"FAILURES OF THE WORLD, UNITE!"
Towards a broader understanding of failure in Disco Elysium and roleplaying games.

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of MA New Media

Supervised by

Word count: 11,997

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Abstract

By calling on the works of Karl Marx, Raewyn Connell, Jesper Juul, and Judith Halberstam, this dissertation defines three frameworks within which failure becomes possible, and which we can examine the notions of failure in video roleplaying games. Then, using Halberstam's work on The Queer Art of Failure, I explain how these frameworks create an unhealthy and unattainable notion of success. By applying these frameworks and subversive, queer notions of failure to roleplaying games, I able to examine systems which encourage and reward failure. Then, I look at Studio ZA/UM's Disco Elysium as an example of a roleplaying game which similarly critiques contemporary frameworks for success and failure. By analysing its narrative and mechanics, I come to find an interesting critique of neoliberalism; one that takes the player's assumed knowledge of roleplaying game mechanics (like pursuit of self-improvement) and subverts it to state that no ideology is flawless. Overall, I find that adopting Halberstam's idea of seeing failure as a "speedbump to mastery" is a key part to self-actualisation and rejecting capitalist notions of success.

Introduction

Metal Gear Solid's (1998) **GAME OVER** screen has become a gaming icon; "It's video game's iconic scream." (Kotzer, 2017) The devastated exclamations of *Solid Snake*'s team echoing against a black screen overlaid with neon, futuristic lettering is proof of one thing: the player had failed, and Snake had died. Snake had died *because* the player failed. Considering failure and success as a life-or-death situation seems reductive, an equivocation entirely unrelatable to most people who pick up a game controller. But adhering to these black & white, good & bad definitions of failure is commonplace in videogames. Where we would balk at them in real-life, they do not appear out of place in games. This is the aim of the essay; to reframe this reductive notion of failure and ask, what happens when we begin to look at failure as a state of different degrees? When we question the systems which enable success and failure? Most importantly, what happens when we recontextualise failure as

appealing? I will answer these questions during this essay to ultimately offer a contrasting notion of what it means to fail. *"There's another kind of pleasure in that"*, says Jack Halberstam, *"You rewrite the game, and in the process you accept what we call failure."* (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p.202) I aim to redefine failure and, by extension, success purely because our current notions of success seem unattainable; I graduate with debt, unable to purchase property, with a Master's degree in a subject which is first in line for sneering remarks from the public. I am a failure by all accounts, and all that remains is to reject the game I was born into and find my own definitions of success. This is also the reason why I chose to research failure and Disco Elysium in particular: it is a game made by a group of people whose lives followed a similar trajectory to mine. Lead designer Robert Kurvitz was a novelist, an artist, a communist activist (EGX, 2018) and struggled with alcoholism. It was, ironically, only once he embraced the capitalist notion of success that he and the rest of the team were given an opportunity to create Disco Elysium. Exploring and embracing failure as a creative is freeing, though the potential for self-annihilation is overwhelming. By researching failure, I aim to self-reflect and create a personal philosophy I can follow for the rest of my life.

It is only fitting for an essay about failure (and queer failure, no less) to begin with a disclaimer: I am cis-gendered, white, and heterosexual. I am disclosing this now rather than later to frame the words I type; I will be looking at the Estonian-made Disco Elysium through a queer lens shaped by my own heteronormative experiences. To begin in earnest: Disco Elysium is a roleplaying video game developed and published by the Estonian studio ZA/UM, released in 2019. The game revolves around a washed-up, self-destructive police detective named Harrier Du Bois (Harry). Harry serves the Revachol Citizens' Militia (RCM), a fragmented, volunteer-driven peace corps trying its hardest to preserve order. More importantly, the RCM is a remnant of the Mazovian Revolution (Kraz Mazov is, of course, a Karl Marx-parallel). The city of Revachol and Disco Elysium's wider world are a eulogy to communism and failure, its team thanking Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels at awards ceremonies (EGX, 2018); marks of war pepper the city's buildings, and its people yearn for change but are instead met by the slowly-encroaching "Pale" – a featureless force of nature which swallows all in its

path. A recent labour dispute in Revachol's district of Martinaise culminated in a man murdered and hung from a tree. It is the job of Harry and his partner - tall, professional, and dry - Kim Kitsuragi to solve the murder. What follows is a journey of self-discovery: Harry wakes face down, naked, amnesiac, and hungover. The person he becomes is, the game posits, up to the player.

While the field of possibility of "the person Harry Du Bois becomes" is vastly interesting, I am focusing on something this possibility permits: *failure*. I write about failure because failure is, to me, the defining zeitgeist of the 21st century; failure to address mass economic inequality (Hobbs, 2021), failure to address fascism (Hammar, 2020), climate change (BBC News, 2021a), racism (BBC News, 2021b), and so on. Capitalism, using Karl Marx's definition of a system where "profit is ultimately derived from the exploitation of the worker" (Wolff and Leopold, 2021), permits accumulation of wealth, and so where some *have*, others *have not*. Someone, of course, is making untold amounts of money off this "failure", and with that bringing the question of "what does it mean to fail?" Exploring the ontology of failure will allow me to build a framework with which I can approach a close reading of Disco Elysium. Failure is often clear-cut in videogames: the player fails at some test of skill and is placed back at the start or before said test of skill. These failures have been well explored in academia and they are mostly irrelevant to Disco Elysium. What happens when the player has no choice but to live with their mistake? And is it really a mistake if the game's narrative continues as intended regardless of the mistakes made? These are questions that few games concern themselves with, and they are the reason I picked Disco Elysium as the focal point of this dissertation. I aim to answer these questions by calling upon work in the field of game studies which explores failure in games; importantly, this work is prohibitive as it focuses only on singular, normative definitions of failure, and so I will have to venture outside of videogames and look towards academics of queer theory such as Bonnie Ruberg, Jack Halberstam, Adrienne Shaw, and Jordan Youngblood who try to redefine failure as a positive. It is Halberstam's definition that I will be aligning closely with, an encouragement to "to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite … to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate." (Halberstam, 2011, p.110). Failure

is merely a speed-bump to mastery, claims Halberstam. These multitudinous definitions of failure are key to this dissertation; they will not only help guide my assertions and, by extension, the reader's understanding of Disco Elysium, but also point the reader towards an understanding of failure as a socio-political concept which can be a rich ground for identity-making and radical self-love.

