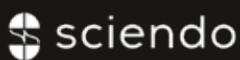


In Focus

**“What kind of cop are you?”:
Disco Elysium’s Technologies
of the Self within the
Posthuman Multiverse**



CONOR MCKEOWN, University of Stirling, UK; email: cmmckeown@gmail.com

10.2478/bsmr-2021-0007

ABSTRACT

I suggest in this article, drawing upon Francesca Ferrando, Karen Barad and N Katherine Hayles, that *Disco Elysium* illustrates the human through the mode of a ‘posthuman multiverse’. Per Ferrando, humans and other beings act as nodes in a material multiverse while what we think, eat, our behaviours and relations, create part of a rhizomatic ecology that can be understood as who and what we are. This, I illustrate, overcomes a complicated tension in existing posthuman theory, particularly as it relates to game studies. Although theorists have detailed the entanglement of players and machines, and the new materialist nature of becoming, it is unclear to what extent human-machine assemblages can be said to be a singular ‘thing’. This is tackled in *Disco Elysium* as the seemingly mundane and often invisible actions the player takes, all play a role in constructing Harry Dubois and the world that is also endlessly producing him. Game actions, therefore, can be viewed as ‘technologies of the multiverse’, the ontological functions through which beings come to exist in a dimension. The game positions the player in a ‘relational intra-activity’ not only with the actions and outcomes of play, as discussed in previous scholarship, but also with the hypothetical outcomes of choices they have *not* made. When read through the lens of Ferrando’s philosophical posthuman multiverse, *Disco Elysium* represents a valuable resource for bridging gaps in contemporary posthuman scholarship.

One of *Disco Elysium*’s (ZA/UM 2019) promotional posters asks: “what kind of cop are you?” In a sense, it is the central question of *Disco Elysium*. Although the game proper compels the player to solve the mystery behind a dead mercenary in the fictional city of Revachol, throughout the game, players must also piece together the personality of their police officer avatar,

Harrier “Harry” Dubois. Through the character construction system, for instance, players can focus on building Harry’s physical body (his “electro-chemistry,” “endurance” or “pain threshold”) or else choose to fortify his relationship to abstract concepts such as “authority,” “drama,” or even his tendency to see the surreal – as the game calls it – his “Inland Empire.” The strength of these

various attributes impact on the game's dialogue as the more prominent one sense is, the more likely it will be to influence Harry's actions and words. Yet the game's other characters, along with elements of Harry's own mind (such as his "ancient reptilian brain" voiced by Mikee Goodman), seem to already have an opinion on, and expectations of, Harry. Some characters may be surprised or even angered by the actions Harry takes at the player's insistence. This implies the player's choices for Harry can be incongruous with an established ideal of Harry, already known by the other characters. In giving the player freedom, but also the potential to fall short of character expectations, *Disco Elysium* toys with the idea that human beings could have an enduring or true self when they are composed of such varied and changeable chemical, physical and social processes. As such, although the poster asks, "what kind of cop are you?" *Disco Elysium* seems really to be asking much more than just what kind of sleuth the user may aspire to be.

Beyond the character construction system, in the game's world – the eponymous Elysium – existence uneasily straddles a creeping void: "the Pale," a vast plane of incoherence that separates landmasses, is creating cracks in the game's world, challenging the very nature of *being*. We are told that the fundamental property of the Pale, is the suspension of properties. It is a zone in which the rules of Newtonian physics break down. While an excellent narrative device, the Pale is not entirely inconceivable within lived experience. Discoveries in quantum physics and astrophysics that should shake common-sense ontological assumptions about our universe, are frequently on the cover of popular science magazines; and yet, humans continue on regardless. "What kind of cop" Harry is may seem to initially to be the driving question of the game. However, as players become more familiar with the game's complex depiction of the human mind and the non-Newtonian premises of its universe, it seems that the driving question may be: how is it that Harry can be *any* kind of cop,

amidst, alongside and within the ever-growing void of the Pale? How can a human ever "be" in a universe that is fundamentally uncertain?

