a useful tool or experience points that could improve my attributes.

### "Accidentally" Helpful

This speed did lead to some roadblocks. On both the third and fourth day, I made decisions that resulted in Lt. Kim Kitsuragi departing to handle other business. In both instances, Kim's absence prevented me from progressing along the game's main quest. As a result, I found myself in a dilapidated town with nothing to do but get intoxicated and interact with some locals. I explored the nooks and crannies of the world, helped a cryptozoologist check their traps, and even went on a date. As a result of being bored, I had become what I wanted to avoid: a (semi-)upstanding member of the community.

I attribute part of this lapse to Kim's absence. Though Robert troubles the notion of Kim's status as a moral authority, Kim does still represent an example of how players can choose to act, his measured approach appearing especially virtuous in the context of my dark play. In my experience, Kim acted not as an example to aspire to, but a model to diverge from, and I based many of my dark play values around his presence. Without him, I lacked a perspective that had helped ethically orient me toward the game. Thus, a game's moral center does not necessarily act as a force

of attraction for the player; in the case of dark play, it can be essential to repelling players away from such ethics.

During this lonely period, I encountered a group of enthusiastic ravers trying to build a club in the remains of a decrepit church. The club, of course, would be a front for a drug lab. I bribed the ravers and then convinced them to build the club without the drug lab. This choice, however, felt inconsistent with my character.
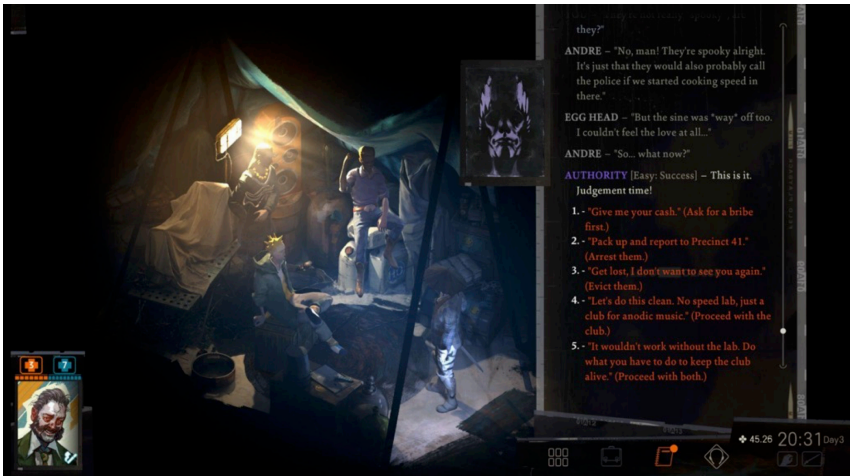


*Figure 5: Options to deal with the encampment of "entrepreneur" ravers.*

For me, Harry was a drug-addicted corrupt cop. Exercising my authority to arrest the ravers would have been more consistent with earlier actions, yet I chose to make the decision that would enrich their lives. However, this choice does align with how I had approached the game previously. In my earlier playthrough, the church/rave club questline was one of my favorite aspects of the game. Drawing on Souvik Mukherjee's work on player memory, Juan Francisco Belmonte (2021) describes how players' choices across previous playthroughs and save files "form layers of experience" that continue to influence their identity and in-game actions (p. 52). These layers of experience came into conflict at this juncture, forming a tension between my personal history and current intent. I was even aware of this tension as

I deliberated between the choices. Despite this awareness, I still chose not to arrest them. I simply couldn't make this once personally-significant part of the game become 'dark.' In the context of my current playthrough, this felt like a failure.

**Success and Failure**

It's easy to imagine dark playthroughs of previously-played games to be straightforward: take what I did the first time, then do the opposite. As noted by Sicart (2013), an ethically designed game troubles this dichotomy. If a dilemma is truly ethically challenging, then choosing a 'dark' action still requires ethical reasoning. Dark play in *Disco Elysium* is not simple. The multiplicity of choice troubling "virtuous" players also problematizes the ethical reasoning of those attempting to engage in dark play.

