

ALIENATION, CRITIQUE AND THE FAILURE OF RATIONALITY IN THE ANALYSIS OF *DISCO ELYSIUM* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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A TALE OF INDIVIDUAL ALIENATION AND THE COLLAPSE OF LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM, 2019) has established itself as one of the most acclaimed video games of recent years, winning numerous awards at prestigious international competitions. At the 2019 Game Awards, it won no fewer than four: Best Narrative, Best Role-Playing Game, Best Independent Game and Fresh Indie Game. The video game provides an immersive experience, characterised by Tan and Mitchell (2020) as a type of dramatic narrative game that fits within the context of Aristotelian drama. However, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná (2023) describe it as an expansive role-playing game, while Novitz (2021) highlights its narrative conflicts, which place it between a detective role-playing game and a work with elements of Gothic literature.

Beyond these various perspectives and considerations, the game has aroused considerable academic interest, especially for its narrative structure, defined as multi-level by Shibaev (2022), and for its innovative game mechanics, which integrate moral decisions and sociopolitical themes. It is important to note that academic studies on *Disco Elysium* are extremely diverse, both in their disciplinary perspectives and in their findings, which once again highlights the multidisciplinary and intertextual nature of game studies (Freire-Sánchez, 2024; Maté, 2020; Pérez-Latorre, 2023). For example, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná (2023) analyse the game in relation to how the vocal performances of the characters can support the sociomoral orientation of the gamer, while also concluding that voice stereotypes can serve to enhance perceptions of the characters rather than increase existing stigmas and prejudices. Shibaev (2022), on the other hand, analyses the char-

acteristics of the dialogue and polyphonic narration in the video game's text in order to determine its replayability and immersiveness. In contrast, a study by Novitz (2021) focuses on how the influences of Gothic elements and its status as a detective adventure allow for a more transparent appreciation of the sociopolitical critique emerging from both its story and its gameplay mechanics. *El Viaje del Antihéroe en el Videojuegos* (Freire, 2024) analyses the construction of Harry DuBois, the protagonist of *Disco Elysium*, highlighting how his fragmented personality and alcohol addiction distance him from both the monomyth or narrative pattern of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey and the traditional hero archetype. A study by Spies (2021) also explores the configuration of this character, but from a perspective of the mental disorders suffered by DuBois and his existential connection with the absurdism of Albert Camus' work. Spies' article is not the only one to approach the game from a philosophical perspective; McKeown (2021) examines it in relation to various post-humanist theories, concluding that the game represents an ideal narrative resource to address gaps in contemporary post-humanist research from the perspective of the video game sector.

The plot of *Disco Elysium* presents a story that blends fantastical elements with more realistic ones while exploring numerous social problems, such as depression, racism, alcoholism and drug addiction, trauma and corruption. At its narrative core is a bleak portrait of a disintegrated society where everyday life is characterised by a lack of opportunities, extreme ideologies and institutional failure. At first glance, the game also seems to be based on premises that use the control of the protagonists to immerse the player in a scenario of individual alienation and the collapse of late capitalist society.

It is precisely this critique of late capitalism that constitutes one of the rallying points of thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, founders of the

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Frankfurt School. This critique focuses on how dominant ideologies alienate the individual (Podvoyskiy, 2021), limiting their capacity for action and promoting the commodification of the self (Langman, 2009). With this in mind, this article offers an analysis of *Disco Elysium* with reference to the main axioms of the Frankfurt School with the aim of examining how these critical concepts are expressed in the video game's narrative and interactive design.

This research is framed within the discipline of game studies, a critical perspective that recognises video games as a cultural and artistic form with the capacity to reflect and represent society (Maté, 2020). This capacity is due to inherent characteristics of the medium, such as interaction, immersion and the ability to influence choices and narrative paths. In this respect, Jiménez-Alcázar and Rodríguez argue that video games "narratively function in the same way as other cultural products, but with the novel factor of the necessary intervention of the player" (2018: 59). These elements of interaction and immersion allow video games to represent rather than simulate worlds (Frasca, 2019), transforming the passive into the active (Gómez and González Álvarez, 2017).

