

Takeo Rivera

Asian, Adjacent



Utopian Longing and Model
Minority Mediation in *Disco Elysium*

The City on the Edge of History

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the hegemonic attitude of much of the Global North across the political spectrum has proclaimed the absolute victory of liberal capitalism as both the final stage of economic and social organization, with any serious challenge to this reigning order rendered futilely quixotic. The truth of the claim notwithstanding, this is the grand narrative best encapsulated by Francis Fukuyama’s celebratory claim of the “end of history,”¹ with the lasting effects of liberal capitalism’s hegemonic power lambasted on the left, most famously by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism* (1989) and the British cultural theorist Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Certainly, contemporary global trends toward reactionary far-right authoritarianism in the late 2010s and early 2020s would forcefully rebuke Fukuyama’s thesis in regard to liberalism, but the cultural domination of capital remains difficult to unseat. As Fisher puts it succinctly, “Capitalism

seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable,” erecting both the social and aesthetic limits of the Global North’s metropole.² Realism has become the aesthetic lingua franca of our age, and the boundary of the thinkable, and with it the truth-claim of capitalism’s inevitability.

Fisher’s initial formulations of his solution would appear in his introduction to his sequel project, *Acid Communism*, unfinished before his tragic suicide in 2017. In this work, Fisher turns to 1960s Anglophone psychedelic counterculture as a critical cultural potentiality to break free of capitalist malaise. “The crucial defining feature of the psychedelic,” writes Fisher, “is the question of consciousness, and its relationship to what is experienced as reality. If the very fundamentals of our experience, such as our sense of space and time, can be altered, does that not mean that the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable?”³ To resuscitate the aims of the counterculture, Fisher proposes acid communism, which is “the convergence of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising and psychedelic consciousness, the fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life.”⁴

The argument of *Acid Communism*, preliminary and unfinished though it is, is a compelling and organic extension of Fisher’s observations in *Capitalist Realism* but relies on a hitherto unacknowledged basis in colonialist orientalism. The countercultural elements to which Fisher alludes heavily exploited South and East Asian spiritualities in order to produce their affects of radical alterity—an alterity relative to capitalist whiteness, but one that has drawn on a logic of commodification by other means. The co-optation of various Asian spiritualities to produce an orientalized mystique for various countercultural forms is so commonplace as to be assumed; for example, as Jane Iwamura has observed, the “Beat Generation and its followers in their own unique interpretation adopted Buddhism as a way to distinguish themselves from ‘middle-class non-identity’ and to guide and justify their own pursuits.”⁵ Yet, Iwamura continues, “Zen became something to ‘try on’ and ‘entertain,’ rather than something that directly challenged American values. In fact, Zen as *stylized religion* covertly consolidated American national identity and its capitalist orientation.”⁶ Such a similar dynamic played out throughout the next decades with respect to multiple Asian religions, with “counterculture” adopting such two-dimensional, commodified versions of Asianness to satisfy utopian yearning for oriental mysticism, including in the tech industry, as elaborated extensively by

R. John Williams.⁷ This racialized dynamic goes unproblematicized in *Acid Communism*, with the central protagonists of the socialist spirit quest as white artists of the Global North.⁸

I do not reject Fisher's central dialectic between capitalist realism and acid communism; in fact, his observations of the hegemonic grip of bourgeois realism and the necessity for an aesthetic break from its logics are difficult to deny. As Fredric Jameson writes in *Antinomies of Realism*, "The realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and to change,"⁹ so it logically follows that something like "the psychedelic" offers a disruption of contemporary neoliberal ideology, whose ongoing circumscription of political imagination remains dauntless. Nevertheless, Fisher's critique is incomplete without serious attendance to orientalism, coloniality, and race. One can begin with Christopher B. Patterson's recent theorization of the "Asiatic," a strategy of acknowledged virtual otherness found across Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that enabled them to achieve considerable breakthroughs out of various hegemonic Western normativities.¹⁰ In Patterson's reparative formulation, the Asiatic is an intentionally fantastical Orient, but one that avoids any presumption of epistemological mastery and becomes a necessary component for rethinking queer relations outside Eurocentric grids of intelligibility.

Fisher's acid communism is thoroughly "Asiatic" in Patterson's sense, but it also gestures to a particular kind of political relationality that I term, to borrow a title from a Margaret Cho song, "Asian adjacency."¹¹ By "Asian adjacency," I refer to a quality found across varying manifestations of Asiatic racial form that arise in articulating communist futurity,¹² a "besideness" that provincializes white epistemology as a position relative to either superego model minoritarianism or mystical, exotified wonder.¹³ Rather than the "white adjacency" characteristic of model minority ideology, which places the Asian in a complicit positionality within white supremacist racial capitalism, Asian adjacency instead invokes Asianness as a mediator of utopian political imagination without actually positioning "Asia" as its utopia, fluctuating between idealization, moral comparison, and wonderment, holding together multiple relationalities open for contestation.