In *Disco Elysium* a player does not need to act in an 'evil' manner to play darkly but can engage and craft their own version of a 'dark' character. This happens through exploring the intersecting dynamics of Harry's personality, the game world's political ideologies, and the options available for interacting with that world. The player makes choices and then justifies them by continuing to pursue similar choices or rationalizing them through an ethically-reflective process. A successful dark play of *Disco Elysium*, then, is not one that instrumentalizes morality into "pick only [insert political ideology] responses," but that allows room to explore the multiplicity of Harry's identity while engaging the player's own ethical imagination.

It is functionally impossible to 'win' in *Disco Elysium*. Even though I knew the real murderer's identity and location beforehand, the game's structure prevents players from solving the case and resolving the conflict in Martinaise. Both Harry and the player will always fail in their quest. This tension, that players fail even as they succeed, is a core component of *Disco Elysium*. The game is one big, wicked problem, irresolvable and uncertain.

Through this uncertainty, players are challenged to reflect on the ethical, political, and personal meanings of their actions and define for themselves what it means to play the game well.

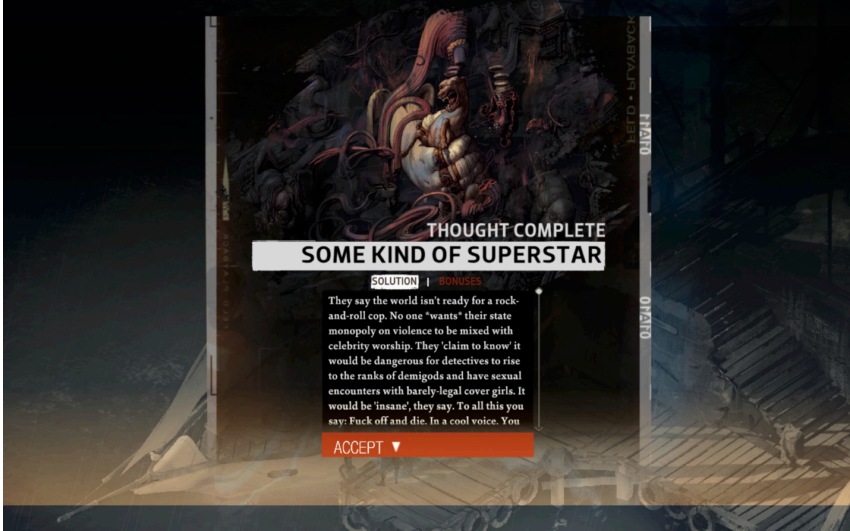## SUPERSTARHARRY & ME – MIA'S PLAYTHROUGH



*Figure 6: Unlocking the Superstar thought*

SuperStarHarry and I could not be more different. SuperStarHarry embraces his physicality, loudly proclaims himself a superstar, is not embarrassed to ask others for money, and is blunt in his conversational style. SuperStarHarry also isn't that bright, but he isn't that mean, either (well, neither am I), particularly to his partner Kim Kitsuragi. He saves his harsh words for everyone else. SuperStarHarry is also, of course, a white man. SuperStarHarry emerged as my answer to what a dark path through *Disco Elysium* might look like. Determining the role was only one challenge – the next was seeing if I could play that role well, if at all. I was determined that SuperStarHarry would be very different from my regular playstyle. Normally in ethically-notable games I take on the role of a smooth talker, high in rhetoric and intelligence, more eager to talk my way out of conflict than to fight, but also the 'hero' who could be

counted on to do the right thing. In that, I solidly fit the model of most players who also enjoy games with moral choices (Consalvo et al., 2019). In contrast, SuperStarHarry was not much of a talker, but when he did talk, he said what needed to be said, whether you wanted to hear it or not. This Harry also flirted with some sexism, and tried drugs and alcohol, but saved his wildest expressions for his wardrobe. In this limited space, I'll overview three key points from my own attempt at dark play: being rude can be liberating; some gameplay/dialogue options almost destroyed any pleasure I took in playing; and trying to play a role different from my regular type is exhausting, almost becoming not-play in its enactment.

