

In Focus

“You Won’t Even Know Who You Are Anymore”: Bakhtinian Polyphony and the Challenge to the Ludic Subject in *Disco Elysium*



DANIEL VELLA, University of Malta, Malta; email: daniel.m.vella@um.edu.mt
MAGDALENA CIELECKA, Tischner European University, Jagiellonian University, Poland;
email: magdalena.cielecka@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

When approaches to the notion of the ‘self’ as it exists in the game have been discussed in game studies – for instance, through work in existential ludology or through discussions of agency – the ‘self’ in question, explicitly or implicitly, has tended to be the rational, stable, unified and coherent self of the humanist tradition.

By fracturing the ludic subject into a set of contrasting and conflicting voices, each with their own apparent motivations and goals, *Disco Elysium* presents a challenge to this singular and unified understanding of selfhood. That this challenge is situated within the representation of a figure who, at face value, seems to represent the very locus of the authoritative, self-possessed subjectivity of humanism – not only a straight, middle-aged white man, but also a figure of police and colonial authority – strengthens the game’s critical slant.

Drawing on theories of ludic and virtual subjectivity, this paper will approach *Disco Elysium* with a focus on this undermining of stable and unitary understanding of subjectivity. First, the game will be considered in relation to the tradition of *film noir*, and the way the genre both established and subverted the figure of the detective as the avatar of stable, rational, authoritative masculine selfhood. Next, its treatment of the theme of amnesia will be considered, drawing a parallel to Jayemanne’s (2017) reading of *Planescape: Torment* to examine how the loss of memory creates structures of discontinuity and rupture in the represented ludic self. Finally, Bakhtinian notions of polyphony will be invoked to address the game’s plurality of different voices not (as it is usually present) in a dialogue between individual subjects but within a single, fragmented subjectivity.

When academic approaches to game studies have discussed the notion of the 'self' that digital games construct for the player to inhabit in, and towards, the game – for instance, through discussions of agency, or through work in existential ludology – the 'self' that has been in question, explicitly or implicitly, has tended to be the rational, stable, unified, and coherent self of the humanist tradition.

By fracturing the ludic subject into a set of contrasting and, often, conflicting voices, each with their own apparent motivations and goals, *Disco Elysium* presents a challenge to this singular and unified understanding of selfhood. That this challenge is situated within the representation of a figure who, at face value, seems to represent the very locus of the authoritative, self-possessed subjectivity of humanism – not only a straight, middle-aged white man, but also a figure of police and colonial authority – strengthens the game's critical slant.

This paper will begin by examining the oft-unquestioned authoritative, unified understanding of subjectivity implicit in several prominent approaches in game studies, placing this understanding in a philosophical context and highlighting the limitations, and the ideological implications of such an understanding of subjectivity. On this basis, we will then approach *Disco Elysium* with a focus on its undermining of the stable and unitary understanding of its player-character's subjectivity.

First, the game will be considered in the context of the *noir* genre with which it aligns itself, reading the player-character in the tradition of the hard-boiled detective protagonist and identifying the ways in which the game systematically undercuts the authority such a figure is expected to hold. Next, we shall turn our attention to its usage of the trope of amnesia as an instance of the fractured self, considering this in the light of narrative approaches to selfhood. Finally, we shall use Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony to shed light on the multiple ludic subjectivity that *Disco Elysium* establishes through a player-

character that is explicitly constructed as a mesh of intersecting, often contradictory, voices and ideas.

DIGITAL GAMES AND THE UNIFIED SELF

Though game studies has not been overly concerned with articulating philosophical theories or conceptions of selfhood, it is still the case that such theories and conceptions implicitly structure a number of key assumptions in the field.

Conceptualisations of agency – such as Janet Murray's definition of the term as referring to "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of your decisions and choices" (1997: 126) establishes a clear conceptual distinction between a powerful, self-possessed agent on the one hand, and a domain it can unidirectionally influence on the other. Even more elaborate approaches to the concept, like Wardrip-Fruin *et al.*'s definition of agency as "a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take *as supported by an underlying computational model*" (2009: 7, italics in original), still rest on an assumption of a distinction between a conscious, rational player-agent on the one hand and the game on the other.

