

# Capitalist Games: *Disco Elysium*'s Critique of Capitalist Logics of Play

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, scholars have often returned to an examination of the ways that capitalist and neoliberal logics function in and through videogames (Baerg 2009; Dooghan 2023; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Garite 2003; Stallabrass 1993; Woodcock 2019; Yee 2006). For Yee (2006, 70), the ways in which videogames layer rewards and action “condition us to work harder...[they] are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers.” For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, 192), games are ‘machines of subjectivation’ that ‘interpellate’ us into particular subject positions, preparing us to act in ways which reinforce capital’s military and consumerist logics. For Dooghan (2023, 15), players are “excellent agents of necropower” who accumulate through the production of death.

What these and other authors observe is that the logics of action offered to players of videogames often reflect capitalistic logics: games break down tasks so that players can maximise the efficiency of every action (deWinter, Kocurek & Nichols 2014); games encourage the accumulation of currency and experience points for the purposes of expansion and domination (Dooghan 2023; Morrison 2024); games build worlds for players to conquer as ruthless imperialists (Ford 2016). In each case, games appeal to, and reinforce, the desire for stability and control cultivated by our investment in capitalist systems. Failure, in these games, is a means to success (Juul 2013), a success that is itself equated ‘with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 89; see also Ruberg 2019).

Through observations from a close reading (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011) of *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), I argue that, in its approach to failure, the game offers an alternative. *Disco Elysium*'s game-world is suffused with failure. The city in which the game takes place, Revachol, is governed by The Coalition, a collection of ‘ultraliberal’ capitalist nations that crushed a revolution in the city’s past. Reminders of the failed revolution lie throughout the game-world: dilapidated bunkers filled with rusted old weapons and forgotten books and statues from the revolutionary movement. Other failed ventures await the player in the dusty spaces of the game-world. Within the abandoned rooms behind a bookshop, the player can find the remnants of an project left behind by a game development studio that ran out of money. Similarly, the player can find a selection of old pinball machines in the backrooms of a hotel. Banfi (2024, p. 6, emphasis in original) argues that the inclusion of these machines in *Disco Elysium* is one way in which the game critiques capitalism, explaining that the production of pinball machines in the real world declined as companies realised that slot machines were more lucrative: ‘If games cannot generate enough profit, then they are dispensable’.

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Though the player cannot escape or directly resist capital, the game offers a critique of the commonplace gameplay mechanics observed by the authors above. It does this alongside an explicit, though complex, representational critique of capital. *Disco Elysium* saddles the player-character (PC) with debt, which changes the context of accumulation: the player accumulates in order to continue living in their hotel room, without which they cannot continue playing the game. At the same time, the game does not offer a fantasy of control. There are very few moments in which the player can ‘decide’ what happens in the game-world at large. The game’s dice roll system, and its filtering of most action through what is usually called a ‘dialogue system’ (Domsch 2017), frequently undermine the player at important moments. Failed dice rolls will often not only cause the player to fail to perform the desired task, and will also make the PC perform unintended actions.

I argue that the dominant forms of action facilitated by game-worlds offer a fascistic experience of agency: the subordination of the game-world to the often violent actions of a unified player-subject, a body whose capacities to act are measured, defined and protected. *Disco Elysium*, however, encourages the player to let go of their desire for stability or control and embark on a ‘becoming’ (Deleuze 1983) – by which I mean a process of transformation through failure and adaptation. In *Disco Elysium*, actions are almost never certain to succeed, and the player is constantly undermined by the PC and game-world. Because of this, the distinctions between player, PC and other components of the game-world are increasingly difficult to maintain: each act in, on and with the others. The player is becoming-failure, part of *Disco Elysium*’s critique of capital. They are one of the multitude (Hardt & Negri 2005) struggling against the relentless accumulation of the capitalist machine, rather than the one that stands outside of the game-world with the singular capacity to fix it.

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## Ludography

ZA/UM. 2019. *Disco Elysium*. Windows. Self-published.

## BIO

**Dr. Sebastian Morrison** is a researcher and tutor at the University of Adelaide. His research looks at social and economic critiques of capitalism in videogames, focusing on the limits of representational critiques of labour and class.