Thus, based on the specific case of *Disco Elysium*, this article aims to analyse how video games, through their narrative designs and interactive mechanics, facilitate critical reflection on philosophical, social and moral problems. It also highlights their ability to shape and question the dynamics of contemporary society, thereby positioning them as devices of social criticism and satire of extreme ideologies. At the same time, this

study seeks to explore how *Disco Elysium*, through its interactive structure, offers a critical perspective by actively engaging players in philosophical reflections through moral decision-making and determinations.

STATE OF THE QUESTION ON THE APPLICATION OF CRITICAL THEORY TO DIGITAL ART

The Frankfurt School, founded by philosophers including Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, emerged in the 20th century as a radical critique of the social and economic structures of advanced capitalism (Kellner, 2012). This group of thinkers, despite the significant disagreements between them, as Hohendahl (1985) explains, developed what we now know as critical theory. Initially, the aim of critical theory was to analyse society and propose a transformation through philosophical reflection on the conditions that perpetuate oppression and the alienation of the individual (Bronner, 2017). The concepts of alienation, ideology and instrumental rationality, fundamental to their work, provide a theoretical framework that is essential for understanding the relationship between contemporary social systems and the human experience within them (Holanda, 2019).

As mentioned above, one of the most important concepts of the Frankfurt School is alienation (Podvoyskiy, 2021), which takes up and reworks Karl Marx's critique of the individual's relationship to the capitalist system. For Marx, alienation was the result of exploitation in the production process, where workers are separated from the products of their labour, from their fellow workers and from their own humanity (Øversveen, 2022). Adorno and Horkheimer, however, contribute new layers of reflection and extrapolate this idea to the cultural sphere. In their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2016 [1944]), they argue that alienation is not just an economic phenomenon

but a cultural and emotional entity. The cultural industries, according to these thinkers, impose a homogenisation that reinforces the passivity of individuals and distances them from a critical understanding of their reality, even leading them toward self-estrangement (Roberts, 1987).

Today, one of the main interpretations of alienation is the transformation of the products of individual and collective activities into an independent force that subjugates people, who cease to see themselves as active agents and lose conscious control over the circumstances of their lives, experiencing their own creations as alien and beyond their reach (Schweitzer, 1991). This alienation has implications for culture, which, rather than being a space for emancipation, becomes an instrument of control (Podvoyskiy, 2021). Paraphrasing Adorno in his analysis of the culture industry (2005 [1951]), modern entertainment is presented as an escape mechanism that anaesthetises the audience, evading any possibility of critical reflection. Cultural products thus reproduce dominant ideologies and create an illusion of freedom and satisfaction that perpetuates alienation. This phenomenon limits individuals' ability to recognise their own subordinate status within a system that exploits them. There are also emotional consequences of alienation, understood as an internal separation in which the person feels alienated from their own emotions, experiencing a loss of personal meaning and difficulty integrating their feelings into their worldview (Szanto, 2017).

Another key concept in critical theory is instrumental rationality. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that as modern societies advance technologically, rationality becomes a tool for domination or social control. Instead of being oriented toward the emancipation sought by Marxism or toward human development, reason is subordinated to utilitarian ends and productivity, where what matters is efficiency and control, not the liberation of the individual.

The aforementioned thinkers argue that this type of rationality, far from bringing real progress, reinforces the oppressive structures of capitalism. Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man* (2024 [1964]), takes up this argument by pointing out that instrumental rationality leads to a society in which alternatives to the dominant system are almost unthinkable. According to Marcuse, advanced capitalism manages to integrate even those forces that should oppose it, creating an illusion of freedom and plurality that in reality reinforces conformity and control. The individual's critical capacity is reduced, and alienation becomes a permanent condition. However, for Blau (2020), attacking capitalist instrumental rationality is a mistaken approach because the fundamental problem is capitalism, not instrumental rationality.