In this article I suggest that *Disco Elysium* can be understood as offering an answer to the above question (or, at least, the beginnings of an answer). However, this answer is not easily achieved without the context of aspects of posthuman theory, past and present. The early sections of this article are dedicated to explaining my interpretation of *Disco Elysium*, highlighting how it resonates with the work of N. Katherine Hayles then Karen Barad. I suggest that the game's character construction system invites parallels to Hayles' early work, suggesting that "the human" is "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (1999: 3). After this, I turn my attention to The Pale, which, I suggest, rewards a close reading infused with elements of Barad's agential-realist worldview. In Barad's agential-realism, humans, just as all bodies and "things," do not exist and then act but rather are "agential enfoldings that reconfigure the connectivity of the spacetime-matter manifold" (2007: 235). In other words, in contrast to the Cartesian separation of subject and object, they envision energy and materiality in a constant state of flux that comes to produce elements of resolution within indeterminacy. Barad suggests that all bodies – all matter – do not ever really become a discrete, self-contained unit which remain an "infinity of infinities" (2012: 218). With these two posthuman theories clarified, a difficulty comes into view: how then, if matter is infinite infinities, can we accommodate Hayles' heterogeneous components constructing the human being? In other words, if we accept the reading of quantum mechanics that is the basis of Barad's work as reality/if reality is more akin to The Pale than it is to atomist notions discrete things, how can it be that the boundaries of Harry could ever be said to be constructed, even if we accept that they are just going to be reconstructed?

As my goal in this article is to fruitfully combine the posthuman theories of Hayles and Haraway, among others, I'm seeking to contribute to the growing arm of posthuman game studies. Although popularised by Jonathan Boulter (2015) and Elise Vist (2015) whose work introduced Hayles and Donna Haraway's work into the space of game studies and has generated growing interest in the notion of understanding players through the lens of the cyborg, my particular interest in posthuman game studies is not in troubling players as complex entities themselves, but in troubling the player and gameplay as outcomes of a complex materiality. While eschewing (though undeniably overlapping to some extent) the object-oriented ontological approach of Ian Bogost (2012), I am nevertheless interested in locating play and the player's place in a philosophical model of existence. To that end, this article builds on the work of numerous games scholars using Barad's agential realism as a means to engage with games. Similarly, Sonia Fizek (2018), Justyna Janik (2019, 2020), and Poppy Wilde (2020) all use agential-realism in some way, often discussing the notion of entangled modes of being or acting ("intra-action"). Most recently, Miguel Sicart (2021) seeks to use Barad's onto-epistemology to provide a materialist ontology to games augmented through a reading of gameplay as a form of situated knowledge. Echoing my peers in this space, I seek to bring together a range of posthuman theories to produce new ways of understanding established writings. In my case, much like how Sicart reads elements of Barad's work through Hayles, commenting on the nature of games and materiality, I will outline how Hayles' concepts of bodies interacting with an environment can be enhanced through Barad's agential realism, though at all times inspired by and clearly outlined by the mechanics of *Disco Elysium*.

Hayles' view and Barad's view, it should be noted, do not contradict one another. Instead, Hayles' work can be read as extended by Barad's. Still, it is important to acknowledge that while Hayles and

Barad's work can enmesh productively, there are still important ontological differences between them. Hayles writes of a body that exists "in space and time and that, through its interaction with the environment, it defines the parameters within which the cogitating mind can arrive at 'certainties'" (1999: 203). Though it is noted by Hayles that bodies are in a constant state of change, there is little doubt offered that they exist *in* space and time to interact *with* an environment. It is a thin boundary – but a boundary, nonetheless. By comparison, there is no such division in Barad's agential-realism. A misreading of their work might suggest that this problem is resolved through the notion of the "agential cut," but we are not let off so easily as Barad makes it clear that whatever's on the other side of the agential cut – including both *matter and time* (Barad 2007: ix) – "is not separate from us" (2007: 393).

