

Master's Thesis – master Sustainable Development  
Meaning-making processes in successful commercial  
games: A Dark Souls and Disco Elysium case study

Frans Rijnders – 9354670

Supervisor: Joost Vervoort



**Utrecht  
University**

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## Abstract

Games have developed the last decade into a strong and versatile medium with a strong potential and opportunities for societal change. Serious games have attempted to varying success to use the medium to create educational gain in their players, however, these games tend to create superficial experiences that don't seem to retain the attention of the player. Commercial video games on the other hand focus on these deeper emotional experiences, but to what extent these experiences lead to meaningful implications towards the player's real life, which are sought in serious games, is unexplored in literature. This research set out to explore these potential meaningful implications in the successful commercial games *Dark Souls* and *Disco Elysium*, using meaning making theory. Various meaningful themes have been found in both games, varying from empowerment and perseverance to diving into and understanding one's own thoughts. These themes revolved around immersion and resonance with the real world, which led to a strong emotional involvement and thereby the lessons learned in the game were more easily translated towards the player's real life. This research is a starting point of exploring how meaningful experiences can be created within games to eventually be able to implement specific meanings the developer wishes to get across. The immersion and resonance with the real world seemed crucial for the meaningful experiences here, but this is still largely unexplored in literature and needs to be further investigated in different games and genres. Still, the strong meaning making processes that were seen highlight the relevance of the deeper emotional experiences in game development, when these meaningful applications are sought.

## 1. Introduction

Video games have received a larger interest recently as a large medium and potential force for societal change. Video games are the largest form of media globally (Siwek, 2017) surpassing both film and music with over 3 billion players worldwide. As it stands the medium is largely focused on financial gain, however, the gaming industry holds a broad set of opportunities for societal imagination and thus change. The industry is now at a state where it has far fewer limits than before in terms of what can be expressed with games (Vervoort, 2019).

In 2019 UNEP started the gaming industry centred alliance 'Playing for the Planet' as a strategy to tackle sustainability issues through commitments ranging from integrating green engagement in games, reducing their emissions, and supporting the global environmental agenda (Playing for the Planet, n.d.; UNEP, n.d.). It thereby strives to connect the gaming industry to these common goals. The first of the options, integrating green engagement in games, is a new development for the commercial gaming industry, where these matters are not yet seen.

Serious games are games designed to have underlying often educational objectives beyond mere entertainment. Serious games are games designed with a purpose outside of the play experience, used to for example allow learners to experience certain situations or emphasise on learning a set of skills that are impossible in the real world due to safety, cost, time etc (Laamarti et al., 2014; Mayer, 2009). Applications are extremely varied from staying fit to learning how to operate machineries, and have also seen their emergence in climate change and environmental topics (Wu & Lee, 2015).

However, such games assume an active mindset where the player is interested in seeking meaning in the game (Khan et al., 2020), and are generally interested in conveying learning or concepts in a rationalistic, didactic style that is very different from the types of engagement in the most popular commercial games. The intended behaviour change effect is often so focused and concrete that the experience becomes superficial, and opportunities for engaging in deeper meaning-making are missed (Michael & Chen, 2006). A major downside of these serious games is that they often miss what makes the commercial industry strong: offering deeply engaging activity in which the player is given intricate, well-woven experiences that are potentially felt at a deeper level (Susi et al., 2015).

Commercial games have been made with wildly varying success, and even successful games can be very superficial experiences that do not connect to players' meaning-making processes. However, the best games on the quality spectrum, often called genre or paradigm defying (Kelly, 2021; Wood, 2022), have led to deepfelt experiences (Perkins, 2022). The players highly attribute behavioural changes to these games (Reddit, 2013), but how the games caused these behavioural changes is largely unexplored.

Serious gaming and commercial game development are increasingly starting to influence each other, however, there are many aspects to the increasingly diverse and al-pervasive world of commercial games that are still disconnected from and unexplored in serious games (Vervoort et al., 2022; Vervoort, 2019). This gap between the two development areas is where this research fits. It aims to investigate aspects of commercial games can contribute to powerful engagement and meaning making among players. If understood it can be applied to games that seek to create meaningful experiences for important societal topics, such as various environmental issues (Wu & Lee, 2015) and understanding our role in the world's ecology (Chang, 2020).

Two successful commercial games, Dark Souls and Disco Elysium, will be investigated in this research on these experiences and the player reflections that followed from them, to learn the key aspects that led to these reports of deepfelt experiences and reflections. Therefore, my research question is:

*How do the commercial games, Dark Souls and Disco Elysium, contribute to the meaning-making processes of their players?*

This question will be dissected into the following sub-questions:

- How do players connect their meaning-making around a game to their lives' global meaning?
- How do the community influence the individual's meaning-making process through their collective meaning-making processes?
- What recommendations for creating meaning-making through serious game development can be derived?

The focus will lie on the first question and will be investigated through a thorough review of reflections in various media channels and an online questionnaire. Data will be investigated using open coding to stay as close to the original text as possible. These are then thematically analysed, using three theoretical steps as backbone: their initial emotional reaction, the meaning-making process that follows, and the final engagement area where the individual places the experience after their reflection. These steps are backed by meaning-making theory (Park, 2010) and engagement theory (Iwasaki et al., 2017). The meaning making processes are the core of these steps, which revolve around the discrepancies between an individual's global meaning (their beliefs and view on themselves and the world around them), and the appraised meaning to events they encounter. A further explanation will be given in the theoretical background. A closer look will be given to community meaning through the same online questionnaire to see how they influenced the meaning making process of the player. In the end the results will be discussed from which recommendations for game development that seek to create meaningful experiences are derived.

## 2. Theoretical background

To be able to answer the research questions, theory is needed to put the different individual experiences into perspective. Therefore, a closer look will be given here to meaning-making theory.

### 2.1. Meaning making processes

Meaning and meaning making theory dives into how stressful lives events are confronted and used towards a positive stable mental state. The theory centres around discrepancies between the 'global meaning' of an individual and the appraised meaning of an event. The global meaning entails how the individual perceives the world around them, themselves, and their place within the world, as well as their goals and purpose (Dittman-kohli & Westerhof, 1999; Mischel & Morf, 2003; Pargament, 1997). The events are the situations the individual faces. The initial appraisal of such an event involves a variety of determinations such as the extent to which the event is threatening, why the event occurred, and its implications for the individual's future (Aldwin, 2007; Sweeny, 2008). If this event threatens the global meaning that the individual holds, it causes distress (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Dalgleish, 2004). The process of changing the meaning of the event and/or their global meaning to relief this distress is meaning making (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

The meaning making literature seeks to explore the interest by, and is largely used to aid and facilitate meaning making processes in many areas of psychology (Park, 2010), such as positive psychology (e.g. Steger & Lopez, 2009), health psychology (e.g. White, 2004), and clinical psychology (Hayes et al., 2007). There it is largely used to give structure to the overall coping process. The specific events investigated differ largely ranging from for example military traumas to the covid period to education (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Kasworm, 2003; Kopacz et al., 2019). The theory has not been applied yet to (serious) gaming experiences, however as the aim of this research is to understand the meaning that came from these games, as well as the process to get to this meaning, this theory is useful and



applicable to this research. This research then adds on to the theory by investigating a new type of experience, as well as investigating and comparing meaning-making processes that both do and do not start in a negative mindset.

The meaning making process is described by different proposed categorical schemes. The most common ones – automatic vs deliberate, assimilation vs accommodation, searching for comprehensibility vs significance, and cognitive vs emotional processing – are described here (Park, 2010). Note that these show different dimensions of the process and are therefore overlapping and not mutually exclusive.

*Automatic vs deliberate processes* highlight the difference between unconscious and effortful coping activities. The deliberate processes are more clearly visible as they entail effortful reflection and coping. Folkman (1997) identified three major coping mechanisms in using positive reappraisal and thereby identifying or reminding one selves of positive attributes, revising goals, or activating spiritual beliefs and experiences. The automatic processes are less visible as they for example shift their life goals when previously ignored conditions that undermine the attractiveness of blocked goals become more available (Brandtstädter, 2002).

*Assimilation vs accommodation* focusses on whether the appraised meaning changes towards meeting the global meaning, assimilation, or the global meaning changes towards meeting the appraised event meeting, accommodation (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Accommodation in this sense allows for a better growth as it allows shifting towards better suited goals and understanding of their situation (Brandtstädter, 2002). It must be noted however that it is a spectrum where both seem to co-occur (Block, 1982).

*Searching for comprehensibility vs significance* highlights the difference between the search for the meaning of the event and thus trying to make sense of the event asking ‘what caused the event to happen?’, comprehensibility, and determining the value or worth of the event asking ‘what does this event mean?’, significance (Janoff-Bulman & McPherson Frantz, 1997). These often occur in a temporal sequence, however more emphasis is put on either.

*Cognitive vs emotional processing* distinguishes between emphasising the reworking of one’s beliefs and thus cognitive nature, and emphasising the experiencing and exploring of one’s emotions, thus emotional nature (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). Emotional processing thereby involves exposure and habituation along with the regulation of negative affect (Ehlers & Clark, 2006). Cognitive processing rather involves reappraisals and continuous comparisons between their experience and their existing beliefs to modify either through thoughtful reflection (Creswell et al., 2007).

## 2.2. Placement of made meaning

Iwasaki et al (2017) focussed on how the meaning making theory described above intersects with leisure research literature to describe key themes of leisure-induced meaningful engagement with life. This combination focuses on how leisure contributes to helping people make sense of life to gain valued meanings on different fronts such as spiritually, socially, and culturally (Iwasaki et al., 2015). Here they are relevant as the individual reflection of the experience after the meaning making process is placed in different aspects of their global meaning. These aspects are a joyful, a connected, a discovered, a composed, and an empowered life.

*Joyful life* refers to a life filled with positive emotions, shown by concepts as mindfulness and savouring (Fredrickson, 2013). Mindfulness has been traditionally described as engendering positive qualities such as joy, happiness, gratitude etc. Savouring on the other hand focusses the pleasurable features of a stimulus and positive emotions that arise from it. They are thereby complementary as being

mindful of the savoury experience allows one to deepen and enrich the savoured experience (Garland et al., 2015).

*Connected life* refers to a life with a holistic sense of meanings (Chun & Lee, 2010). To be able to define connections between attained meanings allows the individual to place themselves in their world, as well as creating goals for making a positive difference for themselves and the world around them.

*Discovered life* refers to a life that demonstrates the unique talents and characteristics of the individual and therefore this theme focuses on the creating an identity for oneself (Kim & Kim, 2013). Discovering oneself both individually and collectively through meaningful leisure leads to an established self-identity and thus a clear view of their personal global meaning (Banfield & Burgess, 2013).

*Composed life* refers to a life that is controlled, collected and self-contained (Iwasaki et al., 2017). Leisure activities allow for a less restrictive and more flexible opportunities to adjust the pace and tone of life (Watters et al., 2013). Self-restoration and self-protection are key functions of leisure that are used to cope with negative life events to maintain a composed life (Kleiber et al., 2002).

*Empowered life* refers to a life that is perceived as emancipated and strengthened. Leisure activities provide a person with opportunities to counter stressful or traumatic events for effective coping or healing (Heintzman, 2008; Iwasaki et al., 2008). This healing process facilitates growth and transformation which represents the role of leisure in helping people pursue this empowerment.

### 2.3. The influence of collective meaning-making

Finally is the effect and implications that the online community can have on the overall meaning making process of the individual. In the end the meaning making process, from appraisal to eventual shift and stabilisation of the global meaning, is individual and differs from person to person even if they all experienced the same event (Klein et al., 2006; Russell et al., 1993). However the collective can have an influence on the process that the individual undertakes, and in certain time-critical and/or high-reliability domains it is sought to come to a common meaning to pursue shared goals (think of for example military or healthcare) (Albolino et al., 2007; Jensen, 2007). The research on collective meaning making allows highlighting of different approaches in which this influence can occur. It must be noted however that the literature on collective meaning making is highly focussed on organisational meaning and thus collaborative meaning making towards shared goals (Weick, 1993). For this research it is only valuable on how it has impact on the individual meaning making process through the information that the individual receives, and not the step further to set common meaning and goals. The three main characteristics of collective meaning making are *prioritising relevant information, trajectories, and activity awareness*.

#### *Prioritising relevant information*

Making relevance judgments on found information is an important aspect of the individual information retrieval process (Weick, 1995). Following from that is that an individual shares information with others depending on how relevant they thought that information was (Paul & Reddy, 2010). Whether that piece of information was relevant is thereby a crucial decision by that individual that has consequences for others that then receive that information.

#### *Trajectories*

Meaning making trajectories are in the context of a collective that an appraised meaning from an individual can influence the appraised meaning of others, which can then influence others (Reddy & Dourish, 2002). These different steps that the appraised meaning takes allows for multiple

perspectives on the meaning of the event and thus for potentially a more complete view but also a different interpretation of the situation (Paul & Reddy, 2010). Knowing the path that the appraised meaning of the individual took helps meaning making of others.

#### *Activity awareness*

The final aspect that came forth in literature is activity awareness. It emphasises the need to maintain awareness of the bigger picture (Caroll & et al, 2003). It draws on activity theory to conceptualise an activity as a sequence of actions towards obtaining a goal or object (Convertino et al., 2004). It thus aims to connect actions perceived by different members towards a common goal, and thereby enhancing the meaning making process through connecting and thereby strengthening the meaning of otherwise unconnected actions (Paul & Reddy, 2010).

