

Game Narrative Review

Marshall Sandoval-Clark

University of Silicon Valley

msandovalclark@usv.edu

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Game Title: *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*

Platform: Nintendo Switch

Genre: RPG

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Developer: ZA/UM

Publisher: ZA/UM

Written by: Robert Kurvitz, Helen Hindpere, Argo Tuulik, Cash De Cuir, Olga Moskvina

Editing by: Justin Keenan, Märten Rattasepp, Martin Luiga

Overview

There's been a grisly hanging in the backwater of Martiniase, and detective Harry Dubois been sent to solve it. Late to undertake a proper investigation and recovering from a staggering hangover, Harry stumbles downstairs and begins to understand the situation. Garte the cafeteria manager, and Kim Kituragi from Precinct 57 explain things and insist he deal with the body of the hanged man. The inciting incident is getting the body down from the tree. He has to commit, pushing through the disgusting smell. When Harry finally does that, he accepts that he is a policeman and embarks on the path to solve the case. It becomes immediately clear that Harry is supposed to prevent an escalation in the ongoing dustup between the Dockworkerss Union and the Wild Pines Group. He runs back and forth interviewing Wild Pines' representative Joyce Messier and union leader Evrart Claire, and he tries to find the truth in their competing narratives.

The case breaks open when Harry unravels the sham hanging and discovers the hanged man was shot from a distance. Kim and Harry find Ruby and she reveals the facts about the hanging after a dramatic confrontation. When the detectives return the clash between the union and the mercenaries comes to head in a violent tribunal with multiple possible outcomes. After this violent showdown the game's denouement begins as Harry embarks to the Sea Fortress. There he meets the real murderer who deserted from the failed revolution in Martinaise. The washed-out deserter and a fantastical cryptid close out the core story before a brief summary encounter with the other precinct detectives.

Characters

- Harrier “Harry” DuBois – the player-character and the main protagonist of the story. Harry is a detective from the infamous 41st Precinct of the Revachol Citizen’s Militia (RCM). While many of Harry’s traits are determined by the choices of the player, his past is always the same. He emerges from the oblivion of a terrible bender into the harsh reality of his trashed hostel room. Not only is he hungover, but he can’t remember who he is or why he’s there. Harry’s central drive quickly becomes clear; he needs to solve a murder. Ideally, he’ll figure out who he is and prevent an all-out war between the Dockworkers’ Union and the mercenaries brought in by the Wild Pines corporation. Clearly, Harry trends closer to the anti-hero archetype than to the mold of a traditional hero.

As Harry continues to piece together his broken past, he learns about some decidedly unheroic things he’d been up to in just the last couple days. One of the most egregious examples of Harry’s hedonistic lack of professionalism is when he discovers that he sold his police-issued gun at a pawn shop. It’s equally unheroic when Harry comes to understand that he drove his police car into an irretrievable ice patch by careening it over the beach and through a sign. It was part of an evening in which he also lost his badge, drank heavily, and partied with the locals until the next morning. Despite the rudeness and debauchery Harry is still an effective anti-hero because he wants noble goals the player can latch onto. Harry wants to solve the murder, and Harry is willing to drag his ailing mind and body through extreme work to do so. Finally, the characters that stand in the way of Harry’s goals are often even worse than him. Harry can be a bit of a blunt instrument, but he’s less violent than the Hardie Boys. He might be self-interested, but he’s less corrupt than Joyce Messier and Evrart Claire.

- Kim Kitsuragi – Kim Kitsuragi is Harry’s partner for the investigation. He was sent by the 57th Precinct, and he is the quintessential detective in the RCM. Kim fastidiously records case notes to his notebook, and he is empathetic and thorough in conducting interviews. These traits of Kitsuragi’s are especially useful at the beginning of the story; in many cases the player won’t have had time to invest in Encyclopedia or Empathy skills. In the first interview with Joyce Messier Kim’s empathy and recall fill in for those gaps.

