

From Colonialist Boardgames to Radiocomputer Wizardry: Investigating Disco Elysium’s Intermedial World via Media Archaeology

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Abstract

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM 2019) is a computer role-playing game set in a fully realised fantasy world, Elysium, in the city of Revachol, at a historical time that offers caustic echoes of our world’s 1970s. Lauded for its complex detective narrative and memorable protagonist, Harry du Bois, the game is also notable for its detailed world-building, including a history of failed technology that mirrors the failed city-state of Revachol (“the disgraced former capital of the world”) is in at the time of the investigation. This paper argues that both creating and exploring *Disco Elysium* interrogates playful media as sediments of culture and world-play as a tool for critical engagement with media history.

Following Jussi Parikka’s theoretical legacy, I analyse the intermedial world-building of *Elysium* through the lens of (fictional) media archaeology, noting how the presence of printed documents, stained glass windows, radios, pinball machines, computers, and board games contribute to a sense of worldness and dormant commercial media culture within the *Elysium* setting. Memorable for its alternative course of technological development, *Elysium* is an ideal example of a game that issues a non-deterministic, historical materialist inquiry into technology’s power to shape social conditions in a fictional setting.

I examine the way ZA/UM uses the modalities of media production to convey history, ranging from its spatiotemporal compression to the semiotic encoding of technology, as well as their impact on ludic and political agency within *Elysium*. Special attention is paid to how exposition of the fictional world is embedded and mapped onto different media types to disclose different aspects of world-building, including economic, political, and media history. Theoretically, the paper understands the media products under scrutiny as “dead media” to varying degrees, reflecting upon the anomie and lawlessness of Revachol itself.

Keywords

Disco Elysium, computer role-playing game, media archaeology, dead media, historical materialist media studies

Bio

Péter Kristóf Makai is an Assistant Professor in Game Studies at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz. He received his PhD at the University of Szeged, writing his dissertation on autism in literature and literary theory. In 2022, he has been a Landhaus Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in München. In 2021, he has been a KWI International Fellow at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen, studying how theming and theme parks are adapted in board and computer games. Between 2018-2020, he has been the Crafoord Postdoctoral Fellow in Intermedial in Multimedial Studies at Linnaeus University in Växjö. His most recent publications include chapters on virtual theme park games in *Virtual Interiorities* (eds. Dave Gottwald, Gregory Turner Rahman and Vahid Vahdat), and a contribution on climate change video games in *Ecogames* (eds. Joost Raessens, Gerald Farca, Laura op de Beke and Stefan Werning, Amsterdam: AUP, 2023).

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