### 2.4. Linking theory

The general meaning making theory model presented by Park (2010) is thereby used to gain insights from different dimensions of the meaning making process starting from the appraised meaning to the effect on the global meaning. The distinctions made by Iwasaki et al. (2017) are then used to highlight where made meaning is placed within the individual's global meaning. Both are however focussed on the individual and do not account for community impact. Therefore the theory on collective meaning making is added to be able to explain the community impact on the meaning making process.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Cases

For this research two successful commercial games have been chosen in *Dark Souls* and *Disco Elysium*. They have been selected on their high appraisal and setting new directions through redefining a genre or spawning a new one altogether, and thus having a high impact on the game development and sector. Additionally, they were highly critical of their genre at their development and release and are known to have led to many meaningful experiences. Finally, it was made sure that the games have similarities to allow for a direct comparison, yet a clear difference was ensured:

#### - *Dark souls (Remastered)*

Dark souls is the first of a series of action role-playing games made by FromSoftware (FromSoftware, n.d.). In the game the player assumes a role of a cursed human character, called a hollow, who sets out to discover the fate of undead humans like themselves. The game takes place in the fictional medieval kingdom of Lordran, where they have to fight through several hordes of enemies and bosses, and piece together clues found in dialogue, item-texts, and environmental details, to understand the story (Mecheri & Romieu, 2019). Over time the game has been recognised to be genre defying due to its high level of difficulty, as well as the mystery that comes through how it tells its story (Meade, 2021; Mecheri & Romieu, 2019), eventually winning the 'Best game of all time' award of the golden joystick awards by public vote in 2021 (Tyrer, 2021). After its release in 2011, and the release of the sequels, Dark Souls got a revamped version featuring graphical and gameplay enhancements in 2018: Dark Souls: Remastered. Dark Souls has been chosen for its focus on individual empowerment. The player is on their own to overcome the demons that they face.

#### - *Disco Elysium*

Disco Elysium is a role-playing game made by ZA/UM (ZA/UM, n.d.), in which the player takes the role of an amnesiac detective who has been tasked with solving a murder mystery. During the investigation, he slowly recalls events about his own past as well as the deeming forces trying to affect



the city. The game, which does not involve combat, is decided through skill checks and dialogue decisions. These skills, which reflect cognitive abilities, are thereby crucial as well as relations between the different non-player characters that the player interacts with (Cardy, 2022). Its heavy text-dialogue approach to game progress, depth and interactions were received as genre defying. It is currently the highest rated PC game on review site Metacritic (Metacritic, n.d.) and has won various awards such as best independent game and best narrative (The Game Awards, n.d.). Disco Elysium has been chosen for its focus on community relations and its effect on the player and their decisions.

Dark Souls and Disco Elysium are thus games that are different in the focus on individual empowerment and community building. This is purposefully chosen to investigate personal development on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

### 3.2. Data

A diverse set of media was selected to fully encapsulate the reflections, experience, and overall perception of the players on both Dark Souls and Disco Elysium.

There are many different forms of player reflections available. These different forms will be investigated to give a complete overview of both the broad audience as well as deep dives into their reflections. First are the individual reflective reviews and video essays that are selected by number of views on YouTube, an important platform for these types of reflections. Next to that are the reviews and reflections made by major games journalism sources such as IGN. Due to time constraints podcasts and threads were not used. The complete list of sources used can be found in appendix I. In total 41 and 50 sources were used for Disco Elysium and Dark Souls respectively.

As a second data collection method, online questionnaires have been used to validate initial findings of the reflection review and add upon it. These questionnaires consisted open ended, undirected questions to allow responders to tell their story. The specific questions can be found in appendix II. In total there were 115 and 61 responses for the questionnaire on Disco Elysium and Dark Souls respectively. The results were then compared to the reflection findings to see whether they match. As it is expected that the community will only react enthusiastically to an open questionnaire once, the questionnaire was not tested online.

### 3.3. Coding

After the data selection, the data was studied through a qualitative content analysis involving coding. The coding analysis has been done using the NVIVO software. The codes are derived from an inductive analysis. To allow the players to tell their stories open coding is used to be able to fully capture the essence of their story. Additionally, open coding will be used to highlight specific in game aspects in reflections such as mechanics and world setting. Multiple codes can be used for a paragraph as it would better capture the complexity of the texts. The spoken data types in podcasts and video essays have been automatically transcribed through AI software to allow for a more fluent coding process, but have been listened to when coding to be able to hear emotions, be aware of for example jokes and sarcasm, and spot mistakes made by the AI.

### 3.4. Analysis

The engagement and meaning-making theories are used to guide the dive into individual experiences and reflections and understand the steps they took throughout their entire experience. From the theory a three-step thought process is derived in the initial emotional reaction, followed by the meaning making process, and finally the placement of the made meaning in their global meaning and thus their engagement outside of the game experience. For the analysis the different codes will firstly be listed on occurrence to highlight frequency. Afterwards a closer look to each code will be given to

draw overall conclusions on what the code meant in the context of Dark Souls and Disco Elysium. In this process, codes that have frequent overlapping pieces of text, and are thus likely correlated in meaning, are noted down. These relations that come forth are then investigated on the earlier conducted individual analysis of each code to highlight groups of codes that form themes with similar meaningful experiences. Through this analysis the meaningful experiences, as well as their connection to the player's global meaning can be highlighted to answer sub question one. Sub question two will be answered through the themes that arise from the questions focused on the game community in the questionnaire, as well as natural occurrences in the other media forms. Finally, as a result of this thematic analysis, the themes and their discussion will highlight the game development aspects and mechanics that can be used to create recommendations for future (serious) games to answer sub question three.

## 4. Results

The two cases will be investigated separately and the different themes that came forward will be discussed below. Each theme will be opened with the codes that were used to create the theme. Then a narrative is used to explain the common reasoning the respondents took within that theme. Afterwards, an overview accompanied with several examples how the respondents use the theme towards their own life and thus global meaning, and finally the theme is concluded with each theme will be analysed with an explanation using the meaning making theory and the meaningful engagement that follows. The abbreviations after each quote *DE* or *DS* refer to the readily available essays for Disco Elysium and Dark Souls respectively, along with the number which corresponds with the item in appendix I. *DEQ* and *DSQ* refer to the questionnaire of Disco Elysium and Dark Souls respectively.

### 4.1. Dark Souls Themes

#### 4.1.1. Determination

In table 1 the codes used for the theme Determination are shown. A closer look will be given at mainly *Perseverance*, *Determination*, and *Empowerment* as they are core to explaining this theme. *Accomplishment* and *Satisfaction* are large themes, but have been rather superficial, without further reflection by themselves. If the player did further reflect than the initial accomplishment or satisfaction feeling, this was also coded in the three codes that will be divided into in this theme. *Self-efficacy* is a strong umbrella for the entire theme, but it is small as it is only actively mentioned by a few respondents. The other smaller themes also come forward in the explanation as different pathways or applications of the core codes, but are not core to the theme themselves.

Table 1. Codes used in theme Determination

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Accomplishment</i>	42	66
<i>Perseverance</i>	39	59
<i>Satisfaction</i>	17	25
<i>Determination</i>	16	21
<i>Empowerment</i>	14	23
<i>Failure</i>	13	13
<i>Purpose</i>	9	17
<i>Growth</i>	7	9
<i>Patience</i>	6	7
<i>Trying</i>	6	7
<i>Self-efficacy</i>	4	7

A large theme that came forth from the questionnaire is determination. The players highlight that the game has a focus on throwing them in seemingly impossible challenges, in which they have to travel through a hostile area or defeat a difficult boss to continue. This almost certainly leads to many failures before the player overcomes the challenge and can move on to the next obstacle.

These challenges are found daunting and intimidating, which makes the player doubt whether they can overcome it at all and the failures that follow will further test the player's determination. However, the players found this to be strengthening and trains their level of determination through the rewarding feeling of accomplishment that follows defeating a boss or finding the next bonfire.

*"As many players would probably express in one form or another, overcoming the challenges in Dark Souls that initially seemed impossible has brought some of the most profound elation I have felt playing a video game. Having my ass handed to me by Ornstein & Smough so many times only for me to finally beat them by a hair, through my own skill and improvement, was enough to keep me motivated to play the rest of the game." (DSQ#32)*

Even though the world and its challenges are intimidating and may feel hopeless at first, the world constantly reminded the players to keep their head high and not give up. Throughout the journey many 'hollows' will be encountered which are the same cursed humans as the player, but through dying repeatedly they lost their determination and purpose. They gave up, making them the hollowed husks they are and mindlessly wander around Lordran. The player is not special or more powerful than the hollows, but they have kept their sense of purpose:

*"The inhabitants of Dark Souls' world are going hollow. You might think this is because of the Undead Curse, the Dark Sign, the fading flame, and the encroaching darkness, but it's not. These things would cause everyone to hollow when the fire does finally fade, but that hasn't happened yet. Instead, the reason they go hollow is because in the face of this impending doom, they give up. They become resigned to their fate with no reason to continue and hollowing is the result. ...*

*You are a part of the game's story and it's your resolve that's being tested, just like how it is for every other inhabitant of this world. And the game does try to test that resolve of yours. You're dumped in a bleak, hostile, dying world with little explained and less understood where the game then tries to kill you over and over again, taking your souls, wasting your time, and always asking you, do you really have what it takes? Are you really going to keep going? Are you sure you wouldn't just prefer to turn the game off and roll over and hollow alongside everyone else? And it's left up to you how you respond to this. But if you do choose to persist, you will eventually find yourself rising to the game's challenges, both as a result of the game's more encouraging than challenges, both as a result of the game's more encouraging than it might initially seem design and as a result of your own hard work." (DS#15)*

It has become a key catch phrase of the community and one that stuck with many players in their playthrough: 'Don't you dare go hollow', reminding themselves to stay determined to their goals and not give up.

#### 4.1.1.1. Perseverance vs Empowerment

While similar in meaning, there are two different groups that form with this base sense of determination in mind: perseverance and empowerment. Perseverance entails the thought of not giving up, keep going and eventually you will succeed. The people that took this mindset focus more on trying and improving their skills over a period of time, and thus their growth across the journey

rather than overcoming the obstacle in the end, because they know they will overcome it. The eventual success naturally still offers the joy of accomplishment, but that is not what they took from the game.

*“So by persevering through failure, you, the chosen undead, will feel great satisfaction when you overcome those challenges that gave you so much trouble. You will run up against an enemy that seems unbeatable, you will die, you will fail, but it doesn't matter how many times you are slain, how massive and impossible the road ahead might seem, because so long as you push against the inevitable and learn from failure, you will survive in Lordran, and you will survive the real world.” (DS#05)*

*“Never give up. Always keep trying. Learn from your mistakes. If you set your mind to something, you can accomplish it no matter how daunting or impossible it may seem. There are always solutions to problems.” (DSQ#19)*

The empowerment group however tends to focus on their ability to overcome the challenges and the fulfilment that overcoming them brings. They thereby focus more on the growth of their confidence in their ability rather than the ability itself. The victory allows the player to realise that they were in fact capable of the act, when they initially thought they were not.

*“An invitation to find proof of your strength disguised as a hauntingly gorgeous game that your friends won't stop talking about. I think every single one of us would be lying if we said that we've never doubted our ability to do anything. if we said that we've never doubted our ability to do anything. Sometimes something as simple as getting out of bed in the morning feels like a Herculean task. Sometimes trying to believe a positive thought is like trying to start a fire in a rainstorm.” (DS#07)*

*“Sometimes when I have to do a scary and/or hard thing I will literally think ‘I beat Dark Souls, I can do this’” (DSQ#47)*

Interesting to note here is that the starting mental state of the player seems to be related to which of these two groups they belong. The players that are dealing with a heavily negative mental state or depression tend to lean towards the empowerment side, as they are more surprised by their accomplishments and capabilities.

*“It helped my depression. People can tell you what the right things are to do all day long, but the Souls games are the only thing that made me truly realize I can do anything. And I have the power to take my life wherever I want, because it made me conquer all these hurdles without even realizing I was doing it. It's only after that you realize what you accomplished.” (DS#19)*

#### 4.1.1.2. Self-efficacy

This all is facilitated and further strengthened by the game's difficulty and combat mechanics and fairness. One video essayist dived into this and showed that the game allows the player to truly award themselves with their victory and not shrug it off due to an external variable. They explain it with a concept called self-efficacy. It is the confidence boost that you can do something you previously feared you could not do. However, the player must be able to say with certainty that the feat they accomplished was due to their capabilities. Otherwise they can shrug it off due to a luck factor:

*“Pep talks are nice, watching someone else do it is nice, but doing it yourself is proof that you've got this. Usually. The caveat here is locus of control because you very well could do well on that exam, but then discount it as luck or the exam simply not being that tough. And studies like this 2016 analysis on self-efficacy for computer software show that this is often the case. The only way mastery experience actually helps build our efficacy is if we can confidently attribute what we've done to our own skill and*

*not some other factor like a lack of task difficulty or luck. And I think this is what separates Miyazaki's works from the pack. ...*

*Souls games, however, are quite different. ... these games provide a provocation. They insist that they can't be bested. And they dare you to try and prove them wrong. Every enemy is a threat. There is no ego fodder here. Damage is never neglectable. Nothing is ever certain, and this series will embarrass you just as early and often as some others will coddle you. ... And because of all this, if you've ever beaten one of these games, you'll know that it wasn't because you deserved it, it's because you damn well earned it. There is absolutely no way to flunk your way through Souls games, and because of this, there is no way to have an external attribution for them. These games demand that you take it fully upon yourself to win. So any victory afforded to you will be seen with an internal locus. And since you knew that you were the one that made this happen and not the game, since you took that dare, proved to the game and yourself that you could do it, and rose to the occasion, your self-efficacy rose right along with you." (DS#07)*

#### *4.1.1.3. Real life meaning*

The theme thus brought lessons of self-efficacy, and thus in the end self-confidence, that bleed into different skills, challenges, and hurdles through a more powerful determination and patience to keep going, not give up, and try new things:

*"Never give up. Always keep trying. Learn from your mistakes. If you set your mind to something, you can accomplish it no matter how daunting or impossible it may seem. There are always solutions to problems." (DEQ#18)*

*"It's definitely improved my patience, it gave reasons and rewarding feelings for being patient which means I tend to give most things, especially media, more of a chance to grow on me before I make an opinion." (DEQ#08)*

*"Something that has always stuck with me is encountering a message from another player, 'Maintain Composure' - I often say this to myself in stressful or nerve-wracking situations. Even when faced with things that make scared or stress me out, it's an excellent reminder to stand up tall and face it head on. It also reinforced the idea of "No way out but through", that some tasks that seem impossible cannot be ducked dodged or cheesed, you must simply rise to the occasion." (DSQ#13)*

#### *4.1.1.4. Meaning making*

This theme explores more heavily on the comprehensibility of the appraised events. Answering the question what caused this success to occur with the fact that the player overcame the challenges that came their way through their own ability is what makes this theme so present. This process is thereby accommodating as through overcoming the challenges their global meaning changes towards the newly found growth and accomplishment that the player is capable of the feat. Interesting here is that most describe future experiences regarding determination, after going through this personal growth, to be assimilating processes. An initial reaction that something is too intimidating or too challenging to overcome will quickly be reappraised towards the global meaning that they shaped through overcoming Dark Souls. Furthermore, the process is more of emotional nature as the player exposes and habituates themselves with the initial fearful intimidating emotions that they can later overcome with those of success and accomplishment.

