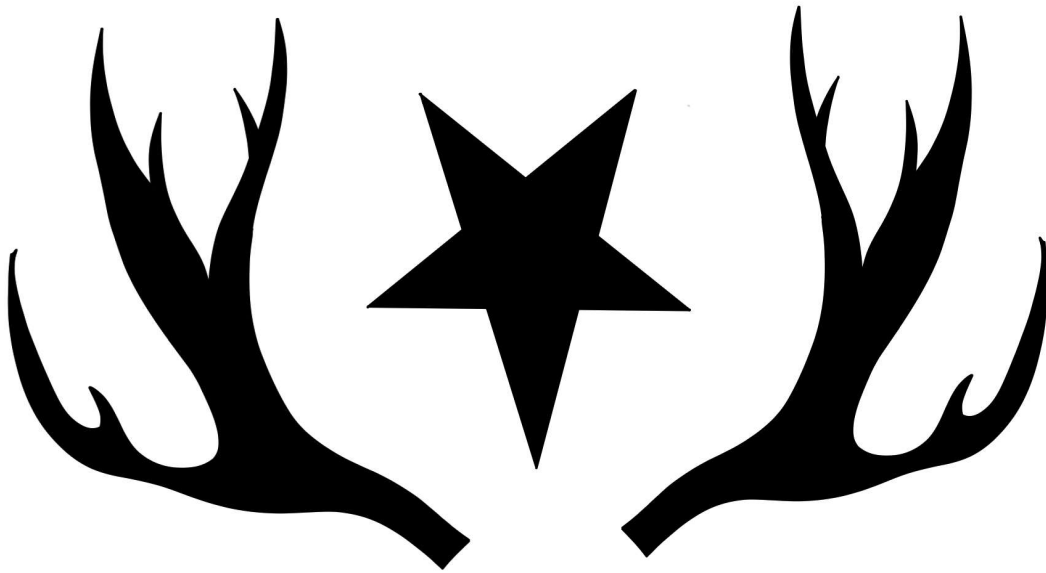


# **The Post-Punk Revolution of Disco Elysium**

An analysis of Post-Soviet Europe and a Remastered Review  
of Disco Elysium by Lydia Isabelle



*“I want to look her in the eyes.*

*Look in her eyes and cry.” – Boris Ryzhy*

When I first covered Disco Elysium, I had done so from a position of utter astonishment that such a game could even exist. Indeed, Disco Elysium’s development history is nothing short of an absolute miracle. The lead writer, Estonian novelist, and musician, Richard Kurvitz, spent years attempting to get concepts for the game off the ground with multiple fellow developers on the project selling personal belongings along with a failed novel to kick start funding development to boot. Thematically and mechanically, however, Disco Elysium is even more of an anomaly. In a modern gaming climate dominated by live service battle pass systems and constant online updates with absurd developer crunch and corporate, capitalist greed infecting every corner of the industry, Disco Elysium stands out not only as a return to the classic 90s-esque RPG format, but also does so whilst keeping the satire and sardonic tones of the story extremely sharp and pointed. It almost even mocks the player at several points for assuming this game would take roads more traveled today in regards to quest and character writing. Disco Elysium’s handling of politics is equally shocking. All too willing to brutally criticize existing and proposed structures for society, Disco Elysium forces the player into a position of engagement with political and economic philosophy. Needless to say, none of this should have worked on (capital G) Gamers, whose irritation at political analysis in video games, while misplaced at best and outright ignorant at worst, is well documented. It’s success is truly astounding. I couldn’t help but drag out often misunderstood concepts such as schizoanalysis and political theory in regards to how the world of Disco Elysium arranges itself. While I think viewing this work of art through that lens is useful and can be interesting, I would like to zoom in further on the game’s story and characters and draw comparison to cultural and artistic moments in the real world. I will warn you, however. There will absolutely be spoilers in this essay. If you have not yet done a playthrough of Disco Elysium, you owe it to yourself and to this essay to do so before reading. Beyond this point, there will be major plot points and character analysis discussed. I will also be discussing heavy topics such as substance abuse and suicide so if those are not things you wish to engage in discussion with I recommend clicking off this essay and engaging in self-care. You are valued and deserve to live a life of love and beauty just as much as myself or anyone else. Keep yourself strong and stay on task. There is a tomorrow and you will be there to see it.

