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Harrier Du Bois and the Voices In His Head

The 2019 detective role-playing game Disco Elysium, produced by ZA/UM, helps develop the narrative through attributes and skill checks. Using textual analysis, I have drawn similarities between the main game mechanics and real-world intrusive thoughts. Although there's doubt this specifically was the intention of the narration, it strikes as an accurate representation of violent, sexual, and religious intrusive thoughts, all common themes within the gameplay. Therefore this gives the player the experience of then having to pick how to cope. Harrier Du Bois' attributes are independent but still tied to his subconscious, presenting him with violent and quirky thoughts and actions for the player to choose from; this reflects an individual experiencing intrusive thoughts, weaved into the game's skill mechanics.

Disco Elysium is a game where you can customize the player's attributes and skills. There are four main attribute types and twenty-four skills in total. It is within the player's interest to diversify these skills and to level them up in order to pass skill checks. However, when a player has levelled up their skills, the narrative of the story changes. When interacting with the environment and other characters, the skills also then interact with the player through Harry Du Bois. Harry "hears" voices, which isn't new as some items and environment are also "talk" to him, but the voices that mainly interact with him and therefore the player are a part of Harry's subconscious. They express their opinions and goals, all aligning with whatever attribute they

belong to, and different because of it. However, even they are differently opinionated with their own personality, they are still a part of Harrier's subconscious whether the player agrees with them and act on their advice or not. The frequency of the skills' communications depends on the player levelling them up. If the player then decides not to level up any skills to avoid such bias and sometimes violent opinions, the game forces you to level up at least once when starting the game when the player picks their 'special ability,' making sure at least one of these voices are unavoidable. For example, although the player is a role-player as Harrier solving a murder case the skill of Electrochemistry constantly encourages the player to get drunk and high. On some playthrough Electrochemistry even says "Just remember it's not the alcohol, but more of that too. Alcohol is not the problem. And it's certainly not the dextroamphetamine," and other such encouragements throughout the whole game (Disco Elysium). Although they richen the narrative element of the story and solidifies the role-playing experience of a drunken cop with strange character quirks, it also subjects the player to sometimes graphic and upset ideologies and impressions.

After being exposed to the skills' thoughts it then begs the question, what are actual intrusive thoughts? In "Intrusive Thoughts in Clinical Disorder" Dr. David A. Clark defines them as "...unwanted clinically relevant intrusive thoughts, images, or impulses as an instinct, identifiable cognitive event that is unwanted, unintended, and recurrent. It interrupts the flow of thought, interferes in task performance, is associated with negative affect, and is difficult to control." (Clark 4). In layman's terms, unwanted thoughts often distressing and sometimes obsessive. Mental Health America categorizes intrusive thought types into violence, sexual, negativity, and delusional. However, it does ignore religious intrusive thoughts, which are a common motif for many people experiencing them. There is often a common theme in these

thoughts where the person experiencing them is having intrusive thoughts of doing something wrong. Examples would be thoughts of pushing another person into traffic, rape, killing themselves in public, and harming one's family. This is notably distressing for individuals and they may then begin to obsess over them; feeling guilt, shame, and fear of themselves. An anonymous first-person account of experiencing intrusive thoughts stated, "I had strong impulses to commit crimes and hurt people around me even though I didn't, and I eventually began to believe that controlling my thoughts and emotions was a way to prevent myself from doing anything wrong." as if these thoughts made them evil and somehow make them act on them (3). Nevertheless, if an individual does not frequently experience these thoughts, it is important to note that they cannot be helped, they are upsetting, and they do not make the person experiencing them a monster. It is an abstract concept in which these disturbing thoughts come from a person's subconscious, but it is not them thinking it they are just exposed to it. What matters is not the person being exposed to these thoughts, but how they cope with them. Therefore, does Harrier Du Bois experience intrusive thoughts? Seeing the overlap in content, execution, and response it isn't unreasonable to say he does.

There are many aspects within the game mentally ill people have related to. In one article Hope Corrigan relates to Harry in a self-reflective way and states that "[Harry] needs therapy, serious therapy and if he does then I probably do too." (Corrigan). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to state that Harrier Du Bois' depiction is too outlandish to accurately represent a single point of a spectrum of symptoms within multitudes of mental illnesses and struggles. One interpretation specifically would be diagnosing Harry with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Like with OCD his "skills" (subconscious) intrudes his thoughts with self-loathing, inappropriately sexual, and violent thoughts. Some attributes even urge him to die by suicide despite that ending

the game for the player. Because the player is in control of Harry and his actions, Harry's own intrusive thoughts are not controlled by the player, a representation of how an individual suffering from intrusive thoughts could not control their own.

The player may then also choose to cope in a self-destructive way that specifically appeals to the likes of Electrochemistry, and drink. One symptom OCD and alcoholism have in common is episodic memory loss, and the very opening of the game introduces the player to Harry by having them mutually wake up from a drunken stupor with no idea of the context of the world. This allows the player to be more realistically familiar with the world while cementing their role-playing experience as an amnesiac detective. Although it is important to note one can experience intrusive thoughts without having obsessive-compulsive disorder, intrusive thoughts are usually more impactful and frequent to those who have it, with aligns with the narrative in Disco Elysium. It is also important to note that OCD affects different people in different ways and that not everyone diagnosed with it is inherently germophobic which would also explain Harrier's ability to be a continued slob. In conclusion, it makes sense for players experiencing these symptoms to relate to Harrier Du Bois in a way they cannot through most video games, as the core game mechanics and narrative parallel that to real-world intrusive thoughts.

Disco Elysium's ability checks and skill points interact with the protagonist Harry Du Bois through speaking to him and presenting him with often strange and violent options, reflecting the nature of intrusive thoughts in an individual. During my playthrough of the game, this is what I related to and was drawn to the most. The intrusive thoughts Harrier experiences are uncontrollable and inevitable within the gameplay experience. Non-playable characters do not understand this experience and will often make Harrier feel crazy, ostracized, and defensive. This leads him to become obsessive with authority, masculinity, and the past. In closing, Harrier

Du Bois is not inherently a foolish man in some drunken stupor, but a genuinely good person if the player would allow him to cope.

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