The made meaning is a clear example of the empowered life category. The perseverance as empowerment path facilitate growth in the player which is seen in different ways for the different paths, but both aid the player to grow and pursue this growth in other parts of their lives as well.

#### 4.1.2. Place in the world

For the theme Place in the world the focus lies on *World*, *Relations*, *Not a superhero*, and *Place in the world*. These codes describe how the player felt the world looks at them in the first three, and further reflect on this in *Place in the world* which is the code where respondents describe the core of the theme themselves. *Purpose* comes up here as some describe the search for agency as their purpose, but this is not the case for most respondents.

Table 2. Codes used in theme Place in the world

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>World</i>	28	49
<i>Relations</i>	16	21
<i>Not a superhero</i>	13	18
<i>Place in the world</i>	11	17
<i>Purpose</i>	9	17

Closely linked with the difficulty and combat game mechanics is the theme regarding players understanding their place in the world. What are they capable of influencing and how does the world see the player? Mainly the latter part of that question became apparent to the players because the Dark Souls world does not see them. It is not only hostile towards the player, but even indifferent. It does not care who they are, what they want to do and what they want to accomplish. The world would exist whether the player was there to experience it or not. Things would always keep moving:

*“Regardless, it seems indisputable that fire will follow darkness and thus Dark Souls story is concluded. This effectively means that all endings across all games are that all endings across all games are basically the same ending and anything the player might do doesn't matter and it never did. Link the flame or walk away at the end of Dark Souls 1 and it changes nothing. Dark Souls 2 still happens regardless, proving that even if you didn't link the flame someone else did. The same is true in Dark Souls 2 for it will always lead into Dark Souls 3, and in Dark Souls 3, every ending, secret or not, still shows that darkness will soon be upon us, and that darkness will simply lead into an age of fire all over again. And that's it, that's the end of Dark Souls. Every ending is the same ending, nothing you did ever mattered, and it's all just pointless.” (DS#15)*

It is thereby the opposite of the often seen power fantasies in games, where the player is stronger than their surroundings, capable of enabling world changing events, and/or rise to the top of a power hierarchy. Here the player is just an average joe and thus treated as such by those they encounter, both hostile and friendly. The enemies do not fear the player, and the allies won't set aside everything just to help the player:

*“... it almost just feels like the real world a lot more. You're just walking around the world; characters move from place to place sometimes without you even realizing why.” (DS#08)*

*“The situation your character is thrown into seems to resonate with common human experience. You are thrown into a hostile and confusing world. The world is full of history that isn't quite clear and takes work to understand. Characters can help or hinder you, have their own goals and feel independent. You will have your understanding of the world challenged and changed. Ultimately, though others have laid their own paths for you, the choice of how to live is your own. Dark Soul's mirroring of our own existential condition is what resonates most for me, as specific minutiae of playing are forgotten.” (DSQ#27)*



#### 4.1.2.1. Real life meaning

It is thereby found by the players that the indifference of the Dark Souls' world makes the world resonate with the player's situation in the real world. It is a hostile and confusing world, where people can help or hinder the player while having their own goals and are independent, and the player is thus not seen as special. However, the players also notices where they can have an impact and thus where they can act to make the harsh, hostile, and indifferent world bearable.

*"The world around us is completely indifferent to any of us and would continue whether we were here or not. With that in mind, the way to live a happy life becomes clear. Take the little steps to gain as much agency over your life as possible and make the lower points as bearable as possible so that you can experience the numerous high points that come after them." (DS#09)*

*"You are nobody, with potential for great things given effort." (DSQ#41)*

#### 4.1.2.2. Meaning making process

This theme is meaning making process is largely defined by the stronger assimilation compared to the other themes. Here the world seems indifferent to the player at first where the player cannot have a strong impact. This appraised meaning holds true as the world still stays indifferent to the player and is thus accommodating to the global meaning. However it does lose some of its strength as the player learns how they can make a difference to the world. The appraised meaning thereby weakens, and more assimilation is present. The process tends to be more emotional as the world at first often feels hopeless and sad due to the indifference, however hope is found in the various actions that the player and others make to make the world liveable.

Central for the made meaning is the connected life, as the player learns to highlight their patch of the world and how they can make a positive difference for themselves and the world around them. It however also holds elements of composed and/or empowered life, as the player learns what they can and cannot do in the world.

#### 4.1.3. Living the moment

The theme Living the moment is mainly described by the codes *Ambience*, *World*, and *Storytelling*, which describe the facilitating aspects that the game provides, *Curiosity*, which describes the player's overall feeling of interest towards the mystery of the game, and *Watcher*, which is the code that actively describes the core of this theme. *Awe*, *Hope*, and *Respite* are the feelings that accompanies the reflection of the core thoughts within this theme.

Table 3. Codes used in theme Living the moment

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Curiosity</i>	29	36
<i>Ambience</i>	29	39
<i>World</i>	28	49
<i>Storytelling</i>	16	21
<i>Awe</i>	15	15
<i>Hope</i>	10	11
<i>Respite</i>	8	10
<i>Watcher</i>	7	8

The world and its ambience are thereby important facilitators that the game provide towards the players' unique and immersive experiences. Next to its role in indifference explained above, the players praise the game's mystery in storytelling. They highlight that the world is carefully build up

with little snippets of information to be found everywhere. Naturally from dialogue, but there is limited dialogue, and it is often cryptic. Therefore the world also provides information in written form through item descriptions, but many snippets can also be found in the direct surroundings. So there is information to be found about the mysterious world everywhere, and FromSoftware made sure to implement gameplay mechanics and items into its story:

*“Let me ask you, have you ever thought about what Estus actually is and why it heals you? Most people probably saw it as any other item that restores health, because it's just a potion, med kit, food, magical green herbs that definitely isn't weed, a harmonious melody. Games never explain why you get healed from this \*\*\*\* because it really doesn't matter. But in Dark Souls, it does. Estus is bottled fire, people. That's why it refills at the bonfire. You capture the flame in your flask. Dark Souls is about disparity between life and death, fire and darkness, and the bonfires are beacons of life. Miracles come from Gwyn and his faithful knights. Pyromancy comes from the Witch of Izalith and her Daughters of Chaos. And sorcery comes from Seath the Scaleless. These gameplay tools have a reason to be in the game beyond their immediate use. You could run through the list of items, mechanics, tools, and weapons that connect each one of them as pieces to form the greater whole of Dark Souls' universe, story, and lore.” (DS#05)*

*“The way in which it manages to tie every element of its play into theming and narrative. Most notably in the way it treats item placement and item description.” (DSQ#07)*

At the same time the game is not going to hold the player's hand and tell them every page of the story. Continuing the line of indifference from the world, Dark Souls has placed the mysterious story throughout Lordran and leaves it for the player to find. A group of players say that they went through the whole game without ever noticing that there even is a story to uncover, only learning about this after the fact. The game therefore holds a very strong 'show, don't tell' storytelling principle, where the player has to be observant to find the little clues and put them together to construct the rich narrative.

Due to this mysterious story that the player tries to uncover, the player becomes more aware of the moment they are living in and their surroundings. They thereby notice the details and beauty of anything they encounter and appreciate these things as they present themselves:

*“...but for me there was a much more simple source of joy that I found within Dark Souls. The views. That may sound silly, but the stunning world design and the vistas in Dark Souls encouraged me to keep going even when the difficulty felt insurmountable. Even when the design is at its most grim, such as in Blighttown or Sen's Fortress, there is a level of detail and architectural consistency to the design of these places that they take on a warped beauty of their own, and as such exploring them is just as rewarding as any other area of the game to me. Why do I mention this? Because it actually encouraged me to go outside and explore the world around me in real life.” (DS#09)*

#### *4.1.3.1. Real life meaning*

The theme and thus application to the player's overall global meaning comes in the form of being aware of their surroundings, highlighting interesting and beautiful details of that specific moment and enjoying those, or actively seeking out these details and exploring the world around the player, as shown for example in the quote above or the following:

*“I think a sort of smaller thing is that the world rewards you for engagement and attention it is worth being present in a situation if you can.” (DSQ#09)*

*“I alluded in an earlier question that I didn’t know the lore or world would be interesting. I learned there is a lot of joy in looking at things a little more closely and it is often worth the effort.” (DSQ#25)*

#### 4.1.3.2. Meaning making

This theme describes a mindset that is facilitated by the mysterious premise and ambience that the game provides. The theme allows for a certain type of meaning making process because the mindset gained strengthens the search for significance as the player more actively asks themselves what the value or worth of an event is. The process is thus deliberate and not automatic as the player actively reflects upon what is happening around them. This process could be both cognitive as emotional, which depends on whether the player reflects on the experience in comparison or focuses on exposure to the emotions and savouring them respectively.

The theme is therefore focused upon a joyful life, where the player is more deliberate and actively seeking the significance of what is happening around them, and thus mindful of highlighting the positive experiences and savouring them when encountered.

#### 4.1.4. Not alone

The theme Not alone is mainly described the codes *Online*, *Brotherhood*, and *Connected*. The code *Online* describes the different in-game mechanics that are present to connect the players within the game. *Brotherhood* and *Connected* (as well as the smaller codes *Presence* and *Understanding*) describe the safety that certain players find with the presence of other players. It is from these codes however clear that this theme is not applicable to all players, as the largest code *Deepening* highlights that most use the online community for mere information rather than deeper reflection or emotional deepening.

Table 4. Codes used in theme Not alone

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Deepening</i>	34	36
<i>Online</i>	23	32
<i>Brotherhood</i>	18	19
<i>Connected</i>	15	17
<i>Hope</i>	10	11
<i>Presence</i>	7	8
<i>Understanding</i>	2	3

The last theme that came forth from the Dark Souls questionnaire comes from its in-game online mechanics and its online community. The players highlight that the (online) community and content is largely used for the further explanation and deepening of the story, by seeing the clues they missed and the various theories that are present. The community is however also a valuable place for certain players where they enjoy the company of other players of which they know that they went through the same journey as themselves.

*“Before joining the band whose members introduced me to DS, I had felt pretty isolated in my life. To have had this shared experience with now lifelong friends in retrospect means the world to me. And to know it’s offered the same to people all over the globe is just beautiful ain’t it.” (DSQ#22)*

This is not only present for the ones that actively seek out this community. Within the game there are many ways through which other players can leave their presence in the game. Their spectres can be seen as they rest at a bonfire or where they last died. They can leave messages to inform or warn about an upcoming enemy. Or they can leave a sign through which they can be summoned:

*“...but I would argue that the game would flat out not work if not for the summoning system, which although derided by some as a means of not playing the game right, can give people a sense of respite when they need it the most. Or even just the spectres that sit at the bonfires as you approach. They exemplify the game's philosophy that, hey, you're ultimately the one that's going to have to work hard in order to survive in this world, and the world is brutally indifferent towards your present, but you can get through this, because you're not alone in your efforts.” (DS#09)*

#### 4.1.4.1. Real life meaning

As shown in the quote above, the player is reminded that even though they need to put in the effort to survive and overcome obstacles but that they do not have to do it alone, can ask for help from others and enjoy their company along the way, both for in the game as well as in the real world:

*“It's okay to ask for help. The world is a scary place but we don't have to face it alone, and asking for help does not make you less of a person.” (DSQ#16)*

*“Also, enduring life together with others, helping each other, and challenging yourself to be better, is the meaning of life.” (DSQ#21)*

#### 4.1.4.2. Meaning making

The in-game online interactions are still mostly focused on the personal player experience, as they do not allow for a community to form or for deeper conversations, and thereby the interpretation and imagination of the world is still largely in the hands of the player themselves. The meaning making process here is emotional rather than cognitive, through the encouragement to not give up that the online systems provide. Additionally it seeks for significance over comprehensibility, as the player seeks the meaning of the event, rather than why it occurred. This theme itself is accommodating as the player notices others, where they at first thought they were alone in their efforts. Interesting is that the theme can be assimilating other processes, as the confidence of the player might be dwindling due to a seemingly impossible challenge, but through this theme the appraised meaning of that challenge is lessened due to the presence of the other players.

The active online community is a safe place where the players can openly discuss their theories and experiences, and thus there are community interactions which could influence the meaning making process of the individual. However, the experience to most was so personal throughout the game, regardless of prior knowledge, that their meaning making process did not undergo major changes through the community. There are aspects of activity awareness, where through discussion the awareness of certain bigger pictures or themes are highlighted, but most of the time this is used in this case by the player to reaffirm or reexperience what they felt and thought before.

The made meaning is a combination of composed and empowered life as the player can rely on others in times of need, as well as gaining the confidence that this backing brings.

## 4.2. Disco Elysium Themes

### 4.2.1. Dealing with failure

The large theme Dealing with failure is explained by the codes *Storytelling* and *Skill tree* that describe the facilitating game-mechanics, and the reflection that is seen *Letting go*, *Optimism*, *Failure*, and *Perseverance*. *Addiction* is a clear and relatable example of a problem or failure state with which the respondent can resonate or empathise. The smaller codes are only relevant for few respondents, and therefore only touched upon briefly.

Table 5. Codes used in theme Dealing with failure

Code names	Number of participants	References
Storytelling	36	62
Skill tree	23	44
Letting go	21	25
Optimism	20	25
Failure	19	22
Perseverance	16	20
Addiction	14	16
Control	7	7
Empowerment	7	7
Face problems	6	6
Purpose	5	5

A major theme that came forth from the Disco Elysium questionnaire is dealing with failure. The player starts the game at the lowest point Harry could have been, nearly drinking himself to death, with several problems and challenges facing him that the player does not yet know of. Within the game, the player is continuously faced with skill checks, where the player virtually roles dice to see whether they succeed or not at what they were trying to do. And the player is guaranteed to fail many of these checks as some are nearly impossible early on in the game but that the player does encounter. Most of these checks can be retried later after levelling the appropriate skill or unravelling a clue, but some can only be tried once and thus failed. The players highlight that Disco Elysium then, rather than putting you in a failed state, makes these failures as enjoyable as the successes if not even more enjoyable.