Kim fulfills the role of traditional sidekick to Harry. He is a constant convenient exposition vehicle, and he’s an audience surrogate when noting things that Harry has done with shock or dismay. He is a loyal supporter of the hero, Harry; he has his back and manages to deftly minimize Harry’s outrageous gaffes. Kim doesn’t really fit the Sidekick role of making the hero look more impressive. In fact, Kim takes on aspects of the Mentor role. He often provides the motivation to keep Harry on task when he’s refusing the call. Though Kim is a sidekick, he is also a foil that reflects and underscores many of Harry’s attributes. He’s a mentor in that he knows many of the RCM policies

backward and forward while Harry didn't even know he was a cop at the start of the game. Harry is a brash braggart, but Kim is reserved and humble. At the end of the game, Harry attempts to recruit Kim to Precinct 41 and the skeptical Jean Vicquemare says they'd be flattered if Kim considered it. He is taken aback by the offer. Earlier, Kim had claimed not to be one of the finest or strongest officers of his precinct. Harry wears his flaws and triumphs on his sleeve, but Kim quietly contains multitudes.

- Klaasje – the very first non-player character with which most players will interact. In that first interaction she acts as the herald archetype. Harry emerges from a void into his room and from his room into the world; it's Klaasje who tells you what you are (a police officer) and where you are (Revachol). The archetype is most clear in that conversation, but Klaasje delivers important plot information later in the game. The information she provides, like the way Lely (the murder victim) was shot, progresses the investigation

Klaasje is a tragic figure. She was in Revachol trying to lay low and party away her troubles. She had a dark past working in corporate espionage, and she was a lover of the murder victim. The murderer sniped the victim out of a deranged obsession with Klaasje and a hatred for the mercenaries. She covered up the murder out of fear.

- Titus Hardie – Evrart Claire's muscle and leader of the "Hardie Boys" gang. When Harry first meets Titus Hardie he comes off as extremely direct and he unambiguously claims credit for the murder. In other words, he seems like a textbook Henchman. Titus and his crew collectively confess to the murder. To follow Evrart's machinations, probably to prevent an individual being singled out for retribution by the remaining mercenaries, and to make it harder for the detectives to arrest one of them, they stick to their story at first. As you continue to unravel the game's story the suspicion that Titus and the boys are hiding something is confirmed. Klaasje, Titus Hardie, and Ruby conspired to cover up Lely's shooting and fake the hanging. Titus Hardie is a shapeshifter in the story; he's unreliable from the start. As things progress, Harry's relationship with Titus changes from antagonism to fragile alliance. Harry and Kim eventually ask the Hardie Boys to help with a character who is mentally ill called the Pigs. In the game's final act Titus expresses admiration and appreciation for the RCM officers. The Hardie Boys' arc feels effective, and Titus' changed attitude seems earned. A lot of gameplay is spent trying to piece together the ruses and deceptions of Titus Hardie.
- Evrart Claire – Leader of the Dockworkers' Union. Evrart Claire and Joyce Messier are on opposite sides of the labor dispute that is broiling in Martinaise. Both characters stand in the way of Harry solving the murder and obstruct the process to protect their own interests. Joyce is the representative of the Wild Pines corporation, so she is on the opposite side of Evrart in the bargaining. She describes Evrart as, "fantastically corrupt" and says the union has devolved into a crime syndicate. The Dockworker's Union is known to be involved in the drug trade under Evrart's directive. The actual murderer, idealistic zealot Iosef Lilianovich Dros, expresses disappointment in Evrart and his

brother. Some people in the town like Evrart's rebuilding efforts and the way the union helps keep the peace, but Dros' frustrations show that even those on the political left often have issues with the corruption of the union in Martinaise.

Evrart isn't a villain in the story for the corruption as much as for the obstruction of the investigation. He functions as a villain in the story by driving the conflict that motivates Harry. He directs the Hardie boys to continue lying and tells Elizabeth to make sure they stay on message. Manipulating the facts and obstructing the investigation to protect union interests create roadblocks for Harry.