Therefore, although the thinkers of the Frankfurt School differ on certain points, it is possible to affirm that they agree that true reason should be emancipatory, oriented toward liberating the individual and overcoming the conditions that oppress them. The contemporary relevance of these theories is evident in current resistance movements such as alter-globalisation, which calls for a radical reorganisation of economic and political life (Masquelier, 2014). Alienation and ideology seem to work in unison to maintain the individual in a state of conformism and entertainment in which radical critique is devalued.

The relationship between ideology and culture is another central aspect of the Frankfurt School's critique. In their essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (2007 [1947]), Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mass culture has ceased to be a space for the expression of diverse ideas and has instead become a mechanism of ideological control. The culture industry, organised in a manner similar to mass production, standardises the content it produces and distributes, eliminating any disruptive potential (Horkheimer, 2013 [1947]). The function of this industry is not so much to educate or encour-

age critical reflection as to perpetuate the status quo through the reproduction of narratives that reinforce the dominant ideologies. This is most palpable in war films that reinforce the nation of the victors or in the construction of the American action hero of the 1980s. For Marcuse, this ideological integration goes even deeper, as reflected in *One-Dimensional Man* when he argues that advanced capitalism has managed to neutralise even those forces that might oppose it. Resistance movements, cultural critiques and countercultural movements are absorbed by the system and turned into products rather than real threats. The individual's ability to imagine radical alternatives to their current situation is compromised by the pervasiveness of the dominant ideology, which shapes their desires, needs and beliefs.

AN ADAPTATION OF HERMENEUTIC INTERMEDIAL ANALYSIS

This study uses a qualitative methodology based on a narrative and textual analysis of *Disco Elysium*, understanding video games as ergodic texts (Aarseth, 1997), that is, cultural products that require interpretive effort beyond passive reading. This methodology is combined with hermeneutic analysis, which seeks to understand the deeper meaning of a text, phenomenon or experience by considering its context and the author's intentions, and with interpretive analysis, supported in this case by the critical theories of the Frankfurt School. The hermeneutic intermedial analysis proposed by Kłosiński (2022) allows us to unravel the ideological and narrative layers in the interaction between mechanics, dialogues and visual design. This analysis is complemented by Jauss's critical reception theory (1982), adapted to the interactive context to examine how player choices trigger political and existential meanings in *Disco Elysium*. Also taken into account are the theoretical precepts of Sicart (2014), who also explores the ethics of gaming and how players negotiate moral

meanings. Through this methodology, the objective is to examine how the game reflects themes of alienation, ideology and failed rationality, and how these are articulated through its narrative, characters and gameplay mechanics.

The narrative analysis of the game focuses on the dialogue, characters and moral decisions the player faces throughout it. The discursive and narrative choices that reveal the philosophical approaches characterising the post-revolutionary world of *Disco Elysium* are analysed. This includes an examination of how the protagonist, an amnesiac and emotionally devastated detective, embodies the ideas of alienation and personal crisis that are central to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Particular attention is paid to moments in the game when dominant ideologies, a sense of hopelessness and a loss of faith in rationality are evident.

This textual analysis is complemented by a theoretical approach based on the ideas of Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer. While the Frankfurt School's critical theory has been applied in numerous disciplines, its presence in game studies and the analysis of video games remains limited. Research on video games has rarely used Frankfurt School theories to examine video games as instruments of ideological reproduction or critique. Research on how these ideas align or contrast with the theories of alienation and ideology of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse is also rare, although there are some recent studies that have offered new readings, including those by Flores Ledesma (2020), Si (2022) and Grimes and Feenberg (2009), although none of these focuses on a case study. The theories of instrumental reason and alienation provide the interpretive framework for understanding how *Disco Elysium* critiques social and political structures in a fictional context that nonetheless reflects the anxieties of modern societies. In addition to the narrative, this study analyses how the visual design and gameplay mechanics contribute to the creation of a sense of alienation.