It is through Asian adjacency that I analyze *Disco Elysium*, the 2019 indie role-playing game developed by UK-based indie game developer ZA/UM. Written by Estonian novelist Robert Kurvitz, Helen Hindpere, Argo Tuulik,

Cash de Cuir, and Olga Moskvina,¹⁴ *Disco Elysium* arrived on the gaming scene to near-unanimous critical fanfare, nominated for several “Game of the Year” awards and winning Best Narrative and Best Role-Playing Game from the 2019 Game Awards. *Disco Elysium* puts its player in fictional Martinaire, the district of a cosmopolitan, vaguely European city called Revachol, which languishes under foreign occupation by a multinational alliance of liberal-capitalist governments called the Coalition, which had suppressed a communist revolution fifty years prior. Assuming the role of a self-loathing, substance-abusing, amnesiac detective named Harrier DuBois, the player is tasked with solving the murder of a right-wing mercenary who had been sent to break a dockworkers’ strike, while simultaneously plumbing the depths of the character’s depression and anguish.

Moreover, *Disco Elysium* is a game that embraces, but also supersedes, the political and aesthetic charge of acid communism, including its relationship to race and orientalism. The writers are openly Marxist; during their acceptance speech for the Fresh Indie Game Award at the Game Awards, writer Helen Hindpere said, “I would like to thank all of the great people who came before us . . . Marx and Engels for providing us the political education, thank you!”¹⁵ Correspondingly, Revachol is the city on the edge of history, inundated with a melancholy for a communism that never actualized, currently governed instead by an ideology of centrist normativity, but its political yearnings express themselves through the game’s starkly expressionist aesthetics, its mind-altering psychedelics, and its forays into magical realism. Moreover, like the psychedelics of Fisher’s acid communism, *Disco Elysium* necessitates the presence of Asian adjacency to negotiate its political affects, but does so with considerable, diasporic difference. In actuality, although drug use and hallucination are rampant throughout the game, *Disco Elysium*’s Asian adjacency lies less in its *psychedelics* than in its *psyche*, its ego-ideal, its projections of fantasy, and its inculcation of wonder. Correspondingly, this chapter focuses attention on three manifestations of Asian adjacency: DuBois’s police partner, an “Asian” diasporic man named Kim Kitsuragi; the racial ambiguity of the Marxian Kras Mazov; and the semimythical Insulindian Phasmid. Although deeply flawed in its racial politics, *Disco Elysium* nevertheless presents a racialized dialectic that yearns for a liberatory, postcapitalist futurity to resolve its stark contradictions, utilizing Asianness with and against orientalist clichés to generate its political idealizations.

Difference with a Difference: The Model Minority Ego-Ideal

Unlike many games in its role-playing genre, *Disco Elysium* in many respects disempowers its player through the avatarial vessel of Harrier DuBois, a formerly successful detective in the Revachol Citizens Militia who has, since the departure of his wife, fallen into a bout of self-destructive depression, resulting in a drug-fueled bender just before the start of the game's action.¹⁶ As a consequence of hitting rock bottom, DuBois begins the game with amnesia, prompting the player to effectively reconstruct his personality from the ground up, principally through dialogue choices that allow the player to assume a range of different positions, from aggressive to apologetic, feminist to misogynist, empathetic to cruel. The possible permutations of events in *Disco Elysium* are legion, requiring dozens of playthroughs to fully access every possible short-term outcome, although intriguingly, the conclusion of the game remains unchanged. The paths may vary widely, and the final debrief reflects the player's actions, yet the apprehending of the killer will occur no matter how the player arrives at that point. Meanwhile, the world of the game plays out both in the luscious oil-paint art style of the physical world and the thousands of lines of expository text and dialogue that unfolds on the sidebar of the user interface. Stylistically, the game presents a visual environment of futurist grays of the streets contrasting with the often vibrantly impressionist yellows, reds, greens, and oranges of the clothing, and karaoke and dance halls, visually enacting a dialectic between the whimsy of Muñozian excess and urban-modernist Kafkaesque ennui.¹⁷

Notably, each of Harrier's levelable skills occupies a schizophrenic place in his mind, talking to his ego-self throughout the game by providing advice and insight, but often also bickering among one another.¹⁸ The skills are grouped into four general categories: Intellect, which includes skills like Rhetoric, Logic, and Encyclopedia; Psyche, which includes the likes of Empathy, Suggestion, and Authority; Physique, which includes Endurance and Pain Threshold; and Motorics, which includes dexterous abilities such as Hand/Eye Coordination and Perception. The twenty-four Skills become characters in their own right, each with a distinct, insistent personality vying for influence within Harrier's mind. Harrier's propensity for hallucination and internal bickering, not to mention the intense brushstrokes and colors of Aleksander Rostov's oil-painting environmental overlays and textures, represents a sense

of shattered reality and fractured consciousness reflective of Mark Fisher's psychedelic, all the more intensified by the implication that mind-altering substances are at least partly responsible for his mental state. But it is not so much the centrality of actual psychedelics so much as what they highlight, the psyche itself, that occupies the most verbal presence in the game. The experience of playing through the game, with the twenty-four internal representations of Harrier's psyche bickering and occupying an enormous proportion of the game's CRPG narrative text, has a surrealist acid-trip quality to it, sometimes keeping the player in a haze of competing internal thoughts rather than engaging with the exterior world. But that exterior world is most readily accessible through the figure of Harrier's partner, Kim Kitsuragi.