- Joyce Messier – A Senior Labour Negotiator for Wild Pines. Like Evrart Claire, she functions as a villain in the story, because she stands in the way of Harry solving the murder. She is not forthcoming about the mercenaries and her concerns that they might act as vigilantes. She also refuses to help Harry until he retrieves his badge. She is less of an obstruction than Evrart, and she leaves the Martinaise in the final act of the game.

Breakdown

The central conflict of *Disco Elysium* is solving the murder of the man hanged behind the Whirling-In-Rags. *Disco Elysium* is a game with ample player choice and so the exact order of how Harry and Kim conduct their investigation and the way that they do so can vary greatly. A few main story beats are required for Harry to solve the murder in any playthrough.

One of the very first missions you're given as a player is to take the body down from the tree for an autopsy. The story moves forward through a series of interviews. Harry learns that the hanged man was a Krenel mercenary hired by Wild Pines. This connects the murder to the ongoing strike and the disputes between Wild Pines and the Dockworkers' Union. Harry and Kim also quickly extract a false confession from Titus Hardie and his gang. Their supposed motivation is that Klaasje was allegedly raped, and they provide a taped phone conversation to support their claim. On further questioning, Klaasje admits that isn't what happened. They all admit that she wasn't raped, and the cause of Lely the mercenary's death was a shot not a hanging. Klaasje points the finger at Ruby as the potential shooter. The next part of the story has a hard time-lock, but once it's the third day, Harry can get across the water locks and go to the fishing village. In the fishing village explores and conducts more questioning before eventually locating Ruby. Harry and Kim learn that Ruby didn't shoot Lely.

The next section is the tensest moment of the game. Harry and Kim return to the Whirling-in-Rags to find the mercenaries and the Hardie Boys in a military tribunal. There are a few paths through the confrontation, but every time it ends with Harry being shot. In my playthrough, Raul the mercenary, Glen, Angus, and Theo of the Hardie Boys all die. Harry wakes up in his room in the Whirling-In-Rags two days later. The story pushes to a conclusion as Harry and Kim set out to investigate the island that would've had a potential vantage point to have shot Lely. As Harry closes in on whoever is living on the island, he has a dream in which he sees an amalgam of his ex-girlfriend Dora and fictional cultural figure Dolores Dei. Kim and Harry find Josef Dross, the secluded communard deserted. He confesses to shooting the mercenary. Finally,

Kim and Harry interact with a giant cryptid called the Insulindian Phasmid and have a final conversation with Harry's associates from Precinct 41.

The central relationship in *Disco Elysium* is the partnership between Kim Kitsuragi and Harry DuBois. Their progression is the biggest shift in characterization as the game plays out. Kim begins the game deeply annoyed that Harry didn't show up to meet him two days in a row and flummoxed by Harry's bad habits. By the end of the game, Kim is arguing for Harry to continue as a detective and hoping to join him by moving to the 41st Precinct. The massive popularity and fan support for Kitsuragi demonstrates how satisfying players find the journey.

There are knotty themes explored throughout *Disco Elysium*. Martinaise is a barely held together. There was a failed revolution that devastated the economy. The contradictions and opportunities of that political and cultural milieu are big focus of the game. There are also even stranger supernatural forces at play in the world of Elysium. Much of the world is referred to as the pale. It's a kind of non-substance that is difficult to quantify outside of its effects. It's described by turns as an environmental effect of human interference and a strange Hegelian force. In one of the last sections of the game, Harry encounters a hyper intelligent being called and Insulindian Phasmid. While the rest of the game is grounded, these elements supply a more fantastical theming.