DYNAMICS OF EXPLOITATION, INEQUALITY AND HOPELESSNESS IN A POST-REVOLUTIONARY WORLD

In the opening moments of the game, the protagonist, Harry DuBois, wakes up in a state of complete physical, psychological and emotional helplessness. He has lost his memory, is unaware of his identity and begins to confront the consequences of his previous actions. This initial state represents the definitive expression of individual alienation, in which the subject is unable to recognise themselves in their own actions and feels trapped in a system that reduces them to just another cog in the social structure. The detective has lost everything and in one of the first dialogues, as he looks at himself in the mirror, he reflects on his face destroyed by alcoholism and poverty, unable to recognise himself: "You cannot see yourself, just a vague impression of a man." This disconnection from his own identity reflects personal alienation, where the individual no longer has control over their own life or their relationship with the world around them—an echo of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of how modern societies fragment human beings, separating them from their sense of self. Returning to the moment when DuBois observes his reflection in the bathroom mirror, the player can choose whether to confront the reality of his physical deterioration or to avoid it. This simple act symbolises the subject's alienation from themselves, while the mechanics reinforce this disconnection by giving the player the option to ignore the problem and the character's own condition.

DuBois also feels alienated from the rest of society, as we are constantly told that he has failed other people and therefore no longer has a place in the world. He is determined to feel depressed and alienated, as reflected in the following lines of dialogue: "Four point six billion people – and you failed every single one of them. You really fucked up", "a tremendous loneliness comes over you. Everybody in the world is doing something

without you” or “Brother, you should put me in front of a firing squad. I have no words for how I failed you.”

One of the most innovative features of *Disco Elysium* is its Thought Cabinet, a system that allows the player to adopt various ideological thoughts throughout the game. These ideas, developed through choices and dialogue, shape the protagonist’s perspective on the world and allow the player to choose how the protagonist defines himself ideologically, providing dialogue options that align his thoughts with different political worldviews such as communism, ultra-liberalism, fascism, or a more centrist or depolarised moralism. When the player adopts extreme ideological positions, these become narrative paths within the story but not real alternatives for changing the course of events, which underscores the futility of ideologies, according to the game. For example, if the player adopts the thought “Mazovian Socio-Economics”, which is based on Marxism, the protagonist will begin to analyse the world’s inequalities from a perspective that is critical of capitalism. This will affect the available dialogue and alter how the player interprets the game environment, highlighting the impact of ideologies on the subjective experience but not changing the actual story of the game. Consequently, none of these ideologies is presented as a viable solution to the problems in the video game’s world and all are treated critically. For example, one line of dialogue states: “Democracy is a meaningless sham as long as the working class is under the boot-heel of

WHEN THE PLAYER ADOPTS EXTREME IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS, THESE BECOME NARRATIVE PATHS WITHIN THE STORY BUT NOT REAL ALTERNATIVES FOR CHANGING THE COURSE OF EVENTS, WHICH UNDERSCORES THE FUTILITY OF IDEOLOGIES, ACCORDING TO THE GAME

Capital” Another optional line of dialogue states: “Capital has the ability to subsume all critiques into itself. Even those who would critique capital end up reinforcing it instead.” These statements are examples of Marcuse’s critique of how capitalism has neutralised society’s capacity to imagine alternatives or achieve revolution against dominant structures. Through these dialogues and thoughts, far from providing answers, the game emphasises hopelessness in a fictional society where all revolutionary promises have failed.