Shortly after awakening with amnesia in the wake of his drug-filled, suicidal bender, Harrier meets Kim Kitsuragi in the lobby of his hotel. Kim Kitsuragi is *Disco Elysium's* sole Asian-racialized character, but also the only NPC party member (besides Harry's inner voices) who remains a near-constant presence throughout the game. Kim sports circular teashades, neatly combed short hair, and a wiry build. First described via the in-game text as a "bespectacled man in an orange bomber jacket . . . tapping his foot on the floor," he often keeps his hands folded behind his back in a formal military "at ease." As the deuteragonist, Kitsuragi is undoubtedly the most important and present NPC in the game, representing a paragon of competence and principle that consistently contrasts with DuBois's wildness, excess, and inner psychological torment. But most importantly, Kitsuragi's diasporic Asianness becomes, in fact, a necessary ingredient for DuBois's inner journey. Kitsuragi is Asian, adjacent: he provides not so much a yellow perilist counterpoint to white interiority as he does a semipermeable sounding board on which the player can gauge DuBois's emotional progress. Kitsuragi is not a techno-orientalist bugaboo but a model minority superego to a whiteness characterized principally by failure and ruin. The developers of *Disco Elysium* cast white Belgian actor-musician Jullien Champenois in the role in an unfortunate whitewashed casting; however, Champenois notes that the most necessary ethnic marker for Kim's casting was not Asianness but, rather, a "French accent."¹⁹ Aurally, this is the most distinct feature of Kim, whose French accent permeates his deliberative, restrained vocal performance throughout the game. The effete properness of Kim's vocal presentation suggests a layering of model minoritarian forms, allowing him to assume a hypercivilized position relative to the chaotic Harrier.

Although DuBois's political ideology can vary widely depending on the player's dialogue choices, DuBois's masculine whiteness remains fixed, as does Kitsuragi's racial otherness relative to it.²⁰ Early on, the player/Harrier can choose to tell Kim, "You don't look like other people around here." A dialogue then transpires, and with a high enough Encyclopedia stat, you may learn more about "Seol," Kim's ancestral motherland:

YOU: You don't look like other people around here.

KIM KITSURAGI: That's because I'm half-Seolite. Or quarter. My father's father was from Seol—so was my grandmother, but from my mother's side. . . . [*He shakes his head.*] It's not an interesting topic.

YOU: What is Seol?

KIM KITSURAGI: It's a part of the world, officer. A geopolitical entity—*and* a geographic division. I told you it wouldn't be interesting.

ENCYCLOPEDIA: Seol is a protectionist, isolationist panisoliary state west of the Insulindian isola. Actually, it's *quite* interesting; some would even say mysterious . . .

YOU: You're only making it *sound* uninteresting. I still want to know more about Seol.²¹

KIM KITSURAGI: You're barking up the wrong tree. I don't speak a word of Seolite, I've never met either one of my grandparents. And I've never *been* to Seol. [*He seems almost proud of these things.*] I'm a regular Revacholiere.

Harrier, racked by amnesia, begins the exchange with a presumably innocent but nevertheless microaggressive observation of Kim's phenotypic otherness, followed by Kim providing patient explanation of his Asianness and Harrier's ongoing questions about Seol, which is something of an analog of Korea and Japan, which we can infer from the orientalized description of the isolationist nation and the spellings of the names (Seol ≈ Seoul, Kitsuragi having pseudo-Japanese phonetics). Although Harrier is innocent, the player is not—as an Asian American player, I felt conflicted by the choice of initiating this dialogue, knowing my own irritation at being on the receiving end of such a question, yet eager to delve further into Kim's Asian diasporic

background—I sensed that Harrier’s bumbling amnesiac inquiry would be the principal means of learning more. Encyclopedia, which ostensibly represents Harrier’s internalized voice of book knowledge, describes Seol in thoroughly orientalized terms—protectionist, isolationist, and especially *mysterious*—stoking Harrier’s interest more (and thus lending said orientalism epistemic authority). Kim then proudly disavows his ethnic identity, insisting that he is “a regular Revacholier.”