It is also important to make my intentions clear: this dissertation is a close, conceptual analysis of key philosophical concepts and a particular videogame. I will explore failure as a broad concept and explore how failure relates to the game's mechanics and its narrative. When speaking of "mechanics", I want to interrogate the dice-rolling system which makes up the heft of Disco Elysium's gameplay. Conversely, "narrative" concerns the themes of failure present in Revachol, Harry's life, and the socioeconomic state of the world the two inhabit. Where one knows that reading a book entails reading from left to right (in English, at least), from top to bottom, and flipping one page to the next, analysing videogames requires, in parts, dry descriptions of what the player sees on-screen and how they interact with the game due to the affective elements of both. These might be uninteresting to anyone familiar with videogames, but nonetheless a necessary exercise in accessibility. With several disclaimers out of the way, only one remains and, to quote Jesper Juul: "Needless to say, any remaining failures of this [essay] are entirely my responsibility." (Juul, 2013, preface)

The first chapter of this dissertation will briefly historicise and define failure in video games with the aim of informing and framing the second chapter. Using the research of Óliver Pérez-Latorre and Mercè Oliva as a groundwork, I will make the argument that games replicate the features of neoliberalism (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva, 2019) and define neoliberalism as one of the frameworks which enables failure. Digging deeper, I will also refer to Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* (2005) to establish parallels between neoliberalism and the social organisation of masculinity. These two frameworks will be my main tools in establishing a broad, philosophical definition of failure. With

that definition in mind, I will look towards Judith Halberstam's The Queer Art of Failure (2011) for a radical critique of what it means to fail and the first step of recontextualising failure as a positive. Looking at videogames as a framework which allows the player to fail also, by definition, requires the player to have some *agency* to enact that failure, especially when we consider neoliberalism. Looking at broad theories of agency and chance written by postmodern French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2005) will aid me in creating a critical framework through which we can assess failure in videogames and begin approaching roleplaying games, namely Disco Elysium (ZA/UM, 2019) in the second chapter.

Following on from this, chapter 2 will be a close reading of Disco Elysium. While my intention is not to create a list of recommendations for developers to implement a broader understanding of failure in their games as it would be entirely unattainable for indie developers, I want to explore a game *about* failure, and a game which does it well. For that reason, I will talk about Disco Elysium's narrative and the failure that permeates it. These will be contextualised by the definitions I establish in Chapter 1. Its plentiful characters experience failure in a multitude of ways; a Novelty Dicemaker battles the free market, and eventually finds a home catering to a steady supply of regular customers; a game studio aims too high and runs out of funding. These characters approach failure according to frameworks I set up in Chapter 1. Because of that, using those frameworks to reflect on the situations these characters are in can be a productive exercise in dialectics, ie. "a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides." (Maybee, 2020)

Finally, before I start the essay proper, it would be worthwhile to define some terms I will be referencing and, while I find genre classifications tedious and limiting (the specifics of which are well beyond the scope of this essay), I will call on several well-known genres to facilitate a smoother conversation. "Roleplaying games" is a broad genre, and one that also needs context. A somewhat old-fashioned term, "roleplaying" was mostly attributed to tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) like

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) (Gygax and Arneson, 1974) wherein players would sit around a table armed with dice, pencils, and hastily-scrawled maps, and crawl through dungeons narrated by a "Dungeon Master", all while playing the role of some treasure- and glory-seeking adventurer. "Dungeon Master" is a trademarked term and has fallen out of grace in the greater contemporary TTRPG community, and so I will instead use "Game Master" (GM) from here onwards. D&D rulesets made the jump to computers, thusly called computer roleplaying games (cRPGs), with Baldur's Gate (Interplay Entertainment, 1998) using a modified version of D&D's 2nd edition rules. While Baldur's Gate was by no means the first cRPG on the market, its popularity and rippling effect on the videogame industry leaves it a good reference point when talking about cRPGs. These definitions are important to get out of the way: Disco Elysium's TTRPG roots are clear and its developers don't shy away from them (Wiltshire, 2020). When defining failure, I will look to cRPGs like Disco Elysium and, indeed, even TTRPGs for guidance. John Harper's Blades in the Dark (2017) will be my main point of reference in tabletop roleplaying games due to its interesting framing of failure as a point of improvement. Calling on pieces of media like TTRPGs and cRPGs is an intentional departure from the academic work on these subjects; Halberstam writes of "Low Theory", a mixing of "low brow" and pop culture texts with academic work in an attempt to avoid being "snared by the hooks of hegemony" (Halberstam, 2011, p.2). The independent TTRPG scene is heavily populated by designers on all ends of the queer spectrum, and so I would rather draw inspiration from their work rather than the works of established brands like Hasbro's D&D. Likewise, easy access to the indie TTRPG scene means the community is rife with radical approaches to game design, self-identity, and community building.

Chapter 1: Defining Failure

This chapter will focus on theories of failure as part of a process of creating a framework for approaching failure critically. This will be the foundation of the rest of the essay; work mentioned here will be key in further discussion. Firstly, I will briefly historicise the broad concept of failure in

videogames to show how failure has developed with the medium's maturity, and so that the reader can see where this analysis of failure fits in with contemporary videogames. This history will also leave behind threads of ideas I wish to explore further, and these threads will be highlighted as such.

In platforming (games where the main challenge stems from navigating through an environment) and puzzle games like Portal 2 (Valve, 2011), failure is clear and well-defined. When the player fails to make a jump and falls into a bottomless pit, the end-state is obvious. You must try again. Likewise, if the player does not find the one, correct solution to the puzzle, they cannot proceed. They must try again. In action games like Uncharted 4 (Naughty Dog, 2016), Nathan Drake can get shot and subsequently die or he can, again, fall into a bottomless pit. Failure is clear. Failure in videogames is *death*. Failure outside of videogames is death, too. Death as failing to live, and death as un-life. Luckily, in videogames that failure is often not final. The concept of re-trying has roots in arcade games; they were means for arcade machines to separate players from any spare change they had. For extra money, the player could try again and keep going. There was little narrative, nor an endpoint. If the player finished one game of Pac-Man (Namco, 1980), they would simply be placed back at the start, their score rolled over and ready to climb higher and higher. Here, failure served two purposes: it made their failing in a specific set of circumstances into a *personal* failing, one that encouraged them to try again and keep trying until they were better and held mastery over the game's systems and controls. It would test the player's stamina, their skill against increasing odds and, of course, their pockets. For this reason, Jesper Juul says of these games that they are "pleasure spiked with pain" (Juul, 2013, p.9), that they set up a framework for us to fail. The feeling of failing in a videogame is not cathartic and, unlike other arts, it is more than a simple release and remediation of these negative feelings. When we fail in a videogame, we are the ones responsible. We are the ones who feel those negative feelings of personal failure directly, where in a film or a book we would simply be witness to someone else's failure. This all makes sense, and Juul's essay goes to great lengths to examine the pain of playing video games. The industry moved away from this, though, with a heightened focus on narrative play. When consoles moved to the home, arcades

couldn't rely on pennies to keep games going and players were introduced to "save" mechanics; save the game, turn the console off, eat your tea, and return, the game ready to go from exactly where you paused it. "Checkpoints", likewise, made death *toothless*. The player, post-death, was placed before their point of failure and asked to try again. There are no stakes in this approach. In response, there has been a contemporary renaissance of "roguelike" and "roguelite" games (the name itself a reference to *Rogue*, a dungeon-crawler published by *Epyx* in 1980), games which are disinterested in narrative (though not always, of course) and games which deny players the continuity afforded by "saving". Roguelite games, again, focus on that final definition of death as failure. The player must start again, their progress and gear reset.