# PART 1

## *Awake from the Void*

Disco Elysium begins from the most illogical and out of left field place your player character could possibly begin from: self-annihilation and ego death. Beginning at the end. You awake to the world with no recollection of your own identity, nor the identity of the world in which you live. Important fundamental concepts of Disco Elysium's world, its past, and your own past are nothing but a miasma of blurry images and unrequited thoughts and feelings. Even before this, all you see is a blank void with only your own subconscious and your bodily nervous system to speak to you. "Nothing....Warm primordial blackness." You come from nothing and to nothing you will return after your time in Elysium is up. What you do with that is up to you. You are also nothing, mostly nothing I should say. You see, here is where Disco Elysium really shines. You wake up alone in a trashed hostel room. Your body is very much broken. Simply grabbing your tie, which has stuck itself to the ceiling fan, can straight up kill you and send you back to that nothingness from whence you came. The lights sting your eyes. Your face is a bloated mess of meat in the mirror should you work up the courage to even look upon it. You stumble out of the apocalyptic mess hungover and confused about who, where, how, or why you are. You speak to a couple people and begin to get a vague picture of what you did immediately before obliterating your own self-identity through copious alcoholism. You are a police detective sent to investigate a hanging in the backyard of the hostel. You are scheduled that day to meet your partner, lieutenant Kim Kitsuragi, who will assist you with the investigation. Finally, at last, you have **something, anything** to hang onto and keep yourself tethered to some form of goal for yourself, or you don't depending on how you choose to play it. You don't have to agree with Lt. Kitsuragi on any of his morals or ideals, but what he represents regardless is stoic, absolute professionalism. You can lean on that or you can shove it away and enact your previous self's own prophetic thoughts. Because you **do**, like it or not, have an identity. You were someone some time ago. Who? Lieutenant double-yefreitor Harrier Du Bois, that's who. A washed up and burnt out former "supercop" who has drunken himself not only into a brutal break up with the love of his life, Dora, but also has turned himself into a disco parody of himself to his coworkers. He is mocked and ribbed in multiple calls to his station. "Harry" Du Bois has become, in his own words, "a joke", and quite the bad one at that. It's so unbelievable, so sardonically fantastic, but somehow still so relatable if you have experienced even a fraction of the substance abuse, burn out, or even crash out that Mr. Du Bois here has. It can feel like a

self-fulfilling prophecy. That's exactly what Harry was doing on this night of the deadly deluge of drinking: fulfilling prophecy. He believed he was too much of a mess, too much of a fuck up, too much of a bad person to continue on as himself. He engages ritualistically with drink and song, screams about how he does not want to be "this type of animal anymore", and then enters the murky void of ego death to come out a corpse or a husk of himself, either does the trick. You don't have to be him, but can you really deny the task of trying to put that life back together in some way, shape, or form? Well, yes, you actually can just become a new person named Raphael Ambrosius Costeau. Even giving you the option to engage with this self-identity belies a strong understanding of characterization. It's not something that's out of the realm of possibility for someone so bludgeoned as Harry. It makes sense. The void taketh, but the void also giveth as well, I suppose. Life, death, or ego death: take your pick. Is Harry Du Bois redeemable? Well, I suppose that's relative to the playthrough. I will say you can be a pretty fucked up person in the game. You are constantly thrown options to be a violent misogynist and racist, almost as if these might have subconsciously been true thoughts beneath the surface for Harry as well. Is that redeemable? Does simply saying no to those make you redeemable? Is some sort of redemption even the goal? Disco Elysium seems to say no.

## **PART 2**

### ***A Failed World***

Disco Elysium is set upon an island nation called Revachol in the continent of Insulinde. The continents of the world are divided into these islands of matter known as isolas. The sea in between is an eruption of nothingness at the border of reality known as the Pale. For all of its talk of the Pale being this entropic force, this swirling chaos, it is largely absent from major plot beats of the game. It is a constant. It is nature unwinding the history of mankind. It just simply is. It's also nothing so it isn't. Spaces within the Pale cease to be spaces, but become a cocktail of memories and ideas. The laws of science break down within the Pale because they cannot grasp something as immaterial as memory. The Pale, in being a constant, is also something that is taught to children as simple as the sky being blue. It comes up in side tangents often in Disco Elysium, but remains on the fringes of main events in fitting with its edge of reality nature. This is all I will say on the Pale. It is a fascinating concept and Harry Du Bois is noted multiple times to be quite interested in it in his forgotten past. However, it really isn't important to this story beyond that. It is entropy and entrance into the Pale means self-annihilation. It's quite understandable why Harry is so interested given his self-destructive alcoholic binge. Understanding the Pale means understanding suicide at a large scale. There are

references within the text of it being spread through human self-destructive appetites. There are more easier theoretical and material concepts presented within Disco Elysium that more clearly lay out parallels to historical analysis in our world. The Pale, being the furthest into fantasy conceptually that the game delves, is ultimately an unreal analogy.

Revachol, as its current existant polity, is relatively young having only existed for fifty years to the point of the game's events. It exists in a sort of political limbo. Much of its social services are largely community led as things are getting more organized under the watchful eye of the Moralist International, Moralinern for short. Revachol is, in essence, an occupation zone. The forces of international capital have seized the island and turned it into a neo-liberal, or ultra-liberal to fit within terminology in text, laboratory. It is mentioned multiple times to function as a tax haven for the elite of far flung isolas. How did Revachol, once the bastion of an absolute monarchy and cultural center in its own right, end up here in this state of veritable lawlessness and exploitation? By force at the barrel of a cannon.