Implicit in such an understanding of agency is a very particular, and historically situated, understanding of subjectivity – the unified Enlightenment subject of the humanist tradition. This understanding of the subject finds its roots in the Cartesian *cogito*, which, through the gesture of the "I think," simultaneously sets itself apart from the world and collects itself into the singular, defined position of an "I" – in Descartes' words, "When I consider the mind [...] I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire" (1970: 196). This subject finds other articulations in, for example, the "transcendental unity" of the Kantian subject, or in the *homo economicus* of the classical liberal economics of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, who acts with perfect

rationality in the pursuit of their self-interest (Urbina, Ruiz-Villaverde 2019). Broadly speaking, it is defined, on the one hand, by its internal unity and singularity, and, on the other hand, by its separation as subject from the world as its object. In short, it is *unified* and *free* – a rational, self-possessed agent in full control of its own faculties, and situated in a position of power towards the world.

Elsewhere in game studies, we find a similar implicit understanding of subjectivity at work in the broad body of work which, following Matthew Thomas Payne's coining of the term, has come to be referred to as "existential ludology" (Payne 2008). This is hardly surprising, given that existentialism, as a philosophical line of thought, in many ways represents a further development in the conception of this unified, free self. Iris Murdoch, for instance, writes that Sartre's existential philosophy, which is particularly central to a great deal of work in existential ludology (for example: Leino 2010; Vella 2015; Kania 2017; Gualeni, Vella 2020), represents "the psychology of the lonely individual," presenting "an egocentric and non-social world" and valorising the freedom and self-determination of the individual (Murdoch 1953: 51-52).

Accordingly, work in existential ludology has tended to frame the subject that exists towards the gameworld in similar terms. The notion of the "ludic subject," for example, paints a picture of an "I-in-the-gameworld" who rationally puts the abilities at their disposal towards the pursuit of a clear goal (Vella 2015). When playing a game – this line of thinking goes – we adopt a focused subjectivity that is single-minded in its motivations (winning or doing well, completing the quest, etc.), coherent in its actions, and focused in rationally wielding its agency towards the gameworld.

Needless to say, a long list of theoretical developments – from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist critical theory to poststructuralist and posthumanist approaches – has done a great deal to destabilise the unified, rational subject of humanism. The notion of the unity of

the self has been problematised by an awareness of the extent to which the subject is inevitably split, multiple, and self-contradictory, composed of the irrational as well as the rational, the subconscious as well as the conscious. In the words of Donna Haraway, the self "is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly" (1988: 586). At the same time, the freedom of the subject has been qualified by an understanding of its constitution through socio-cultural discourses, through its embodied situatedness, and through encounters with the Other (see, for example, Cavarero 1997).

Such thought has also highlighted the problematic political implications of the unified Enlightenment subject. The strict separation of subject and world upon which this understanding of subjectivity is founded establishes a binary opposition of "mind" vs "body" and "reason" vs "nature," in which "mind" and "reason" are privileged and, inexorably, this opposition is used to structure a similar opposition between those individuals who are considered to be on the "mind/reason" side and to whom subjecthood is granted, and those on the "body/nature" side to whom it is not – "male" vs "female" and "civilized" vs "savage."

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a survey of the range of perspectives on what an alternative understanding of subjectivity would look like. However, it might be useful to consider Luce Irigaray's argument that a feminist approach to subjectivity would be guided by an "economy of the multiple," which "upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarisation toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" (1985: 30).

It would be a gross simplification to claim that there have been no theoretical approaches in game studies that have taken on board such critical challenges to the unitary understanding of subjectivity. To name just a few examples, Justyna Janik (2018) draws on Karen Barad's agential

realism to theorise videogame play as a co-constitutive relation between player and game, and Brendan Keogh adopts a cybernetics-based approach to theorising the multiplicity of bodies and embodied positions across which videogame play is distributed (2018). In the domain of the social sciences, meanwhile, T.L. Taylor's account of the "assemblage" of technological, material, bodily, social and historical actors that constitutes play (2009) has influenced a wide-ranging body of work on players and playing communities. Even the approaches described above recognise the complexities behind the facade of the unified subject – whether in Leino's post-phenomenological argument for the "hybrid intentionality" that results from the coming-together of the player and the technological interface (2010: 174–177), or in arguments that, in the experiential structure of digital game-play, the player's subjectivity is distributed across two (Vella 2015: 55–72) or even three (Kania 2017: 49–50) subject-positions.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that most games construct representations of individuated, unified subjects for players to adopt within the game world. Diane Carr's (2014) reading of the horror action game *Dead Space* (Visceral Games 2008) can be taken as typical in this regard. Drawing on disability studies and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, she argues that the game structures a binary opposition between "depictions of ability and augmentation" on the part of the player-character and "representations of injury and monstrosity" among the Necromorph enemies he struggles against. The threat to be avoided is that of the dissolution of the "bodily cohesion and control" of the unified subject – that of the player-character's "able-bodied masculinity, his agency and his individuality" – isolated from the world in his protective metal suit.

