Worldbuilding and Capitalism in *Disco Elysium*

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Keywords

Worldbuilding, Worlds, Capitalism, Disco Elysium, Fredric Jameson, Political Unconscious

INTRODUCTION

Since at least *Star Wars* and *the Lord of the Rings* franchises, worlds have become a focal point for popular fictional media (Martin & Sneegas, 2020). Alongside the increased prevalence of detailed imaginary worlds in games, film, art, media, literature, architecture, design and music, there has been a growing academic and popular interest in the concept of *worldbuilding* (Ryan, 2018). This process often involves the creation of fantastic and speculative fictional worlds which immerse us in their 'reality', while ostensibly expanding far beyond the immediate content of the artistic work (Wolf, 2012). While worldbuilding has been extensively studied within the academic literature, we have only recently seen attempts to redefine it from a purely artistic or commercial practice, to a deeply political aesthetic process that's highly entangled with capitalist social relations (e.g. Hassler-Forest, 2016; Ekman & Taylor, 2016; Martin & Sneegas, 2020). These studies have mostly omitted the examination of digital games, which – with their emphasis on massive, interactive, and explorable worlds – are not only an obvious point of departure for a discussion on worldbuilding, but give us essential insights into how popular culture envisions alternatives to capitalism.

In this paper I propose that worldbuilding is always-already political, and that the creation of game worlds – whether they be pro-capitalist, anti-capitalist, or somewhere in-between – involves a constant negotiation between developers, publishers, fans, and broader society. As the pre-eminent recent example of a popular game that questions and critiques capitalism through its game world, I argue for *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019) as an important case study in the ways that video game worlds variously challenge or critique neoliberal capitalism. More recently, with ongoing conversations and speculation about a conflict over the IP of the *Disco Elysium* game world – which are occuring between the developer ZA/UM and the creators of both the game and the world the game is based in – it is a prominent example of how the worldbuilding process involves constant negotiation with economic, governmental, and legal institutions.

To perform my analysis I begin this paper with a brief literature review addressing worldbuilding in games, and offer a critique of the Tolkienian concept of 'subcreation', as popularised by Wolf (2012). By building off the work of Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson (2013), I propose that worldbuilding is not a process driven by an auteur-god figure who builds a world out of nothing, but is instead an artistic practice that is highly informed by the 'political unconscious' of historical social relations. I then summarise my method for outlining the political nature of

game worlds, which involves closely analysing a game within its historico-political context.

This methodology then follows with a discussion and analysis of *Disco Elysium's* game world. I focus on the ways the game world is deeply influenced by history, class struggle and a tension between capitalist and anti-capitalist imaginaries, and how this is developed throughout the game world. In this section I closely analyse specific examples within the game, reading them alongside the developer's commentary on how and why they built the game world, to assess the significant ways that politics and worldbuilding are entangled. I conclude with a brief discussion of the ways that fan communities on Reddit have interpreted the political dimensions of the game's world, especially in light of recent controversies over its ownership. I finish by proposing further ways that scholars in game studies can explore worldbuilding and question its nature as a political practice.

BIO
Finn Dawson is an independent researcher who will soon be starting a PhD with the University of Sydney on worldbuilding in video games. As a researcher, he is interested in studying worldbuilding as a political practice, and highlighting the ways that it is deeply entangled with capitalist social relations.

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