Kitsuragi is a racially familiar figure in ethnic studies, who makes a claim to legitimacy through cultural assimilationism. Within an Asian American context, Kim reflects a well-trodden World War II-era Japanese American Citizens’ League-style hyper-Americanness, prideful of his severance from his immigrant background, which the game exoticizes as oriental-barbarous. Kim is, on an individual basis, a model minority, although there does not appear to be any racewide basis for Seolite-Revacholier model minoritarianism as such, but the articulation of his antiracism is principally through assimilationist logics of respectability, a racial strategy that remains prevalent in contemporary continental Europe.²²

Correspondingly, throughout *Disco Elysium*, Kim is the most exemplary law enforcement agent in the game, outstripping DuBois in terms of competence, professionalism, and reputation. Whereas Seol exists in an ambiguous haze of generic orientalized despotism and the authoritarianism that accompanies it, Kim is less authoritarian than authoritative, leading not through command but through example. Although Kim works in a different precinct, DuBois’s disaffected teammates speak to Kim with deep reverence for his accomplishments at the conclusion of the game. Kim does not always comment; rather, he casts a constant, if deliberately understated, judgmental gaze on the range of the player’s actions throughout the game. A common recurrence is Kim raising an eyebrow, which often immediately sends a sense of shame down Harrier’s spine. While Harrier is a chronically depressed, slovenly, pungent drug addict whose face has been eerily frozen into an otherworldly smile, Kim is a beacon of order, duty, and proper procedure. Here Tara Fickle’s astute reading of model minoritarianism is quite illuminating: in her analysis of William Petersen’s early articulation of the Japanese American model minority, Fickle observes that the model minority theory is “ultimately less interested in holding up Japanese Americans as a punitive example for blacks. If anything, he considered the former a far more effective parable for white Americans. . . . These were not . . . merely model *minorities*, but model *Americans*.”²³ Similarly, Kim is Harrier’s ego-ideal, not only a model minority but a

model Revacholier, and part of what animates Kim's desire to excel is precisely that sense of feeling out of place. This applies equally to Kim's ethnicity as his sexuality; Kim subtly hints at his own queerness throughout the game when he amusedly reacts to Harrier's bewilderment at homosexual imagery, and through sufficient dialogue and leveling choices, Kim may reveal that he is gay, although this has no additional bearing on the storyline.²⁴

In many respects, Kim's competence, detachment, and achievement reflect the type of character most RPG players will usually assume within the genre, as opposed to the slovenly, excessive Harrier. With the dialectic between Kim and Harrier, *Disco Elysium* positions whiteness—often, *leftist* whiteness—as the position of failure relative to model minority Asianness, inviting the player to take on a complex identification mediated by Asian adjacency. Harrier, as the full embodiment of failure, embraces the position of failure even more so by choosing a communist orientation—when the player asks Rhetoric, “What's this *communism* even about,” Rhetoric responds, “Failure. It's about failure . . . abject failure. Total, irreversible defeat on all fronts!” but with the hope that, as the comically framed “Last Communist,” the player can somehow have different fortunes than their predecessors. Yet regardless of political orientation, players often find themselves yearning to be, or at least be like, the Asian/Asiatic Kim, the character most closely aligned to the RPG's power fantasy—unless the player wishes to go in the opposite direction and abandon all semblance of success, which is its own tacit acknowledgment of Kim's moral and professional superiority.

Perhaps the only instance in *Disco Elysium* in which Kim breaks his generally serene disposition is when he is verbally harassed by a character known only as the “racist lorry driver” (figure 3.1), when the player first initiates dialogue with the driver standing several yards away from the strike:

RACIST LORRY DRIVER: “Welcome to Revachol!” announces the rotund man. The remark isn't addressed to you. It's addressed to the Lieutenant . . .

KIM KITSURAGI: “Don't you *Welcome to Revachol* me,” the lieutenant fires back. “My grandfather came here from a three-thousand-year-old racist-isolationist culture, while your ancestors came to this island a mere three hundred years ago.”

“Every school of thought and government has failed in this city—but I love it nonetheless. It belongs to me as much as it belongs to you.”



3.1. The Racist Lorry Driver harasses Kim Kitsuragi, who responds. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium* taken by author, courtesy of ZA/UM.

The interaction further cements Kim as a figure whose route to antiracism is through assimilation, and with it an orientalist disavowal of the barbarism from which his ancestors immigrated. In some respects, Kim's assimilationist antiracism reflects Homi Bhabha's oft-cited mimic man, whose assumption of the colonizer's habitus exposes the constructedness of the colonizer's racial superiority to begin with.²⁵ However, Kim's mimicry/model minoritarianism leaves orientalism intact—Seol is once again cast in terms of exoticized barbarism from which Western civilization has rescued Kim's ancestors. Kim is thus simultaneously racially exceptional *and* avowedly normative, even as he perpetuates exoticism through disavowal. While Kim is the Asian adjacent to Harrier, *Kim positions himself adjacent to Asianness*. The exotic is external rather than internal to Kim, decidedly antithetical to the iconic, vexed sleuth and purveyor of orientalized wisdom, Charlie Chan (while sharing Chan's serenity and logical prowess). In this respect, Kim resists epistemological mastery, even if Harrier's internal voice yearns for colonial knowledge. It is through not racial exceptionalism but exceptional racial mundaneness that Kim aims to distinguish himself, recalling

Ju Yon Kim's argument that the quotidian is a key domain for Asian diasporic self-fashioning.²⁶

In terms of social disruption and normativity, despite Kim's sexual preference for men, Harrier is the "queerer" figure relative to insistently lawful Kim.²⁷ While each of Harrier's personality traits clings to its specific bias, Kim plays the role of deadpan "straight man" (in the comedic sense, *not* a sexual sense, yet remaining essentially homonormative), bemused sounding board. His relationship to the player is adjacency, a constant besideness that neither intrudes nor wholly surrenders.