*“Disco Elysium does the opposite and relishes the skill check with so much playfulness and creativity. Regularly, you'll find yourself in situations where you have to roll for one of your many skills, and the outcome of the encounter changes whether you succeed or fail. And the beautiful part is, Disco Elysium is finally a game that fully embraces the joy of a bad role. I've said that numerous times in past videos, that a good DM knows how to make even bad roles, or often the bad role specifically, so interesting that you don't shy away from trying an impossible check, from getting a little playful with your character, embracing some chaos and creativity in your choices instead of always just min-maxing outcome and most video game RPGs simply don't embrace this possibility fully, not even close to the degree Disco Elysium does. Even in my favourite RPGs of all time I still largely play with the mentality that I want to mostly avoid failure when I can because at the end of the day it will lead to a net penalty.*

*Disco Elysium on the other hand is the first game that, within the first half hour or so, strongly makes it clear that failed skill checks will lead to incredibly fun and interesting situations. It only took a good 10 minutes for me to get to the point where my character, just woken up with a severe hangover that he's forgotten literally everything, gets asked for his name, which is when he realized that this is the ideal chance to come up with a really darn cool name for himself. So you have the option, and I say the option because you can be a square and just be honest about having forgotten your name, you get the option to roll a conceptualization check to come up with a really awesome name. And what can I say, I do not regret in the slightest to have critically failed that check, because when my sense of conceptualization, full of determination, came back with the name Raphael Ambrosius Cousteau, it was the second time that the game had me in stitches.” (DE#06)*

Players mention that through this strength in storytelling they refrain from reloading and rerolling the dice until they eventually succeed to ensure a stronger level of immersion as you tried but failed,

which makes sense as they will not be successful in everything they will encounter. They highlight that the game thereby lets them know that is indeed okay to fail and you will continue regardless of it. They learn from it and move on trying to do better in their next obstacle.

Next to the direct failure that comes from these skill checks and therefore player's choice, respondents notice that failure is a large part of Disco Elysium's story and world as well. Both in Harry's background as Martinez and its inhabitants, failure is ever so present. Harry got to his low point due to a failing relationship which he could not let go. Martinez is the remainder of the battleground of an old communist revolution that eventually failed, where bullet holes, mortar pits, and destroyed buildings are to be found everywhere, and where every inhabitant is trying to cope with the hardships they are facing in this environment.

*"I felt like I was enjoying the utter sadness that this game has. It is grim, dark, sinister and it shows the lives of people in the gutter. Yet, it does bring a certain spirit." (DEQ#85)*

*"The whole of Disco Elysium appears to frame the past and failure as an anchor dragging you down, but through the lens of shivers, the collective trauma of the world is recontextualised into a source of incredible power for growth and positive change. We can see it in the Dicemaker and in Garte, the owner of the whirling racks. Knowing about the curse of the doomed commercial area has just made them savvier and more determined than ever to beat it. When Moral and Lena couldn't find the phasmid, they refined their technique, learned a bit more, and went out searching again. And when the very first settlers arrived on the island and found that hole in reality, did they leave? Did they cower in fear? No, they built a church around the \*\*\*\* thing in an attempt to fight back." (DE#05)*

The player thereby encounters the different problems Harry himself and other inhabitants face, and tries to help them deal with them. It handles the problems of for example addiction to drugs and alcohol as Harry wakes up with a massive hangover from them, and gives the player the chance to help Harry face his problems and ill-doings.

*"Disco Elysium is a game about starting off as an absolute disaster of a human being, and then getting the chance to stop being that. To turn it all around, to get your \*\*\*\* together, and to put right all that you've put wrong before the game even began. Of course, you don't have to play the game this way, but I think even players who begin have to play the game this way, but I think even players who begin by just picking the craziest options for the entertainment factor will sooner or later feel that latent desire to be better that Disco Elysium weaves into its narrative." (DE#20)*

Importantly however is that the players mention that they also must come to accept that some problems cannot be overcome and must be let go. The most prevalent example here is the ex-relationship that Harry is trying to hold on to, through keeping old letters, phone calls, and eventually a dream in which Harry desperately tries to keep her in his life. However, the relationship has ended long ago, and she is not going to come back. This story resonates with most players as they are likely to have had a failed relationship they wish had gone differently.

*"Your ex appears in the form of the near mythological historical figure, Dolores Dei, and so you can finally ask all the questions you know you shouldn't. For how much this encounter's been built up, there's actually surprisingly little new information to find out here. Instead this scene provides details, colouring in all the gaps of a picture you've likely already worked out for yourself. That might seem disappointing for something that's been teased since the game's earliest moments, but what this scene lacks in revelation, it makes up for in raw emotion. makes up for in raw emotion, and it's hard not to be hit by the pain of it all as you watch Harry try in vain to stop the woman he loves from leaving him.*



*There is nothing you can do here. It doesn't matter what dialogue options you choose, what dice you roll on skill checks, what information you have previously uncovered, or what the many voices in your head will say, nothing will change the outcome. And so your only option is to experience the moment, to let the waves come crashing down around you and hope that if you ever find yourself in this situation again or for the first time, that you remember how important it is sometimes to let go.” (DE#20)*

#### 4.2.1.1. *Perseverance and optimism (Real life meaning)*

What players learn from these failures towards their own lives comes forward in the combination of the different aspects of failure described above. The player sees that a turnaround is possible and that there is always time to face problems and grow as a person. At the same time the player experiences that certain problems cannot be solved and that they will only hurt the player if they dwell on them, so it is important to let them go. It ensures the player that the pain will pass and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

*“Everything will pass and the pain is temporary. You just need to focus, get your \*\*\*\* together and keep on moving.”(DEQ#63)*

*“It's given character to some of the thoughts I have I know what it's like to have Volition in your ear telling you to keep going and to not slip and spiral.” (DEQ#80)*

Perseverance is thereby a strong aspect that comes forward by not giving up and whatever the struggle may be, eventually it will get better if the player keeps going. And if they fail at a certain challenge, it is the attempt and effort that strengthens them. It thus does not necessarily focus on overcoming a certain challenge in the end, but the journey and growth the player made trying to get there.

*“That sometimes even when you try your hardest and achieve the best you could ever achieve, it still isn't enough and you lose. That even though you lose, it's important that you try. Things will end no matter what you do, so it's the trying that counts. A dead future doesn't mean we can't make today a little better.” (DEQ#109)*

#### 4.2.1.2. *Meaning making*

The meaning making process here is at first more automatic that later transforms into a deliberate process. As failure is so embedded in the story, the player experiences it throughout the game, but it is not as clear at first and is thus automatic. However as the players go through the game, and especially after stronger scenes such as Harry's wife leaving him and the ending, they mention to more frequently reflect on that scene towards their own life, but also on the more subtle hints that even though they failed they still made progress. Progress towards the case and towards improving their life. The perseverance mindset that they mention highlights a search for comprehensibility because questioning what caused the eventual progress to happen lead to the conclusion that they learned through the process. These processes tend to be emotional rather than cognitive as the initial hopeless feelings towards the success in the end, or coping with failure, challenges the player's emotion and composure.

The made meaning that came from interpreting failure, especially in the cases where the player must let go is a clear example that falls under the composed life. The player gains more control over how they cope with negative life events, and is thus more self-protective, collected, and self-contained. The perseverance aspect that flows out of it however focusses more on the empowered life, where the player is learning from these possibly negative experiences to facilitate growth and transformation and knows that this is possible regardless of how the situation is.

#### 4.2.2. Understanding oneself

The theme Understanding oneself entails the game-mechanic of the different skills and how this is used in the storytelling which is actively mentioned in the codes *Skill tree* and *Storytelling*. The code *Own mind* is the core of this theme and entails how players reflect on this game-mechanic and how it is applicable to their own life.

Table 6. Codes used in theme Understanding oneself

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Storytelling</i>	36	62
<i>Skill tree</i>	23	44
<i>Own mind</i>	18	23

The skill system is an important game mechanic that players mention made the game stand out to others. The different skills represent different parts of the brain and they will chime in more often when they are stronger. The players highlight that it is a visualisation of how the different parts of the brain react to the things we experience, and battle it out to conclude the best reaction:

*“And not only that, the very nature of it just lends to numerous varied interactions between not only the protagonist and the people of Revachol, but the protagonist and the different facets of his personality. It's a stroke of genius that I only really understood when I saw it in practice. Having the different parts of your brain personified as characters all their own that bicker with each other and chime in to pull you towards specific dialogue choices, you almost forget that there isn't combat because so many of these conversations can feel so tense. It's like you're controlling a brain more so than controlling a character. They could make asking for a sandwich an arduous accomplishment and they kind of do that actually.” (DE#08)*

The players found joy in this mechanic that made for a fun and innovative way to handle the text heavy game, where anything the player encounters gets viewed through different lenses. However, players highlight that it also gave them a playful way of structuring the complexity of their own brain and thoughts through giving names to different thoughts:

*“The different voices of the psyche and their relationship with specific energies and sense perceptions. This is something I hadn't thought of it in this way before, but it felt so aligned with reality. Later I had a spiritual experience which catalysed a more careful observation within, and I found myself seeing how this game helped lay the groundwork for that inner work - really paying attention and allowing these unique energies within to express. The game beautifully reinforces the way choice runs how we perceive and enjoy reality while simultaneously affirming the power of surrendering to the mystery of it all as it unfolds.” (DEQ#84)*

##### 4.2.2.1. Real life meaning

There is a group of players that thereby actively takes this tool of structuring their own brain and apply it to their own life. The players highlight that by being able to reflect on these different personalities they become able to highlight their own stronger and weaker personalities outside of the game, and see on what they exactly want to work.

*“It made me think a lot more about the parts of the mind and feelings we have, the many voices and what we need to feel satisfied etc. Putting actual names and voices to these things felt sort of hyper-real.” (DEQ#13)*

“But taking the game’s skills and considering them from your own perspective—which ones you may need to work on, which one you are specialized in, or which ones you would rather give up on—is an interesting introspective exercise that I think of when I’m free.” (DEQ#51)

#### 4.2.2.2. Meaning making

As this mechanic is new and surprising to most, but also immediately present, the players start to deliberately reflect on how their own thoughts are structured and how it is helpful for them to make sense of previously messy situations and experiences. This thus cognitive process helps the player to gain a better understanding and toolset to tackle complex thoughts by giving certain thoughts names as a part of their brain. The process tends to being more accommodating as they change their global meaning towards this new understanding of how their brain and thoughts are structured, which lead for most to growth.

This theme therefore entails a discovered life, as the mechanic aids the player in identifying certain characteristics and thereby their personality. Additionally, it entails a composed life as the player is able to also understand the negative events and thoughts that accompany them, and effectively deal with them in a controlled and collective manner.

#### 4.2.3. Understanding others

Understanding others is the theme on how the player experiences other characters. *Relations* explores the initial reactions between them and the characters. The codes *Politics*, *Perspective*, and *Perception* then reflect on the game’s focus of political ideologies and how the characters take the stance they have.

Table 7. Codes used in theme Understanding others

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Relations</i>	64	93
<i>Politics</i>	43	55
<i>Perspective</i>	34	39
<i>Perception</i>	7	7

Disco Elysium’s world lets the player interact with a large set of characters, all with different backgrounds, goals, and views. These characters all have their own roles in the world and would be there whether Harry arrived there or not. They are fully fleshed out individuals with their own preferences and opinions. The players see that they are struggling with different problems in their lives and react to this in different ways. Some hold up a defensive façade, some are in denial, and some gave in to the problems. Much like the real world every individual is different and is independent from the player, and the players recognise the efforts by ZAUM to translate that feeling to the game.

“The presentation of the characters you meet is perhaps amongst the strongest I’ve ever experienced in a game. You’ll hate them and then love them and vice versa – they’re more than conduits of information that you extract from before moving on. Their stories are heartening and endearing but grounded in a cold and hardened reality all the same. Their plights are relatable and deeply moving in their own strange and complex way. You will grow to empathise with them.” (Keengamer – DE)

The players mention to uncover what lies beneath the superficial initial reactions through talking to the individuals, and thus uncover the reasoning behind why they act the way they do. They notice that they are likely to be different than what they at first expected. A nice example here are the Hardy boys, a group of rough looking men that overtook maintaining peace in the area when the police left. They appear hostile and intimidating towards Harry and Kim when first met, but through the game

and gaining the trust of this group eventually the player will learn that in the end they want to strive for the same things as the player. After an incident with 'the Pigs', a mentally unstable woman that got hold of your gun, Harry can ask the Hardy Boys to help her out and this is their response:

*"What's that, copper? You want us to help little old ladies now? You're local law enforcement, aren't you? Helping troubled civilians should fall under your jurisdiction. Yeah, yeah. We'll send someone out. Who is it? Wait. It's the pigs, isn't it? God! Poor lady. Don't worry. We'll handle this. I think she got some family in Coulron or something. Bastards left her alone when she got sick. We've been getting complaints. No problem, old cop man. We take care of our mentally ill here in Martinez. Ain't that right, boys?" (Disco Elysium)*

Accompanying this is the exploration of politics. Throughout their journey the player at times gets to respond with different political views to larger societal topics that arise in Revachol. These are fascism, communism, ultra-liberalism, and moralism. They are all extreme ends of the political spectrum, apart from moralism which is the extreme centre of it, and the responses are thereby extreme to a ridiculous extent. The players mention this exploration of the different views with a joyous undertone.

*"The Moralist v. Communist v. Fascist ideologies were like a more in-your-face version of how they work in real life, and I feel like they're more approachable in terms of understanding the spirit of the ideas for people who may not understand politics very well." (DEQ#109)*

The players explored the political views deeper through internalising the political thought and the political ideology's side quest, which were added with the final cut version of the game. All ideologies are through these means criticised. First through the answer to the thought, and then through exploring it with new characters that hold that specific view in the side quest.

*"All of the political vision quests end this way, with Harry coming to some grand conclusion about the nature of the world that he hopes will change his life for the better, but actually revealing how futile and pointless it all is. ... There's a reason why most of the political dialogue options are either cartoonishly extreme or just a joke. Harry isn't looking to actually understand or better the world through politics, he just wants a surrogate identity to hide behind, each time inadvertently revealing just how \*\*\*\*\* the entire system is." (DE#05)*

The players mention that it allowed them to understand where the people that hold a specific view come from and believe that that is the way to go. A strong example from understanding the reasoning why people hold onto an ideology is the path of fascism. Players highlight that they at first were sceptical of this group. There are several fascists in Revachol, in for example Measurehead, Rene, and Gary, but none of them hold the same values nor act similarly. Discovering where their reasoning came, and thereby understanding their perspective helped the players strongly in becoming empathic towards these at first seemingly uncollaborative people.