We can take this to be typical of the majority of commercial digital games, which, by and large, present themselves as power fantasies of confident subjectivities. Arguably, this is particularly true of role-playing games. The mechanics of gaining

experience and levelling up, the clear structure of quests to be pursued and tallied up in a journal, and the evaluation of the player's choices according to a rigid alignment system, make cRPGs – at least in their established form – the archetypal ludic representation of the cumulative self-creation and -improvement of an autonomous, self-defining subject.

What would a ludic subjectivity look like if it departed from the foundational assumptions we have described above – i.e. rational agency, unity, goal-orientation – and was, instead, guided by something closer to Irigaray's economy of the multiple? In the rest of this paper, we shall argue that *Disco Elysium* opens up a space of possibility for precisely such a ludic subjectivity, presenting us with a player-character whose unity, authority and freedom are, at best, conspicuous only by their absence. Here, the protagonist we play is the avatar of the game's postmodernist thematic concern with a world in which familiar, authoritative grand narratives and systems of meaning no longer holds sway (see **Figure 1**).

DISCO ELYSIUM AS NOIR INVESTIGATIVE THRILLER

Despite its neocosmic trappings and elaborate worldbuilding, *Disco Elysium* inhabits instantly recognisable genre territory, planting its feet firmly within the boundaries of the hardboiled *noir* tradition. More specifically, according to the typology of *noir* "'tough' thrillers" proposed by Frank Krutnik, *Disco Elysium* would qualify as an "investigative thriller," in which "the hero, often a professional detective, seeks to restore order – and to validate his own identity – by exposing and countermanding a criminal conspiracy" (Krutnik 1991: 86).

Though such *noir* investigative thrillers appear to be concerned with the "safeguarding of 'normal' society" from the criminal underworld, Krutnik argues that this "often tends to be overshadowed by what arguably constitutes the *real* thrust of the narrative: the affirmation of the hero as an idealised and undivided figure of masculine potency and invulnerability" (*ibid.*: 93).



FIGURE 1. Caption: "You won't even know who you are anymore" – the dissolution of identity constructions

The detective figures in such narratives are “valorised as unified egos,” facing down challenges to their masculine integrity (*ibid.*: 92).

Krutnik reads the character of Sam Spade, as played by Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941), as an example of the ‘tough’ detective asserting a masculine self, defined by its authority and self-control. “As the invulnerable, controlled hero,” Krutnik writes, “Sam Spade represents an attempt to deny that masculinity is divided or problematic,” facing a quest that is “emphatically linear, with the detective located as the dynamic agent of the narrative process” (*ibid.*: 113). He is “the master of his feelings” (*ibid.*: 123), in rational control of his emotions.

As the 1940s wore on and the *noir* outlook grew ever darker and more nervous, this idealised, unified masculinity came to seem less and less attainable. Later *noir* investigative thrillers, like *The Dark Corner* (Hathaway 1946) and *Out of the Past* (Tourneur 1947) “tend to be obsessed with lapses from, and failures to achieve, such a position of unified and potent masculinity” (*ibid.*: 93): here, we witness protagonists who lose themselves in labyrinthine quests and fractured temporalities, who are trapped by the consequences of their past actions, mastered by their conflicting emotions, who act irrationally, and who relinquish – or are unable to retain – positions of authority.

Disco Elysium invites a reading as a hyperbolic pastiche of this tradition, presenting us with a protagonist – the initially unnamed police detective we later come to know as Harrier du Bois – who represents not merely a destabilisation, but also a complete and total shattering, of the controlled, rational, and authoritative detective figure. From the start, we see none of Spade’s self-possession, control, or authority – instead, we see a determined inversion of every one of these qualities.