This varied story is told through a variety of innovative RPG systems. Skills in *Disco Elysium* are storytelling engines and not just advancements on a tech tree for player powers. There are 24 skills which represent aspects of Harry, and they speak in a distinct voice during the dialogue exchanges in the game. Leveling up these skills will impact skill checks which have major impacts on the story. Finally, the Thought Cabinet allows Harry to ruminate on new ideas that are presented in the story, in order to internalize these ideas into his personality.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game's story is the unique skill system that fleshes out and adds texture to the narrative. The skills personify aspects of Harry's psyche and bring up different viewpoints for the player to consider. Whichever skills the player invests in are given increasing weight in Harry's internal discussion. Zooming in on a small story beat shows the dynamic way these skills affect gameplay. Harry encounters a Smoker on the Balcony. First there's a successful Electrochemistry check as Harry notices the smoker's proclivity for cigarettes which pushes him to continue the conversation; next a successful Visual Calculus check helps Harry quickly realize that the Smoker could be an important witness from their vantage point above the lot. Visual Calculus grants Harry the ability to make impressive deductive leaps from the evidence at hand. Next, Harry's intuition helps him notice how the Smoker's gaze keeps nervously wandering thanks to passing a Half Light check. The conversation continues from there and Harry realizes he should question the smoker further. This small interaction demonstrates how the skills contribute to solving the murder and keeping the interactions fresh for the player. It's a well-implemented system that makes Harry's internal monologue interesting and dynamic.

Unsuccessful Element

It is sometimes too easy to get lost in the breadth of rich dialogue in *Disco Elysium*. Each character and exchange in the game is full of context and interesting characterization. The writers crafted deliberate dialogue that prevents players from pattern matching and invites them to approach dialogue choices with meaning. In a recent interview, writer Justin Keenan noted, “We tried to find something interesting about everyone we wrote about. We didn’t want anyone to be generic or forgettable... That also means, like you can’t like walk up to somebody and immediately know like, ‘OK, I just need to like click through this dialogue tree until they give me a task to do’” (Valentine). In a GDC talk, Keenan explained that they made deliberate choices to obfuscate the mechanical and instrumental purposes of interactions with non-playable-characters (Keenan). The writers and designers of *Disco Elysium* succeeded in making a mechanic for talking with NPCs and investigating that was rich and varied, but there were unintended consequences.

When it’s not simple to determine the mechanical functions of an NPC, progression can stall out at inopportune times. A clear example of these types of hard gates is the quest to understand the murder victim’s tattoos. The quest description notes that you should ask around about the tattoos, but it can feel like a needle in a haystack to question the correct person. To successfully gain this vital information the player character must ask Joyce Messier and Klaasje about them, but there are other opportunities to ask about the tattoos unsuccessfully. This type of quest can create a frustrating feeling of dead ends for the player. These dead ends undercut the rewarding aspects of the game’s openness.

A better balance could have been achieved with a hint system to get players back on track when they’re stuck. There is already a mechanic in the game where the skills speak up in Harry’s consciousness and interject dialogue for the player. The game’s designers could’ve used these talks from the skills to point the player to these types of gates if they had tripped certain narrative flags but still weren’t progressing. In the example of the quest about the victim’s tattoos the Logic skill could jump in and remind Harry about the lingering question during interactions. Similarly, the Shivers skill might’ve been utilized as a sixth sense to clue the player in if they were interacting again with the NPCs who had the undiscovered solution to this unresolved quest.

Highlight

The highlight of *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* might be different for each player and that speaks to the strength of the writing along the game’s far edges. The character Neha, the Novelty Dicemaker was a highlight. Despite the other business that have closed in her area of Martinaire, she has carved out a small niche making novelty dice. If the player character asks enough questions, she will tell you about the other companies that failed in the area, which the townsfolk call cursed. One of the companies she tells you about was called Fortress Accident, a roleplaying game studio. They were successful for a time, but they couldn’t maintain the discipline to see

their final wild projects to fruition. It's a tiny detail, but small story wrinkles like this make the game so engrossing.

Critical Reception

Disco Elysium and the updated version *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* were critically lauded. *Disco Elysium* received a 9-out-of-10 from *Edge Magazine*. The magazine has a reputation for harsh reviews, but they praised the game's skill system and the way the world-building and characterization intertwine. The reviewer said, "The writers do a sterling job of conveying the impact of each choice" (Brown, 100). They praised the meaningful branching options throughout.