*"Pretty much all the Political Side quests left a big impact. Even and especially the fascist one. Everyone thinks of marching armies and totalitarian imagery when fascism is brought up, but seldom the internal beliefs of fascists themselves. Getting to understand why Fascists believe the obviously wrong things they do is something only a game like Disco Elysium could accomplish." (DEQ#34)*

#### 4.2.3.1. Real life meaning

Taking the lessons towards their real life, players highlight that the politics in Disco Elysium showed them how people get to a certain ideology towards societal topics, but also that Disco Elysium taught them the deeper roots of why people act and react a certain way also for smaller scale issues, and thereby creating empathy for the person along the way. Politics simply exert a strong example as

people can often wonder why others believe and/or follow certain ideologies, so striving to understand where this ideology roots from is important and often not actively sought. It is a strong lesson that players highlight that the game facilitates through proving that the initial impression might not be what it seems, and thereby being patient to understanding where the person comes from rather than judging them immediately on their façade is important.

*“I learnt to respect the political ideas of those I disagree with and have more sympathy for where they come from. It helped me understand what my own positions are like from the other side's perspective. In general, it helped me have more sympathy.” (DEQ#19)*

*“Disco has sort of helped me get a better grasp on being an understanding person, to not judge someone from how they act at first because you never know if there's something an unfriendly personality is trying to cope with.” (DEQ#88)*

*“When taken down a different path, the same background, but with a different response to it can result in your guy having the communist outlook on the world. Or potentially becoming the ultraliberal. It's the same backstory, but the butterfly effect of answering situations in slightly different ways can snowball down into a very different, but equally radical take on the world. I can't stress this enough: Disco Elysium understands that as we search for answers on why populist, nationalistic and reactionary movements have been able to take root all around the world, recognising that people's pain, frustrations, and anger at the world is the same, but a complex web of factors and influences have taken them down a certain path, is critical in addressing the more toxic ideologies. We don't need to tolerate the ideology, but we need to have a dispassionate understanding of where it comes from.” (Digitally Downloaded – DE)*

#### 4.2.3.2. *Meaning making*

The NPC's stories and politics in Disco Elysium are thereby a strong active facilitator that aided the players to get from the initial reaction to the end meaning that the interaction with a person provides. Interesting for this topic however is that through its storytelling Disco Elysium actively tries to deliver the experiences shown above. Through simply playing the game the players mention they discover and explore the mindsets and underlying reasoning of the characters, or through internalising certain thoughts in the thought cabinet, and thus start to understand their perspectives. The player does not have to actively reflect to get that experience, because the game provides the tools to grow this empathy with the NPC's. Naturally, to reflect and utilise this growth and conclusion towards real life is something the player will have to do themselves, but the conclusion the game provides is very resonating with that outside of the game, so the required effort is low.

Following this reasoning, that Disco Elysium facilitates this theme through its storytelling, the initial meaning making process is automatic and not deliberate. Through uncovering the NPC's mindsets automatically through advancing in the game, the player's sympathy towards them grew. It then becomes a deliberate process as the player starts to reflect on what has happened throughout the game with the other characters, especially with the exploration regarding political ideologies. This allows the player to highlight what they have experienced subconsciously and then place it within their global meaning. It is thus a cognitive process as the player modifies their beliefs through thoughtful reflection, where accommodation tends to be stronger, and where comprehensibility is sought as they seek to understand why the character acts in the way they do.

In terms of the placement of the made meaning of this theme, this is a clear example of connected life. It aims to understand ourselves in relation to others, and placing ourselves in their shoes. It

strengthens the player’s empathy and sympathy and thereby their ability to make a positive difference for themselves and the world around them.

#### 4.2.4. Place in the world

In the theme Place in the world the impact that the player can and cannot have within the world is explored. The code *World* and *Not a superhero* shows how the respondent views the world and how they think the world sees them. The theme is directly explained by the reflection visible in the code *Place in the world*, and the codes *Choice* and *Control* then explore how the respondent deals with this reflection. *Relations* is present here as the code highlights the impact that the player can have on others, but this is a follow-up after the initial reflection.

Table 8. Codes used in theme Place in the world

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Relations</i>	64	93
<i>Choice</i>	27	45
<i>Not a superhero</i>	23	28
<i>Place in the world</i>	22	26
<i>World</i>	20	26
<i>Control</i>	7	7

In close regard to the empathy and sympathy gained towards the individuals that the players meet, is how they then enact upon it. Similarly to Dark Souls, the world is indifferent to the player. The world keeps moving whether you are there or not, and Harry or the player therefore does not have power over many societal issues. A clear example is that Harry will likely never experience the pale apart from the 2 mm hole in the church, and much less can do something about it. The players clearly highlight that Harry is not special compared to the other inhabitants apart from maybe an impressive resume and a heavy substance problem. Harry will have to help most of them before they are willing to help you. Still, the players notice that Harry can have a clear influence, both positive and negative, on the small patch of the world where he lives and thus also the people that live in that patch. He can for example help the cryptozoologists in their search or help set up the church rave with the kids.

*“Disco Elysium, to me at least, feels like a game that tries to make you feel small compared to the world at large, but at the same time show your importance and your impact in your own little patch of the world. You always hear from NPCs about other nations, philosophies, even the very mechanics of the world such as The Pale and Technology, stuff you're never going to see in the game, and is implied Harry won't see ever in his life, but you play an important role in Revachol, as both a good and a bad influence, with Harry's drunken rampage before the beginning of the game, to whatever actions you take in the game, be they good choices to solve the murder and other people's problems, or bad choices that screw other people over or end up compromising the investigation.” (DEQ#88)*

##### 4.2.4.1. Real life meaning

The feeling described above is mentioned to be resonating with the real world, where the players hear about many different topics, issues, and ideologies, but will never be around long enough to experience it all nor have a large impact on that world. They however can have an impact on themselves and their direct surroundings and should make the best of it.

*“Sometimes things don't have to make sense in order to exist. \*\*\*\* happens but we can do something to lift each other up and try to make our world a better place, if only a little.” (DEQ#21)*



“I should be more aware how my actions can make other people feel, even though I have good intentions.” (DEQ#47)

“That we are what the world makes of us at first, then every now and then we get the choice to rethink about what we have become and try and change it” (DEQ#74)

#### 4.2.4.2. Meaning making

This theme is meaning making process is largely defined by the stronger assimilation compared to the other themes. Here the world seems indifferent to the player at first where the player cannot have a strong impact. This appraised meaning holds true as the world still stays indifferent to the player and is thus accommodating to the global meaning. However it does lose some of its strength as the player learns how they can make a difference to the world. The appraised meaning thereby weakens, and more assimilation is present. The process tends to be more emotional as the world at first often feels hopeless and sad due to the indifference, however hope is found in the various actions that the player and others make to make the world liveable.

Central for the made meaning is the connected life, as the player learns to highlight their patch of the world and how they can make a positive difference for themselves and the world around them. It however also holds elements of composed and/or empowered life, as the player learns what they can and cannot do in the world.

#### 4.2.5. Living the moment

The theme Living the moment is explained by the curiosity that the respondents have towards the murder mystery and the world itself. This is explained by the codes *Curiosity*, *World*, and *Ambience*. The code *Watcher* is the core of the theme where the respondent shows the reflection directly themselves. The remaining codes describe the emotions that come forth from the reflection and the mindset that develops from it.

Table 9. Codes used in theme Living the moment

Code names	Number of participants	References
<i>Sadness</i>	64	75
<i>Joy</i>	50	25
<i>Curiosity</i>	42	49
<i>Hope</i>	31	33
<i>Ambience</i>	27	43
<i>World</i>	20	26
<i>Watcher</i>	13	13
<i>Awe</i>	9	9
<i>Nostalgia</i>	8	10

Even though the world of Revachol is filled with failure, dread, and hardships, it also evoked a sense of hope in the players. Despite the hardships the inhabitants have encountered through the revolution or what happened afterwards, the players notice that the people continue living and make the most out of it. The detective story and therefore search for clues made the players observant about the little details, as they try to uncover the mysteries surrounding the murder. In doing so they noticed the problems Revachol faced and faces and how the people living there try to make the most of it. All in their own way with different goals but all aiming for the hopeful enjoyable moments. The players highlight the mindset of always being aware of their surroundings, learning from them, and how they impact the player allowed them to dive deeper into these moments. What they specifically learned from this behaviour is very different as the world is complex with lots of different possible directions

to explore and details to uncover and appreciate. Some focus more on how communities are affected by major ideologies, some focus more on the simple enjoyable interactions such as sitting with Kim on the swings.

*“I’ve not been a very good student of history throughout my life, and this was an opportunity to get curious about how smaller communities are affected by giant political shifts. It made me more curious about community organizing, unions and strikes, corruption, how people make change even in difficult situations, for good and bad.” (DEQ#06)*

*“You should focus less on big ideas and big loves, and more on the moment that is in front of your eyes and catch small things as they are, be more focused on other feelings. Small things with Kim as sitting on a swing or hitting aces high and low, small smiles that only you can see were treasures.” (DEQ#77)*

#### 4.2.5.1. Real life meaning

The players thus highlight moments that sparked their interest or joy from being aware in the moment, and how they take those moments towards their own life. However this theme and thus the mindset that they took to get to those experiences is the main general application to the player’s global meaning.

*“Being more present, more cherishing those small moments of connection with boyfriend and friends, being more soft and understanding new people. Minus points in prejudices towards races and nationalities.” (DEQ#77)*

*“It has been a continuation more than a discovery, but I often try to look / feel the beauty of the universe at any time.” (DEQ#91)*

*“The importance of hanging on to a sense of wonder about the things around you, and the awareness that your environment is impacting you all the time.” (DEQ#114)*

#### 4.2.5.2. Meaning making

This theme describes a mindset that is facilitated at first by the premise of the game, solving a murder mystery and thereby heightening the awareness for small details, as well as the overall ambience and storytelling of the world and characters. The theme allows for a certain type of meaning making process because the mindset gained strengthens the search for significance as the player more actively asks themselves what the value or worth of an event is. The process is thus deliberate and not automatic as the player actively reflects upon what is happening around them. This could be both cognitive as emotional, as can be seen in the examples above. The interest in how history affects communities is more of a cognitive nature, while enjoying sitting with Kim on a swing is more of an emotional nature.

The theme is therefore focused upon a joyful life, where the player is more deliberate and actively seeking the significance of what is happening around them, and thus mindful of highlighting the positive experiences and savouring them when encountered.

#### 4.2.6. First vs third person perspective

A difference can be highlighted in the player’s perspective in both cases. In Disco Elysium, the player is not playing a character that they can create themselves which is the case in Dark Souls, outside of which thought attributes are stronger and weaker. Instead they get the character of Harrier/Harry Dubois, a detective with an already existent backstory and actions in the world of Revachol. Yes, Disco Elysium is a role-playing game through the near clean slate that the player gets through the memory loss caused by an alcoholic episode, however part of the game’s objective is to find out who Harry is and what he has done in Revachol before what was seen in the game. The player also gets the choice

in how Harry acts and reacts in the world, but never fully as these actions are directed by Harry's mindset and experiences, subconscious or not. This causes the player to live and relive Harry's story, not necessarily their own. Most players clearly mention how they are trying to help 'my Harry' to turn his life around rather than speaking of Harry from a first-person perspective.

*"All along the game I tried so hard to help Harry overcome his addictions and fixation on the past. In the dream with Dora and I realized how damaged and broken he really is, and I can do nothing about it (at least during Disco Elysium playthrough)." (DEQ#104)*

The players mention to thus be experiencing resonance with Harry's story and use their own experiences to in the first place create meaning from what Harry lives and has lived through and then be able to choose what they wish Harry to do. The players reflect upon their own experiences to highlight aspects that they wish to change in their own life. They can experience that growth in Harry already through the game, which made them realise certain aspects about their own situation as well.

*"Harry's personal journey with his ex-fiancée has also made me realize that maybe I'm not as over past loves as I thought I was. It hasn't helped me get over them, but maybe it has given me tools to resolve the matter emotionally and has helped me rationalize the experience." (DEQ#89)*

This is thereby different from Dark Souls, where the player takes the first-person perspective as they are dropped in the world as 'themselves'. Their character has no backstory and all choices made develops the character, which is entirely controlled by the player. Therefore they see the actions as their own, rather than that of the character.

#### 4.2.7. Weak impact community

After taking a closer look at the responses on the questions regarding the Disco Elysium community, it appears that for Disco Elysium the community does not have a major impact on the player's experience. It is either unknown or unsought, or when known it cannot add value to the gained experience within the game, because every playthrough is different and therefore how each player experienced it was also different.

*"Disco Elysium -to me- feels like a very personal game to experience, something that is planted deep within you and that is not really shareable as other pieces of media can be (firstly because the story itself has so many branches that many different playthroughs are possible, unlike for example Outer Wilds, another game I love, has a very fixed story that players will experience even if the order of some details changes). So I'm not sure it would be easy to consider the "community" as a homogeneous group. I'm sure, even if the people adoring this game must have some correlation in taste and personalities, we are still vastly different from one another" (DEQ#54)*

The community therefore does allow for a gathering place for somewhat likeminded people that all liked Disco Elysium, but it did not add to how the player experienced the game itself and thus the meaning they took from it.