The player-character starts off – in a very literal sense – stripped of all signifiers of status and authority. Waking up naked on the floor of his hotel room, the player-

character begins the game without his distinguishing uniform, with its RCM insignia. Even more pointedly – as becomes apparent – he has also lost his badge and his gun, the two most stereotypical talismans of police authority.

Stripped as he is of all signifiers of authority, it is hardly surprising that NPCs exhibit a marked tendency to comment on the fact that the player-character doesn’t *look* much like a cop. Frequently, in such cases, the player is free to either insist on their character’s official authority, or to renounce it. No matter what the player chooses, the effect is much the same: few things are as demeaning to authority as being forced to impotently reassert itself.

AMNESIA AND THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

Of course, it is not only the markers of his authority that the player-character has lost at the start of the game. Even more fundamentally, he has been stripped of his identity, and, as a result, of his very sense of self, by the loss of his name, and of his memories.

The amnesiac protagonist is, at best, a thoroughly familiar trope in games, and, at worst, a convenient but tired cliché (Caselli 2019). In *Disco Elysium*, however, the trope is called upon to do more serious and far-reaching work than simply that of aligning the character with the player’s lack of knowledge about the gameworld or the character’s past. Here, amnesia – and the radical rupture it instantiates between the individual’s in-the-moment lived subjectivity and any past self (or selves) that can be reconstituted through fragmented memories or contextual evidence – is a key thematic fulcrum.

In this way, *Disco Elysium* aligns itself with *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle 1998), another cRPG that uses the trope of amnesia to explore the rupturing of the stable subject. In Black Isle’s game, the immortal Nameless One – another protagonist who has lost the proper name as the marker of his individuality – is fragmented across the multiplicity of his former incarnations.

Though, initially, the Nameless One does not remember anything of these former selves, the character given over to the player to control has been constituted by each of them, as evidenced by the dense tapestry of scars, marks and tattoos making up “the semiotic bedlam on his skin” (Jayemanne 2017: 151). In this way, “the body of the avatar is presented not as the seat, ground and tangible proof of a stable subjectivity,” but as being “intensely vulnerable to (and an effect of) the trajectories and projects of all manner of weird apparatuses and figures of reversal” (*ibid.*).

Just as pointedly, here again, *Disco Elysium* stands firmly within the *noir* tradition. Andrew Spicer identifies a tradition of “amnesiac films noir,” which “intensify the instabilities of identity, loss of control and vulnerability, and the sense of alienation in a strange and hostile world that characterise films noir as a whole” (2010: 6). Almost inevitably, in such stories, the recovery of the lost past becomes a primary narrative impetus, and this is certainly the case in *Disco Elysium*.

Most immediately, the player is faced with an overwhelming body of evidence relating to the player-character’s last few days in Martinaise. Just as much of the player’s investigative efforts are oriented towards piecing together the events of these days (and the player-character’s actions within them) as they are towards actually solving the murder.

What emerges is a picture of a dysfunctional, reckless, self-destructive wreck of a man, who has trashed his hotel room, pawned his gun, driven his police car into the sea, attempted to flush his ledger down the toilet, terrorised the Whirling-in-Rags Café with terrible karaoke and graphic descriptions of his suicidal ideation, partaken in narcotics, and drunk himself most of the way into oblivion.

Beyond that, however, another, earlier self emerges. Careful perusal of the player-character’s ledger – once it is recovered from the dumpster behind the Whirling-in-Rags – reveals that he has distinguished himself in eighteen years of service, having

successfully concluded hundreds of cases. This is borne out by additional clues and personal anecdotes the player can uncover during the game, together with other details of a life that seems floridly perfect – a residence on Voyager Street, and an apparently loving relationship with someone who cannot wait to get back home to him at the end of the day, and who, in the note he finds concealed in the secret compartment of his ledger, writes devotedly of his “vast soul.”

Faced with these two, radically different former selves, the player is likely to attempt some form of narrative reconciliation, probably arriving at something like this other familiar trope: this man used to be an upstanding, hard-working police officer and a loving partner, before a devastating break-up (and, perhaps, other unknown personal crises) sent him into a downward spiral of self-loathing and alcoholism.