While Hayles' view of the parameter-defining body does not fit perfectly within Barad's worldview, it is still – I believe – worth clinging to for the clarity it provides for understanding ideas of the posthuman self. To bridge this small gap, in this article I draw on Francesca Ferrando's notion of the posthuman multiverse and human beings "as nodes of becoming in a material network" (2019: 180). Ferrando's embrace of the multiverse from somewhat speculative branches of physics such as string theory allows us to reposition Hayles' amalgam within Barad's agential-realist universe. The heterogenous amalgam would no longer be seen to produce certainties or even individualities but, rather, as involved in producing multiple configurations that exist alongside one another in a material network. Ferrando's extension of Barad's agential realism adds an important simultaneity and multidimensionality to posthumanism. Reading Hayles through Barad then through Ferrando, I believe, there is less temptation to understand specific material configurations as cancelling others out. It prevents a reader from confusing the agential-cut – which doesn't really cut anything – with the interpretations of the measurement

problem in which quantum wave functions are said to “collapse” into classical Newtonian systems. After all, Barad notes, “there is no collapse” (2007: 345).

In the ending section of this article, I focus on the skill check system and how it allows for (some) overlapping and occasionally contradictory repetitions of events within a single playthrough. Through this *Disco Elysium* suggests the presence of multiple versions of reality that are materially inseparable and co-constitutive of one another. Ultimately, the game suggests that Harry is never just one type of cop, but instead should be read as multiplicity of becoming – a node in a material network, an overlapping of infinities. Yet, within this, the taking and making of decisions are transformed into new technologies of the self within the context of the posthuman multiverse. In this way, *Disco Elysium* highlights how even seemingly banal actions take on tremendous importance when viewed through the correct posthuman lens.

DISCO ELYSIUM AND HAYLES’ POSTHUMANISM

Looking at the character construction system of *Disco Elysium*, the “set skill” menu/mechanic is functionally like the *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) (Gygax, Arneson 1974) character sheet resource it resembles (Morningstar 2014). Twenty-four of the traits that produce Harry are each noted with individual levels. However, these traits are significantly different from what one might find in a typical role-playing game; gone are the acrobatics, perception, survival, etc. familiar to D&D players. Instead, Harry’s character is broken own into “electrochemistry,” “visual calculus,” “shivers,” “esprit de corps” and even – borrowing from the cinema of David Lynch – “Inland Empire.” The more creatively named character attributes, however, are not merely included as comic relief; this element of the character can play an important role in the game. Without placing points into one’s Inland Empire statistics, for example, players will not be able to communicate

with the supernatural forces that populate Elysium. If a player boosts Inland Empire, Harry can eventually communicate directly with the dead mercenary central to the mystery, substantially assisting in cracking the case. Similar success can be found by placing an emphasis on perception and savoir faire, turning Harry into a person with acute awareness of their world. Conversely, it is entirely possible for the player to dedicate their play to appeasing base desires of their electrochemistry by consuming cocaine, nicotine, and alcohol. No style of play is wrong, and different elements of Harry will thrive regardless.

Morningstar writes, “a character sheet [...] can mirror the evolution of a game’s design and serve as a metaphor for design missteps and triumphs” (2014). The character sheet here is nothing short of a triumph in itself as it makes plain that whatever Harry is, it is not a singular Cartesian mind piloting muscle mass and neurons, not a discrete system acting out into the world (Maturana, Varela 1980). We can frame the character sheet of *Disco Elysium* through Hayles’ conceptualisation of the posthuman subject as: “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (1999: 3). The idea of “heterogenous components” conforms to what we see in the game; the sense of *savoir faire* and *esprit des corps*. These are not just bodily functions but instead complex amalgams themselves of materiality that transgresses the traditional boundaries one would confine the human body within. Hayles discusses cellular automata as fundamental to this conception of the liberal subject in her work: “for embodiment can flow from cellular automata as easily as from atoms” (1999: 12). Given how abstract the various skills are within *Disco Elysium* it is not too difficult to position them as the subject-producing cellular automata from Hayles’ theories.