Yet what is peculiar about Kim's Asian adjacency is the juxtaposition of his assimilationist model minoritarianism with his ironic actual lack of success in the course of the game. As Chris Breault states, "Before the player even learns their own name, they learn to rely on Kim's judgment—he immediately outlines a plan, establishes that Harry's badge is missing, and begins the work of interviewing suspects." Yet, Breault keenly observes, "it takes a while to see that Kim, the voice of reason, is usually wrong."²⁸ Indeed, as the mystery of the murder of the strike-breaking mercenary unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that Harrier's messier, sometimes-nonsensical tangents—as opposed to Kim's straightforward, commonsensical approaches—become key to not only solving the murder but also reflecting on the thinkability of political futurity itself. As the final section of this essay will explore, this is particularly true should the player decide to pursue the Insulindian Phasmid, a cryptid with no apparent bearing to the murder case; the player can choose to complete Phasmid side quests (like laying out and restocking bait traps) out of pleasure or amusement while Kim repeatedly bemoans the activity as a waste of time. As a consequence, Kim reflects an inverse of Harrier, the paragon of discipline to Harrier's chaos—a well-worn police procedural cliché, to be sure, but his model minority status coupled with the shadow of orientalist exoticism helps mediate a psychedelic utopian consciousness.

Acid Communism with Asian Characteristics

Rather than the moral alignment that has become a convention in many North American RPGs,²⁹ *Disco Elysium* instead deploys a political alignment system that allows the player character to embrace one or more of the four principal worldviews: Communism, Moralism (essentially centrist liberalism), Fascism,

and Ultraliberalism (neoliberal capitalism). The player can choose any of these alignments through dialogue choices of the game, yet the game's own storyline ultimately embraces a narrative of communist melancholia. Given the overt political stance of the developers, I would assert that the communist political path is the "canonical" one, and the one that best fits the narrative themes of the larger storyline.

Of the four political alignments, Kim claims neutrality, instead embracing his role, above all else, as a model officer of the Revachol Citizens' Militia, though his attempt at apoliticality tacitly makes him a centrist Moralist.³⁰ Thus, the game's sole Asian NPC represents a figure of multiple levels of normativity: of idealized police behavior, of genre (the detective procedural), of assimilationist culture, and of political alignment. The ideological description of Moralism in the game, as described by the "Thought Cabinet" perk "Kingdom of Conscience," is a searing description of political centrism, which effectively describes Kim's political role throughout the game:

The Kingdom of Conscience will be exactly as it is now. Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child reprimanded. Centrism isn't change—not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth.

Overall, moralism represents the Fukuyamaist position, humanist liberalism as triumphant default, an ideology of normalcy that contrasts with the utopian dream of communism, the misogynist violence of fascism, and the unfettered avarice of ultraliberalism (neoliberalism). As model minority, Kim represents realism in its ideological and narratological functions alike, having disavowed the orientalist mystique of wonderment to become its exact opposite. However, this is complicated slightly by the fact that Kim also wears an old orange bomber jacket of the communards' Revolutionary Air Corps, for reasons that Kim seems uncomfortable to disclose, suggesting that there is, in fact, a part of him that may have once nostalgically yearned for a left-wing political futurity. Moralism may thus be the position of detached, resigned pragmatism for Kim, as it has been for the post-1990s left at large.³¹ Kim's moralism is not so much an enthusiastic passion as psychological management, establishing what Kim has learned to be his horizon of possibility.

Perpetually the moderate, Kim moderates Harrier's excesses, but in doing so ironically necessitates that Harrier give these ideas verbal form. Eventually, Harrier and Kim discover a bust of Kras Mazov in the apartment of a commundard. Described in-game as the founder of scientific socialism and leader of the first major communist revolution, Mazov is an obvious analog for Karl Marx, sporting a wide white mane and thick mustache and beard. Harrier might begin to suspect that he himself is Mazov, to Kim's great annoyance. Gazing on the bust, Harrier insists on his physical resemblance to Mazov, mostly through the excessiveness of the hair. Kim, with a roll of his eyes, points out that Harrier lacks Mazov's birthmark, but, more importantly, adds: "Alright. But here's the big thing—Kras Mazov looks Samaran, and you don't." Harrier claims part Samaran ancestry (though we do not have any prior knowledge of this), and the game describes the response to this claim thus: "The lieutenant closes his eyes. 'Okay, you win. Be Kras Mazov then, I don't care . . .' He opens his eyes again, tilting his head in a quiet wonder. 'Why are you so hell-bent on proving that you're Kras Mazov anyway?,'" to which the player can reply with a choice of responses reflective of the political ideologies in the game (see figure 3.2).