There is nothing surprising about this reaching for the established structures of narrative in the attempt to make sense of a self. Dan Zahavi, in fact, has argued that “the self as a narrative construction” is one of the longest-enduring and most cogent understandings of selfhood in philosophy (2008: 8). This conception of selfhood is founded on the idea that we can only speak of a singular, unified self, marked by a coherent and fixed identity, through an *a posteriori* operation of narrative organisation, coming up with a story that attributes some degree of coherence to the confusing multiplicity of our moment-to-moment stream of lived experience.

Paul Ricoeur’s work is typical in this regard in its intertwining of the questions of narrative, selfhood and identity. A fundamental difficulty to our concept of selfhood, Ricoeur argues, is our coming face-to-face with *otherness* within the self – with thoughts, impulses, experiences or actions that do not fit our self-understanding, that seem to be *other to ourselves* (1992: 3). An impulse of impatience which causes one to express frustration with a student, for example, might trouble one’s self-understanding as a patient, dedicated professor. Attempting to narrate ourselves is how we

attempt to grant “unity, internal structure and coherence” to our lived experience (*ibid.*:143).

This foregrounding of the painstaking work that must go into the maintenance of a coherent self – which, moreover, is understood here not as a given, transcendental unity, but as a necessary fiction – already takes us a significant way down the path of destabilising the assumption of the unified self. We become aware of the discontinuities and internal contradictions of the self, in its temporal and processual dimensions. Yet there are further steps to take down the path of the narrative self. As Adriana Cavarero noted, it is not just that we narrate ourselves, but also that we are narrated; identity is constructed relationally in our engagement with, and exposure to, the others we encounter (1997). This encounter, Cavarero argues, is essential for our construction of a sense of identity – we want to be, even need to be, narrated.

It is not surprising, then, that the player-character obsessively asks – or, at least, has the option to ask – others about himself and how they see him. This is most obviously the case in his relationship with his partner, Lt. Kitsuragi, who comes to function as something of an externalised sense of the social expectations that come with Harrier’s role as a police officer. But it does not stop there – the game gives the player the opportunity to ask a wide range of NPCs about their opinion of Harrier, and of his actions or decisions. He is haunted by the sense of how he is, or might be, constituted by others.

ENACTING A POLYPHONIC LUDIC SUBJECTIVITY

Despite Harrier’s best attempts – or our best attempts, as players – to put his fractured self back together with narrative glue, he remains multiple and discontinuous to the core. There are distinct achievements for playing the protagonist as a Marxist (or Mazovian, in the game’s secondary world parlance) activist concerned with class struggle and social inequalities, as a political centrist invested in the status quo, as

an apocalyptic harbinger, reading omens of the impending end times in the most mundane events, as an artist concerned with creative self-expression, as a mystic obsessed with identifying hidden meanings “beyond the veil,” as a self-conscious apologist for his own perceived failures, as a self-aggrandising superstar, and so on.

Importantly, these achievements – and the pursuit of the identities they represent – are not mutually exclusive. Though many of the identities embody contradictory values, dispositions and desires, it is perfectly possible for the player to achieve several, or even most, of these identities in a single play-through. Having established a pattern of expressing left-wing political opinions, or adopting an apologetic attitude, does not preclude the player from changing tack and speaking in the voice of a convinced free-market liberal or extroverted wannabe superstar. Still, internalising many conflicting ideas might provoke snappy remarks from NPCs inhabiting the world, especially Lt. Kitsuragi, who struggle to understand how Harrier manages to reconcile said views.

This plurality of perspectives and ideas existing mutually and equally creates space not only for said ideas to be engaged in dialogue with the designers’ purported intentions and the player’s own perspective, but also in a dialogue with and within themselves. With such egalitarian *multi-voicedness*, parallels can be made to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, opening yet another lens for interpretation.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), the scholar begins with the notion that Dostoevsky is the author of a fundamentally new genre – a polyphonic novel, which needs a new set of frameworks for analysis, since those usually applied to the European novel will not suffice. The polyphonic novel’s main characteristics are the existence of a protagonist whose perspective and preconceptions about themselves and the world are not subordinated to those belonging to the textual author, as would be the case in a typical monologic

novel. The hero's ideals are not presented merely as a mechanism of characterisation, and nor are they the author's convictions in disguise. The protagonist's statements about the world are fully independent and, as such, can take part in the discussion between various ideas and voices in the novel, alongside those of the author and those held by other characters, without any one of them being subjected to the author's judgment. The discourse of such a novel therefore consists of equally valid perspectives (*ibid.*: 7).