Looking at death as the only means of failure is prohibitive, however. In the Western epic *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), the narrative culminates in death. It is the sole and undeniable end which the game makes clear from its midpoint: down this path only death lies. The player character, Arthur Morgan, is a frontiersman and the player's actions early in the game leave him unknowingly infected with tuberculosis during a money shakedown. His father figure and gang leader, Dutch van der Linde, slowly succumbs to paranoia and the pressures of endless pursuit from the law. By the end, Dutch betrays Arthur and leaves him for dead. Here, we see that death-as-failure is prohibitive: the player followed the game's orders and succeeded in fulfilling them, yet Arthur still dies. Juul calls this a "tragic ending", "where the player is happy to have successfully overcome failure and played the game to completion, but where (this being a tragedy) the protagonist is correspondingly unhappy." (Juul, 2013, p.93) And, though speaking about Red Dead Redemption 1 (Rockstar Games, 2010), Juul highlights a definition of tragedy here that calls for the protagonist's death as "[necessary] and [inevitable]". It is also worth noting that, while Arthur's ultimate death cannot be stopped, the player does have some agency over the means of Arthur's death. Following the game's simplistic morality meter, a righteous Arthur will die peacefully atop a mountain overlooking a sunrise. A dishonourable Arthur is shot through the head on that same mountain by one of the game's antagonists. Later, I will refer to this reading of failure as tragic and

tragedy as failure. I will further discuss this idea of multiple endings later on in the context of living with one's mistakes. This also creates a dissonance between *who* is defining failure: failure and success as defined by players, and failure and success as defined by developers can take on different meanings. Success as defined by the individual, and success as defined by a ruling system can lead to dissonant, opposing definitions. This is one of the ideas our approach towards failure with Queer theory addresses. While this dissonance is a key aim of this dissertation, developer intent is beyond the purpose of this essay. Instead, it is failure and success as experienced by the players and the affective experiences resultant of these systems that will take centre stage. Death-as-failure is an unfortunate by-product of a videogame landscape which prioritises life-and-death combat as its main mode of interaction; so much so that games console controllers have buttons named and shaped after gun triggers. So… what happens when failure becomes ill-defined? When there is no **GAME OVER** screen to look at, nor a high score to beat? When death is not part of the game's structure? To answer these questions, I will first interrogate three ideologies which form a structure for failure and success: neoliberalism, hegemonic masculinity, and capitalism. These are some of the ideologies taking centre stage in Disco Elysium; the game is highly critical of capitalism and neoliberalism, saying that these people "… don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet." (ZA/UM, 2019). One of the game's first dice rolls is during a conversation with Klaasje, a woman who becomes one of your investigation's main suspects. The check prompts: "Try *The Expression* on her – let her know you want her. Physically." (ZA/UM, 2019) The success rate shown by the game tells the player that they have less than a 50% chance of success. It is a ridiculous, nigh-impossible check which (mostly) ends in utter embarrassment. Pure, unadulterated, masculine confidence is embarrassing, and goes to show the player that failing a skill check in Disco Elyisum is not the finality they have come to expect from other games.

Failure in a Neoliberal Context

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Kim Kitsuragi: "It's worrying. Especially considering his political views. Detective Du Bois is -- as you may know -- a Mazovian socio-economist. He wants to liquidate the ruling class. Which -- again -- for a police officer... is a little odd." (ZA/UM, 2019)

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Óliver Pérez-Latorre and Mercè Oliva approach the game of Bioshock through the lens of neoliberal ideology, defining neoliberalism as follows:

> "Free choice and individualism are at the core of neoliberal governmentality. Collective well-being should be achieved through the sum of the actions (free and autonomous) of individuals and companies who try to maximize their own wellbeing. Neoliberalism is based on placing the responsibility on individuals, who must look after themselves, while it also advocates the dismantling of public policies. In other words, in neoliberal societies, individuals are expected to govern themselves according to certain objectives. Thus, in neoliberalism, power is not absent but rather internalized by citizens." (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva, 2019, p.790)

This is worth drawing attention to as a baseline for approaching a definition of failure; failure does not exist without context, and to define failure we must also define the parameters of success. The genre of roleplaying games overlays with neoliberal politics very neatly: both are concerned with self-governance (*Bioshock*), self-improvement (*Path of Exile*), and are usually highly individualistic (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*). And so, by extrapolating from those win conditions, I claim that failure through a neoliberal lens entails subservience, subjugation, and subordination. Likewise, at the opposite end of the spectrum to self-improvement is decay, entropy, and *laziness*. Individualism

becomes collectivism. I'd like to draw attention to the social and power dynamics of these terms as they set up the next chapter on masculinities. Overall, this gives us a broad, philosophical definition of what it means to fail and one that we can apply to Disco Elysium.

A lesser point I'd like to make in the context of Disco Elysium is the "Thought Cabinet" mechanic. Completing tasks, reaching milestones, and certain conversation prompts grant the player "thoughts". The player can then "internalise" the thoughts to consider its implications over a set period of in-game time; the thoughts ranging from theories of self-identity to political affiliations, to personal philosophies. Internalising the thoughts has certain effects on Harry's skills. A notable example is the "Advanced Race Theory" thought triggered by a man aptly named "Measurehead". Measurehead's phrenology, if pursued, gives Harry a -1 to any Drama-related skill checks, saying that he is "Fooled by the absurdity" (ZA/UM, 2019). The Thought Cabinet is an interesting renunciation of the neoliberal self-improvement typical to RPGs; these skills make Harry *worse*, and they make a succinct statement. Phrenology is *absurd*, and believing it makes Harry worse at fooling others. How can he fool anyone if he's been fooled so easily himself? The Thought Cabinet also allows for incongruent, unique combinations: the player can choose to pursue "Mazovian Socio-economics", the in-world analogue to Communism, despite being a serving policeman. Not only does Disco Elysium put failure front-and-centre in its worldbuilding, it also allows the player to explore interesting consequences thereof: is communism and state-led policing compatible? Is phrenology and police work compatible? Exploring Mazovian socio-economics leads Harry to finally realize:

> "0.000% of Communism has been built. Evil child-murdering billionaires still rule the world with a shit-eating grin. All he has managed to do is make himself *sad*. He is starting to suspect Kras Mazov *fucked him over* personally with his socio-economic theory. It has, however, made him into a very, very smart boy with something like a university degree in Truth. Instead of building Communism, he now builds a precise model of this grotesque, duplicitous world." (ZA/UM, 2019)

Similarly, exploring Moralism:

> "The Kingdom of Conscience will be exactly as it is now. Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child reprimanded. Centrism isn't change -- not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth." (ZA/UM, 2019)

These explorations of ideologies become renunciations of ideology; every political affiliation the player can pursue ends up unsatisfactory, bitter, and cynical. The affective properties of playing with the game's systems of self-improvement, and neoliberalism, lead the player towards a realisation that self-improvement is *flawed*. The system, in this case Disco Elysium, tells the player to expand their ideological horizons by presenting them with the Thought Cabinet. When the player reaches the end goal the game instead shows that there is no happy ending: the game is set against them. Ideology is altogether flawed. I'd like to tie this back to the wider point of this dissertation: the systems which frame whether we fail or succeed are rigged against us. It is, overall, an interesting subversion of the systems we come to expect of roleplaying games.