**Performing SuperStar-ness**

Men and women are socialized to interact with the world in different ways and are rewarded and punished accordingly. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performing gender highlights this artifice, including how it accretes over time, solidifying one's gender identity. Gender(ed) performances happen in myriad ways: through one's clothing, hairstyle, walk, language, and decision-making style. Given the heavy role that language plays in *Disco Elysium*, how I chose to present SuperStarHarry linguistically, in dialogue as well as actions, ultimately contributed to, without my realizing it at first, a re-gendering of my playstyle.

> *"I'm going to have a REALLY hard time if I try to be a jerk to Kim in the game" – playthrough notes, October 31, 2021*

In an examination of presentation style, gender, and humility, psychology researchers Priebe and Van Tongeren point out that men use an *inflated presentation style* more frequently than women – they more often oversell or overclaim their own abilities (Priebe & Van Tongeren, 2021, p. 1). This is likely because "a woman stating her opinion in a straightforward manner may be perceived as aggressive, pushy, or bossy, while a man saying

the exact same thing might be perceived as confident" (p. 2). Playing as SuperStarHarry was like putting on an outfit that screamed "look at me" when all I wanted to do was blend into the background. Yet despite my discomfort, I persisted: singing karaoke, telling people how wonderful I was, physically threatening others, and refusing to play along with their obvious efforts to lead me astray. At first, I constantly worried how this might affect the case and character interactions. Yet as Priebe and Van Tongeren again make clear, in situations where women outperform others, they tend "to be preoccupied with how the other person perceived their immodest language; however, the men … thought that their immodest language made the other person like them even more" (p. 3). While I never believed that others liked my boasting, it slowly became an enjoyable thing to do, and I did look forward to seeing how often a reference to my superstardom would be offered as a dialogue option.

Yet in playing as SuperStarHarry, I worked hard to overcome gendered language conventions I didn't realize I had internalized. I didn't want to insult or let down any of my digital colleagues, or possibly provoke suspects or witnesses in the wrong way. Two weeks after I began, I was "still having trouble being mean" – conflating being frank with being unkind, possibly telling someone something they didn't want to hear. Of course, the game also offered "mean" dialogue choices, but those remained a step too far for even SuperStarHarry.

This playstyle required conscious and continuous decision-making, particularly in how I chose to respond to others. While choice-based games always offer players multiple ways to perform their characters, I needed to actively think past my normal responses, scanning the options for more showy or blunt remarks. This would definitely *require a lot more work than my 'normal' play"* (playthrough notes, November 13, 2021). Being loud and showy was exhausting. Eventually I figured out some parameters and leaned into my role. The game also reassured

me that trying a different playstyle would not end in chaos and hatred. In an early interaction, for example, Kim suggested a course of action (see Figure 7) and I had the option to tell him I "don't take orders from anyone." Fearing the outcome, but wanting to push myself, I chose the option, and the game continued, with Kim retorting *"I see, yes. You're what we call a 'bad ass', aren't you? He makes little quotation marks around the words, indicating he is unsure of its actual badassery. "Tell me, does your bad ass see more in there or are we done here?" The lieutenant peers into the trash.*