Applying the concept of polyphony to video games expands the number of layers of the work that can be analysed through this lens. Although the usual objects of such an analysis would be the interactions between the voices of the player-character and those of NPCs, what makes *Disco Elysium* stand out in this manner is the fragmented, multiple voices making up the ludic subjectivity of the player-character himself, and how game mechanics are incorporated into, and embody, this polyphonic multiplicity.

Though one might wonder if *Disco Elysium* can be counted as belonging to the cRPG genre while also lacking a combat system, the first contact with the game is an entirely familiar one to players with any prior experience with role-playing, that is, on the character creation screen. Those that choose to customise their character will encounter a screen of 24 card-like portraits neatly ordered into four categories – Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics. Each of the expressive and surreal portraits represents a character skill. While most are relatively straightforward, skills like “Inland Empire” or “Esprit de Corps” might raise an eyebrow or two. The first one is the character's imagination, gut feeling, and capacity for being in tune with the universe all at once. While having a low “Inland Empire” makes Harrier shamefully dull, investing in this skill will bring inanimate objects to life and ever so slightly distort the character's perception of reality. However, as the player will eventually learn, in one way or another, all of the skills do that and the

only difference is the type of distortion the player experiences.

Most of the time, the game uses the chosen skill value as the base for a difficulty roll that some actions require. The difficulty is balanced to allow the detective to always have a slight chance of winning in a hopeless situation and an equally slight chance of failing at the simplest task. There is usually a set of actions that act as difficulty modifiers, but these are kept hidden until performed, requiring the player to guess what might help them with a given challenge.

Judged by the active difficulty rolls, *Disco Elysium* would seem like a fresh but fundamentally familiar take on the classical structure of RPG skill tests. However, what has a tremendous effect on the game's discourse are passive tests rolled in the background of Harrier's dialogues with NPCs. Each time a test is passed, one of the character's skills will have a say in what is going on at the specific moment, tinted by that skill's one-sided perspective. It might be a comment from Rhetoric suggesting someone just lied while giving a statement; it might be Electrochemistry coercing Harrier into having a smoke, or Encyclopedia spewing fascinating (and usually useless in the ongoing conversation) facts about the world. In effect, Harrier doesn't have a single voice in his head – he has twenty-four, often overlapping, speaking over or contradicting one another, to the extent of drowning out the voice we would most generally consider ‘his’ – the voice of his conscious agency, as expressed in the dialogue (or inner dialogue) choices the player makes.

At first, this might be seen as an interesting quirk. After all, the protagonist can talk to a mailbox or to his tie if he wants to. However, as time goes by and the skills develop further, the detective's invisible voices change the context of interaction and – through that context – the expected reaction. Often, the player-character is drawn into discussion with a specific skill, whether he likes it or not. The skill will suggest a course of action, sow dissent, or mock him – which, in and of itself, already

represents a fragmentation of his subjectivity, split between the aspect of himself represented by the skill and the broader 'you' the skill addresses.

This is not such a problem when it happens mid-action, since Harrier has more time (that is: options) to explore the situation and adjust his thinking. In this aspect, *Disco Elysium* does not necessarily diverge to a great degree from typical CRPG mechanics since, in the genre, the link between a player-character's skills and the dialogue options available to them is a recognized convention. However, *Disco Elysium* goes beyond the typical mechanic of unlocking certain 'special' dialogue choices when specialised skills are obtained, or stat thresholds are met. It is a different matter when the various skills begin interjecting almost mid-sentence, resulting in a drastic change in dialogue structure. Harrier's various skills become dialogic interlocutors, and options are addressed to the player, to his skill set and his NPC interlocutor in the same list of answers; the only differentiator the usage of quotation marks in sentences that are to be said out loud – an easy way for a hung-over cop to make mistakes. When more than one skill wins the passive check, the discussion can become even more intense. Not only are the skills disagreeing with one another, but they are also competing for control over the player-character's decisions.

Here lies a space where Bakhtin's polyphony seems to ring true. He argues that "all of Dostoevsky's major characters, as people of an idea, are absolutely unselfish, insofar as the idea has taken control of the deepest core of their personality" (Bakhtin 1984.: 87). That serves as an accurate description of the named entities residing within Harrier's multiple subjectivity – ideas became voices and made their dwelling among Harrier's thoughts. As Bakhtin would point out, quoting *The Brothers Karamazov*: "There is a great and unresolved thought in him. He is one of those who don't need millions, they just need to get a thought straight" (*ibid.*: 87).