## 5. Discussion

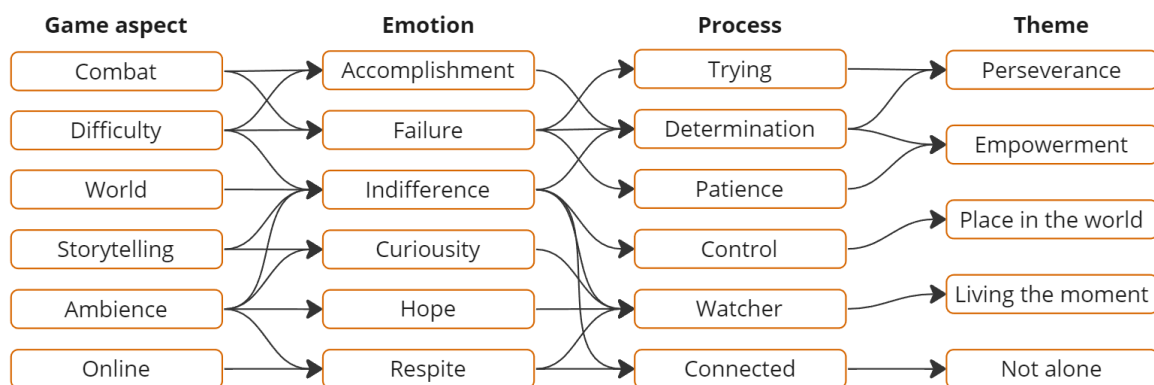
Here first an overview of both cases and their theme interactions will be given separately, supported by an overview in flow chart form. Second, the overall applications of meaning making theory and its findings will be discussed. Third, the differences in the similar themes between the cases will be discussed, followed by the major general differences backed up by immersion literature. Next, an overview on community meaning making and the implications for meaning making theory are given.

This is followed by the recommendations for future game development, the limitations, and finally the future research pathways.

### 5.1. Dark Souls overview

The different themes in Dark Souls are not independent from each other, and while different lessons can be highlighted, they build from the same mechanics and reinforce each other. In figure 1 a complete overview is given of the Dark Souls game aspects, the emotions that follow, the process that erupts from these emotions, and finally the reflection on these processes that leads to the shown themes. What becomes clear from this overview that even though clear different themes have formed in the end, they all build upon from the same mechanics and the emotions that occur from them. The theme *Determination* that comes from overcoming the seemingly impossible challenges builds from the same feeling of indifference the world gives in the theme *Place in the world*. This indifference makes the approaching boss more intimidating, and thereby the challenge feels more difficult, as well as highlighting the beforementioned impact the player can have, and the personal agency they can strive for. The theme *Not alone* then further builds upon this as the player must indeed put in the effort to create meaning and overcome challenge in the indifferent world but highlights that they are not the only one with that goal and can seek the help, company, and support from and for others they encounter. The theme *Living the moment* originates from the same indifferent, sombre, and hostile ambience, yet despite these at first seemingly hopeless feeling seeking out the hope in the world around them, both in the direct ambience as well as the underlying story. There are naturally different facilitators for the different themes that add to this base, such as the combat mechanics for *Determination*, the online mechanics for *Not alone*, and the mysterious storytelling for *Living the moment*, but it becomes clear that the indifference of the world is an important resonating base that allows the game to surpass a mere leisure experience and create meaningful experiences that are applicable to the player's real life.

Figure 1. Complete overview of the main game aspects, emotions, processes, and themes of Dark Souls

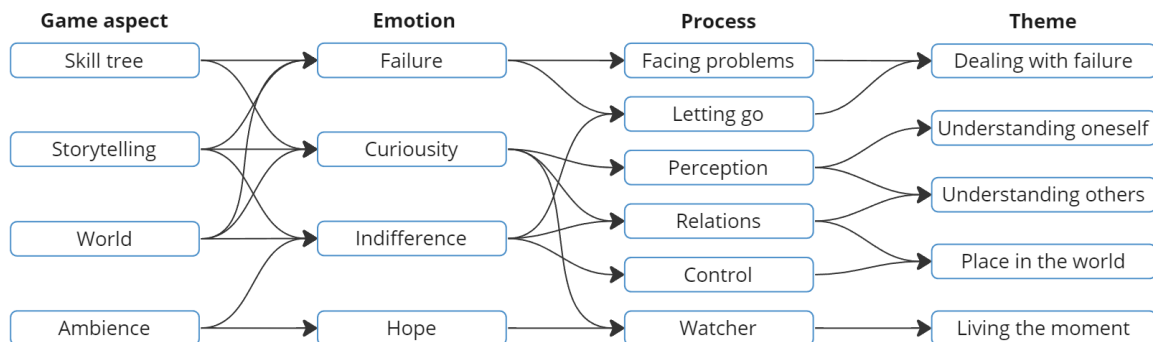


### 5.2. Disco Elysium overview

Similarly as with Dark Souls, the different themes in Disco Elysium are interconnected through facilitating game mechanics and world aspects. Figure 2 gives an overview of the connections between the main game aspects, emotions, processes, and themes for Disco Elysium. The way the story is told, combined with the sombre ambience with shimmers of hope and the skill system, is recurring within the themes. The way failure is embraced by the story to encompass a joyous outcome rather than a failure state, or how the different thoughts bicker in Harry's mind to direct him towards certain options in the theme *Understanding oneself*, are elevated due to a strong and fully fleshed out story and storytelling. Similarly, the exploration to understand different perspectives of different characters and

ideologies in *Understanding others*, is built upon the storytelling. At the same time, the overall indifferent and sombre world and ambience in which Harry finds himself allowed the player to highlight the struggles of the characters but also the efforts these characters put into their surroundings. This highlights the aspects where the player does and does not have agency to impact their own experience and their surroundings, which is found in the theme *Place in the world*. Because of the complete story and the indifference of the world to Harry to not see him as a world-altering being, resonating game experiences emerged that were applicable to the player's real life and thus were able to change the global meaning of the player.

Figure 2. Complete overview of the main game aspects, emotions, processes, and themes of *Disco Elysium*



### 5.3. Meaning making theory application

Throughout this research meaning making theory has been applied to the cases to highlight differences in the meaning making processes of the different themes. Here the findings surrounding the themes with the meaning making theory as base will be discussed, and followed by the additions that were found for the theory in general.

It was expected that two categories of meaning making processes were less seen in automatic processing and assimilation. Automatic processes are less visible as the players themselves do not actively notice these shifts in conditions, and it thereby becomes difficult or impossible to write about it in either the questionnaire or media, as that would then make it a deliberate process of active reflection. Accommodation towards the global meaning was sought in this research as the interest lay on what players took as meaningful from the games, and thus which experiences changed the player's global meaning. Assimilation, where the appraised meaning is lessened throughout the meaning making process, is thus not actively sought in this research and players are less likely to mention these experiences as these processes did not affect their global meaning. Still, assimilation was found partly in the theme *Place in the world*, as the appraised meaning shifts when the shimmering hope becomes clear to the player.

For the other two categories both types have been found in the themes, but there is a tendency to which type occurs. Between the search for comprehensibility or significance, the control the individual has on the occurred event creates the tendency. When the player has more control over the event, they tend to focus on how the event occurred, what they did to get there, and what they could have done differently. When the control is low however, they tend to focus more on what that specific event means. Between the cognitive and emotional processing the difference lies in the clarity of the problem or challenge that lies central at the appraised meaning. If this problem is clear and concrete, the process tends to be cognitive as the understanding of the problem and its rules allows the player to actively compare and reflect between the appraised meaning and their global meaning. When the

core of the appraised meaning remains vague however, the individual is not able to clearly compare and thus it becomes an emotional process where the individual exposes and habituates themselves to relief the discrepancy between the appraised and global meaning.

For the placement of the made meaning in the player's global meaning it can be said that the overall game experience falls under *joyful life*, as the overall goal of game design and what the player seeks within the game is going through a pleasurable experience that they can savour afterwards. The fact that both games have the player base they have, and that these players are willing to engage in a community and this research show this aspect of the experience. The themes and their placement in the global meaning are different and dependent on the focus of theme. What however can be seen is that all categories were seen in the themes, and thus all categories of the global meaning are feasible to improve through games. Additionally, all themes could be categorised and therefore no aspects were missing in the proposed aspects in the work of Iwasaki et al (2017).

#### 5.4. Cases comparison

Here the cases and their similar themes will be compared to each other and explained with literature where applicable. In table 10 an overview is given of this section, showing a short summary of each section along with the used literature.

##### 5.4.1. Determination, Perseverance, and empowerment

Both games have a large central theme of determination and perseverance. Both games allow the player to grow within the game, and then take those lessons to their real life as well. The main difference here is the perspective through which the theme looks at perseverance, and this causes largely different take aways in what the game meant for the player. Dark Souls focusses on the eventual success the player will come to experience after overcoming a difficult hurdle. Even though the player may feel like they hit a wall at any point in the game, the game's focus always remains on overcoming that wall. Disco Elysium on the other hand focusses on dealing with failure and hardships. It shows that the player can still strive for a better path for themselves and their surroundings, even though failures are still present and encountered. Disco Elysium therefore does not show a presence of empowerment, as it does not focus on overcoming a specific hurdle and the elation that would follow, but on learning to cope with the failures and grow as a person as a result.

In the Dark Souls theme *Determination* the concept of self-efficacy was introduced by one of the essayists. The way he explained the concept is that it revolves around whether the player can or cannot attribute the achievement to their skill and mastery. This is known within literature as the internal and external locus of control (Arslan et al., 2009; Rotter, 1954). If viewed from the internal locus, the individual considers events to have happened because of their actions. Whether the event happened or not was within their control. The external locus on the other hand describes events that happened due to an external factor and is thus outside the individual's control. In Dark Souls this was prevalent as the player was able to fully attribute the accomplishment of defeating a boss to their internal locus. In Disco Elysium both loci came forward in the focus on dealing with failure. The internal locus came forth in the failures and problems where the individual could actively change the situation, such as the alcohol abuse. The focus on external locus is shown in cases where the player did not have the control, such as Harry's wife leaving him in his dream. Disco Elysium thereby focuses more on when and how to view failure and problems from which locus, rather than the self-efficacy that can come from it. This takeaway is thereby reminiscent of lessons seen in for example the prayer of serenity from Alcoholics Anonymous: *"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"* (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2019). This links even more strongly due to both focussing on overcoming addictions.



Table 10. Overview themes with the game, the in-game explanation and real-life application, and literature used to explain the theme (DS = Dark Souls, DE = Disco Elysium)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>DS/DE</b>	<b>In game explanation</b>	<b>IRL application</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<i>Perseverance and failure</i>	DS	Even though a boss may seem intimidating, remaining patient, learning from mistakes, and keeping trying will eventually lead to beating the boss.	Staying determined towards eventually overcoming any challenge, because of a base of self-confidence that will eventually lead to self-efficacy for that specific challenge.	Self-efficacy and self-confidence (AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997)
	DE	Experiencing Harry's failures and having to deal with the consequences, both when he does or does not have the control to change the outcome.	Realising when the player can act towards solving a certain problem and must acknowledge when they cannot and have to let it go.	Locus of control (AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997; Arslan et al., 2009)
<i>Empowerment</i>	DS	The victory over a challenge was surprising to the player as they at first did not believe in their capabilities.	Gaining self-efficacy for Dark Souls specifically that bleeds into self-confidence in general, making the player confident in their ability to succeed in general	Self-efficacy and self-confidence (AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997)
<i>Living the moment</i>	Both	Through a mystery story the player becomes attentive to the details in their direct environment, which made them appreciate that moment.	Actively experiencing the moment the individual is in and savouring that experience.	Game ecology development (Chang, 2020; Heijmen & Vervoort, 2023)
<i>Place in the world</i>	DS	The player is insignificant to the hostile world of Lordran which resonates with the player. However, while minor, they can create an impact on that world to make it bearable	Learning what the patch of the real world is that the player can and cannot have influence on and seeking the agency towards that impact.	

Table 10 (continued). Overview themes with the game where it is seen, the in-game explanation and real-life application, and literature used to explain the theme

<b>Theme</b>	<b>DS/DE</b>	<b>In game explanation</b>	<b>IRL application</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<i>Place in the world</i>	DE	Each Revacholian inhabitant has their own story, thoughts, and goals regardless of whether Harry was there or not, but Harry can have an impact on their story, both negatively as positively	There are societal issues that the player cannot change, but they can have an impact on those directly around them	Game ecology development (Chang, 2020; Heijmen & Vervoort, 2023)
<i>Understanding oneself</i>	DE	The innovative skill system that gives characters to different parts of Harry's brain, to create a tangible visualisation of the complex thought process.	Using this way of structuring to the player's own thoughts in real life scenarios where the thoughts may have been chaotic and overwhelming.	Internal family systems (Green, 2008; Schwartz, 1995)

Dark Souls on the contrary does focus on the rise of self-efficacy. Literature explains self-efficacy as a person's belief in their ability to overcome the difficulties inherent in performing a specific task in a particular situation (AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997; Bandura, 1986). Overcoming Dark Souls grows the ability of the player to defeat the challenges, and evidently from the results made them believe they could defeat the next challenge. This thus is an example of growth in self-efficacy as their belief in their capabilities within the game. Self-efficacy should not be confused with self-confidence, as self-efficacy focuses on a specific skill or situation while self-confidence encompasses the belief in their abilities to succeed in general (AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997; Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982). This difference is also named specific and general self-efficacy in literature (Luszczynska et al., 2005). However, the difference between the two could explain the difference between the perseverance group and the empowerment group within Dark Souls. As seen in the results, the empowerment group tend to start off in a more negative mindset. Their overall self-confidence is low(er) and at the start of the game they have a lesser belief that they can overcome the challenge. However, at the end of the game when their self-efficacy rose for the skills needed in the game, this shocks the player as their self-confidence is low. It goes against their global meaning that they believe they cannot do tasks such as these, and the meaning making process that follows thereby strengthens their self-confidence. The perseverance group on the contrary has a high(er) self-confidence at the start which they use to push through and slowly gain the self-efficacy for the specific tasks Dark Souls asks for. They thereby do not have the self-efficacy for the game yet, but through their overall belief in their ability they persevere which eventually leads to that self-efficacy.

#### 5.4.2. Living the moment and Place in the world

Living the moment and thus more actively experiencing the moment the player is in, was prevalent in both games. This is because both entail a mystery story where the player has to unravel parts of the story through what they hear and see in the world. They are different in that Disco Elysium actively asks it of the player due to the detective story, but most of Dark Souls' players also seek out the story as they wish to understand why they are set on their journey. Strong in this regard is that both are not afraid to leave parts of the story hidden, where the player has to search for it to find it or otherwise will never find it. Additionally, both games aimed to flesh out their complete story and world, which is noticed by the players as all direct but also most indirect game and story aspects have an explanation and connection, which makes the search for them rewarding. The differences lie in how the story is told and how secrets are hidden. Disco Elysium focuses on dialogue with the world and its inhabitants to unravel its story, while Dark Souls mainly uses visuals to tell its story. The hopeful tones that the player receives is also explained through these different storytelling styles, as in Disco Elysium it is present through talking with the inhabitants, while in Dark Souls it is present through ambience ('Praise the sun!'). Both games also use the other style, but emphasis lies on the respective styles. Finally, the hidden snippets of story simply remain hidden if the player does not uncover them in Dark Souls, while in Disco Elysium the player won't see certain snippets due to the dialogue paths and skills the player has chosen.