In the context of Disco Elysium, two of its characters embody neoliberalism in notable ways. Harry's partner, Kim Kitsuragi, is open about his affiliation with "Moralism" and so Kim acts as a solid sounding board for the player's various, possible political affiliations. Likewise, one of the main tasks the player is given is to "get a reality lowdown" – find a rich person and ask them to tell you about the world. This rich person is Joyce Messier, the Wild Pines Group's representative and negotiator with the Dockworker's Union. She describes herself as an "ultraliberal" and, interestingly, acknowledges her own class consciousness. Messier is aware of her wealth, and of the unsavoury relationship her wealth has to union busting, corporate espionage, and the status quo. She

acknowledges the human cost of her wealth but is comfortable enough in her life not to change anything. Messier is an interesting antithesis to the central statement of this dissertation: I propose recontextualising and redefining failure as success seems unattainable, but those whose success came easily have a vested interested in the continuation of the status quo. This antithesis becomes a moral question, then: why *should* I make life easier for others? Unfortunately, I do not have an answer to this question. Regardless, the sentiment of this dissertation is one of collectivism; of working for the betterment of the community.

Failure in a Masculinist Context

Digging further into neoliberalism, I want to explore masculinity as it is organised in a neoliberal society. This is a broad definition of masculinity, calling on the sociological organisation of masculinity and also of the cultural and marketing ideas of who plays video games and *how* they play video games. Raewyn Connell's Masculinities (2005) defines masculinity as a relational concept; it does not exist independently. It is, rather, always contrasted to femininity, and is composed of four interplaying masculinities: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization (Connell, 2005, p.76). In short, though, Connell writes:

> "an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent,
> conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual
> conquest, and so forth." (Connell, 2005, p.67)

To find a counterpoint to these notions of failure, it is not enough to find the opposites of their prescribed notions of success. Masculinity, as per Connell's writing, organises itself according to certain values. Removing those values and reversing them doesn't leave us with a "positive masculinity", because masculinity does not and cannot exist without those component parts. Instead, we must look for a more radical approach; one which does not try to work within these current restraints, and one which establishes an alternative system. For that reason, work of academics of queer theory will be my main reference point for building a rebuttal to these notions of

failure. Before I approach that, however, it would make the most structural sense to also discuss the effects of Capitalism as a system within which we live, and the implied system of the world of Disco Elysium.

I would also like to call on Shira Chess' work in Ready Player Two (2017). Chess writes about "Player Two", the designed identity which acts as a counterpart to "Player One". Player One is the masculine ideal of who should play videogames: "white, cis- , heterosexual, young, abled, and middleclass male" (Chess, 2017, p.171). Chess expands on this, writing that "The designed identity of Player Two, like Player One, is a fiction, an amalgamation of many hybridized images of who should play, how they should play, and what that play looks like." (Chess, 2017, p.6) If we were to look at Disco Elysium through the lens of Chess' work, formulating the identity of the person this game was made for seems somewhat difficult. This is not a game which demands mastery, it is critical of the middle classes, and is thoroughly unviolent. To make this point more cogent, I'd also like to call on Donna Haraway's concept of the "cyborg". Haraway writes of the cyborg as "creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted." (Haraway and Wolfe, 2016, p.6) Haraway's work is deeply rooted in feminist theory, and so an apt critique of a heteronormative society in which masculinity is a dominant component. With this in mind, I propose an image of the player as one who exists between the game-world and the real-world.

Failure in a Capitalist Context

To cohesively discuss failure in Disco Elysium we also have to consider the procedures which make up its mechanics. Using Ian Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric, that is embracing that "video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary." (Bogost, 2008, p.119) We can then interpret game mechanics and processes as specific statements about the world. Because Disco Elysium always displays a count of the player's money (Réal), we can interpret that as a sign that the player's capital worth plays a big role in the game's world. When

Harry meets the Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy, merely approaching him makes the Réal count rocket up to nigh infinity.

> **Harrier Du Bois**: "Are you telling me that you are so rich that light literally bends around your face?"

> **Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy:** "Among other things... but calm down, I'm but a lowly single-digit billionaire."

> **Harrier Du Bois:** "Really?"

> **Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy:** "No, not really. There are actually quite many digits."

> **Suggestion:** "A man this *chill* is at least a triple digit billionaire." (ZA/UM, 2019)

The game makes a simple, satirical statement: rich people bend the reality around them, and merely being in the presence of someone so unbelievably rich opens opportunities; to social status, to wealth, to business, and so on. Wealth attracts wealth. Later, the Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy introduces Harry to the "Weiss-Wiesemann" a fictional, highly complex mathematical formula which measures the difference between the net-worth of all individuals in a room. Once you approach the peak of 1, or 100%, the laws of physics have been observed to bend around the high net-worth individual. Asking Kim for a second opinion reveals that he doesn't see the light-bending, suggesting he is considerably wealthier than Harry. The notable thing here is that the game does not glorify the riches of the Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy; his status and wealth are satirised and clear out of the reach of most people. There is no "hustle porn" to be seen here, and the meeting is a total rejection of neoliberal self-improvement. The system does not permit the people to reach this level of wealth without the connection and contact to someone else of that status. Wealth attracts wealth, and so on.

So, how do we define capitalist success? By virtue of using the works of Karl Marx to discuss capitalism, capitalist success is inextricable from the moral judgements that go alongside them:

"Marx argued that all capitalist profit is ultimately derived from the exploitation of the worker."
(Wolff and Leopold, 2021) It is difficult to extract a definition of capitalist success from the works of
Marx who, for obvious reasons, was more preoccupied with defining a human emancipation from
capitalism, making the state of capitalism a failure in itself. For this reason, and what may sound
somewhat contrived, our definition of capitalist failure is Marxist success. We're disinterested in the
capitalist success of accumulation of wealth, and so can make the simple rhetorical leap to say that
capitalist failure would be failure to accumulate capital. This is a simplistic reduction of capitalism at
large, but appropriate for a conversation concerning the mechanics of Disco Elysium.

I acknowledge that these frameworks for success and failure as broadly philosophical and mostly
applicable to our lived reality, and less so to videogames. This essay is an exploration of what it
means to fail in videogames, acknowledging that most games do not permit the scale of failure
discussed here. This is my reasoning for choosing to discuss Disco Elysium first and foremost; Disco
Elysium provides ample room to discuss these topics and stands as a good example of redefining
failure in videogames according to these principles. Likewise, this is not a call for videogames to start
introducing multicursal narratives (using Espen Aarseth's definition of "aspects, such as repetition,
interlaced narrative threads, prolepsis,…" (Aarseth, 1997, p.7)) which permit the kinds of rippling
effects failure has on a narrative. This would be financially impossible for studios to implement.
Nonetheless, embracing failure from this perspective becomes a philosophical shift I ask for players
to go through: the narrative peaks of Mass Effect 1 and 2 are successes, but they ultimately do not
stop the catastrophic events which take place in Mass Effect 3. This has led to many online
discussion forum threads eager to call the narrative of Mass Effect 2 "pointless" (metroidman92,
2011; Dreamboum, 2018; bobbythecat17, 2018). This viewpoint extends past videogames too, with
Rian Johnson's Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) seeing similar complaints (lockpick4862, 2017;
SavageHoliday, 2018; Carro, 2019; Rossi, n.d.). The topmost point of Halberstam's Queer Art of
Failure establishes that queer lives are, to some extent, defined by their failure to conform to
heteronormative standards. By rejecting the heteronormative framework for failure and success,

these stories become stories of camaraderie, courage, and learning. Player choice in the build-up to Mass Effect 2's Suicide Mission (an impassioned charge into dark space with low chances of survival) enables the possibility of losing crew members who the player has built up a relationship with. Those crew members, obviously, do not reappear in Mass Effect 3. Instead, this failure in saving their lives manifests as the ultimate sacrifice: those crew members committed their lives to saving the universe in Mass Effect 3. The main takeaway here should be that failure is a learning process. Success, as defined by neoliberalism and masculinity is oft unattainable. The value of failing does not only lie in learning, but in standing against unreasonable standards and finding a self-defined meaning of success.