Achieving that is not an easy task, for a variety of reasons. The detective's amnesiac mind struggles to remember fragmented voices inside itself, each one being somewhat new and alien. Reading them, especially the more aggressive and self-immolating voices, the player can often hear that the words they use are not only Harrier's, but sometimes borrowed, heard long ago by the protagonist, and long forgotten during the events of *Disco Elysium* (see **Figure 2**). As Bakhtin notices:

Our practical everyday speech is full of other people's words: with some of them we completely merge our own voice, forgetting whose they are; others, which we take as authoritative, we use to reinforce our own words; still others, finally, we populate with our own aspirations, alien or hostile to them. (*ibid.*: 195)

It should be noted that not every one of the skills has the same relation to others' words, representing, instead, different types of discourse catalogued by Bakhtin. Some, for example, possess a "self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance, speech with a thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes and the like. Such speech literally cringes in the presence or the anticipation of someone else's word, reply, objection" (*ibid.*: 196) – a description which also fits perfectly the archetype of "sorry cop" the game allows the player to follow.

The parallels between Bakhtin's thought and *Disco Elysium*'s dialogues are not limited to loudly vocalized speech. Bakhtin's analysis of the hero's discourse (that is: monologic discourse and its internal dialogisation) comes to conclusions that might very well be said about Harrier's inner dialogue with the skill voices. Being somewhat similar in this matter to *Crime and Punishment*'s Raskolnikov,

his inner speech is filled with other people's words that he has

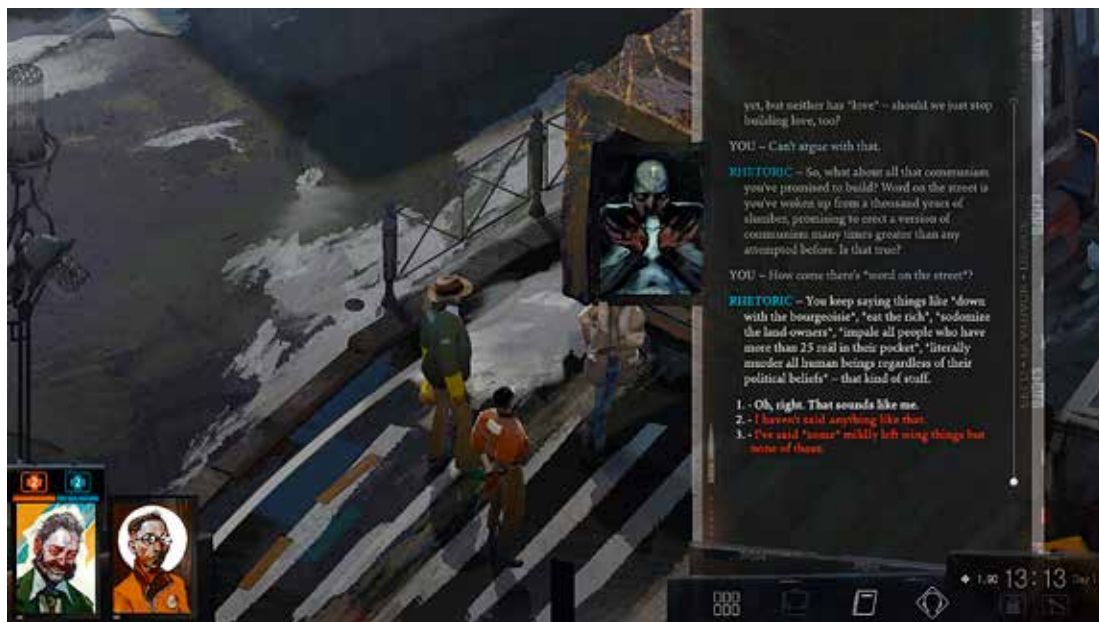


FIGURE 2. Caption: Ambiguity as to the attribution of the protagonist's words.
 FIGURE 3. Caption: The possibility of a return to the authoritative subject – and its undermining.