However, the cellular automata are not solely responsible for bringing forth the posthuman subject. Throughout, Harry has



FIGURE 1. The Character Sheet of *Disco Elysium*

regular dialogue with his “ancient reptilian brain” – a kind of fully voiced manifestation of Paul MacLean’s (1990) problematic notion of the lizard brain – suggesting that Harry’s consciousness is the product of multiple sources. Similarly, Hayles problematises the idea of the autonomous liberal human subject, the conscious master of their own universe; she writes:

the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures. (1999: 288)

Given that Harry is quite literally given information about himself from the fundamental systems that produce him, the idea that “conscious will is the story consciousness tells itself”, fits well within *Disco Elysium*.

Yet Hayles’ embodiment is not as simple as stating that the specific structure of the body can predictably produce the posthuman subject (or lived experience). At a fundamental level, Hayles’ “Regime of Computation” suggests that computational processes may be a quality of “physical reality at the subatomic level” (Hayles 2005: 217). The posthuman subject for Hayles is one being produced by a kind of material universal computing that forms fundamental processes. Beyond this, Hayles writes of bodies as complex systems that

...evolve toward an open future marked by contingency and unpredictability. Meaning is not guaranteed by a coherent origin; rather, it is made possible (but not inevitable) by the blind force of evolution finding workable

solutions within given parameters. (1999: 285)

Just as in Hayles’ work, in *Disco Elysium* an emphasis is placed on both computation and randomness in action. In the first instance, this is visible in the ‘cellular automata’ of Harry’s skills not just existing but also having numerical values that are compared to environmental values in the game’s dialogue and skill check systems. It’s not enough that Harry *has* perception – rather his perception is computed against the difficulty factor of the environment he finds himself in. Not only this, but within the skill check system, the player must roll dice when doing skill checks regardless of the construction of Harry. Not only is Harry produced then as the computed emergence of automata, and the interaction with his environment; a universal randomness further complicates this emergence.

Reading the game through the work of N. Katherine Hayles then, it seems that Harry is an emergent system, being produced by heterogenous automata. At the same time, however, external environmental forces and randomness continue to act on this bodily autopoiesis, shaping the emergence of that system. As mentioned, considering that the player can choose to make Harry a physicist, a super sleuth or even a drug addict and still complete the game, what is being expressed here is entirely in keeping with Hayles’ posthumanism. Within this schema, Harry is, admittedly in a complex way, still being produced as *some* kind of cop. It may be random and emergent and subject to change but if we choose to focus on the character creation system alone it would seem that no further discussion is required. However, *Disco Elysium* is – thankfully – not so simple and invites further delving into posthuman theory.

BARAD AND DISCO ELYSIUM

The game’s *noir* setting may not immediately seem to lend itself to posthuman theory. However, there are a wealth of hints that the game is working on numerous levels beyond a typical murder mystery. Key

amongst these is the recurring mentioning of something known only as “the Pale.” A player can choose to discuss The Pale with Joyce Messier, the senior labour negotiator for The Wild Pines corporation whose business interests lie in Revachol. Messier informs Harry of the Pale:

...it’s difficult to describe – or even measure – something whose fundamental property is the suspension of properties: physical, epistemological, linguistic... The further into pale you travel, the steeper the degree of suspension. Right down to the mathematical – *numbers* stop working. No one has yet passed the number barrier. It may be impossible. (ZA/UM 2019)

The Pale is described as something akin to a physical space that doesn’t obey the spatial rules familiar to lived human experience but also to be a force for increasing entropy or the measure by which we determine a systems progression towards equilibrium (Johnson 2018: 130). Amidst the backdrop of this encroaching, but also ubiquitous, oblivion *being* ceases to be a given. In Elysium, as Messier puts it, existence is instead more fittingly conceived of as “an uproar of matter... rising into the Pale.”