You see, the history of Revachol is a broken one. The authoritarian control of monarchy which had become decadent and rife with corruption and abuses was seized and replaced with a socialist commune. The world turned over. Communism sprouted as a new ideology poised to bring people together and fight against not only the forces of capital, but also against entropy itself. Communism in Disco Elysium is creation and transformation. The promise of a future without destruction. It did not come. Infighting and violence plagued the realms that attempted revolution. They succeeded, but only for a short time. Capital stormed its gates and ransacked everything. They largely rebuilt everything in their own image, but Martinaire, the neighborhood where the game takes place, serves as a permanent scar upon the cityscape, a reminder of the destruction.

Revachol's history largely reflects that of Harry's. Its a broken world and these are broken people who had a bright past that was thought to have looked into an even brighter future, but a cancerous hunger for wealth and death destroyed that future. Harry is a broken person who had a romantic partner that deeply loved him and interests that fascinated him until his desire and curiosity for annihilation destroyed him and then rebuilt him into the facade we see in the game. Destruction begets destruction. The world turns on. Disco Elysium is a warning about the results of that craving for annihilation. In spite of its constant usage of suicidality as a tool to shock and horrify, but also relate to the player, it is a game that opposes such an option in favor of creation and transformation, abandonment of resentments. Where have I heard this before?

## PART 3

### *Rusted Iron*

In 1991, the Soviet Union fell. Several decades of promise, then repression, then destruction, then promise again, only for the cold grip of stagnation to freeze the land harder than the coldest Siberian winter came to an end. Post-Soviet eastern Europe has not been the same. Petty reactionary oligarchs now rule much of the land. An older generation of Soviet citizens remembers an era in which there was a sense of national pride with little reckoning for the actual theory that went into it. Younger generations grow up only knowing the grey nothingness that followed. Art reflects culture and its times. Eastern European post-punk grew up during this period of decay and mob rule, Molchat Doma of Belarus probably being one of the more popular bands to come out of this. Much of the musical content is very darkly nostalgic. Late Cold War era synths and filters give way to punk-esque percussion. There is a resentment buried in the lyrical contents. The delivery of the words by vocalist, Egor Shkutko, carries with it a coldness and longing that, when I listen, takes me almost to the world of *Disco Elysium* and the mind of Harry Du Bois. Their most popular song, *Sudno*, is an adaptation of a Boris Ryzhy poem (a website catalogue of his work will be provided at the end of the essay). Boris Ryzhy was a mostly unassuming figure who grew up in the Ural region of the Soviet Union towards the end of its existence in the 1980s. Much of his poetry would not even see the light of day until after his suicide in 2001. In his work is captured the waning days of the Soviets and the early years of the Russian Federation and how outlooks were in this particular region. Stories of lost love, alcoholism, mental illness, and more lurk within his catalogue. In much the same way as with Molchat Doma's rendition, I cannot help but see through the eyes of Harry Du Bois.

Estonia, the home of the lead developers of *Disco Elysium*, was a satellite republic during the time of the Soviet collapse. An entire way of life was gone out the window. It's reflected in the hard and difficult process Richard Kurvitz had of even getting development started. The world of post-Soviet Europe and the world of *Revachol* are both places in limbo. You cannot make your own luck anymore. You aren't guaranteed a future. Europe, especially, has seen an increase in conflict and reactionary imperialism in the past decade alone. It's a cold world out there. Can't we just get up out of bed, dust ourselves off, and....do better???

## PART 4

### *A Sacred and Terrible Conclusion*

In Disco Elysium, Harry Du Bois is presented with a choice: get the fuck up and make something of yourself or rot. The game has very little care for which you choose and will gleefully present you with the consequences of either decision you make without so much as a wink. This feeds back into how sharp this game's wit truly is and how incredibly relatable it is. The world does not give two shits what you put into it. All things, ultimately, are meaningless in the grand scheme of things. All reality is subsumed into the Pale. All nations eventually collapse. All civilizations and their cultures are fleeting. To go beyond the Pale, is to build something of yourself that means something **to you**. **You** are the one who chooses. **You** are the arbiter of yourself. It means very little to the world and everyone else in it whether or not Harry chooses transformation in the form of creation or destruction. It means the world to himself what he chooses. For his sake, I cannot bring myself to destroy him. He is equally a beautiful fucked up being in this world with hopes and dreams as I am. He's far from perfect but doing better is a conscious choice he and all of us can make.

Communism is not ultimately a solution as presented in Disco Elysium. The game shares its most painful longing for Communism and Socialism, but it cannot in full conscience say it is flawless in opposition to anything else. Let's not even call it Communism anymore. Labels are meaningless things. It is a collective resolution to do better, to be better. Disco Elysium's proposition to the player is that you abandon the petty resentments and bitterness towards yourself, others, and the world. Disco Elysium wants you to build. Not as a "BIG COMMUNISM BUILDER", but as a builder of yourself to begin with. Or....circle the drain some more. It doesn't care. The world doesn't care. It's your choice. Nothing is more punk than self-determination in the face of overwhelming order. What do you say? Where will you go from here?

**Boris Ryzhy Poems and Biographies:** <https://borisryzhy.com/>

Richard Kurvitz and many of the other developers of Disco Elysium were forced out of their own company a few years after the release of the game. Please support their continued projects outside of ZA/UM. Corporate greed will never destroy art.