just recently heard or read (...). He inundates his own inner speech with these words of others, complicating them with his own accents or directly reaccenting them, entering into a passionate polemic with them. Consequently, his inner speech is constructed like a succession of living and impassioned replies to all the words of others he has heard or has been touched by words gathered by, him from his experience of the immediately preceding days. (*ibid.*: 283)

While, in Raskolnikov's case, the input of words and accents is outside of him, one cannot know the exact source of words and ideas that solidified into the voices of his multiple subjectivity. Only the final entity, that is, Harrier du Bois's present mind, is shown - the mind in which "the *dramatis personae* are embodied points of view on life and on the world, realized in living situations" (*ibid.*: 239), growing more potent and vocal as the player invests points into them. And even though *Disco Elysium* differs from Dostoevsky's work, that "contains no evolution of thought, not even within the boundaries of the consciousness of individual heroes," the game's dialogue structure lays bare the fact that the

... internal ideological struggle which the hero wages is a struggle for a choice among already available semantic possibilities, whose quantity remains almost unchanged throughout the entire novel. (...) All that matters is the choice, the resolution of the question "Who am I" and "With whom am I?" To find one's own voice and to orient it among other voices, to combine it with some and to oppose it to others, to separate one's voice from another voice with which it has inseparably merged. (*ibid.*: 239)

With the decision to traverse from the unified self to a multiple subjectivity, a space for a polyphonic monologue was created that - in response - invites the player as an essential part of the discourse. Unable to find universal truths or authors' convictions as a point of reference, they are forced to hear out the arguments, look for contexts, and make an informed choice as a result. Since such choices hardly ever bring undoubted successes, and their outcomes usually range from the catastrophic to the almost mediocre, there is no obvious strategy for playing *Disco Elysium* with an optimal playthrough in mind. And since there is no one "right" way to finish the game, the options that weren't chosen remain with the player as parts of the character's internal monologue no-one acted upon, potentially valid and true until proven otherwise. They stay as parts of the conversation within the game, regardless of whether they were chosen or not.

CONCLUSIONS

We shall end with a comparison. In the aforementioned *Planescape: Torment*, which, as we have already argued, plays upon similar ideas surrounding the fragmentation of the ludic subject, there is arguably a conclusive move back towards the unity (and univocality) of self. Over the course of the game, the player's actions will lead to the stabilisation of an alignment on the game's *Dungeons & Dragons*-based two-axis alignment scale. Likewise, by the end of the game, the player will have chosen a fixed class for their Nameless One. Finally, although throughout the game the Nameless One encounters evidence of many disparate former incarnations marked by divergent characters and conflicting goals, in what is generally considered the 'best' ending, he convinces his three dominant former incarnations to merge with him, restabilising himself into a gestalt of all of his incarnations in an act of "reconstitution" (Jayemanne 2017: 155).

None of this happens in *Disco Elysium*. The player's choices are not forced into the coherence of an alignment or class label,

nor is the polyphony necessarily reduced to a univocality in a final triumph of the unified self. Of course, perhaps inevitably, there are limits to the extent to which *Disco Elysium* fully commits to this multiple ludic subjectivity. During the course of the game, the player can recover the protagonist's name (the ultimate marker of his individuality and unified identity) and his badge and gun (the markers of his institutional authority). It is possible to play *Disco Elysium* as a fractured-self slowly finding the path back to unification and stability, rendering the game representative of a crisis of the authoritative unified subject, but a surmountable one – a dark night of the soul that tests the unified subject, but that ultimately ends in its reinstatement, the challenge having been met and overcome (see **Figure 3**).

And yet, as we hope to have demonstrated, the game leaves a tantalising amount of leeway for the endurance of this subjective multiplicity and goes a long way towards undercutting the univocal agential authority we are used to associating with the ludic subject. No matter how straight a line we try to walk through the game, no matter how much we try to patch up the fault lines in his sense of self, Harrier's remains an inherently multiple, polyphonic consciousness, containing irreconcilable ideas, being pulled in multiple directions.

It might be a step too far to claim that, in this way, *Disco Elysium* structures a representation of a subjectivity that is more in line with contemporary currents of thought than the strictly univocal, self-possessed subjects we are more used to playing. At a minimum, though, it opens up a dialogue within which these assumptions of subjectivity can be questioned, and within which the implicit assumptions and ideological biases of such an understanding of subjectivity can be foregrounded and put into question.

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