It goes without saying that some would respond to this by asking what the issue is with aligning to current ideas of success. Marx would call this ideology: "… a "worldview" providing the members of a group with a sense of meaning and identity" (Wolff and Leopold, 2021), and would even write about "seeking to liberate individuals from certain false and misleading forms of understanding" (Wolff and Leopold, 2021). The question of: "what is wrong with aligning with contemporary frameworks of success and failure?" is one based in a firm ideology. There is a benefit to interrogating our ideologies for we might come to learn surprising things about our assumptions and what we deem "common sense". The answer, then, is "There is nothing wrong with that." with the caveat that the wrong question is being asked. Rather, the question should be: "What is the benefit of these contemporary frameworks for success and failure?". Bringing this back to previous analyses of neoliberalism and capitalism, by interrogating our ideology we might find that these frameworks push us to "internalise power" (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva, 2019, p.790) and strive to self-improve. And we ask, "With what benefit?", and "With benefit to whom?" Using the example of the "carbon footprint", a means of measuring an individual's contribution of CO_2 to the atmosphere and consequently to climate change (Anon, n.d.), the oil giant BP pushed everyday people to be more conscious of their impact on climate change. Of course, this push for individual responsibility and "internalised power" was a convenient diversion tactic: BP to this day produces 3.8 million barrels of

oil *a day* (Kaufman, 2020). Sorting one's recycling pales in comparison to the systematic changes required to stop just 100 corporations creating 71% of the world's pollution (Riley, 2017). And so, by interrogating just one small aspect of our ideology we have found that the notion of paying attention to our carbon footprint, of self-improvement, does more to push the blame from multinational corporations to individuals.

Queer Art of Failure

The neoliberal, capitalist, and masculinist approaches to failure outlined previously place the player in opposition to the game systems; the player is expected to persevere, grow, improve, and triumph over the game's challenges. When we look at Disco Elysium, we know that this is not a game requiring dexterity or other forms of player skill; it is slow and prose heavy. Brendan Keogh writes:

> "… videogames produced beyond the confines of the high-budget blockbuster industry are instead phenomenological— explicitly that of situated navigation rather than godlike configuration, a corporeal engagement of the senses rather than an intellectual engagement of systems— and they require an integrated and cooperative relationship between the human and the computer." (Keogh, 2018, p.184)

Phenomenology is a philosophical school of thought, widely agreed to have been founded in the late 20th century by Edmund Husserl. A succinct definition can be found in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy from David Smith:

> "phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view." (Smith, 2018)

This is a key concept for considering videogames, especially roleplaying games, where the player is tasked with inserting themselves, or a character of their making, into the game's world. Roleplaying

games, above all, are concerned with the idea of "immersion" or "flow", with the two terms often used interchangeably. The key aspects of a state of flow are the loss of perception of time, a balance between game challenge and player skill, and unbroken concentration (Michailidis et al., 2018). Taken in the context of Disco Elysium especially, the game presents the player with a breakdown of every aspect of Harry's personality. These 24 aspects break down the barrier between Harry's phenomenological experience and the player's. Some of these aspects, like "Endurance", "Pain Threshold", "Encyclopaedia", "Rhetoric", and "Empathy" are self-explanatory. Others, like "Inland Empire" and "Electro-chemistry" are more abstract and instead make a statement about the kind of person Harry is/was. "Inland Empire" is described in-game as:

> *"Hunches and gut feelings. Dreams in waking life."* (ZA/UM, 2019)

To bring this back to Keogh's initial point, I'd like to make a connection to Donna Haraway's idea of the "cyborg" as "creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted." (Haraway and Wolfe, 2016, p.6) If the neoliberal approach is to dominate the system and the game then, conversely, I want to apply the idea of the cyborg to a gamer who integrates with the game systems.

This "cyborg-gamer" Keogh outlines is a more apt lens for me to approach Disco Elysium with. Disco makes clear the factors which affect the player's rolls. If the player, for example, maintains an amicable relationship with Kim Kitsuragi, the interface indicating a dice roll during a pivotal narrative beat will display the following disclaimer: "+1 – Kim trusts you". If the player develops a *friendship* with Lt. Kitsuragi, the game will also show: "+1 – Kim *really* trusts you". While the game relies on dice and chance to randomise outcomes, it also offers the player assistance. To turn down the game's assistance and instead "savescum" is "To abolish chance by holding it in the grip of causality and finality, to count on the repetition of throws rather than affirming chance, to anticipate a result instead of affirming necessity - these are all the operations of a bad player." (Deleuze, 2005, p.27). Thusly, the cyborg-player is one who denies the hegemonic dominance required of neoliberal and

masculinist approaches to failure, and one who aims to integrate with the game's systems. This leads me neatly to the next, key piece of theory. To integrate with the game's systems is one thing but lacks purpose independently. *Why* should the player integrate with the game's system and stop trying to dominate it?

A key text of this dissertation is Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011)*.* I would like to note that the author goes by both Judith and Jack and uses he/him and she/her pronouns interchangeably. With respect to the published work, here I will use the author's published name Judith, with the pronouns she/her. Halberstam sets up the following argument:

> "Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique." (Halberstam, 2011, p.89)

Later, in a moderated conversation between Jack Halberstam and Jesper Juul, as transcribed in *Queer Game Studies* (2017), Halberstam expands on this, saying:

> "[Queer people] fail in their socially prescribed role. There are two responses you can have to that. One is to try and play the game as it's been written, to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I will now get married and have children, and then maybe you will accept me as a success on your terms." Or you refuse the game. You say, "Actually, that outcome is not what I desire." You rewrite the game, and in the process you accept what we call failure. So, that acceptance in failure, that investment in failure, that excitement about failure, is the queer art of failure." (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p.202)

And so, the central statement of this dissertation is based on the above quote: we should embrace this queer art of failure when playing roleplaying games. Indeed, outside of them too, but that is

beyond the scope of this essay. By willingly failing, we reject the terms of success established by another and instead we establish our own boundaries, facing a moment of self-actualization: defining our own terms for success. As I have discussed before, the terms of success in videogames with point-scoring systems or competitive systems are clear. In roleplaying games, these terms are less clear. For that reason, I'd like to reference the input of an audience member in that same conversation. Kathryn Boyd Stockton refers to it as an "accumulation of anti-capital" (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p.208). It is this accumulation that builds up value over time, and it is these failings that feel awful in the moment but yield greater benefits over time. While this feels like success-with-added-steps, in a capitalist society that moment-to-moment failure can have devastating consequences especially for those who identify as part of the precariat. Isabel Lorey defines the precariat as a low-income people who live their life according to a relationship with precariousness; the precarity of health insurance tied to employment, to housing and food related to employment, and so on (Lorey et al., 2015, paraphrased). And so encouraging the accumulation of anti-capital comes up against its main barrier: a literal situation of life and death. Succeed, or face loss of earnings. Encouraging failure when livelihood is at stake seems a privileged, out of touch position to take. This is a rebuttal I unfortunately do not have an answer for; but the question is quite broad and does not require a black-and-white approach. If failure puts the reader at a potential loss of housing or sustenance, it makes sense to confront the reality of the system we live in and seek out capital.