The concept of instrumental rationality, fundamental to the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, is also reflected in the game’s mechanics. Throughout the story, the detective uses a thinking engine, a system that allows the player to process the character’s ideas and deduce facts about the cases he is investigating. However, these mental processes often lead to absurd or irrational conclusions, illustrating how reason, when subordinated to instrumental ends, does not always lead to progress or truth. For example, in one case, the detective may theorise that a victim’s cause of death is a paranormal conspiracy; while possible within the game’s fictional world, this line of reasoning is completely irrational and reflects the confusion that can be generated by the instrumentalisation of reason. The Wild Pines Corporation and its interests in Revachol, the city where the plot takes place, constitute a representative example of an economic system in which people are reduced to mere means to achieve economic ends. This is reflected in the labour conflicts and systematic oppression faced by the dock workers. For example, the player can interact with Joyce Messier, a representative of Wild Pines, who defends the corporation’s practices by describing Revachol’s situation in cold, utilitarian terms. Her dialogue is filled with euphemisms for labour exploitation, such as when she talks about the inevitability of corporate control as part of the natural order or how demoralising and humiliating work is: “Time to go to work in the shit factory!”

The fictional world of Revachol is, in short, a representation of a disintegrated society in which institutions have collapsed and the ideologies that once guided sociopolitical life have lost their purpose. Its citizens are trapped in a rut of despair and conformity, and any attempt to resist the oppressive structures is fruitless. This aligns with Marcuse's critique of how advanced capitalism has managed to absorb any form of resistance, stripping all forms of rebellion of their subversive force and turning them into just another part of the system. In the game, the protagonist's attempts to solve the central mystery also seem futile, reinforcing the sense of powerlessness in the face of a system beyond his control. During the investigation of the central murder, the player may find that the case is not a priority for the authorities, reflecting a structure where justice is not an end in itself but a means determined by political and economic interests. Another example of this discrediting of institutions is Evrart Claire, the union leader, who uses political manipulation tactics to advance himself; despite appearing to advocate for workers' rights, his actions are corrupt. This shows how even movements that seek to combat alienation end up reproducing the very exploitative dynamics they criticise.

Revachol's visual design offers another example of the decline of ideologies. Its streets are filled with ruined buildings, political graffiti and abandoned factories, evidence of an idealised past destroyed by ideological conflicts. In Martinaire, the neighbourhood where much of the game takes place, the landscape includes an abandoned church, rusty cranes and a desolate harbour. These elements also reflect social and economic decay while acting as symbols of a system that has failed both its individuals and its communities. By requiring the player to make decisions about problems with no solution, the gaming system reinforces the idea that the individual, trapped in oppressive structures, has a limited capacity to change their destiny—a key theme in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of modern society.

A CRITIQUE OF EXPLOITATION AND INEQUALITY

Through the representation of alienation and instrumental reason, the video game critiques the dynamics of exploitation, inequality and hopelessness that shape the fictional world in which the plot unfolds, as well as the collapse of 20th-century ideologies and economic systems. Although these elements have many parallels with the theories of the Frankfurt School thinkers, it is important to consider whether they can be extrapolated to today's society. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2000), in contemporary societies, social institutions that previously provided structure and stability have dissolved, leaving individuals in a state of constant fluidity, without roots or security, navigating a life characterised in part by uncertainty and precariousness. This "liquid condition" is also reflected—albeit in an outlandish way—in the protagonist of *Disco Elysium*, who has lost his identity, his place in the world and any notion of stability. This is an extreme version of Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity", where the protagonist's decisions lead to no resolution, and ideological choices provide neither refuge nor hope but quite the opposite. The character's instability, and the city of Revachol as a whole, epitomises the state of flux in which social and personal structures no longer provide meaningful guidance.