Through the Pale, *Disco Elysium* subverts our expectations of some of the fundamental properties of reality; chief amongst these assumptions that ‘things’ are the atomic or indivisible unit that defines being. It is worth highlighting, however, that the Pale is always present alongside matter; ‘things’ exist along with the Pale and the Pale with them. Both Pale and not-Pale remain material in *Disco Elysium*; one is just acting, through a rise, an “uproar,” within the Pale, in order to “be.” This idea of existence or non-existence simply as a configuration of materiality resonates, however marginally, with Barad:

Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity. Phenomena – the smallest material units (rela-

tional “atoms”) – come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity. “Matter” does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, “matter” refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization. (2007: 151)

Perhaps even more fittingly, Barad later reflects, “matter is not some givenness that pre-exists its interactions. Matter is always already caught up with nothingness. Bodies, space, time, and the void are not ontologically separate matters” (in Tsing et al 2017: G110). Things are not a given but instead must emerge through similar ‘uproars’; through activity and action, beings and environments intra-act into apparent beings and actively re-constituted over and over. Within “coherent” quantum weirdness, Newtonian beings are configured and reconfigured through agential relations.

Building on this, Messier highlights that the Pale produces “the bend-over the self. The pale does not only suspend the laws of physics, but also the laws of psychology, maybe History, even... the human mind becomes over-radiated by the past.” The notion that the self is being “bent-over,” and that History is playing a part in the construction of self in the present is further in line with Barad’s philosophy. Writing on time in the wake of the atomic bomb, Barad reflects, “In the twentieth century, time is given an infinite lifetime, a decay time. Moments live and die. Time, like space, is subject to direction, splitting, dispersal, entanglement. Each moment is a multiplicity within a given singularity” (in Tsing et al 2017: G105). *Disco Elysium* allows us the chance to see Barad’s work enacted as the laws of classical physics that seem to govern our senses can be suspended in a virtual world. The game enables the enactment of an agential-realist posthuman subject as, when focusing on The Pale, Harry is not defined as a “self” in a way that we might recognise it but is rather positioned as an ever-moving activity of spacetime where a multitude of forces continually intersect and bring forth “Harry.” As part of

the reworking of causality that comes with agential-realism (but that wouldn't necessarily be at odds with the regime of computation), Harry is not autopoietic, but rather the product of matter in space producing time through agential phenomena (what Barad calls space-time-mattering). Barad's ontology (or onto-ethico-epistem-ology as they would have it) is brought into stark relief when discussing *The Pale* with a character known as the Paledriver – an old woman who drives commercially through routes overrun by *The Pale*. When asked about her routes she finds it hard to focus, as if she is in a different place, a different time, or finding it difficult to maintain coherence at all. If the player should choose to say, “ride until you're dust sister”, the Paledriver responds, “I already *am* dust”. The Paledriver confirms the ability within *Disco Elysium* as within Barad's writings, for bodies, space, time and the void to exist together as ontologically connected matters.

What then, does this mean for *Disco Elysium*? How could Harry be any type of cop in a world where matter is already caught up with nothingness? In a world of temporal multiplicities, surely Harry is simply already “dust” like the Paledriver? The difference between Hayles and Haraway's work and how they change how *Disco Elysium* can be understood is subtle. Put simply, while there are “underpinning” forces at work in Hayles' writing, the cellular automata from which beings and consciousness emerge, there is no such structure or hierarchy within Barad's theories: although there may be cellular automata, they must *also* always already be a part of the intra-active manifold, “resolution[s] within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy” (2007: 334). They stress that “the agential realist ontology that I propose does not take separateness to be an inherent feature of how the world is. But neither does it denigrate separateness as mere illusion, an artifact of human consciousness led astray” (*ibid.*: 136). It is space-time-matter it/ourselves that is, to Barad, an enactment

of difference. Yet, there is little within *Disco Elysium* that can support this idea of material separateness. Focusing on *The Pale* and its agential-realist implications, the suggestion is that Harry's separateness is hard fought, and transitory. Given this, how can the player differentiate one type of cop from any other?