When many games present players with "morality" meters; multiple choices, some of which are presented as "good" and "bad"; or scoring systems, the reflex to succeed can be tough to overcome. Finishing *Mass Effect 2*'s (BioWare, 2010) "Suicide Mission" with a full squad of loyal, alive teammates can be a satisfying reward for time spent investing time into exploring the game's many missions, systems, and narrative arcs. But heading into *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) with a squad which is mourning, a squad personally affected by loss can be an indulgently cathartic experience. Overcoming our want to succeed is a direct stand against the neoliberal ideology Western readers

will most likely relate to. And so, we come to another interesting question: if deliberate failure and accumulation of anti-capital is our aim, we're not only coming to a moment of self-actualization through establishing boundaries, but also reflecting on a way of life that is default. If we accept failure as the goal, are we rejecting the aims of the videogames we play and the terms of the world we live in? This way, as Halberstam explains, failure becomes an anti-capitalist, revolutionary act. Bringing up neoliberal ideology in this context isn't without intention; placing the wellbeing of the community in the hands of individuals and companies by means of self-governance and responsibility is a central dynamic in most roleplaying videogames (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva, 2019). Overcoming obstacles, defeating enemies, and other shows of prowess rewards the player with experience points they can spend on improving their characters more, with an expectation that players will build the most optimal character for approaching the game's systems. This focus on self-improvement places every character on an even playing field of even opportunities and prescribes any failure as a personal failure rather than a systemic one.

Synthesising the definitions of failure outlined by neoliberalism and masculinity gives us a philosophical framework. However, by bringing in the lessons from The Queer Art of Failure, we can begin questioning this framework. The notion that the opposite of masculinity is femininity, and so the failure of masculinity is to be feminine is a clearly sexist idea.

Chapter 2 – Disco Elysium and Dice

For this academic reading of Disco Elysium, the player is… *me.* This is important; my experiences are inseparable from this reading. And so, I will try to outline my own attitudes and perspectives and their bearing on this reading. Sarah Ahmed speaks of "orientation" as beyond the commonly understood *sexual* orientation: "Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention towards." (Ahmed, 2006, p.3) Orientation is an idea I will return to regularly, comparing and contrasting my orientations against Disco Elysium. I am a Polish immigrant to England; my

parents and extended family are manual laborers from a post-Communist era. My political

orientation leans, nay, sits firmly left. After an extended conversation with my partner, we both

settled on the idea that we identify as male and female, respectively, because that is what we are

used to. Being referred to as a man does not feel *wrong*, and so the label stuck for the past 24 years.

I am heterosexual *so far* – my lived experience has been privileged by the lack of fear that feels so

common to queer lived experience – but I cannot say this with full certainty. My creative work has

always focused on ideas of masculinity because, despite me identifying as a man, I *do not* identify

with masculinity. It has been defined as "toxic", "unhealthy", and so on, and so my aim has always

been to find something which does not feel fit those criterions. Something that could help other

men in the same situation find their path. Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg say that "Queerness, as

its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside of

normative boundaries." (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p.x-Introduction). Having lived my entire life

happily benefitting from passing as a heterosexual man, it approaches stolen valour to say that I

identify with queerness. The queer experience is not, of course, defined by suffering. So far, there is

little to contrast; if the player pursues centrism and neoliberalism (referred to as "Moralism" in-

universe), the game says:

> "Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's
>
> toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child
>
> reprimanded. Centrism isn't change -- not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over
>
> yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition
>
> airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then
>
> answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth." (ZA/UM, 2019)

Having grown up surrounded by video games, they became my main hobby and outlet. This is a

relatively heteronormative journey, and quite stereotypical. My ideological journey, however, was

one of a slow lean towards pacifism and a rejection of authority, of "getting yours", and of

individualism. A common sentiment throughout my family went as follows (translation mine):

> "Communism was great. We had lots of money but there was no food on the shelves,
>
> under Capitalism we have no money but there's lots of food on the shelves … it was
>
> only terrible if you had a problem with authority."

This, largely, spells out disaster for me and this dissertation. Challenging authority and the status

quo is an underlying tenet of this whole piece. Taken outside of the context of the Communist

states, however, we can apply this to the notions of failure I set up earlier in the essay.

This close reading will approach two main aspects of Disco Elysium. I want to talk about Disco's

mechanics and its narrative. Of course, the two are interlinked and separating them is merely for

structural neatness and not a statement for or against the specific approaches of narratology and

ludology.

Disco Elysium is a prose-heavy game. Its key gameplay mechanic is the textbox; every interaction, be

it with a person or inanimate object, is framed by a textbox. Every interaction is made livelier by the

constant chatter of Harry's 24 "skills" chiming in and adding their observations. Sometimes, these

skills will argue between themselves, riff off one another, and even sway each other. The player's

role is to arbitrate them and pick their next course of action. Of course, 24 voices get chaotic, and so

the game presents a simple mechanic to filter them out: the player can spend progression points to

improve these skills, drawing out their voice out of the crowd of others. Any time there is something

to be said, the game rolls two 6-sided dice (**⚅ ⚅**) in the background, and whichever skill scores the

highest gets to speak. During most conversations these die rolls stay in the background, though the

player can hover over most dialogues to see the rolled number compared against a target value. At

key moments and narrative beats, the player is explicitly asked to trigger a die roll, its dark-orange

coloration showing that there is no retrying here; whatever happens, happens. Other dice rolls, the

ones coloured White, can be tried and, if failed, retried on the condition the player chooses to spend a progression point to improve its constituent skill. This distinction between what can be retried and what cannot be retried is mainly one of timing; these Dark-Orange checks happen mid-conversation, while the White ones are mostly triggered by objection interactions in the world. The reasoning for this distinction is "logical" and follows a common-sense understanding of conversation – we can't keep saying different things until we get the desirable outcome – so I will not explore this reasoning further. What *is* interesting, is the distinction itself. The game makes it clear that anything happening after this point is final and cannot be retried.

When it comes to dice systems and games which approach failure with nuance, John Harper's *Blades in the Dark* (BitD)(2017) is a great example. BitD is a tabletop roleplaying game which primarily uses pools of 6-sided dice 6 to adjudicate outcomes, based on whether the player's actions are deemed *Controlled, Risky,* or *Desperate*. For brevity, I will only quote the rules to *Risky* actions below.