This mention of Mazov's racial otherness raises a question: What does a Samaran "look like"? The game's previous elaboration of Seol suggests that most countries in the world of *Disco Elysium* have real-world analogs, and the island of Samara is no exception—within the game's lore, Samara is described as the sole surviving communist nation, the "People's Republic of Samara." In another segment of the game, the People's Republic of Samara is named as site of manufacture for a set of bootleg speakers. The nonwhite racial otherness, combined with these other iconographic signifiers, seem to suggest that while Seol is a clear analog for Japan and Korea, Samara might vaguely represent China, Southeast Asia, or a Russian/Kazakh border region.³² Nevertheless, there remains the suggestion of orientalist otherness in Mazov, one that Harrier can claim (albeit quite dubiously, or even facetiously).

This comical moment from *Disco Elysium* represents a moment in which both a socialist futurity and an Asian identity occurs in the space of the whimsical maybe, the what-if, the temporally adjacent. Here Asian adjacency plays out twofold. First, the Asian-diasporic (or perhaps, in Patterson's parlance, Asiatic) Kim Kitsuragi plays the role of deadpan "straight man" to Harrier's wild conspiracies, whose skepticism allows Harrier to elaborate on his grandiose theory, a tragicomic notion that he actually is the Marxian father purported to have killed himself decades prior. Kim regulates Harrier (and thus



3.2. Harrier and Kim inspect the communist's apartment, including the bust of Kras Mazov, which is the only physical depiction of Kras Mazov in the game. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium* taken by author, courtesy of ZA/UM.

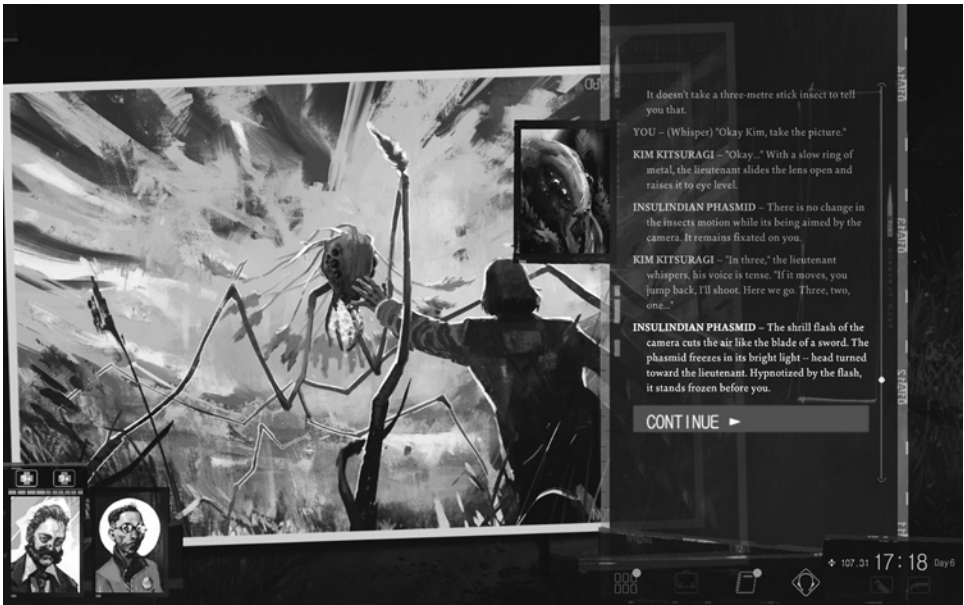
the player) not so much in political disagreement as in a regular return to "reality," trying to maintain a grip of normativity while Harrier constantly fantasizes, hallucinates, and goes off on tangents. Yet Kim very rarely resists Harrier, either—enabling Harrier even as he occasionally shames him.³³ But the moment in the apartment suggests Asian adjacency with Mazov himself. As an Asian American player, I zoomed as much as I could onto the bust of Mazov, wondering if I could make out phenotypical Asianness in this sole physical representation of the game's author of scientific socialism. Asian/America, as David Palumbo-Liu famously contends, "resides *in transit*, as a point of reference on the horizon that is part of *both* a 'minority' identity and a 'majority' identity," which is a description that equally applies to the liminal racial position of Asian Americans in an antiblack racial order as it does to the affective confusion that arises from this nebulous state.³⁴ Within *Disco Elysium's* communist imagination, Asianness exists not essentially but spectrally, an acid communism with ambivalently euphemistic Asian characteristics.

Cryptozoology and the Utopian Sublime

The conclusion of *Disco Elysium* presents a compelling transition from Harrier's largely imagined psychedelic interiority to a genuinely magical event that occurs in the material world for even Kim to witness and believe with his own eyes. Harrier and Kim finally deduce that the murder was committed via sniper rifle from an island off the coast of Martinaise, where an old communist revolutionary bunker withers in the bleak wilderness. There they find the murderer, Iosef Lilianovich Dros, an elderly former communard holdout who delivers an extensive, affecting exchange about his traumas, the horrors of anticommunist repression, and his profound melancholy over the failure of the revolution—but who was largely motivated by a libidinal masculinist jealousy over the mercenary's coitus with the beautiful Klaasje Amandou, a corporate spy staying in the hotel. The failure of Iosef's communism appears to have been wedded to this attachment to heteropatriarchal masculinity, a reactionary blind spot within an otherwise dialectical materialist worldview.