MULTIVERSE POSTHUMANISM

It remains unclear how a posthuman subject can be computed by an underpinning of automata, perhaps even at a cellular level, while always already an inseparable part of the always ongoing reconfiguration a universe. I am not alone in this either; object-oriented ontologist-scholar Graham Harman writes of Barad's work, “I do not see how the idea of relations that generate their terms out of nothing is feasible: as if a marriage generated both partners out of thin air, rather than joining and changing them” (Harman 2017: 258). However, I don't believe that Barad's theories are themselves problematic; rather that it simply makes it difficult to account for the “stories our consciousnesses tell ourselves.” Difficult, but not – I think – impossible.

Building on a broader visualisation of Barad's philosophy as one that generates multiple potentialities for matter, Francesca Ferrando suggests the “posthuman multiverse” as a method for understanding the construction of the human self. She writes, “humans, and any other manifestations of being, in the frame of the multiverse [...] can be perceived as nodes of becoming in a material network” (Ferrando 2019: 180), while banal, unthinking acts become “technologies of the multiverse.” She states, “what we eat, what we think, how we behave, who we relate to, creates part of the network and who and what we are” (*ibid.*: 181). This, to an extent, overcomes the complications of being at once part of a non-atomist ecology (which we could alternatively call a network or rhizome) and fashioned through embodied actions. Mathematical and scientific writings on the probability of there being multiple, entangled universes or of actions

producing simultaneous realities denounce the thought as “science fictions, theologies, works of the imagination” (Hossenfelder 2018: 107). Even proponents of multiverse theory don’t see it as something fundamentally distinct from quantum theory but rather an explanation for some of the oddities observable within quantum mechanics (Deutsch 2011). It is highly questionable to what extent the “many-worlds interpretation” is of any use to actual quantum physics, as Ferrando mentions throughout her work. However, as noted by Cecilia Åsberg, Kathrin Thiele and Iris van der Tuin, speculation without recourse to positivism is immensely helpful for posthumanists (Åsberg *et al.* 2015).

Before moving on, briefly, it is worth mentioning that the “technologies of the multiverse” are drawing on the “technologies of the self” but have a complicated relationship with Foucault’s writings (Martin 1988). The practices of self-making in the scope of Ferrando’s multiverse may not be entirely conscious, rational or may be simply too small in scope to be considered comparable to Foucault’s ideas. Ferrando discusses song, dance, subversion and spirituality (though expressly not dogmatic religious practices) as various methods of posthuman technologies of the self, while – by comparison – technologies of the multiverse are the ontological phenomena that enable existence within a dimension (Ferrando 2019: 181). That said, untangling this connection is not of central importance to this paper.

Extending the many-worlds interpretation to posthumanism through Ferrando, along with evocative texts like *Disco Elysium* can help non-physicists to picture an a-temporal view of reality in which phenomena contain multiple outcomes that do not come to pass but rather are co-constitutionally configured and yet remain open to reconfiguration. To that end, *Disco Elysium* provides us with an insight into the posthuman subject as a being that does not emerge from the biological equivalent of cogs in a machine, to simplify Hayles’ position, but rather are a multitude of pos-

sibilities, each of which is as “real” as any other, though some are much more likely and although we only ever feel as if we experience one.

This is evident in *Disco Elysium* in the game’s unusual use of randomness and repetition. Early in the game skill checks are introduced in a novel fashion. In a conventional game of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a player may have to roll a die to see if they are able to fire a bow and arrow. However, in *Disco Elysium* the dice symbolically determines to what extent Harry’s sense physical features determine his fate. For instance, Harry’s *savoir faire* may determine if he is able to overcome his electrochemistry’s desire to take amphetamines. Sometimes a failed skill check can be repeated (white checks); other times, they can’t (red checks). This is not entirely out of the ordinary for role playing games. What is unusual is how the game treats these retaken skill checks. Characters are not written as if one chain of events took place and then a change occurred. Instead, when a white check is retaken, it occurs as if a player has entered another reality. *Disco Elysium*’s presentation of retaken skill checks as overwriting the past could be considered a reflection of the supra-natural setting of the story as it is never entirely clear what’s real. There is, however, another way to view *Disco Elysium*’s unusual repetition; a way that resolves the posthuman tension found at the disconnect between the character construction system and the way it is manifested in the game’s dialogue.