> **RISKY**
>
> *You go head to head. You act under fire. You take a chance.*
>
> **Critical**: You do it with **increased effect**.
>
> **6**: You do it.
>
> **4/5**: You do it, but there's a consequence: you suffer **harm**, a **complication** occurs, you have **reduced effect**, you end up in a **desperate** position.
>
> **1-3**: Things go badly. You suffer **harm**, a **complication** occurs, you end up in a **desperate** position, you **lose this opportunity**. (Harper, 2017, p.23)

My reason for using BitD rules as an example here is simple: it offers a much more nuanced framework for considering failure, both in TTRPGs and in cRPGs. At no point does the game stop if the player rolls badly; rolling the lowest possible results of **1**-**3** results in complications, but at no point is the player blocked from progressing. Notably, I claim that the rules support leaning into the accumulation of anti-capital mentioned earlier in the essay. Pure success is only possible on a roll of **6**, every other result leads to some complication. The rules push the players into uncomfortable positions, with each roll leading to a frantic, improvisational game of actions and consequences. Regardless of the risk of each roll, be it **Controlled, Risky,** or **Desperate**, the threshold for success is the same. Making **Desperate** rolls is encouraged, too, with the game noting that players attempting desperate actions be rewarded with experience points regardless of if they succeed or not. Here, the mechanical incentives for players and game masters alike are clear: drama resulting from attempting Desperate manoeuvres is good; failure is encouraged, and failure drives you forward. Applying this to cRPGs can be a naïve endeavour; videogames are limited to their code and offer predetermined choices. There is no Game Master to give improvised situations and outcomes. Nonetheless, we can read this through the lens of queer failure which Halberstam established; failure is merely a "speed bump toward mastery" (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p.214).

Disco Elysium's dice rolls use two six-sided dice **6** to adjudicate outcomes. However, in videogames we come up against the problem of *savescumming*. "Savescumming" – though a somewhat crass term – is the practice of saving the player's progress and reloading, allowing the player to retry from that point until the player reaches a desirable outcome. In the context of Disco Elysium, if a certain die roll doesn't go their way, the player can simply load the game at the start of a conversation and try again and again until they succeed. During the game's countless conversations, the meanings of "success" and "failure" become defined by outside forces; by the developers themselves. The interesting question I aim to answer: should the definitions of these successes and failures concern thematic cohesion, narrative "flow", "common sense", affective or satisfactory outcomes, or

something else? Harking back to the example of Red Dead Redemption 2: the player overcoming Arthur's tuberculosis would be a satisfactory outcome, surely, but one that would nullify his redemption arc.

There is nothing stopping the player from savescumming, though referring back to my previous mention of Deleuze, we approach a philosophical juncture. As he writes, ""To abolish chance by holding it in the grip of causality and finality, to count on the repetition of throws rather than affirming chance, to anticipate a result instead of affirming necessity - these are all the operations of a bad player." (Deleuze, 2005, p.27). By savescumming, the player is acting in bad faith; they take full advantage of the uncertainty of repeated die rolls, and they disrespect the finality of chance. There are two approaches to this: the first is a concerted effort to reclaim agency. The player feels they are owed a certain result, be It due to creating their character in a way where their failure feels unearned, or due to a narrative turn they feel was likewise unearned. This is the neoliberal approach; the player is met with a system with a clear end goal and will take advantage of this system to achieve their optimal result. The reasons for taking advantage of the system are multitudinous; going back to the idea of the "cyborg-gamer", the player has no reason *not* to savescum, but the practice is generally frowned upon (hence the name). The other option is a straightforward acceptance of their failure; this most aligns with the queer art of failure I have mentioned before. But this is also at odds with the idea of Player One: where these masculine hyper-gamers would be proud of mastering the game's systems and overcoming its challenges without resorting to lowly savescumming, to say that their approach can be queered and turned into a story of self-actualisation seems unfounded. Their aim to complete the game without savescumming is the masculine, societal pressure of self-improvement. The difference, then, must lie in changing how we play videogames. Where the pride of completing a game without savescumming is a celebration of one's ability to dominate the game's systems, and thus a thoroughly masculine approach, the queer approach is to accept the failure that comes of our inability to finish the game. The approach

of failure as a "speedbump to mastery" doesn't go far enough in this case: it is accepting that the game has bested us that matters.

Deriving fun from the game's systems in ways other than completion is also something to consider: Aubrey Anable writes that "video games offer us ways of being with and feeling machines." (Anable, 2018, p.39) This is a natural next step in the idea of the cyborg-gamer as it closes in on the devices which facilitate this connection. While Anable writes of the affective properties of the touchscreen, we can expand her work to the controller:

> "Being touched, in the sense of being moved emotionally, signals the very real experience of something immaterial pressing itself on our emotional state and changing it, and the capacity for us to touch someone or something else in a similar way." (Anable, 2018, p.39)

Playing videogames in this way poses a different notion of success which savescumming has no bearing on. Playing for the emotional resonance of a game introduces a whole spectrum of approaches that would be, by the dominant approach, a failure of playing the game. This way, the game stops being a system to be dominated, and a system to be embraced and lived within; a vehicle for emotional connection, the medium of which being a remediation of the game's world and the game's controls. This requires further research as it opens up a broad avenue for approach; Bo Ruberg writes about this, calling it "playing games queerly" (Ruberg, 2019, paraphrased). Here, completing the game is no longer the sole aim; rather, to play games queerly is to play with the aim of losing, the aim of spending time in the game's environments, the aim of *not getting better*.

Going back to the topic of savescumming, to exemplify savescumming in the context of Disco Elysium, I will use the late-game example of Kim Kitsuragi being shot during a standoff with a mercenary group. As previously mentioned, the player can get several bonuses during this conversation for building a friendship with Kim. At one point, when Kim's back is turned, the player is given the option to warn Kim of the gun pointed at his back. After spending several hours talking to Kim and exploring Kim and Harry's relationship, a rogue roll of the dice, despite the bonuses,

could mean that Kim does not react in time and gets shot. If the dice roll is successful, Kim is only grazed. In the moment there is no way to tell if Kim is dead (luckily, Kim is *only* severely injured by the gunshot) and so the player can immediately action a solution: reload their save and try to warn Kim again. This is a strong counterargument to the Queer Art of Failure. Where I would pontificate about the value of accumulating anti-capital, about learning from your mistakes, and accepting failure, the player would ask: *But why should I?* The failure here isn't skill-based, and the player has mitigated their risk of failure as much as possible by building a friendship with Kim. There is no learning experience here, other than the one that even when a system is tipped in your favour it might not always act favourably. A sobering message, but a message nonetheless. Overall, the arguments *not* to savescum are quite weak – it is only natural to seek the best outcome (or so my ideology would say).