The place in the world theme highlights the patch of the world where the player can have an influence and make the most of it. Both games recognise that the character in their respective world is not a powerful or special being that could create world changing events. The world is indifferent to the player in both, but Dark Souls does put more emphasis here. In Dark Souls nearly all enemy barely recognise the player past somebody that can be slain, while the inhabitants of Revachol do recognise that you are there and that you are having an influence on the area. In Dark Souls the emphasis regarding this theme thereby lies on that even though you are not special in any way to the other undead, you seek to gain the most agency over what you as an individual can influence. Disco Elysium on the other hand shows the indifference through highlighting the large scale, societal issues that are

at hand that Harry cannot influence. The game however shows the player that they can have an impact on those directly around them, and thus on community agency.

Recently papers have emerged that seek to create more focus on this ecological and environmental game design (Chang, 2020; Heijmen & Vervoort, 2023). Chang (2020) proposes different design goals towards more environmentally intelligent games, where the focus thus lies on succeeding environment's function as backdrops for play with deeper interacting game ecologies. Heijmen (2023) then takes this further through highlighting pathways in which the player becomes more entangled with these ecologies through both decentring and deconstructing the subject. These game development pathways are suggested to create more emphasis on the world and its ecology, where the character the player controls is merely one of its parts. The player is thus not the centre of the game's universe. This action of decentring was seen in both games as they show that the world around them exists and continue to exist, whether the player would interfere with it or not. Through their storytelling methods and mystery story in general the games put emphasis on this world and its ecology. For example, *Disco Elysium* actively does so through one of the skills called 'Shivers'. Shivers momentarily switches from a micro personal perspective to a macro perspective, in which the world does not revolve around the murder mystery but portrays the expansive, breathing environment. This aspect is also seen in the theme living the moment. The theme place in the world comes back in this argumentation through acknowledging that the player('s character) is not central to the world and therefore does not have complete control, but is definitively a part of its ecology and thus can have agency within it. Most important to note within the line of game ecology development is that not only decentring of the player character and emphasis on the world as a breathing and complex entity are seen and experienced by the player, but they were also strong enough to highlight these focus points as meaningful experiences themselves that the player could implement in their own life.

#### 5.4.3. Understanding oneself

The theme understanding oneself from *Disco Elysium* is specific to that game as it interacts with the innovative skill system it introduces. From the theme it becomes clear that the players use the skill system to understand the complexity of their own thoughts by giving names to the different thoughts in the same way the different skills bicker with one another in the game. By doing so they can create structure for the debate within their thoughts and identify the needs of the different 'characters'. This process or tool is also seen within psychotherapy under the name Internal Family Systems (Green, 2008; Schwartz, 1995). It is used to identify different parts of oneself and give structure to conflict within oneself. By giving these parts distinct personas the individual can allocate certain thoughts to a certain persona, and thereby is able to understand different and possibly contradicting interests and needs that they might have (Green, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). This is thus extremely similar to how the skill system within *Disco Elysium* interacts with the complexity of Harry's thoughts. Naturally, the different personas in the different skills are set in stone and the player does not have an influence on what each persona means, but is given the ability to play with the strength of each persona through allocating skill points. The skill system in its development does not seem to be based directly on the Internal Family Systems model, but the model does explain the presence and essence of the theme as it is actively used in psychotherapy and can be used to further investigate *Disco Elysium's* skill system.

#### 5.4.4. Immersion and resonance

Immersion literature can be used to explain a part of the player's resonance. Over the years researchers have looked at what game mechanics and aspects have an impact on the level of immersion, which resulted in a large set of similar yet different explanations, sub-terms, and categories. To keep overview the research of Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) will be used here to identify three

types of immersion, the research of Brown and Cairns (2004) for three different levels of immersion, and the research of Qin et al (2009) for facilitating dimensions.

Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) divide immersion over three categories in challenge-based, sensory, and imaginative immersion. Challenge-based immersion entails the feeling when one is able to achieve a satisfying balance between challenge and ability, often also described as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Sensory immersion entails the audiovisual cues that powers and realises the sensory information of the game world, and thereby purely focus on those cues. Finally imaginative immersion entails the absorption of the world and its stories, where the player can let their imagination roam free or emphasize with characters. It is highlighted that immersion types do often overlap, are thus not mutually exclusive, and likely reinforce each other even though the intensity of each type may differ (Bowman, 2018).

Brown and Cairns (2004) show three levels of immersion that have increasingly stronger barriers: Engagement, Engrossment, and Total immersion. Engagement is the lowest level of immersion, that requires the initial investment of effort and attention. Engrossment then builds upon it, in which the player is emotionally connected to the story. The player here accepts the fantasy world and persona as 'real' with the goal of having fun (Fine, 2002). Total immersion or dissociation is then where the player describes the experience as being cut off from reality to such an extent that the game is all that matters, and thus is the only thing that impacts the player's thoughts and feelings, but Brown and Cairns note that this state is often a short and fleeting experience.

Qin et al (2009) then describe six dimensions to measure player immersion:

1. Curiosity: The arousal of senses and cognition to explore the game. The interest allows that the player interacts with the game to gain knowledge and skills to get better at and better understand the game.
2. Concentration: Ability to concentrate on the game. A combination of interesting content as well as an appropriate workload for the player's perceptual and cognitive memory limits is important here.
3. Control: Ability to exercise a sense of control over the character and the game world. The player needs to have control over how they want to unravel the story and overcome challenges in the game to be emotionally connected.
4. Challenge: Uncovering a story or overcoming obstacles should ask a certain level of skill from the player. The challenge helps facilitate attention as well as desire to grow their skillset.
5. Comprehension: Understanding the goal and aim of the game. Before discovering the world, a premise must be clear to which the player can add information through careful observation, create hypotheses, and test these hypotheses.
6. Empathy: Mentally entering the imaginary world and begin to feel for or identify with a game character. This requires a strong emotional connection and is thus the aspect that leads to the highest level of immersion.

If a closer look is given to the game construction of both cases, it becomes apparent that all three types of immersion are visible, although with different strengths. Dark Souls strongly shows the challenge-based immersion through its combat system in which the player can fall into a flow of dodging, parrying, and attacking, while it still holds a strong ambience and thus sensory immersion through the detailed world and sounds, and also shows the imaginative immersion through its mystery story and the interactions with it. Disco Elysium focuses more on this imaginative immersion through the development of the character, the murder mystery, and interacting with the other characters. Still

it does not shy away from the other immersion types, as unravelling the murder mystery requires a sense of cognitive challenge, as well as a strong audiovisual ambience for sensory immersion.

Looking at the six immersion dimensions several interesting aspects can be seen. To initially grasp the players' curiosity both games created a mechanic that was not seen before, in the skill system of Disco Elysium, or deeply refined, in the combat system of Dark Souls. These mechanics form the core of the game, and its novelty and strong execution attracted the attention of the gaming community. For Dark Souls, this combat system puts the outcome of the battle fully in the hands of the player and thus the control of the player is high. Interestingly however, for Disco Elysium the level of control is limited to only selecting an initial dialogue option, with the outcome being unclear. Still, the player does not see this as limiting as it allowed for the uncertain situations and the player often views his role as guiding Harry rather than fully impersonating him. Another dimension that stands out is comprehension. In both games the premise of the story is vague, and the overall world understanding is very limited. Still, waking up from a hangover and shortly after learning that you are a cop to solve a murder or hearing that you need to ring a bell of awakening is enough to start the journey. Players even mention that this vague start and overall mystery is more a strength rather than a weakness, as it becomes rewarding to uncover the story, which thus sparks curiosity as well as challenge.

In terms of intensity of immersion both games show a limiting factor that withholds them from total immersion on all fronts. Dark Souls is limited by its world as it is a fantasy world with magical beings, which are naturally not resonating with the real world. Disco Elysium is limited by the level of control as they are guiding Harry rather than impersonating a character of their own. Yet, both games show that the player is heavily emotionally involved in either overcoming the hostile world of Dark Souls or becoming empathic towards Harry and the other inhabitants in Revachol. Thereby a strong baseline of engrossment is seen in both games, with certain aspects showing total immersion.

What however is missing in the literature is the explanation of resonance in games and how resonance and immersion has an impact on the meaning making of the player. From the results it becomes clear that the level of immersion and resonance of the character and the world around them with the real world allows for the meaning making processes that follow in the themes. Both games do so through the world's indifference towards the player which leads to most themes. Dark Souls' world does not go much further than the character being average and the world being indifferent to the player, but the themes that came forth from both games are likely present because the player can relate to the experiences. If the game centred around a power fantasy, where they are superior to those around them, meaning making processes would likely not be prevalent as the experiences as that powerful character do not relate to the player. Additionally, Disco Elysium dives into several societal issues through the different characters, all with stories the player can relate to or at least emphasize with. The ability to reflect the experience gained to the global meaning thus seems to be based on a level of resonance between the game and the real world. A deeper dive in what creates this resonance and how much impact it has on meaning making is thereby an interesting research gap to dive into for future research.

### 5.5. Personal Journey and community meaning

Looking at community meaning making, in both cases the players do state that the community did not have a major influence on their experience before nor after the game. The community adds in deepening of mostly the understanding of the game's world and story and as a safe place to tell the stories of your experience with those that went through a similar journey. However that journey that the player experienced is often deeply personal. Within Dark Souls the players go through roughly the same steps, but the player's feelings, goals, and focus are still likely to be different. Within Disco



Elysium each player can take an entirely different pathway which makes the experience vastly different.

The online community is thus mostly a meeting place for individuals that enjoyed the same game, but did not influence the experience that the player had or will have, according to the players. Here it did not matter whether they had heard from the community prior to the game or not. Dark Souls is a good example as the 'git gud' mentality and difficulty are well known attributes of the community and the game, but the game showed the player entirely different meanings.

It could be the case that subconsciously it did have an effect, or even that due to the discrepancy between the known community sentiment and the actual experience the shock is bigger and that the meaning making process is stronger because of it, but this is outside of the scope of this research.

### 5.6. Additions to meaning making theory

The most important additions to current meaning making theory that came forth from this research is on how the appraised meaning is formed. In literature this is often mentioned as a stressor (Crossley, 2000; Park, 2010). The discrepancy between the global and appraised meaning then determines the level of distress the individual undergoes, and therefore the appraised meaning is likely to be seen as negative from the individual's global meaning (Park, 2010; Watkins, 2008). What however became clear from different themes, but mainly the empowerment group in Dark Souls, is that this appraised meaning can be of positive nature. Overcoming the different challenges showed the player that they are capable of such feats, even though their global meaning might have said that they were not. The appraised meaning is thus positive, and the meaning making process then uses this appraised meaning as an anchor to change the global meaning positively. The appraised meaning therefore is not necessarily a negative experience that requires a coping process to grow as a person, but can use the appraised meaning directly to change the global meaning positively.

Additionally, the extent of growth the player went through by playing the game determines to what extent they praise the game for behaviour change in other areas of their life. The stronger the growth during the game the more the player notices its change towards these other parts. Therefore those that were more shocked by their capabilities or growth of them, because of for example a depressive mental state before the experience, speak more highly of the game being a major influence in being determined with other goals.

### 5.7. Game development recommendations

From the themes as well as the closer look at immersion, the facilitating mechanics and aspects of game development that aided the meaning making process become clear. The themes showed that the world's indifference towards the player was for these two cases highly influential towards creating meaningful experiences. It showed that even though the player is not significant from the world's perspective, they can still strive to achieve things in life, both in their own agency as for a community, as shown in the theme Place in the world. Themes as Failure for Disco Elysium and Determination for Dark Souls were highlighted through the challenges the players faced, either through story or combat respectively. Looking at immersion theory, it becomes clear that both games have a strong base of a core mechanic that allows for initial curiosity and challenge, which leads them to uncover the mysteries of the game world. A game world that is completely fleshed out where the different story elements and game mechanics are interconnected. This then, combined with the world's indifference, allows the player to discover what the challenges thrown their way mean as they can empathise with their and other characters, which can be seen in the different meaning making processes that come forth from the themes.

What thus becomes clear for future game development that seek to create meaningful experiences, is that the meaning that the game is trying to get across must be visible in a way that resonates with the experiences gained in the real world. From the immersion perspective it is seen that this experience becomes stronger when the player can emphasize with their own character as well as other characters in the game, and when they are challenged to achieve the feat in which the meaning is hidden. Both games actively searched to get the meaning across in their development. Dark Souls did so through challenging combat, that is difficult but fair and leads to empowerment (Kamen, 2016). Disco Elysium did so through embracing failure in its dialogue tree (GameSpot, 2020). And both did so through the mysterious story of the world the player can uncover (GameSpot, 2020; Kamen, 2016). From literature it is thus unclear to what extent the intensity of immersion and resonance can explain the found meaning, but it does come forth from this explorative research on these two cases.

### 5.8. Limitations

Within this research a few limitations are present. Firstly are the chosen cases. Both are chosen due to their relevance and critique to their respective genre, their impact on that genre and game development as a whole, while still remaining relatively similar that allows for a comparison. Still, these are not the only games that match those requirements, and others can be explored. Additionally, both are Role-Playing Games which revolve around impersonating an in-game character. This goal of the genre could be a major facilitating factor to create meaningful experiences, and the difference between genres could not be shown due to the selection of these cases. This decision was made mainly to keep the experiences relatively similar.

Secondly, the research actively sought out positive personal stories of players in which they describe meaningful experiences. It must be said however that the games will not suit every player, and that even though players enjoyed their experience it does not necessarily lead to changes in their global meaning.

Thirdly, the methodology allowed for a broad exploration of community sentiment and experiences that the games provide through the media analysis and questionnaire. What they however do not allow for is follow-up questioning of the statements made. This was largely felt in the extent the players were able to explain how the meaningful experiences impacted their life.

Finally, as the research was conducted by one, researcher bias should be accounted for even though the best effort was given to remain objective throughout each step of the research. Additionally, due to time constraints, not all forms of readily available online media could be used, and therefore online discussions in the form of podcasts and threads were not investigated.