Kim's joking reply negated my worry that I had forever earned his ire and gave me permission to try out other conversational options without worrying that I might 'break the game' if I was too rude. Yet this is a common concern for women, as "some men may view women who display dominance features as a threat to their own power" (Priebe and Van Tongeren, 2021, p. 2). But of course I was not me, I was SuperStarHarry, a white man. Taking on this role let me experience what being rude, egotistical, or just blunt might be like, for another type of person. It was something I grew to appreciate.
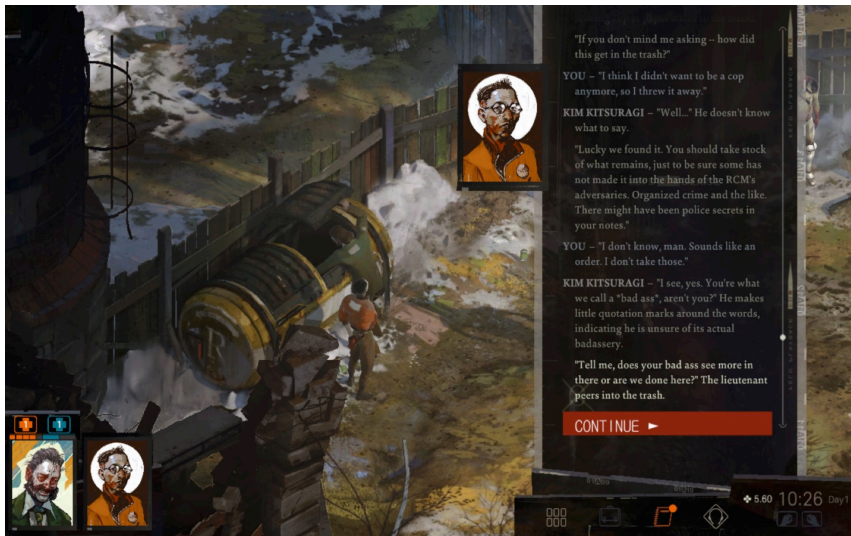
*Figure 7: Being rude to Kim does not result in total chaos.*

## Play history

It wasn't simply gender socialization that made it difficult for me to engage in a different playstyle: gendered, dark, or otherwise. Sicart (2011) argues that players do not engage with ethical practices and concepts in games from a blank slate: "players interpret the game experience from their game cultural background" (p. 102). My own prior experiences playing "the hero" in similarly styled games created a familiar set of pathways, identifications, and expectations that proved difficult to push up against. I was used to being the Paragon version of Shepard in *Mass Effect*, and the Grey Warden from *Dragon Age* who always saved the mages. Playing those games and others like them for dozens or hundreds of hours provided me with a template for Hero Play, but no similar guide for a boasting superstar. I had to set aside my prior experience, where "players rehearse and potentially stabilize versions of themselves they wish to see" (Consalvo et al., 2019, p. 12), and had instead waded into new and uncomfortable territory.
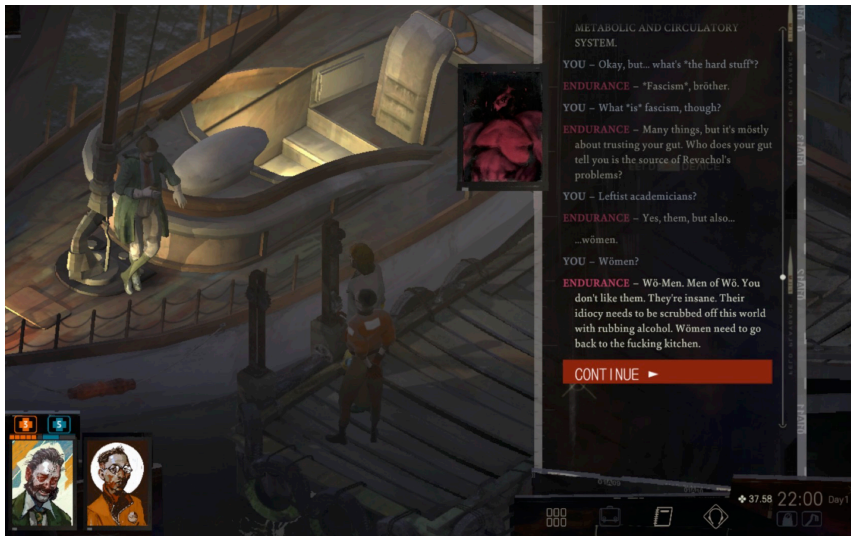
*Figure 8: One of many opportunities for Harry to be sexist.*