THROUGH THE REPRESENTATION OF ALIENATION AND INSTRUMENTAL REASON, THE VIDEO GAME CRITIQUES THE DYNAMICS OF EXPLOITATION, INEQUALITY AND HOPELESSNESS THAT SHAPE THE FICTIONAL WORLD IN WHICH THE PLOT UNFOLDS, AS WELL AS THE COLLAPSE OF 20TH-CENTURY IDEOLOGIES AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

From the perspective of reception theory, Jauss (1982) argues that the significance of a work depends on the interaction between text and historical context. In *Disco Elysium*, this dialogue translates into a confrontation between the player's expectations (shaped by traditional narrative genres) and the systematic subversion of these norms. For example, the figure of the detective—an archetype associated with conflict resolution—blurs into a character incapable of even resolving the question of his own identity. This contrast between expectation and reality reflects Bauman's aforementioned "liquidity" but also questions the legitimacy of the redemptive narratives that have historically structured popular culture. While Jauss stresses that literary criticism must consider how a work transforms the audience's horizon of expectations, we can seemingly expect little to nothing from the video game's protagonist, who seems doomed to anthropological pessimism.

The ideological fragmentation experienced by the player in *Disco Elysium* can also be related to Jean-François Lyotard's theory of postmodernism (1984), with its suggestion that in the postmodern era, metanarratives—the great narratives that once explained the meaning of history and provided frames of reference—have lost their legitimacy. In *Disco Elysium*, this distrust of metanarratives is expressed in its representation of political ideologies, as none of the ideological options is a response to the world's problems; rather, they are presented as fragments of worn-out narratives that are no longer capable of providing coherent reasoning for political or social action.

The sense of hopelessness and alienation in *Disco Elysium* also aligns with Mark Fisher's 2009 contemporary concept of "capitalist realism", which describes a condition in which capitalism has come to be perceived as the only possible reality, blocking or mitigating any political or socio-economic models that might offer real alternatives. In the game, the city of Revachol is trapped in an eternal cycle of decay and stag-

nation and any attempts to change the system through ideological or moral decisions prove fruitless. Kłosiński (2022) argues that video games, by combining text, image and interactive action, are particularly suited to depicting social contradictions. This perspective connects Frankfurt's theories with Fisher's capitalist realism, as the game critiques capitalism while embodying its logic of control and hopelessness. It is, in fact, a more extreme view but based on very similar ideas to Fisher's.

Ergodicity, a property that establishes that over time a system or process will be subject to all possible states or at least a representation of them, as proposed in the work of Espen Aarseth (1997), is manifested in the structure of the interactive game, where every decision (psychological skills and branching dialogues) involves a constant negotiation between the subject-player and the algorithmic system that encodes the narrative possibilities. This dynamism reflects the alienation described by the Frankfurt School, but with a particular twist: instead of the homogenising passivity encouraged by the traditional cultural industry, the player is forced to act within predefined limits, in an implicit critique of the neoliberal freedom that Byung-Chul Han links to burnout. Extrapolating some of the precepts of Han's *The Burnout Society* (2012), it becomes apparent that individuals in neoliberal society have been transformed from obedient subjects into subjects of performance, exploiting themselves in their endless quest for productivity, optimisation and success. However, this quest inevitably leads to a feeling of exhaustion, depression and self-collapse. In *Disco Elysium*, the protagonist is the ultimate embodiment of this collapse: his alcohol addiction, amnesia and complete inability to perform his job effectively are symptoms of a life destroyed by the weight of impossible expectations. He believes he has failed everyone and that therefore the only thing he deserves is death. Instead of being an active, productive agent, he

has become a worn-out, empty figure, unable to live up to the expectations imposed on him by society. The player must contend with a character unable to make coherent decisions or achieve real progress due to his amnesia, which finds parallels in Han's description of a society whose obsession with performance, productivity and appearance has led to a widespread state of exhaustion and collapse.

Finally, the concept of fragmented identity and the quest for authenticity in *Disco Elysium* can be compared with Charles Taylor's conception of modernity (1989). Taylor argues that in modern societies, people search for an authentic identity amid the multiple options offered by the contemporary world. Koenitz (2015) highlights that in interactive environments, identity is constructed collectively between the game design and the designers, the system and the player. In this case, this construction is doomed to failure, reflecting a pessimistic view of the possibility of authenticity in liquid societies, since in *Disco Elysium* the protagonist seems to be on a failed quest for authenticity, as evident in his amnesia, his inability to remember who he is or what he stands for, and his constant doubting about his decisions. Throughout the game, any attempt to reconstruct the protagonist's identity is doomed to fail, reflecting a pessimistic anthropological view of the quest for authenticity in contemporary societies in which traditional frames of reference have disappeared.