Eventually, after this burst of eloquence, Iosef suddenly falls senile, his faculties failing him completely. It is then that Harrier suddenly notices, camouflaged in the reeds behind them, a three-meter-tall mythical cryptid, the Insulindian Phasmid. Throughout the game, Kim doubts the presence of the Phasmid and, if the player decides to complete side quests in pursuit of it, repeatedly expresses his frustration that doing so is a waste of time. The revelation of the Phasmid's actual existence represents a turning point for Kim in particular, humbling proof that his authoritative cynicism was wrong all along. In contrast with a game replete in cynicism, broken dreams, and disappointment (including the scene immediately preceding this one), Harrier and Kim's encounter with the Phasmid is the sole moment of absolute wonderment, vulnerability, and awe. It is also the only supernatural, otherworldly occurrence in the game that Kim actually confirms—it is not one of Harrier's fantasies, not something that Kim hastily dismisses, but an actually occurring figure of resplendent mystery.

As Kim and Harrier are adjacent to one another, so were the Phasmid and Iosef. The game heavily implies that it is the Phasmid's pheromones that enabled Iosef's lucidity and mental youth; Iosef's adjacency is revealed to be alongside not an Asian but an otherworldly creature. Moreover, the Phasmid establishes a telepathic link with Harrier, communicating and conveying the perseverance of the natural world well past the boundaries of coming anthropocentric ecological collapse. The miraculous appearance of the Phasmid



3.3. Kim Kitsuragi takes a photo of the Insulindian Phasmid. Screenshot from *Disco Elysium* taken by author, courtesy of ZA/UM.

represents, at the very conclusion of the game, a glimmer of vulnerable hope, disrupting the futility of futurity in exchange for wonderment. And given the Phasmid's affinity with Iosef, as well as its comedic final advice to Harrier, couched in socialist terms, that he emotionally move on from his lover ("Do it for the working class"), the Phasmid seems to represent a particular kind of socialist possibility.

On Harrier's cue, Kim takes a photo of the Phasmid, providing material proof of its existence in the world, and with it, the possibility of another world, in more ways than one (see figure 3.3). The nonhuman, magical Phasmid represents an otherness that far exceeds the orientalist imagination, taking the place of acid communist wonder that orientalist mysticism would otherwise have occupied.

Although the player experiences the discovery of the Phasmid from Harrier's perspective, Kim's self-shattering awe is perhaps more significant than Harrier's wonderment; the model minority assimilationist, cathected to centrist lawfulness and the realist worldview it demands, suddenly has no alternative but to see, and imagine, otherwise. Just as he had disavowed his own

Asianness, Kim had disavowed the possibility of the Phasmid's existence. In the world of *Disco Elysium*, Asianness is not countercultural commodity, but the figure of diasporic assimilationist exemplariness, who provides the proof of political possibility, allowing the world of the imagination to transmute into the realm of the "real."

Thus, while for the game more broadly the Phasmid represents an imperative to political audacity, for Kim the model minority moralist it provides permission to embrace alterity, racially, politically, and beyond. Although we experience most of the game from Harrier's standpoint, it is from Kim's gaze that we witness the Phasmid in all its glory in the photograph he takes, Harrier in the foreground, reaching out toward it like Gatsby toward the green light (see figure 3.3). Suddenly gone are the logics of normativity that undergird his cathexis to the "regular Revacholier," allowing the Asian diasporic character to experience the totality of strangeness and possibility that had evaded him much of his life. Either by the chemical whisper of the pheromone, or through the sighing skepticism in camaraderie, adjacency opens the utopian imagination for the player, the NPC, the Asian, and the non-Asian alike.

Notes

I would like to thank Jayna Huang (a.k.a. Jeffrey A. Ow), an early pioneer in Asian American video game studies, for exposing me to *Disco Elysium* and remarking on its Asianness. Thanks also to the Boston University Center for the Humanities for supporting the development of this piece through a Junior Faculty Fellowship. And my gratitude to the graduate students in Racial Capitalism and Contemporary Culture, my Fall 2022 seminar at Boston University—especially Lauren Machado—whose discussion provided additional perspectives on *Disco Elysium* and racial capitalism.

1 Fukuyama, "The End of History?"

2 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

3 Fisher, "Mark Fisher | Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)."

4 Fisher, "Mark Fisher | Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)."

5 Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 35.

6 Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 36, emphasis in original.

7 J. Williams, "Techne-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism."

8 In fact, orientalism goes unproblematized in Fisher's mention of the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows," which he says was "minimally adapted from *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*."

9 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 5.

10 Patterson, *Open World Empire*, 235.

11 Cho, “Margaret Cho—Asian Adjacent.”

12 For “Asiatic racial form,” see Lye, *America’s Asia*.

13 I elaborate on the concept of superego model minoritarianism throughout the chapter, but I will also note that this represents an inversion my other elaboration of the superego in relation to model minoritarianism in Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism* (2022), an Afro-Asian superego that represents a moral authority in the opposite, anti-model minority orientation.