### 5.9. Future research

This research set out to explore the research gap surrounding the impact commercial games have had on their players, and what pathways can be identified for future game development that seek to create meaningful experience. Within serious game development it has become clear that the focus lies heavily on the educational value that the game wishes to get across, and the focus on the immersive experience itself is not seen (Kickmeier-Rust et al., 2007; van Beek et al., 2022; Wu & Lee, 2015). Additionally, most of the serious games rely on other serious games as a backbone for game design philosophy, and do not show inspirations from commercial game development that have been successful (e.g. Fennwald & Kievit-Kylar, 2013; Wu & Lee, 2015). Serious games have shown a strong potential to indeed create educational value compared to other educational media forms (Charsky, 2010; Crookall, 2010), but the potential found in the immersion and resonance shown in commercial games and this research is not explored yet.

From the other side of the spectrum it can be seen that game immersion is being investigated within commercial games (Brown & Cairns, 2004; Mäyrä & Ermi, 2011; Qin et al., 2009). The immersion theory has dived into the different types, dimensions, and intensity of the immersion felt that can be used to explain the felt experiences within the game. However how that immersion and experience then links back to the real world, and how the player took those experiences from the game to apply towards their own life is missing. It thus becomes clear that both ends of the spectrum have been building and evolving separately, both in game development as well as in literature. There is thus strong potential to be found in the middle ground where the strengths of both commercial and serious games are utilised. A start has been made here that highlighted the lack of understanding between the immersion of a game and how it leads to meaning making. A deeper investigation on the extent to which immersion and resonance impact the meaning making process, and thus to what extent immersion and resonance are necessary to create meaningful experiences needs to be further investigated.

To facilitate this search a larger variety of games and game genres should be investigated. Other role-playing games could be used to see whether similar immersion and resonance is found that led to meaningful experiences. The comparison could then potentially highlight what aspects of immersion are important for meaning making processes outside of the game. Additionally, other genres can show whether the process from immersion and resonance to meaningful experiences are or are not unique to the role-playing genre, where impersonating characters is sought and the development aims for deep emotional investment.

Secondly, looking back to the focus on developing more complex game ecologies proposed by Chang (2020) and Heijmen (2023), it was seen that the indifference of the world, and thus being merely a part of its ecology, was valuable for being aware of surroundings and the ecology of that world. Additionally, it was valuable for creating resonance with the real world as the player is not able to control everything, much like real life ecologies. A strong emotional connection with the game world's ecology is thus already shown here in *Dark Souls* and *Disco Elysium*, even though not focused on environmental issues as was the intention of Chang (Chang, 2020). These games have shown the potential for games that create this strong emotional connection with the game's ecology for future games that do focus on environmental issues, that lead to meaningful experiences with those issues at its core, and thereby further validating the call for developing stronger ecological entanglement within games.

Thirdly, a direct impact from the community on the individual game experience and thus the meaning making process while playing the game was not found, but it could very well be that they did have an unseen impact that the player is not aware of. A further investigation on the extent to which communities have a subconscious or automatic effect on the meaning making process should be performed, as well as whether they can increase the discrepancy between the appraised meaning and global meaning and thus make the meaning making process stronger than it would be without community influence.

Fourth and finally, a deeper dive into the personal stories through methods that allow follow-up questioning should be performed to have a clearer insight into the application towards the player's real life, as the explanation present in either questionnaire or essay was at times limited. Additionally, investigating the differences between those that have strong meaningful experiences and those that merely view it as "just a game" can be used to highlight what obstacles and/or facilitators are present towards viewing a game as a potential deeper meaningful experience rather than mere entertainment.

## 6. Conclusion

This research set out to explore how two exceptional commercial games, Dark Souls and Disco Elysium, contribute to and create meaningful experiences that eventually lead to a change in the player's global meaning, using meaning making theory as theoretical background. This main question was split up in three sub questions regarding connecting the meaning making processes within the game towards their global meaning, the effect the community has on this process, and what recommendations can be derived for future game development.

Both cases created a meaningful experience that created various themes through creating a world, story, and character that the player can to some extent resonate with towards their own life. Additionally, they made it challenging to uncover parts of the story and game and were not afraid that players are thereby likely to miss parts of the story. This created an environment where players were challenged and after succeeding a challenge in any form were rewarded with a deeper emotional connection and thus the experience was more meaningful. Because of the resonance the player then reflects that experience back to their global meaning and their real life. Various themes became apparent with a variety of placement in the player's global meaning, with for example empowering themes regarding determination and patience as well as themes regarding self-discovery through understanding their own mind.

The community did not have a clear impact on the meaning-making process according to the questionnaire respondents and video essayists, which was contrary to expectations. The community was a valuable place where they met similar minded people where they could relive or strengthen the experience they had, but community interaction both before and after playing the game did not have an impact on the experiences the player had.

Regarding recommendations for future (serious) game development, it thus became clear that resonance between the real world and the game world is important if meaningful experiences are sought. Additionally, both games created a fully fleshed out and interconnected game world, where immersion breaking issues are thus rare, which led to a deep emotional connection with the world, which again strengthens the meaningful experience.

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## 9. Appendix

### 9.1. Appendix I: List of essays and reviews used

YouTube essays and reviews Dark Souls

<i>Creator</i>	<i>Link</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Title</i>
<i>Big Will</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtXCn3SHT3w">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtXCn3SHT3w</a>	Review	The Brutality of Dark Souls
<i>CircleToonsHD</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL4OSaSf88E">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL4OSaSf88E</a>	Essay	How Dark Souls perfected difficulty in video games
<i>CriticalRants</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m28iveDMk0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m28iveDMk0</a>	Essay	Dark Souls believes in you   Video essay
<i>Daryl Talks Games</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keIWG6hSD7Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keIWG6hSD7Q</a>	Essay	How Souls Games Save you
<i>DaveControl</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNQCmzjh1w4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNQCmzjh1w4</a>	Essay	Dark Souls Design - Retrospective
<i>Ember Games Are Art</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABV_7BEsIX8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABV_7BEsIX8</a>	Essay	Dark Souls saved my life
	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiPuU7cSWNA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiPuU7cSWNA</a>	Essay	Soul Series - Understanding Dark Souls as a safe space
<i>GameSpot</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dXjBhPB4t0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dXjBhPB4t0</a>	Essay	Can Dark Souls help your mental health?   MindGames
<i>Gingy</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQZi0BBi4MA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQZi0BBi4MA</a>	Essay	The complete dark souls series story retrospective
<i>IGN</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmlaLqYauTA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmlaLqYauTA</a>	Review	Dark Souls Exclusive Review
<i>Indie Bytes</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y41l4FGHPg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y41l4FGHPg</a>	Essay	Don't you dare go hollow - Dark Souls as an allegory for depression
<i>Joseph Anderson</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeJC9l3NPME9lB4u4Rt4wfFht8tUOv5-8">https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeJC9l3NPME9lB4u4Rt4wfFht8tUOv5-8</a>	Essay	Dark Souls Critique - Part one to five
<i>KingK</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0l-gQYA08fM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0l-gQYA08fM</a>	Essay	Dark Souls retrospective
<i>NeverKnowsBest</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqMfmAUXA8Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqMfmAUXA8Q</a>	Essay	Dark Souls is underrated
<i>Noah Caldwell-Gervais</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_KVCFxnpi4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_KVCFxnpi4</a>	Essay	I Beat the Dark Souls Trilogy and All I made was this lousy video essay

<i>SoulReborn</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjltb5bk5B4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjltb5bk5B4</a>	Essay	Critically analysing Dark Souls 11 years later...
<i>The Act Man</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LghtBsxAZNo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LghtBsxAZNo</a>	Essay	Why is Dark Souls 1 a masterpiece?
<i>The Gemsbok</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpf3KQBloCY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpf3KQBloCY</a>	Essay	Philosophical analysis of Dark Souls
<i>VaatiVidya</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lnq44iwiVM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lnq44iwiVM</a>	Essay	Dark Souls: Why it's different
<i>WhatCulture Gaming</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoh59V-qyiY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoh59V-qyiY</a>	Essay	How Dark Souls will change you as a person
<i>Writing on Games</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viP4psS3MUQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viP4psS3MUQ</a>	Essay	Dark Souls helped me cope with suicidal depression

YouTube essays and reviews Disco Elysium

<i>Creator</i>	<i>Link</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Title</i>
<i>Adam Millard</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZITfuZPt9g">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZITfuZPt9g</a>	Essay	What was Disco Elysium actually about?
<i>Aryarchi</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3OVq3DICTO">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3OVq3DICTO</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium has feature no other game has
<i>Epoch Philosophy</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n84A3ykGya0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n84A3ykGya0</a>	Essay	The philosophy of Disco Elysium: Psychoanalysis, Ideology, and Absurd Modernism
<i>GameSpot</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TxUS9hp3b4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TxUS9hp3b4</a>	Review	Disco Elysium Review
<i>Grim Beard</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9ArFXRQEAE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9ArFXRQEAE</a>	Review	Grimbeard - Disco Elysium - Review
<i>IGN</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp8lIWcWrc0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp8lIWcWrc0</a>	Review	Disco Elysium Review
<i>IGN</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaQ1bKERoAs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaQ1bKERoAs</a>	Review	Disco Elysium - The final cut review
<i>Jacob Geller</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md5PTWBUgpg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md5PTWBUgpg</a>	Essay	Searching for Disco Elysium
<i>Kay and Skittles</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdW7Cp0iV0A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdW7Cp0iV0A</a>	Essay	Why Disco Elysium is the most hopeful game I've ever played
<i>Kybitzed</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YNYVfES7BA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YNYVfES7BA</a>	Essay	The philosophy of Disco Elysium
<i>Leadhead</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hWeR4lpEt8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hWeR4lpEt8</a>	Essay	What Disco Elysium means to me
<i>Luke Stephens</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsSgpacIDEK">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsSgpacIDEK</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium did something incredible

<i>Mortismal Gaming</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9LeIbdD6jk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9LeIbdD6jk</a>	Review	Disco Elysium - Review after 100%
<i>NeverKnowsBest</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f9vGYRBtCE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f9vGYRBtCE</a>	Review	Disco Elysium Critique
<i>Nightmare Masterclass</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vny8mR9AqN0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vny8mR9AqN0</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium: In-Depth Analysis
<i>Noah Caldwell-Gervais</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_7ngJDbUQE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_7ngJDbUQE</a>	Essay	Judicial opinions: What makes Disco Elysium a modern classic?
<i>Oblivionblade</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9Xm46_7AA0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9Xm46_7AA0</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium   Detective. Arriving. On the scene.
<i>Outcast Docs</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3NY7PnPhwY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3NY7PnPhwY</a>	Essay	Making Disco Elysium: The importance of failure
<i>RagnarRox</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSmZcN7AgHQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSmZcN7AgHQ</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium is a Role-Playing Dream come true
<i>Scrap Takes Skill up</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJkamriBQT0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJkamriBQT0</a>	Essay	Why I played Disco Elysium 21/2 Times
<i>Sophie from Mars</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY8nfRjTGUQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY8nfRjTGUQ</a>	Essay	Disco Elysium, Roleplaying heaven
<i>The Escapist</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhConc2uU_E">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhConc2uU_E</a>	Review	Forge linear stories, give me more immersion storytelling   Extra punctuation
<i>Worth a buy</i>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuGiQnHINVU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuGiQnHINVU</a>	Review	Disco Elysium review - new standard for rpg's

List of written reviews Dark Souls gathered through <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/dark-souls/critic-reviews>:

- AOTF
- AusGamers
- CheatCC
- Destructoid
- Digitally Downloaded
- Eurogamer
- GameCentral
- GameCritics



- Gameinformer (original and remastered)
- GameOver
- Gamer.NL
- GamersHeroes
- Godisageek
- IGN
- ImpulseGamer
- PSLs
- PSU (original and remastered)
- PushSquare
- Twinfinite
- VideoChums
- WCCFTech
- Worth Playing (original and remastered)
- XGN

List of written reviews Disco Elysium gathered through <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/disco-elysium/critic-reviews:>

- Digitally Downloaded
- GameGrin
- GameInformer
- GameRan
- GameSpot
- IGN
- KeenGamer
- NintendoLife
- PCMag
- Press Start
- Shindig
- Vooks
- WCCFTech
- Xbox Hub

- Xbox Tavern
- XGN

## 9.2. Appendix II: Questionnaire

### *Your Dark Souls Experience and Meaning – Questionnaire*

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. I am Frans Rijnders, a Sustainable Development MSc student at Utrecht University, and am currently researching the opportunities that (video) games can have for creating personal and societal change together with my supervisor Dr. Joost Vervoort. I am doing so through investigating how the experience of playing truly exceptional games such as Dark Souls can create a lasting memory and change in the player.

In this questionnaire I am intrigued in your personal story about and connection to Dark Souls and what it is that you take from the experience. A set of open questions will give you the opportunity to tell your story. We will start with a few questions about your experience before, during, and after the game, followed by questions about how you perceive the Dark Souls community.

Note: I am focusing on Dark Souls 1/Remastered, and not the remainder of the series. If the sequels add to your story, you can mention them, but please focus on the first game.

The questionnaire will take up to 10 minutes, but you are of course free to give a more in-depth story. All answers will be kept anonymous and can therefore not be tracked back to you. By filling in this questionnaire you consent that the answers will be used for the study.

#### *Your story*

First, a few questions about your experience before, during, and after playing Dark Souls.

How did you get into Dark Souls?

What were your expectations of Dark Souls?

What are the most memorable or meaningful experiences you had in Dark Souls?

During the game, what were the main emotions that you felt? Can you explain why?

What lessons or insights do you feel Dark Souls gave you?

Are there lessons you learned that you implemented in your life or that resonate with your life experience?

#### *The Dark Souls Community*

A large community has been built over the years since the release of Demon Souls up until Elden Ring, in which players share their love for the From Software games. Think of reddit threads, YouTube video essays, wikis, and numerous podcasts. Here are a few questions that focus on this part of your experience.

Did you have any interaction with the community members outside of the game itself? If so, how?

Were there any sources of information (podcasts, video essays, reviews etc.) that influenced or changed your experience of the game, and how you relate to it?

In general what do you think of the Dark Souls community?

(The Disco Elysium questionnaire was the same apart from substituting Dark Souls with Disco Elysium, and without the specifications of the version of the game and community.)