IS IT EASIER TO IMAGINE THE END OF THE WORLD THAN THE END OF CAPITALISM?

Siğın (2022) highlights how video games, as products of the cultural industry, provide easy pleasures and fantastic fictional worlds that divert attention from the real problems of society. However, in *Disco Elysium* this dynamic is reversed, as the video game explores the ruinous state of reality with a mix of parody, satire and acerbic, sar-

castic criticism. This article demonstrates how a video game—in this case *Disco Elysium*—can overstep the boundaries of interactive entertainment to allow those who wish to delve into its narrative to establish philosophical connections with the problems it poses and a number of current social issues. Analysing *Disco Elysium* through the multifaceted lens of the Frankfurt School also reveals how the game critically develops or exposes key concepts in the work of philosophers such as Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer, such as alienation, the decline of ideologies and the failure of rationality.

Through its immersive narrative, moral choices and the impossibility of achieving meaningful change within its world, the video game effectively conveys the idea that modern social structures, far from liberating people, keep us trapped in a cycle of alienation and socioeconomic control. This is in keeping with the ludo-narrative interactive design of video games which, according to Roth van Nuenen and Koenitz (2018), is based on a procedural system in which the game mechanics convey values and criticisms through their operation; as such, they are not neutral. To a certain extent, they also keep the video directed at players who do not have the ability to effect real change, as despite the different paths offered by the plot choices, all options correspond to pre-programmed algorithms that provide an artificial sense of freedom.

Disco Elysium also reflects the powerlessness that Marcuse describes in *One-Dimensional Man*, where political ideologies—whether communism, fascism or liberalism—have lost their capacity to generate revolutionary change, and capitalism has also ended up mitigating any chance of social transformation or revolution. This analysis of the game thus raises the question of whether it is possible to imagine a real alternative to the capitalist system when all ideologies seem to be mere variants of the same oppressive system. Perhaps, as Fisher would say, it is easier to imagine the end

DISCO ELYSIUM ALIGNS WITH THE CRITICAL CONCERNS OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND DEMONSTRATES ITS RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ADVANCED CAPITALISM, THE IDENTITY CRISIS AND THE EXCESSIVE DEMANDS FOR PRODUCTIVITY AND OPTIMISATION THAT SOCIETY EXPECTS OF CITIZENS OR THE DEMANDS THEY PLACE ON THEMSELVES

of the world than the end of capitalism. In this regard, *Disco Elysium* aligns with the critical concerns of the Frankfurt School and demonstrates its relevance to contemporary discussions about advanced capitalism, the identity crisis and the excessive demands for productivity and optimisation that society expects of citizens or the demands they place on themselves.

On the question of art, Flores Ledesma suggests that “Adorno’s criticism of the work of art, of culture and society, follows a non-definitive death of art through a discreet iconoclasm” (2020: 71). It is therefore possible to argue that Adorno rejects the reduction of art to propaganda but sees in its autonomy a latent resistance to capitalist instrumentalisation. In *Disco Elysium*, the protagonist’s amnesia and fragmented identity reflect the conflict between autonomy and sociality (the natural inclination of human beings to associate with and relate to others) that Adorno describes. Just as true art is not intended to be a tool of instrumental rationality, the detective protagonist we operate does not want to be a productive agent in a meaningless world. His physical and moral collapse is a metaphor for alienation in neoliberal society and his failing abilities symbolise the impossibility of resolving social contradictions under capitalism, foreshadowing an end to art where criticism is exhausted by its own representation.