14 I should note that, as of this writing in 2023, Kurvitz, Hindpere, and Aleksander Rostov of the original creative team have since departed from ZA/UM, with Kurvitz and Rostov suing the company for fraud and illegal takeover. The legal feud between the original creators of *Disco Elysium* and ZA/UM remains ongoing at this time.

15 The Game Awards (@thegameawards), “Helen Hindpere is back on #TheGameAwards stage to accept award #2!”

16 Revachol Citizens Militia is the principal law enforcement agency in Revachol.

17 “Muñozian excess” refers, of course, to the love of utopian parties and queer dance halls in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. I would moreover argue, however, that the binary between excess/color and gray utilitarianism in *Disco Elysium* is reversed from the usual cliché associations we’ve seen in the anticommunist West, wherein grayness is associated with Soviet bleakness and color with democratic freedom.

18 Harrier gains experience points almost entirely through dialogue and internal-mental interactions, rather than the conventional RPG procedure of gaining experience through killing enemies.

19 RShuman, “Disco Elysium.”

20 North American readers may make the immediate association between Harrier DuBois and the great W. E. B. Du Bois. When the game was first released, a connection between the two was not immediately evident; *Elysium’s* DuBois is pronounced in the French manner, is phenotypically white, and characterized by unkemptness. However, with the advent of *Disco Elysium’s* “Final Cut” in 2021 (authored by Helen Hindpere), all of DuBois’s interior voices are now voiced by Black British musician Lenval Brown, effectively making both DuBois and Kitsuragi’s English-language voice acting racially asymmetrical.

21 For simplicity, I have inserted the dialogue tree branch of one of two options for dialogue in this line, the other of which is “Okay, I guess it’s not interesting then.”

22 For example, in Robert Kurvitz’s home country of Estonia, the first Black person elected to public office, Abdul Turay, remarked in 2013, “Precisely because there are no blacks here, I have no natural constituency, nobody to speak to as a black person, I cannot have a message that talks about black

issues. . . . So race literally doesn't matter" (de Pommereau, "A First for Estonia"). Turay, who was also a columnist, wrote an article explaining his experiences being stopped for his immigration card, with the principal grievance that as a Black man he is not recognized as the Estonian he is (Turay, "What's Up with the People"). Kim's presence as a quasi-Korean Eurasian may also draw from the cultural memory of Soviet rock icon Viktor Tsoi, ethnically Korean but identified staunchly as Russian (although Tsoi and Kitsuragi, not unlike Harrier and W. E. B. Du Bois, are dispositional opposites).

23 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 90.

24 The homoeroticism between DuBois and Kitsuragi is subtextual but palpable, inspiring a considerable proliferation of fan art and "slash fics" between the two—apparently far more than between DuBois and the game's femme fatale, Klaasje.

25 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 130.

26 J. Y. Kim, *The Racial Mundane*.

27 If the player selects the right "Thought Catalog" leveling choice, Harrier can discover that he is sexually queer, being intensely attracted to a mysterious man called the Smoker on the Balcony. However, if the player does not take this leveling route, Kim will amusedly remark at the game's conclusion that Harrier has never even heard of homosexuality—at least, with his amnesia, he lacks the nomenclature for his own desire.

28 Breault, "Dick Mullen and the Miracle Plot."

29 The games of BioWare are perhaps most emblematic of this tendency. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) features a Light Side to Dark Side spectrum based on player choices; the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007, 2010, 2012) features "Paragon" and "Renegade" sliders. Other games keep track of such moral scores internally without revealing to the player—*Dishonored* (2012) and its sequel (2016) keep track of "chaos" based on the number of voluntary kills the player makes and provide correspondingly different endings. Game morality is perhaps most spectacularly explored in 2015's *Undertale*, in which disciplined, determined pacifism is the only way to acquire the "best" ending. Usually such alignments are determined through accumulation of points depending on the player's moral decisions.

30 The player-run *Disco Elysium* wiki on *Gamepedia* lists Kim as a Moral-ist, as well, even though it is not a political identity that he explicitly embraces. See "Political Alignment," in *Disco Elysium: A Detective's Wiki*, at *Gamepedia*, accessed February 20, 2021, https://discoelysium.gamepedia.com/Political_alignment.

31 Thanks to Matt York on the Lefty Paradox Plaza Facebook Group (an on-line leftist gaming community), who pointed this out quite deftly to me on social media. York, "Just one of the details."

32 There does not appear to be a clear answer for which real-world countries the various nations of *Disco Elysium* represent or draw clear inspiration

from, but a spirited debate on the matter unfolded on Reddit, with a general consensus that Samara represents some form of East Asian country: see random_user_1987, “The real world inspirations of the countries in Disco Elysium?” It is also worth noting that, in the real world, Samara is a city in Russia near the border of Kazakhstan, and “Mazov” is a Russian surname.

33 Procedurally, the only action Kim actively prevents Harrier/the player from doing is removing combat boots from the bloated corpse’s body for personal use.

34 Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 5.