Rather than attempting to puzzle out whether *Disco Elysium* is a game that frames the posthuman human as either only-ever-apparent phenomena, or else an assemblage of underlying biological parts working in tandem, *Disco Elysium* may be a game with the courage to suggest that these two seemingly distinct ideas are, rather, two sides of the same coin. What if, instead of thinking of the posthuman human as either configured by forces or else the product of a system of organs, we consider the possibility that, within Baradian intra-activity, there is room to conceive

of Hayles' posthuman subject? The trick, I believe, comes from not confusing Barad's ontology with a process that develops singular outcomes, but instead understanding that – as Barad sees it – the universe's quantum logic allows for the possibility of continued indeterminacy even after what appears to be a solid body takes action. To Barad, the past is not “finished” and the future is not ours (2007: x; see also McKeown 2019).

We can see this clearly in one of the most troubling exchanges in the game, with a character known as “Measurehead,” a tall man obsessed with, what he dubs, “race theory.” He stands in the way to a more central character to the game and so Harry is tasked with either sneaking around him or overcoming him. This can be achieved by using a fake ID, by making him doubt his understanding of his eugenics and phrenology derived theories, or simply incapacitating him with a – highly improbable – spinning kick. What is remarkable about the exchange with Measurehead, however, if a player should fail in any of these attempts, it is possible to retry so long as they are able to acquire the necessary skill points. Measurehead can overpower Harry and make him admit to being an alcoholic – but with no consequences; it is possible to reattempt to fist fight again in a matter of seconds should you choose to. Simple actions that Harry can take increase his odds in fighting Measurehead as well. You can choose to talk to another person in the area and receive tips on how to fight; you can borrow an ID card; even getting drunk changes your chances of succeeding. As noted, the game does not suggest that there is only one outcome. You can continue to try changing the world in small ways until the white check can no longer be retired. As such, through the white checks in the game, we are shown the multiple outcomes that emerge from any moment of sufficient complexity in the universe, manifested here – rather fittingly – in a throw of the dice.

From the perspective of the posthuman multiverse, the encounter with Meas-

urehead illustrates how simple acts (in this case, stealing an ID card, drinking alcohol, or just talking with strangers) are reframed as “technologies of the multiverse.” The game positions the player in a “relational intra-activity” (Ferrando 2019: 181) – existing by virtue of being that which you also aren't – with the hypothetical outcomes of choices they have not made. Simple actions change the conditions of reality in such a way that, when the time comes, we are changing the conditions that determine what our lived experience will be; hopefully, fully aware that our “other selves” dispersed throughout the multiverse are experiencing the alternatives (though this is a grand oversimplification).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have proposed that *Disco Elysium's* particular character construction system, imaginative setting and replay mechanics resonate with posthuman theory. In doing so, the game enacts a philosophical means for reading diffractively between the works of accomplished theorists whose work can be difficult to productively bring together. I have argued that *Disco Elysium* combines a system for producing a sense of self through heterogenous automata reminiscent of Hayles' earlier publications, with a world that literalises the material non-Newtonian indeterminacy within which Barad suggests agential cuts produce resolution. These two systems, however, are played off one another through the games use of repetition that, following Ferrando, suggests an extradimensional interplay of materiality. This suggests a possibility that the heterogenous automata are not producing a singular coherent form of Harry but, rather, reconfiguring multiple potential resolutions with no one ‘true’ or enduring Harry per se. This extradimensionality is, I think, an important new avenue for posthuman game studies as it presents a solution to troubling questions of entangled selves and others, such as presented in the work by Wilde, Janik and others mentioned in this paper. Rather than discussing play as an agential cut