Finally, although I came to embrace this new style of play, it came with limitations. *Disco Elysium* offers the player multiple paths for Harry to follow, including being able to express extremely sexist and racist ideas. The game does limit some expressions. Curiously, the slur "f****t" is never fully written out or pronounced aloud despite its frequent use. Instead it is written out as previously or, if spoken, has static override the audio. But many NPCs spout sexist (along with racist, homophobic, and fatphobic) language, which can be supported or ignored by the player. But more troubling for me was how the game let Harry himself refer to women as whores, 'cock carousels,' insane, and needing "to go back to the fucking kitchen." This was not language I could get comfortable with. At one point at the very beginning of the game I was offered the chance to pound on a woman's door and when she didn't answer yell "Fucking whore" to see if that would generate a response. I tried it once and immediately felt ashamed. I later pursued a sexist resolution to a problem the hostel manager Garte was having, and was similarly troubled. After that I dropped the sexist lines, and never let SuperStarHarry make any racist comments or support any

homophobic statements made by others. All these actions were extremely uncomfortable simply to entertain, let alone engage in. Why was this the case, given it was a single-player game, with no one the wiser if I did so, even if only for "research" purposes? For me it destroyed the idea of play altogether, as doing so would have given me no joy, nor felt playful in the least.

To conclude, SuperStarHarry provided an entry point for me to engage in, if not dark play, then perhaps gray play. I could experiment with different presentation styles, ones mainly associated with white men. It was quite a bit of work, until I could get the hang of it. And there were some facets to a potential Harry – racism and homophobia – that I couldn't square with *any* kind of player I wanted to be. More than a decade ago, TL Taylor (2006) wrote that for women playing the MMO *EverQuest,* "the game may allow access to gender identities that often are socially prohibited or delegitimized offline" (p. 97). In that space they could move around freely, engage in combat, and become skillful and admired. While *Disco Elysium* is a single-player game and no one was there to admire my performance of SuperStarHarry, perhaps he has given me license to push back against some societal gender norms and consider what a different form of "playing well" in everyday life might entail.

## CONCLUSION

The three explorations presented here only scratch the surface of what makes *Disco Elysium* ethically notable and what qualities are involved in a well-played performance of the game. Yet these narratives do point to how a game stripped of all combat, dexterity, or skill in movement can still generate feelings of success and/or failure by presenting scenarios that challenge players to ponder what is the best way out of – or through – a particular situation. In refusing to offer conventional markers of mastery and growth, players must determine their own definitions of the terms.

For each author that meant taking time and care to develop a particular playstyle for "their" Harry. However, as noted, each author also suffered lapses in Harry's ideological and behavioral consistency. This might be due to the fallibility of a supposed moral center (Kim) or the remembrance of favored elements in a prior playthrough (the dance/rave church). Yet, playing well does not equate to perfect play, and each of us was satisfied with our pathways through Martinaise, indicating that consistency of character may be less important than exploring and pushing the boundaries of one's player identity.

Perhaps the most ethically notable quality of *Disco Elysium* is that its very structure forces 'virtuous play' to sometimes be dark and 'dark play' to sometimes be virtuous, leading to the "gray play" discussed by Mia. Our conclusions are therefore less complex than the game itself – which provides for a multiplicity of ways to play well, whether in a dark or virtuous way, according to player preference.

That being said, it's important to note that both authors involved in the less-virtuous playthroughs found it difficult or impossible to take dark play to its extremes. *Disco Elysium* has its own dark elements that have largely been glossed over in popular reviews and discussions about it – namely its sexism, fatphobia, and homophobia. These components raise even more questions: Can one play well at being sexist? Is there humanity to be found in Jules's theoretical "racist, xenophobic fascist"? In particular, can one play these roles 'well' if, as indicated by Mia, to do so destroys the very act of play itself? *Disco Elysium*'s flexibility opens the door to ask these questions and future research should investigate these darker elements to unearth the game's less-examined qualities (e.g., what are the implications of using the same naming convention to earnestly call one character "Racist Lorry Driver" while another is ironically named "Fat Angus"?). The challenges and contradictions that *Disco Elysium*'s design and narrative structures provoke thus offer rich avenues for future

research into both the dark and virtuous affordances for ethical play, along with the ethics of dark design choices themselves.