Alice Bell at Rock, Paper, Shotgun had a more complicated opinion of the game, but ultimately called it a flawed masterpiece (Bell, 1). She praised the Thought Cabinet system and heaped appreciation on the skills mechanic. Perhaps rightly, she noted, "The skill system is some of the highest quality writing in *Disco Elysium*" (Bell, 2). One of her criticisms was of the dense exposition in the flavor text. She also had a few quibbles with some inconsistencies in how certain narrative flags were checked and felt unsatisfied by the ultimate solution of the murder. These criticisms notwithstanding, Bell had a positive view of *Disco Elysium*.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: A million-word game with little combat can still be gripping and fun.**

The staggering amount of text in *Disco Elysium* is often mentioned in reviews and analysis of the game, and the amount of reading required to complete a playthrough could easily have kept the game from finding an audience. The Thought Cabinet system is a big part of what keeps the hefty dialogue entertaining. Lead writer Robert Kurvitz has compared the thoughts players discover and open up for research to the loot in other RPGs (Gamespot). Indeed, they function as rewards that give the character buffs and encourage the player to keep exploring. Players can shoot the belt by which the victim is hanging on the tree and get an option to high five Kim. This unlocks the Ace's High thought which grants +1 Empathy towards Kim and +1 *Espirit de Corps* for the backstory about the RCM and the revolution the thought provides.

Filling the Thought Cabinet with these delightful discoveries lends conversations a sense of possibility and excitement. Systems like this could be implemented in other narrative games to make exposition and dialogue mechanically meaningful.

- **Lesson 2: Video games can effectively replicate the freedom and experimentation of tabletop RPGs.**

The creators of *Disco Elysium* made it an explicit goal to recreate the personal role-play and creative experimentation of pen-and-paper RPGs (Bell). They came as close as to

that long-sought goal as any developer has come to date. There is a wild range of approaches a player can take to their character in *Disco Elysium*. Harry can be a diehard communist revolutionary or a violent fascist. Roleplaying can also label Harry as a specific copotype. Copotypes are thoughts that can be internalized in the Thought Cabinet, and they unlock when the player has chosen enough dialogue that fits a specific approach to police work. If the player character apologizes frequently, they can become a Sorry Cop. If they pick flamboyant and self-obsessed dialogue, they might become a Superstar Cop. The copotypes are a fun mechanical outgrowth of the breadth of options for roleplaying and choice across the game.

- **Lesson 3: Games can have both wildly branching narratives and satisfying story arcs.**

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut is a masterclass in how to write a branching narrative. The game follows a structure of branching and reintegrating the story frequently. There are countless paths through the game based on dialogue choice and ways of progressing the murder mystery. Despite this variety, the game successfully tells a complete and satisfying story. A major example of this branching complexity is in the tribunal which is the game's climax. One of the Hardie Boys, Shanky will run from the fight based on some dialogue options. If he didn't run away, he is killed later in the encounter. Depending on skill check outcomes different characters will or won't die in the tribunal. These are consequential differences, and yet the fundamental story of the tribunal doesn't change. Harry always gets shot, at least once, and the narrative always continues.

Despite all the permutations and side stories the game can take in the journey, Harry's main story stays satisfying by funneling back to strong narrative beats. The developers of *Disco Elysium* have described the game as being "about reapplying for your job as a human being and as a cop" (Bell). This is a good summation of the overall arc Harry goes through. At the game's start he is almost disembodied. By solving the mystery Harry gains the ammunition to pass muster with his colleagues and be allowed to continue working on the police force. He doesn't change too much as a person, but Harry and the player learn who he is and ultimately pass the application to continue moving forward as a cop. As destructive as some of his habits are, Harry is a good cop. He has solved over 200 cases. The game provides some hope that he might also progress personally; his dream and the phasmid encourage him to move past his heartbreak.

Summation

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut progressed the medium of computer role playing games forward. Not only does the story offer players almost unprecedented choice, it's also memorable. Anchoring the large cast of characters are the two main detectives and Revachol itself. Those flawed and loveable characters tell a story worth revisiting.

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