This analysis of the video game raises a number of questions for future research. One relates to whether the instrumental rationality derived from the video game is reflected in aspects of contemporary life. Another is whether citizens’ decisions really are reduced to pragmatic calculations as they are in the game analysed or, in other words, whether individuals are depersonalised by the expectations of productivity and compliance with certain established social requirements.

This research suffers from certain limitations that are inherent to the subjectivity of the gaming experience itself (where the player’s decisions influence the development of the narrative), which may lead to results and interpretations that vary significantly from one gameplay experience to another. The game also features thousands of lines of dialogue and countless combinations, making an exhaustive analysis of its text practically impossible. This constitutes a significant limitation of the analysis, as the conclusions drawn here are based on a particular interpretation of the game, even if the core mechanics and key themes are consistent.

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ALIENATION, CRITIQUE AND THE FAILURE OF RATIONALITY IN THE ANALYSIS OF DISCO ELYSIUM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of *Disco Elysium*, one of the most acclaimed video games of recent years, based on the theoretical framework of the Frankfurt School and the concepts of alienation, critical theory and the failure of rationality in a post-revolutionary context. *Disco Elysium* depicts a desolate world in which the player's moral decisions and dialogues are intrinsic to the existential tensions that characterise individual and collective alienation. The research examines how the game reflects the concerns of critical theory regarding social and political disintegration in capitalist societies. From the perspective of the visual arts, and more specifically of game studies, the study analyses the game's narrative and textual content through its dialogues, characters and moral decisions, complemented by a philosophical interpretation based on the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. To contextualise the analysis, the findings are discussed in relation to postmodernist theories such as Byung-Chul Han's burnout society, Bauman's liquid modernity and Fisher's capitalist realism. The analysis finds that *Disco Elysium* reflects an explicit critique of contemporary ideologies, pushing players to experience alienation through the decisions and narrative paths presented. *Disco Elysium* is therefore understood as a self-reflexive work whose interactive and narrative mechanics provide a critical perspective on the social tensions and ideological failures of the so-called hypermodern society.

Key words

Alienation; Frankfurt School; Instrumental rationality; Game studies; Hypermodernity.

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ALIENACIÓN, CRÍTICA Y FRACASO DE LA RACIONALIDAD EN EL ANÁLISIS DE DISCO ELYSIUM DESDE LA ESCUELA DE FRANKFURT

Resumen

En este manuscrito se analiza *Disco Elysium*, uno de los videojuegos más premiados de los últimos años, a través del marco teórico de la Escuela de Frankfurt y los conceptos de alienación, teoría crítica y fracaso de la racionalidad en un contexto posrevolucionario. *Disco Elysium* presenta un mundo desolado donde las decisiones morales y los diálogos del jugador están intrínsecamente ligados a las tensiones existenciales que caracterizan la alienación individual y colectiva. La investigación examina cómo el juego refleja las preocupaciones de la teoría crítica sobre la desintegración social y política en sociedades capitalistas. Desde el ámbito de las *visual arts* y, más específicamente, los *games studies*, el análisis discute el contenido narrativo y textual del título a través de los diálogos, personajes y decisiones morales, complementado por una interpretación filosófica basada en los textos de Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer y Herbert Marcuse. Para contextualizar el análisis, los resultados se discuten con teorías postmodernistas como la sociedad del cansancio de Byung-Chul Han, la modernidad líquida de Bauman y el realismo capitalista de Fisher. Entre los hallazgos se destaca que *Disco Elysium* refleja una crítica explícita a las ideologías contemporáneas, que empujan a los videojugadores a experimentar la alienación a través de las decisiones y caminos narrativos que se plantean. Se considera, por ende, que *Disco Elysium* actúa como una obra autorreflexiva que, mediante sus mecánicas interactivas y narrativas, ofrece una visión crítica sobre las tensiones sociales y los fracasos ideológicos de la denominada sociedad hipermoderna.

Palabras clave

Alienación; Escuela de Frankfurt; Racionalidad instrumental; *Games studies*; Hipermodernidad.

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