## REFERENCES

Belmonte, J. (2021). The Hanged Rhizome on the Tree: Arborescence and Multiplicity in Disco Elysium. In Apperley, T. & Ozimek, A. (Eds.), *Special Issue on* Disco Elysium [Special issue]. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 9(1), 44-54. https://doi.org/10.2478/bsmr-2021-0005

Bernick, E. D. (2021). Do Hobocops Dream of the Rule of Law? *Northern Illinois University – College of Law*. Available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=3927213 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3927213.

Bjork, S. (2015). Fabricated Innocence: On How People Can be Lured into Feel Bad Games. In T. E. Mortensen, J. Linderoth, & A. M. L. Brown (Eds.) *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (pp. 171–187). Routledge.

Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York: Routledge.

Consalvo, Mia, Busch, Thorsten, & Jong, Carolyn. (2019). "Playing a better me: How players rehearse their ethos via moral choices," *Games and Culture,* 14(3), 216-235.

Jorgensen, K. (2015). Dark Play in Dishonored. In T. E. Mortensen, J. Linderoth, & A. M. L. Brown (Eds.) *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (pp. 210-225). Routledge.

Kłosiński, M. (2021). The Object Gives Rise to Thought: Hermeneutics of Objects in *Disco Elysium*. In Apperley, T. & Ozimek, A. (Eds.), *Special Issue on* Disco Elysium [Special issue].

*Baltic Screen Media Review*, 9(1), 56-66. https://doi.org/10.2478/bsmr-2021-0006

Mortensen, T. E. (2018). Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side. In T. E. Mortensen, J. Linderoth, & A. M. L. Brown (Eds.) *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (pp. 154–170). Routledge.

Murphy J., & Zagal, J. (2011). Videogames and the Ethics of Care. *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*. 3(3), 69-81.

Novitz, J. (2021). Disco Elysium as Gothic fiction. In Apperley, T. & Ozimek, A. (Eds.), *Special Issue on* Disco Elysium [Special issue]. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 9(1). 32-42. https://doi.org/10.2478/bsmr-2021-0004

Priebe, Carolyn and Van Tongeren, Daryl. (2021). "Women pay a steeper price for arrogance: Examining presentation style, gender, and humility," *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* online at https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.1991451

Sicart, M. (2009). *The Ethics of Computer Games*. The MIT Press.

Sicart, M. (2013). *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. The MIT Press.

Taylor, TL. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vella, D. & Cielecka, M.(2021)."You Won't Even Know Who You Are Anymore": Bakthinian Polyphony and the Challenge to the Ludic Subject in Disco Elysium. In Apperley, T. & Ozimek, A. (Eds.), *Special Issue on* Disco Elysium [Special issue]. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 9(1), 90-104. https://doi.org/10.2478/bsmr-2021-0009

Zagal, J. (2009). Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay. *Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/ethically-notable-videogames-moral-dilemmas-and-gameplay/.

Zagal, J.P. (2011a). Ethical Reasoning and Reflection as Supported by Single-Player Videogames. In K. Schrier & D. Gibson (Eds.), *Designing games for ethics: Models, techniques and frameworks*. (pp. 19-35). IGI Global.

Zagal, J.P. (2011b). Heavy Rain: Morality in Inaction, the Quotidian, and the Ambiguous. K. Poels & S. Malliet (Eds.), *Vice City Virtue: Moral Issues in Digital Game Play*. (pp 267-286). Acco.

ZA/UM. (2019). *Disco Elysium.* (Windows). ZA/UM.