Disco Elysium takes place in a fictional, unnamed world. More specifically: a tiny district of the city of Revachol (Re-va-shol), Martinaise (Martin-ay). Martinaise has all the marks of a city ravaged by war; its buildings stand in disrepair, walls and bridges pockmarked by bullet holes, and its people abandoned by a government not set on supporting them. Martinaise's most relevant landmarks are the Whirling-in-Rags, a hostel cafeteria and the meeting place of the Hardie Boys, a muscle-unit of the Dockworkers' Union who work nearby. Opposite the Whirling-in-Rags is the East Delta Commercial Centre, though it more commonly goes by the superstitious moniker "Doomed Commercial Area". The people of Martinaise call it so because every business which moves into the office block mysteriously fails within a few months. Is it a curse cast upon the building, or is it the inevitable destiny of capitalism running its course? One of the building's largest offices was occupied by a game studio, now abandoned, whose project ballooned out of scope. In the notes the player can find scattered amongst the office's debris and defunct radiocomputers is a story paralleling that of ZA/UM themselves. A group of friends, young and ambitious with little direction, gathering to make something great. In their ambition they refused to settle for anything but perfection and, one by one, their friendships broke, and the team drifted apart. There is a self-aware rebellion here: the

team at ZA/UM knew that they could succumb to that same fate their characters did. This is a studio which, unfortunately, did not stand up to the test of capitalism. The fact that the studio had to close is an indictment of capitalist success: gathering a group of creatives under a common cause, ready to create something enriching but unable to fund it is a sad state of events. But it comes up against another rebuttal to the central thesis of this essay: it is easy enough to say *No!* to the system we live in, but that does not change the fact that we are part of that system regardless of our opinion on it. Saying "we embrace failure" is rather meaningless when that embrace puts a stop to our work, our livelihood, and puts us in a position of precarity. This unfortunately mirrors an earlier rebuttal: brandishing failure as a weapon against unattainable notions of success doesn't change the reality that without work, we put our lives at risk.

Deep within the Doomed Commercial Area, past its offices and maintenance tunnels, by a window overlooking Revachol and next to a now-defunct chimney stack sits a Novelty Dicemaker. She doesn't have a name; the Novelty Dicemaker is one of the few characters defined by their labour. She runs, right now, the only successful business operating out of the Doomed Commercial Area. She laughs the "curse" off as mere superstition but acknowledges that the chimney stack is *technically* outside of the building. It's important to note that the Novelty Dicemaker is the only one who seems to have staved off labour alienation, using Marx's definition of a worker who has been separated from the product of their labour (Marx et al., 1988, paraphrased), and instead works independently, creating a product which she herself sells to a local community she is part of. The Dicemaker is, by capitalist definitions, a failure. She lives by herself, in a property which doesn't belong to her, and she does not accumulate wealth. Nonetheless, this highlights that the neoliberal use of "self-improvement" isn't an inherent negative and shouldn't be looked at as such. Growing one's skills isn't a malicious scheme to extract profit and alienate workers from their labour. At least… *not always*. The difference here is between self-actualisation and labour alienation; the Dicemaker has reached a point of equilibrium. Her skills provide for her lifestyle, and nothing more. There is no flagrant display of wealth here.

Conclusion

Using work on neoliberalism, capitalism, and masculinity, I have defined a broad concept of failure that includes lack of accumulation of wealth, lack of self-improvement, and collectivism. These concepts of failure were unsatisfactory, and so I used the work of academics who study queer theory to create a subversive notion of failure which places those very things at the forefront. Bringing in the work of Karl Marx, I posit that collectivism is the thing we should be striving for. This brings with it a critique of ideology, also inspired by the work of Karl Marx, that takes us dangerously far from the intended topic of discussing failure in videogames. Nonetheless, the two are inextricably linked and so the essay criticised capitalist ideology for a narrow spectrum of success which is unattainable to most. Finally, I discussed how these theories apply to Disco Elysium. By calling on the work of John Harper in *Blades in the Dark*, I looked at a gameplay system which encourages failure and gives the players a reason to attempt high-risk manoeuvres. While the possibilities and wide permutations tabletop roleplaying games permit fit the central thesis of the dissertation almost perfectly, I ultimately arrived at the point that this would be unsustainable for game developers. Instead, I found that Disco Elysium offers a similar solution: it offers a more linear narrative that gives the *illusion* of open-endedness thanks to the 24 skills which make up Harry's psyche. By allowing the player to prioritise certain skills, those skills shape the perspective through which the player interacts with Disco's world, though the narrative beats remain largely unchanged. Even that in itself is a tough ask: a throwaway Tweet claims Disco Elysium's script contains over *one million words (Disco Elysium - The Final Cut, 2020).* This is, likewise, quite unattainable for small studios. Unfortunately, the barriers to an expanded understanding of failure are, by all accounts, quite *boring*: it is a matter of scope and budget. The takeaway isn't that developers should focus on expanding the fail states their games contain. Rather, that the successes these games contain perpetuate an unhealthy status quo. If, like Disco Elysium, we instead focus on the failures and make

those the key goal of our art we can avoid the scope bloat – the goal of games then turns into collective action, mutual aid, and charity (as opposed to accumulation of wealth). Going beyond roleplaying games, if we look at the 4X genre (abbreviation of eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate) and its colonialist mechanics (as clearly evidenced by the name), the notion of success is a flawed one. Often, there are no means by which the player can restore, protect, and share, which means playing with those goals in mind is to fail the game. The to-be-released game Terra Nil instead reverses those goals, "[presenting] players with the task of environmental rejuvenation" (Anon, n.d.).

To conclude, by interrogating contemporary sociology and political ways of thought I have created a definition of failure in videogames that goes beyond the simplistic dichotomy of life and death. By approaching failure from the perspectives of neoliberal thought and hegemonic masculinity, I have also defined parameters of success, enabling a holistic outlook on what it means to fail both in video games and in a neoliberal, capitalist society. I posed a brave proposition at the start of this essay: that this understanding of failure can be a rich ground for identity-making and radical self-love. By rejecting the systems we're born into we can begin to carve our own, non-conformist, definition of success and interrogate the ideologies we take for granted. Using Disco Elysium as a key text, I have explored how game mechanics promote failure and how its characters do the very thing this essay has been about: the characters reject success and strive to find their own meaning. This isn't to say that the thesis is watertight; there are strong rebuttals to the rejection of ideology. Losing a job is a speedbump in one's life, but it can also have devastating effects to one's ability to secure shelter or food. In that case, encouraging people to embrace this kind of failure is irresponsible. On the other hand, to put up with poor working conditions rather than unionising due to the potential of job-loss is likewise to embrace exploitation. It is a nuanced conversation, and one this essay only scratches the surface of. Bringing in the work of Aubrey Anable has opened up another potential avenue for explorations of failure, however, and one that Bo Ruberg's "Videogames Have Always Been Queer" (2019) explores. By applying queer readings to games, we can form other, non-hegemonic

definitions of play itself. Playing not to finish the game, but to spend time in its space, to score the lowest score, or to play in ways unsupported by the game's systems are all means of queer play which would be treated as "failure" by the frameworks I have established throughout. I would have to further research these theories as part of a PhD; combining theories of socioeconomics, gender, and video game theory was an ambitious task, and one that would benefit from a much-expanded scope. Nonetheless, it has been the sole purpose of this essay to explore the cases which do not lie at the extremes of precariousness; the cases in which embracing failure is a vehicle to explore our ideologies and to learn about the side of our psyche which vehemently steers away from.

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