that forms one configuration of entangled selves and others, we can embrace the notion that the multi-dimensional agential cut is non-destructive; there are hosts of different configurations possible, and each has a material role to play in the existence of the other. What kind of cop is Harry? Through an awareness of action as technologies of the posthuman multiverse, he is every materially-probable cop, simultaneously. There is much more to be said on the matter, not simply about how *Disco Elysium* plays into this discussion but many other games and systems of play besides. However, this game does point to an interesting direction for ways in which interactive art is enabling us to engage with the notion of the posthuman human; indeed, even doing so in highly nuanced ways that other art forms do not allow. It is not the subject matter alone that provides players with a chance to engage with these questions but rather the fundamental systems and logic that the game has been built on which resonates with contemporary philosophies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the peer-reviewers for the excellent insights that shaped the article.

WORKS CITED

- Åsberg, Cecilia; Thiele, Kathrin; Van der Tuin, Iris** 2015. 'Speculative Before the Turn: Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity'. – *Cultural Studies Review*, 21, 2, 145–172. DOI: 10.5130/cs.rv.21i2.4324
- Barad, Karen** 2012. 'On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am'. – *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, 3, 206–223. DOI: 10.1215/10407391-1892943
- Barad, Karen** 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bogost, Ian** 2012. *Alien Phenomenology, or, What it's like to be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boulter, Jonathan** 2015. *Parables of the Posthuman: Digital Realities, Gaming, and the Player Experience*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Deutsch, David** 2012. *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ferrando, Francesca** 2019. *Philosophical Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fizek, Sonia** 2018. 'Automation of Play: Theorizing Self-playing Games and Post-human Ludic Agents'. – *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 10, 3, 203–218. DOI: 10.1386/jgvw.10.3.203_1
- Gygax, Gary; Arneson, Dave** 1974. *Dungeons & Dragons* [Tabletop Role-playing Game].
- Harman, Graham** 2018. *Object-oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. St Ives: Pelican Books.
- Hayles, N. Katherine** 1999. *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine** 2005. *My Mother was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hossenfelder, Sabine** 2020. *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray*. New York: Basic Books.
- Janik, Justyna** 2019. 'Ghosts of the Present Past: Spectrality in the Video Game Object'. – *Journal of the Philosophy of Games* 2, 1, 1–22. DOI: 10.5617/jpg.2943 (19 August 2021).
- Janik, Justyna** 2020. 'Negotiating Textures of Digital Play: Gameplay and the Production of Space'. – *Game Studies* 20, 4. <http://gamestudies.org/2004/articles/janik> (19 August 2021).
- Martin, Luther H.** (Ed.). 1988. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Maturana, Humberto R.; Varela, Francisco J.** 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. London: D. Reidel.
- McKeown, Conner** 2019. "'You Bastards May Take Exactly What I Give You': Intra-action and Agency in Return of the Obra Dinn". – *Game: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 8, 1, 66–85. https://www.gamejournal.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/18_GAME_04_MCKEOWN.pdf (19 August 2021)
- Morningstar, Jason** 2014. 'Visual Design as Metaphor: The Evolution of a Character Sheet'. – *Analog Game Studies* 8, 2. <https://analoggamestudies.org/byline/jason-morningstar> (19 August 2021)
- Sicart, Miguel** 2021. 'Playthings'. – *Games and Culture* [Online First]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211020380>
- Tsing, Anna; Swanson, Heather; Gan, Elaine; Bubant, Nils** (Eds.). 2017. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Vist, Elise** 2015. 'Cyborg Games: Videogame Blasphemy and Disorientation'. – *Loading...*, 9, 14, 55–69.
- Wilde, Poppy** 2020. 'I, Posthuman: A Deliberately Provocative Title'. – *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, 3, 365–380. DOI 10.1177/1940844720939853
- ZA/UM** 2019. *Disco Elysium*. London: ZA/UM.